

Rebuilding Romanian rugby is not an easy task

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Losing to England 134-0, in November 2001, was the moment when Romanian rugby hit rock bottom. It was hard to swallow for a nation whose national team had beaten France eight times (once even on French soil, 12-6 at Agen, in 1991), Wales twice (24-6 in 1983, at Bucharest and 15-9 in 1988, at Cardiff), Scotland twice (28-22 in 1984 and 18-12 in 1991), drew Ireland (13-13, in 1980, at Dublin) and stood up to the mighty All Blacks led by Graham Mourie (6-14, in 1981, in Bucharest). After such a catastrophic result, Romanian rugby found itself in the basement of international rugby. It could not fall any lower.

However, you cannot keep living in the past and you need to look at the future. Such a defeat – 134-0 – was not the result of individual mistakes, missed tackles, lack of fitness or tactical errors. It was the result of a deep, crisis. It was the collapse of a system. Since the early '80's, there has been a continuous erosion process that has slowly weakened rugby's structure. That was the period when the political, economical and social crisis of communism became acute.

The fall of Romanian rugby cannot be separated from the country's overall crisis. When the shelves of the groceries shops were empty and people's daily main concern was how to find food for their children and to provide the bare necessities for their families; when in the middle of winter, at - 20°C outside, heating was spare, due to fuel shortages, and the indoor temperatures in the apartment buildings did not rise above 10 ° C; when an entire country was in a permanent crisis, at every level of society; when all these facts represented the everyday reality, it was difficult to make people think about sports in general, and rugby, in particular.

But the worsening of the political and economic conditions was not the only cause of rugby's debacle. In addition to the overall crisis, Romanian rugby has paid, and it continues to pay, a heavy price for having neglected, for years, two fundamentals aspects of the game: establishing programs for the development of coaches and players and strengthening the domestic competitions.

The communist regime has always used rugby, like it has used any other sport, as a propaganda tool during the cold war with the West. Every international success was presented as a direct result of the righteousness of the communist rule and ideology. Leaving aside the emptiness of the propagandistic lie, this approach had a disastrous impact on rugby because all the financial resources were directed toward the preparation of the National Team, whereas the domestic development was completely neglected.

This attitude had dramatic consequences with respect to the health of the Romanian rugby. Once the generation of the quality French school trained coaches from late '40s, and '50s, who had built a system and had led the national team to the success of the '60s, '70s and early '80s, had retired, and in the absence of a coherent national coaching program, there were no young coaches who could successfully replace the old coaches. All of a sudden, Romanian rugby faced a vacuum with respect to coaching and without capable "teachers" it could not progress anymore and started sliding into mediocrity.

After the catastrophic defeat from Twickenham, there was a need for a change and such a dark moment required bringing in new people with moral strength and managerial skills, capable of turning the page and take the Romanian rugby to much greener pastures; capable of understanding the new professional era and building solid foundations for the future. That is when Octavian Morariu, the son of Viorel Morariu, one of the most famous Romanian players and a former captain of the national team in the '50's and '60's, became the new president of the Romanian Rugby Federation (F.R.R).

The young Morariu, Engineer by trade, had defected to France in 1987 while touring l'Hexagon with his club, "Grivita Rosie". He returned home in the '90's and, following the family tradition, became involved in rugby. In 2001, he won the election for the presidency of the F.R.R, and he and his team started the reconstruction of Romanian rugby. It was not an easy task since the country was facing a very painful transition from a totalitarian regime to democracy.

The heritage of the communist system proved to be a terrible burden not only on the social and economic resources of the country, but also on the mentality of people. To add to that, rugby becoming professional in 1995 did not help the cause of a small nation like Romania. In the new professional era, the rich became richer, the poor became poorer and the inequality between the haves and have-nots widened significantly. These were not ideal conditions to rebuild a sport like rugby, which has always lived in the shadow of soccer, a hugely popular sport in Romania.

Since the deep crisis that had engulfed the Romanian rugby pertained to the quality of the coaches, and since it was absolutely vital to avoid the repeat of a "Twickenham disaster", Octavian Morariu sought the help of the French Federation regarding the coaching staff of the National team. Bernard Lapasset, the powerful President of the French Federation, helped the Romanians, and in

2002, Bernard Charreyre was appointed coach of the national team. Under Charreyre, the "Oaks"'s decline has been stopped and the team has started to slowly climb from the basement of international rugby. It qualified for the World Cup in 2003, where it beat Namibia and lost to Ireland, after an honourable display, and then to Australia and Argentina. Charreyre was dismissed after the World Cup and two other French coaches followed in the steps of their conational: first, Phillipe Sauton, for a very short period, and then Daniel Santamans, who is the current coach. As recent as last week, another Frenchman, Phillipe Berot, a former French international, has been appointed as coach responsible with the preparation of the backline, Santamans, the former Toulouse hooker, taking care of the forwards.

Having stabilized, to a certain extent, the situation of the National Team, Morariu's team tried, at the same time, not to repeat the mistakes from the past and understood that international success cannot be achieved without building a solid base at national level. One of the most important achievements was the foundation, in 2003, of the Academy of Rugby. Faithful to the same "French Connection", the F.R.R appointed Robert Antonin as a manager of the new Academy. Under the guidance of the French technician, who is also manager of the National Team, the two main goals of the newly created body are: first, to create a Romanian school of coaching that would produce quality coaches, and second, to prepare the elite players at junior and senior levels.

Currently, all the coaches of any national team (Under-17, Under-18, Under -19, Romania "A") must be graduates of the Academy. Young coaches have already been given big responsibilities and, for example, the Under-18 national team is coached by Florin Matei (32 years) and Robert Ion (28 years), two of the youngest coaches to have ever worked at national level.

The other major problem faced by the Romanians is the players' migration. Similar to what it is happening in Canada, the best players are leaving the country to play professional rugby in other countries, with France being the most popular destination. Presently, Romania can easily field 15 starters that play in the Hexagon. Therefore, Daniel Mitrea, the Federal Coach, has indicated that one of the main goals of the F.R.R is to try to find a formula to keep the best young players in Romania. How? The intent is to sign contracts with the best 25-30 young players and keep them playing in the internal leagues. The F.R.R cannot afford to offer big contracts, probably not more than around a few hundreds Euro's per month. Taking into consideration that the average salary is about 202 euro (\$280 CD), Mitrea hopes that the amount would be sufficient to convince the young players to stay home and play in the domestic competitions.

Despite the fact that rugby is still amateur in Romania, the realities of the professional era cannot be ignored. Since rugby is no longer financed by the Government, the F.R.R had to look for sponsors. Again, the French responded to the call and the main sponsors of the F.R.R are some big names, including European automaker giant Citroen, the bank Groupe Societe General and Carrefour, one of the largest European retailers.

The recent International Rugby Board's announcement regarding the funds provided to the Tier 2 countries generated big hopes in Romania. According to the IRB's schedule, Romania will receive 1,5 million U.K pounds over three years, to fund various development programs that will be closely monitored by the IRB. The funding represents a huge boost for Romania, and part of the funds will be used to lock the young elite players in contracts signed with the F.R.R.

Octavian Morariu, who left the F.R.R last year to become the President of the Romanian Olympic Committee (COSR), one of the highest positions in the sports structure of the country, and his team had their share of criticism. As long as there is constructive criticism that helps identify the real problems that need to be solved, it could be nothing but helpful and it will serve the interests of the game. How could a Government properly lead without the continuous checking of the Opposition? All criticisms such as this must be welcomed and accepted as part of a democratic exercise.

Morariu was replaced at the helm of the F.R.R by George Straton, one of his closest associates, who pledged to continue on the same path and to follow the same goals. The most important aspect for Straton and his team is to stick to the original strategy of rebuilding solid foundations and develop the game at the internal level. Straton (49 years old) leads a young team of officials that is trying to make a difference: Adrian Dumitrescu, Chief Executive Officer, is 48 years, Daniel Mitrea, the Federal Coach, is 30, Radu Constantin, the press Officer, is 34.

Everybody knows that miracles will not happen overnight. The difficult transition from communism to democracy, from planned economy to private market, from the lukewarm spirit of equalitarianism to competitiveness, all these factors will have a noticeable impact on the rebuilding process of Romanian rugby. Even with all these plans in motion, it will still be a long way until Romania will renew with the glory of the past and beat France, Wales, or Scotland.

There are still many challenges lying ahead. The level of the game at national level is low; the number of players registered at senior level is a meagre 1000 and at junior level approximately 4000;

the domestic competitions are weak, many clubs are barely surviving from one year to another because it is not easy to find sponsors willing to support the game. The National Division consists of 10 teams, whereas Division A consists of two Conferences: East, with 7 clubs and West with 4 clubs.

The challenges are huge and the problems are hard to tackle. But overcoming the most difficult challenges and getting up after tough tackles, this is the beauty of rugby. I hope and I wish that the young team that leads the Romanian Rugby Federation knows how to discover this beauty.

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