
Between National Discrimination and Regional Prestige: the Case of the Heroization of Franc-Comtois Gymnast Michel Mathiot (1948–1960)

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Résumé

An Olympic gymnast from 1948 to 1960, Michel Mathiot, first in the French national championship in 1955 and 1956, was one of the world's elite gymnasts. His achievements were reported in the local and national press. In the regional press of Franche-Comté and neighbouring regions, he was presented as a 'champion'. Journalists presented his victories as a collective success, using a unifying 'we'. However, in the national press, indifference towards the Franche-Comté gymnast or the promotion of other gymnasts suggested a form of discrimination through invisibility. Indeed, Michel Mathiot's supporters protested against the difference in treatment he received.

These differences in reputation and recognition are part of a context in which methods for evaluating gymnastics routines remain subject to interpretation. Between 1946 and 1960, the scoring system for men's gymnastics gradually developed. In France, training and examinations for judges were introduced in 1966. Added to the media injustice is what can be perceived as a certain Parisian 'chauvinism'. More specifically, the gymnast's ranking seems unfair. Michel Mathiot and Raymond Dot had equivalent results at international level (22nd and 20th respectively in London in 1948, 51st and 70th in Helsinki in 1952 and 40th and 32nd in Melbourne in 1956). However, the Parisian seems to be favoured at the national level, both in terms of results (first in the French national championship in 1950, 1951, 1953, 1954 and 1957) and media coverage.

Based on a corpus of 303 articles, private correspondence and two semi-structured interviews, this study aims to demonstrate that between 1946 and 1960, the geographical origin of athletes reflected territorial communities. Indeed, in national and regional media coverage and, more broadly, in these intimate and public relationships, this discrimination contributed to making athletes invisible at the national level and, paradoxically, to heroising them at the regional level.

Mots-Clés: History go gymnastics, Media coverage, Territorial communities

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