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Sébastien Fleuriel a & Manuel Schotté b

a University of Lille Nord de France, CNRS, UMR 8019, Clercé, France
b University of Lille Nord de France, CNRS, UMR 8026, Ceraps, France

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The condition of high-performance athletes in France since the Mazeaud Law of 1975

Sébastien Fleuriel\textsuperscript{a}* and Manuel Schotte\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}University of Lille Nord de France, CNRS, UMR 8019 Clercée, France and \textsuperscript{b}University of Lille Nord de France, CNRS, UMR 8026, Ceraps, France

High-level athletes are accorded deferential treatment by the French state. They enjoy the status of ‘high-performance athletes’, which entitles them to assistance from the state and a set of special provisions. This paper provides an overview of the political circumstances in which this status was originated and developed, from its initial recognition under the 1975 Sports Law to the paradoxical social effects that this state policy has had on its beneficiaries: the athletes themselves. The first part of the paper is based largely on a search of parliamentary archives relating to the adoption of this law, known as the Mazeaud law, while the second part is based on a survey and interviews conducted with a number of French athletes who were selected for the 1972 and 1992 Olympic Games in Munich and Barcelona respectively. In addressing these two key phases in the recognition of athlete status, its political development and its subsequent reception, the article illustrates the changes in both status and condition of high-performance athlete, based on very different time scales and inspired by fairly different expectations. Given that the present system aims to improve the position of athletes in terms of their post-competitive lives, the long-term benefit of representing France under these circumstances remains questionable.

\textbf{Keywords:} Mazeaud Law; French public policies; high-performance athletes; Olympic Games; post-competitive lives

Les conditions des athlètes de haut niveau en France depuis la Loi Mazeaud de 1975

En France, les athlètes de haut niveau bénéficient d’un traitement de faveur par l’Etat. Ils jouissent du statut « d’athlètes de haut niveau », qui leur permet d’obtenir des aides de l’Etat et un ensemble de facilités particulières. Cet article propose une vue d’ensemble des circonstances politiques dans lesquelles ce statut a été fixé et développé, de sa reconnaissance initiale conformément à la Loi du Sport de 1975 aux effets sociaux paradoxaux que cette politique d’Etat a eu sur ses bénéficiaires : les athlètes eux-mêmes. La première partie de l’article est basée en grande partie sur une recherche dans les archives parlementaires touchant à l’adoption de cette loi, connue comme la loi Mazeaud, tandis que la deuxième partie s’appuie sur une enquête et des entretiens conduits auprès d’un certain nombre d’athlètes français qui ont été choisis pour les Jeux Olympiques de 1972 et 1992, respectivement à Munich et Barcelone. En s’intéressant à ces deux phases-clés dans la reconnaissance du statut d’athlète, de son développement politique et de sa réception ultérieure, l’article illustre les changements opérés aussi bien dans le statut des athlètes de haut niveau que dans les conditions qui

*Corresponding author. Email: Sebastien.Fleuriel@univ-lille1.fr
leur sont faites dans des échelles de temps très différentes et avec des attentes assez différentes également. En tenant compte du fait que le système actuel vise à améliorer la situation des athlètes en termes de reconversion post-carrière, le bénéfice à long terme d’une représentation de la France dans ces conditions demeure discutable.

Mots-clés: Loi Mazeaud; politique publiques françaises; athlètes de haut niveau; Jeux olympiques; reconversion post-carrière

La situación de los deportistas de alto rendimiento en Francia desde la Ley Mazeaud de 1975

Los deportistas de alto nivel tienen reconocido un tratamiento especial por parte del estado francés. Gozan del estatus de ‘deportistas de alto rendimiento’, que les hace acreedores de asistencia por parte del estado y de una serie de condiciones especiales. Este artículo proporciona una visión de conjunto de las circunstancias políticas en que se originó y desarrolló este estatus, desde su reconocimiento inicial bajo la Ley del Deporte de 1975 hasta los efectos sociales paradójicos que esta política estatal ha generado para sus beneficiarios: los propios deportistas. La primera parte del artículo se basa ampliamente en una búsqueda en los archivos parlamentarios relativos a la promulgación de esta ley, conocida como Ley Mazeaud, mientras que la segunda parte se basa en una encuesta y en entrevistas con deportistas franceses seleccionados para los Juegos Olímpicos de 1972 (Múnich) y 1992 (Barcelona). Al analizar estas dos fases clave en el reconocimiento del estatus de deportista, su desarrollo político y su subsiguiente recepción, el artículo ilustra los cambios acaecidos tanto en el estatus como en la condición de deportista de alto rendimiento, basados en escalas temporales muy diversas e inspirados por expectativas bastante diferentes. Teniendo en cuenta que el sistema vigente pretende mejorar la posición de los deportistas por lo que respecta a su vida tras la retirada de la competición, los beneficios a largo plazo de representar a Francia bajo estas circunstancias aparecen como cuestionables.

Palabras clave: ley Mazeaud; políticas públicas francesas; deportistas de alto rendimiento; Juegos Olímpicos; vida tras la retirada de la competición.

Die Bedingungen für Hochleistungssportler in Frankreich seit der Einführung des Mazeaud Gesetzes 1975


Schlagwörter: Mazeaud Gesetz, Öffentliche Politik in Frankreich, Hochleistungssportler, Olympische Spiele, Leben nach der Karriere
Today elite-performance athletes are accorded special treatment by the French state. Their status as ‘sportifs de haut niveau’ (high-performance athletes) entitles them to special assistance and provisions designed to optimise their training, guarantee their living and social conditions during their sporting lives, and allow them to make a successful career transition when they retire from competition. To this end, the relevant public authority (Ministry or Secretary of State) responsible for young people and sport regularly publishes a quota list of athletes holding the right to ‘athlete’ status, based on suggestions submitted by individual sports federations.

Although the term is fairly commonly used in sporting circles, high-performance-athlete status in France is not without problems, considering its developmental background on one hand and its effective uses on the other. This paper has focused on the period surrounding the adoption of the first Sports Law in 1975 in order to analyse its historical development. This pivotal period resulted from the gradual emergence of an interventionist government policy on sporting performance, and which, after the adoption of the 1975 Sports Law, led to the creation of a basic framework within which the definition of the quality of high-performance athlete was regularly developed. This ultimately led to the notion of full-fledged athlete status. The effects of this pro-active policy on the management of athletic performance are explored from the point of view of the athletes who directly benefit from it, allowing measurement of, if not their expectations, at least their reception of the system intended for their use.

The aim of this paper is therefore to account for these two key phases in the recognition of athlete status: i) its political development, and ii) its subsequent reception by the athletes.

**Political development**

Two areas have been analysed: the first relates to the conditions under which the initial version of this status was developed in order to better understand its
component parts. The preliminary focus of this exploration of the implementation and content of this law is on the parliamentary debates that preceded its adoption. There are three main reasons for this choice. Firstly, athletes and other stakeholders in the world of sport had very little influence on the drafting process, although this was a consequence of empirical necessity rather than methodological oversight. Secondly, and contrary to what a reading of the law itself, which was based on a broad consensus, might lead one to suppose, there was strong opposition to certain points in Parliament. Thirdly, the long and convoluted process of debates on providing assistance to athletes on the public stage made them particularly well suited to analysis. These debates occurred on three occasions: during the presentation of the budget of the Secretary of State for Youth and Sport in 1973, during the presentation of the draft law before the French Senate in June 1975 and during the debate on the law in the French National Assembly in October 1975. Analysis of these debates, placed in the historical context of the development of sporting institutions in France, provides the basis for this section of the paper.

Reception by the athletes
This investigation entails a comparison between two generations of athletes with the aim of highlighting the differences between those benefiting from high-performance status and those who did not. This section is based on a survey by questionnaires (n = 209) and interviews (n = 14) with athletes who were competing in 1972 or in 1992.

Emergence and political recognition of the quality of ‘high-performance athletes’

State action to promote sporting performance
In 1975, the French government adopted the so-called ‘Mazeaud Law’, which recognised the quality of high-performance athletes. This was not an impromptu decision but the outcome of a lengthy and complex development process. In fact, it came about as a result of the convergence of several developments, including a series of discussions and measures taken from the 1950s onwards, based on which the French state intended to promote the emergence of a sporting elite.

These were not the first attempts by the French state to intervene in sporting matters. However, up until that point, such efforts were mainly intended to extend and control sporting practices as they related to the health and education of the general population. It is therefore possible to think in terms of a state policy on sporting performance from this point onwards, if only in relation to a series of institutions established for this purpose. These included:

- 1956 – the Bataillon de Joinville, to which national service conscripts with sporting abilities of international standard were assigned to benefit from training conditions unrivalled anywhere in the civilian sector.
- 1958 – the national sports advisers board, which became the ‘Directeurs Techniques Nationaux’ (national technical managers) in 1966, reporting formally to the youth and sports departments and put at the disposal of sports federations.
- 1961 – the setting-up of the ‘Délegation générale à la préparation olympique’ (Olympic Preparation Committee).
- 1974 – the creation of sport study sections. These were specialised state institutions combining traditional school studies with high-level sports training.
- 1975 – the creation of INSEP, the French National Institute for Sport and Physical Education.

These measures underline the creation of a French management 'model' for elite athletes which accompanied the emergence of approaches to preparation for competition by top-level athletes: professionalism in football and cycling and strict amateurism in the state-sponsored model emerging in Eastern Bloc countries, which found something of an echo in France, with the establishment of military training facilities and the promotion of private initiatives and the localised power of sports clubs. In reaction to the largely inconsistent and ineffective nature of these institutions (the performance of French Olympic teams fell continuously between 1948 and 1960) and to promote the foundation of a public authority for French sport in line with the planning-centred approach of the Gaullist regime,² the state stepped in to promote high-level sporting performance. State intervention implies a surrendering of control and state interference in sporting affairs,³ but rather than thinking in terms of state intrusion into a sport it might be more relevant to concentrate on the conflicts emerging between the relevant stakeholders and the relationships formed between them⁴ to forge a sporting elite. From this point of view, the representatives of the central administration did not intend to replace the federal model. The new federal status, which handed the responsibility of managing one or more sporting disciplines to sporting federations, indicates that this policy was not formulated in opposition to the federations but in association with them. Pertaining as it did to performance sports, the 'agreement' between federation and state stakeholders was reached under contradictory circumstances. Although federations initially resisted the new accreditation system developed by the Haut Commissariat à la Jeunesse et aux Sports (High Commission for Youth and Sport),⁵ they were not opposed to state measures that improved the training of elite athletes.⁶ The formula adopted did, in fact, receive the approval of the federations, because it allowed them to promote their own elite athletes without losing control over them. The tendency of state stakeholders to rely on the federations to develop a national high-performance sports policy was to a large extent due to their own experiences. As Olivier Le Noë demonstrates, the policy’s key stakeholders were all former national and international athletes,⁷ which might well explain why they were in favour of a federal model, with themselves as part of it.

A specific status for athletes: a political imperative

This convergence of interests resulted in the promotion of a system that was focused upon the training of athletes, with both state and federal authorities required to consider the training conditions athletes needed. All institutional measures were designed to free up time for athletes and provide them with an optimal training environment. However, this approach had an undesirable side effect. If athletes were provided with the means to prepare for competition on a full-time basis, their social/living conditions would also need to be taken into consideration. This particular point was raised during the parliamentary debates on the draft of the first Sports Law in 1975 by Mazeaud:
A competitive sports policy must, at the end of the day, define a sort of status for high-performance athletes, which will provide the latter with satisfactory training conditions throughout their sporting career and provide for the social and professional integration, or even career transition and, why not, promotion, of the athlete at the end of their career. [...] We are at a turning point. If athletes do not have their future assured by specific social safeguards, we will no longer be able to field athletes in major international sporting events.

This reasoning, voiced here by the Secretary of State for Youth and Sport, occurs repeatedly in parliamentary debates. The necessity of developing a status for athletes did not meet with any particular resistance and gave rise to the notion that technical support should be associated with a degree of social support; without which even the most promising athletes might not reach the high levels required for success in international competition. It was competitive performance, therefore, that provided the starting point for this discussion.

Arising out of provisions made prior to its development, the need to establish a status for athletes was made all the more acute by changes to the Olympic Games qualification rules. Although only ‘pure’ amateurs could take part in the Olympics, the regulations adopted at the congress of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in Varna (1973) authorised financial and material assistance for athletes as part of their training programmes. However, personal profit from sporting activities was still prohibited. With the removal of the term ‘amateur’ from the Olympic Charter, the question was no longer simply one of preparing athletes with the potential to represent their nation, but also of their status. State and federal authorities needed to adopt a management approach that would enable athletes to devote all their time to training without them becoming paid professionals. This approach was made all the more urgent by the fact that the next Olympic Games were due to be held in three years’ time (1976) and in the intervening period a solution was needed that would meet this dual requirement.

In addition to being a necessity for positive competitive outcomes, several members of Parliament justified the importance of athlete status as a means of ‘protecting’ sport. Although some deputies and senators were slow to criticise professional sport, they did unanimously condemn the presence of money in amateur sport and highlighted ‘the need to combat shamateurism’. In addition to the moral implications of these arguments, that considered money to be a ‘scourge that deflects sport from its purpose and could lead to tragedy’, they asserted the state’s authority over the management of sporting affairs by opposing the clandestine payments sometimes made in sporting circles. This weakened the power of local clubs that acquired the best ‘amateur’ athletes by making illicit payments to them. Establishing a clear status for high-level performers therefore clarified such situations and removed the ‘muckiness’ that surrounded these hitherto unofficial and secret practices.

Developed as a result of a structural requirement, changing international regulations, a will to improve the French national prestige through sport and a desire to control elite amateur sport, the concept of high-performance athlete status appears to have been imposed from ‘above’. Devised largely by the authorities and politicians, its emergence owed nothing to input from athletes as the sports movement was insufficiently organised to have any real influence. A comparison with the situations involving state recognition of other professional groups reveals how unique this situation is. Studies into (for example) artistic sectors, which, like sport, are also based
on a vocational commitment, reveal that unlike artists, who refuse any state interference in their work, athletes did not reject this idea but embraced it.

**The conception of an exemplary and motivational sporting elite**

The fact that the definition of ‘athlete’ status took a long time, that an institutional mechanism pre-dated it, and that training requirements were considered prior to an analysis of the social situation facing athletes reveals that, although necessary, it was not a priority. An analysis of the parliamentary debates of the time clearly confirms that, from both a quantitative (the number of times it was raised) and qualitative point of view (the priority given to the issues addressed), the topic of high-performance-athlete status took second place in the discussions in which it featured. Nor did these debates focus uniquely on elite athletes. Far from it. In fact, they form part of a general analysis leading to the first Sports Law, the main aim of which was to generalise the practice of sport as part of an educational approach targeted primarily at young people. Mazeaud, the Secretary of State for Youth and Sport, reporting to the Ministry of Quality of Life, put forward a law that bracketed sport with his Ministry’s overriding concern: youth policy.

This is revealed in the arguments developed by Mazeaud and the authors of the parliamentary report on the law before the Senate and the National Assembly, which promote the virtues of sport and its ‘essential educational role and purpose – the harmonious development of the individual’. The definition of sport as contained in the parliamentary report drawn up by Senator Ruet on behalf of the Cultural Affairs Committee, is revealing in this regard:

... sport is an element of culture, and a compelling sense of sporting purpose can only be discovered early in life, as part of the educational system, from the first days of school. Sport, a free physical activity, ceases to be culture if it becomes a commercial activity; if it is not an act of physical generosity, it ceases to be the gift of the self as a noble act; as a consequence, public funding should be concentrated on educational sport.

Cited in the introduction to the report drawn up by Deputy Lavielle for the National Assembly, this definition reveals the vision of sport as adopted in the draft law submitted by Mazeaud. Parliamentary reports that allude to applause from all sides greeting statements on the moral virtues of sport suggest that this vision was broadly consensual.

Under these circumstances, initiatives in favour of elite athletes became acceptable only when elite sport was linked with mass sport practices. Mazeaud, in his 1973 budget presentation speech, stressed that:

A sports policy must support both elite sport practices and develop sport for all. In this respect, we need to keep our eye on both balls because they are highly dependent on each other, and it is important to expose once again the false dilemma that tends to place them in constant opposition.

Far from being opposites, elite and mass sporting practices actually complement one another:

a country such as ours needs champions, not only to represent it in international competitions, but also because champions provide a role model for the general population to practice a sport (...). I personally believe in the importance of developing a specific sporting elite because, once again, the elite acts as a necessary driving force.
This view does not of course mean that the law’s sponsor did not recognise the specific challenge raised by elite sport practices. However, although he might be suspected of simply ‘being tactful’ deploying rhetoric purely to justify the latter and avoid accusations of elitism, it is interesting to note that Mazeaud is at no point criticised for linking ‘mass’ with ‘elite’. In fact, although many deputies and senators criticised him for not doing enough (or doing it quickly enough), with a single exception those criticisms were not aimed at the method employed. Bracketing the issue of elite sport – judged to be secondary – with that of the generalisation of sport practice – seen as central to the debate – helped to confer a degree of importance on the former. This legitimising influence subsequently allowed the principle of providing elite athletes with specific treatment to become more firmly embedded.

A double rejection

Once the need for ‘athlete status’ had been acknowledged, the question of the form it would take then arose. Parliamentary debates reveal that it was defined by what it could not be, based on what French MPs were determined to avoid. The first model, pure amateurism, was rejected because, as Mazeaud stated, ‘top-level competitions require sacrifices that are, in fact, incompatible with the traditional notion of amateurism.’ The athlete could no longer remain a ‘pure’ amateur who practices his or her sport in their spare time: ‘let us not forget that today’s champions must be constantly available for their own discipline.’ However, MPs also rejected the conception of athletes as professionals, and especially as ‘shamateurs’, for the reasons cited earlier in this paper, but also because it implied a separation between elite and mass sport practices, and challenged the economy of thought on which the argument for state aid for sport had been built.

This opposition to professionalism, based primarily on a rejection of market professionalisation, raised the possibility of the state management of athletes. This was also unanimously rejected by MPs because, ‘our conception of sport rejects both the idea of a state sport which turns champions into public servants and sport that is subject to private interests alone. The state must respect the independence of the sporting movement, while providing it with support.’

Elite athletes were no longer able to practice their sport solely based on individual commitment alone. Nor were they able to be a professional or a ‘state athlete’. The parliamentary debates were marked by rare positive viewpoints and recurrent negative arguments. As such, athlete status was defined by default. This construction, which resulted from the rejection of alternative options, led to the development of a minimalist formula based on assistance. It would allow athletes, based on material support (training conditions) and financial support (grants), to devote themselves fully to their sport without facing the threat of being banned from international competitions. To the extent that assistance and grants are not comparable to a wage, those who received them were not, as a result, defined as professionals: ‘the provision of these study grants to athletes by the government does not create a risk of turning its beneficiaries into professionals.’

In the end, the law did not define a specific status that entitled its holder to specific rights. The 1975 Sports Law was limited to recognising the quality of a high-performance athlete; a quality which simply entitled the athlete to certain benefits and provisions. The model established in France during the 1960s and 1970s was therefore one of ‘state-assisted sport’ for top-level athletes.
The incomplete nature of the treatment reserved for these athletes – to the extent that their ‘quality’ did not entitle them to any sort of social protection or guarantees – derived from the particular set of circumstances from which it emerged. Its incomplete nature was the outcome of the conditions under which it was formulated. Such a system constitutes, on one hand, a guarantee of non-interference by the state in federation’s affairs, with French deputies unanimously agreeing that the state should provide support for sports federations but should not interfere in their internal affairs. However, on the other hand, the federations approved this minimalist approach because it allowed them to promote their own elite athletes without losing control over them. It also conferred upon them extensive powers over athletes, to the extent that they continued to select national teams and provide the Ministry with lists of high-performance athletes who in their view merited state assistance.

**An assistance-based system**

In view of the above, it would appear that, at the point of conception, the recognition of the quality of high-performance athletes was more associated with the state’s desire to allow them to devote themselves to their sport than to confront any ‘social issues’ that might arise from this. Athletes were offered what might be termed ‘professional’ training conditions, to the extent that everything possible was done to ensure they were able to make training their primary activity. However, this activity was not recognised as their work. During the debates on this issue, MPs from all sides commended the passion and selfless commitment of athletes, whereas the possibility that sport, virtuous by its very nature, should be used for other ends was strongly criticised. For Ruet, the author of the Senate report, sport, a free activity, would lose its value ‘... if it becomes a commercial activity; if it is not an act of physical generosity, it ceases to be the gift of the self as a noble act’. In this context, the ‘selflessness that they [athletes] need to demonstrate’ was highly valued.

These elements indicate that, by restricting themselves to providing athletes with assistance and special provisions, while also urging them to devote themselves to a sport full-time, the quality of high-performance athletes led to a poorly objectified definition of their condition. Involvement in a sport, for a limited period of time, entitled athletes to adequate training conditions and a series of benefits. However, the latter were temporary. They lasted only for the time the athlete was regarded as sufficiently competitive and included a very limited number of social guarantees, such as social welfare, pension, and health insurance.

The categories developed by Robert Castel allow an understanding of the specific nature of the treatment reserved for athletes. They distinguish between an insurance-based welfare scheme centred on work and its associated welfare guarantees and a conditional and compensatory assistance-based welfare scheme. This distinction required the quality of high-performance athlete to be centred on an assistance-based approach and constituted a minimalist form of management and welfare protection that linked performance levels and access to assistance. Given the brevity and uncertain nature of sporting careers, it may be considered that, while providing the conditions for world-class training, the system ‘officialised’ a form of assisted job insecurity. The 1975 law was of course only the initial version (which has been subsequently amended) of a state-based approach to high-performance athletes. However, it has been necessary to examine the initial formation of this
law precisely because it laid the foundations for subsequent developments in the high-performance-athlete status without ever being significantly altered.

From the status to the condition of high-performance athletes

Following the adoption of the Mazeaud Law, the question of the treatment effectively reserved for high-performance athletes was not definitively resolved. The initial formulation of athlete status, as discussed during parliamentary debates, led to the notion of ‘quality of high-performance athlete’, based on a simple distinction between those who receive state assistance and those who do not. To assist in understanding the practical reality of these athletes and their day-to-day material conditions, this purely attributive quality can be contrasted with the notion of ‘condition of high-performance athlete’. The word *condition* ideally expresses the value and social position of a single group, instantly turning high-performance athletes into a homogenous group in the same way as the term ‘worker’ might once have described a person’s social class or a community in the same situation, to the extent that it effaces, at least partially, other differences. By a strange shift in meaning, the term also broadly reflects the notion of ‘conditioning’, which is understood as a form of systematic preparation, both mental and physical, for effort and competition. This acceptance recalls that a high-performance athlete is the product of methodical conditioning that requires the body to be submitted to a series of relatively extraordinary constraints with a view to obtaining specific competitive outcomes.

Asserting that all athletes share the same condition, based on the practice of high-performance sport, avoids a reductionist approach to athlete status: that is, as a simple operation of selecting between rights-holders, by re-integrating them into a collective social-production dynamic, which allows us to think of athletes as a relatively specific group subject to a similarly specific treatment. From this perspective, the change brought about by the 1975 Sports Law is not based so much on the adoption of the quality of the athlete, but rather the effective transformation of the athlete’s condition by enabling them to devote more time to their sport and perform to a higher standard.

As part of a sociological study into the value of sporting capital and its suitability for transfer to other social sectors, a survey focusing on what is called in this context ‘the career transition of high-performance athletes’ was conducted in connection with two generations of Olympic athletes selected for the Munich Olympics in 1972 and the Barcelona Olympics in 1992. The aim was to assess the long-term effects of a sporting career on other areas of an athlete’s social life; including their family and professional lives. The choice of the Munich Olympics was based on several criteria. It ensured optimal objectivity in analysing the long-term impact of the athletes’ careers while providing a survey group young enough to be contacted without too much difficulty. The choice of the Barcelona Olympics met a dual requirement in the need for a survey group sufficiently detached from the first one to allow clear identification of any possible changes in the conditions enjoyed by high-performance athletes, while also ensuring that enough time had passed to assess any impact on career transition processes when the athletes’ sporting careers were over.

From a methodological point of view, a list of 558 athletes (225 for the Munich Olympics and 333 for Barcelona) from 23 federations provided the reference base and who were contacted with the help of their respective sporting federations. 343 questionnaires were sent out and 212 replies suitable for use in the study were received. This represented a return rate of 61.8%. After processing the initial results
of the survey, a series of in-depth interviews (n = 14) were performed, bearing in mind the need to cover the diverse range of social and professional paths identified and to compare both generations of athletes.

A comparison of two different Olympic teams, the first in 1972 and the second in 1992, before and after the passing of the Sports Law, highlights the transformation of performance production methods and, at the very least, its paradoxical effects on the lifestyles and representations of high-performance sporting careers.

**The development of a new system of athletes’ production**

The years preceding the adoption of the 1975 Sports Law were mostly characterised by an inadequate understanding of the conditions required by athletes to allow them to produce high-level sporting performances. In the absence of a clearly consolidated and consistent system for identifying sporting potential across France, proximity to a specific facility or trainer would appear to have constituted the key contributing factor for high-performance athletes. For individual performers, it was not that access to sport practice was not a determining factor – very much the contrary – but that the formal organisation of selection systems failed to provide even coverage of the sporting population. The level of commitment of some athletes was substantially affected by the degree to which they were able to travel and access quality management. For one participant in the Munich Olympics, who was from a modest background and experienced problems at school, meeting his physical-education teacher, also a national trainer in an Olympic discipline, was a decisive moment in his life:

He was my gym teacher in vocational college, because I was studying at a vocational college at the time, that’s what it was called. I was studying to become a metal worker. He was the trainer of the French canoeing team […] I was … my parents were divorced, I only lived with my mum, I was in an under… privileged situation, you could say. I wasn’t unhappy – not at all – but I was underprivileged, I wasn’t from a middle-class family, and I wasn’t obviously in a comfortable financial situation. So this trainer suggested – it all started there, weird isn’t it? – he suggested that I go on holiday to work as an assistant in one of the centres run by the French water-sports union at the time.37

In this case, the trainer presents himself as a third party, capable of initiating individual sport practice arrangements as an alternative form of socialisation to a family unit broken up by divorce. If we put these specific circumstances to one side, the way in which sports were organised at the time appears to have left much to the improvisation of individuals, which nowadays would be improbable given the demanding requirements of very high-level sporting performance. However, this would appear to be an understatement when considered in the light of the documents kept by the athlete himself, which reveal how, in his case, the central administration of his sport had great difficulty in responding to individual situations and found themselves having to negotiate on a case by case basis with businesses to free up the athletes they wished to select. The correspondence sent by the Secretary of State for Youth and Sport reveals the conditions in which these selections, although national in scope, would sometimes take place in the absence of any means of forcing a company to release an employee with Olympic potential. In specific terms, the athlete quoted here learned of his selection via a letter sent by his trainer dated 5 June 1972, around two months before the Munich Olympics.38 It was then up to him to organise his absence from work in a situation that he describes as follows:
So at the time, I was champion of France, and I was still one of the best in my category, and they tell me, ‘we’d like you to be part of the pre-selection process.’ And I said, ‘I can’t. I’m working. I’ve got a job, I can’t.’ At the time, I was still in the ‘I can’t lose my job, it’s not possible’ frame of mind. [...] So I was really annoyed, and that’s when something a little… occurred, that was pretty unusual for me as well. It was … how should I put it? My federation told the Minister for Sport at the time [in fact the Secretary of State] who wrote to the CEO of [my company]!39

The athlete was therefore only able to absent himself briefly from his professional duties and hurriedly prepare for the Olympics thanks to the personal intervention of the Secretary of State for Youth, Sport and Leisure. However that may be, the absence of standardised procedures in respect of athletes selected for international events underlines the fact that such situations differed from case to case and required arrangements to be made in response to problems as and when they arose. These problems were reflected in the issues debated in the Senate at the time relating to leave of absence for athletes and the types of compensation to which they should be entitled but without generating any solutions.40 For this particular athlete, his identification and subsequent selection were due to his close relationship with a trainer and consequently, his preparation was improvised. If such methods did not systematically characterise the situation for all French athletes, they act as a reminder that representing France in international competitions in the early 1970s was not an easy matter to arrange and depended heavily on material and localised contingencies.

Faced with such a level of uncertainty, the adoption of the status of ‘high-performance athlete’ provided a response intended to establish a minimum framework for state intervention in the management of its sporting elite. Although it was initiated in the 1961 Sports Law, with the creation of the Délegation Générale à la Préparation Olympique, (a state organisation responsible for the training of Olympic athletes) this policy was intensified following the Sport Law of 1975. It implemented a raft of assistance measures for athletes including, for example, the provision of the state mechanisms mentioned above, which were placed under the responsibility of the federations,41 and the gradual development of local facilities for athletes that would provide a territorial network for the identification and training of these high performance athletes.42 This battery of administrative weapons helped reduce any initial uncertainty by identifying and standardising ways in which athletes could access high-performance sports and national selection. The effect was that, after 30 years of administrative supervision, almost three quarters (72%) of high-performance athletes declared in a survey on their social conditions that they had passed through these reception facilities at one time or another during their training.

**Intensified training**

The policy of providing high-performance athletes with administrative and bureaucratic support was not confined to a status defined by law. It also had an effect on the very means by which athletes accessed and practiced sport and influenced both their social/domestic and training conditions. It enabled them primarily to take time off, at least temporarily, from their professional duties based on compensatory support measures. Placed under state supervision in order not to violate the amateurism rule, the proportion of athletes who were financing themselves (via employment) and/or relying on family support dropped significantly from one generation of athletes to
another, in favour of public funding. Even then, such subsidies affected an upper limit of less than 46% for athletes in the 1990s (Table 1). The effects of this policy can also be seen in the sharp increase in the time spent training, with an average weekly volume of 19 hours for the 1972-Olympics generation and almost 24 hours for athletes prior to the 1992 Olympics. There was also a relative homogenisation of training practices for the 1992 generation. Although the minimum number of hours devoted to training almost doubled (four hours in 1972 to nine hours in 1992), all of this data (Table 2) suggests a substantial increase in the cost of becoming a member of the French Olympics team. There seems to be no reason to question the success of the sports policy implemented as a result of vote on the 1975 Sports Law, to the extent that athletes are more effectively selected, trained and supported. These measures also seem to accompany a long-lasting improvement of the French team position in the International Olympics medals ranking.

**A paradoxical effect**

Clearly the effect of the increase in the number of hours spent on training was positive in terms of performance improvements and, consequently, of the political class that conceived the system. Paradoxically, the unacknowledged professionalisation of athletes was not fully approved by the athletes themselves. Although everything would suggest that, by providing opportunities to help improve their performance, the expectations of athletes would be more likely to be fulfilled, several findings indicate that it increased their resentment about their wider situations and their sporting careers. It is important to note here, for example, that the increase in training hours, which requires an intensification of the use of the body’s resources, cannot be detached from a greater exposure of the body to injury and premature

Table 1. Athlete funding source trends.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of funding</th>
<th>Munich No. of athletes</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Barcelona No. of athletes</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>32.9</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family/Partner</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clubs/Others</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public assistance (state, local authorities, federations)</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>45.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total/answers</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>465</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents: 209 / Answers: 632 Percentages calculated on the basis of multiple answers.

Table 2. Trends for weekly training hours declared by athletes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Munich</th>
<th>Barcelona</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>19.24</td>
<td>23.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard deviation</td>
<td>8.92</td>
<td>6.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
physical deterioration.\textsuperscript{45} Table 3 shows that the long-term effects of performance on the health of athletes generally worsened between Munich and Barcelona, despite the fact that the second generation aged less rapidly. This indicator, as trivial as it might initially seem, provides a serious insight into understanding what athletes think about their own past investment in sport. The attainment of high-performance-athlete status does not protect its holders from the reason why it was developed in the first place: to enable them to be make their bodies more productive. Former athletes now living with injuries often feel only bitterness about their energetic devotion to sport when it comes to explaining and accepting such disability. It is probable that this physical inconvenience would be partially acceptable if it had been worth the effort; that is, if the cost of the investment had been covered by or compensated for with the profits associated with the status of high-performance athlete. However, since it relates to an ‘incomplete professionalisation’,\textsuperscript{46} designed to ensure immediate performance, it does not include health or social protection, so that the time spent training to meet the sporting needs of the nation does not lead to a specific retirement right or any other health or social care provisions. Viewed against the background of long-term inconvenience, a sporting career is not systematically the panacea that might be expected, as underlined by the testimony herein, even though this particular athlete was an Olympic medallist.\textsuperscript{47}

In this field [the career transition of high-performance athletes] there’s a terrible vacuum in terms of the organisation of athletes, legal protection and even in terms of thinking. Some articles have appeared [in the press] but none of them address the question that’s still bothering me, 15 years after ending my sporting career, while I’m still trying to get the years I spent in high-performance sport counted towards my retirement (I need to work until I’m 71 if we don’t have to work more than 40 years by then), and want the premature degeneration of my body (advanced osteo-arthritis) to be recognised as a professional injury.\textsuperscript{48}

This resentment was validated statistically by comparing this viewpoint with that of all respondents to the questionnaire who, from both generations, admitted to an increasing dissatisfaction with their own condition and, inversely, a decline in their idealised vision of it (Table 4). The positive feelings of the older generation may be inextricably linked to the improvised nature of their sporting careers, viewed as an intense and ad hoc experience, whereas the rationality of the performance production process plainly highlights the higher costs it entails for the younger generation. Taking part in the Munich Olympics was a great opportunity to experience what is perceived to be an exceptional event; following the creation of the high-performance-athlete status and the exclusive commitment it requires, going to the Barcelona Olympics became a duty: a pleasant duty, but a duty nonetheless.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Munich No. of athletes</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Barcelona No. of athletes</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sport-related</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>41.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non sport-related</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No discernable pathology</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>55.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>75</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>120</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The immediate improvement in training conditions implies the following paradox. It led to a rise in the cost of embarking on a high-performance sporting career, but this was not accompanied by an increased remuneration proportional to the level of commitment, to the extent that athletes competing in the 1990s felt more frustrated than their predecessors. These results are corroborated by the qualifying processing of the interviews conducted with athletes from both generations. Even though the reasons for dissatisfaction varied considerably between the athletes from the Games in Barcelona, they are expressed more frequently than those selected for the Munich Olympics, and their social paths appear to be more frequently blighted by divorce, depression, health problems, and so on.

Measured against statistical results for the population as a whole, these interviews provide a valuable insight into how the effects of the performance policy implemented during the mid-1970s came into being. Athletes from the first generation recall with a certain degree of complacency a period when sport was something at which they could ‘try their hand’, as a transitory phase before entering the jobs market. In fact, sports practice did not, or only to a limited extent, seem to compromise an athlete’s long-term professional career, which was performed in parallel with their time as sportsmen or women, by slightly modifying their circumstances. This might involve delaying their specialised medical studies for a year to take part in the Olympics, or training at 5 a.m. before work, and so on. In short, the accounts relating to this earlier period broadly suggest that the future was an open book to be invented and that everything was still possible, both from sporting and professional perspectives. In contrast, the interviews with the second generation were more often marked by potentially chaotic and significant episodes resulting from the higher stakes involved in high-performance-athlete status. For one athlete, it had serious physically disabling consequences for daily family life, while another, after years of being managed almost like a child, felt suddenly abandoned by his/her sporting federation at the end of a long sporting career. This led to depression, poor self-esteem and divorce. A third athlete developed a crippling and almost phobic aversion to competition of any kind, while a fourth experienced a psychological breakdown requiring analytic therapy, despite an objectively stable family and professional life. There is no shortage of examples to describe the profound transformations experienced by high-performance athletes following the adoption of the Sports Law. However, it is important not to take a simplistic approach to this issue, since not all sporting careers are necessarily described in such apocalyptic terms. Some are totally successful, others are more or less successful, while there are also those who would probably have endured difficult times even without the impact of a sporting career. It is obvious, however, that a comparison of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expression of resentment</th>
<th>Munich No. of athletes</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Barcelona No. of athletes</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expression of idealism</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambivalence</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insignificant or little significance</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>56.4</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>55.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the quantitative and qualitative material on the consequences of this law highlights a deterioration in the condition of athletes over the long term in exchange for benefits which are purely short term in nature.

The next step?
To understand what it means to represent France as an athlete, it is necessary to consider the international competitive aspirations of France's political class alongside the condition of high-performance athletes. On one hand, the 'Mazeaud Law', which created the status of high-performance athlete, responded above all to the desire of the political class that French athletes be able to continue to compete on the international scene with relative long-term success. This necessitated a form of professionalisation in all but name for athletes by developing a battery of administrative weapons designed to intensify the physical conditioning of elite athletes. Conversely, this status, designed exclusively to maintain or improve performance levels, does not entirely match the wider expectations of the athletes in question. Required to devote an increasing amount of time to training, they are presented with nothing more than an invitation to give themselves body and soul to competing in national-selection events, without any of the actual guarantees offered by full professional status, such as the entitlement to social, health and retirement benefits. The differences between those who formulated the status and its users has grown out of the gulf that existed between in terms of what is expected of French national teams in terms of national image and representation, and what this involves in reality. Although the cost of a sporting career representing France is very high, the actual returns (in material, social and symbolic terms) for athletes remains fairly small and creates bitterness at the end of their sporting careers, given that their efforts are not properly recognised. As noted by a participant in the Barcelona Olympics: 'The sporting world essentially offers us its recognition when we are active. It might be interesting if this recognition were extended by, for example, developing a set of payment mechanisms for pension-fund contributions to compensate for postponing your studies, for example.' It would be difficult to find a better summary of the 'difference' between the status and the actual conditions of high-performance athletes, based on very different time scales and inspired by fairly divergent expectations. Given that the present system aims to improve the current position of athletes to the detriment of their future, the long-term benefit of representing France under these circumstances remains questionable.

Notes on contributors
Sébastien Fleuriel is professor and sociologist at the University of Lille 1 and the Clerse (UMR CNRS 8019). His areas of research are the sociology of the athletic performance. He has published several books (2004, 2008, 2010) on the public policies and the athletic performance in France.

Manuel Schotté is teacher at the University of Lille 2 and researcher at the CERAPS (UMR CNRS 8026). His areas of interest include sport, migrations and working conditions. He has published several articles and one book in these subjects.

Notes
6. This also applies to the trainers; Amar, Nés Pour Courir, 59.
9. The quality of high-performance athlete was officially recognised in the 1975 Sports Law, which is considered to be the first law devoted specifically to sport. As we explore the implementation and content of this law, our preliminary focus will be on the parliamentary debates preceding its adoption. These debates occurred on three occasions: during the presentation of the budget of the Secretary of State for Youth and Sport in 1973, during the presentation of the draft law before the French Senate in June 1975, and during the debate on the law in the French National Assembly in October 1975. Our analysis of these debates, placed in the historical context of the development of sporting institutions in France, provides the basis for this section of our paper.
17. E. Rickert, Assemblée Nationale, 1st session, October 2, 1975, 6415.
21. One deputy stated that ‘Elitism must be the end purpose of sport’: A. Mayoud, Assemblée Nationale, 2nd session, October 2, 1975, 6432.
27. This status is still relevant in 2011. A range of additional measures has been added to it, as the first high performance athletes census (1982), the oficialising of the first list (created by the so-called Avice Law L 84–610 of July 16, 1984), the definition of the procedure to be in this list (April 23, 1987), the adoption of the charter of the high-performance sports, and so on.
28. Article 16 of the 1975 Law states: ‘The state ensures the social betterment of high-performance athletes. This guarantee includes the granting of a range of benefits, and the alteration and reduction of working hours according to training and competition requirements, and schemes enabling them to enter or return to the workplace. The quality of high-performance athlete is determined by the federation authorised by the Ministry responsible for sporting affairs. High-performance amateur athletes cannot be directly or indirectly associated with a commercial advertising event or campaign.’
32. Roderick, ‘A Very Precarious “Profession”’. 
33. It should be noted that, strictly speaking, it is the first version which is legally binding. A series of positions issued by state departments contain the seeds of what became official in 1975, such as the Lanet Report compiled in 1954. See G. Loirand, ‘Une Difficile Affaire Publique, Une Sociologie du Contrôle de l’Etat sur les Activités Physiques et Sportives et sur leur Encadrement’, doctoral thesis, Université de Nantes, 1996).
34. The quality of high-performance athlete was regularly enhanced, including the drawing up of official lists of high-performance athletes under the Sports Law of 1984.


36. Wacquant, Body and Soul.

37. Athlete selected for the Munich Olympic Games, born in 1945. Interview with authors, December 1, 2008.

38. The Olympic Games were scheduled to take place from August 26 to September 11, 1972.


41. According to ministerial sources, there were 1,614 in 1993 and 1,653 in 2000.

42. In 1984, there were 182 national and international sport study sections, and 216 promotional sections. In 1985, 66 permanent coaching and training centres (CPEF) were created. In 1990, there were 108 CPEFs, 41 high-performance sport sections and 457 regional sport sections. In 1995, 378 Espoir et France centres replaced the CPEFs and the sport sections, 492 in 2008.

43. And semi-public if we add benefits granted directly by the federations, themselves often based on state subsidies.


47. Our data confirms the lack of statistical correlation between the degree of success achieved by individuals and their feedback.


49. The statistical processing was based on recoding the open question, 'Overall, what impact has your sporting career had on your life?' When the content of the response was explicitly negative, such as 'deterioration, bitterness, rage, problems, recurring nightmares', 'totally negative: didn’t see my children grow up', ‘a harmful impact on my family life, a partially stunted professional career’, the answer was recoded under the item ‘Express resentment’. Conversely, when the content was more explicitly positive, such as 'my sporting career made a huge difference to my life: higher social position, a job that I like, I stayed in the sporting field', ‘nothing but good things. Culturally and intellectually rewarding, as well as from a human angle, thanks to the people I met in France and abroad as part of my work’, the answer was recoded under the item ‘Expression of idealism’. Content presenting both positive and negative elements, such as 'a lot of difficulties but a lot of happiness too', 'it destroyed my family life but I built a good professional career', were recoded under the category ‘Ambivalence’. Non-answers and content that expressed no real opinion such as 'none', 'nothing in particular but overall yes because it changed my personality' were recoded under the item ‘Insignificant or little significance’.

References


