

ROMANIAN SPORT INTEGRITY PROBLEMS AND WHISTLEBLOWING IN 2017-2018¹

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ABSTRACT:

ROMANIAN SPORT RECORDED MANY CASES OF WHISTLEBLOWING IN 2017 AND 2018, WHICH HAVE TRANSPIRED ESPECIALLY IN THE MEDIA. SOCIETY HAS OFTEN RECEIVED TESTIMONIES ABOUT ABUSES, DOPING OR FIXED MATCHES AND THIS ASPECT SHOWED THE PROBLEMS OF THE SPORT SYSTEM. THE IMPACT OF WHISTLEBLOWING THAT WAS VISIBLE DURING THESE TWO YEARS DISPLAYS THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PROCESS OF REPORTING IRREGULARITIES AND THE PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOUR OF THE PEOPLE FROM SPORT. THE ETHICAL ISSUES ARE DEBATED THROUGH THE REPORTING OF ILLEGAL WRONGDOINGS. WHISTLEBLOWING BECAME MORE ACCEPTED IN THE ROMANIAN SOCIETY BECAUSE LEGAL STATUTES ARE STIPULATED. THE CASES OF WHISTLEBLOWING ARE A GOOD INDICATOR FOR THE LEVEL OF INTEGRITY IN ROMANIAN SPORT AND IT HELPS TO UNDERSTAND THE CHALLENGES OF THE PHENOMENON. THIS STUDY GATHERS THE MOST IMPORTANT CASES OF WHISTLEBLOWING FROM THE PERIOD 2017-2018 AND EXPAINS THEIR CONTEXT, THEIR RELEVANCE AND CONSEQUENCES.

KEY WORDS: SPORT INTEGRITY, WHISTLEBLOWING, ROMANIAN SPORT, CORRUPTION IN SPORT.

Sport integrity has a positive connotation and it is related with the concept of fair-play. In the last two decades specialists in social sciences focused on the subject and have analysed the ethics³, the mechanisms of corruption⁴ and integrity. The mutations of the sport phenomenon were more frequent. If we consider the integrity as a value of the sport, it is possible to assert that the alteration of the game ethics questions the process of valorisation. However, this process that seems to be irreversible and which alters the competition has an instrument that could reverse the process. It is the whistleblowing, a prosocial and altruistic

¹ This research work was conducted as part of the project „Development of a Course to Teach Coaches Sport Integrity /CSI” (Erasmus Plus Sport, 590595-EPP-1-2017-1-EL-SPO-SCP).

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³ Randolph Feezel, *Sport, Play and Ethical Reflection* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

⁴ Adam Masters, Adam, “Corruption in sport: From the playing field to the field of policy”, *Policy and Society*, 34 (2015): 111-123.

aspect of the society, theorized by Dozier, Miceli⁵ and Hersh⁶. For the integrity process, whistleblowing is essential, because it encourages athletes, coaching staff and other officials from sport to come forward and provide information about irregularities. Dozier, Miceli and Hersh think that whistleblowing should increase if it is observable that it generates a real help for the society or organization. The whistleblowing process could be analysed as a whole or examining the effectiveness of the phenomenon, the financial dimension, the ethical challenges, the organizational misconduct, the retaliation and the loyalty aspect.

Near and Miceli⁷ are identifying three social actors in the whistleblowing mechanism: 1. The whistleblower; 2. The wrongdoer; 3. The recipient of the report. Every aspect is connected with the idea of personal integrity. The whistleblower observes the wrongdoing and takes action, noticing the ethical challenges which he then reports. It is difficult to generalize the whistleblowing process because of the unicity of the phenomenon. Even though sport organizations are trying to prevent, tackle the irregularities and to minimize the damages of wrongdoing, it is nearly impossible to assure a perfect clean environment⁸.

But in such a context, the credibility of the whistleblower is extremely important, the power to convince and the characteristics of the complaint will gain significance. The first action of the whistleblower is to assess and decide whether the gesture is immoral and illegal. After the whistleblower filed the report, the organization has to make a decision on how to manage the situation. The next step should be to start an investigation to determine the level of seriousness of the case. In this situation, the organization that could take a decision has the possibility to make right the wrongdoing or to ignore the claim.

Whistleblowers are considered moral actors in the process of revealing the wrongdoing. But their appearance in the Romanian sport media is often received with reserves. More than that, their testimonies are considered to be exaggerated. Also, some of them are published many years after the events happened. It is the case for fixed matches or physical abuses. However, this aspect shows that years 2017-2018 are favourable for whistleblowing in Romanian sport.

ROMANIAN CASES

Sport problems reflect the society challenges. Integrity differs across different sport practices, it has distinct levels of complexity, as well as it depends on age groups. Sport integrity contrasts between amateur and elite or professional sport. This study uses information leaked in the media. Romanian sport was the centre of many whistleblowing reports, in various sports, such as football, handball, volleyball, judo, or athletics. This variety shows that the system is under a strict pressure and the irregularities are touching these areas. Also, not only the diversity of sports is relevant, but also the problems revealed. They were mentioned cases of illegal betting, fixed matches, physical abuses, corruption, etc. This study will mention the most important cases and will follow their impact. The most popular sports in Romania are football, tennis and handball.

⁵ Janelle Brinker Dozier and Marcia P. Miceli, "Potential predictors of whistle-blowing: A prosocial behavior perspective", *The Academy of Management Review*, 10 (1985): 823-836.

⁶ Marion Hersh, "Whistleblowers – heroes or traitors: Individual and collective responsibility for ethical behavior", *Annual Reviews in Control*, 26 (2002): 243-262.

⁷ Janet P. Near and Marcia P. Miceli, "Whistle-blowing: Myth and reality", *Journal of Management*, 22 (1996): 507-526.

⁸ Muel Kaptein, "From inaction to external whistleblowing: The influence of the ethical culture of organizations on employee responses to observed wrongdoing", *Journal of Business Ethics*, 98 (2011): 513-530.

Football

In 2017 and 2018, the media mentioned many irregularities from the Romanian football, considering abuses, fixed matches and illegal involvement in betting industry. The most important case at the beginning of 2017 was that of a network of referees, which operated in friendly games in Turkey and Cyprus. They were Romanians and they worked for betting mafia. *Gazeta Sporturilor* investigated the case and found out that 13 Romanian referees from lower leagues were part of this network. They were presented as referees from Bulgaria or Turkey and few of them changed their look in order to not be recognized. Their actions were associated with another illegal betting network from Singapore. The journalists identified these referees and have produced many articles about the subject. They discovered that the network was bigger and this practice was frequent in friendly tournaments. The Romanian Football Federation used this whistleblowing case to punish the referees.

Also, in 2017, Alin Pânzaru, the coach of *Dacia Unirea Brăila*, a club from the second league, revealed that players of his team have fixed matches to obtain financial gains from betting. He made public the names of the footballers and described their immoral activities⁹. Footballers proceeded this way because the club did not pay the players in time. After the whistleblowing gesture of the coach, the club reacted promptly and has dismissed the footballers mentioned in this case. The president of the club confirmed the story of the coach after he made an investigation.

These cases questions the concept of fair-play, so usual met in football. Butcher and Schneider¹⁰ are considering that the intrinsic essence of fair-play is respect for the game and are putting in discussion the role of education when the fair play is missing. The cases mentioned above outline the failure of moral reasoning and the absence of impartiality and reflective judgment in sport.

The majority of whistleblowing cases from football were testimonies about fixed matches which happened many years ago. Former footballers confessed to the media that they have participated in fixed matches not only during the communism period, but also after 1989. It was a confirmation of some facts described in that period by the media, but without specific evidence. It is the case of Daniel Chiriță, a former player of *Petrolul Ploiești*, who blew the whistle in 2018 about facts from the 90s. He described the phenomenon of fixed matches from that time, explaining that the teams *Petrolul*, *Ceahlăul*, *Gloria Bistrița* and *U Cluj* had they own reciprocities¹¹. In the same manner, the former striker Ionel Danciulescu explained that when he played for *Steaua* and *Dinamo*, he participated at fixed matches in the last rounds of the championship¹². These types of testimonies regarding the 90s were numerous in 2017 and 2018. Nicolae Stanciu, who was also a footballer in that period, admitted that he played in fixed matches.

Contractual infringement is another kind of immoral behaviour that came to light via whistleblowing. Romanian football has many cases in this category, however they are already considered a normal practice. For example, in January 2018, media exposed the case of

⁹ Digi Sport, 7 December 2017, <https://www.digisport.ro/fotbal/cutremur-in-fotbalul-romanesc-declaratii-incendiare-au-fost-niste-blatisti-ordinari-niste-nenorociti-354826>, accessed January 12, 2019.

¹⁰ Robert Butcher and Angela Schneider, "Fair Play as Respect for the Game", Jan Boxill (ed.), *Sports Ethics: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003): 153-173.

¹¹ Pro Sport, 11 December 2018, <https://www.prosport.ro/video/prosport-live/video-exclusiv-un-fost-fotbalist-in-liga-1-recunoaste-am-jucat-in-meciuri-aranjate-cum-se-facea-sedinta-tactica-in-vestiar-la-comun-azi-castigam-noi-la-doua-goluri-diferenta-17781616>, accessed January 10, 2019.

¹² Costin Stucan, *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 15 October 2018, <https://www.gsp.ro/fotbal/liga-1/gsp-live-video-danciulescu-marturisiri-incendiare-am-jucat-in-blaturi-in-spania-la-steaua-si-dinamo-va-zic-si-un-meci-550671.html>, accessed January 10, 2019.

Alexandru Ioniță, from Astra Giurgiu, a club in the first league, who was cast out of the team and sent to train alone because he refused to extend his contract¹³. In this manner, the club wanted to put pressure on the footballer, but he reacted back and made the case public. Eventually, the player decided to enter in a contract for a period of 6 months, during which period he had the right to sign with any club, however Astra Giurgiu management decided to punish him because he refused any offer of contract extension.

In this context, the sport integrity is altered by the lack of honesty and fairness. The respect for the dignity of each other is missing in such cases of contractual infringement and the footballers are put in difficult situations that could determine them to sign a new contract or, if a club wants to fire a player, to terminate the agreement. The integrity obligations of clubs are often a problem in the Romanian sport and this aspect has a cause in the lack of management knowledge and in the sport mentality.

Handball

The Romanian handball exposes a similar case, but with different significance. For example, player Laurentiu Dinescu complained to the Romanian Handball Federation because the club AHC Dunărea Călărași tried to force him to terminate the contract. The handballer was obliged to overtrain and, on top of that, he was not paid his regular salary¹⁴. Because the officials of the Romanian handball did not take any measure, the player told his story in the press. As a consequence, media became a vital space for whistleblowing. The investigation journalists contribute to revealed the irregularities. The gesture of the athlete shows that the reporting process could often be ignored by the institutions responsible to resolve such cases. In this context, the press justifies its surname, “the sixth power in state”. Journalists are making known the case and often are putting pressure on clubs or federations.

Another case from handball was made public by the sport television Digi Sport. It has discovered that a referee from the first league has broken an important rule. His age was over the limit but he continued to officiate¹⁵. The whistleblowing action of the journalists obliged the Romanian Handball Federation to stop the activity of the referee. This case puts in discussion the implementation of a mechanism to identify such situations. This example represents a lack of controls and governance in the handball sport system, which allows people from the handball scene to abuse the lack of controls and have a behaviour which lack integrity. Even though this case is not perceived as something serious, the way how media exploited it has damaged the image of the handball competition.

Volleyball

Volleyball is a poorly mediatized sport in Romania, however in 2017 and 2018, the press focused more the attention on it because of a betting scandal. Two volleyball players and one of their friends, also volleyball player, bet against their own team, Arcada Galati, in a tournament at the beginning of 2017. The International Volleyball Federation identified them with the help of a software and suspended them. After this episode the Romanian Volleyball Federation stayed in silence and did not take any reprimanding measures, until the club ACS Zalau found out and contested the right of a volleyball player to be on the pitch. After the

¹³ Libertatea, 10 January 2018, <https://www.libertatea.ro/sport/alex-ionita-ii-se-antreneaza-prin-parcuri-2102445>, accessed January 9, 2019.

¹⁴ Jurnalul de Călărași, 25 September 2018, <https://www.soridapress.ro/scandal-la-echipa-de-handbal-din-calarasi/>, accessed January 12, 2019.

¹⁵ Digi Sport, 30 May 2018, <https://www.digisport.ro/handbal/scandal-fara-precedent-se-fluiera-pe-fals-in-handbalul-romanesc-452327>, accessed January 11, 2019.

media investigation, one of the players admitted his immoral gesture and explained all the events that determined him to bet. He assumed the role of a whistleblower and described his feelings, trying to give himself as an example for other players that could have the same temptation. Nevertheless, in this case, the lack of reaction from the Romanian Volleyball Federations seems to be problematic, because it covered the case until an exterior factor came to point out this case.

Another case from the Romanian volleyball revealed in 2017 physical abuses at the CSS 2 Baia Mare. The coach of the team was accused by five junior players of abuses, physical and verbal, during a period of four years. The journal *Gazeta Sporturilor* developed this case and launched an important debate about the training methods in volleyball and the responsibility of the coach. The case became so well-known and forced the Ministry of education to analyze it¹⁶. This situation also revealed other misconduct of the coach, i.e. an attack over a referee. “Negative coaching behaviors and practices have been identified as having a significant impact on sports”, observes Ibrahim Lawal Yazid¹⁷.

In this context, the journal *Gazeta Sporturilor* launched a platform of reporting, called *nuabuz.gsp.ro*, an important instrument which helps against the abuses in sport. Especially its purpose is to identify abuses against children who begin their sports careers. The investigation journalists try to encourage children, parents or coaches to report these irregularities. They are promising the confidentiality of the source and they are verifying the information. This project is an example of good governance in sport, despite the fact that was initiated by a private entity and not by the Ministry of Sport or by the Romanian Volleyball Federation. The online platform is not limited to only one sport and it is an important instrument to report the negative experiences. The sporting environment exposes sometimes the minors from Romanian sport to various forms of violence, like those revealed above, and “can lead to lifelong consequences on their emotional, physical and psychological health, personal development, social and family life, and subsequently impact their participation in sport and life”, as European Commission experts observed¹⁸.

Judo

Another sport with low visibility in the media is judo. Despite of that, in 2018, girls who competed in judo games and were sport athletes in the Olympic centre from Cluj-Napoca, accused coaches Florin Bercean, Gianina Andreica and Ana Maria Mititelu of physical and verbal abuses¹⁹. Florin Bercean is a national well-known coach with important results through his athletes, including Olympic gold. But judo athletes accused him of violent behavior during training. There were five girls who revealed that they were beaten, humiliated, threatened and bullied. These testimonies were published in the journal *Gazeta Sporturilor*, however the

¹⁶ Costin Stucan, *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 9 January 2018, <https://www.gsp.ro/gsp-special/investigatie/plangere-penaliza-impotriva-antrenorului-acuzat-de-abuz-contraminorilor-marturie-pro-rau-e-un-om-foarte-bun-chiar-daca-mai-are-scapari-ce-se-intampla-in-vestiar-trebuie-sa-ramana-acolo-529925.html> , accessed January 11, 2019.

¹⁷ Ibrahim Lawal Yazid, “Integrity Issues in Competitive Sports”, *IOSR Journal of Sports and Physical Education*, 3 (2016): 69.

¹⁸ Expert Group on Good Governance (European Commission), *Recommendations on the protection of young athletes and safeguarding children's rights in sport*, July 2016: 3, available online <http://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regexpert/index.cfm?do=groupDetail.groupDetailDoc&id=25000&no=1> , accessed January 6, 2019.

¹⁹ Justin Gafiuc, *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 24 November 2018, <https://www.gsp.ro/gsp-special/investigatie/foto-video-noi-dezvaluiri-tulburatoare-despre-agresiunile-de-la-lotul-olimpic-de-judo-m-a-batut-cu-sete-pe-spate-cu-o-coarda-de-cauciuc-aratam-ca-o-zebra-553762.html> , accessed January 10, 2019.

Romanian Judo Federation refused to take into consideration their complaint. The mentioned coaches denied the accusations, while other athletes who obtained important medals in international competitions came to their defence and support.

Sport officials showed little interest in vulnerable athletes and their whistleblowing actions were left out. Safeguarding judoka's rights has been given insufficient attention by the Romanian federation and this aspect is an indicator for lack of integrity. By nature, judo is considered a violent sport, however this does not mean that abuse should be acceptable during training and preparation for competition. The nature of judo hide easier different misconducts of the coaches or other officials. Judo athletes may be harmed by an adult or another athlete, but any abuse is hard to demonstrate because the nature of sporting activity. The scientific literature on child or youngster protection in sport is concerned about the safeguarding from violence in sport²⁰, but the connection with the idea of integrity is neglected. Often, child athletes are the victims of organisational threats. To diminish the danger of irregularities, the coach should inspire the morality principles, as Sandra Pelaez has demonstrated²¹.

Boxing

The journal *Gazeta Sporturilor* obtained in 2017 the testimony of few coaches about a bribery and fraud case at the Romanian Boxing Federation. The International Boxing Association (AIBA) has organized in Bucharest a course to license coaches in May 2016²². An international trainer came to Romania, taught the course and tested the Romanian coaches. Few of them reported that general secretary of the Romanian Boxing Federation, Viorel Sima, demanded to the coaches to raise money for the instructor, to obtain the questions of the exam and corresponding answers. They did this and Viorel Sima offered them the answers or the questions a day before the exam. However, only 6 out of the 19 coaches passed the exam. The other coaches felt cheated and reported the case to the president of the Romanian Boxing Federation, who did not take any action in this respect. Few months after their report, the coaches blew the whistle in the media. The subject became national. The lack of reaction from the officials has obliged the coaches to search justice in the public space. But the opacity of the Romanian Boxing Federation continued. This episode was one of the reasons to maintain the funding block of the federation by the Ministry of Sport.

The immoral and unethical activity is realised for the personal material gain, but the case mentioned above is more severe because it has an international dimension, because it involves an AIBA official. Boxing is not immune from traditional types of corruption, which in this case is bribery and the fraud in an international exam. Corruption is used to attain a certain *status* in the boxing activity. The problematic behaviour of the general secretary of the Romanian Boxing Federation was doubled by the favourable response of the coaches that were willing to accept this unethical bargain. This attitude highlights a systemic problem with the corruption.

Athletics

Another sport practice which has recorded whistleblowing cases was the athletics domain. Frequently is called into question the gender difference in this sport, not only when

²⁰ Margo Mountjoy et al., "Safeguarding the child athlete in sport: a review, a framework and recommendations for the IOC youth athlete development model", *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 49 (2015):883-886.

²¹ Sandra Pelaez, *The Coach as a Moral Influence*. Thesis (PhD), Montreal: Concordia University, 2010.

²² Marian Ursescu, Mirela Neag, *Gazeta Sporturilor*, 16 October 2017, <https://www.gsp.ro/sporturi/box/audio-incredibil-marturii-pe-banda-oferite-gazetei-sporturilor-despre-un-curs-organizat-de-federatia-romana-de-box-cum-se-cumpara-licenta-de-antrenor-in-romania-523284.html>, accessed January 8, 2019.

are analysed the performances, but also the abuses. Female athletes seem to experience more harassment than men, as a Norwegian study suggests²³. Underreporting is a general problem, especially in the juvenile and youth athletics.

Abuses against juniors in sport are hard to be whistle-blown because of the statute of the victim. Usually the coach is the source of aggression. Such a case was revealed by the journal *CanCan*, which published the testimony of a junior girl abused by her coach from the athletics club in Suceava²⁴. The girl gave up to her athletic career, but she assumed the whistleblower role and explained that she was not the only one in that situation.

Romanian athletics also offered a case of whistleblowing from the administrative level. German coach Siegfried Becker revealed in the media the way how he was approached by the club CSM Bucharest to train a Romanian athlete. Becker wanted to show the unprofessional behaviour of the people with who he negotiated and the fact that the club has not respected the promises made at the beginning of the discussions²⁵. Becker case could be useful for the athletes and the coaches who want to understand the integrity challenges in the contract negotiation process. They could learn from this experience and they could take safety measures to prevent this kind of irregularities.

Tennis

Individual sports such as tennis often have their own abuse cases, but many of them remain unknown, because the athlete is discouraged to blow the whistle and he or she had low chances to demonstrate its case. However, in rare occasions, athletes have the courage to make a step forward and point out the immoral and illegal situations. It is the case of a junior tennis player, who was the victim of a sexual abuse from her coach. The 11 years old girl made a complaint against the coach to the federation and actioned him in justice. The case became nationally known when the media found out the details and reveals the abuses²⁶.

Previous studies that focused on coach-athlete relationships revealed that the harassment experience has a huge emotional impact. The ratio of male harassment could be identified in the patriarchal power culture of the Romanian society. Dropping out of sport performance is often the main consequence of sexual harassment, but there is also a secondary consequence – destruction of the relationship with the coach and creation of a more negative view of men in general. The lack of a safe environment in tennis could be seen as a problem of integrity and in this case the whistleblowing has a positive role.

CONCLUSION

In a perfect world, there would be no need for whistle-blowers, nevertheless Romanian sport is far from being perfect. Whistleblowing is a key action to fight against abuses and corruption and which could stimulate the fairness of the sport phenomenon. With the risk of suffering severe repercussions, sport athletes or coaches are take ownership for their actions

²³ Kari Fasting, Celia Brackenridge and Jorunn Sundgot-Borgen, "Prevalence of sexual harassment among Norwegian female elite athletes in relation to sport type", *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 39 (2004):373–86.

²⁴ CanCan, 28 January 2018, <https://www.cancan.ro/mega-scandal-sexual-club-sportiv-suceava-antrenorul-e-acuzat-hartuit-santajat-atletele-minore-puisor-scump-trimite-mi-poze-tine-mi-e-dor-p-mea-faci-sustine-profesorul-apararea-17702568>, accessed January 11, 2019.

²⁵ Sport Total FM, 29 December 2018, <https://sptfm.ro/2018/12/29/audio-exclusiv-antrenorul-siegfried-becker-acuza-csm-bucuresti-ca-l-a-umilit-in-cazul-sulitasului-alexandru-novac-au-batut-cu-pumnul-in-rulota-mea-ca-sa-nu-vorbesc-urat-de-csm/>, accessed January 10, 2019.

²⁶ Ebihoreanul, 21 January 2018, <https://www.ebihoreanul.ro/stiri/ultima-or-31-35/revolttor-antrenor-de-tenis-din-cugir-trimis-n-judecata-pentru-c-ar-fi-violat-o-feti-de-11-ani-139262.html>, accessed January 12, 2019.

and became whistleblowers. The cases presented above show that the Romanian sport is confronted with a substantial increase of reporting irregularities, aspect that could help organizations and athletes' vigilance. The information reported by whistleblowers is critically important not only for sport institutions, but also for the athletes and for the public.

With the exception of legal obligations, whistleblowers are confronted with a significant cultural opposition in the Romanian society. They are seen as „informers”, „dobbers” or „snitches”. This aspect makes difficult the action of reporting the irregularities. In the same direction, the culture inside sport organizations doubles the difficulty of whistleblowing process. For this reason, many whistle-blowers chose to make public in the media their case. This is the first source for the report and it shows that 2017 and 2018 were prolific years for the whistleblowing process in Romanian sport.

The level of undiscovered cases prevalent in Romanian sport are greater than reported. This assumption would seem reasonable particularly because our research was limited to some sports and has collected just the cases that have been published in the media. To increase the whistleblowing process and to reduce the integrity problems it is necessary to formulate clear guidelines, establish educational workshops and put into action intervention programs.

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