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## Negotiating Breton Celtic identity on and off the pitch: contemporary football in Brittany

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### ABSTRACT

In recent decades there has been a revival in Celtic cultural identity in Brittany and sport has been one of the spaces in which this has developed. After three periods of cultural revival and renovation in the twentieth century, the early twenty-first century has seen deeper identification with, and pride in, Celtic cultural forms and symbolism, including the widespread adoption of the region's *gwenn ha du* flag. Football is the most popular sport in the region and its professional clubs and their fans have contributed to the most recent Breton cultural revival by adopting and adapting Celtic symbolism and the flag into their kits and match-day spectacles. Stade Rennais FC were, for much of the twentieth century, the standard bearers of Breton Celtic identity and were seen to represent the whole region. However, En Avant Guingamp, Stade Brestois 29 and FC Lorient have also come to represent different aspects of Breton culture and identity during this period of transformation. Furthermore, the clubs have become symbols of the financial revival of Brittany with their owners and sponsors, figures central to the reinvigorated economy, investing in football as a means of promoting the region and its identity.

### RÉSUMÉ

Pendant les décennies récentes on a vu un renouveau de l'identité culturelle celtique en Bretagne, et le sport fait partie des domaines où l'on a pu constater ce phénomène. Après trois périodes de renouveau culturel et de rénovation pendant le 20e siècle, le début du 21e siècle a vu une intensification de l'identification aux formes culturelles et symboles bretons, y compris l'adoption de plus en plus importante du drapeau de la région le *gwenn ha du*. Le football est le sport le plus populaire dans la région et ses clubs professionnels et leurs supporters ont joué un rôle dans le plus récent renouveau culturel en Bretagne en adoptant et adaptant des symboles celtiques et le drapeau comme parties intégrantes de leurs maillots et de leurs spectacles d'avant et d'après match. Pour la plupart du 20e, le Stade Rennais fut le porte-drapeau de l'identité celtique bretonne et un symbole de la région entière. Toutefois, En Avant Guingamp, Stade Brestois 29 et FC Lorient de nos jours

représentent eux aussi d'autres aspects de culture et d'identité bretonnes pendant cette période de transformation. En plus, ces clubs symbolisent le renouveau économique de la Bretagne à travers leurs propriétaires et leurs sponsors qui constituent des éléments primordiaux de cette économie redynamisée et qui ont investi dans le football afin de promouvoir la région et son identité.

## Intro

The last 25 years have seen significant social, cultural, political and economic developments in Celtic nations. These have included devolution in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and the Celtic Tiger period during which the Republic of Ireland experienced a dramatic economic boom. In linguistic terms, devolution has helped breathe new life into the Welsh language and Scots Gaelic while the Identity and Culture Act (2022) recognised Irish Gaelic as an official language of Northern Ireland. In Brittany there has been a notable cultural and economic revival as the region has made its presence felt within France and beyond. In 2021 Breton language activists celebrated after the French parliament passed a law to protect minority rights in the state and 'make it possible for children to receive immersive education in languages like Breton' (*Nation Cymru, 2021*). As a result, the movement in support for Diwan Breton language schooling has grown in prominence and influence in Brittany. This also comes at a time when there has been a revival in Breton music and culture more widely, spearheaded by the annual Celtic cultural event, the Festival Interceltique.

As many of these developments have occurred since the publication of Grant Jarvie's edited volume *Sport in the Making of Celtic Cultures* in 1999, a book that was well received and was central to the analysis of sport, politics and identity in Celtic nations that began at the end of the last century. It is therefore a particularly apt time to reflect on the evolution of Celtic identities in a sporting context. The article will focus discussions specifically on football in Brittany, which appears appropriate given the argument that 'football is, by far, the most prominent sport in Brittany' (Lagrée 1999, 41). At the start of the 2025–2026 season there were four Breton clubs in the top two professional leagues in France: Stade Rennais, Stade Brestois and FC Lorient in Ligue 1 and En Avant Guingamp in Ligue 2. This will begin by assessing existing literature on cultural identity in Brittany and will analyse the specific importance of football compared to other sports such as cycling and sailing. Having done so, it will then explore narratives of Breton identity in a footballing context and examine the extent to which there are differences between what various Breton football teams are seen to represent. It will compare the articulation of Breton identity in relation to Stade Rennais with narratives focused on less well supported or previously under discussed teams such as EA Guingamp, FC Lorient and Stade Brestois. Although this will tease out several significant differences, it will nevertheless be shown that there are factors which are shared between Breton clubs from different types of location. These include the presence of Breton Celtic symbols within club logos, on team kits and within fan culture. Furthermore, Breton clubs' team kits have provided a space where sponsors' logos have boosted the visibility of Breton companies in a variety of sectors within France and beyond. In closing, it will be argued that—despite the sporting and economic

challenges they have faced, Breton football teams can today be perceived as symbols of resistance against homogenising Paris-centric narratives about French identity as well as the hegemony of leading clubs from France's major cities who are able to draw on the wealth of foreign investors as they focus on ambitions that stretch well beyond France. However, it must be noted that Breton clubs are not wholly insulated from the globalisation of football and its finances. For example, FC Lorient, promoted back into Ligue 1 in May 2025, is majority owned by the hedge fund manager Loïc Féry, while the American sports investor Bill Foley, who also has currently a stake in AFC Bournemouth, has had a minority stake since 2023. During the 2024–2025 season its fans protested against the club being part of a multi-club ownership group, indicating a tension between local and transnational forces.

## Brittany and Breton Celtic identity

Although this article does not ascribe any explicitly political undertones to the adoption of Celtic symbolism and the increased emphasis on Breton identity by the four main clubs under discussion and their supporters, it does note that this change has happened at the end of a period of prolonged and intense cultural revival in the region that was underpinned by latent political influences, including the growth of a small but significant independence movement. It is also important to note that this turn to the Breton and Celtic is at odds with a longer history where the Third (1870–1940), Fourth (1946–1958) and Fifth (1958–) Republics had actively tried to eliminate or, at the very least, discourage minority languages in France as a means of building national culture in the single and indivisible French nation. Across the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Bretons associated becoming successful in French society with not only speaking French but getting rid of Breton as it was 'a marker of backwardsness' (Kuter 1989, 81). The French state's imposition of a single language 'resulted in an internalized sense of inferiority and shame' (Gemie 2002, 147). The Breton sociologist Louis Elegoët, cited by Lois Kuter, noted how this became internalised by Bretons:

Breton .... Is a peasant patois, unable to ensure communication even with the neighbouring village, even more incapable of expressing the modern world – the world of tractors, automobiles, airplanes and television. A language only good enough to talk to cows and pigs. From that you get the refusal to transmit this language to children – a language considered to be a burden, a handicap in social promotion, a source of humiliation and shame. (Kuter 1989, 81)

Nevertheless, even in the face of this opposition, there were three key periods of Breton cultural revival starting in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where phases of cultural renovations—*emsav* in Breton—occurred (Amit 2014). The word *emsav* had multiple meanings for cultural nationalists in Brittany, and especially for political militants, at once meaning "re-awakening", "revival", "uprising", and "struggle" very close in sense to the Italian word *risorgimento* (Amit 2014, 31). The first, beginning in the late nineteenth century, made the case for a Breton nation which was modelled on ethno-centric exclusivist versions of late nineteenth-century nationalism, including its French variant. The second *emsav*, in the inter-war years, saw the development of a 'loose network of small regionalist, cultural and nationalist movements which [...] had put forward

programmes concerning the decentralisation of political power to Brittany, and [...] argued the case for state support to encourage the survival and the development of the Breton language' (Gemie 2005, 104–105). The second *emsav*, inspired by the Irish War of Independence, embraced the 'Irish example of nationalism which consisted of two wings: the political and the linguistic' (Amit 2014, 33). As a result, there was a flowering of Breton cultural and political organisations and publications like the newspaper *Breiz Atao* (Brittany Forever) and the literary journal *Gwalarn* (North West) in the 1920s (136). However, with the Second World War, its aftermath and the subsequent rebuilding of the French state, 'the big political drama was being played out on a French national scale: Breton issues seemed parochial' (Gemie 2005, 106).

The third *emsav*, post-1945, found its flowering not specifically in the language but the revitalisation of Breton music and musicians which would also capitalise on the folk music revival in the United States, the United Kingdom and Ireland. Slightly pre-dating the commercial peak of this folk revival, Breton music and dance associations across the region had also begun the task of helping Bretons become proud of their own culture again (Simon 1999). In the 1950s and 1960s, the *fest-noz* dances that were historically held as annual celebrations across Brittany returned and re-popularised traditional music, dance and dress. Singer-songwriters like Alain Stivell and Gilles Servat, activist musician and poet Glenmor, and bands like Tri Yann, most heavily influenced by the Irish traditional music revival of the same period, brought Breton music to the people, and popularised it in the way that The Chieftains, Planxty and the Bothy Band had in Ireland (Bévant 2009). Gemie (2005) notes that Servat and Glenmor's support for striking trade unions and protest movements like the anti-nuclear occupation at Plogoff in 1980 saw the musical revival associated with a grassroots radicalism which had also been highly active in Brest in May 1968, where students and workers brought a different regional context to the national revolt (Reynolds 2008). Left-wing autonomist Breton politician Annaig Le Gars of the Union Démocratique Bretonne said:

Identity found its expression through songs and meetings. Struggles and festivals have always gone together in Brittany, and artists certainly count for something. They have significantly contributed to an awakening of consciousness; they have given expression to the sense of being Breton. (Gemie 2005, 111)

Music significantly contributed to the reawakening of Breton cultural pride, particularly among younger people. The Festival Interceltique, founded in 1971 in the city of Lorient by the Breton folk artist Polig Monjarret, is a major celebration of Pan-Celticism in music and dance that attracts hundreds of thousands of artists and spectators every year from across the Celtic nations and which is now partly hosted at FC Lorient's Stade du Moustoir. The fact that FC Lorient were first promoted to the second tier of French football in 1967 (and remained there for a decade) suggests an overlap between the evolution of cultural and footballing axes of power in Brittany (Raspaud 1999). Other events like the Festival de Cornouaille in Quimper and the Vieilles Charrues rock festival in Carhaix ('le Woodstock Breton') have become major dates in the regional cultural calendar. These festivals suggest that the work of Celtic renaissance artists like Stivell helped prompt 'significant and complex changes in Breton culture' and that 'Breton culture now appears to be "dynamic, trendy, powerful"' (Gemie 2005, 112).

There has been a direct link between football and popular culture in Britain, where rock, pop and dance music and their associated subcultural practices have overlapped with those of largely working-class football fans. Redhead identified and analysed the 'musicalisation of soccer and the footballisation of pop music' (Redhead 2002, 1). There is a direct link to this in contemporary Welsh football where a hymn of the Welsh nationalist movement, *Yma o hyd* (Still Here) by the folk singer Dafydd Iwan, was adopted by Welsh football fans, many of whom are not Welsh language speakers (Ervine 2022), and then became the official anthem of the Football Association of Wales for the 2022 World Cup in Qatar (FAW 2022). However, the same type of subcultural link cannot be made between forms of traditional Breton music and football fans in Brittany: there is not yet evidence of the same regularly occurring patterns of cultural crossover between football fans and Breton music cultures. What we can say is that the recently re-found confidence in Breton/Celtic cultural identity was heavily influenced by music and other forms of popular and youth culture, and adopted, developed and leveraged by the region's professional football clubs. Football generally provides a focal point for the analysis of identity, and specifically Breton identity in this instance, 'because it is a public arena in which urban, regional and national identities are vividly expressed and in which the relations between different cities and regions are articulated' (King 2000, 420).

The most prominent symbol of the new Breton pride has been the movement to near ubiquity of the region's flag, the *gwenn ha du*, the black and white striped flag designed by Breton nationalist Morvan Marchal in 1925 during the second *emsav*. The flag remained marginalised for much of its early history because of its association with autonomists and militant nationalists; it was only after the Second World War that it was adopted by many of the newly emerging cultural and political groups and was hoisted on ships by sailors. It became more common in the 1960s as the Breton economic revival was happening; after it was adopted alongside the Communist red flag by striking workers of Le Joint Français in 1972, it went mainstream. The strike lasted eight weeks and had popular support from the Breton population.

This strike attracted widespread media attention and it was arguably the moment when Bretons began to identify themselves en masse with this symbol. Henceforth, no cultural, political or labour meeting in Brittany was complete without the presence of the *gwenn ha du*. This flag has become the symbol of all Bretons. (Le Coadic 2014, 159)

The flag is prominent in virtually all levels of Breton political, cultural and commercial life and far beyond the boundaries of the region. Variations of the black and white stripes and the heraldic ermine cross symbols that appear on the flag are used on packaging for Breton products in shops and markets across France, as well as on t-shirts, caps and car number plates and stickers. Research in marketing has shown that Bretons identify so much with the flag that they were more likely to buy products or contribute to charity if the *gwenn ha du* was on the packaging or in the accompanying charitable literature (Guégen, Martin, and Stefan 2017).

Within the immediate contemporary political context of Brittany, the flag had a large presence during the 2013 Bonnets Rouges protests that captured widespread media attention in France and across the world. The striking red hats of the protestors were vividly pictured beneath thousands of *gwenn ha du* at mass demonstrations in cities like Quimper (Carney 2013). It was also pictured at major rallies of the Gilets Jaunes in 2018

and 2019, including on the Champs Elysées in Paris (Parthonnaud 2018). Against this backdrop it is not difficult to understand how the flag, and variations of its design, have become so important to sport in the region. It is virtually omnipresent on the roadsides and television screens of the Tour de France each July, and every other major race in the professional cycling calendar. It is flown by fans in the stadiums of the clubs under examination. Its adaptability as a flexible and unthreatening symbol of the region can also be seen as another reason for its ubiquity.

## Breton identity through sport

Alongside football, Breton identity is often articulated in discussions about sport. Given Brittany's lengthy rugged coastline, rural landscape and often inclement weather, it is no surprise that sailing and cycling are the sports that are most closely associated with the region and have come to symbolise a form of Breton sporting identity. This has informed how sports people from Brittany have been depicted by journalists: 'a Breton athlete can be nothing other than stubborn, courageous, resistant to bad weather, just as the Parisian will always be astute and resourceful' (Lagrée 1999, 48–49). This stereotypical vision seems to be most immediately applicable to Breton sailors and cyclists. Both sports have commanded a significant amount of coverage in the regional press including in *Ouest-France*, the largest selling newspaper in France, which has its headquarters in Brittany, as well as the area's other main regional newspaper, *Le Télégramme*.

Three of the most culturally significant sporting figures of the post-Second World War period in Brittany are the cyclists Jean Robic, Louison Bobet and Bernard Hinault, and each has come to represent different manifestations of Breton identity. Robic was the slight figure who won the 1947 Tour de France, the first Breton winner since Lucien Petit-Breton in 1908. Robic's win was evocative of the popular cartoon character Asterix, also associated with Brittany, because 'the combative French rider employs a ruse to snatch victory', in the way that Asterix did in the comic strips (Dauncey 2012, 143). Robic won the Tour with a cunning and unexpected final-day attack. Bobet, the charismatic three-time winner of the Tour de France between 1953 and 1955, is seen as one of the first sports stars of the post-Second World War modern French media age. Despite his debonair good looks and daring racing, Bobet also adhered to the Breton athletic stereotype of durability and courageousness. After winning a savage stage over Mont Ventoux in the 1955 Tour de France, his brother Jean, a fellow competitor on that day, wrote: 'If it is true, as Victor Hugo says, that "martyrdom is sublimation, a torture that consecrates", then Louison was quite right. His consecration in Avignon was, in my view, the crowning moment of his career' (Bobet 2008, 126). Richard Moore stated: 'Bobet had a quality that was essentially Breton, and which, many observers agreed, was what enabled him to win his three Tours: he was ridiculously stubborn' (Moore 2012, 26).

However, the most important and enduring Breton sports figure since the Second World War is Bernard Hinault, who encapsulated the essence of contemporary Brittany on his way to becoming one of the most successful French athletes of the late twentieth century. Born in Yffiniac near St Brieuc, Hinault was nicknamed '*le blaireau*' or 'the badger' because of his and the animal's fighting tendencies, particularly when cornered. Richard Moore noted the nickname 'suited him. His personality was like that—aggressive' (22) and that Hinault approved of it: 'I was the true Breton in our family: stubborn, belligerent and

afraid of nothing' (26). Moore also notes that in the professional peloton, Hinault assumed the role of 'a little Napoleon, impervious, audacious, stubborn, statesman-like' (18). Hinault had a stellar career, winning almost every major cycling race, including the Giro d'Italia and Vuelta a España, and is a five-time winner of the Tour de France. The last French winner of the race, Hinault was a controversial and combative figure during and after his racing career. He led a riders' strike on the Tour in 1978 and also punched a striking and protesting shipyard worker who had helped halt the Paris-Nice race in 1984. His combativity was again on display in 2007 while working in a public relations role on the Tour, when he pushed an ecological protestor from the presentation stage and into the arms of a gendarme. Hinault, more than any other sporting figure, encapsulates a certain form of idealised Breton fortitude and resilience.

Brittany's economic and cultural heritage has also always been inextricably bound up with the sea and sailing. Fishing and fish processing have been cornerstones of the recent Breton economic recovery and ocean going is something ingrained in a region that is bounded by the ocean. Consequently, leisure and commercial sailing, as well as competitive yachting, are important to local economies in Brittany and major yacht races command a large amount of attention in the regional media. During the Vendée Globe race, which has been dominated by Breton sailors, broadcast and print media frequently give the race as much attention as a Formula 1 Grand Prix. Bretons Alain Gautier, Michel Desjoyeaux, Vincent Riou and Armel Le Cleac'h have won the race, which is touted as one of the toughest tests of endurance in sailing. Decorated sailor Jean Le Cam, nicknamed 'the King' by ocean racing commentators, has raced the Vendée Globe six times and has finished second in the race. However, he caught the imagination of the French and Breton public in November 2020 when he rescued fellow Breton Kevin Escoffier, whose yacht had broken up in choppy seas off the South African coast. Escoffier himself displayed an extreme form of Breton resilience by clinging to his life raft for 11 hours before Le Cam picked him up (*France 24, 2021*). Cycling and yachting, especially in their mediated forms, have therefore joined football as a means of Bretons celebrating their regional identity. The sea and Brittany's marine and fishing heritage also feature heavily in the names or nicknames of Breton football clubs. FC Lorient—whose full name is FC Lorient Bretagne Sud, which is the only club with Bretagne in its official title—is known as 'les merlus', while third-tier Championnat National club US Concarneau is known as 'les thoniers'. In the mid twentieth century, the back of the latter's training tops featured the slogan 'mangez du poisson' in large letters (Ollivier 2009, 89).

## Breton identity through football

Jean-Paul Ollivier, utilising a form of journalistic myth-making and quasi-ethnic essentialism, suggested that the region's footballers possess similar characteristics as cyclists and yachtsmen and women derived from Brittany's landscape and climate:

Ce pays de terre et d'eau a donné naissance, depuis des millénaires, à des hommes taillés dans le granit. Qu'ils soient terriens ou marins, les Bretons ont manifesté des qualités de virilité et de ténacité qui n'appartiennent qu'à eux. Ils ont l'habitude de vaincre sur une terre aride ou une mer déchaînée. Les footballeurs sont de cette trempe-là. (Ollivier 2009, 10)

Jean Prouff, a legendary player and manager between the 1930s and 1970s, had a demeanour reflecting his Breton roots. Ollivier described him as 'Né dans le Morbihan [...], dans le village de Peillac, coin sauvage et ingrat où il faut se battre pour gagner sa vie'. He added that Prouff was 'à l'image de cette région déshéritée: rude, volontaire', noting 'son front, souligné de multiples rides, révélait une volonté tenace' (10). These attributes appear to have been particularly notable compared to other Bretons given that his reaction to coaching Rennes to their French Cup triumphs of 1965 and 1971 was apparently much more low-key than that of his excited players, as 'Prouff conservait son visage sec, comme taillé dans le granit de sa Bretagne natale' (10).

Historically, and ever more prominently in an age of sporting and media globalisation, some football clubs have sought to emphasise their identities as being carriers of group identity, and regional identity is often central to this. They seek to be seen as more than sports clubs, but also as symbols for a group, 'people' or the geographical areas or regions in which they are situated. FC Barcelona in Catalonia or Athletic Bilbao in the Basque Country culturally and commercially differentiate themselves from clubs driven solely by financial power and emphasise their position as keepers of regional traditions and culture (Gómez-Bantel 2018). Therefore, when seeking to assess Brittany's place in French football, it is worth discussing what should be considered as part of the region. Matches between Stade Rennais and FC Nantes have often been referred to as 'le derby de Bretagne'. However, Nantes has not actually been part of the administrative region of Brittany since the 1950s, despite often being referred to as the historical capital of the region. In part due to its present-day status as a city that is located outside of what now constitutes Brittany, this article will focus on teams other than FC Nantes. Furthermore, it will also adopt this approach as the club 'has made no obvious attempt to assert Celtic specificity' (Dine 1999, 125). In recent years it has been games among the four sides under discussion that have been at the heart of the promotion of contemporary Breton identity, particularly those between Stade Rennais and EA Guingamp, who went as far as naming games between themselves as 'le Celtic' and attempting to trademark this light-hearted play on the nickname for Barcelona and Real Madrid's 'El Clásico' rivalry (Goujon 2016).

Breton clubs' significance in France stems in part from their longevity, with several sides from Brittany being among the country's oldest football teams. Stade Rennais was founded in 1901 and two more clubs in Rennes were established two years later. Clubs in Quimper and St Brieuc were founded in 1904. Several of these teams owe their origins to the importance placed on sport by Catholic church-based youth associations during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Dine notes: 'The Church played a leading role in the diffusion and popularization of football throughout Brittany, using its network of patronages or Catholic youth clubs, where the parish priest often ran local sports activities' (Dine 2022). Breton teams are not France's most prolific in terms of trophies won. Stade Rennais, EA Guingamp and FC Lorient have all enjoyed successes in major French cup competitions and represented France in European club competitions, but Stade Brestois have never won a major honour in French national football. In recent decades, the number of Breton clubs in Ligue 1 has nevertheless compared favourably to that of other regions in France. This enduring presence is notable given that Brittany accounts for only 5 million of France's population of over 68 million and has historically not been one of France's most economically prosperous regions. Lagrée observes that

levels of playing football within Brittany compare favourably to many other regions of France (45).

The fact that it has generally been club sides that have become the most powerful symbols of Breton identity in a footballing context is unsurprising given that Brittany—unlike Celtic nations such as Scotland, Wales, Ireland and Northern Ireland—lacks a fully fledged national football team. There has been a national Breton team that has played matches over the years, but these have been unofficial encounters. Croatia, Iran and Tunisia all asked to play against the Breton national team prior to the 1998 FIFA World Cup in France (Caro 1998) and the Breton side played Mali in a charity game in 2013. However, the Brittany Football Association (BFA) is not affiliated to either FIFA or UEFA and as such games must take place outside of the official football calendar. The Morbihannais Yoann Gourcuff—who has played for Lorient and Rennes, as well as Lyon, AC Milan and Bordeaux—said in 2013 that he was in favour of the existence of the team in principle but that it was nevertheless beset by practical difficulties such as finding the time in a crowded calendar of fixtures for it to play matches as well as issues to do with player insurance (Denis 2016). The BFA has always been keen to situate the region's national team in an apolitical space and safeguard against it being adopted as a vehicle for autonomists. Fañch Gaume, chief executive of the BFA, told *When Saturday Comes* magazine: 'We are strictly non-political [...] We don't call ourselves a national team and it suits the French FA. If Breton people want Brittany's status to change, they have ballot boxes for that' (Menary 2013).

### Breton footballing identities in Rennes and beyond

The lack of a national Breton football team that competes in major international competitions has allowed club sides to take on greater importance as representatives of Brittany, its culture and its traditions. Brittany may not regularly take part in football matches against the national teams of other Celtic nations, but the presence of several club sides within the upper levels of French football provides it with a means of 'challenging the other provinces [of France]' (Raspaud 1999, 73–74). Lagrée (1999, 45) has argued that 'when a Breton team rises to the forefront, all Brittany cheers', suggesting that clubs from a specific location can become a symbol of the entire region. While Breton clubs can, and do, project an image of representing Brittany rather than just their immediate area, there are also nuances that need to be addressed. Not all clubs in Brittany can be located within the same type of narrative concerning Breton identity and rivalries between Breton clubs mean that not everyone in Brittany necessarily gets behind a Breton team that is doing well.

A useful starting point for these dynamics is to compare the visions of Breton identity that have come to be associated with Stade Rennais and EA Guingamp. This permits comparison of the forms of identity associated with a team from an inland city of several hundred thousand inhabitants and one from a more peripheral and smaller town. If one discounts Nantes, then it is Stade Rennais which is both the team from the largest city in Brittany and the region's most successful club in terms of top-level honours. Perhaps for this reason, it has at times sought to present itself as the representative of the entire region. An advertisement for the club on the back cover of the February 2007 edition of the *Bretons* magazine featured the slogan 'tout l'esprit Breton souffle sur les Rouge et Noir'

(Bergot 2019, 11). The accompanying image of standing stones in a field by the coast, evoking the ancient neolithic Celtic menhir stones and dolmens of Carnac in Morbihan, is paradoxical given that Stade Rennais is much further from the coast than Brest, Lorient or Guingamp, and its location in Ille-et-Villaine means it is in the Breton *département* with the shortest coastline. More recently, in 2015, Stade Rennais changed the name of its stadium from the mundane Stade de la Route de Lorient to Roazhon Park. The fact that *Roazhon* is the Breton name for Rennes, and *park* (rather than the French *parc*) is the Breton word for field, shows a clear desire on the part of the club to convey a sense of connection to Breton culture and language. Jean-Yves Le Drian, the former French foreign minister and a past regional president of Brittany, suggested it could be called Stade de Bretagne in 2012 (to online jeers from fans of Nantes and EA Guingamp), while Stade Rennais president René Ruello said: 'Nous voulons d'un club qui s'identifie bien à la Bretagne et dans lequel la Bretagne se retrouve' (Ouest-France, 2015). He went further, hailing the club as the most iconic in Brittany: 'C'est le club emblématique de la Bretagne. C'est le club historique' (Coureau 2016). However, Jérôme Bergot (2019) branded the ground's renaming as 'pompous' given that Rennes is not associated with high levels of Breton speakers. Gemie noted that 'for the least ten centuries, the two largest cities in Brittany—Nantes and Rennes—have been French speaking' (Gemie 2002, 146).

Rennes is primarily a location that is a political and educational centre due to being the home to the regional parliament and the region's largest university. The Académie de Rennes is the name of the educational region that covers schools in all four Breton *départements*. Contrastingly, Guingamp's and Lorient's prominence in Brittany is more linked to their status as cultural centres. Raspaud asserts that Rennes 'represents urban Brittany and is opposed to Guingamp, which enshrines the values of deep rural Brittany' (81). When discussing football and Breton identity, Caro (1998, 100) has argued that Lorient and Guingamp, along with Quimper, are 'les plus prestigieux et appréciés creusets de la culture et de la tradition bretonne'. Caro makes no mention of Rennes within his discussion of Breton cultural centres but does discuss occasions when Rennes supporters have celebrated Breton cultural symbols. He recalls how the team's 1971 Coupe de France victory led to 'probablement, la plus grande manifestation jamais vue dans les rues de Rennes avec autant de drapeaux bretons' (106–107). Ollivier (2009) states that Rennes' earlier victory in the 1965 Coupe de France was about more than just sport, as the front cover of *Paris-Match* unusually included a story about sport accompanied by a photograph of the club's victory celebrations in which several Breton flags were visible.

The increased visibility of the Breton flag occurred within a footballing context during the 1990s. Caro notes that a Stade Rennais fan group named Roazhon Celtic Kop displayed the largest ever *gwenn ha du* flag, one with an area of 270 m<sup>2</sup>, at a game against Breton rivals Saint-Brieuc during the 1994–1995 season. Roazhon Celtic Kop are one of several independent fan groups set up by supporters in the 1990s, and their naming and activities show that the embracing of Breton symbols and cultural identity by clubs like Stade Rennais is not merely a top-down process instigated by club directors. Within this context, it is worth noting that replacing a French name with a Breton one is not something that started in Rennes and its stadium's renaming in 2015. Raspaud notes that the piglet which Stade Rennais fans chose as a mascot for the Coupe de France finals of 1965 and 1971 (symbolising Breton pork production) 'underwent a major transition as the French name it was given in 1965 changed to a Breton one in 1971' (78). He also

highlights how the Stade Rennais goalkeeper Marcel Aubour sang the traditional folk song *Ma Bretagne* when the team celebrated their 1971 cup victory. Raspaud argues these events occurred during a period when 'symbolism became more radical [...] with the Breton flag beginning to appear among the public' (81). In sporting terms, Stade Rennais' 2019 French Cup win is certainly significant as it was achieved against Paris Saint-Germain's array of highly paid stars such as Neymar and Kylian Mbappé and was achieved via a penalty shootout in a game in which Stade Rennais had trailed 2–0. The narrative of the fairy tale, of the win against all odds, in the face of the European superclub owned by the Qatari royal family, should perhaps be leavened by the fact that the owners of Stade Rennais, the Pinault family, are among the richest people in France themselves.

EA Guingamp, FC Lorient and Stade Brestois represent something different in sporting terms in Brittany. Stade Rennais has played in the French top flight for considerably longer than its Breton counterparts and has been a much more frequent representative of France in major European club competitions. Stade Brestois attained top-flight status for the first time in 1979, EA Guingamp in 1995 and FC Lorient in 1998. However, EA Guingamp has a more pronounced status as an underdog, owing much to it being from the smallest town in France to ever have a top division football team. Guingamp's population is approximately 7,000 whereas Lorient is an industrial city, home to a large port and 57,000 inhabitants. Guingamp's status as small-town underdog has been created by its supporters, who see the club as being at odds with much of what is associated with modern football. One supporter described it as:

Guingamp, ça représente bien la Bretagne centrale, profonde. C'est un petit patelin qui nous ressemble, dont on se sent proche. [...] un super public. Un public rural dans lequel on se sent bien. Il nous ressemble, à nous, campagnards. On revient pour lui aussi. (Caro 1998, 49)

This captures EA Guingamp's status as a rural underdog which attracts fans from across the region, which also stems from celebrated exploits in the Coupe de France during the 1970s when it eliminated several teams from the upper tiers of French football whilst still an amateur lower division side. the rural amateur team in the celebrated film *Coup de tête* (Annaud 1979) is named Trincamp, a thinly disguised reference to EA Guingamp, which symbolises the club's place in the French national sporting memory.

However, EA Guingamp has become progressively less of an underdog since the late 1970s, even though its status as a small-town club continues to evoke romanticism. This can be attributed to the involvement of multi-millionaire businessman Noël Le Graët as the team rose through the leagues. Its most notable successes came in 2009 and 2014 when it won the Coupe de France, on both occasions in finals against Stade Rennais. In sporting terms, EA Guingamp's 2009 success was particularly notable as it was achieved during a season in which its opponents finished seventh in the top tier of French football, yet EA Guingamp was struggling to maintain its place in the second tier. These matches at the Stade de France became celebrations of Breton identity. The *gwenn ha du* and Breton language were prominent in the French sports daily *L'Équipe* on 9 May 2009, the day of the first final. The paper's front page linked football and Breton culture with the headline 'Festival Interceltique', while that cover was also translated into the Breton language (*L'Équipe* 2009). The decision to translate into Breton led to a 20% increase in sales (Ouest-France 2014). The 2014 final was preceded by Brittany-born pop star Nolwenn Leroy

singing the Breton anthem *Bro gozh ma zadoù* on the pitch (Bergot 2019, 134), a performance that has since amassed more than 1.3 m views on YouTube (Leroy 2014). In this way, the Breton language and Breton culture took on a more visible and audible position within a major French event than they had on previous occasions.

Raspaud describes Stade Rennais as a 'standard-bearer of Breton identity' (71) and the club can perhaps most naturally take on the mantle of being Brittany's leading club. This symbolising of the entire region stems from several factors. Rennes is the largest city in Brittany and its most successful football team. It was founded a decade before US Concarneau (1911) and EA Guingamp (1912), and several decades before Lorient (1926) and Brest (1950). Although Breton clubs have been in the top division of French football for most of the last few decades, for much of the twentieth century Stade Rennais was the only one occupying such a position. Consequently, for much of the last century supporting Stade Rennais in a French Cup Final as a fan of Stade Brestois, EA Guingamp or FC Lorient would not have involved cheering on a direct rival. This helps to explain why Stade Rennais' cup final appearances in 1965 and 1971 became a focus for football fans from many different parts of Brittany and the Breton diaspora. The way in which Stade Rennais has at times been a focal point for football fans from across Brittany has not been mirrored by fans of that club reciprocating interest in the exploits of other Breton clubs. Raspaud argues that Stade Rennais supporters' pride in their own club has led to them not taking pleasure in the successes of other Breton teams.

### **Breton identity in football: patrons, sponsorship and Breton symbolism**

Alongside the reinvigorated pride in Celtic identity and culture in Brittany in the last 30 years, the region has also benefited from an economic recovery which has seen it move from being the poorest French region at the end of the Second World War to being in the second quartile in terms of GDP in 2013 (Cole and Pasquier 2015). The Breton economy has historically been built around agriculture, agri-business, fisheries and tourism. This economic renaissance has also happened thanks to investment by the French government, the European Union and overseas companies in shipbuilding, aeronautical engineering and car production, while there has also been significant growth in the telecommunications, electronics, services and financial services sectors (Cole and Pasquier 2015). Some of the key companies and business leaders associated with this economic growth are also closely associated with the four Breton clubs under discussion, either as sponsors, senior administrators or both. All the clubs under examination have been highly visible 'billboards' for Breton financial success stories. While there was some Breton symbolism used by clubs prior to the start of this century, since the 2000s they have echoed the near ubiquitous turn to the Celtic imagery that has been observed in the Breton public sphere. Echoing the broader reaction against the perceived backwardness of the Breton and the Celtic, clubs have now embraced this symbolism, and their playing kits, club badges and stadium cultures resound with it.

François Pinault, the billionaire businessman behind the Kering group of luxury companies, including Gucci, was born in Rennes and has been the owner of Stade Rennais since 1998. His investment in the club since then has seen it stabilised as a Ligue 1 side and accounted for its regular participation in the final of the Coupe de

France since 2009. Until the age of 16, his bedroom overlooked the Stade Route-de-Lorient and he has seen his custodianship of the club as not simply a financial speculation, but as an emotional investment and giving back to Brittany. In 2020, *Le Monde* stated:

Le Stade Rennais fait partie de leur famille, il est devenu comme un cousin [...] M. Pinault a voulu rendre à la Bretagne ce qu'elle avait pu lui donner en aidant le club à se développer alors qu'il faisait l'ascenseur entre la première et la deuxième division. (Pedro 2020)

The Pinault family businesses, prior to their expansion into luxury goods and art collection, sponsored Stade Rennais for many years, with the family name or that of their companies, Conforama and Finaref, appearing on either the home or away shirts. Since 2006, Stade Rennais has been sponsored by another Breton economic success story, Samsic, the business services organisation that Christian Roulleau founded initially as an employment agency in 1986. Roulleau, who was born in Plérin near St Brieuc, has turned Samsic into a €3bn a year business which employs 25,000 people. Roulleau's business has also been an enthusiastic patron of other Breton sports teams, formerly as the joint sponsor of the now disbanded Brittany-based professional cycling squad Arkéa-Samsic and of FC Lorient. Samsic sponsored Lorient between 2003 and 2005, but since then it has had an unbroken period as the main shirt sponsor of Stade Rennais.

At EA Guingamp, Noël Le Graët has provided a compelling template for the politically and financially influential Breton patron. The family business, founded in 1986, which includes food canning and the Celtilg food processing company, was built on its commercial fishing fleet. Le Graët is a consummate Breton political figure, a former socialist mayor of Guingamp between 1995 and 2008 as well as president of EA Guingamp between 1971 and 1992 and between 2002 and 2011. He took the club from the amateur leagues to competing in European competitions and was the often-controversial president of the Fédération Française de Football between 2011 and 2023. His time at the top of French football ultimately ended in disgrace after he was forced to resign amid charges of the sexual harassment of women (Nouvian and Panja 2023), as well as accusations of underplaying racism in football coming from players including Kylian Mbappé (*Le Monde* 2022). However, prior to his 'downfall', echoing earlier stereotypes of Breton representation in the media, Le Graët was described as 'le Breton granitique' (*L'Express* 2021) and metaphorically monumental—"le "Menhir" du foot français" (*France 24* 2022). Celtilg has been one of the two main shirt sponsors for EA Guingamp this century along with the employment services company Servagroupe, which was also founded in Brittany.

Stade Brestois and FC Lorient can also be said to be living visual embodiments of the reinvigorated Breton financial and public spheres, with each attracting sponsors that tell a story of the recently found economic confidence of the region. Brest has been owned by Denis and Gerard Le Saint, food-distribution entrepreneurs from the Finistère *département*, since 2016. In recent years, Brest's jerseys have been dominated by the Breton building and real estate company Queguiner Matériaux, as well as the dairy producer Yaourt Malo, while the Breton soft-drinks company Breizh Cola has been a junior sponsor along with the Breton environmental services and refuse company Guyot. In 2023, the Brittany-based banking and insurance giant Crédit Mutuel Arkéa

bought the naming rights for Stade Brestois' new stadium, which will be known as Arkéa Park when it opens in 2027 (Doucet 2023).

FC Lorient has attracted perhaps the largest number of sponsors that represent the Breton economic and cultural revival. It has been most supported by the Morbihan-based pork-processing company Jean Floc'h, one of the producers most associated with the recent Breton agri-business success story. In this century it has also had as its main shirt sponsors the Finistère-based luxury clothing manufacturer Armour Luxe, the Morbihan-based biscuit producer La Trinitaine, and the Brittany-based bargain hotels chain B&B Hotels, as well as Breizh Cola as a second shirt sponsor.

There has also been a marked turn to Breton and Celtic symbolism on some club shirts, in club badges and with branding at grounds on match days. Stade Rennais has led the way in utilising Breton and Celtic influences in moulding the club's contemporary identity, although it is the only one of the four clubs under discussion that does not have any elements of the regional flag in its current badge. The flying of the flag and the flags of other Celtic nations is a central feature of the match-day experience at Roazhon Park, as is the singing of *Bro gozh ma zadoù*. Roazhon Park is branded with the heraldic ermine crosses that appear in the top right-hand corner of the Breton flag, while the club match-day mascot, Erminig (Breton for ermine), wears the number 35 shirt representing the departmental number of Ille-et-Vilaine (Stade Rennais.com 2024). The club has also used Breton and Celtic imagery and symbolism most effectively on some of its jerseys. The 2010–2011 away strip was overtly modelled on the *gwenn ha du*, with black stripes traversing a white shirt with the flag's ermine panel on the right chest/shoulder of the jersey. The 2003–2004 away shirt featured the heraldic crosses on the upper chest and collar of the jersey and down each sleeve.

EA Guingamp's badge, which has undergone major alterations in this century, has carried the swirling Celtic triskell/triskelion pattern, which was increased in size when the badge was redesigned for the 2022–2023 season. The club also dropped the reference to its home department, Côtes d'Amor, in the same revamp, but it maintained the black and white colour scheme from the *gwenn ha du* contrasted with the red of the club's shirts.

Stade Brestois maintains the reference to place by virtue of the official name of the club, Stade Brestois 29: the departmental number of Finistère. The club badge has gone through some radical redesigns since the mid-1980s, and each has maintained overtly Breton symbolism. Variations of the badge used between 1992 to the time of writing have featured five ermine heraldic crosses (commemorating the five clubs that merged to make Stade Brestois in 1950), stripes borrowed from the *gwenn ha du* (contrasted in the club's red colours) and a representation of the coastline of Finistère. One of the most recent redesigns in 2010 saw the badge simplified to feature the club's name and one large single heraldic cross.

FC Lorient has perhaps done the most to emphasise its Breton identity especially in the development of the club badge. Between its formation in 1926 and 2010, the club's badge was a simple variation on its name and the figure of a fish, the hake, and the club's jersey colour of orange. The hake referenced the club's origins in the fishing communities of Morbihan. Between 1994 and 2010 the badge included a football and, between 1994–2002, it also included the number 56, a reference to Morbihan's departmental number. In 2010, the badge went through a major overhaul and the club introduced a representation of the *gwenn ha du* into the top section of a new

badge. In 2020 FC Lorient's club website switched to a .bzh web address using a suffix that is an abbreviated form of *Breizh*, the Breton word for Brittany. This came at a time when the club also supported a campaign for there to be an official Breton flag emoji. This turn to the Breton has echoed the club's increasing emphasis on regional and Celtic identity among fans: a tweet in November 2022 congratulating fans for the atmosphere that they generate in the Stade du Moustoir included a video which showed the *gwenn ha du* and other Celtic flags being flown by the club's ultras (FC Lorient, 2022).

## Conclusion

There have been several significant occasions in recent decades when football clubs in Brittany have sought to exploit their Breton identity to draw upon important cultural, historical and linguistic symbols. In so doing, they project an image of regional specificity that challenges the focus on centralisation and universalism within the French state. Although these narratives around the specialness of Breton identity that are projected by leading clubs are in many ways significant, they are at times also quite vague, as they do not always pinpoint precisely what aspects of Breton identity the clubs perceive as being of value. They are also intensely rooted in contemporary sports branding and the commercial exploitation of local and regional identity by football clubs across the world. We hope to have mapped out how, why and when several key teams have sought to exploit their Breton identity and how these efforts can be situated in broader social, cultural and political contexts.

In many ways, leading Breton clubs appear to have sought to appeal to notions of inclusive 'Bretonness'. This is a flexible concept that creates a means of connecting with fans and players whose personal links to Brittany can be traced back several generations whilst simultaneously allowing players, fans and officials from outside the region to become part of something that stands out within the footballing landscape. Although the phrase has not been regularly used in a Breton context, it is as if Breton clubs are—like Barcelona have done via their Catalan slogan 'mes que un club' (more than a club)—suggesting that they are more than just sporting institutions, and have a wider social, cultural and political significance.

This specificity gives Breton clubs something that marks them out as different from the likes of Paris Saint-Germain, Olympique de Marseille, AS Monaco and Olympique Lyonnais, teams from large cities backed by foreign investors who recruit many highly paid global stars and have aspirations that extend well beyond France. Lyon won the French league title seven times in a row from 2002 to 2008 and Paris Saint-Germain have been champions in 11 of the last 13 seasons. Both the annual budget and stadium capacity of Rennes are well behind those of not just Paris Saint-Germain, Olympique de Marseille and Olympique Lyonnais, but also several other provincial clubs (Gavard 2023). Dine argued the region's presence in 'a highly centralized nation-state' has meant that 'Brittany must be reckoned to have achieved only a very limited sporting expression of its Celtic specificity' (1999, 129–130). We have shown that the Breton cultural revival of recent decades has found new and significant spaces within which it has been possible to articulate visions of Bretonness on and beyond a French national context. The victories of Stade Rennais, EA Guingamp and FC Lorient in cup competitions during this period

have provided a series of brief but nonetheless memorable interludes to the hegemony of clubs from large cities with big budgets, as well as enabled teams from Brittany to increase the visibility and audibility of Breton culture. This in turn adds weight to Jérôme Bergot's argument that today 'la région bretonne historique [est] une incontournable place forte du football français' (11).

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