
THE NEW “YOUTH FOUNTAIN” OF ROMANIA: HOW TENNIS OVERTOOK GYMNASTICS AS THE PREMIER JUVENILE SPORT OF THE COUNTRY

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***Abstract:** Starting with the 1976 Montreal Olympic Games, which saw then 14-year-old Nadia Comăneci book her place in the history of sport with the first perfect 10 ever recorded, gymnastics became a national craze in Romania, where thousands of young girls, as little as 3, would flock the Deva training complex in Transylvania, in a bid to become “the new Nadia”. Following the Romanian Revolution in 1989, gymnastics remained at the fore of sport in a society marred by corruption and poverty, acting as a unique springboard to stardom for disadvantaged youth from all over the country, second only to football prestige-wise. However, after peaking in the early 2000s, Romanian gymnastics eventually dwindled. We argue that this reverse in the history of the sport in Romania and its sharp drop in youth appeal come down not only to falling standards or the steady “bankruptcy” of the Communist-inherited sports system, but also to a change in mentality and the emergence of a new socio-economic class which embraced tennis as a positional good. Interest in the sport is today at an all time high thanks to the exploits of Simona Halep in particular, making tennis the new “youth fountain” of Romania.*

***Keywords:** gymnastics, juvenile sport, tennis, Nadia Comăneci, Simona Halep*

Introduction

A diagram found in “*L’enfant et le sport*” by Marc Durand (1987: 15) puts the minimum age of initiation in the sport of gymnastics (in the USA) at 3, and the median age at 8. Meanwhile, for tennis, ages were 8 and 14, respectively. Accordingly, it would seem that gymnastics is a more natural fit for children, better suiting the development of what Gallahue (1982: 131) defined as fundamental motricity (from 2 to 6-7 years), while

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tennis falls in line, based on these numbers alone, with the sporting motricity phase (from 6-7 years old). Yet although research tends to support and promote the virtues of gymnastics from an early age, the decline of gymnastics – a much-beloved sport during Communism – in the cultural preferences of Romanian parents and children alike, and its dethronement by tennis, witnessed in the past two decades, can only startle and call for examination. The goal ahead is to prove that major societal and economic changes, more importantly leading to the creation of a class *habitus* by an emerging new elite in Romanian society, made tennis the darling of Romanians “looking for a sport”.

Gymnastics in Romania

A popular saying in Romania states that everyone is an expert in football and in politics (Dragotă, 2005: 5; Fircă, Fircă, 2009: 96; Kocsis, 2006: 73). It used to be the case with gymnastics too. Nowadays, everyone seems to be a tennis pundit. Gymnastics and tennis both have tradition in Romanian sport, dating back to the start of the 20th century. Tennis was imported to Romania by youngsters coming back to the country after studying abroad (Viziru, 1998: 9; Popa, 2013: 176-178) first as a leisure activity, and ultimately becoming a sport of the elite. Interestingly, gymnastics is rooted in physical education, introduced in the curriculum of the Wallachian school of „Sf. Sava” back in 1776 (Giurescu, 1971: 99; Popa, 2013: 79-80).

But modern, artistic gymnastics is a different story. Incidentally, a story in the January 1999 issue of *International Gymnast* magazine, a monthly publication edited in Oklahoma, USA, glowingly covered the state of Romanian junior gymnastics under the headline “*Onești – Romania’s fountain of youth*”. It is therefore poignant that, 21 years later, we explore the apparent collapse of one of the most cherished Romanian sports, while asking if tennis jumped at the chance and took over the vacated seat.

While (recent developments notwithstanding, i.e. Simona Halep’s successes) both sports have registered their most celebrated triumphs and heroes under Communist rule (Riordan et al., 2003), they could not be any more different: gymnastics, both during the Cold War years and after the Revolution in 1989, entertained the rags-to-riches narrative, with which it lured the most gifted, and most impoverished young talents in Romania to the “medal factory” of Deva, a state-of-the-art, centralized, draconian training complex. Tennis, on the other hand, although gaining many plaudits thanks to great players such as Ilie Năstase, Ion Țiriac and Virginia Ruzici, never quite took off with Romanians in Communism: other popular sports (football, handball) were also booming, but ideology played its part too, with tennis inherently branded a “bourgeois sport” (Găitan, Capellos, 2014; Noble, Watkins, 2003), an elitist pastime unlikely to stir millions, to gain State support and funding like football or gymnastics.

“We want a future for our children”

The January 1999 issue of *International Gymnast* is notable not only for the detailed reporting of the technical achievements and prowess of junior Romanian female gymnasts, one year and a half before one of the most successful Olympics in the history of Romanian sport (with 6 medals coming from gymnastics, 3 of which golden, 2 silver,

1 bronze). The article also includes a map of Romanian gymnastics training power centers at the time: no less than 11 cities all over the country are included. “Most [national] junior team members are recruited when they are 12 and stay in Onești for two years before moving to Deva. Not all the girls make it to Deva. (...) As the feeder of the national team, Onești is the ideal place for talent-spotting. Indeed, gymnasts who want to go to Deva have to pass through Onești first. In short, Onești is where the future of Romanian gymnastics is prepared”, the article stated (Jellema, 1999: 29-33).

The Romania of 1999 was not the happiest spot under the sun. At the very start of the year, the country was crippled by social unrest, with images of the miners in Jiului Valley marching towards the capital city of Bucharest and throwing huge boulders in the path of security forces (Martin, Cristesco-Martin, 1999). The footage was broadcasted all over the world by major news outlets such as CNN and Euronews. One banner at a protest held by disgruntled miners, who were facing the closure of the mines and losing their jobs, read: “We want a future for our children!”.

Yet few sports in Romania could truly provide a future for children at the time: chief among them were football and artistic gymnastics, which had long been springboards to stardom and, not least, to financial prosperity, in a country where inflation was at a staggering level of 45.8% in 1999 (Murgescu, 2010: 467). A popular sport in the 70’s and the 80’s, tennis was in a lacklustre state, with a few notable exceptions like Irina Spîrlea, Ruxandra Dragomir and Andrei Pavel. Junior tennis in particular was ailing: the high cost of logistics, travelling and playing in international competitions, with virtually no support from the State (as opposed to gymnastics), meant few children had a sporting chance to play tennis. This applied not only to professional playing: tennis courts in the country were scarce, apparel costs and court renting fees were high, therefore only a handful of privileged kids from well-off Romanian families could afford the luxury of picking up a racket.

It is important to note that the insights and statistics this article provides concern artistic gymnastics, the Olympic sport which has won over millions of Romanians (and foreign fans alike) during the last decades, and not aerobic gymnastics, a discipline which as of March 2020 is not included in the Olympics. Moreover, artistic gymnastics, the most decorated Romanian sport at the Summer Games in history (with 72 medals as of March 2020), still favoured by the State’s sport budget (Ursescu, 2019), owes its fame primarily to women’s gymnastics, the traditional “supplier” of medals and one of the best sporting “exports” of Romania. Consequently, as the sources on Romanian women’s gymnastics are vastly richer, this analysis (statistics aside, which cover both genders) will document to a much greater extent the rise and fall of Romanian gymnastics by repeatedly referring to famous female gymnasts.

Drawing findings from the media of the past two decades, memoirs and statements by the gymnasts and coaches, oral history interviews, sport anthologies and official Romanian sport yearbooks, this paper tries to trace the root cause for the fall of gymnastics and the rise of tennis in the last decade, in post-Communist Romania.

Building the legacy

The reasons young people in Communist Romania embraced gymnastics were a combination of ideological imbueement, glory hunt and freedom mirage in a tightly controlled society, on the part of both parents and children. Being a top gymnast, sacrificing your youth and health aside (Caine et al., 2001), allowed young boys and (especially) girls to bypass a life of – more often than not, even more so in the 1980’s – hardships and become a member of the national sports elite, which had many perks in comparison with the life of regular people: travelling all around the world, having the chance of gaining glory and earning a good living, and last but not least becoming an icon of Romania.

When the Communist regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu decided to make artistic gymnastics one of its primary cultural weapons in the Cold War era, a soft power tool which would enhance the status of the country on the world stage, culminating with an all-round training complex at Deva, in 1978 (Niemelä, 2015), a chance at glory and the globetrotting side of the discipline enticed the parents of the girls who were ultimately selected to the national team.

The man chosen for the job was Bela Karoly, one of the top gymnastics coaches in Romania. As his recollection goes, he and his wife, Marta, dreamed of an utopia: creating an experimental school of gymnastics in Onești, a newly-built industrial city of some 35.000 people (in 1966, up by 216% from 1956). No less than 4000 children were tested by the duo in what was, significantly, described as a “raid” (Almanahul Sportul ’76: 7).

The establishment of a major school for women’s gymnastics in Onești, Eastern Romania, in the late 60’s, would create a new breed of gymnasts (with Comăneci as flag-bearer) under the Karolys and would have far-reaching consequences not only for Romanian sport, but also for the international stage. What made the Onești experimental school of gymnastics stand out was the fact that “it focused on early specialization in gymnastics as a revolutionary method that changed women's gymnastics in the 1970’s. This meant that coaches recruited young children, ages five or six, so that by the age of thirteen or fourteen they would be able to compete at the same level (or even higher) as other world-class gymnasts” (Wood, 2010: 137).

It would take a few years for the Onești School, heavily supported by the State, to start producing champions. But the investments and the wait were well worth: in 1976, not yet fourteen year-old Nadia Comăneci would rewrite sports history and win Olympic gold with a perfect 10 (Barker-Ruchti, 2009; Clément, 2017).

In 1978, Karoly was tasked with building a new “nursery” of gymnastics at Deva, “a center that would surpass Onești’s facilities and that would become the official Olympic Center for training women gymnasts” (Wood, 2010: 186). The “medal factory” in Deva lived up to its reputation for generations to come. By and large, the 1990s and the best part of the 2000s were very succesful for Romanian gymnastics, with 36 Olympic medals won across 20 years, between Barcelona 1992 and London 2012, the last Romanian collective participation.

Yet, with the Nadia myth looming large and putting a heavy burden on the shoulders of the newcomers, the legacy of the gymnastic schools in Onești and Deva was destined to unravel. The 2016 Olympic Games were the first, since 1968, not to feature the Romania women's gymnastics team. The boys did not qualify either, also for the first time since 1984 (Ștefan, 2016). It was called "*the darkest hour of Romanian gymnastics*", yet the future did not hold anything brighter. In April 2019, an article by Romanian daily *Adevărul* with the headline "*Disaster in gymnastics! Since when Romania hasn't been this low in the sport it dominated for decades*", lamented the complete lack of medals at the European Gymnastics Championship in Poland, a negative first for the Romanian delegation.

Confronted with an unprecedented crisis, the Romanian Federation of Gymnastics started a national selection programme in December 2017 titled "*Come with us into the land of champions?*", which targeted new talents for Romanian gymnastics at grassroots level (4-6 years old) (Romgym, 2017), whose benefits are yet to be reaped. Its stated goal is to "relaunch Romanian gymnastics and take it back into the world elite of this sport". In justifying its actions, the Romanian Federation identified four major causes for the decline of gymnastics in Romania: underfinancing gymnastics at children and junior levels; the dramatic decline in registered gymnasts; a massive exodus of experts; a drop in professionalism and involvement by technicians working in gymnastics clubs, due to lacking pay. These thoughts were echoed by Romanian radio journalist Adrian Fetecău, a witness of six Olympic Games with Romania, who commented in 2016 that "the disaster in Romanian gymnastics is down to many people, and mirrors the society as a whole" (Fetecău, 2016: 111).

In a bid to secure answers to the question of the decline of Romanian gymnastics, I interviewed (anonymously, as per his request) one of the most reputed sports journalists in the country, who has witnessed the many successes, but also the fall of Romanian gymnastics in the last third decades. He spoke of years of bad management at the Romanian Gymnastics Federation and the mass exodus of Romanian gymnastics coaches abroad, yes – yet, he said that the reason why young gymnasts are scarce is hardly institutional, but societal and cultural: to put it bluntly, it's the lack of motivation "now, when you have the Internet". According to the interviewee, gymnastics doesn't fit well with the value system of the millennial generation:

"Girls nowadays don't enroll in gymnastics anymore because it is a tough sport, and people don't want their girl to be beaten by coaches, as was the custom in the Romanian schools of gymnastics. Now, with the Internet and social media, there is no motivation anymore. Why sacrifice for years, why hold back from having a normal life, from eating what you want, when you want to? There is no «raw material» left for this kind of task."

Mirroring the comments of Dominique Moceanu from 2008 to LA Times (Pucin, 2008), the interviewee said:

"After 1976, Karoly was a monster, a coach of extreme toughness. His successor at the Romania national team, Octavian Bellu, had a dictum: «You can't achieve greatness in gymnastics with tenderness and pats on the back» The system worked until circa 2004, and then it shattered into small parts. Years ago, in the 1980s and even during the 90s, you had this extraordinary impetus of going out of the country - there were tournaments which were held as far as Hawaii. Girls from

poor families came to Deva, got selected and then had everything catered for, were supported entirely by the system. There was also the mirage of the Olympics where, if you ended up with a medal, you won a consistent annuity. To receive 2-3000 euros per month, for the rest of your life, it's not bad, is it? Today, such incentives don't work anymore. How can you tempt a youngster with going abroad, when he takes four or five vacations per year, with his parents? He won't be impressed by this type of rhetoric. That's why we won't qualify for the 2020 Olympics either. Maybe we'll only have an individual gymnast, like in Rio” (Oral interview, given anonymously over the phone, to the author, in August 2019).

Gymnastics – passing into oblivion?

It might be that we are only skimming the surface of the problem and that some data analysis is required. In order to get a clearer picture of the overall situation in Romanian gymnastics and try to verify via objective indicators the appeal of the sport to the younger generation and their parents, precious informations regarding the decline of children's gymnastics can be traced in the *Yearbook of Romanian Sport*.

In 1995, things looked bright for Romanian gymnastics. There were 41 gymnastics sections across the country and 180 coaches (Lăncrăjan, 1995: 282). No less than 1896 gymnasts were enrolled, children providing the critical mass (1251, or 65.98%). Boys (517) accounted for less than half, while little girls (734) were the most drawn to the sport, of all age groups.

Between 1998 and 2002, the number of registered child gymnasts shrank to almost a third (from 1251 to 473, a dramatic decrease of 62.91%). Boys were hit the most, enrollment dropping from 517 to just 123 in this interval, while the number of registered girls also halved, from 734 to 350 in four years. The number of coaches increased, if only by a small margin.

In the Olympic year 2008, the country had 732 gymnasts, with 319 coming from the youth system (43.57%). In 2012, the year of the London Olympics, Romania had 779 gymnasts at all age levels, 456 (58.53%) of whom were children, again, the girls (329) greatly outnumbering the boys (127). A year later, with 130 coaches and 696 gymnasts to choose from, the children provided the better part (357 gymnasts or 51.29%). Finally, in the Olympic year 2016, there were 34 registered clubs, 916 gymnasts and 147 coaches, with 383 children (91 boys vs. 292 girls) representing 41.81% of the total roster of gymnasts.

For the last ten years analyzed, some clarification is needed. At its lowest number during the decade, registered in 2006, the children's gymnastics system in Romania provided only 281 gymnasts. At its highest value, in 2012, it had 456 children to choose from, as can be seen in Figure 1. The number of young girls coming to the gyms constantly outnumbered the boys (with the median ratio being 3 to 1).

Figure 1: Evolution of Romanian juvenile gymnastics, 1995-2016

Year	Affiliated clubs	Year-over-year change	Registered child gymnasts	YOY	Boys	YOY	Girls	YOY	Active coaches (overall)	YOY
1995	41	N/A	1251	N/A	517	N/A	734	N/A	180	N/A
1998	41	N/A	1251	N/A	517	N/A	734	N/A	180	N/A
1999	47	+14.63%	456	-63.54%	194	-62.47%	262	-64.30%	185	+2.77%
2000	38	-40.42%	583	+27.85%	120	-38.14%	463	-76.71%	184	-0.54%
2001	47	+67.85%	473	-18.86%	123	+2.5%	350	-24.40%	183	-0.54%
2002	47	no change	473	no change	123	no change	350	no change	183	no change
2006	52	N/A	281	N/A	118	N/A	163	N/A	151	N/A
2007	47	-9.61%	397	-41.28%	138	+16.94%	259	+58.89%	160	+5.96%
2008	35	-25.53%	319	-19.64 %	94	-31.88%	225	-13.12%	164	+2.5 %
2009	48	+37.14%	335	+5.01%	109	+15.95%	226	+0.44%	163	-0.60%
2010	47	-2.08%	426	+27.16 %	180	+65.13%	246	+8.84%	143	-12.26%
2011	39	-17.02%	368	-13.61%	88	-51.11%	280	+13.82%	157	+9.79%
2012	36	-7.69%	456	+23.91%	127	+44.31%	329	+17.5 %	147	-6.36%
2013	32	-11.11%	357	-21.71%	102	-19.68%	255	-22.49%	130	-11.56%
2014	34	+6.25%	422	+18.20%	85	-16.66%	337	+32.15%	158	+21.53%
2015	41	+20.58%	452	+7.10 %	102	+20%	350	+3.85%	149	-5.69%
2016	34	+2.04%	383	-15.26%	91	-10.78%	292	-16.57%	147	-1.34%

Source: Author's compilation. Data source: *Anuarul Sportului (Yearbook of Romanian Sport)*. Green indicates highest value / greatest increase, while red indicates low-est value / sharpest fall

Preliminary findings (Gymnastics)

Romanian gymnastics has lived a golden age of innovation and continuous success starting from the late 60's until the 2010's, when the legacy of the Communist era, interlinked with the attraction of the general public to the sport, had by now waned and the draught began to manifest itself. A great deal of the appeal of gymnastics towards the youth was owed to a centralized training system which selected young, talented and often disadvantaged girls and raised them into superstars of world gymnastics, providing them with the financial and symbolic perks of this status. However, in post-Communist Romania, as fewer children embraced gymnastics, medals became more and more rare, condemning gymnastics to a peripheral standing. According to various sources, it is not necessarily that State support is lacking; the Romanian Gymnastics Federation budget, for instance, was up by 25% in 2019 (Ursescu, 2019). The times have changed and millennials (born circa 1981-1996) would not put up anymore (either for them or their children) with the famously spartan rigours of gymnastics and the

harsh treatments of the coaches that in the past had shaped great champions such as Comănesci. Tennis, a more elitistic and “leisurely” sport, would capitalize on this predicament.

Tennis in Romania

Tennis has a history of more than a century in Romania, starting as an imported elitistic pastime at the beginning of the 20th century (Voia, 1979: 70), growing roots in the interwar period and then being appropriated and instrumentalised by the State, along with other major sports – gymnastics included – as a propaganda tool, although not to the same extent, in the Communist era. Benefitting from a beautiful crop of players such as Ilie Năstase, Ion Țiriac, Virginia Ruzici and Mariana Simionescu, tennis has captured the attention of Romanians in the 70’s and the 80’s, when Romania constantly vied with the superpowers of tennis for Davis Cup and Fed Cup glory (Breznik, 2015; Vanc, 2014). Yet for all the tradition, Romania has a single Olympic medal in tennis, won in 2016 in men’s doubles, tennis courts are, when not scarce, almost impossible to enter due to high costs (László, 2017) and until a decade or so ago, tennis was lagging behind the more “established” sports, like football and handball.

Introduced to Romania probably 15 years after its inception in Britain (Voia, 1979: 71), with its first clubs consequently opening in 1898 or 1899, probably by foreign officials working in Galați (Galatz Tennis Club) and Bucharest (Tennis Raqueta), tennis was at first the monopoly of wealthy individuals, of boyars and aristocrats, much like golf (Majuru, 2011: 169; Țifrea, Roșculeț, 2018). It took a while for society to adopt it as a sport of interest. In 1906, the first major club, Doherty, opened in Bucharest for diplomats and members of the high class. In 1909, the mountain resort of Sinaia hosted the „Campionatul Sinaiei” tournament, won by the team of the Doherty Club (Petrescu, 2000: 274).

The press reports on tennis then multiplied, helping the sport catch the eye of the Romanian public. It is important to remark that, although tennis was the stomping ground of the elite (Voia, 1979: 78) and a truly expensive hobby, it gradually loosened its grip and people from the lesser echelons were allowed to take part, such as Sabina Bărbulescu, “the daughter of the stationmaster in Sinaia”, who dominated women’s tennis from 1913 onwards (Voia, 1979: 77-78).

The First World War halted the expansion of tennis in Romanian society. The 20s, however, made up for the lost time with the successes of Nicolae Mișu, one of the first internationally renowned Romanian tennis players, a winner in Monte Carlo in 1919, and – significantly, a diplomat by trade, working at the Romanian legation in London (Cain, 2007; Petrescu, 1997, 2004). From this point on, the Romanian authorities took a closer look at tennis and timidly supported its development to other cities across the (now enlarged) country and games abroad by top Romanian players (Popa, 2013: 177). In 1924, at the first Summer Olympics to feature tennis, Romania sent a team which was pre-selected through a special contest back home (Voia, 1979: 77-78). The year 1926 saw Bucharest hosting its first Davis Cup encounter, between Romania and Italy (lost 0-5). In December 1929, the Federation of Romanian Tennis Societies was

founded – notably, one of the three of its kind in the country, along with box and chess (Țifrea, Roșculeț, 2018).

It would be lazy to believe Romanian tennis means only Simona Halep, Virginia Ruzici, Ilie Năstase and Ion Țiriac – the present, and past, icons of the game. A worthy predecessor of Halep, Magda Berescu-Rurac (1918-1995) won in 1947 the Monte Carlo tournament (Voia, 1979: 107), while triumphing in 1948-1949 in two successive editions of the U.S. Clay Court Championships. She also ranked, unofficially, 7th in the world (Voia, 1979: 98). Rurac was recognised as one of the best players to grace the tennis courts in the 1940s and the 1950s.

Playing tennis in the interwar period was, as stated previously, an elitistic endeavour, one in which money alone was not enough to guarantee admission. Indeed, the enrollment and annual taxes were steep, but social standing and the recommendation of other members of a tennis club were decisive (Voia, 1979: 98). *Gazeta Sporturilor*, writing in 1939 after a defeat in the Davis Cup at the hands of Hungary, lamented tennis' isolation in an "ivory tower": "Played for years between the Chinese walls of the Tennis-Club, (tennis) could not penetrate the masses, from where the pillars of the game arise."

From the “production line” in Communism to the DIY tennis player

Although Communism formally took over Romania in December 1947, measures to subordinate all aspects of public life were instated as early as 1945 (Păiusan et al., 2002). Under the catchphrase “All sports for the people! / Toate sporturile pentru popor!” (Massiera et al., 2013; Stoicu, 2011: 171) the propaganda machine was set in motion, “with the well-defined goal of winning as many adherents as possible” - in this case - “to playing tennis” (Voia, 1979: 104). Special exhibitions organized around the country drew important crowds. New sport organizations were set up to promote mass sport, to encourage young people and propagate tennis to the wider society .

The victories of Romanian tennis abroad helped make tennis a popular sport at home. Notably, Cristea Caralulis would play a mixed doubles final in Roland Garros in 1947 and a semifinal in the singles event, in 1948 (Voia, 1979: 110). Such feats provided new impetus (and justification) for the State to build new arenas, part of a “large action to popularize tennis” (Voia, 1979: 115). Trials were arranged for some 150 schoolboys in the capital, a preamble to an effort to “make hundreds, thousands of children to master the secrets of tennis”. Consequently, the young proletariat embraced tennis with audacity and the median age of the players dropped dramatically, to under 20 (Voia, 1979: 115).

The same pattern which worked for Romanian junior gymnasts from the 60s onwards can be traced in the story of Ion Țiriac and Ilie Năstase, two players who came later on to be associated almost symbiotically. The two players shot to fame from relatively modest backgrounds, propelled not only by their talent, but also by the favourable post-war context, in which vigorous State involvement in sport had become the norm, and the talent-spotting system was constantly recruiting new and new youth, which would

not have normally had access to tennis in a capitalist society, due to high costs and their non-aristocratic origins. The duo was state-sponsored and allowed to tour extensively all around the world, due to individual and national team commitments – privileges only elite sportsmen were allowed in a tightly controlled society. It is conceivable that their great achievements in the late 60s and 70s created national emulation among Romanian children.

The team of Țiriac and Năstase – the latter being no. 1 in the world in 1973 and a winner of the French Open and US Open (Maquirriain, 2012) – would write history for Romania, in particular their three finals in the Davis Cup (1969, 1971, 1972), all lost to the USA, marking a turning point for Romanian tennis (Năstase, Beckmann, 2006: 80-83, 130-133). While it continued the tradition of Rurac or Caralulis and beautifully promoted tennis not only abroad but also internally, to the Romanian kids, it set the bar dizzyingly high for the next generations.

In women’s tennis, the 70s and early 80s were dominated by Virginia Ruzici, alongside Mariana Simionescu and Florența Mihai. A winner at the French Open in 1978, when only 23 (Dumitriu, 2018), Ruzici played another final in Paris in 1980. Her former partner, Mariana Simionescu, better remembered as the ex-wife of the Swedish ace Bjorn Borg, was undoubtedly a fine player too. She won the 1974 junior French Open and also played the final at Wimbledon in that same year.

An interesting insight into the “production line” of Romanian junior tennis and the milestones it involved during communism is provided by the biography of Florența Mihai. She began tennis by passing through the initiation courses held at *Tânărul Dinamovist*, a “school of talents”, under the umbrella of the famed Dinamo Sports Club, a “laboratory” for future talents. She was dubbed one of the best prospects of Romanian junior tennis as part of a trio with Ruzici and Simionescu, which she confirmed by becoming the first Romanian finalist at the women’s event in Roland Garros, in 1977 (Barclay, 2017), at just 22 years of age.

After peaking in the 1970s thanks to the aforementioned names, in Grand Slams but also in the Davis Cup and Fed Cup, Romanian tennis never quite recaptured the magic of old. Still, it continued to produce in the next two decades respected players, both women (Ruxandra Dragomir, Cătălina Cristea, Irina Spârlea – no. 7 in the WTA rankings in 1997) and men (Florin Segărceanu, Adrian Voinea, Dinu Pescariu, Gabriel Trifu, Răzvan Sabău, George Cosac and the better known Andrei Pavel, Victor Hănescu etc.).

Far better than men’s tennis, however, fared women’s tennis. In the 2000s, a new generation of tennis players who would constantly reach the Top 100 WTA came to the fore. Apart from Simona Halep, a winner in the Roland Garros junior tournament in 2008, players like Sorana Cârstea, Irina Begu, Monica Niculescu or Alexandra Dulgheru also achieved prominence during this time. In May 2018, Romania had a record 6 players in the Top 100 WTA (Sport.ro, 2018), more than France or Serbia (DigiSport, 2014), two countries of great repute in the “white sport”.

Somehow counterintuitively, given the fact that substantial investment in junior tennis by Romanian tennis authorities has long been lacking (Lupu, 2013), the last five years in

Romanian tennis have been the most glory-filled since the days of Țiriac, Năstase and Ruzici. Since 2014, Constanța-born Simona Halep has played 5 Grand Slam finals (three in Roland Garros, one in Wimbledon, one at the Australian Open), winning two of them (the French Open in 2018 and Wimbledon in 2019) and becoming the most successful woman player in Romanian tennis history. In the men's game, Horia Tecău, himself a Grand Slam doubles winner, and Florin Mergea were close to winning the Olympic gold in 2016: the pair finally had to settle for silver after a dramatic final against Spain.

Although the emulation created by the successes of Simona Halep is visible, and many parents are guiding their children towards tennis, structural problems following the fall of communism meant tennis could not produce the promising youngsters it once did. It has been justly observed that, in communism, tennis – like other sports – supported top juniors from an early age, while in post-Communist Romania, playing tennis, in whatever capacity, is predominantly an individual, self-sustained, endeavour.

The growth of Romanian tennis

In a bid to understand the shift from gymnastics towards tennis in Romania during the past decades, we will again resort to numbers, using as a source the same important statistical source, the *Yearbook of Romanian Sport*, for the year 1995, and the intervals 1998-2002 and 2006-2015 (*note that for the year 2016, the Romanian Tennis Federation was not included in the Yearbook of Romanian Sport due to legal issues at the Federation. Moreover, these legal problems hampering the activity of the RTF continued up to the election of new president Ion Țiriac in the summer of 2019. Therefore, data for the interval 2013-2015 is unreliable, but was included here because it is officially sanctioned by the Yearbook of Romanian Sport*).

The first thing to notice about the official data available for this interval, in conjunction with the data analysed for gymnastics (see Figure 1) is that, at its lowest recorded value, in 2012, in the aftermath of the financial crisis, tennis in Romania still had 1977 registered child players, more than four times the highest number of gymnasts recorded for the interval 2006-2016 (incidentally, also in 2012). At its highest value, reported by the Romanian Tennis Federation, in 1999, tennis had drawn 6852 players of young age (see Figure 2), which shows the appeal the sport has over gymnastics (with a personal best of 1251 children in 1995), as does the highest number of affiliated clubs (285 in 2012 for tennis vs. 52 in 2006 for gymnastics). Furthermore, as statistics post-2012 are disputable, this doesn't take into account the *Halepmania* phenomenon (Ciuhu, 2014), which drew considerable numbers of people to a tennis court - some to watch tennis, but many to buy lessons for their children, conceivably to follow in the footsteps of Simona Halep. Of course, many of them did not enter the registers. One most recent estimate of then-president George Cosac put the number of affiliated tennis players in Romania to 3500, in 2017 (Nenciu, 2017), but that is most certainly a low estimate. "The number of unaffiliated players is much higher", Cosac said.

Figure 2: Evolution of Romanian juvenile tennis, 1995-2015

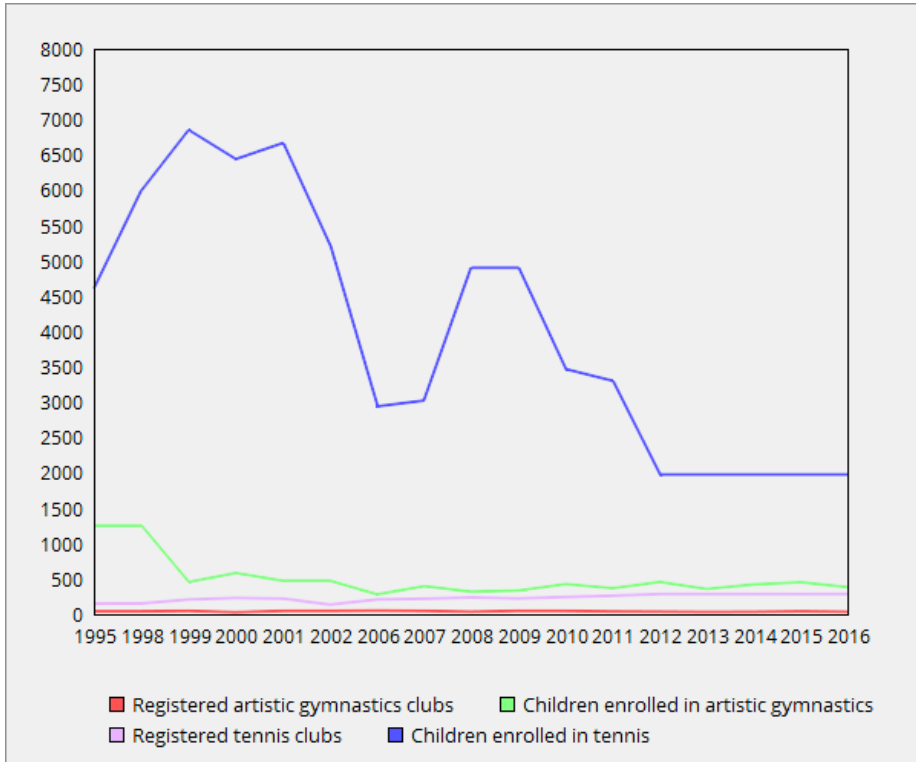
1	Year	Affiliated clubs	Year-over-year (YOY) change	Registered child tennis players	YOY	Boys	YOY	Girls	YOY	Active coaches (overall)	YOY
2	1995	150	N/A	4618	N/A	2522	N/A	2096	N/A	226	N/A
3	1998	152	N/A	5997	N/A	3312	N/A	2685	N/A	261	N/A
4	1999	208	+36.84%	6852	+14.25%	3876	+17.02%	2976	+10.83%	269	+3.06%
5	2000	230	+10.57%	6440	-6.01%	3520	-9.18%	2920	-1.88%	246	-8.55%
6	2001	220	-4.34%	6668	+3.54%	3572	+1.47%	3096	+6.02%	254	+3.25%
7	2002	136	-38.18%	5214	-21.80%	2502	-29.95%	2712	-12.40%	243	-4.33%
8	2006	208	+52.94%	2941	N/A	1639	N/A	1302	N/A	259	N/A
9	2007	219	+4.30%	3023	+2.78%	1654	+0.91%	1369	+5.14%	259	no change
10	2008	237	+8.21%	4901	+62.12%	2744	+65.90%	2157	+57.56%	259	no change
11	2009	223	-5.90%	4901	no change	2744	no change	2157	no change	259	no change
12	2010	243	+8.96%	3469	-29.21%	1967	-28.31%	1502	-30.36%	233	-10.03%
13	2011	262	+7.81%	3303	-4.78%	1861	-5.38%	1442	-3.99%	259	+11.15%
14	2012	285	+8.77%	1977	-40.14%	1140	-38.74%	837	-41.95%	258	-0.38%
15	2013	285	no change	1977	no change	1140	no change	837	no change	258	no change
16	2014	285	no change	1977	no change	1140	no change	837	no change	258	no change
17	2015	285	no change	1977	no change	1140	no change	837	no change	258	no change

Source: Author's compilation. Please note that due to legal problems, data provided by the Romanian Tennis Federation between 2013-2015 needs to be treated as unreliable, as it mirrors the last data showing any fluctuation, in 2012. Data source: Anuarul Sportiv (Yearbook of Romanian Sport). Green indicates highest value / greatest increase, while red indicatest lowest value / sharpest fall

A nation hungry for sport (just not any kind of sport)

Various polls and public opinion barometers realised in Romania in recent years tend to reflect the gradual transition towards tennis by the Romanian public.

Figure 3: Juvenile artistic gymnastics vs. juvenile tennis in Romania, 1995-2016



Source: Author's data compilation. Data source: *Anuarul Sportiv (The Yearbook of Romanian Sport)*

That the nation was hungry for sport was evident in 2009, in a national poll, by CCSB, a sociological research company, regarding *Romanian youth and their preoccupations* (CCSB, 2009). Some interesting insights were collected when people were asked of their favourite sports. As expected, football was the preferred sport (31% first mentions, 44% total mentions). Lawn tennis got 4% first mentions and 17% total mentions, while gymnastics fared somewhat similarly, 6% first mentions and 14% total mentions (CCSB, 2009: 34). Significantly, youth aged 18-34 preferred tennis (20%) to gymnastics (5%), compared to the 18% who preferred it from the rest of the population, showing gymnastics is becoming obsolete for new generations. The researchers concluded that youth preferred lawn tennis, which was included as a “strongly growing” sport, alongside swimming and basketball, while gymnastics was branded a “passing into oblivion” sport (CCSB, 2009: 35), alongside ice skating, and scoring worst in their preferences.

In summer 2014, a new study, this time by IRES (2014), set out to discover opinions and perceptions by Romanians about sport. Notably, the Simona Halep era had just

timidly started with a French Open final, but the new generation of Romanian womens' tennis had begun to earn plaudits much earlier. When asked if they watched tennis matches, 53% of those who responded said they did it sometimes, 29% said no, while 18% said they did it, frequently. That tennis was on the rise and increasing its market share was seen when compared to football, the most beloved sport of Romanians. IRES reported that 26% watched football frequently, 38% sometimes, while 36% said no IRES (2014: 6). When cumulated for comparison, the answers proved tennis was the most appealing for hardcore and new fans alike IRES (2014: 10).

Another open question asked what the favourite sport of the answerers was. Football (35%) ranked first, gymnastics second (13%), while tennis ranked third (9%). 80% of the answerers of the IRES research had children. 17% said their children practiced sport professionally. When asked which sport, 32% mentioned football, 24% martial arts, 15% swimming, 7% basketball, 5% tennis, 2% gymnastics. Interestingly, of those whose children did not practice sport professionally, 85% said they would have liked such an occupation. Tennis was second in the ranking of desirability for children, gymnastics ranked fifth (IRES, 2014: 25).

Nadia staying strong, Halep on the rise

In the summer of 2016, IRES again researched the *Interest and attitudes towards sport and Olympics in Rio*. According to the report, the top three preferred sports of Romanians were football (35%), tennis (9%) and gymnastics (9%) (IRES, 2016: 3). Of all analyzed sports, tennis had the most occasional viewers (53%). The greatest sportsman in the history of Romania was, for 30% of people, Nadia Comăneeci, Gheorghe Hagi was second (26%), while tennis players Simona Halep and Ilie Năstase ranked joint third (6%). Most frequently watched sports competitions came from football (44%), tennis (12%) and gymnastics (11%). Gymnastics (52%), handball (35%) and tennis (25%) were most sought-after by people watching the summer Olympic Games.

Another research, operated in March 2017 at the request of the Romanian Olympic Committee by IPSOS, indicated 56% of Romanians intended to watch artistic gymnastics at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, 32% athletics, while 27% chose tennis. Commenting on the results, Alina Stepan, Managing Director Ipsos South-East Europe, said Romanian gymnastics brought Romania most Olympics medals and was a true mythology, while tennis was a mix of the memory of Năstase-Țiriac and the new generation of players, putting it in the Top 5 (COSR, 2017).

Armchair sports viewing, a national sport?

Some other valuable insights on the cultural consumption of Romanians in regard to sport can be extracted from *Special Eurobarometer 472*, according to which, views on opportunities for physical activities were least positive in Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia and Italy (European Commission, 2018: 6). More worryingly, 63% of Romanians never exercised or played sport. In addition, 51% of Romanians never engaged in other physical activities, a 15 pp increase from 2013 (European Commission, 2018: 14). Romania also had a low proportion (17%) of people likely to engage in sport or

physical activity in a park or outdoors, with Finland being the frontrunner (67%). The same *Eurobarometer* showed that sport centres were the least popular in Romania (3%), Bulgaria (4%), Greece, Lithuania and Portugal (all 5%). Respondents were least likely to use a sport club in Romania (4%), Bulgaria, Greece, Croatia, Slovakia, Hungary and Cyprus (all 5%). Romania also had the lowest proportion (2%), along with Bulgaria, of memberships at a sport club, the highest being observed in the Netherlands (27%), Denmark and Germany (both 23%).

A 2019 report by Quantix Marketing Consulting stressed that “Romanians continue to suffer in the professional arena [of sport], with few icons, few models for the young generations. Cristina Neagu has amazing performances in handball. However, she is shadowed by Halep, which continues to keep the spotlight” and was, according to the report, “the shining star of professional sports in Romania” (Quantix, 2019: 8). Furthermore, the document indicated that “the future of Romania in the international arenas is rather gloomy. Tennis seems to provide hope (not only through Halep, there are lots of high class performers there)”. While other sports, like table tennis, volleyball, rowing and – curiously – gymnastics were evoked as having great results, “the level of interest they elicit is, unfortunately, modest”.

Preliminary findings (Tennis)

According to Michel Pinchon and Monique Pinchon-Charlot, in the *small bourgeoisie*, practical individualism leads to a cult of the individual and his body (Pinchon, Pinchon-Charlot, 2009). “Meeting yourself” has become a catchy marketing *mantra* for gyms and yoga clubs alike. Meanwhile, for the *upper bourgeoisie*, sports are more often a worldly affair, which strengthens social bonds within the group. To practice sports such as tennis, yachting or hunting is to manage your social capital with high capitalization (Pinchon, Pinchon-Charlot, 2009: 133). How does that suit contemporary Romania?

The individual average gross monthly wages in Romania in June 2019 were 5127 RON / month, or 1086 euros (exchange rate 1 EUR = 4.7187 RON), an all-time high, according to the Romanian National Institute of Statistics (INSSE, 2019). In January 2005, the month which brought about the fiscal denomination, average gross wages stood at 951 RON. Net wages also more than quadrupled since then, from 723 RON in January 2005 to 3142 RON in June 2019 (INSSE, 2019). Statistically, Romanians experienced in the recent past probably the most prosperous economic period in their country’s history. However, monthly spending on food, utilities, clothing plus beverages and cigarettes comprised 66.7% of the total expenditures. Leisure – to which sport can be ascribed (Legg et al., 2017; Tsai, 2018) – and culture had only 2.9% allotted of the monthly spendings, in T1 2019 (INSSE, 2019). Earlier in the decade, Romanians’ sports-related purchases per capita were second-lowest in the EU, on 14 €.

This is not to say that Romanians do not spend money on sport, although, as seen above, only a fraction of them consistently exercise or practice leisure sport – generally those in urban areas, on middle to high wages and having a higher education background. Yet, although history is in the making, data in the last 20 years points to the fact that new socio-economic and cultural elites are developing, and their sport is by no means gymnastics: it is, for the time being, tennis, alongside golf, squash and jogging

(Gândul, 2010). “*You will see some other sports, like frisbee or e-sports, getting bigger and bigger in the future*”, a sports marketing expert, Lorand Boți Balint, told me in June 2019, incidentally when interviewing him at the Bucharest Tennis Open.

The reasons for this are numerous, but the Western value system, “imported” by multinational companies setting up base in Romania (Gândul, 2010), social stratification by way of economic development and, to a lesser extent, gentrification are all possible, conjoining explanations to be found at the core of the issue. Biggest of all, still, is the underlying reason: that sport is, in Romania as elsewhere, a “badge of social exclusivity and cultural distinctiveness for the dominant classes” (Ritzer, 2007: 4705), and a great way of uniting bodily (physical) capital with forms of economic and cultural capital (Wacquant, 1995).

It has been observed by many experts in the field of sports sociology that “any history of lawn tennis will inevitably centre on middle-class involvement in the game with the cost of equipment and the need for a court underpinning its social exclusivity but also ensuring its synonymy with class privilege” (Walker, 1989: 251). And it is plain to see, to this day, that a certain social position, doubled by some economic power is required for playing tennis in Romania, either as a child or as an adult. In a sense, we have returned to the days of the aristocracy. Only this time it’s more like white collars, not white gloves. More importantly, there is a “need for a complementary and integrated analysis of both the class dimensions of a sport and its associated lifestyle dimensions” (Ritzer, 2007: 4705), which we will try to at least partially accomplish below.

A 2017 article by news outlet Digi 24 summed up the philosophy of this new generation of driven, family-less, flexible professionals (Digi24, 2017):

They are young, well schooled and willing to work overtime. They call themselves, simply: corporatiști (corporation workers). A generation which chose to work in multinationals and prides itself with its civic spirit. For them, the dictum “We want a country like in the West” is no longer just a dream, but a goal to attain as fast as possible. They are in the tens of thousands only in Bucharest and are headquartered in the Pipera area. (...) They are in their 20s and 30s, rarely 40s, some are dressed sportly, others in a suit, depending on the company policy. (...) A novice earns circa 400 euros, but for more experienced workers the salary can go up to 1500 euros, while managers earn more than 3000 euros.

Consequently, a new market of goods catering for this middle class fraction of *corporatiști* emerged, from *bio* food to sporting apparel, tapping into the healthy lifestyle movement and insistence on sports within the community of *corporatiști* – who desperately need an outlet of expression and an escape from what the French call the *metro-boulot-dodo* cycle (it would be wrong to describe the workers in multinationals as the sole members of middle class in Romania, although such equivalence has proven enticing for some observers, post-2000. Most visible in Romania is, for the moment, their economic and cultural capital, while their social capital and their tastes / class *habitus* only now take shape and start to manifest themselves). Sport provides such an escape, while practicing certain sports, with tennis chief amongst them, is also, maybe more importantly, flaunting social class.

“Flexible” is not a serendipitous word here. It also conveys the corporality of this new middle and upper classes in Romania, which mirrors the French ones Pierre Bourdieu evoked in his book, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1984). It has been noted that for Bourdieu, whose concepts of *hexis* (deportment - gait, gesture, posture) and *habitus* - “the dispositions through which taste is expressed. It is the habitual way of doing things” (Ritzer, 2007: 327) – have greatly influenced the sociology and anthropology of leisure, sports activities such as “mountaineering and tennis require the flexible, slim, and pliant bodies of the middle and upper classes, whereas the working class sports of wrestling produce an entirely different body and *habitus*” (Ritzer, 2007: 327). A “tennis body” then holds a different symbolic capital than, say, a gymnastics or football body, and, through its use on the clay court, has the ability to express the hierarchies of social power (Ritzer, 2007: 327). Furthermore, it may be that choosing a sport to the detriment of other not only marks “class divisions through class *habitus*”, but also the aspiration to belong to the class that particular sport (in our case, tennis) is culturally ascribed to. When you or your child are playing tennis or playing the piano you are not only doing that, but are also stating the commitment to “class-based values, styles, and ideals.” As Jessica Chin related her experience in the elitist Dinamo Sports Club in Bucharest, “*In an interview with the assistant club manager, I was informed that some people join the club not for health benefits, but rather just to be able to show others that they can afford to be a member*” (Chin, 2008: 178).

Taking tennis classes, playing and/or taking your children to tennis lessons, for whatever reasons (professional or not) has therefore not only usurped gymnastics as the queen of juvenile sport in Romania, but it has also been a statement, in Pierre Bourdieu’s terms, of status, of social standing conveyed through various behaviours (*habitus*) acting as social markers, one of which is sport. Tennis, to paraphrase a famous catchphrase, is more than a game: it is a distinction by which this new *bourgeoisie* / middle class / *corporatiști* socio-economic elite operates, with Simona Halep’s performances of late only providing the pretext for its manifestation (this narrowing does not exclude other social classes from playing tennis. I would not like to channel Thorstein Veblen in saying that tennis is the monopoly of the “leisure class”, i.e. roughly the Romanian *corporatiști*, only that the latter are symptomatic, in their *habitus* and display of positional goods, for the behaviour of the new elites in Romania).

For Romanian anthropologist Carol Căpiță, playing tennis (and, more importantly, consuming it, for whatever reasons) in Romania, nowadays, is a positional good, defined not by its intrinsic value, but by scarcity / unavailability to others. Hence, its extrinsic and high social value, defining those who practice and embrace tennis as successful individuals / upscale families [people need] to emulate. For these individuals, as for the “alternative bourgeoisie” of the Italian Renaissance, prestige is more important than profit, or is maybe the most important form of profit (Dobrescu, 2000: 135). We are, most obviously, in a market of symbolic goods. To quote Pierre Bourdieu (1993: 3),

Symbolic goods are a two-faced reality, a commodity and a symbolic object. Their specifically cultural value and their commercial value remain relatively independent, although the economic sanction may come to reinforce their cultural consecration.

As Simona Halep’s stature grew bigger and bigger in the Romanian public conscience, and media featured extensively both her wins/ financial gains and the sport of tennis, press stories were published with increased pace, fulfilling a public need for information. Due to the great level of interest dubbed the *Halepmania* phenomenon (Dumitriu, 2018), witnessed from 2014 onwards, coaches generally reported an increase in the number of children being enrolled in tennis, with probably more than 10.000 children playing in the mid 2010s.

Conclusions

Playing tennis emerges out of our comparative analysis as a symbol of good repute in contemporary Romanian society, a marker of conspicuous consumption.

As Thorstein Veblen (2009: 113) put it in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*,

To accept and practice the standard of living which is in vogue is both agreeable and expedient, commonly to the point of being indispensable to personal comfort and to success in life. The standard of living of any class, so far as concerns the element of conspicuous waste, is commonly as high as the earning capacity of the class will permit - with a constant tendency to go higher. The effect upon the serious activities of men is therefore to direct them with great singleness of purpose to the largest possible acquisition of wealth, and to discountenance work that brings no pecuniary gain. At the same time the effect on consumption is to concentrate it upon the lines which are most patent to the observers whose good opinion is sought.

While gymnastics still exerts cultural fascination and is revered as a sport of tradition, if not the most representative, the latter is embraced because of the good opinion it elicits in society at the moment and as proof of pecuniary force (Veblen, 2009: 69), with other considerations and motives being secondary amongst respondents.

Economy is not the sole factor behind this phenomenon, as one could be tempted to think. In reality, the emergence of new socio-economic elites in Romania means the new dominant (middle and upper) classes in society rationally and irrationally affirm their class *habitus*, through a wide range of positional goods, amongst which tennis. It is for sociologists and anthropologists of sports to further develop our forays into the subject.

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