

French Soccer: Racism Free (Except For The Ways In Which It Is Not)



Blanc on the left, Blaquart on the right.

Two weeks ago, French website Mediapart [released a report](#) accusing members of the French Football Federation's National Technical Board of racial discrimination. The site asserted that the board conspired to limit the number of young French players with dual citizenship in the French Colonial areas of North Africa.

On Tuesday, France's Sports Minister, **Chantal Jouanno**, who absolved French national team coach **Laurent Blanc** of racism, saying only a few members of the board discussed the plan and no one acted on it.

You'll pardon me if I don't let this sleeping dog lie.

Mediapart got hold of a recording from the November 2010 presentation proposing the limit of young talent from training in well known facilities around the country responsible for many of France's previous players. The plan has since been called an unfortunate misspeak that, although tactless, did not break any laws. But it isn't just the quota that sent alarm bells a-ringing, it was also the members in attendance during this presentation, namely Blanc and **Francois Blaquart**, the newly designated president of the National Technical Board who proposed the quota in the first place.

In the two weeks since Mediapart released its article, the details of the plan and the reasoning behind it have been divided into two points of view: Discriminatory and "Chill Out, That's Not What I Meant." We'll start with the

1. First, the flash point; Blaquart's proposition.
2. Blaquart (which I am choosing to pronounce as "Black Heart") told those in attendance during its initial presentation in November 2010 that the proposition "must not be said."
3. France's Under-21 coach **Erick Mombaerts** said that two of the country's most successful clubs (Olympique de Marseille and Olympique Lyonnais) have already started their own quota system before Blaquart burped up his proposal.
4. Blanc admits to having said that it was necessary to limit the number of French players with a second nationality and who "leave to play in North African or African teams." The FSM absolved Blanc of any discrimination, due largely to such comments only being "on the edge of racism," according to Jouanno.
5. Blanc credited the world football champion Spanish for having said "we don't have a problem, we have no blacks," upon winning the title.

I'll get to the "Chill Out, That's Not What I Meant" section soon, but a couple thoughts first:

How likely is it that anyone connected with the Spanish National Team said anything like what Blanc claims? While an entire country revels in a momentous victory, someone connected to the team hits pause on the confetti party and credits the whole shebang on the lack of black people? That's like someone from the 1988 49ers claiming to have won the Super Bowl because **Lawrence Taylor** *wasn't* on the roster. Interviewer, "Hey Beyoncé, congratulations on your Grammy for best album! How do you feel?" Beyoncé, "Great! I made the whole record without ever having to use a flute!" If it sounds like a ridiculous claim, it's because it's a ridiculous claim; but a claim Blanc was nevertheless excused for allegedly making.

Blaquart repeatedly hung his hat on the claim that the quota was not meant to exclude races. It was meant to rededicate the team to a different type of player. What differences, you're wondering? Instead of "large, strong and powerful," the team hoped to shift toward "intelligence." Yup. There it is. It's just not a thinly-veiled case of racism until someone ponies up the "we need smart players" meme. Are there no smart players in Africa? 'Cause it could just be that the smart players are all joining other national teams.

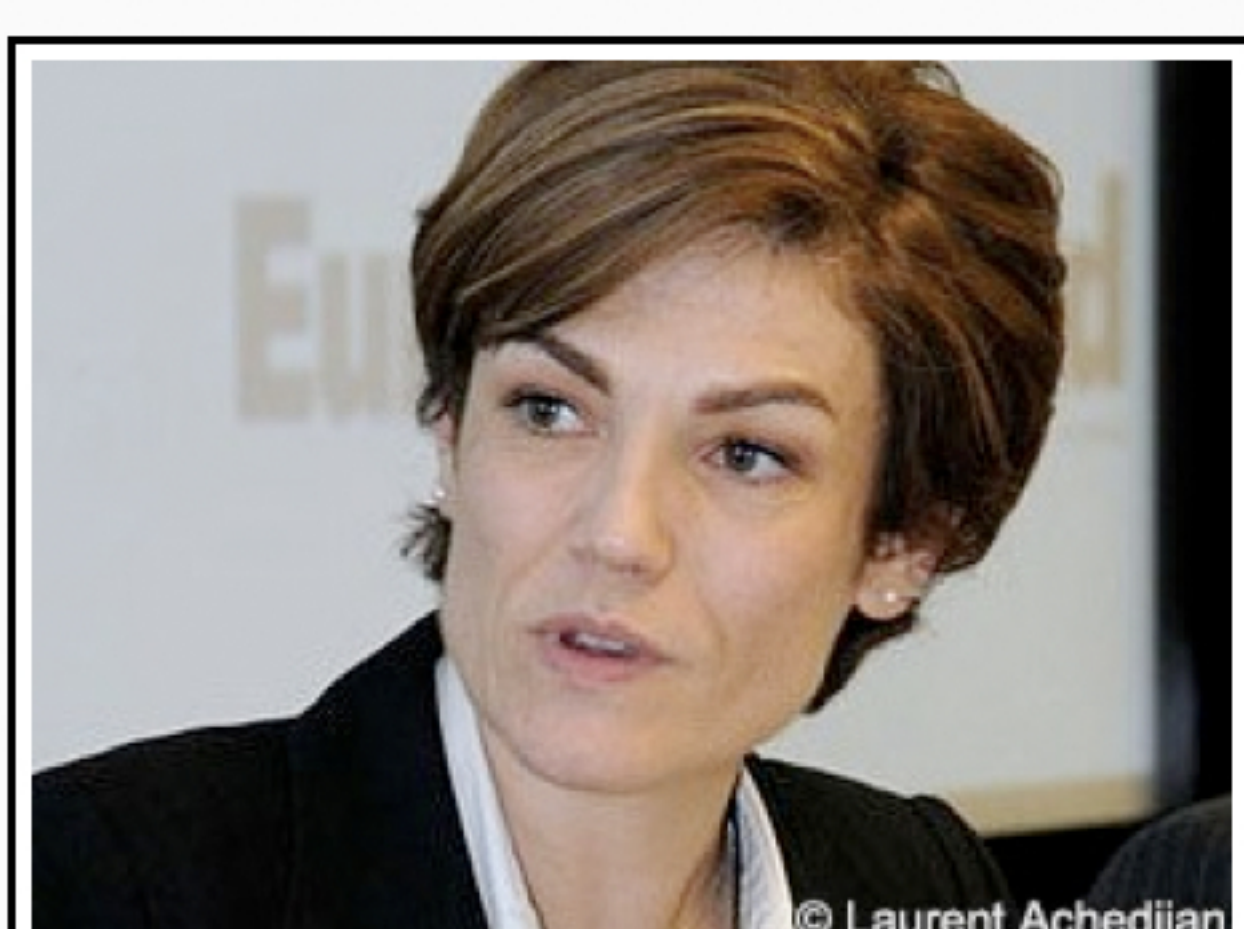
Dude, chill out. That's not what they meant. (See? I told you we'd get to it.)

Many reports have pointed out that several members of France's 1998 championship squad have defended Blanc, most notably **Zinedine Zidane**, **Christophe Dugarry**, **Marcel Desailly**, **Bixente Lizarazu** and World Cup winning coach **Aime Jacquet** - all character witnesses but Desailly, you'll notice, are white. It's also been pointed out the number of players who train with the French and play for someone else's national team. It's understandable for a country not to want to innovate weapons for countries with which they'll eventually be at war. Frankly, it's entirely likely that long before November 2010, members of the FFF were searching for ways to cultivate national loyalty or, at least, safe guard against players abandoning France. But where there's smoke, there is almost always fire. In this case, there are already some flecks of fire licking the underside of the door.

Minister Jouanno spent about 10 days with members of the French Football Federation and cleared Blanc of racial discrimination.

"There is nothing to suggest that Laurent Blanc in any way gave his support to discriminatory actions," she said at Tuesday's press conference. "The subject was brought up in an awkward and uncalled for manner. It was alluded to in a manner which bordered on racist but there was no project to establish quotas."

So that's that. Blanc's Spanish National Team quote? You misunderstood him. The desire to limit players of dual nationality? It was just talk, nothing was enacted. And what about anyone other than Blanc? What about Blaquart, who allegedly created this plan and told everyone in attendance to keep mum about it? Jouanno criticized his comportment a little, but nothing more as of the publication of this piece. Even Jouanno herself, who claimed that there is nothing to suggest Blanc supported discriminatory actions (except for the things no one is refuting he said), has spent her recent free time eating Lance Armstrong's lunch because she believes he's used performance enhancing drugs and needs to come clean (pun!) about it. So where's the nothing discriminatory stance there? Armstrong hasn't been found guilty of anything (yet). The only throughline to Jouanno's behavior in both situations are that in both instances she's siding with the side most supportive of France.



Chantal Jouanno

The most damning suggestion that something isn't squared with this story is Blaquart's response to it. On April 27, the day before Mediapart published its report, it contacted Blaquart and asked him to respond to the allegations about to be leveled on him. His response was as follows:

"If you prove to me that this has been put in writing, that you have it, that it has been made available to you or that someone is a witness to what you say, I am prepared to hear your questions. But in no case has this been discussed in an institutional way, or in an official way, or in writing, or in reports. That's all. Now when people talk, I don't know, they can take percentages or they can talk about other things. In all discussions there are positions that can be considered as excessive, that is the point of any debate. But in no instance has any decision emerged from any such discussions."

Blaquart could have stifled this story. He had the opportunity. It was right there. He could have said, "no, it's not true." He didn't say that. He said he'd answer questions if there was proof. He said it was not discussed *in an institutional way* (something we already knew and of which he was not being accused). He said no decisions emerged. He never denied the allegations. If Blanc is off the hook, Blaquart really shouldn't be. He wields the most power on the board, allegedly introduced the plan in the first place and doesn't deny doing so.

Speaking of which, Mombaerts said in response to the allegations Mediapart rattled away, "No, there is no question of quotas for the moment."

For the moment? For the moment.

Look, this is one cranky blogger's opinion, but any time you have some organizational figureheads claiming racist-sounding changes are not racist because they are a) stylistic in nature, b) organizationally loyal in nature, or c) mutiny avoiding in nature, you can bet it's very little of any of those things and very much about race.

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