

To Prepare Its Reconversion after a Career of High Level Sportsman *The Example of Two Sports in France*

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Abstract

The reconversion of the sportsmen high level, nonprofessional or less popularized through the media than the great sports proves to be problematic. If all seems envisaged, on an institutional plan, and for a long time, the preparation of the reconversion reveals contrasted realities. By analyzing the process of reconversion in its stage first, which is the possibility of being formed and of obtaining diplomas lasting their sporting career, the objective is to understand why few sportsmen high level are in formation and in what the question of the policies of reconversion of the sportsmen high level questions the opposition between amateur and professional. The differences are cultural, related to the constraints suitable for the high level but also with the effects anaesthetizing and making euphoric which the group of membership as regards valorization of the only sporting project can play.

Key words: Reconversion, Sportsmen, High level sport, Constraints, Culture

1. Introduction

A discussion of the transition of Elite Athletes (EA) to life after sport implies observation of the influence, either positive or negative, which the practice of elite sport can have on the vocational training and/or university degree taken during the sports career and on the job held by former EA once their sporting career is over. A careful look at this transitory aspect of a sports career, which leads the EA to prepare for their transition to life after sport or not, reveals the traces on the one hand of the action of the State, through the directives it issues in this area, and on the other, of the way in which the federations, as delegates, interpret these directives and implement them for the benefit of the EA whether or not they take advantage of them. This consideration of life after a sports career by the State, constitutes a cultural exception (Gebauer, Braun, Suaud and Faure 1999) which characterizes the “French model of consecration” (Faure and Suaud 2004: 390) and contrasts it with the other more liberal European models. This State position is relatively recent and has its origins in the “internal and external political functions” attributable to modern sports (Brohm 1976). The first traces of State support arose in the Vichy regime (1940-1944). This State aid, under cover of a return to pure amateurism, referred to an allegiance of the athletes who had to take an oath to the government in office (Tétart 2007). But the real policy of support began two decades later. After their failure at the Rome Olympics in 1960, where the French teams did not win a single gold medal, a general delegation for Olympic training was set up under the directorship of Colonel Crespin. The notion of elite sport thus began to dominate and acquired its full significance in the political context of the Cold War.

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General de Gaulle, president of the Republic from 1959 to 1969ⁱ, is said to have declared after the Rome defeat, “Never again!” At the end of the Second World War, the need for France to be strong and successful in the sports sphere took root in the will of this Head of State, to raise France to a level of great international power and independence, whether on the economic, political or military stage, in the face of the hegemonic will of the Americans and the opposition of their president Rooseveltⁱⁱ. “General de Gaulle not only left in French political culture positive mythical themes like the grandeur of France, its status in the world, and above all “national independence” (Agulhon 2000: 133), he also sought by all possible means to develop the image of France and to promote a political system which was not subservient to the two great power blocks which existed at that time. Sports results constituted a way to increase the international visibility of a strong independent France. What was true in the time of de Gaulle is also true today to such an extent that an advisor to the Secretary of State for Youth, Sports and Voluntary Associations did not hesitate to declare at the opening of the debate on the National elite sports network in 2006:

« A dual ambition gives meaning to elite sport: at the heart of France’s radiance, elite sport is the original expression of national pride, not to say one of the best vehicles for our values and our successes [...] » (MJSVA 2006: 5).

Encouraged by General de Gaulle and his successors, since 1960 the State has organized “Olympic training” as well as aid for EA especially with the concession of grants and the possibility of taking specific competitive exams for the civil service (sports teacher) or without the requisite of qualifications, etcⁱⁱⁱ. Today the ministerial directives make it clear that the process of transition should begin at the same time as the sports career through the prompt creation of a “dual project”. This apparent political will has been reaffirmed many times. Thus, during a speech before the CNOSF^{iv} in Paris, on 23rd May 2007, Ms Roselyne Bachelot-Narquin, French Minister of Health and Sport did not fail to underline its importance:

“With regard to elite sport, the last five years will have allowed France to be numbered among the greatest nations with a 7th place in the medal tables at the Athens Olympics [...]. In addition to the supplementary financial means [...] I would like to welcome the active support received since 2006 for our elite athletes’ professional and sports dual project”^v.

It seems that for quite some time now, everything has been provided for. But, going beyond the institutional discourse, shouldn’t a light be shone on the contrasting realities to which a policy aiming to cut across different federative cultures is leading? This analysis of the transition process in its initial stage, that is the possibility of pursuing further education and qualifications during the sports career, aims to explore why so few EA are taking courses (Authier 2003) and how the policies for the transition of EA to their life after sport question the opposition between amateur and professional.

2. Methodology

Two sports have been compared: table tennis and fencing, similar in their structure and internal logic (Parlebas 1981) but different in the way the athletes carry out their life plan. All the fencers, whatever their sex, are following long university courses while only 2 of the male table tennis players are doing short courses like a diploma in vocational training (BTS - Higher Technician Certificate) and the majority of the others are not enrolled in courses or are studying for the French sports coaching qualification (State Certificate of Sport Educator). Only one is studying for a master’s degree at the Higher Business School in Paris (ESCP). The table tennis players have been officially paid by their clubs since the middle 90s. Fencing remains an amateur sport. While the sums officially received by the table tennis players are nowhere near the income of footballers, basketball or rugby players at a comparable level, they are nonetheless able to live from table tennis. The best players, competing in the first or second division by teams, receive between four and six thousand Euros net per month to which should be added, depending on their status and fame, elite sports grants, sponsoring contracts, exhibitions and tournament winnings. Fencing clubs do not officially pay their athletes who only receive elite sports grants. A “multi-scale” ethnographic type survey (Bromberger 1995) was carried out favouring personal interviews.

Nineteen EA and 2 federative managers were interviewed, the former in the form of a life history (Becker 1986) aimed at recording the life experience of each athlete, the way in which they perceive the preparation for their transition and what is at stake; and the latter in the form of descriptions of their professional practice (Bertaux 1997) to identify the procedures and means put in place to facilitate the non-sports training of the EA. The EA who were interviewed are currently members of French teams and in need (or facing the prospect) of contemplating their imminent transition. In both cases, it was a question of describing the fields of existence and seeing if there were recurring themes and structural homologies among these individual stories and practices (Demazière and Dubar 1997). The interviews were complemented with the analysis of administrative documentation regarding course entry or follow-up, and with questionnaires (74) carried out with all the athletes registered in the elite lists who have been members of the French men's and women's teams over the last 15 years apart from the generations who are currently in the national teams. These questionnaires aimed at identifying the social origins, school and/or university courses taken and professional trajectories after the EA had ended their sports careers. This study is not in fact generalizable. At most it may be possible to promote its *transferability* with a detailed description of the results of the research and the personal diaries (Marshall and Rossman 1989).

3. To prepare its reconversion

3.1. When it is a question of “federative” culture

The further education of the EA clearly differentiates between fencing and table tennis:

“Listen, I can run through the French women's sabre team which is currently number 1 in the world, has therefore been selected for the Games and will, we all hope, bring back a wonderful medal from Peking. The team is made up of Anne Lise Touya, who after getting her ESCP diploma, is a human resources executive with Bouygues in the framework of an agreement for professional insertion. There is Cécile Argiolas who is quite classically, I would say a sports teacher... er...then we have Léonore Perrus who is studying Political Sciences and lastly the youngster of the team Carole Vergne who is in her third year of a Pharmacy degree, so... er ... there you have an example. But things are perhaps not so remarkable with the other weapons...well... it's a good example... then regarding the girls in the foil team, we have a generation with a more traditional education. Céline Seigneur is a P.S.E. teacher^{vi}, Mélanie Moumas is a P.S.E. teacher, Adeline Wuillème is a P.S.E. teacher but also Astrid Guyart who is an aeronautical engineer and works at EADS^{vii}” (Srecki^{viii}, FFE^{ix}).

This extract not only shows the quality of the professional insertion of the fencers. For many years now the media have talked about the “social success” of the best fencers and the nomination of Lamour, in 2004, as Sports Minister in the De Villepin government has only served to reinforce this image. Going beyond the cliché, there is the evident pleasure that this former EA feels when talking and boasting about the professional evolution of the athletes who are currently members of the French teams. There is also a certain pride in showing that the fencers, here specifically the women, follow different and varied courses which go beyond the traditional courses related to sport. If he chose the French women's teams as an example it was not to hide the status enjoyed by the men. Those who were interviewed, are Olympic, World or European champions or more simply international medallists, and at the same time, one has a professional degree in telecommunications and is a project chief, another has a diploma in kinesiotherapeutic massage, another a master's degree in management and is working in an IT company and another has a master's degree in marketing from the Higher Business School in Paris.

The example of the women is not therefore an isolated case. At this level the difference with regard to the table tennis players is remarkable. This commitment of the fencers to higher level education could be interpreted, erroneously, as a class “habitus” (Bourdieu 1984). In collective representations, fencing is essentially an « aristocratic » sport recalling the distinction of the dominant classes. The study of sports tastes reported by Bourdieu and taken up and completed by Pociello (1995) emphasizes the differentiated *praxis* of the social categories or “classes”. Table tennis, a more modern sport, less anchored in tradition and not an heir, as fencing may be, of the ethic of the knights of the middle ages (Dubey 1984) or the duals which went hand in hand with the honour of the well-born from the Renaissance to the end of the 60s in France,^x is usually considered to be practiced by the middle classes.

An analysis of the social origins of the athletes using the PCS (Occupation and Socio-Professional Category) of the father shows that there is not a significant difference between these two sports. It is true that elite fencing is not the fencing of “Mr. Average” and the EA are not a representative sample of the total population of fencing practitioners. The grounding of this study in a particular social group should not be forgotten.

3.2. Distinct federative practices: from the “pedagogical model” to the “fire-fighter”

In fact fencing and table tennis reveal two radically opposed EA management systems. The question of the transition to life after sport has always been a major concern for the fencers:

“This has always been... er ...a ... priority with the athletes themselves [...] in any case the specificity of fencing is perhaps to have this personal ... awareness” (Srecki, FFE).

Ms. Palierne, who has only been in charge of this area since the return to work in September 2007, admits that she only intervenes *a posteriori*:

“Today we work in a rather ...delicate register, because it’s an emergency, it’s always after an injury or a sports failure or a more in-depth consideration of an athlete’s life after sport which arises...”

With these words, she is underlining both the lack of commitment of the table tennis players to successfully manage the dual project and the disinterest of the federation in this matter at least in dealing with it before problems arise. However the texts are perfectly clear. When they become part of the EA lists, the athletes have to develop a life plan, helped by their federation which should motivate and support them. This life plan has two aspects: one sports-related and the other professional. The federation is not asked to be a substitute for the athletes’ motivation. The athletes should be the essential motor of their professional project. Without the will, motivation or interest on the part of the athletes nothing is possible. On the other hand, the federation should play a supporting role from the very moment they enter the system:

“ A supporting role from the federation but it isn’t the federation’s job to decree a great transition plan if the athletes are not personally convinced of the need for it [...] it is all the thinking which is common to all the top athletes ... it’s all the logic of the top athletes or...or as well as elite sport there is a special concern for their studies [...] we don’t create a specific programme, we just act and in my opinion that’s already... er... sufficient to cover perhaps 90% to 95% of the ... of the needs, we just act as the effective relays of the ministerial provisions, Insep or others” (Srecki, FFE).

The distribution of roles seems to be clear. This vision of the commitment of the athlete, which would seem to be more important than the federative role, is perhaps a simplistic representation of the facts. This is a question of the “chicken or the egg”, “the principle of organizational recursion”, that is “a circular process in which the product or the ultimate effect becomes the first element and first cause” (Morin 1977: 186). Is it the federation that has built up, without realizing it, this desire in the athletes? Is it the athletes themselves, through mimicry of the career path of former generations, encouraged by the federative managers? There is probably an element of all of these possibilities. It can be inferred from the different interviews, for example when Srecki states:

“Neither the involved managerial staff, the national coach, nor the federation declare that this is going to be a brake on their performance, on the contrary, people are going to encourage it and stigmatize instead those who commit themselves to a pseudo, a pseudo occupational activity”.

By stigmatizing those who do not construct a dual project the federation obviously guides the athletes towards taking this step and infers their adherence. It is equally important to underline that all the fencers interviewed know the manager in charge of elite sport, understand his role, have met with him, each of them several times, and all make it clear, without exception, that the federation has helped and guided them in the process. This is not the case in table tennis:

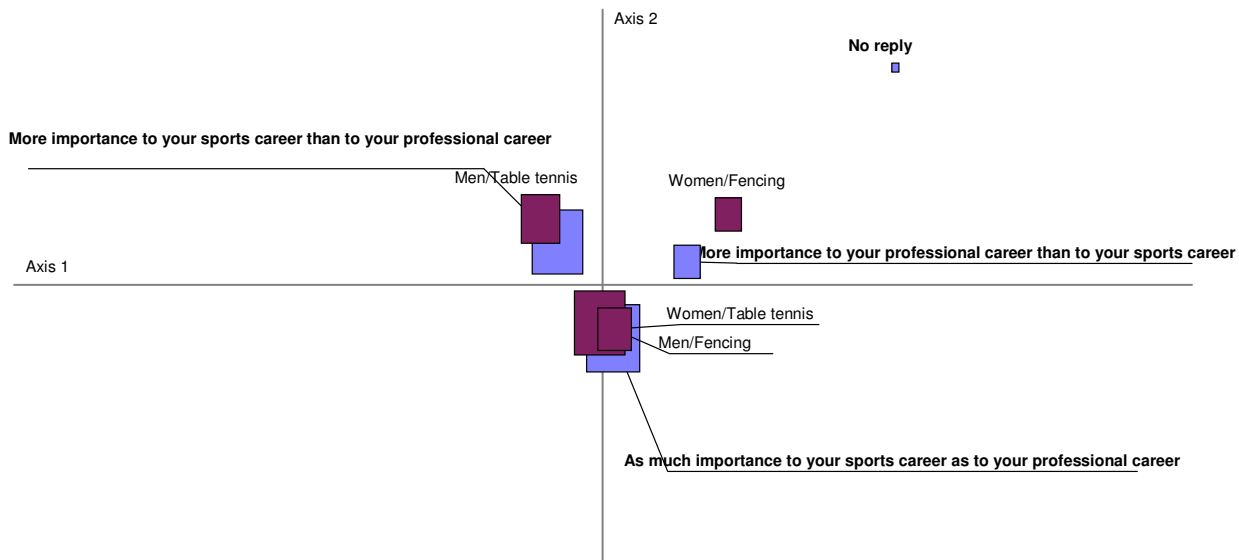
“Indeed as it is in the mandate of the federative president and in the mandate of the national technical director (DTN) so... today they want socio-professional monitoring to be part of the elite scene and for this reason I have been made responsible for creating a support system for these athletes, and so, this support is only given at the present moment if they ask for it” (Palierne, FFTT^{xi}).

This extract shows a recent interest in this question. The FFTT faced with the retirement of a large number of young EA has been confronted with a real problem as, in contrast to the FFE, the athletes, or the majority of them, do not follow any further education courses during their sports career. Every era is different and the sports project is given priority over the professional one.

3.3. Professional and/or sports project: when the EA begin to stand out

These two phases can be detected in the reply to the question of if they attach, more, less or as much importance to their sports career as to their professional career.

Figure 1 AFC importance attached to the professional project with regard to the sports project



The dependence is very significant. $\chi^2 = 22.07$, $ddl = 9$. $1-p = 99.13\%$.

Seventy-three point seven per cent of the male table tennis players who replied, state that they attach more importance to their sports career than to their professional career compared with 34.4 % of their fencing counterparts. With regard to the women they are respectively 57.1% and 33.3 % who declare they attach equal importance to the dual project and 14.3 and 33.1 % who attach more importance to their professional project. This figure reveals three distinct populations:

- The male table tennis players who prioritize their sports career,
- The fencers and the female table tennis players who attach equal importance to their sports and professional projects,
- The female fencers who prioritize their professional project.

These results can be explained in different ways. First of all the length of the sports career is not comparable. Fifty-four point six per cent of the table tennis players stated that their EA career lasted between 2 and 5 years while that of the fencers lasted from 5 to 10 years for 29.3 % and more than 10 years for 22 %. This longevity may be conjunctural and attributable to the specific qualities and exceptional level of the athletes in a given period or, again, related to the psychological, physical and temporal demands and constraints with regard to competition or training frequency. Nonetheless this duration inevitably influences the desire or lack of desire to prioritize the dual project. Obviously a short career probably encourages the EA to invest more in their sports career to the detriment of their professional one, considering in fact the process of transition, not as part of a continuum but as different successive stages. Then there are the financial reasons. In the middle 60s, table tennis turned professional. This decision meant that the clubs were made to compete against each other and the players' income increased exponentially to such a degree that, at the time, the 2 or 3 best male table tennis players were close to earning the same salary as the average players in French football teams.

This professionalization has not failed to have an impact on the choice of the male table tennis players who state that they “attach more importance to their sports career than to their professional one”. But beyond the anaesthetizing effect of money, do the EA always have the desire or the possibility to continue their education?

4. Wanting and being able to enrol for further education

The first brake to the transition to life after sport is probably psychological. Most of the EA remember:

“I arrived like a shot... that’s to say among the best, I wasn’t predestined to have the career I have had...but at a certain moment, I deserve it...but in fact I haven’t had anything, people didn’t have faith in me so there you are... at that level I’m missing something because I don’t know why?” (Table Tennis Player1).

“So it took me time to change, I broke my hand, stupidly, it took me more time... then I arrived at a competition and I said to myself “I couldn’t give a damn about being here”, I was in the hall like a zombie... [...] it wasn’t serious but it took me more time and then I told myself ... that’s it you’ve got to stop... you’ve got to stop playing around. I made the exact decision that I had promised myself I would make but that I hadn’t been able to make” (Table Tennis Player2).

“It’s true that even if they encourage us right away to take a course of studies the moment we arrive here ... well, that’s strange... How can I explain it? You arrive full of dreams and hopes and you are told “O.K. you must prepare for your transition and follow a course of studies for your life after sports or in case you get injured”. It’s a bit of a shock as you already have to start thinking about afterwards when it will all be over” (Fencer 6).

What the EA are talking about is not stopping practising their sport but their doubts about stopping their elite sports career, their uneasiness, their disappointments or their difficulty to integrate the question of what happens afterwards. Stopping their sports career marks a drastic break between being what they are today, what is safe, what marks their achievements, what they have been and what they would have liked to have been and become. This future is made up of hopes but also of fears. Fear of leaving a protected environment, fear of tomorrow, fear of the ordinary world which they have hardly needed to face or have not faced at all, since they began to practise sport at the elite level. They also have hopes, among other things, of doing something else which is interesting and being a success at it. This passage marks the break between an extraordinary world and an ordinary world into which they are going to have to merge or just simply integrate:

“For me, I had really high goals ...I wanted to be among the best in the world...for me when I stopped...that was a shock for me ...it’s not easy to handle...I went to see a psychologist here” (Table Tennis Player4).

For some to think about taking a course of studies and assuring their transition means already thinking about afterwards, it means projecting themselves, from now on, into a time when they will no longer be special, when they do not, at the present moment, feel a crucial need to do so. The end of their sports career marks the destruction of a part of the motive force of their lives, for themselves, in the eyes of others and also in the opinion of others.

“When you talk about the transition, the others have an image of you... it’s over...you are no longer totally committed, in fact you’re finished...you’ve crossed out elite sport... and then it’s not honest, people always have mental reservations ... you feel bad” (Table Tennis Player3).

For some athletes initiating the transition also touches their identity in its third dimension (Heinich 1999). The opinion of others is not focused on the question of the transition but considered with regard to abandoning sports goals, the group, and involves being distanced from it. The fencers never evoke this “loss” of a part of themselves. This does not mean that they do not feel it or that they will not feel it ... later on, when they definitely end their sports career. In the end both fencers and table tennis players above all look to follow the norm of the dominant model.

The fencers go into the transition process when they enter the elite sports channel, by mimicry or course, but also so that they are not left outside the group, “stigmatized” by the other members or by the managers as Srecki recalled when he said “people are going to encourage it and stigmatize instead those who commit themselves to a pseudo, a pseudo occupational activity”. In table tennis the norm is to abandon studies in favour of a single sports project. Not to commit oneself to the single sports project implies giving signals of not belonging to the group and not devoting oneself totally to one’s sports career.

“[...] when I wanted to study to be a sports teacher well...and I stopped, they were disappointed, I think, when I said that’s enough... er...” (Table Tennis Player6).

This stigmatization, experienced by the athletes, is really, according to the work by Goffman (1963), a social construction which is the result of the dominant norm of the group. Strangely this norm can evolve. In the case of table tennis, for example, successive departures from elite sport by a certain number of young players and their enrolment in courses which will give them added value make others want to do the same thing:

“Well, for the moment, in fact I would like to be able to do my vocational training diploma...that’s it... then after seeing how it has gone, if I liked it or if I feel that I am interested and I’m motivated... it would be a case of carrying on afterwards and studying something else... maybe a specialization, maybe do like “Gaye” and enter a business school” (Table Tennis Player2).

For the fencers the norm is to keep the two projects going at the same time. The level of their qualifications and the diversity of their courses are proof. Only one fencer regrets not being able to live from fencing and to have to share his time between his education and/or his professional activity and elite sport:

“I am forced to start my working life well before the end of my sports career. And that is perhaps the problem here in France. Our sport is not “professional” enough from an infrastructure and financial point of view, which means we cannot make a living at it. Plus we don’t make payments with a view to our retirement, and you can understand what that means if you start at 30 ...” (Fencer 4)

This regret is in fact only related to the sports inequality which he and his counterparts experience in terms of world competition. A world team champion, his goal is to win a medal in Peking. It is not the fact of having to do a course of study, or to work which is a problem, as he has a master’s degree from a recognized school, but rather the inequality of training and support which condemns him to competing against opponents who are paid by the State and who have no problems with professional insertion or updating their qualifications or competencies:

“In addition, in other countries, most of the athletes are supported by the State and receive remuneration. In fact even though we could live for a couple of years from this, our qualifications lose their value if we are not active” (Fencer 4).

Elite amateur sport in France exists in a situation of total ambiguity. The results are eagerly awaited by all: politicians, sports managers, media, spectators, sports fans, parents, etc. Strangely no one worries or asks about how the athletes make a living and what their future will be like. Questions could be asked about the fact that the tax office continues to turn a blind eye to hidden sums paid to athletes, if it is not for obvious political reasons: the State doing little to financially support the EA, there are probably precise instructions on the subject which encourage “turning a blind eye to their income”.

5. The dual project between constraints and obstacles

Political statements and good intentions are however not hard to find with regard to the need to guarantee the further education of EA:

“They (EA) too often find themselves alone when they have to initiate their transition [...] No elite athletes should be forced to abandon their studies to be able to fully devote themselves to practising their sport” (Dominique De Villepin, Prime Minister, 6th February 2007, inaugural speech at the 1st crossroads of performance at the Insep).

On the contrary, it seems legitimate to ask if elite sports practice, further education and the transition process are compatible during a sports career. All the athletes are unanimous on this point: to successfully carry out the dual project is to accept a challenge. The constraints are numerous: with regard to the sports entourage, the training demands, the courses of study offered, the international calendar, the dates of the exams... nothing is really spared the athletes. All of them evoke the fact that they chose their courses by default, even though the majority say that they do not regret it today. This choice is made from among those which are easily identifiable at first sight, which are related to the sports environment for example, in second place from among those which are available at the INSEP, as they are easier to manage with regard to training timetables, the proximity of the facilities and the courses organized over 3 years instead of 2 for example as in the case of the vocational training diploma, and also by mimicry, as the athletes can exchange experiences on the way to enrol, the course contents, their pitfalls or simply the job prospects. In spite of considerable progress, the temporal and institutional constraints are still as difficult for the athletes to overcome. However, they are not all equal. Fencing training sessions are held at the end of the afternoon giving the athletes the possibility of following a multitude of courses, or “normal” courses which are open to all, apart from those offered at the INSEP. The table tennis players train twice a day and are forced to stop their sports career to enrol in further education.

Moreover, free time is not time which is totally useable. The life of an EA is organized around technical-physical training, preparation for the competitions, special health care made necessary by the repetitious nature of the exercise and the need for full recovery. In a training centre like the INSEP everything becomes complicated as, once they leave this area, travelling takes up a large amount of time.

The athletes do their best to manage their need to enrol in further education courses, their own desires, what is “within reach” or what is the least far away, all in order to be able to make the two projects compatible.

Moreover the fencers, both men and women, and the women table tennis players are more likely to take up or plan long courses of studies than the men table tennis players. At this level of analysis, it would probably be wrong to read too much into the recourse to short courses or vocational training diplomas. First of all it should be remembered that the fencers are “older”. What shows up is more a transition process in its final stages than a transition process in progress as with the younger table tennis players. The sports diplomas or the vocational training diplomas may constitute an intermediate phase on the way to other courses or projects. The second level sports diploma, equivalent to a degree, permits them to enter the competitive exams for sports teachers. The vocational training diplomas awarded by the INSEP give them the possibility of enrolling in courses in the sports management career path, in the framework of the contracts which the INSEP studies department has made with several universities like Paris X Nanterre, among others. The EA status together with the vocational training diploma permits them, via a specific competitive exam, to study at certain important business schools. These courses and diplomas do not infer the quality of the athletes’ professional insertion or the status and income that they will enjoy after their sports career. Nor do they indicate the ease or lack of ease with which the athletes will be able to enter the labour market at the end of their sports career.

There remains a recurrent topic raised by all the athletes who are following further education courses: the exams. This problem should be resolved as, *a priori*, the EA can take advantage of specific exams. In fact, circular number 1455 issued on 06/10/87 and completed by directive n° 06-138 JS of 1st August 2006 just invites the presidents of higher education institutions to make every necessary effort to permit the EA to combine their sports activities with their studies. Most of the university presidents have responded to this “invitation”. The problems encountered by the EA come from the fact that their group is not a population with identical characteristics but individuals with distinct constraints and sports calendars. All of them talk about the problems they have faced:

“Impossibility of putting off the date of an exam if there was a competition at the same time”
(Fencer 3).

“Few adjustments during the first year. Later on the possibility of choosing courses and therefore their free hours. In the case of exams during competitions, it’s possible to catch up later on”
(Fencer 1).

If the directives exist, they are applied, in the universities and business schools, in keeping with another population “with irregular attendance”, that of the professionals, in a collective manner.

With the difference that the sports calendar varies, the teams can evolve as a function of the results and it is impossible for EA to have a week “off” to take their exams during the World or European Championships. In short, this question remains insoluble unless the managers in charge negotiate case by case with each educational institution and for each athlete. This is one of the corner stones of the system. If nothing is organized, as a function of the specific constraints on the EA, the transition process is put at risk.

Strangely enough, only one EA has raised the problem of absenteeism. However it confronts all of them. This fencer talks about the negotiations he had to manage himself:

“I didn’t have problems for my vocational training diploma. However, for my degree I had to “negotiate” my absences to be able to train and take part in the competitions. My absences were tolerated only if I had above average marks. Something that I achieved by finishing 4th in my year. I was the only athlete among “normal” students!” (Fencer 2).

There again the system shows its limits as these questions should be resolved from the moment when the athletes enrol in the course, managed at the outset, perhaps by the federative person in charge. From one point of view “having to cope” and be personally responsible can turn out to be constructive. In fact this athlete says it with pride “Something that I achieved by finishing 4th in my year. I was the only athlete among “normal” students!”

6. Conclusion

From all that has been said the opposition between the sports project and the professional project is clear. The latter is experienced either as a necessity, the sports career just representing a stage, important and enriching in its moral and symbolic dimensions, in the athlete’s life or, in contrast, as an obstacle to sports success. As far as the two managers are concerned, both former EA, they share the same point of view and are challenging a certain number of traditional ideas by developing the idea of *Mens sana in corpore sano*, of athletes who are more successful because they feel more secure with regard to their future.

But this problematic situation reveals another aspect. Fencing has kept the culture of a disinterested amateur sport practised in addition to the main activity even if it is at the elite level. In contrast, table tennis reveals an “unfinished professionalism”. The players are paid by the clubs, have employment contracts, and earn sums of money which allow them to live comfortably but not to envisage their future without a transition. Nonetheless they are asked to invest the same amount of time as in the really professional sports. It is obvious that table tennis because of the implementation of the transition process for its athletes, is suffering from this ambiguous development in which the EA are the hostages of the system. Unless perhaps it is accepted that the EA constitute “a working class which has exactly the same problems as the working class in the late 19th century, that is precarious working conditions and a lack of recognition by the employers, the fact that they are used, they are picked, they are squeezed and then they are thrown away” (Bambuck 2004: 140)^{xii}.

Of course the project cannot be identical for everyone. Probably not all athletes want to follow higher education courses or have the intellectual ability to do so. The socio-professional monitoring should probably take these constraints into account but nothing however prevents the federations from setting up a regular monitoring program of their athletes, from encouraging their personal project and from making all the arrangements to facilitate their success in accordance moreover with the legal texts which frame the dual project.

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Notes

- ⁱ He actually returned to power on 29th May 1958 at the request of René Coty.
- ⁱⁱ It should be remembered among other things that Roosevelt recognized the Vichy régime and opposed Free France as well as the French Committee of National Liberation, going as far as to refuse to let de Gaulle attend the summit held in Yalta from 4th to 11th February 1945.
- ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.sports.gouv.fr/francais/sport-et-competition/sport-de-haut-niveau/> (accessed 20 August 2011).
- ^{iv} French National Olympic and Sports Committee.
- ^v http://www.jeunesse-sports.gouv.fr/accueil_5/ministre_201/discours_220/intervention-mme-roselyne-bachelot-narquin-devant-comite-nationale-olympique-sportif-francais_1602.html (accessed 17 July 2011).
- ^{vi} Physical and Sports Education.
- ^{vii} European Aeronautic Defence and Space company formerly Aérospatiale.
- ^{viii} Deputy national technical director at the French Fencing Federation (FFE) and the person in charge of elite sport at the time of the interview.
- ^{ix} French Fédération of fencing
- ^x The last official duel in France took place in 1967 between Gaston Deferre and René Ribière over a disagreement in the hemicycle of the National Assembly.
- ^{xi} French Federation of Table Tennis
- ^{xii} Several times European champion, European and World 100 and 200m champion, former Secretary of State for Youth and Sports from 1988 to 1991 in Michel Rocard's administration.