

A Historical Analysis of  
Association Football's Impact  
on  
Haitian National Identity

David Campbell  
110228827  
McGill University

April 11, 2007

EDKP 394  
Historical Perspectives  
Dr. Greg Reid

One of the greatest strengths a state can have is a strong sense of nationalism and political and ideological unity. The motto displayed on Haiti's flag states: '*L'Union fait la Force,*' unity breeds strength. Despite this fact, a general lack of national unity has plagued the Western third of the island of Hispaniola since long before the birth of the Republic of Haiti on 1 January 1804. This lack of unity has proved to be a major problem for the nation of Haiti since its inception and continues to be the root of many of the problems in Haiti to this day (Leyburn, 1941). Over the years, many factors have served to increase this disunity and instability. Unfortunately, Haiti has always had far fewer unifying agents. In many nations, sports have been a way of bringing people together and fostering a sense of national unity through the support of a national team, behind which the whole country rallies (Bairner, 2001). This paper will explain the history of football in Haiti and its role in developing a sense of nationalism among the Haitian people. It will examine the roots of political instability and disunion in Haiti, the role of sports in colonial Saint-Domingue and post-revolutionary Haiti, the birth of association football in Haiti, its growth, golden era, and recent developments.

## **I. Historical Background**

To understand the importance of our discussion, one must first have an understanding of the importance of fostering a Haitian national identity. The roots of Haiti's political and economic instability reach far into history. Its history is one that is rife with unrest and division. There have been a number of ethnic groups and classes which have occupied the island since the early seventeenth century. The island was discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1492, a series of wars between the colonizers and

the natives, the Taino Arawak people ensued. Over 600 000 of the native inhabitants of the island were killed within 50 years of Spanish rule (Trouillot, 1990).

France officially took control of the Western third of the Spanish plantation colony of Santo Domingo in 1697 through the Treaty of Ryswick, it became known as Saint Domingue. France immediately began importing slaves from Africa to work on the plantations. Clearly, the first division under French rule was between African slaves and their white masters. It goes without saying that much bitterness and division existed under these conditions. Slavery lasted hundreds of years in Saint-Domingue, and spawned the formation of a new class: the Free-Coloreds, who were a group of manumitted former slaves. Though some free-coloreds were black, the majority were the light-skinned mulatto offspring of the European planters and their domestic female house slaves. These free-coloreds had hatred and resentment towards the slaves as well, and this was but the beginning of a long divisive battle that is being fought in Haiti even until today.

Through the world's only successful slave revolt, Haiti became the first black republic. With the overthrow of the slave regime, the free-coloreds became the elite class of the nation, while the black masses remained on plantations and eventually received their own land holdings as small peasant farmers. This dichotomy of the mulatto urban elite and the rural black masses remains to this day one of the major reasons for Haiti's instability and failure, both politically and economically.

Haiti is often referred to by historians and anthropologists as a state with two nations. One of the most logical explanations for its failure is the lack of a unified Haitian identity (Trouillot, 1990). Haiti has struggled with this issue from long before its

independence and remains in dire need for unification and identity through whatever means can lend it.

## **II. Sports in Colonial Saint-Domingue and Post-Revolutionary Haiti**

In Europe during the renaissance, the general attitude towards sports was one of disdain. This was because the body was given little or no importance and was thought to be a weak vessel for Satan to attack (Terret, 2003). These were the attitudes brought by the French planters to Saint-Domingue in the Seventeenth Century. Despite religious aversion to sport and games, planters were against it for the sake of work. Black slaves were required to work exceedingly long days and were given no free time other than on Sunday, when it was religiously inappropriate to engage in games (Fick, 1990).

It is no wonder that under these conditions sports failed to become an important part of life in colonial Saint-Domingue. There was absolutely no element of life that united planters and slaves, according to the design of the slave regime.

When slavery was abolished in 1794 and sovereignty was gained in 1804, the regime retained striking similarity to slavery. The black plantation workers still had very little time for personal pursuits or entertainment. Much of the free time that they did possess was spent in religious gatherings or vodun (voodoo) ceremonies. We can see that early in its history, Haiti was not in a state conducive to the promulgation of sport.

## **III. The Birth of Association Football in Haiti**

The game of association football was created in England in the mid 1800s. It quickly spread to France and led to the birth of the Fédération Internationale de Football

Association (FIFA) in 1904. Association football was well established in France by the early 1900s (Gagnon, 2006)

Long after its independence, Haiti remained highly influenced by the French Republic. Many international powers refused to accept Haiti's autonomy as an independent state. The continued class struggles and political unrest caused nations to shy away from engaging in trade with Haiti. France remained Haiti's foremost trading partner. As such, many French merchants often made their way to Haiti. It was likely this group, along with another, which was responsible for the transmission of association football to Haiti.

The other group mentioned above was the students. Haiti's education system has never been very well established. It was a common practice for elite families to send their children to France to receive their education. It is likely that the students who studied in France participated in football and other games there, and brought it back to Haiti upon their return. According to Chauvel (1977) the game was introduced to Haiti in 1904 by three students, the Henriquez, Chevallier and Laroche boys. Ironically, it was embraced most wholeheartedly by the urban poor and eventually spread through the peasants rather than the elite class who brought the game over (Chavel, 1977). This is likely because the elites adhered to the Catholic religion (Leyburn, 1941), which at this time remained disdainful of sport and games. Among the elite it was considered socially inappropriate to engage in games and sport for recreation. By contrast, the peasants were primarily followers of the Vodun religion, which did not impose the same limitations on its adherents. They were also free of the social constraints present on the elites.

#### **IV. Development of Association Football**

Football saw quite a rapid development in Haiti during its first 10 years. The small group of young men who desired to play association football found themselves without anywhere to do so, and resorted to playing in the streets. In 1906 General Thézan, minister of the interior, enthusiastically followed these youngsters with great interest and granted them a plot of land near Pont-Rouge in Port-au-Prince; it became the first football field in Haiti.

The first football teams in Haiti were created shortly thereafter. In 1908, the Union Haïtienne Sportive (UHS) in Port-au-Prince, and the Union Athlétique de Port-de-Paix (UAPP) in the Northwest were formed. The two teams engaged in the first organized football game in Haiti in the same year. UHS was victorious in the game by a score of 1-0 on a goal by Constantin Henriquez. The excitement for the sport created by this match was considerable. This was the beginning of the infamous Port-au-Prince vs. Port-de-Paix rivalry. Following the game, local teams were formed throughout the major centers and more matches were organized.

Thézan's successor Antoine Sansaricq realized that USH was rapidly outgrowing their primitive facility at Pont-Rouge. In 1911, he convinced the President, Cincinnatus Leconte to donate another venue, which was called Parc Leconte in his honor. It was here that football became well known in urban Port-au-Prince and much excitement was generated around football. Chauvel (1977) made the assertion that if Pont-Rouge was the birthplace of Haitian football, Parc Leconte was indeed the cradle.

The sport was also aided greatly in this year by the formation of the Union des Sociétés Sportives Haïtiennes. The USSH was a group of the directors from the Union

Sportive Haïtienne. This organization was created to promote football events and regulate over the teams (Chauvel, 1977). On 26 May 1912 this group became the Fédération Haïtienne de Football, which is today's governing body over Haitian football (Fédération Haïtienne de Football, 1957).

## **V. Inception of the Haitian National Team**

Following World War I, FIFA set out to create a worldwide football championship. Many countries argued that the world championship was already held as the Olympic Games; however, this was opposed on the grounds that it was not open to the best football players in the world – professional players. In 1928 it was decided that the first FIFA World Cup would take place in 1930, hosted by Uruguay.

It was in the wake of the first FIFA World Cup that Haiti began to be involved in international competition. The first time a Haitian team played an international match was against a Jamaican team in 1930. Shortly after that game another match was played against the famous Cuban team Delores.

It wasn't long before Haiti's football community pushed for a national selection of the best players. This selection was made in 1934 and this is the year the Fédération Haïtienne de Football became affiliated with FIFA (FIFA website). Haiti was one of only ten non-European countries who entered the qualifying rounds of the 1934 competition. They lost in the qualifiers to Cuba in February prior to the event (Alsos).

Despite the 1934 team's failure to qualify, it was the beginning of nationalist sentiment derived from Haitian football (Dumont, 1994). The first international victory

for Haiti came in 1938 against the host country of an international tournament played in Panama. Haitians felt great pride in the victory of their team, in the words of Chauvel :

*“These great figures of our national sport will remain forever engraved in the memory of men. Give glory, honor and merit to these illustrious ambassadors who made our bicolor float worthily on foreign soil.”* (1977, p. 19, translated)

The most well known Haitian football player from this time period is Sylvio Cator. He was a Haitian football legend who grew up playing at Parc Leconte in its heyday. Following his career, he remained very active in promoting Haitian football and served as President of the FHF. In his honor, the stadium which had been erected on the original site of Parc Leconte was named Stade Sylvio Cator in 1952 and retains that name to this day (ENTAK, 1997).

Haiti placed itself on the international football charts in 1943 with an impressive win over the national team from Curaçao. They followed in the 1950's and 60's winning many games and tournaments, further generating excitement surrounding national football (Chauvel, 1977).

## **V. Golden Era of Haitian Football**

Haiti had a stellar generation of football players in the late 1960's and 70's. Dumont (1994) states that football in this era was the greatest ambassador to the world Haiti has ever had.

This generation began to show its prowess in the qualifying rounds preceding the 1970 World Cup. Haiti defeated Trinidad and Tobago, Guatemala and the USA on their way to the CONCACAF finals. They lost narrowly to El Salvador by one goal in the final game of the series (Alsos). This was an enormous blow for the Haitian people who were

rallying behind their team (Chauvel, 1977). This was the first time the entire Haitian population was pulling together with a common goal. The rural peasants, urban poor and elites alike all identified with the national team and it was a great disappointment when they were defeated.

The team returned with a vengeance in 1974. Having been so close to qualifying for the World Cup four years earlier, the team was eager for competition. So too were the fans; the Haitian population waited impatiently for World Cup 1974. The team, lead by superstar and Haitian athlete of the century - Manno Sannon, is often referred to as 'the most glorious selection of Haitian football players ever' (Dumont, 1994).

Sannon (personal communication, March 30, 2007) recalls that the team felt that the whole country was supporting them in their World Cup effort: "white, black, red, mulatto, rich, poor; the whole country was behind us, everyone was cheering for us." There was great excitement in Haiti for the first qualifier, both at Sylvio Cator and throughout the country as the home team took on the Dutch Antilles. The game ended up 3-0 in favor of Haiti, they went on to go undefeated as they beat Trinidad and Tobago, Honduras and Guatemala to become CONCACAF champions and qualify for the World Cup. The excitement was not confined to one group or class of Haitians, but for a moment, Haitians were unified in the glory of their country who had qualified for the World Cup for the first time. It was "an unprecedented sociological event in Haitians' calendars. The entire country was in delirium" (Sannon, 1997, p. 78, translated).

Haiti was entirely behind their team in the ensuing World Cup in Munich. Haitians remained faithful to and proud of their team despite crushing consecutive losses to Italy, Poland and Argentina (FIFA website). Despite having lost, the game played on

15 June 1974 versus Italy was undoubtedly one of the most memorable events in Haitian sport history. Team captain and national hero Sanon scored from 46 feet on the world's top goalkeeper – Dino Zoff. This goal has been immortalized and most any Haitian alive at the time remembers this event.

The excitement brought to Haiti as a result of the 1974 World Cup was unlike anything the country had ever experienced – a feeling of national unity, pride and identity (Dumont, 1994). This event represents the peak of Haitian football, in terms of success and popularity. It had never been so popular in the country and the country made great strides in terms of developing a national identity at this time, thanks in large part to football.

## **VI. Haitian Football Under Duvalierism**

Haiti was ruled under a fascist dictatorship from 1957 – 1986. The first of these rulers was François Duvalier, known as Papa Doc; in 1971 he was succeeded by his son Jean-Claude or Baby Doc (Diederich & Burt, 2005). This was a very important time in Haitian history, and it would be worth our while to consider how Haitian football was affected during their rule.

As is the case with many dictatorships, such as Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and the Communist Soviet Union, sports played an important role in Duvalierist Haiti. Sports are a way of proclaiming superiority and of bringing fame to a regime.

Both François and Jean-Claude realized the potential sport had for national solidarity under their leadership. In the late 1950's, François Duvalier renamed the Haitian National football championship the Coupe François Duvalier (Sanon, personal

communication, 2007). This tradition remained throughout the rule of Jean-Claude. The latter was surnamed 'The Great Protector of Sports' (Rouzier, 1977). Government funds were poured into supporting the Haitian national team during the Baby Doc years.

Prior to the 1974 qualifying round, Baby Doc himself made a special visit to the national team. He encouraged them and told them of their importance to the country. Sannon, who was present, states: "At the time, we were living under a repressive regime which controlled the sport, particularly this selection which was to serve somehow as propaganda" (Sannon, 1997, p. 68).

It is clear that the Duvaliers recognized the power that football had on their country and its citizens' perception of their identity. Jean-Claude was sure to have his name and face affiliated with the success of the 1974 team.

## **VII. Modern Events in Haitian Football History**

Haitian football has not seen such success since Manno Sanon's generation. Despite this fact, it remains a large part of the lives of many in Haiti. Many people see football as an escape from the miseries of life.

Football in Haiti was greatly benefited by the renovation of Stade Sylvio Cator in the 1990's. It was closed for renovation in 1994; there was a ceremony for the reopening on 18 October 1997. Those in attendance included President René Préval and Manno Sanon. To promote the opening ceremonies, an invitational tournament was organized. The invitees were: Jamaica, Cuba, Cameroon and Martinique. Haiti's sense of national unity from football was renewed in this tournament as Haiti won the tournament. The tournament provided an outlet for people to forget about the political unrest present at the

time, caused by the overthrow of the first Aristide government. This is clearly demonstrated by one of the popular chants heard in the game: “Se Ayiti wi se pa Kamewoun non – peyi nou gen foutbòl, se politik ki fè n fè back”: It’s Haiti, yes it’s not Cameroon. Our country has football- it’s our politics that cause us to regress” (ENTAK, 1997).

During Haiti’s extended absence from World Cup competition, many Haitians have become great fans of the Brazil national team. On 18 August 2004, the Brazilian National team organized an event in Haiti called “Football for Peace.” The Brazilian football stars arrived in Haiti and were welcomed by masses of thousands of people. The objective was to promote peace and lead the way for UN peacekeeping troops, who were largely Brazilian. They played a friendly match against the Haitian national team in which they easily won 6-0. Despite their team’s loss, the event was an enormous success and brought many Haitians together who had previously been warring one with another (Renois, 2004). This event is another example of football bringing together Haitians in a sense of unity.

Recently, with increasing political stability, Haiti has seen somewhat increased success in world football, which has begun to regenerate interest in Haiti’s national team and has once again brought many people together. On 24 January 2007, Haiti won their first Digicel Caribbean cup against Trinidad and Tobago. It was said to have resembled Haiti’s win in the 1974 qualifying round against Trinidad and Tobago. Haitian Head Coach, Luis Garcia stated:

*“We worked hard for it and we played with a plan. We said we would play with conviction and we did it. We are happy to see how the people of Trinidad supported the football but we are*

*even more happy to do this for the people of Haiti. This is a win for the people of Haiti.” (Kombit pou Ayiti, 2007)*

The victory was cause for much celebration throughout the country, and once again, football served an important role in unifying the people of Haiti.

Political and economic strife date to long before Haiti received its independence and its name. From times preceding Columbus’ landing on Hispaniola to this very day, the history of Haiti is one of disunity and conflict. Many historians agree that the fundamental reason for Haiti’s continued troubles is the separation of the two classes: the elite and the poor (Trouillot, 1990). Since independence, Haiti has struggled to create a national identity because of the immense differences between these two classes. It is very difficult to find aspects of Haitian culture that the elites and peasants have in common. Dumont (1994) states that recreation available to the Haitian people is vastly different for members of the two classes. The urban elites engage in cinema, parties, theatre and variety shows. In contrast, the rural masses participate in gagè (vodun dancing), rara (parades) and worship ceremonies. He asserts that: “Only football is practical all the time, throughout the entire country and draws spectators from all social conditions” (Dumont, 1994, p.85). Haitians from all parts of the country and all economic statuses cheer for the national team and take pride in their fellow countrymen. Football has played, and continues to play an important role in the development of Haitian national identity.

## References Cited

- Alsos, J. (n.d.). *Planet World Cup*. Retrieved March 12, 2007, from <http://www.planetworldcup.com/index.html>
- Bairner, A. (2001). *Sport, Nationalism and Globalization*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Burt, A. & Diedrick, B. (2005). *Papa Doc & the Tontons Macoutes*. Princeton: M. Wiener Publishers.
- Chauvel, L. (1977). *Le Football Haïtien à Travers les Ages*. Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie Henri Deschamps.
- Dumont, P. (1994). *Haïti à Munich: 20 Ans Après*. Port-au-Prince.
- ENTAK. (1997). *Tournoi Retour au Stade*. Port-au-Prince: Gutemberg Imprimerie.
- Fédération Haïtienne de Football. (1957). *Statuts et Règlements*. Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie de l'État.
- Fédération Internationale de Football Association. (n.d.). *Association Details : Haiti*. Retrieved February 28, 2007, from <http://www.fifa.com/en/organisation/confederations/associationdetails/0,1483,HA I,00.html?countrycode=HAI>
- Fick, C. (1990). *The making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue revolution from below*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.
- Gagnon, J. (2006). *La Fabuleuse Odyssée de la Coupe du Monde de Football: 1930-2006*. Montreal: Éditions Les 400 Coups.
- Kombit Pou Ayiti. (2007, 6 February). Haiti Wins Digicel Caribbean Cup. *Haiti Report*. Retrieved March 6, 2007, from <http://www.konpay.org/wordpress/2007/02/>
- Raoul-Rouzier, G. (1977). Introduction. In L. Chauvel, *Le Football Haïtien à Travers les Ages*. Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie Henri Deschamps.
- Renois, C. (2004, August 19). Football Fiesta Aims to put Haiti on Path to Peace. *Caribbean Net News*. Retrieved March 17 from <http://www.caribbeannetnews.com/2004/08/19/peace.htm>
- Sanon, E. (1997). *Toup Pou Yo*. Salt Lake City: Montreux Frères.
- Sanon, E. (personal communication, March 30, 2007)
- Terret, T. (2003). France. In *European Cultures in Sport: Examining the nations and regions*. Portland, OR: Intellect Ltd.