

SPORTS MANAGEMENT IN ROMANIA: SUCCESS MODELS AND CURRENT CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Sport management is a strategic field in the development of contemporary sports organizations, influencing both athletic performance and long-term sustainability. In the Romanian context, the evolution of this sector has mirrored the broader transition from a centralized system to a free-market model, resulting in heterogeneous outcomes. This study analyzes relevant examples of best practices in sport management, such as the Gheorghe Hagi Academy and Sepsi OSK Sfântu Gheorghe, highlighting the positive impact of professional management and public-private partnerships. At the same time, major dysfunctions are identified, including dependence on public funding, managerial instability, and the absence of long-term development policies - issues particularly evident in several traditional clubs. The paper underscores the critical role of sports academies and the discrepancies in the allocation of financial resources among clubs, especially when compared to UEFA-recommended standards. Emerging trends in Romanian sport management are also discussed, including the integration of modern performance monitoring technologies and the professional development of sport managers through specialized training programs. Furthermore, the importance of creating partnerships between educational institutions and sports clubs is emphasized as a means of optimizing youth development processes. The study includes an analysis of the ranking of football academies in Romania, based on the scores obtained during national licensing procedures, tracking their annual progress and evolution. This evaluation provides an objective perspective on the efficiency of youth sport management. In conclusion, the study advocates for the accelerated professionalization of sport management in Romania through increased private investment, infrastructure modernization, and the implementation of sustainable development strategies aligned with the demands of the European sports environment.

Introduction

Sports management emerged as a distinct branch of management with the establishment of the first professional sports organizations. The development of a scientific management system, correlated with the professionalization of sports activities and the integration of market economy principles, favored the growth of managerial sciences applied to sports—initially in the private sector and later expanding into the public sphere [1].

The specialized literature highlights a major concern regarding the progressive deviation of sports management from its core objectives, as it became increasingly subordinated to the logic of commercialism and managerialism under the influence of the neoliberal paradigm [2, 3].

Sports management represents a key domain for any state and should incorporate medium- and long-term managerial policies and strategies [4]. These should aim to develop, on a national level and across multiple levels, managerial teams capable of supporting a modern vision of sports development.

An analysis of articles published between 2010 and 2019 in the three leading sports management journals revealed that only 1.3% addressed critical perspectives of the field. This lack of self-reflection suggests stagnation in the theoretical development of the discipline [5].

The first organized forms of education in sports management appeared in the United States between 1949 and 1985, a period that culminated in the founding of the North American Society for Sport Management (NASSM) in 1985. A defining moment for the global development of this field was the launch, in 1966, of the first university program in sports management at Ohio University—a program that inspired the creation of hundreds of similar educational initiatives worldwide over the following decades. During the 1990s and 2000s, academic recognition of sports management was further solidified through the emergence of major scientific publications such as *Sport Management Review* and the establishment of European bodies such as the European Association for Sport Management (EASM). By 2018, over 800 bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs in sports management had been registered globally (see Table 1) [6].

Table 1. Sports Management Programs by Continent/Country
(Adapted from [7])

Continent/Country	Bachelor's Programs	Master's Programs	Doctoral Programs	Total
Africa	1	1	0	2

Asia	12	13	3	28
Australia	13	4	1	18
Canada	16	7	6	29
Europe	15	27	2	44
India	0	1	0	1
New Zealand	4	1	0	5
United States of America	423	242	35	700
Total	484	296	47	827

In Romania, the field of sports management is primarily addressed through master's degree programs developed within the faculties of physical education and sport across various university centers. Among the most prominent institutions is the National University of Physical Education and Sport in Bucharest (UNEFS), which offers the program *Management in Sport*. The West University of Timișoara hosts the program *Management of Physical Education and Sports Activities and Organizations*. Other important universities offering similar programs include “Transilvania” University of Brașov (*Sports Performance and Management in Sport*) and “Dunărea de Jos” University of Galați (*School Physical Education and Sports Management*). These programs provide specialized training for future sport managers, with an emphasis on organizing sport events, managing sport structures, and developing management strategies tailored to both educational and high-performance contexts.

The Role of Education and Continuous Training in Sports Management

The professional development of sports managers is essential for the efficiency and sustainability of sports-related activities. In Romania, master's programs in sports management offered by institutions such as UNEFS, UVT, or UNITBV provide a formal framework for initial training. However, in order to adapt to the continuously changing demands of the sports industry, a coherent system of continuous education and training is required.

At the European level, the UEFA Academy offers specialized courses for sporting directors, club managers, and academy leaders, facilitating the standardization of competencies and the professionalization of structures [8]. In

Romania, the Romanian Football Federation has launched the “Licensed FRF Manager” initiative, a program aimed at the professionalization of football management, with a focus on governance, sports marketing, and strategic planning [9].

The involvement of international organizations such as the European Association for Sport Management (EASM) provides access to research networks, conferences, and best practices, stimulating Romania’s integration into the European academic and managerial circuit. These resources can significantly contribute to the formation of a body of specialists capable of managing complex structures and attracting investment in sports.

Systemic Challenges of Sports Management in Romania

In Romania, sports management faces a series of systemic challenges that affect the sustainable development and performance of sports structures. One of the most pressing issues is unstable funding, especially in the case of small or lower-league clubs that rely almost exclusively on local public budgets. This dependency generates risks related to discontinuity, lack of autonomy, and political pressures on managerial decisions [10].

Additionally, the excessive politicization of club leadership and sports administrative structures leads to appointments based on non-meritocratic criteria, affecting decision-making efficiency and management professionalism. Many municipal clubs are led by individuals without training in either sports or organizational management, which limits their ability to implement effective long-term strategies [11].

Another obstacle is the lack of coherent and unified sports legislation, which creates ambiguities in applying regulations concerning sports contracts, the legal status of clubs, financing, and taxation. This uncertainty reduces the attractiveness of private investment and limits the development of public-private partnerships [12].

Furthermore, the low level of professionalization of club leadership—especially in lower leagues—represents an inhibiting factor in development. The absence of certified managerial competencies and continuous training leads to the perpetuation of inefficient practices and the underutilization of local sports potential [13].

In the context of modern sports management, athletes’ psychosocial well-being has become an essential component of long-term performance. Recent studies highlight the importance of a safe educational and competitive environment, where bullying behaviors are systematically identified and prevented. The research conducted by Nichifor, Marian, and Țiță [14] reveals that athletes in Romania are exposed to various forms of intimidation and psychological pressure, negatively impacting their self-esteem, motivation, and engagement. The integration of clear

policies for managing interpersonal relationships within clubs and academies thus becomes a necessity—not only to ensure athletes’ rights but also to optimize the training environment and both individual and team performance. Promoting educational values, empathy, and open communication within sports structures contributes to the reduction of these phenomena, strengthening the foundation for a sustainable and inclusive sporting environment.

Examples of Best Practices in Sports Management in Romania

The “Gheorghe Hagi” Football Academy represents a leading example of effective sports management in Romania, grounded in strategic investments in infrastructure, education, and youth development. With a modern training base in Ovidiu and an integrated program that combines sports training with formal education, the Academy applies a sustainable organizational model oriented toward both national and international performance. The outcomes—reflected in the large number of players promoted to national teams—confirm the effectiveness of the managerial vision implemented [15].

FK Csíkszereda exemplifies a regional sports management model focused on integrating youth from Transylvania and the Székely Land into high-performance structures. The club’s strategy emphasizes local player development and internal promotion to the senior team, supported by an extensive scouting network and cooperation with the Ferenc Puskás Football Academy. Since 2019, the club has competed in the second division, and since 2022, it has managed a satellite team in Liga III to facilitate the transition of youth players into senior-level football. Through the implementation of an integrated educational system at the Márton Áron Talent Care Center, the club ensures both athletic training and academic progress for its young athletes. FK Csíkszereda has also developed a rapidly progressing women’s football division that has reached the national first league, thereby demonstrating a sustainable and inclusive approach to youth sports management [16].

In Romania, the academies of clubs such as FCSB, CSA Steaua, Farul, and Csíkszereda operate with annual budgets ranging from €1.5 to €1.8 million. However, the proportion of these funds allocated to youth development varies significantly: 15% at FCSB, 25% at Farul, and up to 45% at second-division clubs, which invest more aggressively in youth development. A particular feature of these clubs is the support they receive from public sources, such as Hungarian state funding for Csíkszereda and the Ministry of National Defence for CSA Steaua.

At the European level, UEFA recommends that well-established clubs allocate between 5% and 20% of their operational budgets to youth academies. Relevant international examples include Ajax Amsterdam, which invests approximately 20% of its budget (around €10 million out of a €60 million total), and Inter Milan, which,

although it allocates only 5%, reaches a similar absolute figure due to its higher overall budget.

It is worth noting that major European academies contribute not only to the development of footballers but also to the training of top coaches. The rise of managers such as Thomas Tuchel, Julian Nagelsmann, Roberto De Zerbi, and Cristi Chivu—a product of the Italian system—illustrates that academic performance in coaching is not reserved exclusively for former elite players. This trend is particularly evident in the German development model.

Academy Classification and Its Impact on the Licensing Process

Following the decision of the Romanian Football Federation (FRF) Executive Committee on June 27, 2021, the criteria for academy classification were tightened, with the minimum score required to support the Liga 1 licensing process increased from 60 to 75 points. Clubs that do not reach the minimum threshold of 60 points are denied a license, while those scoring between 60 and 74 points face a financial penalty of 100,000 RON. The collected fines contribute to a fund supporting youth clubs that are not penalized [17].

Additionally, starting with the 2023/2024 competitive season, academy classification became a mandatory condition for clubs wishing to participate in FRF-organized youth competitions such as the Youth League and the U17 Elite League. A minimum score of 20 points is now required for participation.

Academies are evaluated based on seven fundamental areas critical to youth performance development: strategy and philosophy (10.5%), teams and players (12.7%), technical staff (19.5%), support staff (7.1%), training and matches (9.2%), infrastructure and facilities (20.5%), and sporting results (20.5%). Each domain is weighted in the final score, and categories are rated on a scale from 1 to 4 points.

Through this classification procedure, FRF aims not only to continuously improve sports infrastructure and the quality of sports management, but also to raise the national competitive level in order to strengthen the talent pool for national teams [18].

In 2024, the top-ranked academies in Romania, according to the classification conducted by FRF, were FCV Farul Constanța (92.53 points), followed by AFK Csikszereda Miercurea Ciuc (87.66 points) and AS FC Universitatea Cluj (86.48 points). Other leading academies such as FCSB, Sepsi OSK, and ACS Sport Team also ranked highly, each scoring over 82 points (Romanian Football Federation, 2024). This distribution reflects not only the consistency of elite academy performance but also the consolidation of youth management structures in Romanian football, in line with the new licensing standards.

A comparative analysis of results obtained in 2023 and 2022 reveals a positive trend: 64% of academies re-evaluated in 2023 recorded improved scores compared to

the previous year (Romanian Football Federation, 2023). Farul Constanța, AFK Csikszereda, and Universitatea Cluj are examples of academies that, despite slight variations in score, maintained their top positions. This general progress highlights the impact of implementing sustainable sports development policies, infrastructure modernization, and the professionalization of technical staff—essential aspects in the performance management of youth football in Romania.

To better understand the differences in administrative, sporting, and financial requirements imposed on clubs in Romania’s top three football tiers, the following comparative table provides a synthesis of the key licensing and certification criteria applicable in Liga 1, Liga 2, and Liga 3 (Table 2).

Table 2. Comparative Table: Licensing Requirements – Liga 1 vs. Liga 2 vs. Liga 3 [19, 20, 21]

Criteria	SUPERLIGA (First division) (UEFA/FRF License)	Liga 2 (second division) (FRF Certification)	Liga 3 (third division) (FRF Certification)
1. Infrastructure	UEFA or FRF Category 4 approved stadium, mandatory floodlights, modern locker rooms, conference room, media areas, covered seating.	FRF-approved stadium, adequate locker rooms, no floodlight requirement.	FRF-approved pitch with minimal facilities: locker rooms, referee cabin, scoreboard.
2. Personnel and Administration	General Director, certified accountant, Sports Director, Press Officer, H&S Officer, Head Coach with UEFA Pro License.	Minimum organizational structure, Head Coach with UEFA A or Pro License.	Head Coach with at least UEFA A License, one club administrator.
3. Youth Sector	Points-based system: Clubs must meet a minimum score in the youth academy assessment system. Evaluation criteria: Number of teams in competitions, competitive level (Elite League, county leagues), coach qualifications, available infrastructure, results achieved, partnerships with schools and institutions. Additional obligations: Mandatory participation in FRF U19 and U17 competitions.	Points-based system: Same assessment system as Liga 1, but lower score threshold reflecting competitive level and available resources. Differences from Liga 1: The scoring threshold is lower, reflecting the competitive level and available resources. Additional obligations: Mandatory participation in the U19 and U17 competitions organized by the Romanian Football Federation (FRF).	Specific requirement: Clubs must have at least 5 youth teams registered in official competitions organized by the FRF or AJF. Flexibility: There is no scoring system; the focus is on the actual existence and activity of the youth teams. Purpose: To encourage the development and maintenance of an active youth sector at the local level.

4. Financial Situation	Audited financial statements, no debts to the state, players, coaches, or other creditors.	Clear accounting documents, no outstanding debts to employees or FRF/AFAN.	Simplified situation, self-declaration on the absence of debts.
5. Performance standards	Sporting performance in the previous season + continuity (at least 3 years of activity).	Participation in national competitions following FRF regulations.	Compliance with competition regulations, no major sanctions.
6. Legal Criteria	The club must be a separate legal entity, with no ongoing disputes regarding establishment or legal identity.	Registration certificate + FRF statute.	Own statute or affiliation agreement.
7. Financial Fair Play Criteria	Periodic financial reporting, audit, annual verification by the Licensing Commission.	Financial statements + possible thematic inspection by FRF.	No audit, only administrative checks.

Digitalization of Sports Management and the Impact of Emerging Technologies

Digital transformation represents a major opportunity for the modernization of sports management. The use of digital solutions—from sports performance management platforms (e.g., Catapult, Veo, WyScout) to specialized CRMs for ticketing and fan engagement—offers clubs the ability to streamline decision-making processes and improve communication with supporters [22, 23].

Moreover, data analytics and artificial intelligence are increasingly being integrated into scouting processes, injury prevention, and training optimization. Clubs that adopt these solutions gain significant competitive advantages [24].

In Romania, the implementation of such technologies is largely confined to top-tier Liga 1 clubs, due to high costs and the lack of specialized competencies. A good practice example is the Gheorghe Hagi Academy, which uses integrated physical and video monitoring systems with a positive impact on the development of young players. Additionally, clubs such as Sepsi OSK and CFR Cluj have begun investing in video analysis platforms and digital management systems. For these tools to become more widely adopted, it is necessary to train a technological workforce within federations and leagues, as well as to offer fiscal incentives for acquiring sports technologies [25].

The integration of digital transformation in sports management also requires a shift in leadership mindset—from intuition-based decisions to data-driven processes. Thus, digitalization is not merely a technological upgrade but a structural prerequisite for modernizing sport [26].

An important contribution to the implementation of new technologies in Romanian youth football is the use of GPS monitoring equipment and video platforms even at the junior level. In applied research, Vicol [27, 28] demonstrated how systems

such as Catapult, Polar, and Veo can be integrated into the planning and evaluation of U14 training sessions, contributing to the optimization of external load and players' decision-making processes. These findings suggest that, even outside the professional context of Liga 1, technology can have a major impact on sports training—provided there is a well-defined implementation strategy and trained technical staff. This highlights a clear trend toward the professionalization of sports management at the level of academies and sports schools, helping to reduce the digital gap compared to Western European clubs.

Conclusions

This study highlights both the success models in Romanian sports management and the major challenges hindering the sustainable development of this sector. Elite academies such as Farul, Csíkszereda, and Universitatea Cluj demonstrate that high-level performance can be achieved through strategic investments, coherent planning, and the professionalization of human resources.

On the other hand, chronic issues related to underfunding, lack of professional expertise, and legislative inconsistencies undermine the progress of many sports clubs and institutions. The licensing and classification systems introduced by the Romanian Football Federation (FRF) have created a framework for improving standards; however, their impact remains uneven due to disparities in infrastructure and access to resources, particularly between tiers.

Moreover, the digital transformation of sports management—through tools such as Catapult, Veo, Polar, and data analytics platforms—offers a crucial opportunity for modernization. These technologies enable more precise performance tracking, support evidence-based decision-making, and have begun to reduce the gap between Romanian and Western European youth development systems. Nevertheless, their large-scale adoption is still limited to a few clubs, primarily due to financial constraints and insufficient technical training.

The findings also underscore the importance of tailored youth development policies, fair financial play enforcement, and transparent certification standards across all competition levels—from Liga 1 to Liga 3. The example of Gheorghe Hagi Academy, as well as the applied intervention studies using U14 squads, validate the role of systemic training planning, cognitive and physical monitoring, and the value of data-informed coaching strategies.

In conclusion, Romanian sports management is undergoing a critical transformation. Its long-term success depends on the institutional capacity to adopt modern, sustainable, and performance-oriented models, aligning national practices with international best standards.

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