

Review and Translation by David Chapman

## Emparons-nous du sport: Les Canadiens français et le sport au XIXe siècle

**[Let us Seize Sport French Canadians & Sport  
in the Nineteenth Century]**

by Gilles Janson (Montreal: Guerin, 1995).

Most lovers of strength lore know that the province of Quebec was the home of Louis Cyr, Horace Barre, Leo Robert, the brothers Baillargeon and Weider, and a host of other strength and physique stars. Quebec is still referred to by the name that George Jowett gave it over seven decades ago: the “cradle of strong men.”<sup>1</sup> Although the province is home to only around seven million inhabitants (roughly the same as Georgia or the greater Chicago area), its prominence as an important locus of weight training is far out of proportion to its population. Beyond weightlifting and bodybuilding however, Canada’s French-speaking province is as enthusiastic about sport today as any other region in North America. It supports successful professional baseball, hockey, Canadian rules football, and other teams; but as Gilles Janson points out in his book *Emparons-nous du sport*, it was not always thus.

Early in the nineteenth century, most Quebecers were excluded from both the halls of power and the fields of play. Sport and government were pretty much the exclusive domains of the English; so were the cities since the French relinquished these more or less to the British conquerors. For a number of cultural, linguistic and religious reasons, the Francophone majority lived apart, principally on farms and in small villages, but all of this changed with the industrial revolution when French Canadians were attracted back to the cities where (almost despite themselves at first) they were drawn into social, financial, and — most significantly for us — sporting circles.

The British had long touted the benefits of sport, and it did not take long for their French neighbors to take up the challenge. Sport became a way for Franco-Can-

dians to show that they were just as strong as their English

conquerors. “Let us seize sport” became the cry of those who wanted to show that they could be victorious, too. They could take back their pride as they took back the government. If they had lost the battle for their homeland on the Plains of Abraham in 1759, the French-Canadians might at least win on the baseball diamond or in the hockey arena.

Janson tells the story of this gradual change in mindset among the Francophones that took place in the late-nineteenth century. One of the main sources of pride for many in the province was the massive strongmen that peopled the folklore and history books of Quebec. Janson shows how these human anomalies fit into the bigger picture of sport and recreation in Lower Canada, and he documents his account with hundreds of quotes from newspapers and other contemporary sources. Gilles Janson is uniquely situated to write this book since he is Special Collections librarian at the University of Quebec at Montreal. His talents at locating rare or unique source materials cannot possibly be faulted (as the extensive footnotes and bibliography prove).

In addition to its impressive documentation, *Emparons-nous du sport* is also singularly well written. Those who yearn to know more about Louis Cyr and his fellow Quebec strongmen will find much in this book which will help them understand why *La Belle Province* has been the home of so many powerful and muscular athletes. Readers who have an interest in the history of sport on our continent should not overlook this wonderful volume.



## “Feats of Strength” (Pages 89-95)

Feats of strength have always enjoyed a great popularity among French Canadians. A few strongmen have entered into legend. The literate elite, which ordinarily would disdain to discuss sport, did not hesitate to glorify those who were made famous by their muscular vigor. In 1884 the journalist, literary critic and writer, Andre-Napoleon Montpetit published *Nos hommes forts* [Our Strongmen] in which he “recalled the long tradition of physical strength which characterizes the French-Canadian nation.”<sup>2</sup>

That same year, Benjamin Sulte’s work *Joseph Montferrand* appeared.<sup>3</sup> This was the story of a colossus who could put dozens of the “English” to flight. In 1903 Louis Guyon produced at Le National [The National Amateur Athletic Association] his “Canadian drama,” *Jos Montferrand*.<sup>4</sup> Six years later, Edouard-Zotique Massicotte came out with *Athlètes canadiens-français. Recueil des exploits de force, d’endurance, d’agilité des athlètes et des sportsmen de notre race, depuis le XVIIIe siècle* [French-Canadian Athletes: An account of the feats of strength, endurance, and agility of the athletes and sportsmen of our nation, since the eighteenth century].<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising to see the Francophone media during the 1890s giving extended coverage to Louis Cyr, “the strongest man in the world,” then at the height of his glory, so that this “little French-Canadian” (he weighed over three hundred pounds!) glorified “the vitality which is inherent in the French-Canadian blood.”<sup>6</sup> This man symbolized the vigor, robustness and power of a people who in many regards doubted their own merits. He became the answer to a community that felt inferior. Joliette College hailed with pride this phenomenon, “who proved that the prodigious strength of our fathers has not quite disappeared from amongst us.”<sup>7</sup>

The Society of St. John the Baptist honored this hero several times. Therefore, in the name of the Society, Joseph-Xavier Perrault and Laurent-Olivier David organized an evening’s entertainment for January 21, 1891 “together with all the athletic clubs” to “honor in the person of Louis Cyr . . . he who represents to the greatest acclaim the physical strength of our race.” The notice added, “At a time when the vitality of the French games are placed in doubt on the European continent, it is left to a Canadian of French background. . . [to] prove that at least in America, French blood has not degenerated.”<sup>8</sup>

Students from the University of Laval at Montreal and the Victoria School of Medicine accompanied the “Canadian Hercules” with flags and “music leading the way” to Queen’s Hall where a celebration took place.” Among those in the immense crowd who were in attendance at the presentation of an honorary belt to the hero of the day, one could recognize Wilfrid Laurier and Honoré Mercier.<sup>10</sup> A year and a half later, “the citizens of Montreal” presented Cyr with a medal made of “solid gold.” Virtually apologizing for its appeal “to sporting instincts,” they made reference to the “republics of antiquity” who consecrated “a cult which accorded equality to physical strength and intellectual strength.”<sup>11</sup> And if this justification were not sufficient, they added the “Judaic tradition which has made of Samson a strong man sustained by God to protect the Jewish people against the tyranny of the Philistines.”<sup>12</sup> From there to making our strongmen the protectors of the French-Canadian people is but a short step. For Benjamin Sulte, Jos Montferrand “personified our race, which was then attacked and abused every day by the foreigners who wanted to reduce us to the level of the pariahs of India.”<sup>13</sup> In the 1890s the feats of Louis Cyr in Canada, Great Britain, France, and the United States were cause for an immense pride among his compatriots.<sup>14</sup>

Recognition of Cyr’s merit by foreigners raised his prestige among his own people. Let us emphasize that Richard K. Fox, the New York proprietor of the *National Police Gazette* and promoter of various sporting events, considered Cyr to be the strongest man in the world.<sup>15</sup> We might add that “the press in England and the United States is full of prodigious feats of our fellow countryman.”<sup>16</sup> At the same time, the name of Horace Barre appeared in the firmament of strongmen.<sup>17</sup> To this latter can be added the names of Pierre Cyr — Louis’s brother, Dollard Regimbal, J. P. Poitevin, Émile and Louis Robillard, and M. Brosseau who were discussed from time to time in the sporting chronicles.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to stimulating nationalistic feelings, strongman contests could earn sizeable financial benefits for their promoters. It is therefore not surprising to see the proprietors of Sohmer Park, Royal Park, and of the National Monument hosting such events.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> George F. Jowett, *The Strongest Man That Ever Lived* (Philadelphia: Milo Pub. Co., 1927), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Landry, “Nos hommesforts d’ André-Napoléon Montpetit,” *Dictionnaire des oeuvres littéraires du Québec*. (Montreal: Fides, 1978) 1: 526-527.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Suite, *Joseph Montferrand* (Montreal: Camyre et Braseau, 1884), 48. There was a new. revised edition of this book in

1899. **[Translator's note:** Although he actually existed (he lived from 1802-1864) Joseph Montferrand became a semi-mythical figure to many French-Canadians. Many fantastic deeds have been ascribed to him over the years; most of these feats demonstrated his superiority over his English-speaking Protestant neighbors. He was a boxer of great talent and particularly enjoyed beating Anglo Saxon opponents.

Other stories are more difficult to credit. For instance, Montferrand was supposedly so tall and limber that he could jump up and plant his footprint on the distant ceiling of a tavern. Another story tells of his victory over a crowd of "Shiners" or Irish Protestants who attempted to ambush him on a bridge over the Ottawa River. They were all soundly thrashed after Jos picked up an Irishman by the feet and swung him around at the

height of his career. Montferrand's deeds improved with the telling and he acquired a Paul Bunyanish persona. Known as "Big Joe Mufferaw" by the English, and it was said that he combed his hair with a pine tree and dug the Rideau Canal by dragging his axe behind him. A more accurate account appears in *Les Hommes Forts du Québec de Jos. Montferrand & Louis Cyr* by Ben Weider and E. Z. Massicotte (Trois-Pistoles: Editions Trois- Pistoles, 1999) 69-78.]

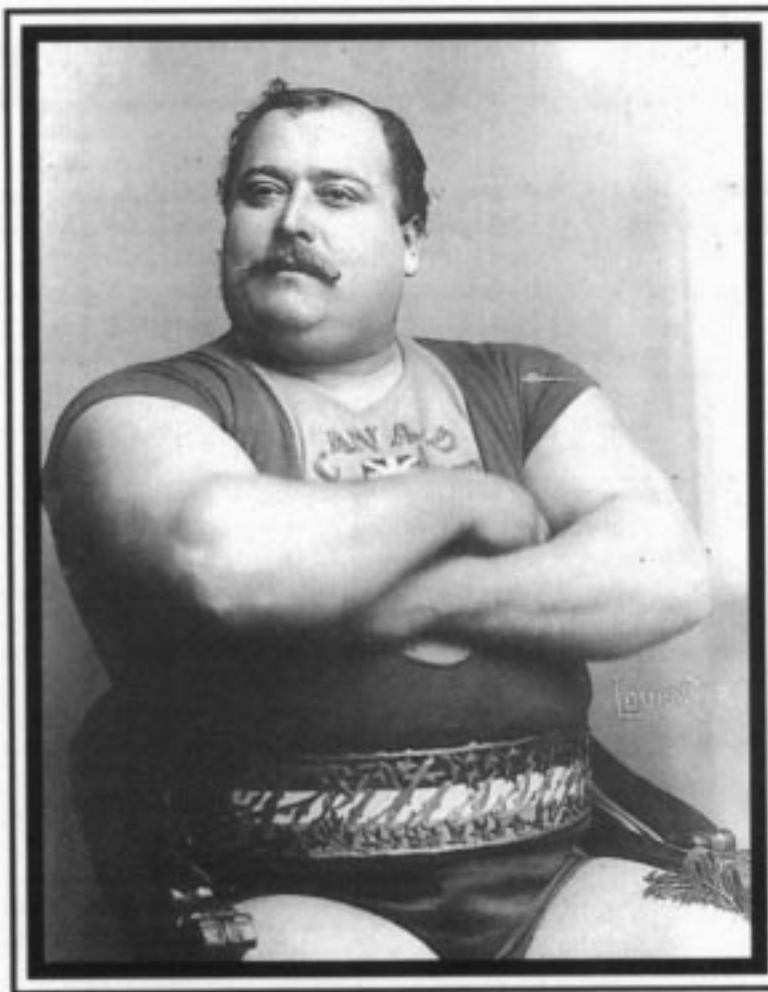
<sup>4</sup> *Dictionnaire des oeuvres littéraires du Québec* (Montreal: Fides, 1980) 2: 732-733.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *La Patrie*, 27 January 1891, 3.

<sup>7</sup> *La Patrie*, 27 October 1892, 2.

<sup>8</sup> *La Presse*, 22 & 27 January 1891, p. 3; *La Patrie*, 22 January 1891, 4; 27 January 1891, 3. This fear of seeing "French blood" degenerate was repeated as a *leitmotiv* in the newspapers of the time. **[Translator's note:** The extraordinary Joseph-Xavier Perrault was born in Quebec City on May 27, 1836, and after spending his youth in Canada, he left for further schooling in France and England. When he



Louis Cyr, the Canadian Hercules, as he looked at the height of his career.

Photo courtesy David P. Webster

This is from a richly illustrated page of text which occupies the entire first page entitled "Strongmen Yesterday and Today." Jos Montferrand, Grenache, and Louis Cyr are compared to Samson, Hercules, Milo of Crotona, etc.

<sup>13</sup> *La Presse*, 3 August 1891, 4.

**[Translator's note:** Cyr never performed in France.]

<sup>15</sup> *La Presse*, 3 January 1891, 4; 19 November 1891, 1; 27 June 1893, 3; 10 April 1894, 5; 11 April 1894, 5; and 19 June 1894, 6. For Richard K. Fox, see Steven A. Riess, *City Games: The Evolution of Urban Society and the Rise of Sports* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 72, 172-173.

<sup>16</sup> *La Presse*, 24 January 1891, 8.

<sup>17</sup> *La Presse*, 26 December 1891, 4; 23 January 1892, 1; 13 August 1894, 6; and 29 September 1894, 7.

<sup>18</sup> *La Patrie*, July 23, August 3 & 7, 1894. *La Presse*, 3 August 1894, 4; & 7 August 1894, 5.

returned, he was appointed Agricultural Secretary for Lower Canada, and in 1863 he was elected to Parliament. Despite his opposition to Quebec's joining the Canadian confederation, he rose to prominence in both provincial and federal circles. This ardent Quebec nationalist was also a dynamic promoter of sport, and he was one of the founders of the first gymnastics organization in Montreal, the Société Nationale de Gymnastique. His story is told in detail on pages 55-58 in *Emparons-Nous du Sport*. Laurent-Olivier David was a prominent sportsman and honorary president of the Montreal Lacrosse Club.]

<sup>9</sup> *La Patrie*, 24 January 1891, 4; and 27 January 1891, 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* **[Translator's note:** Sir Wilfrid Laurier was Canada's first Francophone Prime Minister, serving from 1896-1911. Louis-Honore Mercier (1840-1894) was a French Canadian nationalist politician,

<sup>11</sup> *La Presse*, 6 August 1892, 2; & 8 August 1892, 4.

<sup>12</sup> *La Presse*, 1 April 1893, 1.