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To cite this article: Pascal Delwit (08 Feb 2024): Kicking off passion: the birth and rise of football in Belgium (1880-1914), Soccer & Society, DOI: [10.1080/14660970.2024.2313965](https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2024.2313965)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2024.2313965>



Published online: 08 Feb 2024.



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Kicking off passion: the birth and rise of football in Belgium (1880-1914)

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the early advent and evolution of football in Belgium until WWI, highlighting the crucial role played by British expatriates and the influence of Catholic and State schools.

It traces football's journey from an elite pastime to a 'popular' sport, articulating football development to prominent cleavages in the society, especially Church-State and Economic divides. The paper delves into the challenges of establishing football in Belgian society, including issues of numerous practical problems, amateurism vs. professionalism, the role of Belgians in the establishment of FIFA and the football's contribution to national identity pre-WWI.

In Central and Latin America, Europe, Africa and parts of Asia, football has established itself as the most widely played and popular modern sport. Much has been written and analysed about the role of the United Kingdom in the birth and development of modern sport, and football is no exception.¹ But when it comes to the birthplace of football, there is some debate in the literature as to whether the sport did in fact originate in England and Scotland.² And the extent to which public schools are seen as the main incubators has been questioned³ or reaffirmed by some authors.⁴ But However, all agree that the part played by the United Kingdom in popularizing and charting⁵ modern sport is undisputed.⁶

Indeed, Belgium is proof of this dynamic. Independent since 1830, the country is within easy reach of the British coastline and enjoys close relations with the United Kingdom.

Although Belgians traditionally looked to gymnastics as a means of keeping fit, modern sport arrived on the scene fairly early in the country's history, and the English played a key role in exporting such sports to Belgium. By the close of the 19th century, a national football competition had been set up and a 'Belgian team' took part in the football tournament at the 1900 Olympic Games to demonstrate the sport to the assembled crowds.

As outlined above, much has been written about the early history of football in various countries. However, such comprehensive coverage is much less common when it comes to Belgium. A mere handful of pioneering papers have been published, all of which link the birth of Belgian football to cleavages in society.⁷

In the academic community, interest in modern sport and, more specifically, football, has hitherto been limited and it has proven difficult to piece together the story of football in Belgium, since very few clubs have kept archives from the period before 1914. The same is true of the Belgian Football Federation, despite the fact that it appointed an archivist as far back as 1902.⁸ Its archives are deposited in the General State Archives and are very incomplete for the period up to 1914. In

spite of these challenges, this article will endeavour to look back at the birth and development of football in Belgium from the late 1870's until the outbreak of World War I.

Two periods in the development of football in Belgium have been identified. The first extends from the birth of football to the early years of the 20th century. It is characterized by the pivotal role played by schools and pupils in the emergence of the sport and by the strong influence of the British. It is also marked by football's highly elite nature.⁹ The second phase covers the 10 years preceding WWI, during which football was consolidated, spread and popularized for the first time in Belgium. It also testifies to the vital role played by various Belgian players in the European and international debate surrounding football.

Given that football was still in its infancy, it follows that it was not immune to the issues and divisions with which Belgian society was having to grapple at the time: the significance of the Nation State-Church cleavage¹⁰ which pitted Catholic leaders and religious organizations against the Liberals and Socialists, the growing importance of the language issue when it came to Dutch being placed on an equal footing with French, and social unrest.¹¹ The latter encompasses various facets of the world of work, including wages, working hours, working conditions, paid leave, and more.

1. Football takes off

In the 19th century, several Belgian towns had their own British community. As a country exposed to the continental industrial revolution, Belgium had a large number of British workers engaged in economic, financial and commercial affairs.¹² Many ended up migrating to Belgium, where housing and living costs were often lower than in Great Britain. This community was concentrated in a few cities: Brussels,¹³ Liège, Antwerp and, above all, Bruges, where there was a particularly high number of British residents.¹⁴ 'Throughout the nineteenth century, Bruges was a city of Englishmen', as Stengers observes.¹⁵

This community witnessed the type of modern sport practised across the Channel¹⁶ and it was brought across the water by Belgians visiting Great Britain. Initially, as in other national contexts,¹⁷ young British pupils attending colleges or athénées, the state schools, introduced their classmates to the new sports being played across the Channel and taught them the rules of the game. The first example of football being played in Belgium was at Melle-lez-Gand College, near Ghent. There, in 1863, a young Irish pupil by the name of Cyril Bernard Morrogh showed his classmates how to play football,¹⁸ in what may have been the first demonstration of the sport on the continent.¹⁹ In truth, however, it is impossible to know whether this was a first in Belgium or in Europe. Some also claim that the first football club was founded in Spa.²⁰ At any rate, it is a fact that, little by little, football found its way into a number of colleges and athénées, along with other sports such as cricket, rowing, hockey and lawn tennis.

The aforementioned sports moved from the school playing fields into other areas in the last quarter of the century, as British residents began to set up sports societies and play sport at the weekend. The clubs were English-run, and included Cercle des Régates in Brussels,²¹ Antwerp Football Club²² and Brussels Football Club,²³ which, very early on, organized matches against English teams during the Easter²⁴ and Summer holidays, particularly in the upmarket seaside resort of Ostend.²⁵ In 1896, *Le Véloce* even referred to an all-women's team, the British Ladies Football Club.²⁶

At the beginning of the 1890's, a mix of nationalities began to emerge in these new sports, as Belgian and international pupils joined their British co-religionists in sporting activities. Gradually, young pupils and students in other areas also began to take up football. In Brussels, teenagers from Harlock and Jenkins colleges played football on Sundays in the Ten Bosch Park,²⁷ attracting curious onlookers. Some non-exclusively British clubs sprung up, most of which were established by teenagers or very young adults. Catholic colleges were a key breeding ground, in particular the Colleges of Melle, Saint-Bernard, Saint-Michel, Saint Servais, the Institute Saint-Louis, the Institute

Saint-François-Xavier, and others besides. Clergymen who had visited British public schools introduced sports into the curriculum of their colleges.²⁸ More often than not, the clubs created were multi-sport and grew directly out of the schools.

In some countries, modern sports were slow to catch on in state schools, though this was²⁹ not the case in Belgium. Here, the training of the elite was divided along philosophical and religious lines. Football and multi-sport clubs were also founded in athénées, such as Liège Football Club, which later changed its name to Football Club Liégeois (Athénée of Liège), Football Club Brugeois (Athénée of Bruges), Racing Club de Malines (Athénée of Malines), Racing club arlonais (Athénée of Arlon), Ixelles Football Club (Athénée of Ixelles) and Union sportive tournaïenne (Athénée of Tournai).

As in other countries, football in Belgium developed first and foremost in the cities, which were known as the 'laboratories of modernity'.³⁰ The elite and the British community lived there. Football first began to take off in Brussels, where several clubs or football sections within all-purpose clubs were founded at the turn of the 1880's and 1890's. In 1888, the Athletic & Running Club of Brussels was established and included a football section. In 1890, Racing Club de Bruxelles was founded as an athletics society, opening a football section in 1894. After a difficult start, Union Football Club d'Ixelles emerged in 1892, whilst in 1893, Léopold Club de Bruxelles was founded. This club set out to be the best representative of British sport, while limiting the number of foreign players from the outset.³¹ The Club was the aristocratic and bourgeois elite's club *par excellence*, even gaining the endorsement of the reigning King Leopold II, who agreed to lend his name to the club at the request of his officer-in-charge, Robert Reyntiens, the club's president.³² The dynamic continued with the emergence of Ixelles Football Club, which soon became Sporting Club de Bruxelles, but this sporting society ceased its activities in 1897. Clubs set up at a later date included Daring Club de Bruxelles (1895), Intrépide Football Club (1896), Rapiditas Football Club Molenbeek (1896), Skill Football Club (1896), Olympia Football Club (1897), Kahn Athletic Club (1897), Sporting Club de Schaerbeek (1897) and Union Saint-Gilloise (1897).

Outside Brussels, some towns also expressed an interest in football. In Ghent, young Belgian and English schoolchildren set up Football Club Gantois, Union pédestre de Gand (1885) and Athletic Club Gantois (1887), which merged into a single group on 1 April 1899: Racing Club de Gand,³³ which, for a long time, remained the main football club in the city. Association athlétique La Gantoise was founded in 1864, although its football section was not created until 1900,³⁴ mainly on the initiative of pupils from the Melle College. In Liège, home to an English community which enjoyed contacts with the Cockerill Company,³⁵ Liège Football Club, quickly renamed Football Club Liégeois, was founded in 1892. This was followed by Verviers Football Club in 1896, Huy Football Club in 1896, Dolhain Football Club in 1898 and Standard Football Club in 1898, which was soon renamed Standard Football Club Liégeois. In Bruges, the first club, Brugsche Football Club, was founded in 1890 by pupils or former pupils of the Royal Athenaeum of Bruges and the Xaverian Brothers College. However, the club quickly fell out of favour when Football Club Brugeois was established. For the latter, the use of French was essential in order to show and prove that you belonged to the upper echelons of society.³⁶ Nevertheless, the two clubs soon reunited and kept the name Football Club Brugeois. On 9 April 1899, a rival club, Cercle Sportif Brugeois, was set up. Interestingly, this had more to do with political and social action by the Catholic community than any drive on the part of pupils or students to form a club. Cercle Sportif Brugeois, part of the town's Catholic Circle,³⁷ was made up of players from the Xaverian Brothers College.³⁸ Young Catholics in the city who wanted to play modern sports had to do so at the *Cercle*. Finally, in Antwerp, Antwerp Football Club fell out of favour and the year 1900 saw the creation of a very upmarket rival club, Beerschot Athletic Club.

In the early 1890's, the creation of these sports societies opened up the question of playing matches further afield. Outside of school, the newly formed teams had to face the challenge of finding teams to compete against, although the situation in Brussels was a little easier. After an initial attempt to establish an Association Football League for Belgium³⁹ in the summer of 1895,

some clubs agreed to set up an umbrella organization. The Union belge des sociétés de sports athlétiques (UBSSA) was founded on November 1st, bringing together 10 clubs. A competition was planned: a Belgian football championship, known for a time as the *Belgian Cup*. This was made possible by the relatively small size of the country – just over 30,000 km² – its highly urban features,⁴⁰ the existence of a well-developed railway network that ran through the main centres of the country, and an initial focus on just a few towns. Seven clubs took part in the first championship: Football Club Brugeois, Antwerp Football Club, Football Club Liégeois, Léopold Club de Bruxelles, Racing Club de Bruxelles, Sporting Club de Bruxelles and Union Football Club d'Ixelles.

Setting up inter-club competitions was not the only step taken to institutionalize football in Belgium. In 1898, a tournament was launched, pitting the country's university teams against each other: the Football Club de l'Université de Louvain,⁴¹ the Football Club Universitaire de Liège and the football section of the Université libre de Bruxelles founded the Fédération Athlétique des Universités Belges in November 1898.⁴² For a time, the fact that this federation existed implicitly challenged the UBSSA in its role as the governing body of football in Belgium. In turn, the UBSSA challenged this federation through the press.⁴³ Soon after, the federation integrated the UBSSA. Subsequently, a team from the Université de Gand, the Students Football Club d'Anvers and the Football Club des étudiants de Gembloux were included in the competition.⁴⁴

As in France,⁴⁵ the army also had a role to play in the birth of football. At the dawn of the 20th century, the Prince Albert Cup, which was a competition devoted specifically to football, was launched,⁴⁶ and it gradually became a regular competition.

Alongside the championship organized by the UBSSA or the university competition, Belgian clubs took part in tournaments, regularly competing against foreign clubs, or in gala marches. Winning cups and medals⁴⁷ was like a race for the Holy Grail, with the press devoting pages of coverage to trophies and medals.

In Belgium, international meetings were an early fixture. Even before the launch of a national competition, English teams were invited to compete in several of the games in Antwerp, Ostend, Liège or Brussels. Initially, these were matches between English clubs and teams of English people living in Belgium. 'Belgian' clubs carried on the tradition. Most of them tried to organize or take part in matches and, soon, tournaments involving foreign teams, especially from England, France and the Netherlands, began taking place. Several factors made it easier to organize these tournaments or meetings. Firstly, distance: as outlined earlier, Belgium is a small country bordering on Great Britain, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Germany. It had good rail links, which are crucial for football.⁴⁸ London, Lille, Paris, Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Cologne could all be reached at relatively little expense without players having to cover huge distances. Additionally, many Belgian industrialists and aristocrats had established relationships or routine engagements in these cities, and they sometimes even sponsored these international matches or tournaments.

The aforementioned sporting events offered several advantages. They provided a break from the monotony of home and away games inside Belgium. Outside of the Brussels area, clubs had limited options when it came to finding a fresh team to play against, so facing off against a foreign club offered a new challenge and a break from routine. It was also an opportunity to observe and learn from the football played by rival teams and players, especially if they were British. From 1899 to 1901, Football Club Brugeois, Daring Club de Bruxelles, Racing Club de Bruxelles and Léopold Club de Bruxelles took part in the *Challenge internationale du nord*, where they challenged French, English, Dutch and German teams.⁴⁹ For their part, Belgian teams regularly played against clubs from northern France.⁵⁰

International trips, to countries such as England, France, Germany, and the Netherlands, served as both educational and recreational experiences⁵¹ for the young athletes in the nascent years of Belgian football. Additionally, these international fixtures helped to fill the calendar during the extended off-seasons. Originally, the championship season ran from late September to March, leaving a sizable gap in the schedule. To fill this void, numerous tournaments were organized in the spring, particularly after interclub competitions were over.

Finally, the issue of resources was gradually becoming a key factor in international matches and tournaments. Travelling to play a rival team at their ground or hosting one yourself was not cheap. Attracting a foreign club, especially a well-known English team, could also potentially boost the number of supporters in the stands, even if everything had to remain 'select'.⁵² Consequently, matches soon became ticketed events. As a result, these competitions could serve as a steady source of income, even though financial outcomes were initially quite unpredictable. In the early 20th Century, a trend towards larger crowds and improved infrastructure further expanded the potential for generating revenue from these international matches.

A litany of problems

In the early days of Belgian football, a series of problems made it hard to organize competitions and for clubs to survive. For several years, the main issue was finding a suitable pitch.⁵³ Clubs had several difficulties with which to contend: the pitch had to be the right size, and the team needed to be able to access it on match day and during training sessions. It must be accessible by public transport and not too costly to rent. Matches and training sessions must not disturb the locals. Ideally, a nearby shop or café should also be available for players to change into their kits and possibly freshen up. For most of the teams, instability was the rule in those first few years. Following the example of Racing Club de Gand, Kahn Athletic Club or Football Club Liégeois, some teams played in the central space of a velodrome, of which there were many in Belgium.⁵⁴ In Liège, the Football Club was even founded by young people active in the Liège Cyclist's Union.⁵⁵ But more often than not, the teams rented a field, setting up and dismantling the goals each time they used it. For new clubs or teams, it was not unusual for there to be one or more trees, or even animals, to contend with. Many clubs changed their pitch every year, sometimes even during the season.

Another pervasive issue was the inconsistent number of players available for matches. Many were often injured or had other responsibilities, leading to situations where teams arrived with only 10, 9, or even 8 players. It was not unusual for them not to be on time, or fail to arrive at all, because of transport problems. Fines were legion. To mitigate these problems, the UBSSA introduced geographic pooling for the championships from 1901, with the idea that the season would culminate in a final match between the winners of these pools. However, this system was abandoned in 1904.

To add another layer of complexity, the youthfulness of the players, who were about to enter the world of work, adversely affected the stability of the clubs. Many players would depart after only a few weeks or months, often due to work commitments or other obligations. As a result, many teams struggled with high turnover rates and some ultimately disbanded.

Learning from the 'sportsman' and fair play... or the lack of it

In the early years of football competitions in Belgium, many of the players were still English. Their number diminished over time, but the influence of aristocratic and bourgeois Britain, the home of the much-vaunted amateur sport, remained for all to see. For many, it was even about being more English than the English. The emergence of modern sports in Belgium was part of a desire to perfect the English gesture, known as the 'chivalric gesture'.⁵⁶ What this meant in practice was that you had to be British through and through. And, above all, the supposed golden rule was a sense of fair play. At tournaments, it all culminated in a series of mundanities⁵⁷ on which the press reported in great detail. For example, matches and tournaments were interspersed with banquets, complete with formal speeches. In this first phase of its development, football was an activity for the elite. To join a club, you had to be sponsored and accepted. This meant buying equipment and boots, paying for transport, being available for training and around on match days. This was unthinkable for working-class people. According to Derwael's study⁵⁸ on the development of sport in Ghent, the

membership fee alone equated to a week's wages for workers in the flax industry, who typically worked between 63 and 67 hours per week.

The British influence was also reflected in the written commentary on football's first steps, which was required to be as British as possible. The terminology one found in such write-ups was full of Anglicisms.⁵⁹ The match, which needed to be a 'great event', was played on a 'ground' measured in 'yards',⁶⁰ began with a 'toss' and was followed by 'kick-off'. The 'referee' was assisted by his 'linesmen'. This was followed by a description of the positions on the pitch. There were the 'goalkeeper', the 'backs', the 'half-backs' and the 'forwards', who had to 'dribble'⁶¹ and avoid 'tackling'.⁶² Occasionally, it was a real team 'rush'.⁶³ You had to avoid being 'off-side' and keep an eye on your 'goal-average'. Meanwhile, at 'half-time', you discussed the match. Teams were obviously made up of 'perfect gentlemen' in a world of 'sportsmen'⁶⁴ and even 'sportswomen'⁶⁵ all adhering to the 'English way of life'.⁶⁶ In the event of a tie, the result was described as a 'draw'.⁶⁷

Nevertheless, in Belgium as elsewhere, the notion of fair play was a 'myth'.⁶⁸ In the eyes of many of its contemporaries, football was seen as a brutal, even violent, sport, an expression of 'ostentatious male virility'.⁶⁹ In 1893, one of the future leaders of Belgian football was disgusted by the brutality of the sport's players.⁷⁰ What is more, the press regularly reported on this.⁷¹ Throughout the period, a number of prominent figures denounced the 'brutal and dangerous' nature of the game.⁷² 'Football is a game where you try to hurt people', wrote the *Gazette de Liège*⁷³ in its first report on a football match.

Beyond this observation, the highly competitive aspect of football was apparent in the many objections brought before the UBSSA. The organization was tasked with settling a myriad of conflicts, ranging from player eligibility issues – such as registration, secondary team membership, and capping the number of foreign players at 5 – to complaints about field dimensions and playing conditions: validity of the sizes of the pitch, the match continuing despite insufficient light, unsuitability of the pitch, etc. Various in-game incidents, such as spectator interference, absence or referee bias, and ball legitimacy, also led to numerous grievances. As in other national cases,⁷⁴ the situation was all the more complex to manage, given that many people had a poor grasp of all the rules, which made refereeing a major cause for concern. People still needed to be reminded of the rules on a fairly regular basis at the beginning of the 20th century, with *La vie sportive* devoting a column to the 'tribulations of the football rules'. In addition, knowledgeable referees were few and far between. Clubs were required to supply referees, but they often had a shaky grasp of the rules and were frequently absent. Those who were available were stretched thin, as described below:

'The lack of referees in the provinces meant that the few who could be found made a considerable effort. There were always at least two matches per Sunday, often three. In other words, a four-and-a-half-hour race'.⁷⁵

A referees' federation was briefly established in 1903, but two years later it was integrated directly into the UBSSA, which set up an official refereeing committee.

The issue of fair play, or rather its absence, was so concerning that the UBSSA lamented the state of affairs on 24 November 1899:

We have witnessed some interesting matches but must also acknowledge a disheartening fact: the overwhelming number of complaints filed with the UBSSA, aiming to nullify match outcomes. To date, only two matches have been free from complaints. The reasons are often petty, revealing a lack of genuine sportsmanship, which is surprising for those who claim to play the sport passionately for leisure. Perhaps they derive pleasure from burdening the Football Committee with long, tedious reports and obliging its members to make needless interventions.⁷⁶

However, even the UBSSA found itself the subject of extreme formalism. In 1902, Rodolphe-William Seeldrayers, one of its leading figures, was suspended for seven months 'for having made London believe that he was a UBSSA delegate' when, in fact, he had no such mandate.⁷⁷

In addition to the championships organized by the UBSSA, very precise rules were also apparent when it came to organizing tournaments, setting up a complaints procedure and the related sanctions to be applied in the event of fraud.

2. The first popularization of football in Belgium

As the 20th century dawned, football in Belgium began to transcend its limited sphere of influence. Membership of the UBSSA saw a significant upswing, mirrored by a rise in informal teams. In 1901, the UBSSA boasted 40 clubs with 2,000 members; by 1905, this had grown to 58 clubs, escalating to 70 in 1907, and further ballooning to 112 by 1910.⁷⁸ On the eve of World War I, the *Union belge des sociétés de Football Association* (UBSFA) boasted an impressive 159 clubs and 12,367 members.⁷⁹

It was not just membership numbers that were increasing: the geographical reach of the sport also expanded considerably.⁸⁰ Concurrently, public interest surged, with larger crowds attending weekend matches. Thus, Belgian football began to spread amongst the masses. Although this expansion remained somewhat limited – largely excluding the two largest social classes, the peasantry and the working class – it did mark a shift away from the sport being an exclusive pastime for the elite. The game began to resonate primarily with the middle classes and some parts of the salaried workforce, particularly white-collar workers. The sport also started to make inroads into various professional environments, and spectator numbers at matches began to swell. This burgeoning awareness and popularity of the game attracted new stakeholders, ranging from public authorities and corporations to media outlets and various political and social movements.

Was Belgian football a segmented and politically charged sport?

In Belgium, sport had little chance of avoiding politicization. At the end of the 19th century, a politico-social pillarization developed⁸¹, which was also experienced in countries such as the Netherlands and Austria. From independence to the end of the century, the Nation State-Church divide, which saw Catholics and Liberals pitted against each other over the right to vote, dominated the political scene. The birth of the Belgian Workers' Party (Socialist, POB-BWP) in 1885 and the first major expansion of the right to vote in 1893 changed all that and the economic and social divide took hold. At the same time, the demand for linguistic equality began to increase in Flemish circles. Gradually, two major pillars emerged, the Catholic and Socialist camps, with each vying to guide citizens from 'cradle to grave'.

In terms of 'physical exercise', gymnastics was the first type of physical education to gain a foothold in Belgium.⁸² In 1865, Nicolaas Cupérus founded the Belgian Gymnastics Federation and played a pivotal role in the establishment of the European Gymnastics Federation.⁸³ His liberal stance and receptiveness to Flemish demands⁸⁴ contributed to the creation of a national federation for Catholic gymnastics and arms societies⁸⁵ in Belgium in 1892.⁸⁶ The federation's inaugural president, Prosper Poulet, later served as Minister of Arts and Science in 1911 and even ascended to the position of Prime Minister in 1925. This federation supported the expansion of patronage societies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, aligning with the Church's initiatives to provide structures for the working classes as a countermeasure to the rising Socialist movement.⁸⁷ The number of Catholic gymnastics societies increased, leading to the creation of the⁸⁸ Socialist Gymnastics Federation of Belgium in 1904.⁸⁹ From 8 societies with 400 members, by 1914, the federation had grown to encompass 57 societies with 2,940 members.⁹⁰

This political stratification within the realm of gymnastics did not initially extend to modern sports.⁹¹ Before WWI, the Belgian Workers' Party had, overall, paid little attention to modern sports, especially football. Unlike other Social Democratic Parties,⁹² there was, strictly speaking, no elaborate programme and ideological profile on modern sports.

Conversely, the early evolution of football was intrinsically linked to the educational landscape, making the key point of division a philosophical one. Often, the educational institution that its

members attended shaped a club's core identity. Moreover, the proliferation of clubs frequently stemmed from localized rivalries between Catholic and free-thinking communities. With its introduction into medium-sized towns and less densely populated areas, football had to contend on a more regular basis with pre-existing antagonisms that were more deeply rooted than in big cities.

In several communes, a Catholic club (C) was pitted against a liberal or anti-clerical team (L): Cercle Sportif Hallois (C) played Union halloise (L); Racing Club de Tournai (C) played Union sportive tournaisienne (L). In Lier, the battle was fierce between Lierse (L) and Lyra (C), and in Mechelen between Racing Club de Malines (L) and Football Club de Malines (C). These two clubs produced two presidents of the federation: Oscar Van Kesbeek, a Liberal interwar MP, and Francis Dessain, private secretary to two Belgian primates, Cardinal Mercier and Cardinal Van Roey. Football Club brugeois became the free-thinking club that took on the Catholic Cercle Sportif Brugeois.

Can we refer to these early teams as 'factions', as Duke and Renson⁹³ have suggested? Initially, the situation was ambiguous, despite clear rivalries. For many years, the football scene was marked by considerable flux; only a handful of clubs exhibited enduring structures, shaped by the circumstances surrounding their creation. The association with either the liberal or Catholic spheres sometimes depended on the personality of the club's president and/or patron, who may not have been eager to leave his own political or philosophical stamp on the club's identity. Clubs initially thought to be liberal or anti-clerical often had more diverse origins than commonly perceived. For instance, Football Club Brugeois originally drew students not only from the Athénée de Bruges but also from the local College.⁹⁴ Likewise, although most of the young founders of Racing Club de Malines were students at the Athénée Royal de Malines, a few hailed from the College Saint-Rombaut.⁹⁵ This dynamic began to shift as the sport grew in popularity. The identity of football started to encompass an expanding fan base, various urban neighbourhoods, and unfolding cultural narratives that were continuously being shaped and solidified.

Initially, class was not really an issue, since football was only played by the upper classes. However, social unrest gradually began to simmer. There were also sometimes harsh clashes between the clubs of the bourgeois and aristocratic elite, and those now run by representatives of the middle classes, two camps which had little time for each other. In Antwerp, the struggle between Antwerp Football Club and Beerschot Athletic Club reflected a form of social division.⁹⁶ Antwerp was the 'popular' club, while Beerschot was the establishment team. In Brussels, the same applied to Union Saint-Gilloise, whose identity became that of the 'popular' club of Brussels. The club was nicknamed *Les Apaches*,⁹⁷ an explicit reference to young thugs from Paris.⁹⁸ Union Saint-Gilloise was a club of 'street kids'⁹⁹ disliked by the federation and seen as the antithesis of the upper-class clubs, Leopold Club de Bruxelles and Racing Club de Bruxelles. In Liège, the philosophical differences between Football Club Liégeois and Standard Football Club Liégeois, which grew out of the Collège Saint-Servais, persisted over time, but gradually became based on social identities. Football Club Liégeois was portrayed as a rather bourgeois club, while Standard Football Club Liégeois acquired a 'popular' identity.

The growing influence of ideological convictions within other sectors of football could also be felt beyond the clubs affiliated with UBSSA., During the process of polarisation, which saw people divided along political and religious lines, the ecclesiastical hierarchy, which was initially cautious,¹⁰⁰ became increasingly receptive to sport, particularly football. Sport, and football in particular, became tools for spiritual guidance, especially when faced with opposition from secular parties and organizations.

Additionally, many advantages could be ascribed to an involvement in sport. After all, it provided a channel for young people to throw themselves into virtuous activities rather than harmful ones.¹⁰¹ As Abbot Philippe de Ribaucourt noted, 'sport has the benefit of teaching young men self-discipline and the ability to act for purposes other than their own self-interest'.¹⁰² Support for these activities grew and was 'endorsed by our esteemed Pontiff, Pius X'.¹⁰³ Led by Francis Dessain, a Cardinal's Cup competition was started, featuring football teams from some of Belgium's

finest colleges. The growing number of Catholic Circles also led to more sports clubs being set up. While these initiatives initially struggled to gain traction beyond urban areas, the expansion of secondary education and the rise of faith-based schools since 1884¹⁰⁴ lent real momentum to the movement, a fact that was regularly emphasized:

'We have a retreatants' league, a study circle, a youth library, a literary circle, a drama section, a football club and a symphony club'.¹⁰⁵

In Antwerp, again on the initiative of Francis Dessain, Union métropolitaine, admitted to the UBSSA in 1907, was the club for the city's patronage teams.¹⁰⁶ Certainly, in Catholic gymnastics circles, there were some who were circumspect if not hostile to football, this 'violent' sport and 'source of vanity'.¹⁰⁷ Still others spoke of the 'evils of football' or worried about people keeping away from spiritual matters, not to mention failing to turn up for the Sunday service.¹⁰⁸ However, some teams got round this problem. At Olympia in Antwerp, mass was compulsory for players: 'Anyone who does not attend will not be able to play'.¹⁰⁹ Overall, the number of college clubs and sports circles increased significantly.

Similar initiatives were taking place in state schools. Several Athénées organized inter-school football tournaments and an 'Athénée Cup' was launched by the Athénée d'Ixelles.

Although the church was beginning to reconcile the worlds of football and religion, there was no real coordinated action in the liberal world. The growing success of football encouraged some sections of the Young Liberal Guard who were trying to set up teams, as did the Gymnastique libérale in La Louvière.¹¹⁰ Similarly, an 'international' match was held at the Liberal Students' Conference in 1913,¹¹¹ and there was a desire to create a football section at the Young Liberal Guard in Chapelle-lez-Herlaimont.¹¹² However, there was no overall movement. For this political family, the relationship with modern sports was primarily a matter of schooling and of notables' initiatives.

On the socialist side, action was primarily aimed at developing gymnastics. It was in Ghent, on the initiative of Gaston Bridoux, that the Socialist International of Physical Education was founded, bringing together the Belgian, English, French, German and Italian federations.¹¹³ Until 1914, little thought was given to football, or to modern sports in general. Football did not prompt the same aversion to these 'bourgeois sports' as it did in other countries. Nevertheless, socialist organizations did not really invest in the sport, since working hours prevented people from taking part. In line with what has been observed elsewhere in Europe,¹¹⁴ with the exception of Great Britain of course, football had little impact on the working class at the time. Secondary school was still reserved for the children of the elite and the middle classes. Moreover, the notion of Sunday as a day off was not introduced until 1905. This was a far cry from the workers' and employers' investment in football in England. In February 1913, *L'Eglantine* organized its first 'Socialist football match'.¹¹⁵ And, during the long-prepared general strike of the same year, the POB-BWP organized cycle races, as well as football and softball matches. The aim was to keep the working classes busy, but also to replace the 'hard work of the workshop', forcing workers 'to go home early to rest'.¹¹⁶ The same logic of channelling and bringing communities together was emphasized by the few Socialist figures who took an interest in the issue. Alphonse Octors was the most assertive. He invited the cooperative movement to provide resources and sports pitches. 'The money spent in this way would be invested at high interest, because the working class is an inexhaustible source of native energy and dedication, and this proletarian energy and dedication can be channelled for the greater good of the workers' party', he emphasized. In 1914, the same Octors submitted his proposals to the annual congress of socialist cooperatives.¹¹⁷ On the eve of the war, the Brussels Young Socialist Guard set up an athletics club focusing on football.¹¹⁸ As in France,¹¹⁹ there were therefore a few scattered initiatives, but also a 'relationship of mistrust'¹²⁰ or indifference towards football. It was not until after WWI that socialist political and trade union organizations took on a more active role in football and sport. At national and international level, alternative competitions to those run by the federations, the fledgling FIFA or the International Olympic Committee were launched.¹²¹

In 1912, football was partly affected by a very philosophically polarized election. A Liberal-Socialist electoral cartel believed it could defeat the Catholic absolute majority that had been in place since 1884. In the weeks following the vote, which saw the Liberals and Socialists fail to win, the infrastructure or representatives of some Catholic football clubs, such as Albert et Elisabeth Club de Mons,¹²² which was part of the Cercle catholique montois,¹²³ or the Société de football Saint-Louis team, were attacked, the latter by young Liberals.¹²⁴

‘The modern sports clubs, which were in the hands of French-speaking bourgeoisie, had little or no contact with the Flemish Struggle for emancipation before 1918’, Tolleneer argues.¹²⁵ However, the overall picture warrants some clarification. The bourgeois and aristocratic origins of football in Belgium meant that French was always bound to become its main language: it was the language of the elite and, supposedly, of ‘the’ culture. Nevertheless, the struggle of the first Flemish movements did have an impact. The advent of universal male suffrage with plural voting in 1893 changed the situation: from then on, the majority of the electorate was Dutch-speaking. Although from the end of the 19th century until the outbreak of WWI, French was, and remained, the ‘obvious’ language in football’s organizational structures, the picture was more nuanced at club level. Most clubs adopted French – or English – language statutes and wording, but functional bilingualism was sometimes the order of the day for players and managers. Also, the gradual opening up of football to the middle and lower classes was starting to contribute to a greater variety of languages being used, even though some Flemings were calling for a boycott of football. Slowly, these developments began to be felt at the level of the federation and political staff. In 1913, the federation finally adopted a Dutch name: *Belgische Voetbalbond*.¹²⁶ At the inauguration of the new facilities at the very select Beerschot Athletic Club, the president addressed the audience in French and Dutch.¹²⁷ Furthermore, on the eve of WWI, 11 of the federation’s clubs had Dutch names.¹²⁸

New audiences, new infrastructure

At the beginning of the 20th century, the issue of stadiums took on a new guise. The number of spectators at weekend matches was growing. It is difficult to form a clear picture of the trend, but the increase is unmistakable. In 1902, the final of the Belgian championship to win the title attracted between 1,000¹²⁹ and 2,000 people.¹³⁰ In 1906, 5,000 spectators came to see an English professional team take on a Belgian ‘eleven’.¹³¹ And a year later, the Liège newspaper *La Meuse* went into raptures over the growing attendance figures:

‘The whole of Belgium is now taking a liking to the beautiful sport of football; Antwerp, Brussels and Bruges have seen audiences of several thousand people enthralled by the efforts of the 22 men taking part’.¹³²

A new record was announced in early 1909: 7,000 spectators attended the match between Belgium and Holland at the Beerschot stadium.¹³³ However, other newspapers put the figure at 4,000. A few weeks later, between 8,000 and 10,000 spectators were recorded for the match which saw England take on Belgium. In March 1913, 15,000 spectators turned out for the annual match between Belgium and the Netherlands. Crowds continued to grow and, a year later, the same match drew a crowd of 25,000.

In 1910, the match between the Football Club Brugeois and Union Saint-Gilloise attracted 5,000 spectators and resulted in takings of 1,893 francs.¹³⁴ A year later, the Brussels derby between Union Saint-Gilloise and Daring Club de Bruxelles also drew 5,000 spectators and reported takings of 4,200 francs.¹³⁵ In 1914, the match between these two leading championship teams drew 10,000 spectators, not including a thousand other people who were unable to get in for lack of space.¹³⁶

This surge in football’s popularity required improvements to be made to the grounds and, in many cases, new infrastructure to be built. Fields had to be fenced off for safety reasons and to collect revenue.¹³⁷ Grandstands had to be built, in particular to protect against bad weather,¹³⁸ and a ticket sales service had to be provided. The issue of safety at matches was increasingly becoming a central concern. In 1908, Racing Club de Bruxelles opened a grandstand with 1,500 seats. During

the same year, Antwerp Football Club moved into new premises in Broodstraat, which it owned for the first time.¹³⁹ A year later, it was the turn of Daring Club de Bruxelles to open new facilities, again with a 2,000-seat stand.¹⁴⁰ A few days later, Union Saint-Gilloise moved to rue de Forest, where the 'vast and magnificent stands' built there were highlighted.¹⁴¹ In 1913, the press was full of praise for the 'prodigious spectacle'¹⁴² and 'sumptuous facilities'¹⁴³ available in the new stadium of Beerschot Athletic Club, which was to host matches at the 1920 Olympic Games, after Antwerp won the bid.

In these new stadiums, social stratification was established, largely determined by the cost of seating. In 1912, for the match between Belgium and the Netherlands, four categories of seats were available: (a) 'covered, reserved and numbered' grandstand seats at 5 francs, (b) 'standing seats for the stands' at 3 francs, (c) 'open stand seats (standing)' at 2 francs and (d) perimeter seats at 1 franc. To these were added (e) 'ring seats': 'numbered chairs located on the side of the stands and goals and placed inside the balustrades' at 5 francs.¹⁴⁴ In addition, the number of spectators, and the takings which they generated for each category, was sometimes precisely established. For the match in question, there were 9,602 spectators, including 377 free tickets, 5,715 1-franc seats, 592 2-franc seats, 1,550 3-franc seats, 862 5-franc grandstand seats and 500 5-franc ring seats, giving a total income of 18,359 francs, which was exceptional for the time.¹⁴⁵

The clubs were very sensitive about match revenues, which made up the bulk of their income, since their expenses were rising, with money needed for transport costs, travel, the construction of new stadiums, the purchase of equipment and, gradually, the hiring of staff, in particular paid coaches. At Cercle Sportif Brugeois, for the 1899–1900 season, expenditure amounted to 310.47 francs compared with 361.45 francs in revenue. Twelve years later, expenditure was 19,422 francs and income 20,136 francs.¹⁴⁶ The UBSSA budget itself evolved considerably: in 1900, its income amounted to 2,601.72 francs compared with 2,360.72 francs of expenditure. Twelve years later, expenditure had risen to 54,360.54 francs compared with 53,849.02 francs in revenue.¹⁴⁷

At the beginning of 1912, there was a dispute between sports journalists and clubs which drew attention, after some journalists were asked to pay for their seats at a Football Club Brugeois match. As far as the Bruges management was concerned, the journalists were not there to cover the game, whereas in the view of the journalists' association, free tickets should always be granted to the press. Under pressure from the guild, the UBSSA announced fines for the Football Club Brugeois, a 'choice that can only be applauded'¹⁴⁸ and specified some rules regarding press cards.¹⁴⁹

'Supporter culture' gradually emerged with the advent of the first organized supporters' groups. Contrary to Dietschy's assertion,¹⁵⁰ there was evidence of them even before WWI. With the growing attraction of football matches, several supporters' societies ensured they gained the strongest possible foothold. These included the Daring supporters Club,¹⁵¹ The select supporters club du Club Sportif Verviétois, the Standard supporters Club Liégeois,¹⁵² the supporters Club de Bressoux,¹⁵³ the Beerschot Athletic Supporters Club,¹⁵⁴ the Berchem Sport Supporters Club¹⁵⁵ and the Antwerp supporters Club.¹⁵⁶

In addition to the associations, club supporters very quickly gained a reputation for themselves. Very early on, the supporters of Football Club Brugeois were portrayed as a problem¹⁵⁷ and numerous incidents often landed them in the papers. Some of them committed 'acts of violence'; a 'gang of madmen' attacked the opposing players¹⁵⁸; and 'hundreds of thugs' gathered outside the stadium.¹⁵⁹ In 1909, Antwerp Football Club refused to travel to Bruges in light of the previous incidents. At Cercle Sportif Brugeois, people looked down on these 'krapuul van Sint Andries' – scum of St Andries. As the century progressed, the UBSSA regularly had to take action to deal with problems that arose during matches. In 1913, Football Club Brugeois was once again penalized for incidents. It had to play two matches 'behind closed doors'.¹⁶⁰

New audiences, new media attention

As football began to take flight in Belgium, one key player slowly emerged: the sports journalist. At the end of the 19th Century, most of the Belgian press was French-speaking and came with its own

political leaning: Catholic, Liberal or, to a lesser extent, Socialist. Few of these journalists were responsible for reporting on sport in the 1890's. They covered turf, some athletics, lawn tennis and, above all, a sport that already had a strong following in Belgium and was described as 'the popular sport par excellence': cycling.¹⁶¹ With the launch of football championships, a few journalists added this sport to their portfolio.

Their numbers grew and a number of newspapers or groups of newspapers began to specialize in football coverage. The first football-loving journalists thus entered the media arena. There were no notable differences between Catholic and Liberal newspapers and, unlike in the Netherlands,¹⁶² the Socialist press started to cover football matches relatively early. The French-language newspaper *Le Peuple* first wrote about the modern sport on 15 January 1898. However, the press did not yet enjoy privileged access to the world of football (*Le Peuple* picked up information from freelancers and other media outlets). At the same time, the UBSSA established its own information channel. On 15 November 1899, *La Vie sportive*, which replaced *Revue des sports*, became the 'official weekly of the Union belge'.

The growing popularity of football meant that it logically received more media coverage. The increase in the number of sports magazines also helped: *La revue sportive illustrée* in 1905, *Le Sport* in 1906, *Sportvriend* in 1909 and *Sportwereld* in 1912.¹⁶³ In both the general and local media, coverage of football matches and competitions expanded, encompassing not only domestic events but also international tournaments. Team tactics were described and explained in ever-greater detail. From 1907 onwards, illustrations and later photographs regularly accompanied the commentary and analysis devoted to football. From 1913, *La Dernière Heure* devoted a weekly page of cartoons to football alone. And, as in other countries, some journals became 'sports patronage' operators.¹⁶⁴ Many tournaments were organized by the press.

In February 1910, a match was captured on film for the first time.¹⁶⁵ Two years later, *Vingtième siècle*¹⁶⁶ echoed with 'various sports films'. And in 1913, a film was made of Belgium versus Holland.

The specialization within the media landscape led to the emergence of the first prominent figures in journalism. In the years leading up to WWI, one of them gradually came to the fore: Victor Boin. Boin was first and foremost an athlete, who practised several sports. He won Olympic medals in 1908, 1912 and 1920 (for water polo, swimming and fencing), while also taking up sports journalism at an early age. His first column, at the age of 17, can be traced back to 1903, and he became the most prominent figure in sports journalism.¹⁶⁷ This focus on sports coverage culminated in the establishment of the first professional organization, known as the Belgian Professional Association of Sports Journalists.¹⁶⁸

At the same time, a number of newspapers and sponsors were involved in the birth of a new phenomenon: sports betting and predictions. In 1911, *Vélo-Sport* began organizing weekly predictions. Other newspapers, such as *La Meuse* and *Le Matin*, followed suit. Other actors were behind the creation of sports predictions. In 1914, a cigarette manufacturer offered 5,000 francs each week to the person who could return the greatest number of correct results on a piece of cloth given away with packets of cigarettes.¹⁶⁹ Private individuals also sometimes became involved in the game. For example, in the province of Liège, the Renson family organized a weekly contest in which people were invited to predict the football results.

In addition, newspapers were often involved in a new practice: charity or philanthropic sporting competitions. Up until WWI, matches were organized more and more regularly for this purpose: 'to come to the aid of the unfortunates affected by the terrible flood',¹⁷⁰ for the benefit of 'the general clothing charity for needy children',¹⁷¹ for the benefit of the 'unfortunate'. Philanthropy through football was already well established in Great Britain. In Glasgow, the 'epicentre of soccer development in Scotland', a charity cup was launched in 1876 and perpetuated from 1878.¹⁷²

New audiences and the issue of professionalism

As we have emphasized, the first football craze primarily concerned the middle classes and part of the world of work. Working class people and peasants were relatively unaffected by the movement, since, for the most part, the condition of working class people was such that they still stood little chance of breaking into any other field. With the clear exception of England and Scotland, this lack of participation was also reflected in other European countries.¹⁷³

However, as Belgian football began to become more democratic,¹⁷⁴ new issues reared their heads. In addition to facilities, the attractiveness of the game for the best players was now at stake. Gone were the days when all costs were borne by the player. The clubs' first revenues made it possible first to reduce and then to eliminate costs for players. Nevertheless, in order to take part in training sessions, Sunday matches and away games in England, France and the Netherlands, one needed to have the professional opportunity to do so. Formal or informal arrangements were necessary. They were all the more necessary as the growing interest in football was also starting to attract the attention of business sponsors. Some hired club players for their businesses. 'Disguised professionalism' was taking hold, and the issue of player 'transfers' was becoming increasingly acute. In Bruges, Torten Goetinck's example was symptomatic. He wanted to marry and settle down, but lacked the necessary funds. Cercle Sportif Brugeois wanted to poach him and offered him start-up capital to establish his own business. But at the Football Club Brugeois where he was playing, another solution was found. After an initial approach to a wealthy brewer failed, he was hired by a tinsmithing company, with good pay and very good working conditions. This led to him choosing to remain with Football Club Brugeois.¹⁷⁵ These situations occurred regularly. In 1909, de Laveleye asserted that 'there is talk of professionalism, that there are professionals among us'.¹⁷⁶ Until the outbreak of war, this issue grew in an increasingly polarized context, as a greater number of players began to specialize in their sport. In the realm of football, a pivotal moment came in 1912 with the decision to create a federation devoted solely to the sport, spurred by a request from the 'athletics' sector. The move to separate was endorsed by a vote of 91 to 36, with 4 abstentions.¹⁷⁷ Concurrently, an independent athletics league was established.¹⁷⁸

The UBSFA became the Union belge des sociétés de Football Association (UBSFA). Within the organization, the discussion concerning amateurism versus professionalism intensified. In the Autumn of 1912, a special committee was established by the newly-formed UBSFA.¹⁷⁹ This committee endorsed the sanctions levied by Antwerp Football Club against players who had sought 'financial compensation in any form'.¹⁸⁰ In the spring of 1913, it decided by 81 votes to 22 to regulate amateur and professional football, but in supposedly separate circles. This decision led to the resignation of the vice-president, Max Kahn. 'I have become accustomed to considering it my main task to defend the principle of pure amateurism', he wrote.¹⁸¹ A few weeks later, the possibility of cancelling the championship altogether was raised following a complaint about players allegedly being paid. After an epic meeting, it was decided not to cancel. Still, nine players were disqualified for being professional footballers:

'Tobias and R. Flaucout of AA Gantoise, Pope Reulen and Varillon of Beerschot AC, James Arthur, Brown Cornelius and Evans Richard of CS Verviétois, and Hogg Georges of Racing CB had not satisfactorily explained their presence in the teams of the subsidised clubs. As the GC has been able to gather a body of evidence and serious presumptions, these players are classified as professionals'.¹⁸²

This decision led to the creation of the first players' union. The story of Maurits Tobias, one of the nine, is typical. Tobias started out at Sporting Club de Bruxelles before moving on to Olympia Football Club. At the beginning of the 20th century, he joined the flagship club, Union Saint-Gilloise, which he later left for Racing Club de Malines. Following his suspension, Tobias headed for Italy, where he played for Associazione Calcio Milan.¹⁸³

For almost a year, the issue remained tense. And on the eve of WWI, a new step was announced in the changes to organized football: the birth of a professional Belgian team, Garden City Football Club in Antwerp,¹⁸⁴ and possibly another in Brussels. This news led the UBSFA to hastily draft convoluted

general principles.¹⁸⁵ They were to be discussed and possibly adopted on the 4th of August. But on that day, German troops invaded Belgium. Although it met briefly, the General Council sent a patriotic message to the King and adjourned its work. The matter was closed for 4 years.

In the years leading up to the war, football gradually made inroads into various professional sectors. Sporadic teams were assembled within the banking, insurance, and industrial management fields, and multiple tournaments were set up. For instance, in September 1912, an inter-bank football championship was established, featuring teams from Banque Nationale, Banque d'Outre-mer, Caisse des Reports, Deutsche Bank, Société Générale, Caisse d'Epargne, Petrobank, Crédit Lyonnais, Banque de Bruxelles, and Banque Internationale. Additionally, sports clubs were founded within industrial sectors, often with a specific focus on football.

The men of Belgian football and their international network

The institutionalization of Belgian football has created a workforce dedicated to managing clubs, the federation and refereeing. A number of key figures, who often went on to become the strongmen of a club, made their mark by setting up structures and making people aware of football, as well as managing the UBSSA, which later became the UBSFA. While it is not possible to mention everyone, a few individuals stand out, with Edouard de Lavaleye being the most notable. The son of renowned economist Emile de Lavaleye, Edouard distinguished himself from his contemporaries primarily by his age. At the time the federation was set up, he was already 40 years old, an exceptional age for such involvement at the time. Initially associated with Liège Football Club, he later moved to Léopold Club de Bruxelles. During the first phase, he established himself as the referee to watch but, above all, as the main person in charge of the UBSSA, of which he quickly became chairman after the resignation of Paul Hanssens. He also presided over the destiny of the Belgian Olympic Committee (1906–1923). A mining engineer who worked in the metallurgy industry, de Lavaleye played a key role in the development of football in Belgium. Louis Muhlinghaus was undoubtedly the person who did the most to get the UBSSA off the ground, and was another of its key figures. Rodolphe-William Seeldrayers was the driving force behind Racing Club de Bruxelles and was fully committed to the development of modern Belgian sports. After World War II, he also took the helm of the Belgian Olympic Committee, serving as its president from 1945 to 1955. In the early 20th century, Charles Barette distinguished himself in two significant ways. Firstly, he became the most prominent referee, the man consistently called upon for all high-profile matches. Secondly, he was the driving force behind Union Saint-Gilloise, serving as its president until 1908. Prior to 1914, the club garnered the most titles and was regarded as one of the best in Europe. But there was little love lost between the team and the UBSSA. As mentioned above, Union Saint-Gilloise was portrayed as having a strong will to win, as being too rough around the edges and not British enough. Max Kahn, the son of Lehmann Kahn, who was the director of the cosmopolitan Kahn International Institute – a business school¹⁸⁶ – established his own football club, despite initially serving as a goalkeeper for Léopold Club de Bruxelles. As the brother-in-law of Albert Seligmann,¹⁸⁷ who was the president of Football Club Brugeois from 1900 to 1902, Max Kahn played a significant role in strengthening the UBSSA, where his opinions were highly valued. His involvement also underscores the role that members of the Jewish community played in the early origins and development of football in Belgium – a trend also observed in German-speaking countries.¹⁸⁸ In addition to this, the Belgian football management community was heavily involved in the internationalization of football. As early as 1899, the UBSSA signed an agreement with the French Union recognizing each other as the only representative federations in their respective states.¹⁸⁹ Subsequently, UBSSA representatives were active in the creation of FIFA. The match between the Belgian and French teams on 1 May 1904 was the occasion for yet another meeting between French and Belgian officials on the birth of an international organization. Robert Guérin, for the Union des sociétés françaises de sports athlétiques, and Louis Mülhlinghaus, for the UBSSA, took note of the Football Association's (FA) refusal to take part in its creation and agreed that the

process should be launched.¹⁹⁰ Three weeks later, Mülinghaus and Kahn attended the congress in Paris that led to the creation of FIFA, with Mülinghaus going on to become its first General Secretary. As for de Lavaley, he played an essential role, both visibly and informally, as an intermediary with the FA, firstly so that it would take part in the project, and secondly so that it would recognize the new FIFA and join it. As early as 1905, at FIFA's second congress, he was made an honorary member of the FA for his contribution to this work.

National and patriotic pride

In the early 20th century, Belgian football started to affirm its national identity. While the primary focus remained on inter-club competitions, matches between national teams also began to be organized, coinciding with a period when governments were becoming 'aware of the importance of the sporting phenomenon'.¹⁹¹ Belgian football was particularly proactive in this regard. The game between the Belgian and French national teams on 1 May 1904, is sometimes cited as the first international match between two national teams,¹⁹² excluding earlier confrontations between England and Scotland, or Austria and Hungary.¹⁹³ The Belgian team went on to play a number of matches, primarily against neighbouring countries such as the Netherlands, England, and France. King Leopold II, and later his son Prince Albert who ascended to the throne in 1909, attended some of these international fixtures. In 1911, a new tournament was introduced alongside the existing championships, inspired by the Belgian monarch: initially called the King's Cup, it was later renamed the Belgian Cup.

The Belgian team was quick to highlight what made it different from other national sides. As for the team's nickname, the 'red devils' was first coined in 1905 by Pierre Walckiers in *La vie sportive*.

While the Belgian national team made its official debut in 1904, this was more a matter of convention than the point at which national football truly began. After all, competitions featuring a Belgian team had been organized long before that. While it might not strictly qualify as a 'national team', a Belgian football squad did participate in the 1900 Olympic Games. This team was assembled under the auspices of the Fédération Athlétique Universitaire and included players from the universities of Louvain, Liège, and Brussels, who were also active in club football.¹⁹⁴

In April 1901, a Belgian squad faced a Dutch team in a new tournament called the Vanden Abeele Cup.¹⁹⁵ Interestingly, the rules allowed foreign players to represent the Belgian side.¹⁹⁶ This cup competition became an annual event, and by 1902, it featured what was described as the 'best Belgian eleven'.¹⁹⁷ However, it was not until the 1905 edition that the tournament was officially recognized as a competition between national teams. Despite this, a jubilee book from the UBSSA¹⁹⁸ as well as François Colin's book¹⁹⁹ cited the inaugural Vanden Abeele Cup match on 28 April 1901, and *La Vie Sportive*²⁰⁰ referred to the event as a competition where 'the players are responsible for representing Belgium'.

The new national focus led to a ban on foreign players and the creation of a national team for the 1904 competition. In a context where clubs were sometimes keen to keep hold of their best players, the question of player selection soon arose. In 1910, the UBSSA suspended six Union Saint-Gilloise players from all international matches after they refused to be selected for the national team.

It also led to the search for 'Belgian roots' in football, a desire on Belgium's part to prove it was the true cradle of the sport, something which was also observed in other countries.²⁰¹ Back in October 1902, on the basis of a manuscript donated to the Royal Archaeological Society, the newspaper *Le Soir*²⁰² explained to its readers that football had been invented in the Middle Ages in the Belgian town of Tienen. 'And that's how football originated in Belgium' concluded the daily. However, this claim to have invented football gained little traction. The desire to link the practices and activities of a particular society to the development of modern sport is commonplace, and also happens when people wish to give reasons for what they perceive to be their nation's superiority over another. John Bale provided good examples of this in his analyses of the alleged specific and superior performances of the 'Tutsi race'²⁰³ in Rwanda in the high jump.

Little by little, football became a calling card, an object of soft power,²⁰⁴ while ‘a sense of nationalist pride and self-confidence was growingly present’.²⁰⁵ The Belgian team played a huge number of international matches for its time, its clubs – notably Union Saint-Gilloise – were extremely well known, and at the many International Expositions held in Belgium, a football tournament was now systematically organized. At the 1910 Brussels Universal Exposition, a ‘huge crowd’²⁰⁶ attended the final. The quality of Belgian sportsmen and women was praised and illustrated as proof of Belgium’s development:

‘We are joining the peoples who oppressed us and left us half-dead by the roadside. To take just one example in passing: who would have thought, not so many years ago, of naming Belgium among the sporting nations? Today, we no longer fear anyone in this field. Our rowers, our cyclists, our horsemen, our football players, and soon our aviators, are at the top of the list in the census of sportsmen the world over’.²⁰⁷

Although officially still imbued with the values of pure amateurism and fair play, it was now also important to win or to be in a position to win: ‘Once again, it is a question of making our national colours triumph abroad’ emphasized de Laveye on the eve of the Stockholm Olympic Games (1912). After much procrastination, it was decided that there would be no Belgian football team. However, this was a blessing in disguise. It would be ‘preferable (for the team) to abstain rather than put in a bad performance’²⁰⁸ or ‘fail to do itself justice’.²⁰⁹

The federation’s relationship with the Government deepened. As the representative of a country, it had to be subsidized. After the 1912 Olympic Games, de Laveye wrote to Minister Poulet, who oversaw the Department of Arts and Sciences, to announce Belgium’s ranking among the participating nations and to ‘draw attention’ to ‘the ever-increasing importance of these sporting solemnities for governments and for all the nations of the civilized world’. New resources were needed: an annual subsidy of 10,000 francs was requested.

At the end of the Belle Époque, with tensions rising in Europe, sports and gymnastics were also increasingly being put forward as good way to prepare for war, with football being the first, according to de Laveye:

I don’t think I’ll find any opponents among you if I assert that football is, of all sports, the one that best prepares its followers for war. ... Football undoubtedly has all these advantages (which other sports also have), but it also develops two qualities that seem to me to be of paramount importance: the spirit of discipline and the spirit of initiative.²¹⁰

3. Conclusion

Introduced relatively early in Belgium, modern sports – especially football – gained traction towards the latter part of the 19th century. British expatriates and schoolchildren living in Belgium played a key role in popularizing the sport in various colleges and athénées, as well as in designated recreational green spaces. The spread of the sport was lent a further boost by Belgian industrialists and educators who, after visiting England, became intrigued by the evolving sports culture there.

Inspired by the multi-sport clubs initially established by the British, Belgian teenagers and young adults began forming their own sports societies. The country’s compact size, coupled with an efficient rail network, facilitated the creation of a sports federation in 1895 and the launch of a national competition the same year.

For several years, the development of football was very fluid and fragile. The clubs encountered many problems, the focus was very much on Brussels and many people were worried about the brutality of the sport. In colleges and athénées, teachers were sometimes hostile to the desire of some pupils to introduce modern sports into the curriculum or play sport during their free time.

Contrary to a certain imaginary image that presents football as a popular sport from the outset, we have shown that it was extremely elite in its early days in Belgium. It was predominantly played

by children from bourgeois and aristocratic backgrounds who had both the time and resources to engage in the sport. The way Belgian football imitated the British in terms of the amateur 'values' and formalities that surround the practice of football was claimed to be total.

In this first phase, the main vehicles for the spread of the game were secondary schools and universities, and, to some extent, the army.

The growth of football was initially hampered by a number of practical problems: the availability of a pitch, the ability to acquire a ball, transport problems, the fluidity of young people's trajectories, the many disputes and criticisms directed at the standard of refereeing, and the fragility of clubs. As the 20th century dawned, Belgian football underwent a process of consolidation and institutionalization, marking its first surge in popularity. Previously the exclusive preserve of upper class children, the sport began to attract interest from children and young adults from the middle classes as the country enjoyed a period of economic growth and society became more democratic. This led to the game opening up both geographically and socially. Concurrently, various sectors of the professional world began embracing the formation of football teams and the organization of competitions.

This popularization of the sport led to an increase in the number of sporting societies, both formal and informal, and a growing interest in matches and their results. Clashes attracted far more spectators, and the imagination surrounding inter-club and international competitions grew. Many changes were needed in the way clubs and the federation were organized: specialization, new infrastructures, budget format, and dedicated staff. The debate over the end of 'pure' amateurism, 'disguised professionalism' or 'pure' professionalism became more and more intense, without it being possible to reach a decision before WWI.

This rising interest in football also fuelled increased media coverage in both the general and local press, giving birth to newspapers and magazines exclusively focused on sports. A professional association of sports journalists was formed as a result. Media organizations became active supporters of football activities, holding tournaments, gala events, charity matches, and in some instances, even facilitating sports betting.

The institutionalization of football and its broadcasting also led to increased interest from political and social players. In its youth work, through patronages and clubs, the Church encouraged and supervised the expansion of football, organizing its own competitions – the 'Cardinal's Cup' – and setting up sports clubs in local Catholic clubs. This approach was much less pronounced among the Liberals and the Belgian Workers' Party. Nevertheless, at the end of the period studied, there was a growing interest in and desire to use sports, and football specifically, as a way to connect with workers and young people. The interest of the State authorities also increased. International competitions and the country's reputation through sport and sportsmen were becoming part of the State's image, justifying an increase in the first subsidies. In the face of rising tensions and the wave of nationalism they brought with them, football was also presented as the ideal preparation for war.

The invasion of Belgium and the 1914–1918 war changed the tempo of football's expansion. But they did not stop football being played. In a situation where mobility was far more complex, football was played 'in the village' or, for German and Belgian soldiers in the country, behind the front line.²¹¹ In Belgium, it became a calling card for 'Poor little Belgium'²¹² through the creation of a football team, the Front Wanderers,²¹³ who carried the good word of the Belgian authorities to British, French and Italian football grounds. All these factors explain the second rapid popularization and democratization that took place in the aftermath of the War.

Notes

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 21. Balduck and Lucidarme, ‘Belgian football. A uniting force in a two-track policy’, 107.
 22. Den Hollander, *Sport in ’t stad. Antwerpen 1830-1914*, 136.
 23. Deswert, *Bruxelles, balle au centre. Une histoire du football dans la capitale*, 11.
 24. *L’Echo du Parlement*, April 12, 1884; *L’Indépendance belge*, April 4, 1895.
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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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