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# FRENCH PROFESSIONAL ICE HOCKEY IS IT REALLY FRENCH? A GEOGRAPHY OF FOREIGN INFLUENCE ON FRENCH ICE HOCKEY

Gerald Billard

► **To cite this version:**

Gerald Billard. FRENCH PROFESSIONAL ICE HOCKEY IS IT REALLY FRENCH? A GEOGRAPHY OF FOREIGN INFLUENCE ON FRENCH ICE HOCKEY. Canada and the league of hockey nations conference, Apr 2007, Victoria, Canada. hal-01626811

**HAL Id: hal-01626811**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01626811v1>**

Submitted on 31 Oct 2017

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GERALD BILLARD (PHD, Assistant professor)  
LUDIVINE LEMOINE (Lecturer)  
Adress: University of Rouen  
Department of Geography - Laboratory MTG  
76821 Mount-Saint-Aignan  
France  
Phone: 33-2-35-14-60-65  
E-mail: [gerald.billard@univ-rouen.fr](mailto:gerald.billard@univ-rouen.fr)

**FRENCH PROFESSIONAL ICE HOCKEY IS IT REALLY FRENCH?  
A GEOGRAPHY OF FOREIGN INFLUENCE ON FRENCH ICE HOCKEY**

Number one sport in Canada, ice hockey gained its independence in France only on April 29th, 2006. Previously affiliated with the Federation of the sports of ice which counted in its rows the figure and speed skating or the curling, French hockey thus hopes to obtain an additional visibility. Of course, this emancipation appears still too recent to see emerging a competitive and economically completely viable professional hockey within a French sporting landscape largely dominated by soccer, rugby or cycling. Today, whereas the Olympique Lyonnais, (currently the best soccer French team) announces a budget of 200 millions euros for the season 2007/2008<sup>1</sup>, the budget of the best teams of hockey reaches a maximum with approximately 450.000 euros; the average wages of a professional soccer player in France rise with 40.000 euros per month<sup>2</sup> against almost 1500/2000 euros for the hockey players ; whereas the League One (soccer) records more than 8 million people in the stadiums into 2004/2005, hockey brings together around the skating rinks 195.000 spectators for the season 2006/2007 but with a average rate of filling of 75%, the same one as for soccer. However, the hockey experiences real progress with the creation of complementary competitions (French Cup, League Cup) to the League Magnus, main professional championship, the modification of the rules of the game (more penalties are called) or the broadcasting of French hockey games on a private channel. The organization of the French Cup final game in the Palais Ominisports of Paris Bercy, which brought together 12 5000 fans, also shows the ambition of the new federation whereas the best average of spectators is held by the Grenoble Team with 3 400 persons per match!

Beyond its institutionalization, one of the great specificities of professional hockey in France remains the high number of foreign players in the League Magnus championship. In the Eighties, the contribution of Canadian and Finnish players raised the level of French hockey and was “assets” with the development of this sport in France. In 1995, the Bosman ruling (liberalizing the movement of the

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<sup>1</sup> Press release of Ppresident Aulas, Olympique de Lyon, *Lyon will rebound, affirms its president*, Agence Reuters, 3/04/2007. The average budget of a club of League One (French soccer) is around 43 million euros annually.

<sup>2</sup> F. Barthez (former French National Team goal keeper) gained nearly 3 millions euros per annum (250.000 euros per month !) <http://www.linternaute.com/sport/dossier/football/07/business-foot-francais/2.shtml>

European players within Europe) transformed the “French-Canadian” championship into a more European championship with the massive arrival of European players from the Eastern European countries (Slovakia, Czech Republic...). In the same way, the performances of the National French are the fruit of foreign trainers. The eighth place at the Olympic Games of Albertville in 1992 is the result of a Swedish trainer Kjell Larsson whereas today the French national team is ranked only at the nineteenth world row (IIHF, 2006) and always pains to find technicians to take its lead.

Through this contribution, we will try to evaluate the level of penetration of the French hockey by foreign players. And then, map a geography of the hearths of players emission since 17 years (1990-2007). In a more analytical part, we will see the factors which make evolve the origin of the foreign players in our championship elite (League Magnus) and discuss, in the final part, the future of ice hockey in France with or without foreign players

### **SPECIFIC ELEMENTS OF THE RISE OF THE FRENCH HOCKEY**

**In France**, as of 1891 of the players gathered by Pierre De Coubertin play for the very first time on the channel of Versailles (Paris). The first club (the club of the skaters of Paris) was besides Hockey club of Paris, founded in 1901 and which with the great surprise d'été “Princess Ice Hockey Club of London” which had been champion of the world for 7 years. In 1905, this sport was in Net progress, the Parisian clubs started to multiply and dominated the French championship until 1922, only the club of Lyon creates in 1905 and first champion of France of hockey, represented the remainder of France.

Then in the Twenties, hockey was diffused by contagion in the alpine areas and not by hierarchy, but much of small cities like Chamonix and Gap adopted the innovation before the great agglomerations like Grenoble. These cities were favorable to the hockey, because of the natural presence of the cold and the ice. From 1923, Chamonix becomes the French reference as regards hockey, with 30 titles of champion of France. In 1930, the city organizes the championships of the world of hockey. From the Sixties, one attends the constitution of teams in north and south-west, thanks to the notoriety of the Olympic Games of Grenoble in 1968 but also following the construction of skating rinks covered and permanent in many towns of plains: Amiens, Rouen, Bordeaux, Angers (Billiards, Lemoine, 2005)... The Seventies and Eighties are remembered by the creation and the expansion of clubs of hockey on all the French territory. However, it is necessary to underline the role essential by the local communities with the level of the infrastructures (inauguration of new skating rinks) but especially of the direct or indirect subsidies; sometimes this contributes artificially to maintain in life certain professional and semi-professional teams.

At the time of the Olympic Games of Albertville in 1992, the mediatization of the good service of the team of France makes pass the number of bachelors of 29.000 to more than 32.000 people but the high professional level of hockey underwent a major crisis in 1991-92, been dependant on the mechanism of a missed professionalism. Indeed, the formulas of the championship of France were dubious. The championship 1991-1992 presented a new final phase which included/understood the national league with 6 clubs and the first division with 10 clubs. Championship 92-93 gathered the 16 clubs, including 4 professional teams survivors of the crisis of the previous year, which had resulted in the disappearance of professional teams in Briançon, Bordeaux, Epinal or Clermont-Ferrand with sometimes due the withdrawal to important and often single sponsor (example of Bayer in Caen) and the limitation of the subsidies of the local communities on the level of the professional sport.

The French hockey launched out in an inflationary professionalism to forced marches, in a French space with weak culture hockey, following the growth of the licenses and seeking to exploit international successes (eighth place with the Olympic Games of Albertville). But the media interest remains fragile, the passion having held with the Olympic test with a vast public not really won over to this discipline. Since 2004, the situation of the French hockey seems to improve with creation of an Executive Authority of the French Hockey (A.E.H.F the hockey body within the French Ice Sports Federation) under the direction of a former player of hockey Mr Luc Tardif. This authority wants to be the starter of an autonomy of the hockey and she wants to give again with the French hockey an image of cohesion, organization and the serious one. In 2003, the limitation of the wage bill of the clubs of the Elite with 450.000 of euros per annum, then the adoption in June 2004, rule of a maximum of four foreign players (except Europe) in the teams disputing the League Magnus go in the direction of a healthy financial management of French professional hockey<sup>3</sup> while limiting the recourse to the Canadian players, thus supporting the formative clubs.

For the French hockey, season 2005/2006 was very paradoxical. It however begin with exclusion from the club from Mulhouse the 2005 League Magnus champion in prey with financial difficulties<sup>4</sup>: Mulhouse was unable to engage a team in 2006. Worse, the finalist of the League Magnus (Tours) also finds itself excluded from the competition for the same reasons<sup>5</sup> and relegated in Division 2. The results of the French national team are also disappointing. In the city of Amiens (France), in April 2006, French finishes second of the world championship (2006 IIHF - World Championship - Division 1 Groupe A) and leaves Germany goes to World Elite Championship. However in April 2006, of Hockey (FFHG is born the French Federation) and the professional championship Elite (Magnus

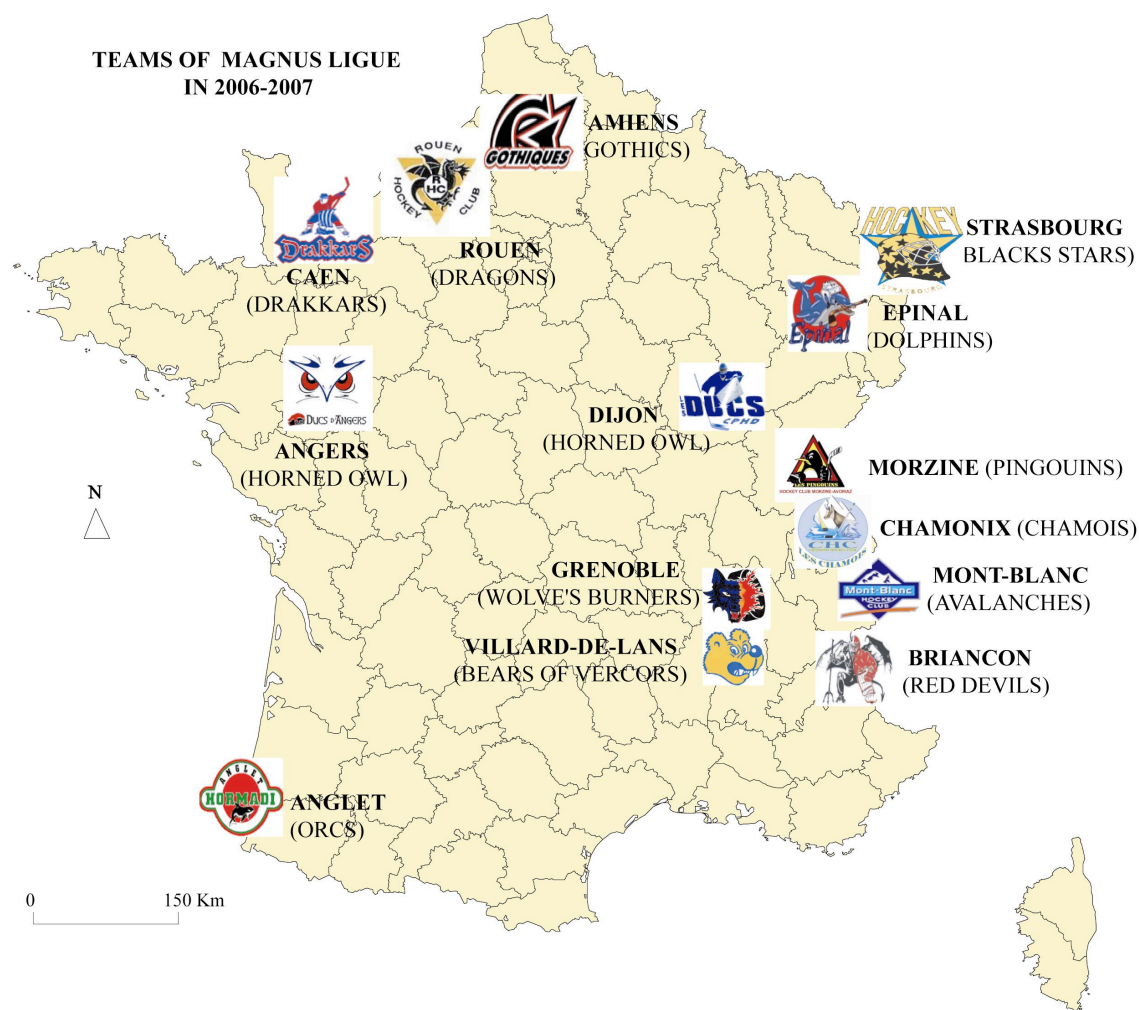
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<sup>3</sup> In a press release 2005, march, the 8th, the FFSG announced that four clubs from League Magnus were seen meaning their exclusion of championship 2005/2006 if the state of their finances did not improve.

<sup>4</sup> Deficit of 290.000 euros (\$371,000)

<sup>5</sup> Deficit of 250,000 Euros (\$319,700)

League) is stabilized with 14 teams<sup>6</sup> (cf Fig.). About fifteen matches are retransmitted on the Sport chain + and the play off give place to meetings with suspense (final victory of Grenoble). One of the events of the season in February 2007, the final of the cut of France, brings together 12.250 people in Bercy (Paris), and at the same time popular, sporting and media success for French hockey. In 2007, the FFHG counts 17.025 permit-holders<sup>7</sup> and 117 clubs located in 108 cities but the way is still long, in spite of many assets, to settle definitively in the French sporting landscape.



Source:FF.H.S.G. (2007)

Author: LEMOINE L.- M.T.G Laboratory.-University of Rouen, France-2007.

Fig. 1 Location of the League Magnus Teams in 2006/2007

<sup>6</sup> In March 2007, the Management Committee of the FFHG made the decision to maintain 14 teams in the Magnus League and that for 3 years.

<sup>7</sup> By comparison, soccer counts 2 283.268.

## A GEOGRAPHY OF THE PROFESSIONAL PLAYERS OF HOCHEY ON ICE IN FRANCE

In this context of revival of the hockey in France, the question of the presence of the foreign players is important because it returns us at the same time to questions of quality of play and thus of sporting interest of the Magnus League but also to the problems of integration on the most level of the young French players. Many federations wonder today about becoming to it certain national championships in which the best teams present themselves sometimes on the ground with a very vast majority from abroad. In France, in 2006, in the various championships elites men, the share from abroad is 43.21 % for the basketball (Pro A), 41,31 % for volley ball (Pro A), 39,58 % for soccer (League 1), and 33,20 % for Rugby (Signal 14)<sup>8</sup>. According to our calculations, the rate of penetration of the foreign players in the Magnus League for season 2006/2007 is at 36.88 %. If this rate is less low than for other sports, it has been however in progression for one year (32.39 % in 2005/2006). All in all, whereas the number from abroad was 12.93% in 1990, it passes to more than 20 % starting from the middle of the Nineties (25.93% into 1995/1996) and more than 30 % in 2002 (cf. Fig. 2). Figures balanced with the rise because one of the characteristics of the French championship is to accommodate players having the dual nationality and in particular the Franco-Canadian ones (10 % for example in 1990/1991), as Fig. 3 shows it.

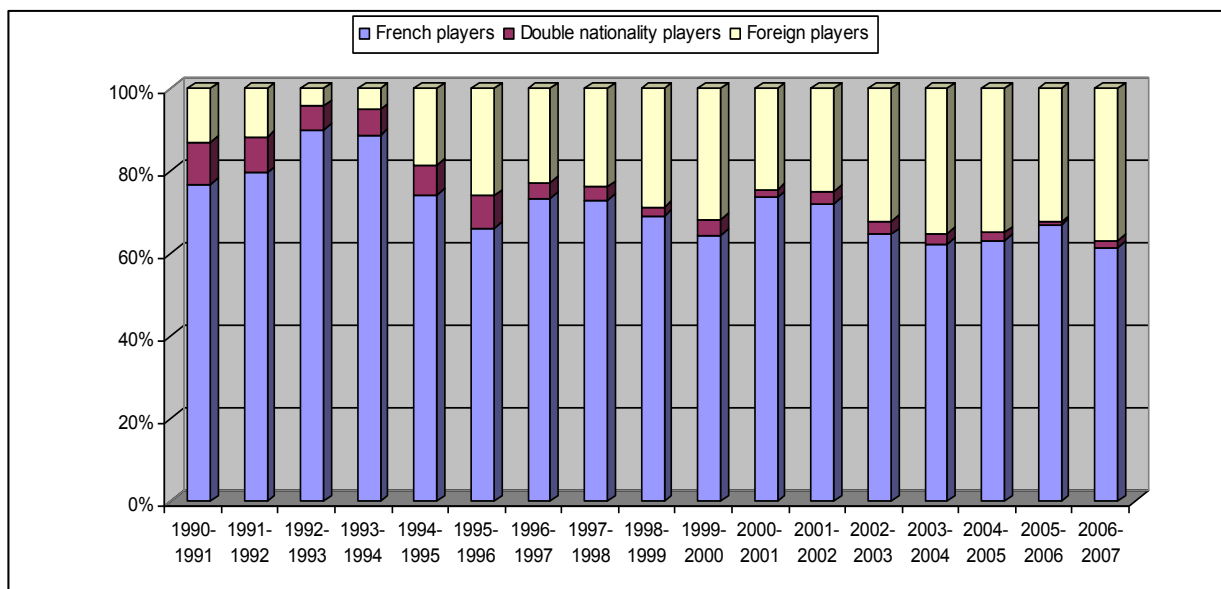


Fig.2 Evolution of the foreign players in the Elite Ice Hockey Championship in France since 1990

<sup>8</sup> Pautot S. Pautot Mr., (2006), "Le sport peut-il se passer des étrangers", Colloque Sport et Nationalités, 17<sup>e</sup> Colloque Legisport, Marseilles, 08/12/06.

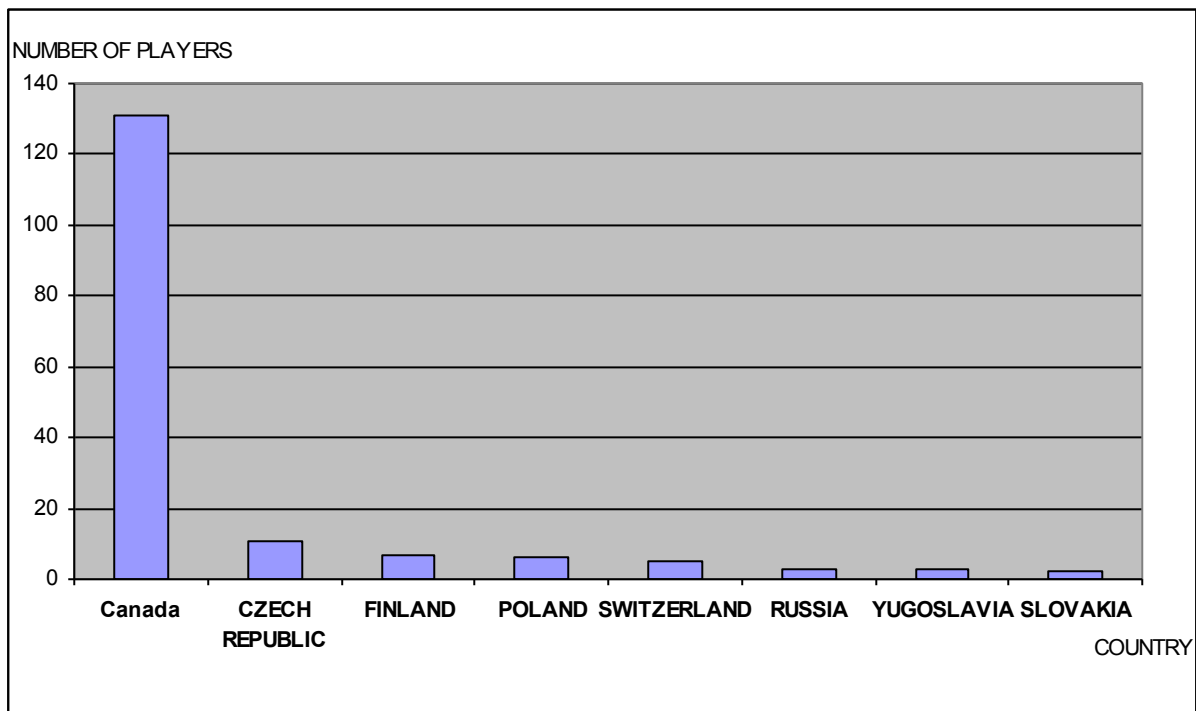


Fig. 3 Mother countries of the Double nationality players in the Elite Ice Hockey Championship in France since 1990

Of course, there are however important differences between the clubs on the level of the presence of foreign players in their row (cf 4). Thus the team of Amiens with 12,5% foreign players or Villard de Lans (12,5 %) posts rates definitely lower than the French average contrary in Briançon (57,14 %), Epinal (56,52%), or Rouen (52,17 %). These high figures are explained is by the incapacity of the clubs to form young loan for the high level or of a point seen budgetary impossibility of engaging the best young people French players of other clubs. It should be specified that contrary to the North-American system, the young French players are not trained by the universities but by the clubs directly. Their first integration in the Magnus League does not depend on a *draft* open to all the clubs but on a relatively traditional market answering supply and. In lack of financial means, certain teams are turned over thus towards the market in particular is European with “cheap” players. The case of Rouen is undoubtedly atypical because which forms a lot of young players seeks to up skills them by good foreign players.

## **Towards a new geography of the professional foreign players in France?**

When we speak today about globalization of the economy, there is not certainly a sphere of activities other than the professional sport where the international mobility of employment is also intense<sup>9</sup>. In Europe in particular, the deregulation of the labour market for the sportsmen in the European Union countries since 1995, liberalization extended in 2002, to the other European countries out-union, the Maghreb and several tens of country of the Africa-Caribbean-Pacific zone. This extension of the European chart in the field of the professional sport obviously did not save the French hockey; it is a new geography of the French professional hockey which is redrawn since 1990.

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<sup>9</sup> Milanovic B, 2006, "Le foot, industrie sans frontière", *Le Monde*, 7 juillet 2006.



### ***Close cultural links with Canada***

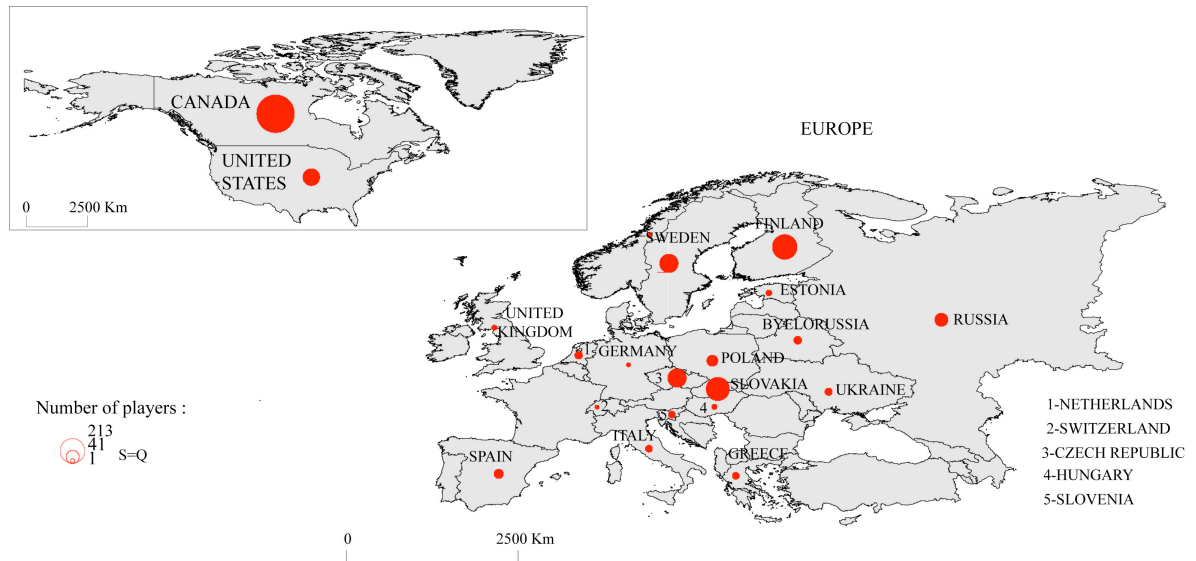
Without context, the Canadian players and in particular Québécois, represent the most important quota for a long time foreign players in France. The enormous number of young Canadian players and the cultural proximity with France, in particular for the French-speaking players, provide the foundation of privileged bonds between the two countries. Moreover much from Canadian will obtain French nationality and will be able to thus take part in the World Championship or the Olympic Games within French national Team, an opportunity undoubtedly impossible in their country of birth<sup>10</sup>. Luc, Canadian of origin, chair current French Federation of Hockey (FFHG) and former professional player in Chamonix (1975) and Rouen (1984) wire-drawer also that at the exit of the University, the arrival in France represents for certain Canadian students an almost initiatory voyage.

*“For a long time, recruitment foreigners was focused mainly on Canadian and in particular the Québécois. The bringing together was facilitated, because Québécois and French have the same language. The hockey is born in France with the arrival of the Canadian players. First Canadians came to France were former students, curious to know Europe. Their notion of ice hockey was more cultural than professional.”* (Luc Tardif, interview of March 27th, 2007).

The next map (Fig. 4) shows perfectly this natural opening towards Canada. For 17 years, 213 Canadian players have arrived to France, far in front of Swedish and the Slovak ones. However, if over the duration this distribution appears relatively clear, since 1995, the things evolved/moved. On 6, Canadian with nearly 30 % of the foreign players, are largely most present within the French clubs in 1990 (Fig. 5).

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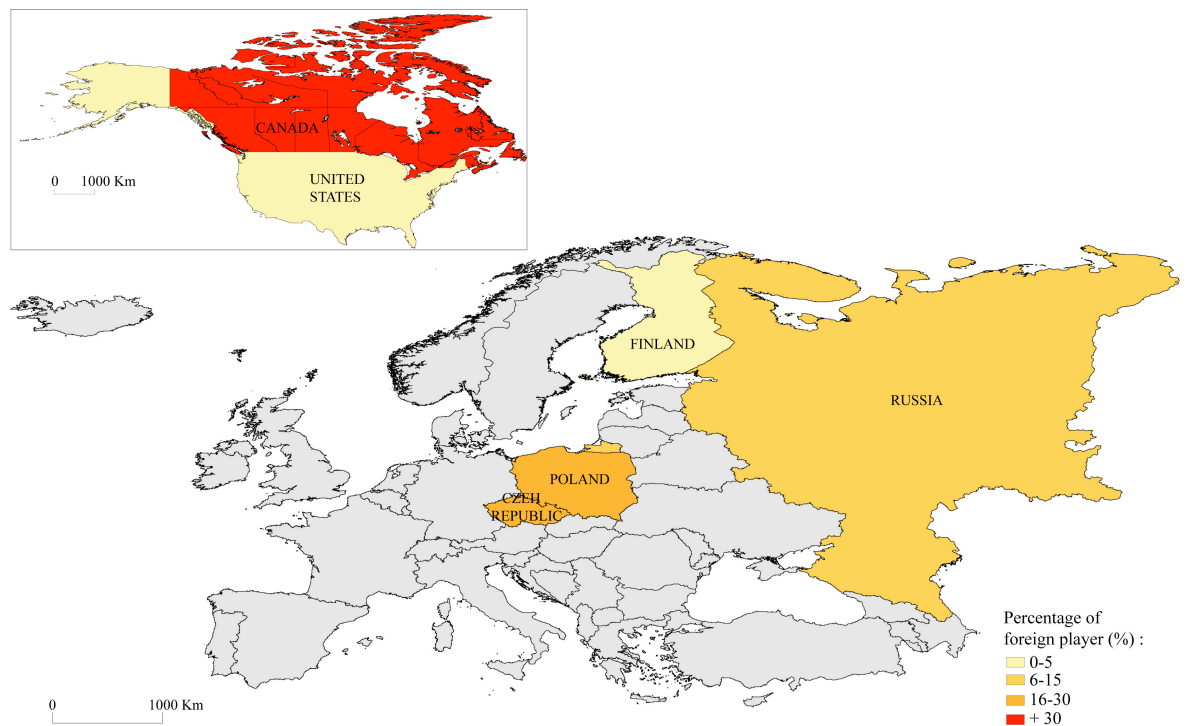
<sup>10</sup> We can speak in particular about the case of naturalized French-Canadian B. Laporte, S. Woodburne and S. Poudrier who played for the French national Team which was quarter of finalist to the JO of Albertville in 1992.



Source : [www.rouenhockeyelite76.com](http://www.rouenhockeyelite76.com) (2006)

Author: LEMOINE L.-Laboratory M.T.G.-University of Rouen, France-2007.

Fig. 4 Mother country and total number of foreign players in the Elite Ice Hockey Championship in France between 1990 and 2006



Source : [www.rouenhockeyelite76.com](http://www.rouenhockeyelite76.com) (2006)

Author: LEMOINE L.-Laboratory M.T.G.-University of Rouen, France-2007.

Fig. 5 Mother country and total number of foreign players in the Elite Ice Hockey Championship in France in 1990

### *When European justice rules the sporting ruling*

From 1995, the geography of the recruitment of the French clubs of hockey will evolve/move, like other professional sports in Europe. December 15, 2005, the Court of Justice of the European Communities gives reason to a Belgium soccer player (Jean-Marc Bosman) which protested in particular against the rule limiting to 3 the number of foreign players in a soccer team. The Bosman ruling as jurisprudence for the whole European sports, including the ice hockey. The quotas related to nationality are abolished for the nationals belonging to a European Convention country, under the terms of article 39 of the Treaty of Rome relating to freedom of movement for the workers of the Member States. From this date, plus no sporting payment will be able to force the club to limit their recruitment concerning of the European players: the quotas can nevertheless always apply for the North-American or Russian players. Since 1995, the hockey anticipates this payment, and the recruitment of the foreign players are directed more towards the European countries like Finland or Sweden.

In 2002, a new decision of court emitted by the Council of State (France), Malaja stop, extends a little more the surface of recruitment of the French clubs because it stipulates that all the nationals of the country having signed agreements with the European Union cannot be the subject of discrimination because of their nationality. May 8, 2003, the Kolpak ruling<sup>11</sup> returned by the European Court widens the Malaja stop and prohibited to apply quotas of players enter the Convention countries and the whole of the countries signatories of cooperation agreements (Russia, ex Pays of the Soviet block and 77 countries of the ACP zone the Africa-Caribbean-Pacific). Today, a player Swedish, Finnish, Russian or Slovak has the same statute as a French player and a team of hockey can thus be composed only from abroad. The payment of the limiting FFHG with four the number of foreign players in each club but this rule applies from now on only for the Americans or the Canadians, for example. This obviously deeply upset the market of the transfers as shown in the figure 7. The recruitment of the French clubs is directed more today towards Slovakia, Finland, Sweden even if Canada remains still a relatively important hearth of emission.

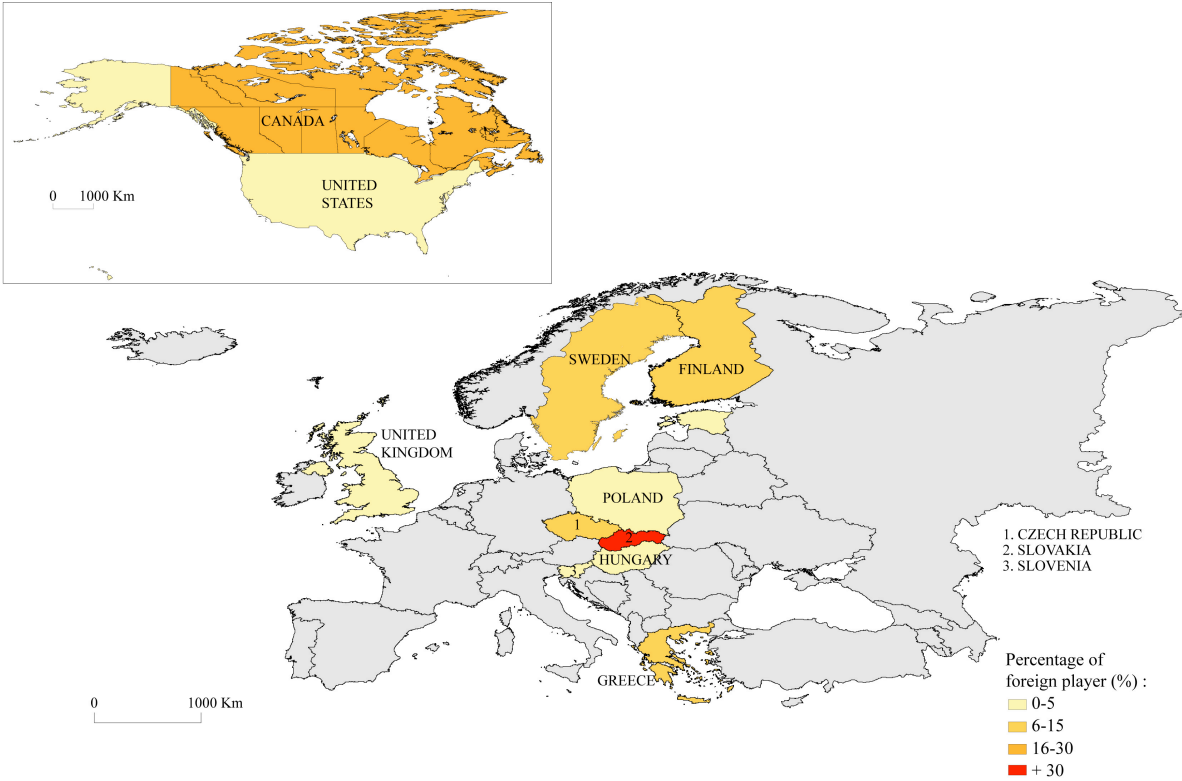
It is undoubtedly necessary here to moderate the speech of a massive arrival of Eastern countries players in our championship<sup>12</sup> even if the players of ex-Czechoslovakia represents in 2006, 42 % from abroad evolving in Magnus League (Fig. 7). If they generally better are gone than their North-American or Finnish counterparts, the recruitment carried out by the clubs is also based on a sporting logic. For a long time, the Canadian players certainly more physical than Europeans had no problem to familiarize themselves with the French play but today the context have changed. The defensive play is

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<sup>11</sup> Supplemented by the Simutenkov ruling in 2005

<sup>12</sup> The Polish plumber symptom

more severely sanctioned and the referees called more easily penalties, which disadvantages the “violent” play more of the North-Americans to the profit of more technical players ready to shine in more during the phases of power-plays (Tardif, 2007, Op. Cit.). Moreover, the larger size of the ice ring playground in France compared to that of the skating rinks in the NHL is sometimes a handicap for the American players: “*some North-American players even with large resume could not adapt to the European standards*” (Tardif, 2007, Op. Cit.).



Source : [www.rouenhockeyelite76.com](http://www.rouenhockeyelite76.com) (2006)

Author: LEMOINE L.-Laboratory M.T.G.-University of Rouen, France-2007.

Fig. 6 Rate of foreign players by mother country in the League Magnus (France) in 2006/2007

In 2006, the deregulation of the market of the transfers in Europe, evolution of the payments of the FFHG (limitation of the extra-community players with 4, levelling off of the budgets), constraints imposed by the play itself (more whistled penalties, size of the ice floe...) very as much as the quality of the training of the young players weigh on the weight and the origin of the foreign players in Magnus League. The French hockey was of course nourished since always of the influence of the foreign players with a more physical hockey when Canadian was in a majority then more technical with the arrival of Finnish or Slovak (Late, 2007). One should not forget with these contributions, those of the foreign trainers who also made evolve/move the French hockey (including the team of France) while bringing new techniques of drive. In 2006, 4 foreign trainers are with the head of team of Magnus League on 14 clubs on the whole.

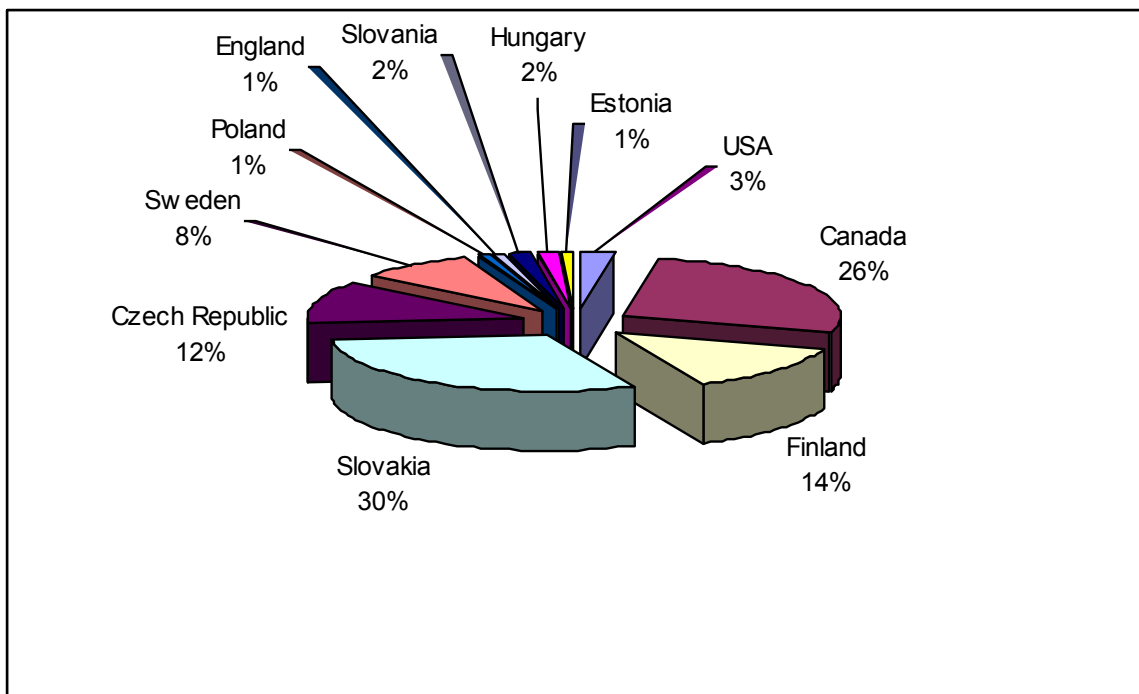


Fig. 7 Nationality of foreign players in the League Magnus (France) in 2006/2007

### THE FUTURE OF FRENCH HOCKEY

Which will be the weight of the foreign players in French professional hockey ? Questioned on the subject, Luc Tardif, current president of the French Federation of Ice Hockey, affirms first of all that the contribution of the foreign players is essential to maintain overall a good level of plays within the French championship. Firstly, this “foreign legion” allows the club to supplement their manpower in the absence of a production of young French players sometimes insufficient. Moreover, for the French

players, the young people in particular, the daily contact with the drive or confrontation in match with players Canadian, Finnish, Czech, Swedish or Slovak represent certainly a factor of sporting progression. But a balance must be found between foreign influence and training of the French players. This question is important so that French hockey can exist on the international scene but without French hockey players, not of team of powerful France to the Olympic Games or in Championship of the World (group A if possible!). This element is far from being anecdotic when the impact is known, on the young practice and the sponsors, of the incredible episode of the French national team to the Olympic Games of Albertville of 1992 (Quarterfinal).

If the NHL is recognized the best league of the world, it mainly owes it with the contribution of the foreign players. A simple assumption is thus posed: does the arrival of the best European players raise the quality of the North-American championship while weakening the level of the American and Canadian players because the young North-American have of weaker advisability of playing in a team and less time of play ? Since 1990, the European national teams reached 11 times the Gold medal of IIHF World Championship against 4 times for Canada (1994, 1997, 2003 and 2004) and zero times for the United States<sup>13</sup>! At the time of the last eight Olympic Games, the United States obtained the gold medal once (1980 - university players) and Canada once (2002) against six times for the European teams. In 2006, in Turin, Sweden (Gold), Finland (Silver) and the Czech Republic (Bronze) obtained a medal. This situation is all the more paradoxical as since 1990, the team of less than twenty years of Canada gained 10 times the world title and finished 4 times second<sup>14</sup>. This as well confirmed as Canada remains certainly the country which produces the best young players but the passage at the professional level perhaps appears delicate because of the overseas recruitment carried out in NHL<sup>15</sup>.

A study published in 2006 by the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) worried about the important presence of European players often too young and badly prepared for the NHL<sup>16</sup>. The American League plans to make pass the ratio to 70 % of North-Americans in the clubs to 80 % to thus make fall the weight of Europeans to 20 % instead of 30 % today. This measurement would thus make it possible to better integrate the young players of the two countries into the world which has the most bachelors (1 million for the USA and 550.000 for Canada against 90.000 for the Czech Republic).

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<sup>13</sup> In the last World Championships in Riga in 2006, USA and Canada teams missed podium (1st Sweden, 2nd Czech Republic, 3rd Finland). <http://www.iihf.com/archive/Ws.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> The United States finished once first and once second since 1990. <http://www.iihf.com/archive/WU20.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> "Ever since the fall off Communism, there has been a deluge of Russian players to the National League Hockey, have well have the American Hockey League and major junior programs in Canada." (Meltzer, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> Colombier F., 2007, "Trop d'Européens en NHL", *Hockey Magazine*, February-March : 44-45.

Of course, the League Magnus is not the NHL but the problems of the formation and the integration of the young national players and thus in the long term, the performances of the national teams also pass by an interrogation on the weight of the foreign players in the championship. Maintain artificially an elite team during a few years with “mercenaries” is undoubtedly not the best way for ensuring the perennial of a club and of allowing the engagement of private partners on the long term. One of the proposals of the new federation is for example to maintain the principle of the levelling off of the wage bill (454 000 € is US\$ 581.000/year) but with possible removals of the upper limit for the formative clubs<sup>17</sup>. Rise of budget are granted height of 5 % into 2006/2007 for the integration of 4 young French players, even of 10 % into 2007/2008 per 5 young players. An effort is also carried on the training of the young players (TEAM 2010) on the most level with for ambition a title of champion of the world (- of 18 or - 20 years) from here 2010.

The question of the identity (if it really exists) French hockey but more still of its future than it is as a professional sport or amateur, does not rest only on the problems of the presence of the foreign players on our national ice floes. The young federation of hockey born in June 2006 must be structured today in-house but more still, to reorganize at the same time the professionalization of the discipline while making the promotion of hockey amateur, including female. E 2006, Luc Late, president of the federation, presented before the general assembly the main trends of its plan of durable development of the hockey in France. The federation is given thus 4 years to ensure sporting and financial perennality discipline while supporting, for example, on the following points:

- referee and trainer, training of young people,
- a better framing and means increased for the teams of France (Senior, Hopes, Women...),
- the search for deprived financial partners and the renegotiation of the rights TV,
- the maintenance of financial control on the clubs,
- the development of the communication around the hockey,
- the promotion of female hockey, leisure and for the people handicapped...

The question of the infrastructures is also essential today bus in France, few skating rinks are entirely dedicated to hockey; some are also today unsuited to the high level sport because in particular of their small size. In 2006/2007, only 3 clubs (Amiens, Grenoble and Rouen) have a skating rink of more than 2.500 places. Is a plan of development of the skating rinks (if possible in double track with one reserved for hockey) thus carried by the federation to modernize the infrastructures, to fix a minimum number of seats (1 500?) and if possible to allow the emergence of clubs elites in the large French cities (Marseilles, Strasbourg, Nantes, Bordeaux, Lyon and of course Paris).

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<sup>17</sup> Proposal made par the League Magnus Commission and ratified by the Management Committee of March 12, 2007.

"French is one of hockey's major international languages, thanks to the many contributions of the game's French-Canadian players and the unparalleled success of the [Montreal Canadiens](#). Quebecois players, coaches, scouts and front office personnel have long been vital parts of the NHL and international hockey landscape. [...] France is far from a world hockey power. Apart from Huet, former St. Louis Blues left wing Philippe Bozon is the only other French born and trained player to play in the NHL. France currently competes at the international Division One level, a step below the elite level [...] In 2006-07, French hockey will continue its transitional period. Complying with IIHF guidelines, an independent hockey federation entirely separated from the French Ice Sports Federation will govern the sport. While France may have a difficult time advancing beyond Division One for the next couple years, the program could achieve greater financial and on-ice strategic stability in the near future. The French hope that translates to more wins on the ice." Metzger (2006)

As Metzger underlines it, the French hockey have to face a vast and complex challenge to sustainably exist in the French sporting landscape and to gain world recognition.

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