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Football in Belgium through the lens of the World Cup (1930-2018)

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ABSTRACT

Belgium, a small country in the centre of Europe, is a country with many historical divisions: linguistic, religious and political. Sport has historically been organized along these dividing lines. While national sentiment proved weak historically, it is interesting to analyse the effects of the careers of the national football team which played in 1986 in Mexico City. In recent years, thanks to a golden generation, the national team has achieved unexpected success. At a time when the existence of the country is being questioned by a significant part of the population in the north of the country, will the good results of the Red Devils save the country or consolidate a weak national feeling?

Introduction: football in Belgium

In the history of football, Belgium is one of the pioneer nations. The beautiful game began being played as early as the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and quickly championships were organized. The competitions mainly involved two partially overlapping *spaces*: schools and universities on the one hand, and a league consisting of established clubs on the other. These were often multi-sports clubs. The early development of Belgian football owes much to the strong presence of British citizens in Belgium as a result of intense trade relations¹ and their role in the development of modern sports.² This is particularly the case in cities such as Bruges, Brussels, Antwerp, Ghent, and Liège. Many sports clubs were founded by British pupils or students. Furthermore, quite a few university clubs or teams initially have a large number of Britons in their ranks. In fact, Scottish figures were behind the creation of the first club in 1867 in the resort of Spa, the FOOT BALL CLUBSPAPATRON, sometimes referred to as the ‘oldest club in the world’. In the same period, a sport called ‘football’ was part of the curriculum of three schools: Jenkins College and Harlock College in Brussels and the college of the Xaverian Brothers in Bruges.³ The latter is known to be one of the main schools attended by British pupils.

The first Belgian Division 1 championship was held from 1894–1895, mainly with clubs from Brussels, Liège, Bruges, and Antwerp. A league was quickly formed and Belgium became one of the nations involved in the birth of the International Football Federation in 1904. The first official match of the Belgian national team was played shortly afterwards. The face-off pitted Belgium against France. In fact, competitions between national teams had already started as early as the turn of the century under the initiative of Frédéric van den Abeele. Indeed, the founder of the Van den Abeele club had started the Van den Abeele challenge in 1901. This competition, which was initially quite confidential – 300 spectators – and which pitted the brothers at war (see

below), Belgium and the Netherlands, against each other, was held annually with increasing success. A year later, the Belgian team was given the nickname it carries to this day: les Diabes Rouges (*The Red Devils*).

The First World War was an experiment in what some would call today soft power. A *national* military football team, the Front Wanderers, was led by Victor Boin.⁴ Under the Belgian colours, the team played several games in the United Kingdom, notably against the best English sides. The aim was to raise funds for the country and to elevate the profile of *Poor little Belgium*. This initiative was extended after the end of hostilities. The Belgians and the British created a specific cup, the Kentish Cup. This competition of military teams would see Belgium, France, and the United Kingdom compete against each other every year. The first one was won by the Belgian team.

In the aftermath of World War I, the first Olympic Games were held in Antwerp. Football competition was not strictly speaking new to the Olympics. However, these were the first Olympic Games after FIFA accepted the principle of considering them as a World Cup. It was agreed upon in 1913: 'Provided that the Olympic Football Tournament takes place in accordance with FIFA regulations, FIFA will recognise this tournament as the World Amateur Football Championship'.⁵

The Belgian football team, several of whose players came from the Front Wanderers, won one of its main victories (2–0) in front of a crowd of more than 35,000 spectators in an epic political and sporting confrontation with the Czechoslovak team in the 1920 Olympics final. However, it should be noted that this success was limited in scope. It happened in the aftermath of World War I, in a context in which the defeated powers had not yet been admitted to take part – there was no German, Austrian or Hungarian team. The international dimension of the Olympic Games was also much less pronounced than it is today. This was particularly true of football. Of the 14 teams registered, 13 were European. Egypt was the only non-European nation. There were no Latin American teams, although some of them would soon leave their mark on football history.

Belgium in World Cups in the inter-war period

This European confinement and the very great difficulty of dispatching a team of players over several weeks when full amateurism was expected of them ultimately led FIFA to abandon its pre-war idea of equating the Olympic Games with the World Cup of Nations. The International Football Federation, despite being divided on this issue, launched its own competition: the World Cup. On 17 and 18 May 1929, the organization of the event was entrusted to the Uruguayan federation. Uruguay had already asserted itself footballistically at the 1924 Olympic Games by winning the tournament.

In Belgium, many debates and controversies arose within the organization in charge of football, the Royal Belgian Football Union (*Union royale des sociétés de football*), over the practical arrangements and cost coverage for the participation of a national team. Disagreements and difficulties were such that it seemed likely that no European nation would participate at all. The threat to leave FIFA by Latino-European federations changed the situation,⁶ and Belgium was one of the four European federations that agreed to make the trip to Montevideo. Given its pioneering participation in FIFA – the organization's first General Secretary was Belgian, Louis Mühlhngaus (1904–1906) – and the role played in it by some of its leading figures, the Belgian federation opted for a 'yes' vote. The Belgian team thus embarked on what will be presented as the Montevideo epic adventure, starting in Gibraltar on the Conte Verde.⁷

Still, it would be an understatement to say that the World Cup did not strike the Belgian imagination. Games were played thousands of kilometres away. What's more, the sporting performance was not up to scratch. The Belgian team played two matches, lost both of them – 0–3 to the United States and 0–1 to Paraguay – and returned home without having scored a single goal, not even in a subsequent friendly match in which they lost to local club Pennarol

(0–3).⁸ There was daily print media coverage in several newspapers, but with very limited space. In fact, reporting on the Belgian team was bare bones, and often mocked it for its results. ‘For all that this team was able to do in Uruguay, it could just as well have stayed here’, cracked *L’Etoile Belge*.⁹

From a Belgian perspective, the 1930 World Cup had a different significance, one related to refereeing, especially for John Langenus. By 1930, Langenus was already a well-known and internationally renowned referee. He had, in particular, arbitrated the semi-final of the 1928 Olympic Games in Amsterdam. He would referee four matches but most notably the final between Uruguay and Argentina. After a debate, he decided that the Argentinean team would use their ball in the first half and Uruguay theirs in the second half.¹⁰ He was not the only Belgian member of the refereeing team, since Christophe Henry was the linesman in the final game. Langenus was again in attendance at the 1934 and 1938 World Cups, where he ‘blew the whistle’ in the match for third and fourth place.

The political character of the 1934 World Cup in Italy was obvious. Still, the fascist nature of the regime repelled only a small number of countries. And Belgium was not one of them. All in all, there was no great hesitation on the part of the federation to once again approve its participation in the competition. From a European standpoint, this participation is much less unusual than in 1930. Indeed, twelve teams from the continent took part in the cup with only two Latin American nations – Argentina and Brazil – plus the United States and Egypt. However, this was also the result of a preliminary round and of last-minute withdrawals. Unlike in 1930, there was no pool and the Belgian team was immediately drawn in the last sixteen where it faced the German squad, the pride of the Nazi regime. Like in 1930, the Belgian run came to a rapid end. On 27 May, in Florence, the Germans beat the Diables Rouges by five goals to two. While they were leading at half-time, the Belgians were wiped out in the second half. This result had been widely anticipated by sports journalists and analysts.¹¹ It should also be said that the Belgian team had qualified without glory in the preliminary phase following a defeat against the Netherlands and a draw against Ireland. Most newspapers in Belgium covered the World Cup games, but the event went relatively unnoticed. This was a far cry from the thousands of Dutch and Swiss who travelled to Italy to support their team. The Catholic newspaper *La Libre Belgique* could not but note and – to a large extent – approved this lack of interest: ‘Belgium’s participation in the world championship is placed under the double banner of absolute indifference, both official and popular, and of spending cuts, which is not a bad thing’.¹²

To a large extent, the indifference was also political. Few political and social figures in Belgium raised the problem of the Italian regime. Only the Communist Party expressed concern over the World Cup. But its opposition was primarily aimed at the mobilization of sport as a metaphor for war. The World Cup football matches were described as ‘vile butcheries’ in which ‘the various chauvinisms were represented’, among which the ‘Italian eleven won because they were the most brutal of all’.¹³ Against this nationalist conception of sport, the Belgian communists put forth the *worker and socialist* vision, embodied in the *Spartakiads* or the *world cup of workers’ football*, organized a short while later, and in which . . . the Soviet Union won.¹⁴ In their opinion, it would be ‘far from this hateful harshness, the poisonous fruit of bourgeois sport, of the football world cup in Italy’.¹⁵

The last World Cup before World War II was just as unexciting for the Belgian team. Held in France, Belgium was in a qualifying group that included the Netherlands and the humble Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. Once again, however, this *qualification* was painstakingly achieved. The Diables Rouges held the Dutch team at bay at home (1–1) and won hard in Luxembourg (3–2). Nevertheless, this was the third time in a row that the Belgian team participated in the tournament. As in Uruguay and Italy, Belgium only made a stealthy appearance in the competition. Against the host country, the Belgian team was beaten three to one and thus left the third World Cup without a single victory at this stage in this international competition.

Although their national team's performances were hardly likely to arouse any enthusiasm within Belgian society, for the first time 'many' Belgians travelled there,¹⁶ particularly for the match between the French and Belgian squads. The Belgian team received criticism for a number of shortcomings: lack of technique, physical ability, physical condition or grotesque individual mistakes, particularly in the case of both goalkeepers Arnold Badjou¹⁷ and Stynen. All in all, this defeat 'will have, in short, surprised nobody'.¹⁸ However, the third edition of the World Cup attracted a new level of media coverage. Preparations for the World Cup and the matches were covered in all the newspapers. Its legitimacy was now established. Moreover, compared to the Olympic Games, it even acquired the virtues of 'honesty' and 'candour': 'No hypocrisy, no lies, the best represent their country without anybody having anything to say about it'.¹⁹

Belgium was thus a pioneering and sometimes controversial player in the inter-war period, contributing to the first organizations of the football World Cup. However, we have shown that the Belgian team was relatively insignificant in the first three editions.

The fall and rise of Belgium in the World Cup (1950-82)

In the aftermath of World War II, there was a timider approach. After much hesitation and considering the costs of participation, the Belgian Football Union decided to withdraw from the first post-conflict competition. The federation did not feel it could satisfactorily facilitate the presence of a Belgian team when it was organized in Brazil in 1950. While it was supposed to eliminate the Swiss team in qualification, the official match did not take place and Switzerland went to Brazil. This was the first World Cup in which Belgium did not take part.

The Belgian team returned to the World Cup again in 1954. The logistics for the European teams were much simpler and the related costs much lower since the competition was held in Switzerland. In order to qualify, the Belgians had to eliminate two Nordic teams, Sweden and Finland. In sporting terms, this was done easily. The Diabes Rouges won in Finland and Stockholm, dominated the Swedish team in Brussels, and drew with the Finnish team. Finding itself in a challenging group with two major footballing nations – England and Italy – and the host country, Switzerland, the Belgian team once more failed to make the grade. In their two matches, Belgium drew with England at the last minute, but lost 1–4 to Italy. This first return to major international competitions was thus once again short-lived. This was followed by a barren period in the second half of the fifties and early sixties, as Belgian football levelled off compared to the progress made by other European nations. As a result, the Belgian team was unable to qualify for the 1958 World Cup in Sweden, the 1962 competition in Chile, and the 1966 one in England.

In 1958, the Belgian team was in a group with Iceland and France. Not surprisingly, France and Belgium easily defeated Iceland on both the outward and return legs. Against France, the Belgian team was badly beaten in Paris and was only able to manage a draw in Brussels. Thus the Belgian side stayed behind. Four years later, the group seemed more manageable: Belgium needed to overcome Switzerland and Sweden. It was a *berezina*: the Belgian team lost all four matches in its group, having scored only three goals for ten conceded.

In many ways, the 1966 World Cup was a turning point in the history of the tournament. One thinks in particular of its being broadcast at a time when the spread of television sets in homes was accelerating. The competition took on a new dimension; all the more so as major transformations were taking shape in several countries, notably widespread professionalization. To qualify, the Belgian team had to eliminate Bulgaria and Israel, two teams which were a priori beatable. Bulgaria and Belgium dominated Israel in both the first and second legs. The matches between the Belgian and Bulgarian teams were black and white. In Sofia, Belgium was beaten hard (3–0). By contrast, in Brussels, the Belgian team outperformed the Bulgarian side by 5 goals to zero. A tie-breaking match had to be played. Belgium missed the train once again, beaten two goals to one by the Bulgarian team.

The year 1970 saw a double breakthrough for Belgian football. The Belgian team participated in the World Cup again for the first time since 1954. Furthermore, Belgian football emerged from a long period of weakness. In the seventies, the Diables Rouges began to build up a reputation, an image, in line with what many Belgians believed: if not brilliant, you need to be tactical and skilful in defence. The Belgian team had to be one that was difficult to manoeuvre and ‘that knows how to hold a result’. The person who carried this specific idea of the Belgian team was its coach, Raymond Goethals. A former goalkeeper, at ease with a certain media style, a fine tactician, he turned the Belgian squad into a team that was tactically anchored in modern football. Qualifying for the World Cup was his first achievement. In 1972, he led his team to the threshold of the final of the European Nations Cup and to the third place in the competition. This breakthrough in Belgian football also reflected an evolution in the domestic league and the transition to a professional club competition. The professional league was created in 1974.²⁰ During this decade, two clubs became part of the elite of European clubs: Sporting Anderlecht and Bruges Football Club. Anderlecht won the Cup Winners’ Cup in 1976 and 1978, and the UEFA Cup in 1983. It reached the Cup Winners’ Cup final in 1977, where it lost to Hamburg, and the UEFA Cup final, where it was defeated by Tottenham. Football Club Bruges reached the final of the Champion Clubs’ Cup in 1978, where it was defeated by Liverpool.

Paradoxically, however, the new status of Belgian football did not change the complex relationship with the performances in the World Cup. In 1970, the Belgian team was in a difficult group in the qualifiers. It included not only the modest Finland, but also Yugoslavia and Spain. Nevertheless, the Belgians performed well. Winning all three matches in Brussels, they were beaten in Belgrade but managed a draw in Spain and won in Helsinki. With an iron-clad defence and three talented players in the midfield and attack, Wilfried Van Moer, Paul Van Himst, and Raoul Lambert, expectations and hopes were high for the first time on the part of the federation, the media, and the fans. But disappointment and discord prevailed. Admittedly, Belgium won a World Cup match (against El Salvador) for the first time since 1930. Unfortunately, the Belgian team was then defeated by the USSR and then by Mexico, the host country. This last match was the object of the typical frustrations of this type of event. Mexico benefited from a very generously awarded penalty. But beyond this frustration, other elements were pinpointed to explain this latest failure. The first one was classic: a series of clashes between players from different clubs, in this case between Paul Van Himst (Sporting d’Anderlecht) and Raoul Lambert (Club Brugge). The second related to the political-social situation: misunderstandings and even disputes between French- and Dutch-speakers at all levels. Finally, a third one was strongly imagined: Belgians did not know how to travel. Belgian footballers, like Belgians, were said to be homebodies who could not bear long separations. This was often compared with the situation in the Netherlands, where players, like the flamboyant Johan Cruyff, often played for foreign clubs. In the twentieth century, few Belgian players spent any part of their career in a club outside Belgium.

This complex relationship with the World Cup was also reflected in the 1974 edition. In the qualifiers, Belgium had to face Iceland, Norway, and the Netherlands, considered to be one of the best – if not the best – teams in the world at that time. The Belgian team was strong. It won against Iceland and Norway, both in Brussels and in Oslo and Reykjavik. And, of course, there were the confrontations with the Dutch team. In Brussels, the teams were tied. In the last match in Amsterdam, the situation was simple: each team had the same number of points, but the Netherlands had a better goal average. Victory was essential. The Belgian team played a serious match, conceding the Dutch team few opportunities. A few minutes before time, the Belgian players scored a goal, which was cancelled for a very questionable offside. Without losing a match and conceding a single goal, Belgium did not qualify. The same happened in 1978, when Belgium was once again blocked by the Netherlands. The Dutch team was at the height of its glory in that decade and was often the executioner of the Belgian team: in 1974, at the European Championship, in 1976 where it blocked Belgium’s path to the semi-finals, and again in 1978. This became the most widely

commented fact. And for the organization of the World Cup in 1982, Belgium was placed in the same group as the Netherlands along with France. This time, the Belgian team did qualify for the tournament in Spain.

The historical, political, and sporting rivalry was at its zenith. The team to beat in football competitions, the one that gave every Belgian utmost satisfaction was win against the Dutch one. The Kaaskoppen ('cheese heads') must be defeated. The slogan was even chanted in French-speaking school playgrounds. No matter if the pupils did not even understand the meaning of the word, they knew that being called Kaaskop was a taunt bordering on an insult. The seventies and early eighties were a time of great emotion in this regard, mixing, as one would expect, deep disappointment and intense joy. Later on, this would continue to be the case. In 1994, in a group match for the World Cup, the victory against the Netherlands (1–0) brought intense collective happiness, which was further amplified by the festive mood of the then Prime Minister, Jean-Luc Dehaene.²¹ However, it is worth noting that from a Dutch perspective, while the matches against Belgium were important, the ultimate rival team and country became Germany.

Three cycle trend in Belgian football

The 1982 World Cup opened up a three-cycle trend for the Belgian national football team and, more broadly, for the relationship between Belgian society and football. The first cycle runs from 1982 to 2002. The second covers the period from the beginning of the twenty-first century to 2014 and the third one is still ongoing. The first sequence witnessed the full-fledged entry of Belgian football onto the international stage.

Emblematically, during the 1982 World Cup, Belgium experienced a first memorable moment. After one defeat and one victory, the Belgian team could not lose to the Hungarians. Trailing one goal to zero, the equalizer came late on a counterattack, punctuated by a missed shot that surprised the goalkeeper. This goal earned qualification for the team to the second round for the first time in 52 years. There was genuine popular celebration across the country. The second round was disastrous, but 'Czerniatynski's equalizer' in the first round brought joy and created a memory of the World Cup. This first collective memory, however, was nothing compared to the situation in 1986. The tournament was organized once again in Mexico and the Belgian team that had qualified was the object of greater media attention than ever. The first round was however disappointing. Beaten from the outset by Mexico, the *Diablos Rouges* won with difficulty against the modest Iraqis and could only manage a draw against the equally humble Paraguayans. Nevertheless, for the second time in a row, Belgium qualified for the round of 16. Thus began what in Belgium was experienced as an epic adventure. Unexpectedly, against the USSR, Belgium won a heroic match by 4–3. Reaching the quarterfinal was historic. Belgium held its own against Spain. At the end of a draw, the tie was broken in a breathtaking penalty shoot-out which the Belgian players overcame to reach the semi-finals. Despite a defeat against Diego Maradona's Argentina, these two victories were the subject of unprecedented collective celebrations in Belgium. They were the focus of lengthy reports and analyses. For the first time, Belgian society behaved in a way that had previously been the preserve of the great football nations: Germany, Italy, and Brazil. The first round was, of course, forgotten, as was the doubtful refereeing in favour of the Belgian team against the USSR. It was a celebration, a communion.

The 1990 edition generated exactly the opposite. The Belgian team was considered to be very good. They made it through the first round without too much trouble and faced England in the round of 16. Although the Belgian team dominated the game, they couldn't score and were crushed in the last minute of extra time. In this first cycle time span that extends until the 2006 World Cup, Belgium's football experienced both good times – the victory against the Netherlands in 1994 and against Russia in 2002 – and disappointments – the loss against Brazil in 2002. In general, however, the level of Belgian football underwent stagnation and decline, to a certain extent. Sponsors became worried at the alleged disintegration of the national team. Belgium was a disappointment at the

Euro 2000, which it co-hosted with the Netherlands. It failed to qualify for the 2004, 2008, and 2012 European Championships. And the same was true of the World Cup in 2006 and 2010. The community divide approach to football²² in Belgium was reasserted²³ and the economic model of the Belgian Football Union came under strain.

This morose phase is often presented in a metaphor with the evolution of Belgian society and in particular the internal political tensions symbolized by the very long delays in the formation of a government after the 2007 and 2010 elections. This long transitional stage nevertheless witnessed a succession of changes in the organization of football in Belgium. Clubs were slow to grasp the socio-economic and financial turning points in football and their inability to play a leading role in view of the increasing gap between top and subtop European clubs became apparent.²⁴ Gradually, however, several of them, Anderlecht and Standard de Liège, for example, developed their training centres considerably. Slowly, a number of young people from these training centres made national and very quickly international breakthroughs in the best English, Italian or German clubs. During the 2018 edition of the football World Cup, Anderlecht was the club with the most players in the tournament. This change had a major impact on the Belgian national team. From 2010 onwards, it was increasingly composed of players who were involved in the best leagues and, in some cases, even enjoyed star status. The team's level rose considerably. Belgium returned to the World Cup in 2014 and 2018 and the European Nations Championship in 2016 with a highly successful side.

The sporting performances of the national team began to improve radically. In the World Cup, the Belgian team reached the quarterfinals in 2014 and the semi-finals in 2018. The economic world's interest in the *Diables Rouges* had never been greater and, of course, collective emotions were back, in particular during the last-minute qualification against the Japanese team in 2018 and the victory against Brazil in the same edition. There was a spate of 'national pride',²⁵ which was rather rare in Belgium, despite a rather deadlocked and increasingly fragmented political system.²⁶

In terms of football standard, Belgium has come to acquire two faces. On the one hand, it has a low standard and increasingly unattractive club competition. This is due to the size of the country in relation to the significance of broadcasting rights in the budgets, but also, routinely, to the weakness and lack of professionalism of the governing structures of clubs. On the other hand, the Belgian national team is now one of the best in the world, made up almost exclusively of players playing abroad, reaching first place in the FIFA ranking and considered to be the most bankable. It is now praised for its diversity, considered to be a source of success²⁷ whereas the first internationals of Italian descent had sometimes been mocked.²⁸ Now the Belgian team is regarded as a vector of soft power and even of commercial strength.

In 2018, the World Cup also witnessed an evolution in rivalries. The Belgian-Dutch derby's importance has tended to diminish over time, particularly in the French-speaking world. Nowadays, it is the rivalry with France and the French team that has become more intense. It was fully on display in the semi-final. But this was, after all, only the manifestation of an evolution. This development has a different impact in Flanders than in the French-speaking world. In the Dutch-speaking part of the country, the antipathy towards France has a double political dimension. There is reticence towards French language and influence. Moreover, in several sectors of society there is hostility towards the country of the Enlightenment and the ideals of the French revolution. For Bart De Wever, president of the Flemish Independence Party (N-VA), the leading thinker – his 'personal hero' – is Edmund Burke.²⁹ In the francophone part of the country, the rivalry also goes beyond sports and reflects the love-hate relationship many French-speaking Belgians have with France. This sports rivalry has grown in parallel with the rise of France as a sporting nation, particularly in football. For example, many Belgians were delighted to see the French side fail to qualify for the 1994 World Cup against the Bulgarian team on 17 December 1993, when at exactly the same time the Belgian squad was qualifying. Let us now take a closer look at the 2018 World Cup and its many connections to Belgian society.

2018 World Cup: all together!

3 September 2017: the Belgian national side defeated the Greeks in Athens to become the first European team to qualify on the field for the 2018 World Cup. While there was no doubt that the fans and the Belgian sports press were delighted despite both the weakness of the team and the opposition they faced, it was still a far cry from the memorable scenes that marked the most recent qualification for the 2014 edition. At the time, the players had been branded the heroes of an entire nation by the French-speaking Belgians. They were the only ones able to hold together a country heading straight for a political crisis that was to lead to its split under the effect of an increasingly pervasive Flemish nationalism. This return to grace of a Belgian team that was still unloved a few years earlier could be explained both by the positive results of a young generation of talented footballers and by the impact of the communication strategy put in place around them. The Diables Rouges became the actors of a real marketing phenomenon, with sponsors and brands jostling to see their name associated with the national squad or with one or other of its players.³⁰

Four years later, however, it has to be said that the 'Diables Rouges effect' has faded, if not at the commercial level, then at least at the socio-political one. And even though Flemish demands are still strong – the Flemish nationalist party N-VA is part of the federal government and tops political polls in Flanders³¹ – and the tensions between the two linguistic communities are still very much alive. This is an argument in favour of those who questioned the status of 'saviours of the nation' from the outset. Moreover, the Diables face new competition from other Belgian sporting 'heroes' with the exploits of the men's hockey team and the heptathlete Naffisatou Thiam at the Rio 2016 Olympic Games, winning respectively silver and gold medals in their field.³² This competition extended even beyond simple sporting achievements to touch the national symbolism with the Brabançonne. Thus, during Naffisatou Thiam's medal ceremony, the whole of Belgium was able to see a proud athlete with gold around her neck and tears in her eyes, singing the national anthem in front of millions of television viewers.³³ And at each of their matches, the Red Lions left the oft used 'multilingual cacophony' argument in the locker room, singing alternately a verse in Dutch and one in French. These symbolic patriotic moments were in total contrast to the image of most of the Diables Rouges, focused, unconcerned, and closed-mouthed when the national anthem played.

Nevertheless, the population's enthusiasm a short time before the start of the Russian World Cup was very palpable. Especially after the debacle in Lille and the elimination in the quarter-finals of Euro 2016 against modest Wales, which resembled a mini-crisis with the dismissal of coach Marc Wilmots and the recruitment of the as yet-little-known Roberto Martinez by the Belgian Union. This choice seemed at the time to be a plan B, and a practical solution to the language issue. Being neither Flemish nor Walloon, he could meet with the unanimous approval of both Dutch and French speakers. Furthermore, while some people saw this decision as proof of a willingness to put an end to criticism of the quality of play of the national team, others regarded it as yet another illustration of the almost institutionalized amateurism of the federation, which, unable to attract a first-rate coach, opted for the first candidate ready to sign. The World Cup in Russia thus appeared to be an event of both sporting and social confirmation. Could this team go down in football history or would it remain a 'promising young team'? At a time when shared moments in the population were becoming increasingly rare, could the Diables Rouges' games be an exception and recreate a bond?

With a group considered on paper to be 'manageable', Belgium, ranked first by FIFA and regarded as an underdog, didn't fail in its first few matches. Meanwhile, the mood in the country rose crescendo, all the more so with the elimination of Germany and the weakness of the likely title contenders. The dynamic style of play of the Diables Rouges boosted the hopes of the Belgian fans, for whom a defeat against Japan in the round of 16 was unthinkable. However, sixty minutes into the game, deception and despair were evident on the faces of the thousands of fans gathered in front of the giant TV screens and television sets: the Blue Samurai were leading by two goals against a Belgian team that seemed dull and powerless to change the situation. The bitter memory of Lille

was on every mind, and the partisan frustration, including among sports commentators,³⁴ was even directed at the national coach, whose offensive system had been praised during the group phase. However, Belgium scored twice, and in an epic game, snatched victory on a lightning counterattack at the last minute when it looked as though the game was heading for extra time. Besides relief, the country was swept from North to South by a black-yellow-red football fever. Even the Brussels public transport company STIB³⁵ was caught up in the game and so the metro station ‘Hankar’ was renamed ‘Hankar de finale’ (a word play on ‘quarter final’, as Hankar sounds identical to *en quart*), and ‘Belgica’ became ‘Belgic Ampioen’ (campion meaning champion in Dutch) only minutes after the final whistle.³⁶ Later on, other stations or stops in the Brussels public transport network were also renamed in step with the World Cup – both in Dutch and in French! – ‘Demey’ became ‘Demey-finale’ (a reference to semi-finals), ‘Merode’ became ‘MeRode Duivels’ (a play on the name of the Diable Rouges in Dutch Rode Duivels).³⁷ This creative cheering-on was copied by the English and French public transport companies,³⁸ rival nations during the competition.

The fever reached yet another level on the day of the quarterfinal between Belgium and Brazil. The whole country seemed to be living as one in the hours leading up to kick-off,³⁹ with the traditional ‘goodbye’ or ‘good day’ being replaced by enthusiastic and partisan ‘good matches’. When thousands of fans invade town squares or assemble in their living rooms to support their team through the screen, they seemed to be animated by a genuine World Cup final feeling. Despite the Diables Rouges leading two goals to zero after half an hour of play, joy gradually gave way to palpable stress with each passing minute, all the more so as the Brazilians narrowed the gap with a quarter of an hour to go before the final whistle and increasingly set out to attack the Belgian goal. The Diables bent but didn’t break. After the Seleçao was denied a penalty (which was celebrated like a goal by the black-yellow-red fans) and Thibaut Courtois’ final save, the three final whistle blows liberated an entire nation. In Brussels, Liege, Antwerp, in every town square in the country, Belgians flocked to celebrate together for hours what many see as a dream: “‘little’ Belgium has beaten the ‘legendary’ Brazil’.”⁴⁰

Even the most sceptical fans started being won over by the euphoria and were beginning to think that the Diables Rouges might well lift the world trophy on 15 July. But to do so, they would have to beat a long-time rival in the semi-finals: France. If the footballing enmity – especially perceptible on the Belgian French-speaking side – was expressed at first through good-natured humour, as is common between opposing teams, the Diables Rouges’ defeat by the slimmest of margins against the pragmatic Bleus made way for an uncommon animosity and misplaced pride on the part of Belgians who like to portray themselves as friendly, welcoming, and unassuming. In cafes or on the streets, and especially on social media, conversations and publications took on anti-French and sometimes hateful tones, as if Belgians, who are usually prone to self-deprecation, especially in defeat, were in fact sore losers. This unusual attitude was also apparent among the players of the Belgian squad in the post-game interviews.⁴¹ The match was obviously not over on social media because after the French press dubbed this behaviour ‘seum’,⁴² there was a ‘war’ of words and especially of emoticons, with Les Bleus fans using the Belgian flag to replace the term, while the Belgians retaliated by using the French flag as a substitute for ‘jerk’.⁴³ This tension was further heightened by France’s victory in the final and by the comments made by some players on the Belgian and French sides. This was still evident a few months later at the launch of the Nations League⁴⁴ or during the Euro 2020⁴⁵ qualifiers, despite the fact of two teams not even playing each other!

Nevertheless, the Belgians intended to celebrate their national team and this historic third place. Supporters from all over the country converged on Brussels to fill the Grand Place and its adjacent streets with black-yellow-red. More than 40,000 people assembled there to cheer and celebrate the Diables Rouges, as well as thousands of others who followed the continuous live coverage on Belgian public and private television stations.⁴⁶ On the Sunday of 15 July, it was hard to believe that thousands of kilometres away, a World Cup final would soon begin. For many, the ‘real’ World Champions came back home. Their return allowed both the players to commune with their fans and the Belgian people to ‘celebrate’ all together, united. A new form of self-confidence could be seen in

the songs, in the comments of the fans interviewed on television, and especially in the few sentences uttered by the players on the balcony of the Brussels Town Hall. At times, this could seem arrogant, and quite unusual for the ‘little’ Belgians.

Unlike the political hijacking that the Diables Rouges suffered during the previous World Cup,⁴⁷ this was barely the case during both the qualifying round and the 2018 World Cup. Indeed, following the new federal government formed around a majority made up of French-speaking liberals and Flemish nationalists, the political world seemed to have become somewhat more detached from the game of football. Even what appeared to be a failed attempt at political recuperation – Didier Reynders, the Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs, ‘crashing’ the team photo of the bronze medallists – went almost unnoticed save for some irony on social media.⁴⁸

The political-football pair had rather a negative image, particularly in reference to the ‘National Stadium’ fiasco. The ‘Eurostadium’ project was launched in 2013 and consisted in the construction of a new football stadium that would eventually house the national team games. This allowed Belgium to bid for⁴⁹ and be selected by the UEFA to host some of the Euro 2020 matches⁵⁰ – which would exceptionally be played in different European cities – as long as construction would have been finished by June 2018. Although the project was mainly driven by ministers from Brussels, the new stadium was set to be built on car park C of the Heysel, which is in the Flemish Region! Given the distribution of competences between federal entities in Belgium it was up to the Flemish Government and other Flemish authorities to decide on the various ins and outs of the project. Needless to say, linguistic and communal quarrels arose after the green light to start construction was repeatedly turned orange by the decisions of Flemish ministers or of the Flemish municipal authorities. On the French-speaking side, there was even talk of ‘sabotage’ by Flemish nationalists.⁵¹ The project got bogged down, and in December 2017 the UEFA had no other choice but to cancel the country’s bid to host the event⁵² since the stadium was still only a plan on paper and remained so in the end. The Eurostadium was then depicted as the symbol of everything that was plaguing the country: community conflicts, linguistic quarrels, the inability to dialogue between the different levels of power because of the complicated institutional structure, and in the background, a kind of amateurism that seems to affect all spheres of Belgian society.⁵³

While racism – even at the intra-national level between Flemish and Walloons!⁵⁴ – is clearly making a comeback in the stadiums of Belgian clubs, ethnicity seems to be completely absent when it comes to the national team. For example, while the so-called ‘Africanness’ of the French team resurfaced after its victory, often mentioned in a negative and controversial way,⁵⁵ the origin or skin colour of the current Diables Rouges has never been discussed. Nonetheless, the ethnicity-based rhetoric used to describe Les Bleus as an ‘African team’ could also apply to the Belgian national team. Indeed, although all its players were born on Belgian soil, many of them have an immigrant background – particularly Moroccan and Congolese – and could even have played for their parents’ or grandparents’ national teams. Yet this is not even used as an easy and fallacious argument by detractors in the event of a backlash. The applause metre on the Grand Place confirms this fact, with Lukaku, Chadli – ‘scorer-savior’ against Japan – and above all Kompany receiving more applause than some of their team-mates. Whether their names are Hazard, Vertonghen, Batshuyayi or Fellaini, by wearing the national jersey, they simply represent Belgium in all its diversity, thereby strengthening the feeling of identification and belonging. For Roberto Martinez, who calls the national team a ‘mirror of the Belgian population’, this cultural and social patchwork is an advantage and an important factor in the great adaptability of Belgians abroad. Thanks to their ‘openness to the world’, it may be easier for Belgians to cope with being ‘jostled in their traditions’.⁵⁶

Conclusion

With a historic third place – and the honorary title of ‘most beautiful team’ awarded in part by the Belgian fans – the Diables Rouges lived up to the sporting expectations placed in them. Along with this athletic factor, the strong representativeness of the team, which embodies the Belgian social and

cultural mix, helped create a bond and transformed each of their games into a moment of sharing and fellowship for the Belgian people. However, as was the case four years earlier, it was clear that the durability of Belgium's unity does not rest on the exploits of the Diables Rouges – even though some politicians do seem to see them as diplomats on spikes. Nonetheless, football once again crystallized the phenomena that underpin the dynamics of a society at any given time. For example, for Belgians who have a strong tradition of carnival every sporting event is an excuse to celebrate, as fans in both the North and South sing in the language of Vondel 'Waar is da feestje? Hier is da feestje?'⁵⁷

Furthermore, on the French-speaking side, while each new election seems to carry with it the spectre of Belgium's near end, the World Cup not only allowed for an 'All together!' self-celebration whatever be the language, but also provided an opportunity to affirm a new way of approaching one's 'Belgianness'. This cannot be simply summed up in the simple 'Diables Rouges effect'. In fact, for several years now, 'Made in Belgium' has enjoyed a certain success and international recognition, especially in France.⁵⁸ As a result, whether in literature, music, or cinema, being Belgian is no longer a 'disadvantage' that must be overcome in order to succeed; it is rather perceived as a factor of success. A 'little' pride has gradually grown among francophones in the flat country, at the risk of sometimes seeming more chauvinistic than the French neighbour. A feeling was thus crystallized during the World Cup, in the reactions before and after the game against the French team: for once, the Belgians thought they could be the best! Therefore, although they failed to save Belgium, the Diables Rouges nevertheless seem to be contributing to and consolidating the emergence of a reinvented and uninhibited Belgianness. What if they had allowed Belgium to no longer 'just be'?

Notes

1. Delheye, Knuts, and Ameye, 'London is just around the corner', 738.
2. Ameye, Gils and Delheye, 'Daredevils and Early Birds', 207.
3. Guldemont, *Toute l'histoire du football belge*, 13.
4. Mandl, 'Victor Boin', 45.
5. Dietschy, *Histoire du football*, 135.
6. D'Amado, 'Montevideo 1930' 857.
7. *Het Handelsblad*, July 19, 1930.
8. *Le journal de Charleroi*, July 28, 1930.
9. *L'Etoile belge*, July 23, 1930.
10. *Los Angeles Times*, June 27, 1986.
11. *La Libre Belgique*, May 27, 1934.
12. *La Libre Belgique*, May 25, 1934.
13. *Le Drapeau rouge*, June 23, 1934.
14. 'Et l' URSS remporta la coupe du monde ... du foot ouvrier en 1934', *SoFoot Blog*, July 1, 2018.
15. *Le Drapeau rouge*, August 25, 1934.
16. *Le Peuple*, June 6, 1938.
17. *Le vingtième siècle*, June 7, 1938.
18. *L'Indépendance belge*, June 7, 1938.
19. *Le Peuple*, June 5, 1938.
20. Dejonghe et al., 'The Netherlands and Belgium', 411.
21. Jean-Luc Dehaene, a Christian-Democrat and football aficionado, had expressed his joy in Vilvorde. Beyond his genuine happiness he had also wanted to show that he was not dismayed by his failure to be designated at the head of the European Commission because of the British government's veto. He had exceptionally allowed TV crews into his home.
22. Delwit, 'Partis et systèmes de partis en Belgique en perspective'.
23. Cassimeris, 'Football and prejudice in Belgium and the Netherlands', 1332.
24. Dejonghe, 'Restructuring the Belgian Professional Football League', 76.
25. Rihoux et al., 'Belgium', 43.
26. Delwit & Lebrun, 'Partis et systèmes de partis en Belgique en perspective'.
27. Martiniello and Boucher, 'The colours of Belgium'.
28. Beaud, 'Les équipes européennes de football au prisme de l'immigration et des enjeux de nationalité, juridique et sportive', 82.

29. Bart De Wever, 'Intellectuele eerlijkheid', *De Standaard*, August 16, 2003.
30. For a more detailed analysis, see De Waele and Sterck, 'Les Diables rouges', 158–162.
31. 'Grand Baromètre: la N-VA en forme, Theo Francken superstar', *Le Soir*, September 8, 2017.
32. Philippe Vande Weyer, 'Si je peux inspirer les gens, je suis super-contente', *Le Soir*, September 5, 2016.
33. A.L., 'Nafi Thiam et sa médaille d'or inattendue, un grand moment d'émotion', *Le Soir*, August 14, 2016.
34. Guillaume Guibert, 'Michel Lecomte sur les commentaires de Rodrigo Beenkens: "Cela fait partie des moments d'exception"', *RTBF*, July 3, 2018. https://www.rtbf.be/info/medias/detail_michel-lecomte-sur-les-commentaires-de-rodrigo-cela-fait-partie-des-moments-d-exception-autour-d-une-equipe-exceptionnelle?id=9962753.
35. Société des transports intercommunaux de Bruxelles, the main public transportation operator in the Brussels Region.
36. 'Belgica . . . mpioen Hankar de finale: la STIB rebaptise ses stations en l'honneur de la victoire des Diables', *RTBF*, July 3, 2018. https://www.rtbf.be/info/medias/detail_belgica-mpioen-hankar-de-finale-la-stib-rebaptise-ses-stations-en-l-honneur-de-la-victoire-des-diables?id=9962843.
37. "En demey finale", "Merode duivels", la STIB soutient les Diables rouges à sa manière', *RTBF*, July 3, 2018. https://www.rtbf.be/info/regions/detail_en-demey-finale-merode-duivels-la-stib-soutient-les-diables-rouges-a-sa-maniere?id=9966548.
38. Arièle Bonte, 'Coupe du Monde 2018: la RATP renomme 6 stations de métro après la victoire des Bleus', *RTL*, July 16, 2018. <https://www.rtl.fr/sport/football/coupe-du-monde-2018-la-ratp-renomme-6-stations-de-metro-apres-la-victoire-des-bleus-7794131158>.
39. Mathieu Colinet and Corentin Di Prima, 'Pourquoi la Belgique a les Diables rouges au corps', *Le Soir*, July 6, 2018.
40. Jennifer Dassy, 'Ce n'est pas un rêve, c'est la réalité': la presse belge exulte après la victoire des Diables', *Le Soir*, July 7, 2018; 'Cette Belgique réunie par la grâce du football', *Le Soir*, July 9, 2018.
41. 'Thibaut Courtois: "La France n'a joué que de l'anti-football"', *Le Soir*, July 11, 2018.
42. From the Arabic word 'semm' meaning venom.
43. 'Les Belges "champions du monde du seum" répliquent sur les réseaux sociaux', July 20, 2018.
44. 'Les Français se moquent des Diables après leur lourde défaite contre la Suisse (5–2): "Un nouveau seum belge"', *Le Soir*, November 19, 2018; E.M., 'Les Français moqués après leur élimination de la Nations League: le seum a changé de camp', *Le Soir*, November 19, 2018.
45. "'T'as le seum": les internautes français se déchaînent sur Thibaut Courtois après sa bourde contre la Russie', *Le Soir*, March 21, 2019.
46. 'Environ 40.000 supporters ont fait la fête avec les Diables rouges à Bruxelles', *Le Soir*, July 15, 2018.
47. For further details, see De Waele and Sterck, 'Les Diables rouges', 162–164.
48. 'Didier Reynders s'invite sur la photo des Diables rouges lors de la remise des prix', *Le Soir*, July 14, 2018; Bernard Demonty, 'Diables rouges: Didier Reynders à l'attaque, Charles Michel en défense et le Roi au milieu', *Le Soir*, July 16, 2018.
49. 'EURO 2020: l'UEFA évalue positivement la candidature de Bruxelles', *Le Soir*, September 10, 2014.
50. 'Bruxelles sélectionnée parmi les 13 villes hôtes de l'Euro 2020', *Le Soir*, September 14, 2014.
51. 'Stade: Bruxelles dénonce le "sabotage" de la N-VA', *Le Soir*, March 30, 2017.
52. 'Stade national: Bruxelles n'accueillera aucun match de l'Euro 2020', *Le Soir*, December 7, 2017.
53. 'Le stade national, symbole de tous les maux belges', *Le Soir*, December 8, 2017.
54. Danvoy, 'Cacophonie'; 'Bruges-Standard: une banderole polémique contre les fans liégeois', *Le Soir*, August 28, 2016. For further details, see also De Waele and Sterck, 'Belgium', 28–29.
55. Balla Fofana, 'A l'étranger, polémiques racistes autour de la victoire de l'équipe de France', *Libération*, July 18, 2018; Robin Korda, 'Les Bleus, une "équipe africaine" ? Les chiffres qui démontent les clichés', *Le Parisien*, July 19, 2018; 'Les plaisanteries sur l' "africanité" des Bleus font bondir la diplomatie française', *Reuters*, July 19, 2018; Balla Fofana, "L'Afrique gagnante du Mondial": le "en même temps" de Trevor Noah', *Libération*, July 20, 2018.
56. Bricmont and Gautier, 'Je vis pour connaître cette sensation de faire trembler les filets'.
57. Literally 'Where's the party? Here's the party!'
58. *Les Belges ça ose tout !*. Directed by Olivier Monssens. France/Belgium, 2017; *J'adore les Belges*. Directed by Gilles Mall and Marc Ball. Belgium, 2018.

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