

## Sport's Impact on the Francophoneness of the Alberta Francophone Games (AFG)

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### Article abstract

This article discusses the conflict between two discourses on “sport” and how their intersection with discourses on the “francophone” shaped the Alberta Francophone Games (AFG). A brief description of the two discourses is articulated in the context of the AFG. Whereas the “discourse of excellence” emphasizes both sporting competitiveness and the reproduction of established technical and organizational standards, the “discourse of participation” promotes recreational sport and the modification of structural and technical criteria. The author outlines the three principal debates generated by the interaction of sport and francophone discourses: competitive vs. recreational Games; smaller “francophone” Games vs. bigger French-speaking Games; and sport vs. francophoneness. The conclusion points to the effects of this muddled discursive space on organizers’ practices leading them to focus on the development of an expertise in sport performance and in sport management rather than developing a more sophisticated knowledge of the promotion of francophoneness.

# SPORT'S IMPACT ON THE FRANCOPHONENESS OF THE ALBERTA FRANCOPHONE GAMES (AFG)

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Il va y avoir aussi du *Culturel*, pas juste du sport<sup>1</sup>.  
[Title of the section on cultural activities, fifth AFG official program]  
(SJFA 1997a: 7)

The inaugural Alberta Francophone Games (AFG) were staged in Edmonton in 1992, attracting about 150 participants competing in volleyball, badminton and track and field. All 12 to 18-year-old French speakers in Alberta are eligible to take part in the AFG, whether French is their first language or not and regardless of their sporting experience. Organized by *Francophonie Jeunesse de l'Alberta* (FJA), the Games were quickly established as one of the most, if not *the* most, thriving francophone youth event in the province. To better manage the growth of the Games, the *Société des Jeux francophones de l'Alberta* (SJFA) was incorporated in 1994. By 1997, the sports program had expanded to include three-on-three basketball and soccer while the number of participants also increased, reaching approximately 300 at the 2000 AFG.

AFG founders and organizers conceived of sport as a way to attract French-speaking youth to an event that would promote francophone identity. They believed that sport conducted in French and under francophone auspices would be an effective medium to attract young people into the francophone community. Based on this presumed contribution of sport to community building, they gave the Games a dual mandate: the development of francophone pride and the development of sporting excellence (SJFA 1995a). However, in the

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1. "There will also be **culture** not just sport" (emphasis in the original).

practice of the AFG, the sport mandate has had the paradoxical effect of both sustaining and undermining the production of francophoneness. Over the years, organizers have faced various dilemmas that follow from limited sporting expertise within the community itself and the challenges of encouraging francophoneness among teenagers. In some cases, the choices they made favored sport over the pursuit of francophone objectives. In other cases, organizers questioned dominant sporting values and attempted to adopt practices that gave priority to the francophone agenda.

The literature on the role of sport in the reproduction of minority cultural identities in Canada reveals that sporting practices can both strengthen and undermine these identities. Harney's analysis of the impact of sport within immigrant and ethnic groups in Ontario (1985) argues that some sporting contexts can lead to the construction of distinct cultural identities, while others lead to assimilation into Canadian mainstream society. When the structure, form and context of sporting events are rooted in the culture of the minority group, sport can contribute to the development of collective identity. Successful examples include the Flemish folk games in Ontario (Rensen *et al.* 1983) and the Northern Games in the Northwest Territories (Paraschak 1991). In these cases sporting events are unique to the cultural communities involved.

The sporting activities francophone minorities practice are not necessarily unique to their own traditions and culture in the same way that popinjay shooting, rolle bolle and pigeon racing are typical Flemish folk games (Rensen *et al.* 1983) or that ear pull and knuckle hop have an exclusive Inuit character. Francophone sporting events reproduce Canadian mainstream sports such as softball, volleyball, basketball, track and field, and hockey. Yet events like the Franco-Ontarian Games, the *Jeux de l'Acadie*, and the *Tournois franco-ontariens* reflect the distinct identities of these communities since they celebrate their linguistic marker — French language — and they also emphasize francophone and Acadian culture through their social and cultural program. Thus, in her analysis of the impact of the Franco-Ontarian Games conducted for the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship, Culture and Recreation, Asselin found that the Franco-Ontarian Games

seem to have contributed to the students' knowledge of the "French fact" in Ontario, they may have increased cultural identification with the Franco-Ontarian community, and they have attained their

objective of leaving “participants with a sentiment of pride in belonging to the Franco-Ontarian community” (1995:33).

Paraschak’s research on various native games, tournaments and leagues (1990, 1991, 1997) demonstrates the possibilities for the expression of distinct identities through sport, but it also notes the complicated effects of sport in simultaneously promoting and weakening them. Other research on the participation of various ethnic groups in soccer leagues in Toronto and London has shown that when the different sport clubs or teams do not sustain their cultural differentiation, sporting practice contributes to the attenuation or erosion of minority cultural identities (Day 1981; McKay 1980; Walter *et al.* 1991). Even when sport is practiced under the auspices of the minority community’s institutions, the adoption of dominant sport values, namely the emphasis on winning and on standardized competition, can lead to practices (such as the recruitment of players outside the community) which disrupt the promotion of the cultural identity. The effect of sport on the production of minority identities evidently depends on the context and on the principles and values that govern sporting practices.

### **Sport Discourses at the AFG**

Instead of taking “sport” and “francophone” for granted, I make use of Foucault’s (1969, 1976, 1983) theory on discourse in an attempt to deconstruct the complexity of their significance and meanings. I have drawn on discourse theory to try to identify the statements about the francophoness and about sport at the AFG that acquire the value of “truth”. The AFG served as a case study, allowing me to outline competing and entangled definitions of these terms articulated over the course of one cycle of the Games. The data for this article are based on fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation (Dallaire 1999)<sup>2</sup>.

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2. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 20th Annual Meeting of the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport (N.A.S.S.S) held in Cleveland, Ohio in November 1999. I am very grateful to David Whitson, Claude Denis and Debra Shogan for their feedback throughout my doctoral research including this analysis. I would also like to thank the editors and the reviewers for their helpful comments on this manuscript. In addition, I wish to thank all respondents who were generous with their time and who agreed to participate in interviews. I am also greatly indebted to organizers who allowed my access to documents, meetings and planning activities. The information they shared with me has been quite useful in gaining a better understanding of the process of staging the Games.

Two conflicting discourses of sport circulate at the AFG. The dominant approach to sport, the “discourse of excellence”, emphasizes both competitiveness and the reproduction of established technical and organizational standards. A second sport discourse, the “discourse of participation” promotes recreational sport and the modification of structural and technical criteria.

*The discourse of excellence*

A discourse of excellence emphasizing expertise in both performance and management of sport governed organizers’ aspirations to achieve sporting and social legitimacy. At the AFG, this discourse draws predominantly from two sources: olympism and sport management principles. Donnelly (1996) states that the vast amount of media, public and academic attention given to professional sports and to Olympism attests to the dominance of high performance sport over alternative forms of sporting practice. Olympism, along with the sport ideology Donnelly identifies as professionalism “have become the yardstick by which all other forms of sport are judged” (Donnelly 1996: 25). The modern Olympic movement and the values that Pierre de Coubertin attributed to modern sport explicitly inspired AFG founders and organizers.<sup>3</sup> They adopted the values associated with Olympism and they also tried to comply with the principles of the amateur sport system, a structure that is, certainly in Canada, aimed at the systematic production of sporting excellence (Macintosh and Whitson 1990). However, the scarcity of certified officials and coaches within the francophone community in Alberta has limited the possibilities of holding sanctioned competitive francophone sporting events in the province.

The discourse about excellence articulated at the AFG draws on beliefs and concepts that produce the need for expertise not only in terms of sport performance, but also in terms of the organizational processes and management practices required for developing sporting excellence. In a study of the changing discourses in the Canadian amateur sport associations, Macintosh and Whitson (1990) have

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3. Olympism’s influence on the AFG is clearly stated in a summary of Olympic principles prepared for organizers (FJA 1993h) and in an information brochure (SJFA 1994).

analyzed the effects of the emerging sport management discourse on the professionalization and on the technical and bureaucratic rationalization of these sport associations. AFG organizers' focus on the improvement of various organizational tasks in order to stage a well-run event reflects, on a local level, the "normalizing" effects of this national discourse. For instance, the press kit for the 1996 AFG announced: "This year the Steering Committee has adopted a mandate of organizing a **quality product**,<sup>4</sup> and has respected this by introducing innovations into the planning of the Games" (SJFA 1996c). While the steering committee has not had the resources to hire permanent staff trained in event organization or in community building, it has adopted what it understood as good management practices in order to improve the level of competitiveness at the Games.

AFG organizers' focus on establishing "sound" management practices and their concern for bureaucratic and technical rationalization is also related to the management practices adopted in francophone associations. Throughout my fieldwork it became obvious that these individuals, most of whom were also involved in the leadership and operations of other francophone associations, spoke the language of bureaucratic efficiency and were familiar with management practices. The discourse of management is obvious in the various reports and technical / administrative documents the AFG organizers produced.<sup>5</sup> In articulating fragments of this management discourse, AFG organizers were reproducing the ideas and practices about the efficient deployment of resources that circulated in FJA and in other francophone associations. Lafontant (1993) and Savas (1988) report that through the allocation of financial resources, the federal government has influenced and shaped the development of francophone institutions by instigating a trend towards the professionalization and the bureaucratic rationalization of such cultural associations. Like amateur sport organizations, francophone associations have become dependent on government funding, and must demonstrate that government funds have been efficiently and effectively used.

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4. Emphasis in original.

5. The rationalization of the SJFA and its activities for instance lead to the development of technical resources (FJA n.d., 1993e, 1993f; SJFA 1995c, 1995h, 1996a, 1996q, 1996k) and the training of organizers and volunteers (FJA 1995).

*The discourse of participation*

The need to create a context where francophoneness would also be fostered was, in the context of the AFG, not entirely compatible with sporting excellence. As a result, organizers also deployed a second familiar sport discourse, the discourse of participation. This second sport discourse emphasizes inclusiveness and enjoyment rather than sporting ability. Indeed, Laberge (1995) notes that other kinds of sporting practices struggle against highly organized and competitive sport over the legitimate definition of their common activity. Some have consciously tried to put the emphasis on sport as a recreational activity and insisted on the importance of making it a pleasant experience for all those involved.

The most important manifestation of the sport participation discourse at the AFG is the fact that no minimum level of athletic experience is required of participants. The level of sporting performance at the Games is thus closer to what one would expect in recreational sport than in competitive meets. Such an inclusive attitude can contradict an ethos of elitism based on athletic skills. The sport participation discourse also emerged in organizers' conception of the Games as a place for youths to have fun.<sup>6</sup> Rather than promoting victory as the ultimate goal, organizers wanted to encourage sociability among the participants. To this end, AFG founders had decided against distributing prizes to the top individual and team performers. They chose instead to award collective prizes to foster collaboration and to emphasize the process of playing sports rather than the outcome.<sup>7</sup>

AFG organizers and founders simultaneously articulated fragments from the discourse of excellence and the discourse of participation in their attempts to create a sporting event that would appeal to francophone youths and thus enable the production of francophone identity. Thus, two contrasting sport discourses — produced through the reiteration of discursive fragments encountered in popular culture — concurrently shaped the AFG.

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6. This idea was clearly expressed during interviews (for instance, SJFA/Ea 1996; SJFA/Eb 1997; SJFA/En 1997). It was also apparent throughout the process of staging the Games as organizers were obviously concerned with offering sport and cultural/social activities that participants would enjoy (as opposed, for instance, to merely offering activities that fulfilled the francophoneness or sporting criteria).
  7. This decision is outlined, among other documents, in a brief information text about the Games (SJFA 1994).

## Intersection of Sport and Francophone Discourses at the AFG

The discursive instability of the sport agenda is not only an effect of the concurrent articulation of the two sport discourses, it is also an effect of the francophone agenda of the Games. In fact, the francophone mandate sustains the articulation of the discourse of participation, thus disrupting the stability of the discourse of excellence. The pursuit of the dual francophone and sport agendas is thus the fundamental challenge confronting organizers.

### *Staging competitive or recreational Games?*

Et ça [le débat sport compétitif vs. sport récréatif], c'est le gros dilemme, je trouve, pour les Jeux. Je n'ai pas de réponse, mais tu entends les deux choses. Qu'est-ce que les gens veulent en région? Il y en a qui disent: "On n'y va pas parce que c'est trop compétitif." Et il y en a qui n'y vont pas parce que: "Bien non, on veut de la compétition". [...] Je pense qu'il faudrait qu'ils [les organisateurs] décident. J'irais plus du côté participatif dans le sens que je pense que les Jeux essaient trop d'être vraiment professionnels ...<sup>8</sup> (FJA/Ed 1997)

The concurrent articulation of the sport excellence and the sport participation discourses results in an ambivalent AFG sport agenda. The unresolved debate between staging a "truly" competitive or recreational event generates recruitment problems as well as recurrent debates among organizers. The most telling example of this contest between discourses was the repeated call for medals to reward the winners of the various sporting competitions (a common practice in competitive sport events).

One of the founders explained that the medal debate called into question the assumption that the Games should comply with hegemonic sport practices:

Ça me reste toujours à l'esprit. [Un des fondateurs] disait: "Bien, il ne faut pas avoir peur... Ce n'est pas parce que ce n'est pas comme les autres, qu'on n'est pas obligé de faire comme les autres, qu'on n'arrive

8. "And that [the competitive vs. recreational sport debate] I think is the major dilemma at the Games. I do not have the answer, but you hear both things. What do the people in the regions want? Some say: 'We do not go because it is too competitive.' And others do not go because: 'Well no, we want competition.' [...] I think that they [organizers] have to decide. I would lean towards participation in the sense that I think the Games try too hard to be really professional..."



pas à se valoriser là-dedans non plus.” Alors pourquoi il faut donner des médailles? Parce qu’aux Jeux de l’Ouest on donne des médailles? J’étais contre l’idée de donner des médailles, mais en même temps, je trouve ça plate d’être obligé encore de marginaliser ces jeunes: “Vous êtes différents, vous êtes pas comme les autres.” [...] Je pense que c’est un débat intéressant. C’est un débat qui vaut la peine d’être débattu aussi. Mais en même temps, je suis d’accord dans le sens que non, il ne faut pas avoir peur de dire: “On fait les choses différemment. Et, si tu veux aller gagner ta médaille d’or en volley ball, ou en athlétisme en 100m, bien voilà toutes les institutions qui peuvent t’aider à faire ça” (FJA/Eb 1997).

Subsequent committee members have tried to comply with the rationale that it is more important to encourage collaboration and fun as opposed to recognizing individual sporting excellence. Yet, *chefs de mission*, volunteers and participants each year inevitably questioned this decision. The issue of medals was thus raised again during the planning process of the 1996 AFG. But this time, rather than abiding by the founding maxim of not officially rewarding individual athletes, 1996 organizers decided to distribute ribbons to those who had finished in the top three ranks for each sporting event. They conceived of the awarding of ribbons as a compromise between the two poles of the debate.

However, this decision was not unanimously endorsed as this comment from a member of the Administrative Council reveals:

Nous autres, on a toujours dit, jusqu’à l’année passée — parce que j’étais toujours sur le comité organisateur ou le conseil d’administration — qu’on ne voulait pas de rubans pour la simple raison que quand tu commences à donner des rubans, tu commences à dire: “Félicitations, tu es arrivé premier, deuxième, troisième.” Qu’est-ce qui vient après les rubans? C’est les médailles. Ça se suit.

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9. “I still remember. [One of the founders] was saying: ‘Well, we should not be afraid... It is not because it is not like others, we do not have to do like others, that we can not increase our standing either.’ Therefore, why do we need to give medals? Because they give medals at the *Jeux de l’Ouest*? I was against the idea of awarding medals, but at the same time, I think it is too bad that we are again marginalizing these youths: ‘You are different, you are not like the others.’ [...] I think that it is an interesting debate. It is also a debate that deserves to be debated. But at the same time, I agree in the sense that no, we should not be afraid of saying: ‘We do things differently.’ And, if you want to win a gold medal in volleyball or in track and field in the 100 m, here are all the institutions that can help you achieve that.”

Moi, je n'étais pas d'accord avec les rubans mais [les membres du comité organisateur l'année passée ont dit: "Ça sera juste des rubans c'est pas comme des médailles. C'est juste pour les féliciter." Mais ça va à l'encontre de notre idée que c'est participatif et que tu compétitionnes pour ton équipe. Les points vont à ton équipe et non pour toi. Depuis qu'on a des rubans, on a entendu que le comité organisateur cette année voulait des médailles. Si on ne leur donne pas de médailles cette année, l'année prochaine, le comité organisateur va probablement revenir demander les médailles. [...] Il y en a toujours qui vont questionner<sup>10</sup> (SJFA/Ef 1997).

Indeed, during the preparations for the fifth Games, the issue of medals came up again. At the March 1997 General Council meeting, a *chef de mission* argued that ribbons were worthless and that medals would be more meaningful to participants. The president of the SJFA disagreed and asserted that the philosophy of the Games was to emphasize teamwork, hence the awarding of collective prizes. She explained that a compromise had been previously reached to hand out ribbons recognizing that the top athletes had helped accumulate more points for their delegation. In the end, organizers agreed to award ribbons, rather than medals, at the fifth Games.

The francophone mandate of the AFG was the motivation for the adoption of alternative practices produced in the participation discourse. Indeed, organizers felt that some of the values associated with Olympism, such as competitiveness and the focus on winning, would not encourage the promotion of francophoneness if they were overtly emphasized. The drive to promote francophoneness may have allowed the adoption of alternative sporting practices, but it did not succeed in modifying or eliminating all the practices aimed at the development of sporting excellence that can detract from the production of francophone identity.

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10. "We always said, until last year—because I was on the Steering Committee or on the Administrative Council—that we did not want ribbons for the simple reason that when you start awarding ribbons, you start saying: 'Congratulations, you have arrived first, second, third.' What comes after the ribbons? It is the medals. They follow each other. I did not agree with ribbons but [the members of] last year's Steering Committee said: 'It will just be ribbons, it is not like medals. It is just to congratulate them.' But that goes against our idea that the Games are recreational and that you compete for your team. The points go to your team, not to you. Since we have the ribbons, we have heard that this year's Steering Committee wanted medals. If we do not give them medals this year, next year the Steering Committee will probably return and ask for medals. [...] There will always be some people who will question."

*The AFG for linguistic or cultural francophones?*

[Le recrutement de participants dans les écoles d'immersion], je n'aime pas ça. On est pas mal hypocrite vraiment. Parce que même dans le temps de FJA: "C'est pour tous les jeunes d'expression française". *Bull shit!* Comme oui, tu veux ça, mais pas trop. Tu veux que des jeunes d'immersion viennent mais que ça soit même moitié-moitié, *no damn way!* Même un quart, je dirais que c'est trop. Parce que ce n'est pas juste pour le jeune d'immersion, non plus. Si tu as une cabane à sucre, que tous les jeunes viennent et qu'ils mangent juste la tige, OK, si c'est ça [le but] *great*. Mais si le but c'est qu'ils vont aller dans une atmosphère francophone où les gens parlent français, et que tu as 90 jeunes d'immersion qui viennent... avec 10 jeunes [francophones]? Ce n'est pas juste pour le jeune d'immersion non plus<sup>11</sup> (FJA/Ed 1997).

The production of francophoneness at the AFG is marked by the ongoing tension between two discourses producing conflicting "truths" about the francophone, the "linguistic discourse" and the "cultural discourse." Despite the shared assumption that a francophone is someone who speaks French, these discourses are articulated at the Games in such a way that they produce competing ideas about francophone identity. In fact, francophoneness refers, on the one hand, to a French speaker's relationship to the French language and, on the other hand, to her relationship to "francophone" culture. The distinction between the francophone discourses is that the linguistic discourse potentially allows membership in the francophone community to all French speakers<sup>12</sup> and offers a broad, pluri-cultural definition of the francophone.

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11. "I do not agree [with the recruitment of participants in immersion schools]. We are real hypocrites. Even during the time of FJA: 'It is for all French-speaking youths.' Bull shit! Yes, you want that, but not too much. You want immersion youths to come, but that it would be half-and-half, no damn way! Even a quarter, I would say, is too much. Because it is not only for the immersion youth either. If you have a sugar shack, that all youths come and eat some maple toffee, okay, if that is the [objective], great. But if the objective is that they will be in a francophone atmosphere where people speak French, and you have 90 immersion youths who come... with 10 [francophone] youths? The purpose [of the AFG] is not just for immersion youths either."
  12. In its simplest and broadest version, this discourse produces a community open to all Albertans who can perform in French. This means that in 1996, approximately 180,000 French speakers could have been considered "francophones" since they reported some knowledge of the French language. Of this population, 58,000 respondents indicated that they spoke French as their first language (Statistics Canada 1997b).

The cultural discourse has the opposite effect of limiting membership in the community by establishing an additional criterion, a shared and distinct culture — which includes but is not limited to the French language, and which refers, ideally at least, to some relationship to French Canadian “roots”. The cultural discourse in the AFG discriminates between French speakers by emphasizing the cultural principle and effectively creates a more exclusive group. Those of non-French Canadian culture are absent from the construction of the cultural community. Their culture is just too different (SJFA/Ef 1996). They may speak French, but they have not shared the historical and cultural experience of the French minority in Canada. Such people include Canadians of second or more generations and/or recent immigrants from France, Belgium, Haiti, Congo, Libya or other francophone countries. The cultural discourse also excludes people of French Canadian origins who may share francophone culture and history but who no longer speak French.<sup>13</sup>

The example that best conveys the impact of sport on the production of francophoneness at the Games is the enduring debate concerning the selection of participants: should the SJFA recruit among all French-speaking youths or should the Games be restricted to youths who speak French as a first language? In this debate, organizers articulated the criteria of mother tongue as a way to discern between cultural and linguistic francophones, assuming that participants who spoke French as a first language were of French Canadian origin whereas those who spoke French as a second/other language were not.

The Games have always been officially open to all French speakers, but youths of French Canadian origins were the genuine target population.

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13. According to the 1996 Canadian census, more than 300,000 individuals in Alberta declared having French or French Canadian ethnic origins (Statistics Canada 1998). However, the cultural discourse defines the francophone as a **French speaker** who shares a specific culture. There are no more than approximately 180,000 French speakers in Alberta. Therefore, not all individuals claiming French or French Canadian ancestry can speak French. This is in contrast to numerous other cultural or ethnic identities in Canada (e.g. Ukrainian, German or Italian) where one may claim the identity on the grounds of genealogy without being fluent in the language. Despite being a basic criterion of the discourse, culture does not prevail over the fundamental criterion about the francophone in Canada, performance of the French language. See Dallaire and Denis 2000 for an analysis of the discursive instability of francophoneness at the AFG.

N'importe qui qui s'intéressait aux Jeux pouvait participer. N'importe qui était bienvenu. Mais c'est sûr que nous, notre clientèle cible, c'était les francophones de souche. Mais on n'était pas pour mettre un article 23 de la [Charte canadienne des droits et libertés] pour la participation<sup>14</sup> (FJA/Ea 1997).

Recruitment practices gradually resulted in an increasing number of youths at the Games who spoke French as a second language.

On a eu les deux premiers Jeux, la plupart étaient des francophones. Et là ça a changé. On acceptait plus d'anglophones qui parlaient français, supposément. Et là, nous avons commencé à voir que l'anglais commençait à dominer un peu. Un peu, pas mal. Nous nous sommes posé la question: "Qu'est-ce qu'on fait?" Mais quoi? On ne pouvait pas dire d'une année à l'autre: "Vous ne pouvez plus venir maintenant!" [...] Moi et [le président], on s'est évidemment parlé des Jeux, et ce que ça voulait dire, tout ça. Et en réunion du Conseil d'administration surtout on parlait de ce que ça voulait dire les Jeux. La grosse question c'était: "La quantité ou la qualité?" Et c'était divisé, incroyable. Oui, on veut avoir beaucoup de jeunes. Oui, on veut qu'ils parlent français. Bon. "Si vous voulez qu'ils parlent français, il n'y en aura pas beaucoup." Un des buts c'est d'augmenter et un des buts c'est de garder la qualité alors... Ça s'est divisé et ça va probablement l'être pour le restant de l'existence des Jeux. Qu'est-ce qu'on veut?<sup>15</sup> (SJFA/En 1997)

The bigger the Games were, the more they would gain sporting credibility since it would presumably improve the level of sport competition and the more they would appear successful.

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14. "Whoever was interested in the Games could participate. Everyone was welcome. But, it was obvious that we targeted francophones *de souche*. But, we were not going to require the application of Section 23 of the [Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms] for participation."
  15. "We had the first two Games, most of them were francophones. And then, it changed. We accepted more anglophones who presumably spoke French. And then, we started noticing that English was dominating a little. A little, a lot. We asked ourselves: 'What do we do?' But, what? We could not say from one year to the next: 'You cannot come anymore!' [...] [The president] and I, we obviously talked about the Games, and what they meant, all that. And at the meetings of the Administrative Council mostly, we talked about what the Games meant. The main question was: 'Quantity or quality?' And it was really divided. Yes, we want a lot of youths. Yes, we want them to speak in French. Well. 'If you want them to speak French, there will not be many of them.' One objective was to grow and one objective was to preserve the quality so... It became divided and it will probably remain as such for the rest of the existence of the Games. What do we want?"

Et moi, je vois plus l'aspect sportif là-dedans. Évidemment, si on veut que les compétitions s'améliorent et que les jeunes... [Que] ça devienne comme des compétitions à un calibre assez élevé... Et il y a certaines zones même qu'on voit qu'ils sont beaucoup dedans. Et ils s'entraînent. Et ils sont bien impliqués et puis que, ils réussissent souvent généralement bien. Et puis qu'il y a d'autres zones, disons, comme tu vois c'est des athlètes, je dirais, récréatifs. Alors, si on veut qu'ils s'améliorent, que ça devienne meilleur, le plus de gens que tu as, le plus que les gens veulent faire. Et avec la population limitée, ça fait que seulement les francophones, c'est plus difficile. Avec des francophiles aussi des fois il y a des gens qui s'entraînent avec d'autres. Ils s'entraînent à l'extérieur de l'école ou ils sont des athlètes d'athlétisme. Et, ils viennent aux Jeux, et ça pousse les autres à mieux réussir. [...] Et j'aimerais que les Jeux deviennent plus compétitifs et d'un calibre plus élevé. [...] Et je trouve que ça serait bien qu'on puisse devenir d'un meilleur calibre. [...] Alors si on pouvait monter de calibre, et être aussi fort que les Jeux de l'Acadie, là ça serait possible. Et ça serait bien qu'on fasse les Jeux du Canada, éventuellement... Mais je pense qu'on a bien du travail à faire par rapport à nos athlètes<sup>16</sup> (SJFA/Ef 1996).

Organizers felt that a greater quantity of participants would, on the one hand, increase the sporting quality of the Games while, on the other hand, it would decrease the francophone quality of the Games. But holding a smaller event limited to “real” francophones in a “true” French environment was not as appealing to organizers — nor was it appealing to participants (Dallaire 1999) — as staging larger Games open to all French-speaking youths.

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16. “And I see more of the sporting aspect in that. Obviously, if we want the competitions to improve and youths to... The level of the competitions becomes high enough [...] And we see that some zones are really into it. And they train. And they are really involved and they generally succeed well. And there are other zones, where you see that the athletes are, I would say, recreational. So, if we want them to improve, to become better, the more people you have, the better people want to do. And with the limited population, I would say that only francophones would be difficult. With francophiles also there are some people who train with others. Like they train outside of school or they are track and field athletes, for example. And then, they come to the Games and that pushes others to achieve more. [...] And I would like for the Games to become more competitive with a higher level of performance. [...] And I think that it would be good if we could improve our level of competition. [...] So if we could improve our level and become as strong as the *Jeux de l'Acadie*, then it would be possible. And it would be good that we made it to the Canada Games, eventually... But I think that we have a lot of work to do with our athletes.”

As accepted wisdom in popular culture, bigger is better, thus larger Games were deemed more attractive and worthier. Organizers had originally hoped that the Games would eventually attract up to 1,000 to 1,500 participants. This figure, they estimated, would ensure the credibility of the AFG as a large-scale francophone sport event. However, they were aware that the population of students in francophone schools, those youths who presumably fit the cultural definition, was not sufficient to achieve their goal of staging larger Games. To ensure the growth of the Games, they had to recruit participants among the French immersion student population.<sup>17</sup>

Opening the AFG to all French-speaking teenagers served to include those who spoke French as a second or other language and who presumably wanted to improve their use of French. Some organizers were inclined towards inclusiveness and welcomed “francophiles” or “immersion” youths interested in the event. However, the advocates of extending the scope of participant recruitment were not necessarily arguing for the adoption of a linguistic and multicultural approach to define francophoneness. Their desire to recruit athletes from French immersion schools was, to a great extent, related to their perception that a good quality sport event requires more competition and more participants.

While the linguistic discourse provides the recruitment language of the AFG, the cultural discourse is used to describe the francophone identity that the Games are meant to produce. Had the population of teenagers of French Canadian origins who spoke French as a first language been higher, the cultural discourse would have probably prevailed and continued to govern the recruitment of participants. The cultural discourse is still articulated in official programs and by organizers to describe francophoneness. It seems to be the spontaneous definition that they ascribe to francophone identity. However, organizers did use the linguistic discourse as well, but in a way that created a hierarchy among French speakers and confirmed the salience of cultural origins as the “true” marker of francophoneness.

As in the case of other minority francophone institutions, (such as francophone schools) the inclusion of French speakers who are not of French Canadian parentage and/or who do not speak French as a first

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17. In 1997-1998, 3,300 students attended francophone schools in comparison to 26,221 students in French immersion programs (Alberta Education/E 1999).

language was primarily meant to increase the number of members / students / participants. The push to include more people in the AFG by “loosening” the francophoneness criteria was related to funding as well as sporting issues. AFG organizers can secure more government funding and attract more sponsorship money with bigger Games. The emergence and stronger enunciation of the linguistic discourse within francophone communities and the ensuing struggle with the historical cultural definitions of francophoneness has also been an effect of the federal government’s regime of rights (Cardinal 1997), the calls for the reconstruction of francophone communities as multicultural communities (Cardinal 1997; Guindon 1984), the increase of mixed linguistic and/or cultural marriages (Bernard 1998) and the community involvement of “francophile” spouses.

### Sport vs. Francophoneness

Au cours de cette activité, [le but] c’était d’avoir, d’assurer le bon déroulement mais aussi de promouvoir le français. Et puis c’est difficile. Souvent ces jeunes, c’est dans un milieu anglophone qu’ils demeurent. Ils arrivent ici et ils se parlent en anglais. Ça c’est difficile. Ça fait mal aux oreilles quand on l’entend. C’est difficile à contrôler. Et c’est difficile d’arriver à des règlements durant la fin de semaine qui vont empêcher ça, qui vont contrôler ça. Mais c’était un de nos buts. C’était de s’assurer que ça se passe en français<sup>18</sup> (SJFA/En 1997).

One of the greatest difficulties organizers faced in staging the AFG has been in finding ways to encourage the use of French among participants at the Games. The production of francophoneness was the impetus for creating the AFG, but it was also an immense challenge. The time-consuming sport program compounded the problem of finding strategies to promote francophone identity. Often, sport imperatives compromised the francophone agenda of the AFG. Sport was an effective means of attracting youths, but it also proved to be an activity that could detract from the promotion of “francophoneness” (whether cultural or linguistic).

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18. “During this activity, [the objective] was to ensure the efficient course of events but also to promote French. And it is difficult. These youths often live in an anglophone environment. They come here and they speak English. That is difficult. It bothers you when you hear this. It is really difficult to control. And it is difficult to make up regulations that will prevent that, that will control that. But it was one of our objectives. To make sure that it would be in French.”



The sport program's dominance over the francophone agenda in commanding organizers' focus and actions became quite obvious throughout my fieldwork. Questions and issues associated with the technical, logistical and organizational aspects of the Games related to staging a professional and successful sport event received most of the attention during meetings of the Administrative Council, the General Council and the Steering Committee. Indeed, discussions about the francophoneness of the Games or about how to improve it were short and infrequent.

During an interview with a longtime organizer, I commented that questions and issues concerning sport had dominated the proceedings in all the meetings I had attended before and during the 1996 Games. Even if there were obvious problems concerning the francophone character of the event — for instance, the use of English was predominant among some participants — practically no time had been spent discussing this acknowledged concern. She explained that it was true that the francophoneness of the AFG had perhaps been neglected over the years since the focus was admittedly on developing expertise in the management of competitive sport.

Je dirais qu'avec les années, à mesure qu'on a de plus en plus de Jeux, au moins ceux qui sont sur le conseil d'administration ou ceux qui y ont déjà siégé, deviennent plus compétents ou un peu meilleurs dans le domaine du sport pour faire l'organisation du sport. Ça devient moins compliqué. [...] Parce que le sport c'est vrai que c'est compliqué, ça prend beaucoup d'organisation. Et dans le fond, en partie, les jeunes sont là pour compétitionner. On essaye de mettre des activités culturelles et insérer ça pour justement sensibiliser les jeunes, parce qu'on utilise le sport comme moyen. Mais des fois, je pense que dans le passé, la culture a comme glissé un tout petit peu. C'est dommage, mais j'espère qu'avec les années si on a plus d'expérience, et puis si on peut développer des outils ou un guide même pour le comité organisateur, ça devient moins compliqué pour eux de faire l'organisation du sport. Et le conseil d'administration peut se concentrer sur les choses culturelles, soit mettre une politique de francisation ou quelque chose comme ça pour s'assurer que le côté culturel ne soit pas perdu au sport<sup>19</sup> (SJFA/Em 1997).

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19. "I would say that over the years, as we stage more and more Games, at least those that are on the Administrative Council or those that have already been a part of it, become more competent or a little better in organizing sport. It becomes less complicated. [...] Because sport is really complicated, it requires a lot of organization. And really, youths are, in part, there to compete. We try to organize

The Administrative Council briefly considered establishing a cultural committee that would formulate a cultural policy and find solutions to ensure a balance between the francophone and sport agendas.<sup>20</sup> But, the Administrative Council focused on staging a “professional” event and on producing various tools to improve the technical, administrative and organizational tasks of managing sport. Because of a lack of time and of human resources, the creation of the cultural committee was indefinitely postponed.

Organizers generally emphasized that the sport agenda was dominating the process of staging the AFG. One of the reasons they devoted so much time to planning and preparing the sport program was related to the importance of gaining sporting credibility to attract youths:

Maintenant, la raison que je pense qu'il est important de mettre beaucoup d'efforts, les raisons pour lesquelles on passe tellement de temps sur le tournoi sportif, l'horaire, la logistique, c'est que pour que les jeunes soient intéressés à l'activité, pour qu'ils veuillent venir et participer, il faut que ce soit une activité de qualité. Il faut que ce soit un bon événement. Alors, ça veut dire qu'il faut que ce soit bien fait. Donc, ça prend beaucoup de temps, beaucoup d'énergie<sup>21</sup> (SJFA/Ej 1997).

A second reason why more effort was put into pursuing the sport agenda was that problems with the tournaments, schedule or technical issues were easier to solve than the problem of the widespread use of English among youths:

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cultural activities and insert them to make youths aware, because we use sport as a means. But sometimes, I think, that in the past culture has slid a little. It is unfortunate, but I hope that with years, if we get more experience, and if we can develop tools or a guidebook even for the Steering Committee, it becomes less complicated for them to organize sport. And the Administrative Council can concentrate on cultural things, either add a policy for the *francisation* or something like that to ensure that the cultural aspect is not lost to sport.”

20. A proposal for the creation of this cultural committee was discussed and approved (SJFA 1996h).
21. “Now, the reason I think it is important to put a lot of effort, the reasons why we put so much time on the sport tournament, the schedule, logistics, is that for youths to be interested in the activity, for them to want to come and participate, it has to be a quality activity. It has to be a good event. So, that means that it has to be well run. So, it takes a lot of time, a lot of energy.”

Puis, je pense que c'est un peu qu'on ne sait pas comment... On est prêt à investir, on dit que c'est une priorité, mais on ne sait pas comment adresser le problème. Je ne pense pas qu'il y a personne qui va pouvoir nous dire comment adresser ça facilement non plus. [...] Comme je dis, quand on parle de logistique dans les réunions, et des compétitions... C'est un peu la nature humaine, ou je ne sais pas trop quoi, de régler les problèmes qu'on est capable de régler et qu'on est conscient. OK, on va discuter pendant une heure et demie de temps entre onze heures et minuit et demie, on est aussi bien d'accomplir quelque chose (rires) [...] On est aussi bien de s'assurer que le tournoi, essayer que le tournoi fonctionne bien. Si on discute pendant une heure et demie au sujet de comment on fera que les jeunes parlent français, bien, c'est pas évident que les jeunes vont parler plus français le lendemain. C'est pas mal certain que ça ne va pas faire rien pour que ça change la façon que les jeunes réagissent<sup>22</sup> (SJFA/Ek 1996).

Organizers were willing to spend a large amount of money on the cultural program to present a French language concert, but they were not spending time during the meetings to discuss the issue of promoting French language use at the Games. It was a problem that preoccupied them, but for which they had no immediate or obvious solutions. Moreover, they felt overwhelmed by sporting and logistical issues. As a result, they did not devote much time and effort to implement the few solutions suggested over the years to enhance the francophone character of the Games. Indeed, they were turning to the issues they felt they could “fix” on a short-term basis: sport management issues.

Another reason they were unable to think of ways to promote francophoneness was that they associated francophoneness with history and traditions. For example, one organizer stated that participants were interested in sport, but not in culture:

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22. “And, I think that it is also that we do not know... We are ready to invest, we say that it is a priority, but we do not know how to address the problem. I do not think anyone will be able to tell us how to solve this problem in an easier way either. [...] As I say, when we talk about logistics during the meetings, and about the competitions... It is in some way part of human nature, or I do not know what, to solve the problems we are able to solve and that we are aware of. Okay, if we will discuss for an hour and a half, between eleven o'clock and twelve thirty, we might as well accomplish something (laughs) [...] We might as well make sure that the tournament, try to make sure the tournament is well run. If we discuss for an hour and a half about how we will try to get the youths to speak French, well, it is not sure that they will speak more French the next day. It is quite certain that it will not change how youths react.”

Je pense que le sport est un moyen d'aller chercher les jeunes. Et par rapport à la culture, c'est difficile: "Venez assister à des ateliers sur la langue française". Tu sais, les jeunes sont moins attirés. C'est moins attrayant pour les jeunes de venir s'asseoir et d'écouter quelqu'un qui va parler de l'histoire de la langue française. Je dirais que c'est moins attrayant. Moi, je trouve que le sport, c'est plus le moyen qu'on utilise pour aller chercher les jeunes afin de participer à des activités qui intègrent la culture française<sup>23</sup> (SJFA/Em 1997).

What is most interesting in this organizer's explanation of why francophoneness is difficult to promote, is her spontaneous example of what a cultural activity could possibly be at the AFG: a lesson on the history of the French language! While most organizers could be described as young adults<sup>24</sup>, they thought of culture in terms of historical practices. Indeed, the most widely circulated version of the cultural discourse, at the AFG and in the community, connotes the traditions and historical experiences of the descendants of *Nouvelle-France's* French settlers and is associated with the ethnicist meaning generally given to the expression "French Canadian." Interviewees speaking the cultural discourse often described this culture by referring to the sugar shack, the Christmas Eve traditional party, meat pies and square dancing. For them, promoting culture at the AFG implied the promotion of French Canadian folklore. But organizers presumed that teenagers were not interested in such things, at least not in the context of the AFG, hence, their reticence to promote such traditions. Yet, they did provide some contemporary francophone cultural activities at the Games, such as an evening French language concert and a performance by a comedian/magician. They did not, however, conceive of these activities as part of the culture that defines francophoneness. This focus on a folklorized and even stereotypical notion of francophone culture that has arguably little relevancy in contemporary francophone cultural practices contributed to their continuing difficulties in formulating strategies to

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23. "I think that sport is a means to attract youths. And in relation to culture, it is difficult: 'Come attend workshops on the French language.' You know, youths are not as attracted. It is less attractive for youths to come sit and listen to someone who talks about the history of the French language. I would say that it is less attractive. I think that sport is the means we use to attract youths so that they participate in activities that integrate French culture."

24. Questionnaire results collected for the larger ethnographic study reveal that half of all organizers involved in staging the 1996 and 1997 Games were 17 to 25 years old and three quarters of the organizers were under 30 years old (Dallaire 1999).

produce a sense of francophone pride. Furthermore, the obtuseness of the concept of culture was also a factor that detracted from a successful implementation of a cultural strategy at the Games. While organizers mostly referred to French Canadian ethnic traditions to describe this francophone culture, there was no consensus on what this culture is. The ambiguous notion of culture contributed to the difficulties of instituting a francophone cultural environment at the AFG and it also contributed to organizers' focus on developing a "sport" rather than a "francophone" event.

That organizational priorities were geared towards the improvement of the management of sport and the performance of sport demonstrates that the sport agenda generated practices that lead the organizers away from a focus on the production of francophoneness. In this sense, sport competitiveness had the same effects that Day (1981), McKay (1980) and Walter *et al.* (1991) found it had on the promotion of cultural identities in ethnic soccer clubs in Toronto and in London. It is noteworthy perhaps, that AFG organizers have not been as successful as the organizers of the Northern Games in challenging dominant sport practices. While modern organized sport has influenced the staging of the Northern Games, Paraschak's (1991, 1997) studies show that native organizers have been able to contest the emphasis on winning and the adherence to sport governing bodies' regulations, and to emphasize the cultural aspects of these Games. Natives' greater insistence on alternative sport principles and on the cultural agenda of the Northern Games is conceivably supported by the fact that the sporting activities practiced at this event are distinctive native games that reproduce native cultural traditions and values.

Sport has played an ambivalent role in producing the "francophone" in the context of the AFG. It has, on the one hand, sustained the production of francophone identity by consolidating organizers' own francophoneness, by contributing to the institutional completeness (Breton 1991) of the community, by providing a place for the gathering of young French speakers where they could "have fun in French". On the other hand, the focus on excellence in sport performance and sport management also competed with the establishment of a francophone environment at the Games (e.g. when the 1996 AFG volleyball tournament was officiated in English because no French-speaking certified officials were available — rather than officiated in French by non-certified officials; when, in some instances, the best athletes were

chosen rather than the more “francophone” participants; and, as illustrated above, when organizers’ efforts were dedicated to the pursuit of sport objectives to the subordination of the francophone agenda).

AFG organizers were dealing with a relatively small French Canadian ethnic community. While they articulated a linguistic discourse that opens the membership of this community to all French speakers, they also produced a cultural discourse that creates categories of francophones where French Canadian descendants are more “francophone” than others. In Alberta, this “core” francophone membership is inadequate to stage a large-scale competitive sport event. Without the necessary human resources and the sport expertise within the community, organizers cannot produce a sport event and expect that it will unproblematically contribute to community building. Sport is not necessarily a threat to francophone minority identities. But, in the context of the AFG, one attitude towards sport — the promotion of expertise in sport performance and in sport management — can detract from the achievement of the francophone agenda.

## **Conclusion**

Organizers considered that fostering a francophone identity is the primary purpose of the AFG. It was the principal reason for their involvement in the Games (Dallaire 2003). Through their involvement with the Games, organizers were gaining experience as future francophone leaders. Ironically, the focus of the AFG slid from promoting francophoneness to the staging of a large competitive sporting event. Thus, the organizers developed skills in staging a legitimate and well-run “sport” event but did not develop skills in promoting French language and culture. While it might appear that this was a conscious choice on the part of organizers, it was not necessarily so. Organizers had aimed to create an environment where youths could feel part of the community and identify with it. This remained their declared objective and their genuine intent. When they leaned towards the achievement of the sport agenda and the development of sport management skills, they did not anticipate the extent to which it could interfere with the francophone agenda. They had decided to prioritize sport because they believed it would attract more youths and they believed it would help achieve the community building purposes of the Games.

Sport does not pose an inevitable threat to the promotion of francophone identity. AFG organizers did not intentionally neglect the francophone agenda, but they did make choices that ultimately led them towards the achievement of other goals. Despite thinking of a few ideas to improve the promotion of francophoneness at the Games, such as inviting an *animateur de foule*, creating a special team of volunteers and instituting a cultural committee, the sport imperatives took over and organizers did not implement these strategies. Thus, sport not only interacted with the francophone discourses in a way that sustained their instability, it also meshed with organizers' wish to put on a successful event in ways that worked against the promotion of francophoneness.

Yet, sport can potentially be a medium to promote and sustain francophone identity. However, this case study of the AFG demonstrates that sport's contribution to the promotion of minority identities is related to the level of sporting expertise and resources within the community. Since one of the objectives of the Games was to develop sporting excellence among francophone youths and within the community, the shortage of human resources to help stage the Games, in addition to the lack of certified French-speaking officials, coaches, sport managers, imposed important constraints on the process of organizing the event. In this context, it is not unexpected that the focus shifted towards the development of sport expertise. Organizers' commitment to the francophone community and their dedication to the enhancement of francophoneness in Alberta will perhaps lead them to further explore and exploit possibilities and strategies aimed at fostering francophone pride once the SJFA has developed a minimum level of sport management knowledge and once more French speakers are trained and certified as sport officials and coaches.

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