



HAL
open science

A geography of ice hockey in France: the weird location of the professional teams

Gerald Billard, Lemoine Ludivine

► To cite this version:

Gerald Billard, Lemoine Ludivine. A geography of ice hockey in France: the weird location of the professional teams. Canada's game? Critical perspectives on ice hockey and identity, The Canadian Studies Program at Bridgewater State College, Apr 2005, Plymouth, United States. hal-01626804

HAL Id: hal-01626804

<https://hal.science/hal-01626804v1>

Submitted on 31 Oct 2017

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF ICE HOCKEY IN FRANCE :

THE WEIRD LOCATION OF PROFESSIONAL TEAMS

Dr. Gérald Billard & Ludivine Lemoine

University of Rouen (France)

CNRS – laboratory MTG - Geography

The lock-out affecting the NHL since September 16th 2004 had two consequences. Firstly, five months after the lock-out began, the NHL commissioner Garry Bettman cancelled the season in February 2005. Secondly, around 180 NHL players have left North-America for European teams. Thus 2 well-known players from the Calgary Flames (NHL 2004 Stanley Cup finalists) Steve Montador and Steven Reinprecht have joined the team of Mulhouse. This arrival, and others like in Villard de Lans (French Alps), had enlightened professional ice hockey in France. It was a great opportunity for this minor sport in France to be under the light of media and gain more consideration.

According to the French Minister of Sports, 17 229 people were practicing ice hockey in France in 2004 out of 60 millions inhabitants. This is far from the two millions French people who play soccer¹, one million tennis, 564 000 judo or 426 888 basket-ball. Professional soccer is also the most attended sport on television in France. In 2004, the ten best audiences, regarding all programs (sports, movies, news magazines...) were made owing to 10 soccer games². And the (private) TV channel *Canal+* broke a new record in 2004, by making an agreement with the Professional Soccer League³ for 600 millions euros per year (for three years) to have the right to broadcast the French first league championship.

A contrario, the professional hockey games have just started to be on air⁴: this year, a cable and satellite TV channel *Sport +*, is broadcasting only few games of the regular season, the Magnus Cup⁵ finals series and the French All Stars Game.

But, compared to other ice sports, like figure or speed ice skating, ice hockey has more permit-holders. After few years of confusion at the end of the 90's, the professional hockey league seems to have found a sustainable formula and seduced the fans. In some cities, like Rouen, Amiens and Grenoble the mean attendance per game rises over 2 000 spectators⁶. It is interesting to point out that professional ice hockey has not been much investigated by the French geographers⁷ despite the captivate problematic of the spatial diffusion of professional ice hockey in France.

¹ 20 % of the total number of players in all sports in France play soccer and only 0.38 % play ice hockey

² Eurodata TV Worldwide, march 2005

³ Ligue Professionnelle de Football (LFP)

⁴ In 2003, the Magnus Cup finals series were not broadcasted on television, only games 2 and 3 of the finals series were broadcasted live on an Internet site (www.planisport.com).

⁵ Magnus Cup is the French name of the professional trophy for the ice hockey, like Stanley Cup for the NHL.

⁶ Source : www.hockeyarchives.info (data from season 2002/2003)

⁷ For about fifteen years, the main studies on sports made by French geographers have been conducted on soccer or rugby.

The slow diffusion of ice hockey in France

Most of the leading sports in France have their global federation and a specific association for professional teams, like the French Federation of Soccer and the Professional Soccer League. Ice hockey does not have a dedicated association and shares a federation with the other ice sports (Skating, Bobsleigh..). It is obvious that ice hockey is a minor sport in France despite the fact that the French ice hockey championship celebrated its centenary in 2003.

At the beginning, ice hockey was a seasonal sport played only in winter and outside. Paradoxically, in France, ice hockey did not appear in the mountains (Alps, Pyrénées...) or in the coldest regions but in Paris, on an iced canal in Versailles by the year 1891. Ten years later, Pierre de Coubertin, the father of the modern olympics games, created the first French ice hockey team : the Paris Hockey Club. They won against the London Princess Ice Hockey team which was seven times world champion. In 1905, several teams were created in Paris (and one in Lyon, first champion that same year) and they dominated the French league until 1922 (Biot, 1996).

In the 1920's, a new pole of spreading appeared in the French Alps. Many teams were created in several cities (Chamonix, Gap..) without any logic regarding the size of the urban areas. Grenoble, the biggest town in the Alps, had its own team later than several smaller mountain towns. All the cities in the Alps share an ideal climatic environment to host hockey players with a cold and long winter which is essential to practice ice hockey outdoor during a long period. Chamonix became the major French team ever by winning 30 championship titles between 1923 and 1979 (see Fig.1).

In 1930, Chamonix hosted for the first time the Ice Hockey World Championship. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that ice hockey was not present in the other French mountains (Massif Central, Pyrénées, Jura...).

After the 1968 Olympics Winter Games in Grenoble, ice hockey became more popular in France and spreaded in the northern part of the country, in the plains. Some cities such as Amiens, Rouen, Viry-Châtillon, Angers or Reims built their first indoor ice rink. In the 70's and the 80's, with the construction of a lot of indoor ice rinks in the large cities, several new teams were created. This spreading of ice hockey was enabled by the large investments made by the local governments, especially the local authorities.

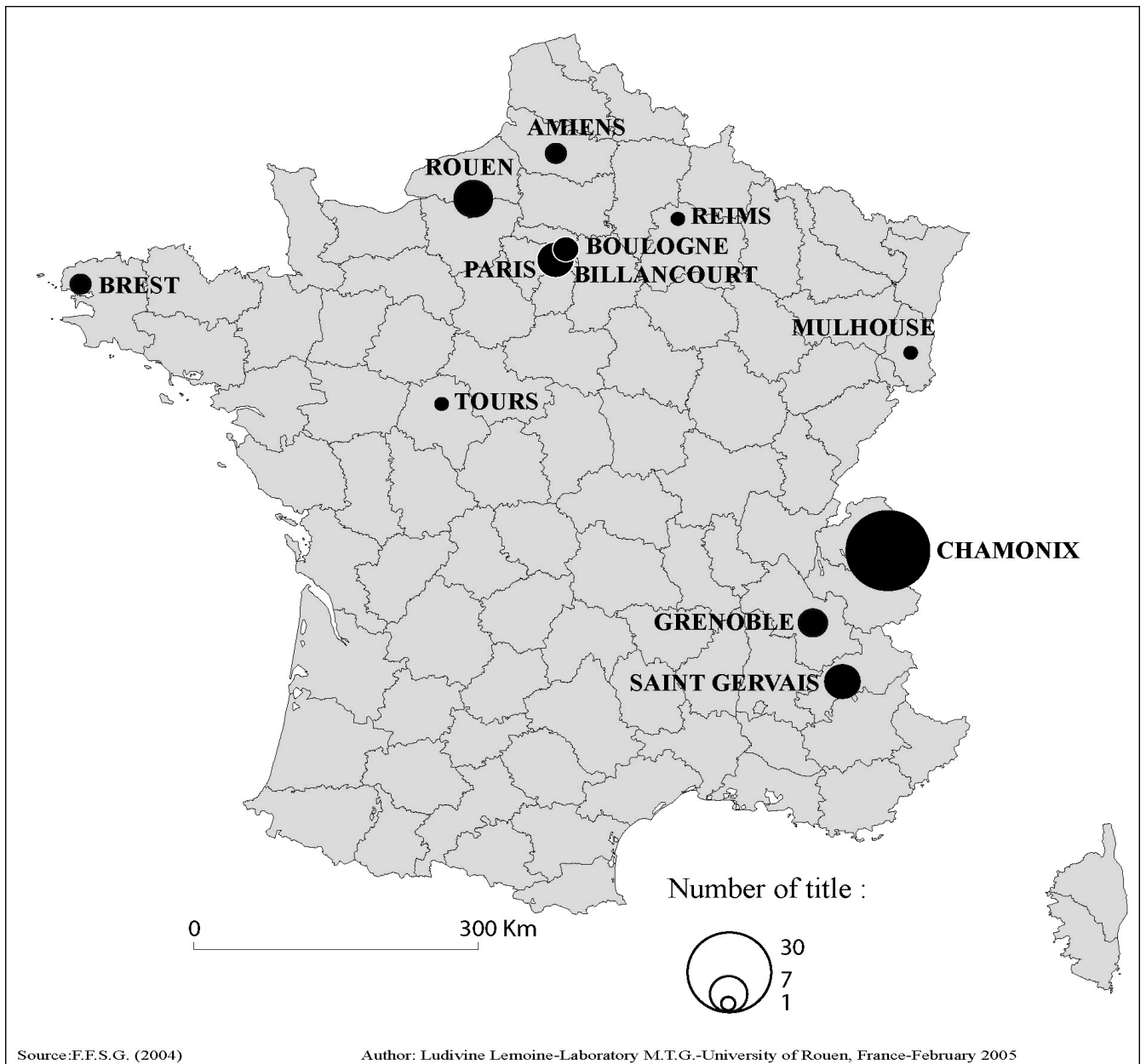


Fig.1 French teams winners of the Magnus Cup between 1903 and 2005

The modern structuration of French professional ice hockey

With the television covering of the French team games⁸ during the 1992 Olympics Winter Games in Albertville (French Alps), more and more young people decided to play ice hockey. In France, between 1992 and 1993, the number of players rised from 29 000 to 32 000.

But, the best professional teams were affected by a major financial crisis started in 1991. Only six teams played the 1991-1992 championship (Magnus Cup) and ten in the minor division.

In 1992-1993, a lot of teams (Briançon, Bordeaux, Epinal or Clermont-Ferrand) had not enough money to compete in the Magnus Cup again. Errors in the financial management of the teams, the retreat of big private sponsors (ex. Bayer Inc. in Caen), less money from the local authorities could explain this crisis. Only four teams, survivors from this major failure, joined the new Magnus Cup formula composed of 16 teams.

We can also argue that despite the good results of our national team, there is a lack of a real ice hockey culture in our country illusted by the weak coverage of ice hockey events by the media. Furthermore, ice hockey does not run its own federation and has to share the French Ice Sport Federation⁹ (FFSG) with some traditional non-professional sports like bobsleigh or curling, ! For this reason, it is very difficult to develop professional skill.

The season of 2003/2004 seemed to be very crucial for the professional ice hockey because it negociated (and gained) more self-sufficiency from FFSG and signed some agreement with a national television channel for the broadcasting of the Magnus Cup Finals.

Since 2004, the sitution of the teams has improved owing to the creation of the French Hockey Executive Authority (AEHF), under the direction of a former pro player (Luc Tardif). This authority wanted to bring some cohesion back in ice hockey as well as a better management of the professional teams.

In 2003, a first rule was settled to restrict the total salaries of each professional team : 450 000 €/year was the new limit.

Then in june 2004, only 4 non-european players could be hired in professional teams of the Super 16 (see Fig. 2). All these decisions show the will of the AEHF to have a sane financial management in professional ice hockey and encourage the training of French young players instead of importing, as usual, canadians ones, for example.

⁸ After some fantastic games, the French National Team finished at the 8th position of the Olympic tournament.

⁹ Fédération Française des Sports de Glace (FFSG)

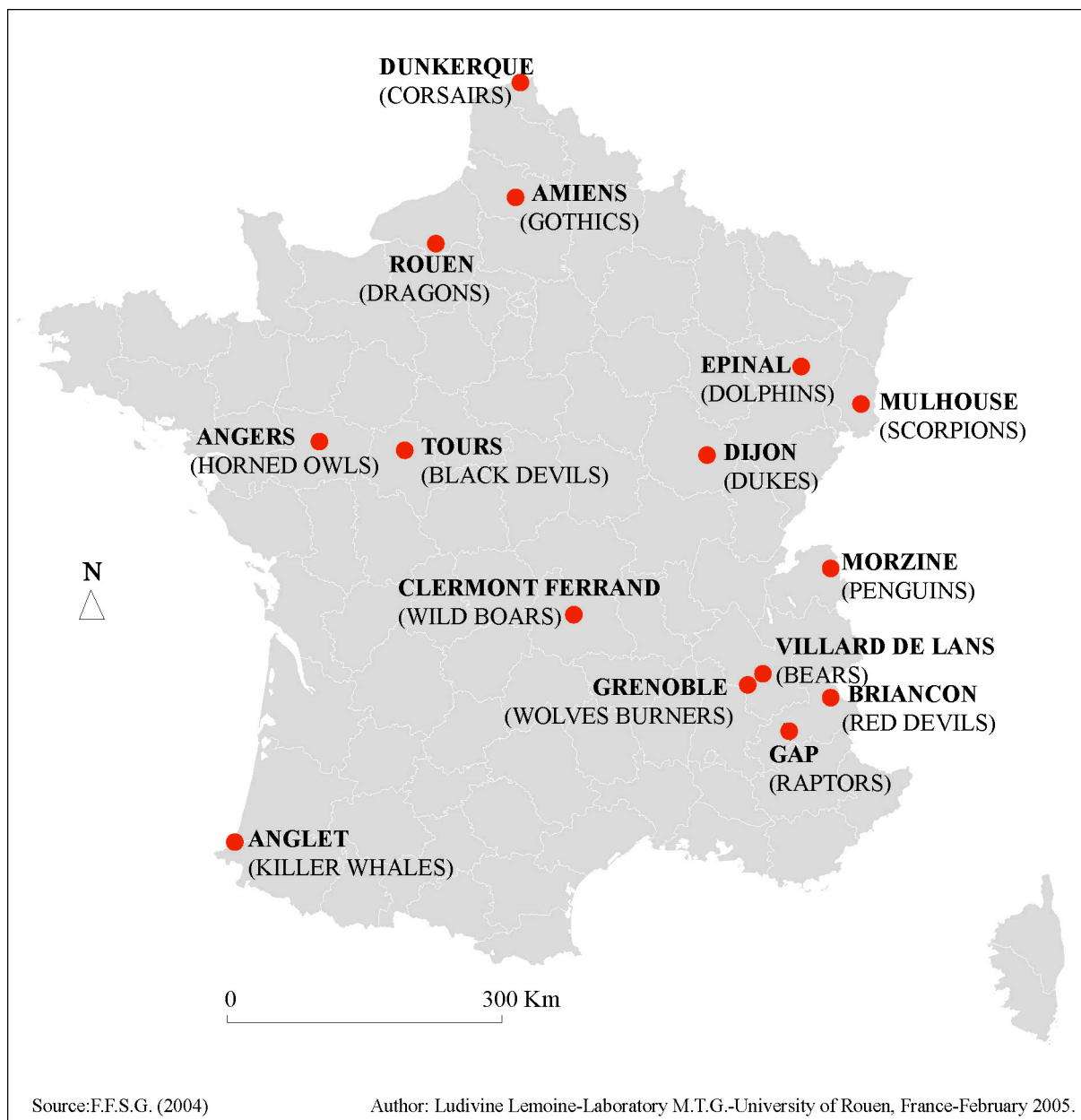


Fig.2 Teams in Super 16 (Magnus Cup) for season 2004/2005

But beyond the financial aspect, the long-term stability of the Magnus Cup is for us an important goal to gain more professionalism in ice hockey and to develop loyalty of the fans. If the Magnus Cup has been existing since 1903, the championship has changed its formula several times. If we consider the last five years, five formulas of the Magnus Cup have been tested with seven teams during the season 2000/2001 and 15 teams in 2004/2005 ! Now, in the Super 16 (Magnus Cup), 15 teams play in the regular season in a unique division with a first and second leg. The 8 best teams run in play-off (3 wins to be qualified) and at the end, one of the finalists need two victories to win the Magnus Cup. The teams not qualified for the play-offs run a relegation division and the teams with the more losts have to leave the Super 16 to play at a lower level the following year.

The weird location of the French champion teams in the history of ice hockey

If the formula of the Magnus Cup has changed many times over the last century, the results (and sometimes bankruptcy !) always determine if a team will stay in Magnus Cup division or will be replaced by a team of the lower level division. In the NHL, the system of professional franchises freezes the location of professional teams (except sale and relocation of franchises). In France, the geography of the distribution of professional teams should be uncertain in times, even it would be logical to find more good teams in the coldest and icy regions like in the mountain areas.

Nevertheless, the first concentration of ice hockey teams was in Paris area (17 Magnus Cup titles won between 1903 and 1939) and in Lyon, the two largest cities in France, both located in the plain. In the beginning of the twentieth century, this phenomena could be explained by the role traditionally played by large urban areas in the diffusion of innovation. Until 1922, Chamonix (see Fig. 3) was the first town in the Alps regions to have won a Magnus Cup : that reaches our first hypothesis that weather conditions could be a good factor to understand the development of ice hockey (Biot, 1996).



Fig. 3 : Players practising ice hockey outdoor in 1920's in Chamonix (Alps area – France)
(Source : Biot R, 1996)

From 1945 to 1989, all Magnus Cup winners but one were located in the primary areas of the French ice hockey history : in the Alps region (Chamonix HC, HC Saint Gervais, CSG Grenoble, CS Megève, HC Mont Blanc), in Paris area (Racing Club de France, AC Boulogne Billancourt, Français Volants de Paris, Paris Université Club) and in Lyon (CP Lyon). In 1980, Tours, a city of 120 000 inhabitants, located in the temperate Loire valley, won the Magnus Cup and made a breach in the usual geography of the location of the best professional teams in France (see Fig. 1).

In fact, since 1990, 15 Magnus Cups have been attributed and only Grenoble (Alps region) won the ultimate title in 1991 and 1998 over the big domination of the cities located in the plains (Rouen, Amiens, Reims) or on the coastline (Brest)¹⁰. The teams in Paris and Lyon disappeared from the Super 16 division. More globally, the current analysis of the development of the professional teams in France shows a triple phenomena : an historical concentration in the Alps region, a large diffusion of outstanding teams in the plain areas around Paris in the western and eastern parts of France (north of the Loire river) and a lack of professional teams in the centre region (Massif Central) and in southern regions (French Riviera, South-West), except in the city of Anglet. (see Fig. 2).

The primary factors of location of the professional teams in France

Since the end of the 60's, cities located in the northern part of France, in the plain area, have been experimenting the creation of several professional teams. This diffusion has had an impact on the geographical distribution of teams able to win the Magnus Cup and we wonder which factors could explain this new spatial concentration of the best French professional teams. The location of the professional teams shows a country cut in two parts along a line between Paris and Lyon. At the beginning of the XXth century, players were practising only outdoor and in winter. If Paris is the first place in the development of ice hockey, we can point out the influent role played by Pierre de Coubertin. Then, the domination of the team of Chamonix on French ice hockey can be explained by weather conditions : with long and cold winters, the outdoor ice rinks could be built for several months. Mountains are also a good place for the development of a winter sport culture.

Since 1955, the massive construction of indoor ice rinks in France (see Fig. 4), especially in the large cities located in the northern plains, has changed the geography of ice skating and since the 60's, of the creation of ice hockey teams. We can link the construction of indoor sport facilities with the climatic factor because indoor sports (hand-ball, volley-ball, basket-ball...) are more common on the northern regions of France whereas outdoor sports (tennis, rugby, surf...) are more frequent in the South. Also, we can argue that cities in the South are far away from the historical first poles of ice hockey (Paris and the Alps) and maybe, it explains the weakness of the ice hockey culture in the southern regions too (Lemoine, 2001).

Another element can help us to understand the geography of ice hockey in France : the global concentration of sport facilities construction in the most dynamic regions in terms of population and economic growth. Indeed, the construction of an ice hockey stadium is a big financial weight for the local communities. Lemoine (2001) shows a correlation between high density urban areas and an important number of ice hockey professional teams. For example, since 1960, the western part of France has been experimenting a large growth of population and hockey teams as well. On the contrary, the Massif Central or the south-west region have a small density of population and only few ice hockey teams. But the number of inhabitants is not the only factor to be considered. An ice hockey rink is not an usual facility for a city on the contrary to gymnasiums, swimming pools, soccer or rugby stadiums or tennis courts. For example, in 1998, there were 3 000 indoor and 10 000 outdoor ice rinks in Canada (for 30 millions inhabitants), 1 500 and 2 500 in the United States but only 97 indoor and 48 outdoor ice rinks in France (Evdokinoff, 1998).

¹⁰ Source : www.ffsg.org

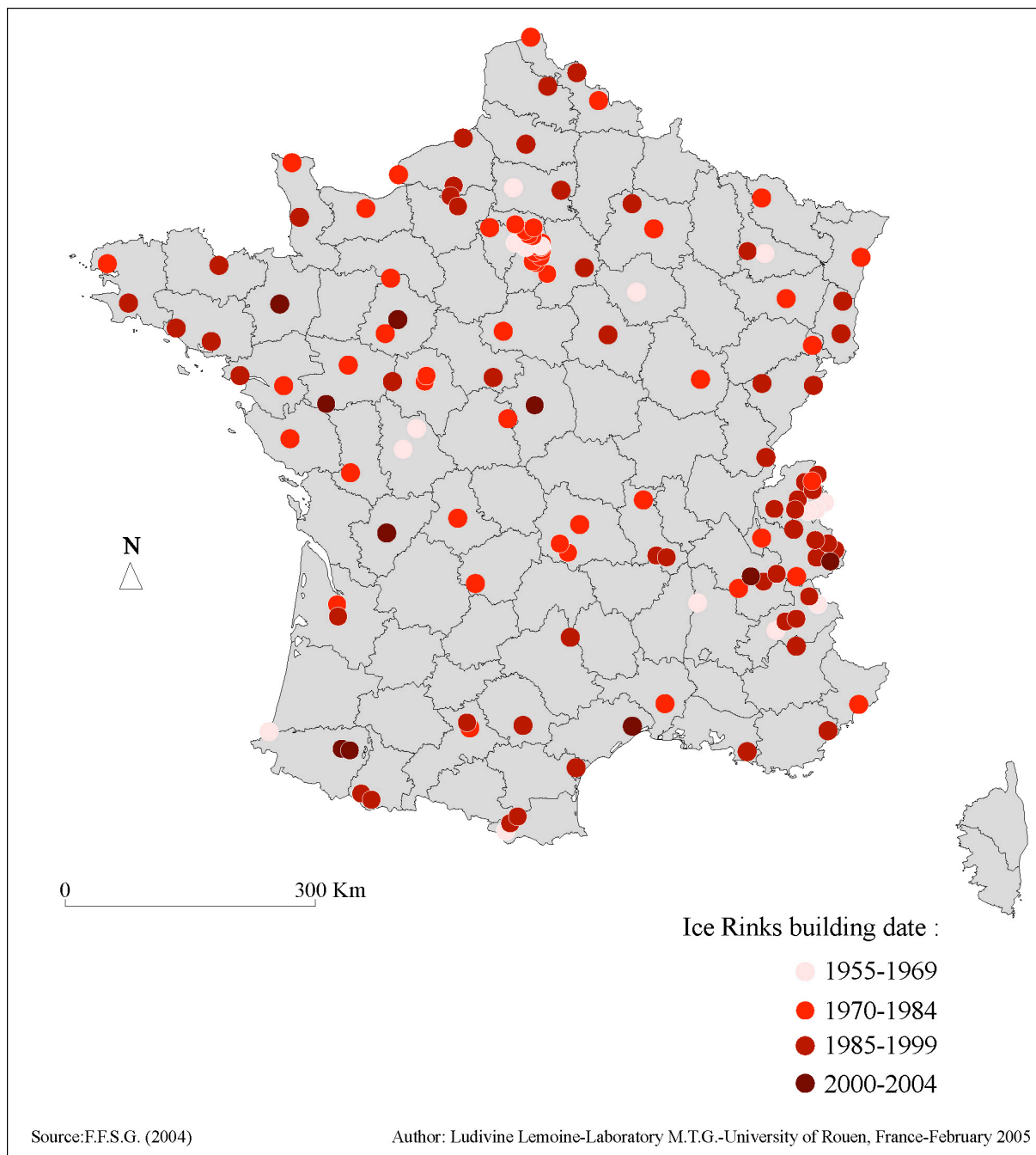


Fig. 4 The construction of ice rinks in France after 1955

Ice hockey is one of the only sports in France that can not be played outdoor because of the tempered weather and anywhere (outside an ice rink). The financial cost of building and maintaining an ice rink is so high that only large cities or winter stations with a lot of tourists can afford such an unusual sport facility. Furthermore, the level of human density is an important factor to reach the financial rentability of an ice rink, to generate enough skaters and potential hockey players.

The case of Rouen's Dragon, to seize the complexity of the development of ice hockey in France

In a previous part of this paper, several structural elements have been identified as primary factors to explain the spread of professional ice hockey in France. Nevertheless, to understand the complexity of the birth and the rise of a professional team at the ultimate level, we have to go from the macro to the micro scale. Thus, the study of the development of ice hockey in the city of Rouen (400 000 inhabitants in the metropolitan area) located in Normandy is very interesting to point out the numerous factors with which we can try to understand a success winter sport story in a western temperate region.

The first days of ice hockey in Rouen

Like in many cases, the development of a new sport in a determined place is often a question of luck and goodwill of one or several human beings. In 1967, Jean-Jacques Calvé, decided to build a temporary ice rink on the riverside of the Seine for leisure skating.

Then, Bernard Le Feuvre, who had worked in Zurich (Switzerland) with a former hockey player and François Legay, found of ice hockey after several stays in the mountain areas, introduced ice hockey to the people of Rouen for the first time (Biot, 1996). Many young inhabitants were interested in this sport but a lack of basic equipments (stick, gloves, helmets, skates...), the few hours dedicated to ice hockey practising and the competition with the soccer were negative elements that froze ice hockey expansion.

But four years later, the City of Rouen decided to build a modern ice rink with a capacity of 876 seats. When the ice rink was opened in 1971, the Rouen Olympic Club (ROC) was already born (1970), composed of both skaters and hockey players. At first, hockey players had lots of problems for practising because they could not use the ice more than one hour and fifteen minutes twice a week and they did not have the right to play with a puck because it made some damages to the white paint around the ice rink !

In November 1972, the first hockey team of Rouen played its first game and lost 22 to 0 against Caen. The first official season for the ROC was in 1973/1974 and two foreign players joined the team. Many inhabitants were curious about this very new physical and intensive sport. In 1978, the birth of the Rouen Hockey Club (RHE) was an important step because the hockey players had for the first time their own club (without ice figure skaters).

The 80's were very important for the RHE which had 65 players with two hours of practice a week in 1979. Then it became an important club of 350 players with 7 teams in different championships and a school of hockey for kids. In competition with ice figure skating, hockey had not enough time for practicing on the ice but, according to Lemoine (2001), local authorities gave 1 850 € each year to the hockey team (only 540 € in the 70's).

The arrival of a new trainer and new players, especially from Canada or northern countries of Europe (Sweden, Finland...), and the setting on of a new politic in the training of the young players had transformed ice hockey in Rouen. It became the most popular sport because, at the same time, the local soccer professional team declined. Twelve years after the opening of the ice rink, the Rouen Hockey Club got to the professional top national division.

A fan was so happy with the good results that he gave the nickname Dragons¹¹ to the players of Rouen and all the fans, medias and players themselves agreed : the Rouen Dragons were born. Ice hockey became more and more popular and the mean attendance for each game rised from 400 in 1985 to 1 500 fans in 1986. The need for a permanent financial and organizational management was another step in the way of professionalism.

The factors of the rise of the Dragons

The 90's were years of consecration for the dragons. The Rouen Dragons became the greatest professional team in France with seven Magnus Cup victories from 1990 to 2003 and an European Title in 1996.

In 1988-1989, the arrival of new sponsors increased the economical power of the RHC. A lot of good foreign players arrived and the Dragons went to training camps in Europe. The economic factor is a crucial element for the development of professional hockey.

In France, without television rights, low income from merchandising, and small attendances, the French ice hockey depends on the private sector (local compagnies). The will of RHC to stay on the top of the professional hierarchy (Magnus Cup in 1990, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995) goes with an invariably inflationist politic : in 1997, RHC was bankrupt because of a too heavy financial pressure. The creation of a new team R.H.E. 76 (Rouen Hockey Elite 76), a private compagny with a sport object (S.A.O.S., law n° 84.61 of july 16th 1984) under the control of the AEHF more and more vigilant about the financial management of professional teams¹² : in 2001 and 2003, the Dragons won two more Magnus Cups (see Fig. 5).



Fig. 5 The Rouen Dragons team of season 2004/2005
(source : www.rouenhockeyelite76.com)

¹¹ The dragon is a mystical animal on the front of the drakkars, boats of the Vikings who invaded Normandy before the Middle Age. A dragon was also the emblem of a valiant knight who battled fidely closed on Guillaume Le Conquérant's side.

¹² In March 2005, the FFSG announced that 4 teams of the Super 16 would not be authorized to join the Magnus Cup 2005/2006 if their financial statement did not improve. (source : www.ffsg.org).

Even if the public law in France strictly limits the direct financial involvement of the local authorities in professional sports, the City of Rouen and later the Metropolitan Government of Rouen played an important role in the success of professional ice hockey. In 1992, an olympic ice rink of 3 500 seats (the biggest ice rink in France¹³), financed by local governments, was built near the first ice rink. This new rink is entirely dedicated to ice hockey for professional practising and games, young training and the school of hockey. In France, ice rinks are often dedicated to leisure and, so as to maximise the rentability of this facility, hockey players have to share the ice with figure skaters or simply the population for pleasure.

And a lot of professional hockey teams are submitted to another constraint : most of ice rinks in France open in autumn and close in the middle of spring. The City of Rouen understands the stake of the development of a great professional team and offers to the Dragons an olympic ice rink opened 10 months a year. For the moment, only the cities of Rouen, Amiens, Dijon, Grenoble and Reims in France have a specific ice rink for the practise of hockey.



Fig. 6 The olympic ice rink located on Lacroix Island, home of the Rouen Dragons (G. Billard ©)

Another important element of the long term life of a professional team in France is the training of young players and kids. Working for the future of the Dragons, the CHAR (Club Hockey Amateur de Rouen) is one of the biggest training center in France with 450 players and several teams. With the help of several local authorities (City of Rouen, Departmental Council and Regional Council), the CHAR welcomes kids of 4 and over in a school of hockey. The best young players can join a special program with school class in the morning¹⁴ and hockey training in the afternoon. The goal is to supply the professional team of the Rouen with French young players.

It is also an interesting program to build locally a real ice hockey culture.

¹³ For comparison, the new 375 millions \$ Staples Center in Los Angeles, home of the LA Kings, has 19 000 seats for hockey.

¹⁴ 40 young players (from 11 to 18 years old) from 2 high schools are involved in this program

To conclude, the success of the Dragons can be explained by a complex interactions of several positive and complementary factors (see Fig. 7) which start by the involvement of a community of enthusiastic people (fans, parents of the young players, volunteers...), private sponsors, local governments, set up of a performant and sustainable training school. In Rouen, the lack of other professional teams in more coverage sports (soccer, basket-ball...) is also an essential factor. In this condition, to understand the development and the location of the best professional ice hockey teams in France, we often conduct our analyses at the local scale and dive in the history of each team.

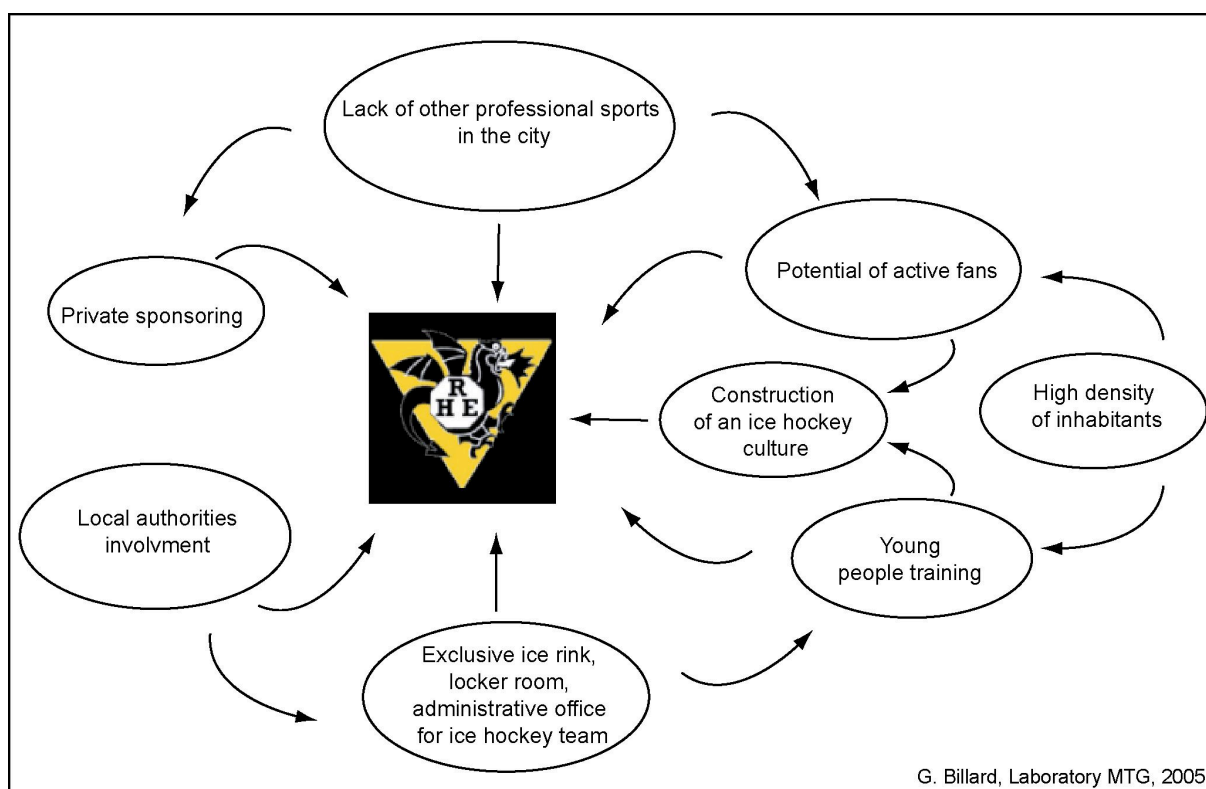


Fig.7 The complex system of the development of professional ice hockey in the city of Rouen

BALANCE SHEET OF ONE CENTURY OF ICE HOCKEY IN FRANCE

Far away from a large and total territory coverage, ice hockey in France seems to be a minor sport with only two historical poles (Paris and the Alps) and a current development in large cities of the northern part of the country explained by a local complex interaction system. On the contrary to France, ice hockey in Canada is the national sport and is part of the construction of the Canadian Nation and of the construction of a specific identity as regard to the Unites States and Europe (Augustin, 2000).

In 1998, there were 29 679 teams and 465 000 players in Canada and 22 234 teams and 294 195 players of ice hockey in the United States (Evdokinoff, 1998). Very spectacular but paradoxal with a small media coverage in France, professional ice hockey is subject to a lot of constraints : financial, cultural, climatic, political...

Nevertheless, there are 475 teams in France and 10 564 players. But in the 30 professional teams in France, a lot of players must have a second job because of the small salary. Despite a lack of information, we can say that the mean salary for a professional player is around 1 500 €/month : for the rookies, this salary is around 1 000 €/month. The best salaries are often reserved for foreign players. In 2004, Merrigan and Trudel (2004) pointed out that the mean salary for a NHL player was around 1,7 million / year.

Now, out of the 304 players playing in Super 16, 104 are from foreign countries (34 % of the total). This foreign *légion* empowers French teams which have some difficulties to form good French players. In fact, only two French players have played in the prestigious National Hockey League ever : Philippe Bozon (*St Louis Pinguins*) and Christobal Huet (*Montreal Canadiens*).

RÉFÉRENCES

- Augustin J-P, (1995), *Sport, géographie et aménagement*, Paris : Nathan
- Augustin J-P, Sorbets C., (1996), *La culture du sport au Québec*, Centre d'études canadiennes, Talence : MSHA
- Augustin, (2000), "La culture sportive au Canada : le hockey sur glace comme sport identitaire", in *Sport et identités*, Paris, l'Harmattan : 69-72
- Biot R, (1996), *Rouen, les années Dragons*, Rouen : Sports de Glace Editions
- Evdokinoff S., (1998), *Le hockey sur glace*, Toulouse : éditions Milan
- Grelon B., (1998), *Cours de hockey sur glace*, Paris : éditions De Vecchi
- Lemoine L., (2001), *Le sport, une culture : l'exemple du hockey sur glace rouennais*, Master's thesis, sous la direction de Françoise Lucchini, Université de Rouen.
- Le journal du hockey, n°49, avril 2001, Grenoble.
- Merrigan P. Trudel P., (2004), *Dernières minutes de jeu : les millions du hockey*, Paris, Editions Hurtubise HMH.