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Writing Swiss Sport History: A Quest for Original Archives

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ABSTRACT

Writing Swiss sport history was never an actual aim in my career; but, while I was doing my PhD in Switzerland, its archives eventually seduced me and convinced me to move from writing about European medical history to writing more sports-based histories on every level (local, national, or international). Mainly empirical, my work has always been focused on the way individuals are slowly building entire institutions around sports (creating rules, administrations, and competitions). Moreover, this passion opened a complete new world full of possibilities where documents are scattered between German, French, and Italian. Thus, to me, empirical-based research were never 'naïve', as the explanatory potentials of sport are very strong. And regarding this amazing potential, I always felt dedicated to pursue every possible effort, to identify new archives, to take this history to a higher epistemological level and to spread these results beyond academic circles.

KEYWORDS

Switzerland; archives; history; sport; institutions

When I arrived in the fall of 2006 in Lausanne,¹ to begin my PhD thesis on French physicians' commitment in physical education,² I quickly noticed that sport history was not a very developed research field in Switzerland. Although my primary object of research did not focus on Switzerland, I soon had the opportunity to expand my interests to Swiss sports and physical activities, and especially the history of football. Indeed, at the approach of the European Football Championship of 2008 – co-organized by Switzerland and Austria – the Institute of Sport Sciences of the University of Lausanne wanted to organize a conference on football in Switzerland, called 'Le football en Suisse: enjeux sociaux et symboliques d'un spectacle universel'.³ During the conference's preparation phase, on the advice of Nicolas Bancel – then my thesis supervisor – I carried out my first research around the history of Swiss football. Indeed, he whispered in my ear that 'there had been a fixture between Germany (Nazi) and Switzerland during the World Cup of 1938' and it would, therefore, be relevant to analyse this match. This was the precise moment, when I entered into researching Swiss sport history, a now 10 years long path, which I will outline in the following paragraphs, between football, gymnastics, and skiing history. Thus, as I will describe this decade, the dynamics remained quite constant, between locating archival material and an urgent need for collaboration, particularly because of the linguistic divisions in Switzerland.

A few days later, I went to the University of Geneva's library to peruse various specialized and non-specialized journals about this particular meeting. My first concern was, therefore, to try and grasp the logics of re-composition of an 'imagined community'⁴ around two matches between Switzerland and Germany during the first round of the World Cup of 1938. I especially sought to consult press reports published during the 10 days surrounding the two fixtures,⁵ and also tried to identify several similar works led in Switzerland and other countries.

Following this first presentation and soon-to-be first publication, and with the support of my research supervisor, I then decided to extend my research beyond the event of 1938, so as to understand to a greater extent the transformation of these same imagined communities in every fixture between Switzerland and Germany during the inter-war period.⁶ Shortly after that, I met a Masters student by the name of Philippe Vonnard, who encouraged me to also take Italy into consideration⁷; and thus, began a collaboration based on true friendship.

Nevertheless, such research also elicited some frustration: although journals and newspapers were a very stimulating starting point to understand echoes and repercussions of contemporary sports in our society, and grasp the mechanisms of identification and the circulation of 'national' stereotypes surrounding sports events, they became however, less interesting when it came to comprehend the structuring of sport and go beyond representations that we know to sometimes reflect the viewpoints of journalists rather than a true 'spirit of the times'.

In the meantime, ever since the fall of 2006, I had been preparing to teach sport history at the Institut des Sciences du Sport de l'Université de Lausanne with Nicolas Bancel and soon after Philippe Vonnard. This led me to push Swiss historiography to a certain edge. Indeed, insofar as we wanted to introduce our students to elements of Swiss history, we had to face the shortage of works based on the history of Swiss sport (or the Swiss history of sport) in the past decades, and more so the absence of a real coordination between existing works. This observation was particularly striking in comparison with other European or North American countries where sport historians had often already federated into scientific associations (Société Française d'Histoire du Sport, North American Society for Sport History or British Society for Sport History).

If the Swiss field shared some characteristics with its neighbours, notably about the relative importance of physical education history in published texts,⁸ it was also a fairly recent arena, since the creation of sport sciences institutes within universities only dated back to the 1990s.⁹ Also, like in many other countries, sport had never been taken into account within the scope of larger historical projects or publications of synthesis works about the history of Switzerland.¹⁰ Of course, the country's linguistic division between French speakers and German speakers (not to mention Italian speakers as well) formed another important obstacle as much regarding research itself (when documents are only accessible in the 'other' language) as concerning collaborations that could develop.¹¹

Finally, although some sports had been usually arousing interest for the past two decades, especially football, ski, or sports tourism, whose respective histories were notably written by Christian Koller,¹² Hans-Dieter Gerber,¹³ Thomas Busset,¹⁴ or Laurent Tissot,¹⁵ attempts at historical syntheses were relatively rare, and thus, we were not really able to quote other works except for Markus Giuliani's, based on a PhD thesis he defended at the end of the 1990s about the structuring of Swiss sports system in the inter-war period.¹⁶

Therefore, Philippe and I sought to take a more detailed interest in the structuring of football, using the institutional archive that the Association Suisse de Football kept at their headquarters in Bern's suburb. Our first visit – achieved in Dantesque weather conditions – was marked by a great curiosity for nearly exhaustive fonds accumulated since the first years of the twentieth century. Our ambition became then to understand how, beyond what representations the media conveyed, Swiss football structured itself in the inter-war period and worked its way to professionalism.¹⁷ If this new approach echoed my thesis supervisor's critics – Professor Rebecca Rogers, who quite rightly regretted that I would not take better advantage of my thesis to look deeper into more archival aspects – my passion for research led me henceforth to systematically seek to identify new archival fonds. From 2011, we thus tried, still with Philippe Vonnard and soon joined by other colleagues – such as Quentin Tonnerre – to systematically identify, locate, and compile archives from different Swiss sports institutions and every time, we aimed to plan for projects that would valorize these archives, as other historians had not yet taken them into consideration. Resources turned out to be huge every time and offered administrative documents (minutes, official reports, etc.), iconographical documents (the Association Suisse de Football had indeed been keeping several dozens of images related to each international meeting since the beginning of the 1920s), as well as some leaders' personal documents, and commemorative documents about specific clubs or cantonal organizations.

My nomination as senior lecturer in the summer of 2015, allowed our initiative to increase by taking advantage of the possibilities brought by a permanent position whose research and teaching activities focused on the history of Swiss sport. From then on, we organized several conferences on football and led more systematic works on the structuring of Swiss football during the twentieth century,¹⁸ thus, achieving a first global synthesis of the history of Swiss football.¹⁹ Regarding ski, we co-organized an exhibition on the history of Swiss ski at the Sport Museum of Switzerland in Basel (January to September 2017), and more recently we concluded our first analyses on the creation of the first specific method of ski learning.²⁰ Finally, concerning gymnastics, I was able to analyse the developments of the discipline in Switzerland and in France through studies on rhythmic gymnastics as part of primary comparisons,²¹ with more specific works on Switzerland²² and the Chablais in particular.²³ Not to say writing institutional history is our sole target, it appeared important to us to propose some first milestones for a more ambitious history to be written in the following years.

Moreover, each time, because of the location of the relevant international federations (the Fédération Internationale de Football Association in Zurich, the Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique in Lausanne and the Fédération Internationale de Ski in Oberhofen), we were able to cross-reference the analytic scales between national and international.

The rekindling of my scientific interest towards Swiss archives also happened on the basis of shared reflections, in particular by focusing on the biographies of the leaders of Swiss sport.²⁴ These dynamics have actually been at the centre of the studies led by the members of RERIS (Réseau pour l'Etude des Relations Internationales Sportives) – of which I am a founding member – since 2015,²⁵ and should lead to new publications in the months and years to come. Gathering early career historians from all over Europe, this young network did not aim to concurrence other existing organizations – with which it is already collaborating – but wants to provide a platform for discussions around international sport history, where time dedicated for exchange is by far longer than in other kind of conferences.

At the end of a first decade spent researching the history of sport in Switzerland, I can easily guarantee that Switzerland represents unquestionably one of the European countries with the richest archives, where the development of sport history must be supported with diligence and a concern for the international level. Of course, there will be numerous difficulties to overcome: multiple languages used in official documents (German, French, Italian, English), absence of funding or even refusal of certain organizations to share their documents. But the explanatory potentials of sport remain so strong that we are required to pursue every possible effort to take this (hi)story to a higher epistemological level and to spread these results beyond academic circles.

Notes

1. We wish to thank Julie Coccagne for her assistance with the translation and corrections.
2. Grégory Quin, 'Le mouvement peut-il guérir?: histoire de l'engagement des médecins français dans l'élaboration de l'éducation physique (1741–1888)' (PhD thesis in Sport Sciences, University of Lausanne, 2010).
3. The conference's main contributions were published in 2009 in the following book: Nicolas Bancel, Thomas David, and Fabien Ohl, eds., *Le football en Suisse: enjeux sociaux et symboliques d'un spectacle universel* (Neuchâtel: CIES, 2009).
4. Grégory Quin and Nicolas Bancel, 'Football et construction nationalitaire en Suisse: les matchs Suisse-Allemagne lors de la Coupe du monde de 1938', in Nicolas Bancel, Thomas David, and Fabien Ohl (eds), *Le football en Suisse: enjeux sociaux et symboliques d'un spectacle universel* (Neuchâtel: CIES, 2009), 83–98.
5. After a draw in the first fixture, Switzerland and Germany met again for a second game three days later, a match that Switzerland won with a score of 4 goals to 2.
6. Grégory Quin, 'Football et "imaginaire national" helvétique (1920–1942). Les matchs Suisse-Allemagne au cours de l'entre-deux-guerres vus par la presse romande', *Revue Historique Vaudoise* 116, (2008), 149–60; Grégory Quin, 'La Suisse face à la Grande Allemagne (1933–1942): Eléments pour une histoire du football helvétique', in Michael Attali (ed.), *Sports et Médias. Du XIXe à nos jours* (Biarritz: Atlantica, 2010), 761–70.
7. Grégory Quin and Philippe Vonnard, "'Par delà le Gothard". Les matches internationaux Italie-Suisse et la consolidation des champs footballistiques italien et suisse dans l'entre-deux-guerres', *Diacronie. Studi di Storia Contemporanea* 5, http://www.studistorici.com/2011/01/29/quin-vonnard_numero_5/ (accessed 30 June 2017).
8. Louis Burgener, *La Confédération suisse et l'éducation physique de la jeunesse* (La Chaux-de-Fonds, 1952); Jean-Claude Bussard, *L'éducation physique suisse en quête d'identité (1800–1930)* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007).
9. On this subject, see: Grégory Quin, *L'odyssée du sport universitaire lausannois: entre compétition et sport-santé* (Paris: Glyphe, 2016); Grégory Quin, 'De la guerre et de l'éducation physique en Suisse à la fin des années 1930. Quelques jalons pour une histoire de l'essor de la formation des «Maîtres-ses spécialisés-s» pour l'éducation physique à Lausanne', in Luc Robène (ed.), *Le sport et la guerre, XIXe–XXe siècles* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2012), 379–87.
10. Sport is thus nearly completely absent from the big syntheses on Swiss history, in Jean-Claude Favez (ed.), the *Histoire de la Suisse et des suisses* (Lausanne: Payot, republished in 2005), but also from cantonal syntheses.
11. In the fall of 2016, a *Société Suisse d'Histoire du Sport* was created, with the ambition to legitimate works on sport history led in Switzerland both in universities and in some museum and archival institutions. This new organization's aim is also to organize regular scientific conferences to promote research led in Switzerland.
12. Christian Koller, 'Football Negotiating the Placement of Switzerland within Europe', *Soccer & Society* 11, no. 6 (2010), 748–60; Christian Koller, 'Sport Transfer Over the Channel: Elitist

- Migration and the Advent of Football and Ice Hockey in Switzerland', *Sport in Society* (2016), doi:10.1080/17430437.2016.1221067.
13. Hans-Dieter Gerber, 'Fussball in Basel von den Anfängen bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg', *Basler Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Altertumskunde* 107, (2007), 9–33.
 14. Thomas Busset and Marco Marcacci, *Pour une histoire des sports d'hiver - Zur Geschichte des Wintersports* (Neuchâtel: CIES, 2006); Thomas Busset, 'La diffusion du ski en Suisse jusqu'à l'entre-deux-guerres', *Traverse* 1, (2016), 25–35.
 15. Laurent Tissot, 'À travers les Alpes. Le Montreux-Oberland Bernois ou la construction d'un système touristique, 1900–1970', *Histoire des Alpes* 9, (2004), 227–44.
 16. Markus Giuliani, 'Starke Jugend – Freies Volk. Bundesstaatliche Körpererziehung und Gesellschaftliche Funktion von Sport in der Schweiz (1918–1947)' (Zürich: Chronos, 2001).
 17. Philippe Vonnard and Grégory Quin, 'Élément pour une histoire de la mise en place du professionnalisme dans le football suisse: processus, résistances et ambiguïtés', *Revue Suisse d'Histoire* 62, no. 1 (2012), 70–85.
 18. Grégory Quin and Philippe Vonnard, 'Switzerland - A Stronghold in European Football, 1930–1954?', *Sport in History* 35, no. 4 (2015), 531–49; Grégory Quin and Philippe Vonnard, 'Internationale Spiele der Schweiz im Zweiten Weltkrieg: Sport und Politik, Kontinuitäten und Traditionen', in Markwart Herzog and Fabian Brändle (eds), *Europäischer Fussball im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2015), 177–95.
 19. Jérôme Berthoud, Grégory Quin, and Philippe Vonnard, *Le football suisse. Des pionniers aux professionnels* (Lausanne: Presses Polytechniques et Universitaires Romandes, 2016).
 20. Grégory Quin, 'De la cure d'air à l'or blanc, une *Interassociation Suisse pour le Ski* face aux enjeux de l'essor du ski en Suisse (années 1920–années 1960)', *Histoire des Alpes* 22, (2017), 135–55.
 21. Grégory Quin, *Devenir un sport olympique. «Jalons pour une» Histoire comparée des développements de la gymnastique rythmique en France et en Suisse (1961–2011)*, Report for the Académie Nationale Olympique Française (ANOF), 2014.
 22. Grégory Quin, 'History of Swiss Feminine Gymnastics Between Competition and Feminization (1950–1990)', *Sport in Society* 19, no. 5 (2016), 653–66.
 23. Grégory Quin and Marie-Julie Papaux, 'L'introduction de la gymnastique rythmique à Bex (1918–2012): éléments pour une histoire d'un 'sport' féminin', *Revue Historique Vaudoise* 121, (2013), 237–51.
 24. Grégory Quin, 'Promoteur et dirigeant «sportif»: Francis Messerli (1888–1975) pionnier de l'organisation du sport helvétique', in Emmanuel Bayle (ed.), *Les grands dirigeants et managers du sport. Trajectoires, pratiques et héritages* (Bruxelles: De Boeck, 2014), 45–57.
 25. Founded in the summer of 2015, the RERIS gathers about thirty researchers and meets every year in Barcelona to debate and exchange on various themes/research objects, questioning in particular the biographies of male leaders and female leaders in 2016 and 2017, respectively.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on Contributor

Grégory Quin is a senior lecturer at the University of Lausanne, in charge of teaching and researching Swiss sport history since the second half of the nineteenth century.