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## Heroes of Romanian Sports in Transition

By Cristina Merrill

SEPTEMBER 13, 2004

BUCHAREST, Romania – Summer is drawing its last breath, taking in its flight memories of another intense season of “transition survival.” Translation: In the capital of this post-Communist country, summer was long and hot, made worse by heavy atmosphere produced by toxic exhaust from old cars with substandard emissions, endless building and paving construction and the chemical by-products that winds carried over from nearby factories and chemical plants. Scant greenery can’t protect residents from this pollution onslaught, since many of Bucharest’s nearby forests have fallen into developers’ hands and saws. Doctors say that such poor conditions have produced an increasing number of respiratory diseases, with lung cancer on the rise. Chain smoking, popular here, doesn’t help either.

Bucharest now has only half the 34.7 million meters of green space it had in 1989, the year the Revolution ended Communist rule, and only about five square meters of green space per person, considerably below the 12 square meters considered healthy by international standards. There are only ten bird species left here, compared to 400 throughout the country. Crows, seagulls and bats, by contrast, have adapted admirably and can be found in abundance nesting in abandoned and neglected spaces. No wonder the Sci Fi channel has been shooting movies here. This city of two million people is said to be the most crowded metropolis in Europe. Every square kilometer pits together about 9,079 people, about three times as many as either Vienna (3,950), Budapest (3,674) or Berlin (3,905) and ten times more than Paris, where 890 people occupy the same measure of space. By that count alone, Bucharest, which has in the past called itself “Little Paris,” should now become “Great Paris.” Or perhaps not.

Cornel Nistorescu, the daily *Evenimentul Zilei* editorial writer considered the most powerful journalist here, recently wrote in typical dramatic style that the pervasive dust, large holes in the roads, dogs and loose women on the prowl make for an “infernal” city. He called Bucharest “an enormous open market where you can sell yourself quicker and for more... garbage cans, even when empty, stink as bad as the holes on the outskirts. And [where] the center and historic part of the city stinks. It’s humid. Its old walls, which cry for help, grin at the poor who hang on to them in desperation. The walls’ cavities grin. The toothless roads marking the lines of the tram grin as well. The police officer who asks for a bribe because he caught you in some offense grins too. The garbage that collects after a day of inferno grins as well. Everybody runs around like mad to shoot down [a few dollars].”

It’s a mad, mad world indeed. I cannot think of too many places elsewhere where I can have my skirt lifted by teenage boys, in daylight and full view of grinning security guards posted outside Bucharest’s Anti-Corruption Tribunal. The daredevils’ hands worked swiftly, much the same way they work on buses and subways, pickpocketing the elderly. Law and order are applied haphazardly here. A recent mayoral directive ordered all shopkeepers to clean the pavement outside their stores every Monday morning, but there are parts of the capital consistently left dirty and unusable because of construction projects that spill out

into the streets — with no protection for pedestrians. And while in this year of elections the government tinkles with minor measures, such as keeping already-low produce prices low, it still offers no solution for handling the city's roaming dogs — 60,000 of them officially, though I'll bet the last canine census was taken long ago, before dogs learned the joys of free love in this transition period. One technique I have learned to use when approached by a barking, furry ruffian is to shout back — though the advice is voided when a whole gang appears. Then, I'm told, climbing on top of a car is advisable. That shouldn't be too hard, since there are plenty of cars on and off the sidewalk. I may, in fact, end up performing such stunts unwillingly, at the mercy of careless drivers who zoom out of tunnels at full speed into one-way streets while looking to the right, if they look at all. I'd like to remind these Michael Schumacher-wannabes at the wheel of 30-year-old fume-factories that their instincts are good on UK roads only, but since I'm usually running for my life I have little time for sarcasm.

A not-too-distant memory to cheer up the nation has been that of the Athens Olympics, which brought Romania an excellent 15<sup>th</sup>-place finish among nations in the medal count and an impressive eight gold medals. Since the majority of wins, in gymnastics and rowing, came early, Romania saw itself in 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> place for the first ten days, prompting a national love fest with these athletes, also nicknamed the "*tricolors*," or the "three-color bearers," in honor of the Romanian flag's colors of red, yellow and blue. "Thanks to them, our country now finds herself among the best on earth," wrote one journalist. "The magnificent six!" cried the media when Romanian gymnasts beat the American team to win first place in the team competition. "They are the most beloved of humans," said one newspaper, paraphrasing a classic Romanian novel by the same name. "The tricolors have proved once again that sport is one of the few areas in which we can compete with the world's great nations."

Catalina Ponor, the doe-eyed Romanian gymnast who won two individual gold medals in addition to the team's — giving her a tie for second place among gold medalists among all competitors — became "another Nadia" for many of those who remembered Nadia Comaneci's gymnastic success at the Montreal Olympics in 1976. Nadia, the lithe, pony-tailed 15-year-old who won three gold medals, was the first gymnast ever to score a 10, the highest possible rating in a gymnastics competition. She won that mark seven times during the '76 competition. Nadia, like tennis player Ilie Nastase, brought Romania fame in



*Romanian press proclaimed the gold winning women's gymnastics team "the magnificent six"*

the 1970s, at a time when the Communist ring was tightening its grip on the population and dictator Nicolae Ceausescu was beginning to develop his all-enveloping personality cult.

Many sports-related talents are associated with Romania. Fred Lebow, the now-deceased founder of the New York City Marathon, was born in Romania, in the city of Arad. And wealthy, Greek-born merchant Evanghelie Zappa, who became a Romanian citizen in 1844, bequeathed large sums of money to help organize sports activities modeled after the ancient Greek Olympics and is credited with being one of the seminal organizers of the modern Olympic Games.

### *Physical Education in Romania: The Beginnings*

Romanians have been sportsmen since antiquity, with skills such as archery, horseback riding and javelin throwing sharpened for military purposes. The first ritualized physical exercises were offered in a Romanian school in 1776; gymnastics was introduced in the army in 1862, and in secondary schools in 1878. Over the next few decades Romanian teachers taught exercises adapted from the three established "systems" — French, German and Swedish — finally adopting the latter by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Swedish system focused on the therapeutic as well as the educational aspect of gymnastics, with the emphasis on posture and precisely executed movements on command, often just using the body without an apparatus.

In 1922 the first national university for the teaching of physical education was created — the *Institutul National de Educatie Fizica* (National Institute of Physical Education). Over the years this sports academy has changed its name several times. Today it is known as

*Academia Nationala de Educatie Fizica si Sport*. Sports-governing bodies have also changed names many times, especially in the “transition” decade. What was the Ministry of Youth and Sports in 1992, became the National Sports Agency, which includes the Romanian Federation Sports for All and which will soon be absorbed by the Romanian Olympic Committee and reorganized.

After World War II, during the communist era, sport was considered “an issue of national interest” and its mission, as in other East European states, was to increase the prestige not only of the country but also of the regime on the world scene. One of the earliest stated missions of the newly installed Communists in the 1940s was “the creation of a democratic mass sport but also the promotion among the working masses, women, pupils and students of the fight against hooliganism, business in sporting life and professional sport.” A certain backlash persists against the forced nature of the sports movement instituted back then, and no wonder. Still, significant investment was made by the Communists in sports facilities. Bucharest alone has about half a dozen sports stadiums — albeit crumbling — a figure not even matched by my hometown, the Big Apple, New York.

I was a beneficiary of the old system, taking classes in gymnastics, running and learning to play all sorts of sports during and after school including handball and volleyball. I even remember practicing the long jump in a specially arranged part of the school courtyard. I was — and am — the daughter of a physical-education teacher and passionate sports lover who first took me running on the streets of Bucharest when I was seven. I grew up accompanying my dad to track and field meets, watching in awe and attempting to emulate high-jumpers, sprinters, even discus throwers. I will never forget the peculiar smell of sweat and burned rubber that floated above athletes competing in indoor meets. At the age of

eight I was lucky enough to pass a screening, consisting of two full days of physical-exercise tests, to select a small group of children to be grown into the next generation of champions by the Romanian Tennis Federation.

Lessons were free, though it’s also true that it was thanks to my father’s power of persuasion — and my mom’s cooking, which rewarded my coach’s effort — that I learned to play tennis properly. At the time Bucharest had plenty of outdoor courts but very few indoor ones, so I have some unpleasant memories of waking up at 3 a.m. to secure a tennis court way before the gym cleaner ever showed up. I can’t say I liked the obligatory gymnastics lessons — flexibility was never my strong point — but I’m thankful for having being exposed to so much sports activity early on. I now can’t live without it. After years of competitive tennis, I have turned to long-distance and marathon running. It’s rare to see runners on the streets of Bucharest, so I don’t blame people for staring at me when I run. Women, particularly, regard me curiously. Recently I stopped at a gas station to buy a bottle of water and the saleswoman asked me “why” I run. She wouldn’t have understood, but I wanted to say that I do it for the joy of it, and also because I’ve always done it — and I learned it right here.

### *Now: Sports for the Few*

It is especially evident now, 15 years into the transition, that in the absence of the compulsory “physical education socialist system” that sought to create a sports culture both for the masses and at the highest performance level, exercise is now an afterthought for this former factory of champions. It is reserved for only an elite group who still work under the old stringent rules. Away from home for 11 months of the year, gymnasts train for eight hours a day and endure a Spartan regimen of small portions of food. Sport tends to be practiced by the wealthy

few who can afford the high price of equipment (good sneakers cost \$90, or \$900 in terms of US buying power) and indoor gyms. Studies by the Romanian Federation Sports for All show that only ten percent of Romanian people say they engage in leisure sports. The percentage is higher in cities, with one fifth of the urban population exercising regularly. Research shows that in their free time Romanians prefer watching TV, spending time with friends and family at home or in restaurants, or even talking on the phone to participating in sports.

After a decade of lack of interest, the government is waking up, but some say that it is too little, too late. For one thing, last year it ordered the building of 436 school indoor gyms throughout the country, to be completed by elec-







*The first of the 436 school indoor gyms the Romanian government is rushing to build before elections in November*

tion time this year, at the end of November. Critics point to the fact that many contracts have been awarded on the basis of political patronage and that proper space dimensions are omitted in the rush to completion. Some gyms, in fact, are not functional at all, lacking proper roofs or insulation. While they are fit for a number of sports, including basketball, volleyball and tennis (singles), they don't have the right dimensions for such popular school-level sports as handball — nor do they have enough space to allow for spectator stands. I visited the first finished gym, which belongs to gymnasium No. 22 in Bucharest (grades 1 through 8) and officially opened last November. It proudly displayed a large blue banner touting its firstness.

Another directive, under the slogan "Movement for Health," has been to require all entities that answer to the Sports Ministry to make their facilities available for public recreational use at least three times a week, two hours at a time. The schedules aren't always respected, especially at facilities in private hands. One such place is a nicely refurbished stadium, "Arena BNR," which has 24-hour guards at the entrance and is leased by the Romanian National Bank (a government institution). It is rarely available to the public, and prefers to charge heavily for use of its tennis courts. "That arena is a complicated case," says Viorel Coada, an official with the Bucharest Sport Direction, the main sports-coordinating entity in the capital. "The bank is not willing [to allow] anyone to use it without pay."

Whereas back in the bad old days, up to

four hours of physical exercise was required in schools — not counting regular daily and weekend extracurricular competition — some students now exercise only an hour or so a week. Sabina Macovei, a leading gymnastics teacher, says that because of lack of physical exercise, Romanian kids today are more anemic and physically underdeveloped than 30 years ago. She says that it is harder and harder to recruit talented youngsters. "We are raising a nation of motor-skills-handicapped people," she says.

### *The Romanian sport bubble*

A sports-writer friend from the U.S. e-mailed to congratulate me on Romania's achievement in Athens and to pass on a remark from a friend's mother who "admires the athletic prowess of Romanian athletes,

and sometimes refers to Romanians as 'the pint-sized Master Race.' It's true that Romanians aren't all *that* tall — except perhaps in the Northern and Western part of the country, where fresh air and Hungarian and Germanic blood help produce "men as tall as fir trees." But you can't help being impressed by a nation of 21 million that wins 19 Olympic medals, while a country like India, with a population of a billion, can garner only one silver.

I think that Romanian success in sports has less to do with genes than with a long tradition of very hard work, sustained during four decades of Communism by a combination of forced training and the desperate desire among athletes to succeed and leave the country.



*A government directive requires sports facilities to allow the public to play sports a few times a week, at set hours.*

Communism force-fed winners, but did not inspire a physical-education culture here. Now, in the transition stage, that tradition of hard work has been replaced by a laissez-faire attitude — even neglect — in both the government and the general population. That attitude will soon enough spill over into performance sports. Romania could be in for a disappointing showing as early as the next Olympics in China.

What's more, the latest success is illusory, critics say, since most of the Romanian medals were won in just a handful of sports — the “last mohicans,” made up of gymnastics (which accounted for more than half the medals and has a very high-turnover of athletes), rowing and swimming. What's worse, the Olympic-team gymnastics coaches, unhappy with their salaries and teaching conditions, are threatening either to leave the country or quit training the national team and set up a private studio.

As a sports journalist here wrote after the Olympics, “The performances obtained by our athletes do not reflect the daily reality. The long string of medals is blinding us to the truth. In Romania, sports on a large scale doesn't exist. Too few people exercise for the joy of it. Even fewer relax doing gymnastics or rowing. The infrastructure is nonexistent, while the much-touted “indoor gyms” promised by the government exist only on paper. That's why, every time our athletes come back with a bag of medals, we can say we're witnessing a small wonder.”

As a way to encourage top athletes to reach Olympic heights, four years ago the government started awarding sizable monetary awards for medals, increasing the prizes this year to 55,000 Euros (about \$70,000) for each gold medal “I would rather use the money for each medal to encourage every Romanian to perform some kind of health movement on a daily basis,” says Aurelia Suci, the head of the Romanian Federation Sports for All, a former governmental outfit now turned NGO and tasked with increasing recreational physical activity among Romanians — a losing battle, some say. Even though she will not quote exact figures, she says performance sports receive the lion's share of public funds, an elitist way of encouraging sports that serves to perpetuate the material incentives that kept athletes performing during Communism — and which doesn't help create a culture of engaging in sport for the love of it.

“Here, we're not like in the West,” says Viorel Coadă. He says he has been impressed every time he has traveled abroad to see groups of people engaged in recreational races for “the fun of it,” and not for money. “People don't come for the joy of sport in Romania, they come for prizes. We need to teach them to want to run for the joy of fresh air. Hopefully, the fitness “virus” will get here as some point. Here people prefer to go out for a beer to relax rather than exercise.”

Top athletes (and members of the security forces) were among the few Romanians allowed to travel abroad



*Anca Vasile, a former competitive handball player, entered sports so she could travel abroad during Communism.*

before 1989, so the incentive for many was to become among the best in the country and get out. As rewards for acting as golden representatives of the regime, these athletes were treated royally, with gifts of money, housing and access to material goods not available to ordinary Romanians. But what kept many of them going was the international-travel carrot. Anca Vasile, a former competitive handball player who is now a fitness instructor, said that her mother pushed her to get into the sport so she could, hopefully, get out. “I remember my first trip to Germany,” she said. “It opened a whole new world for me.”

Many Romanian athletes defected over the years, including Nadia and the coaches who trained her, Martha and Bela Karoly. The three created a gymnastics force in the United States, where they settled. The 1,216-page 2002 edition of the bible on Romania's participation at the Olympic Games, *Romania at the Olympic Games* lists for the first time 84 Romanian representatives at various Olympics who had previously been kept out of older versions of the book because they had defected and thus were considered traitors during the Communist era.

#### *To leave or not to leave*

The trouble is, they're still defecting, in a way. Now that Communism is gone, athletes can legally settle or spend long chunks of time elsewhere. It's happening in other post-Communist countries as well. The Russian women tennis players now dominating the professional circuit train in sunny Florida and California. Some Romanian athletes spend the year playing abroad for international professional teams (Romania's best soccer player, for example, is a forward for the UK's Chelsea team); others simply move to other countries. Even surprise silver medallist Ionela Tarlea in the 400 meter hurdles in Athens has announced she is following her new husband and moving to Canada.

Even if many wanted to stay and train in Romania, conditions are not fit for preparation for international





*The Romanian hockey team has not been able to use the Lia Manoliu ice rink, whose roof still leaks.*

competition. The national hockey team, which usually trains in Bucharest, has had to travel hours away to Galati for training. They've been promised that their rink, part of the National Sports Complex Lia Manoliu, will reopen this fall, but a former hockey player said to me, "If you saw what poor condition the rink is in, with a leaking roof, you'd cry." I have fond memories of that rink, incidentally, since I spent a year there learning to skate and train for competitions. Thirty years ago, the rink was nicely maintained. The upstairs restaurant served delicious hot chocolate and grilled *Croque Monsieur* ham-and-cheese sandwiches.

There are no Olympic-quality pools in Bucharest, for instance. Olympic diver Ramona Ciobanu, who lives in the capital, had to train far away — but even one of those distant pools, in the city of Bacau, had broken windows, so Ramona trained in freezing temperatures in the winter. As Ramona's coach, Claudia Tiu, said to a reporter, 'People nowadays would much rather buy a PC for their kids than enroll them in a sports program. For diving, this is all the more difficult because there are no places to train, so very few juniors become senior performers.'

Under these conditions, teachers and coaches are demoralized. Teachers here are poorly paid in general, at about \$200 a month — about half the amount miners, garbage collectors and police officers bring in, and a quarter of what members of the judiciary earn. In fact, a general teachers' strike is announced for later this month, to coincide with the start of the school year.

"The thinking among teachers is, 'Why should I kill myself to make so little money?'" says Stefan Iancu, a retired physical-education teacher who lives in Campina, one hour outside of Bucharest. He says the situation got worse over the last few years, as teachers became disillusioned

with the transition period. During Communism, teachers were paid middle-class salaries. He said he went back to visit the school where he used to teach, only to see that the red-clay tennis court he helped build nearby had been abandoned. "It's hard to motivate kids and teachers nowadays," he says. "Many kids choose to opt out of phys-ed, but even when they do go to class they get substitute teachers who don't care. And kids prefer to watch TV, eat fast food and use the computer."

### *Young and Restless Coaches*

Teacher-morale problems were evident at a fitness-instructor camp I attended (as an observer), at the end of which coaches-in-training received certificates from the Romanian Federation Sports for All that allow them to teach at various levels, up to internationally approved standards. For one, the county

organizer who was supposed to mobilize local coaches had recently left for Qatar on a contract to teach physical education — causing Aurelia Suciu, head of the Romanian Federation Sports for All, to scramble for participants. It wouldn't be the first time Ms. Suciu — whom people here sometimes refer to as "a hero for a lost era" and the "undisputed queen of mass sports in Romania" — lost a trusted person. In fact, she says she cannot remember who among the dozens of young coaches she has supervised over the decade the entity has been in existence has remained in Romania. (Before 1992 the agency was called the Direction of Public Sports Programmes.) Those who have left are either in the Middle East (Dubai, Qatar and Kuwait are well-paying hot spots at the moment) or have settled in the United States.

Her flock's dispersal is a sore topic for this Mother Sports, who loves and keeps in touch with all her projects. One day after the camp closed, I was in her office in Bucharest, trying to get a five-minute interview between numerous visits from the sports organizers, government officials or former students who stop in to say hello during brief visits from abroad. I heard her talk about a young man, a fitness-dance instructor I had met at the camp and who has a dance studio in the city. "Tudor wants to leave [Romania] too," she sighed after hanging up the phone. "They all leave. Nobody will be left here to take my place when I retire," said this 58-year-old former gymnast and monument of vitality. "But who can blame them? How does one live on \$100 or \$200 a month?"

Ms. Vasile, a former Suciu student who had come back to Romania a few months earlier after spending five years as an aerobics instructor in Kuwait, said she had hoped to open a gym for families in Bucharest, where mothers could leave their children while they worked out. Women engage even less than men in recreational

exercise in Romania, spending their free time instead on household chores, raising children and cooking. Ironically, however, women are big winners at the highest performance levels. At this year's Olympics, all eight of the Olympic gold medals awarded to Romanians were won by women athletes, prompting one enthusiastic journalist to give Romanian sexist men a word of advice: "Next time a ferocious member of the male species screams at a daughter of Eve, "To the cooking pan with you!" he ought to eat his words and mutter, "To the Olympics with you!"

Ms. Vasile, a shapely 30-year-old who credits her infectious confidence to the years she's spent as an athlete, said she was shocked to see, upon her return, the "difference in mentality" between her native country and Kuwait. She thinks she'll end up either going back to Kuwait or to a Western European country, such as Spain, to teach fitness. "There is nothing for me in this country. Nobody is interested in sports here. I have seen 60-year-old Kuwaiti women who look far better than some of our 40-year-olds because they exercise. But even if they did want to exercise, there are few places to do it, especially outdoors. There are no bike lanes, no proper roads. If you wanted to go out on the bike you'd be pressed to avoid the cars on the pavement. Forget about going on the road. It's too bad to have to go to another country to work but what are we to do?"

The same ambivalence is shared by another young woman I know, Luminita Paun, a fitness instructor at the Hilton hotel. This petite, 27-year-old firecracker and daughter of a former handball player, is pondering leaving for Nice, France, where she has been accepted into a physical-education program starting in October. Luminita already has a diploma from Bucharest's prestigious ANEFS (National Academy for Physical Education and Sport). Only two of her four university years count toward the Nice degree but she is willing to undertake two more years of school just to "enter the fitness network"



*Fitness instructor Luminita Paun (left, with me) has not decided whether to go abroad for better "networking" opportunities.*



*Aurelia Suci, Secretary General of Romanian Federation Sports for All, and famous fitness instructor Radu Teodorescu*

abroad and, hopefully, earn good money afterwards. She is not deterred by the foreign-language problem nor the hard work she will have to perform outside school to pay for tuition and expenses. "Life as a student in Bucharest was difficult. I know all about tough living conditions and scraping by to survive," she says. Indeed, students live in deplorable conditions in the "camine" (student housing) in Romania.

No task is too hard for Luminita, or too beneath her. She is one of six young members of the Hilton fitness team (almost all are ANEFS graduates), most of whom take turns working the reception desk, cleaning floors, providing massages (which they learned to do at university) and acting as instructors, of course. The major hotel chains here are hiring qualified instructors like Luminita and are, as a result, fueling a pioneering recreational movement effort — though few ordinary Romanians can afford annual memberships ranging from \$750 (Hilton) to as much as \$2,500 (Marriott). The latter, however, has a state-of-the-art gym and an indoor swimming pool and is launching a second large facility right across from the Hilton.

It will be interesting to see what Luminita decides to do next. I have seen her under-eye circles get darker and darker over the last few weeks as she has fought to get a sponsor in France, a loan — and has debated an uncertain future with her Hilton-fitness-instructor boyfriend and his mother, in whose house they both live. Recently she has been tempted to stay in Romania, lured by an offer from the Hilton that would give her greater responsibility in building an aerobics program at the hotel, which is now faced with the impending arrival of the Marriott's



established aerobic team, right across the street. On her own initiative, Luminita started offering two aerobics classes a week at the Hilton, in whatever unoccupied rooms the hotel makes available. She's certainly capable of giving Marriott a run for its money, should she decide to stay.

### Radu

One of the more famous legacies of the sports culture created under Communism is Radu Teodorescu, the world-renowned fitness instructor known simply as "Radu" to many international models and Hollywood stars.

Since leaving his native country in 1972 (he settled in the US in 1977), Radu managed to parlay his knowledge of Romania's famous physical-education tradition — like Luminita, he is a 1969 graduate of ANEFS — into an enviable clientele in the United States. Among the celebrities whose bodies Radu has shaped are Cindy Crawford, Anthony Quinn, Calista Flockhard, Susan Broderick, Jodie Foster and Calvin Klein. He was named "Toughest Trainer" by *New York Magazine*, in 1983.

With three fitness locations in Manhattan and a mega-center planned for March 2005 in Southhampton, Long Island, Radu has enough on his hands to keep him busy in America. But love of his native Romania has brought him back on numerous occasions and persuaded him to open, last October, Radu Fitness International, the only center outside the United States where the Radu Method, his interpretation of the Romanian fitness system, is taught. He has a partner in the venture and though I don't know the facts and figures of the matter, I don't think it makes much money at the moment. Classes, which start at about \$9 an hour, aren't cheap for Romanians, especially if they don't consider spending on exercise a necessity.

If his venture proves successful, he intends to open more such gyms throughout Romania. He has seen that the sports tradition in this country has suffered after the Revolution. "All of a sudden, people don't care about sports anymore," Radu says. "Heroism and patriotism have been lost. Unfortunately, it's all about money now."

However, he says he is devoted to helping bring a sports culture back to Romania. Beyond the visits he makes to the fitness center to help train staff and keep up morale, Radu returns a couple times a year to teach his method and sports-marketing during camp sessions sponsored by the Sport For All Romanian Federation. "Radu can serve as a symbol of sport and fitness for Ro-



(Above) Radu instructing his staff (Below) At Radu Fitness, the instructors are all former athletes and train themselves to keep in shape.



mania," says Ms. Suci, who is one of Radu's good friends in Romania. "We have a long sports tradition that we need to uphold. He will help get us through what has been a painful and endless transition."

When I heard Radu was in town for a short while, I hurried to meet him and take one of his famous classes. He offered the sessions free of charge, as a way of promoting the new gym. Surprisingly, only about eight people showed up. Radu may be approaching fitness-god status back in the States, but in Romania he is known only by a few, many of them TV stars who hire him a session at a time to keep them looking photogenic. Radu is also a columnist for magazines, such as the Romanian edition of *Elle*, but in general his name doesn't evoke the same response here as it would in New York or Los Angeles.

I was terrified of meeting him for the first time, but



once he appeared I relaxed. Radu is naturally charming and open. On the short side and slightly balding, he's not Apollo, either, which makes him that much more approachable. In between hurried sips of coffee, he made sure to greet and tease his instructors and the rest of us, calling everyone "darling," even though we soon felt like victims.

"Let's play," he boomed, leading us into the wide studio of the gym, a large and sunny room with panoramic views of the city but otherwise spartanly furnished: a few workout machines, wooden benches, mounted ladders, mattresses. It's the kind of gym room familiar to anyone who grew up under Communism, when sports had no frills. The Radu Method draws from traditional ways of teaching physical education in Romania, where the emphasis, as adapted from the so-called Swedish method, has been to use the body, rather than machines, to achieve a full-body workout. His method employs movements from gymnastics, track and field, martial arts and cycling, adapted to each client's needs. The method is, however, all his own. Radu's personality shines through the pace and rhythm of the exercises. "This isn't just about sports," he says. "It's an attitude about life, the pleasure of living. We need to rediscover the pleasures in play we had as children. Life is the ultimate Olympiad." Maybe if more people learned to make the tough Communist sports philosophy fun, more people would exercise in Romania.

Many of the moves, though quite intense, are playful, even childish. Quick sprints were coupled with measured jumps, lunges, stretches and more dance-like side-steps, all flowing seamlessly to the rhythmic beats of music. The hour started with aerobic workout and ended with serious abdominal and stretching work. I was grateful that the medicine balls I eyed in the corner of the room were not put to use that morning. I was even more grateful to be a mere observer at a later session that night, when Radu oversaw a master class for his instructors and some advanced clients. There, I witnessed some feats of physical supremacy, as the instructors jumped around wooden benches, climbed ladders and slalomed between obstacles. Radu is already a mentor to his young instructors, some of whom have followed him to the United States over the years. That's where many of Suciu's "kids" have gone. In fact, 80 percent of his instructors in America are Romanian.

### *Rays of Light*

Not all the young guns are leaving Romania. A bright light is 30-year-old Hilton instructor, Ion Vrancea. Friends call Ion "John," because they sense in him a confident, can-do Western attitude. A graduate of ANEFS with a specialty in kino-therapy (a type of rehabilitation sports medicine), John is vowing to stay put for now. "I want to enjoy success with my own friends from home," he says with a booming voice that scares the revelers in the trendy coffee shop we're sitting in — and which doesn't fit in

with John's simple and straightforward attitude. "I can't take my friends with me abroad. I'm very tied to what I'm doing here."

John has clear ideas about the problems this country is facing as far as sports and politics are concerned. "There is a large gap between performance sports and recreational sports. There is no solid foundation for sports for everybody, in part because there is no demand — and the demand is not there because the facilities aren't there. After 1989, Romanian society fell flat, the way bread dough deflates with bad yeast. We need to start over from scratch. We need charismatic leaders who actually care to help this country."

John, who once considered becoming a lawyer, could be one of those leaders. During his university years he brought back the dormant student association, served as president during his last year and fought on the students' behalf for better housing. One of his accomplishments was persuading authorities to stop overcharging students for maintenance costs, such as electricity. He searched past records and found out that students were being charged three times as much as they should have been. "It was a full-time job, doing all that research," he said. "We became experts in invoices. But it just hadn't been done before. It's a big problem when civil society doesn't know its rights."

John hopes some day to go back to his small town of Slobozia, about one hour outside of Bucharest, and get into politics. He doesn't know how yet, as people there "wouldn't know what to do with a CV if I sent them mine," but he feels it's necessary for people like him to bring about change. As part of his future political life, he even envisions helping build in his hometown a "five-star town hall," with professional customer service, and honest and accountable politicians — all in good time.

An idealistic spirit also fuels Doru Trasca, one of the founders of the "Ecology Sport Tourism" Association (or EST), a 10-year-old nongovernmental organization that promotes eco-tourism and sport among young Romanians at the high-school level. EST educates students about Romania's nature and mountains (the Carpathian Mountains cover a third of the country), trains hiking guides and organizes hiking and trekking trips throughout the year — all on a shoestring budget. I met the 33-year-old during one of the group's weekly meetings, at a YMCA-type facility close to a large engineering school, the Polytechnics University. I needed guidance from one of EST's members to get there across the large, nameless and abandoned park that leads to the facility. Large mounds of trash, apparently dumped there by the public entity that administers the city's trash, dotted a large portion of the entrance to the facility. "I want to start a campaign called "Save the parks of Bucharest," Doru says when he talks about that site.

Over the last decade, Doru has fought hard to keep

EST afloat — it took two years for the association to get all the approvals from four ministries it needed to function. The group has grown to about 120 members, though only about a dozen are “active.” Recruiting students, Doru says, has been very difficult. He gets a scant 10 or 15 interested students from among the 600-700 students at one of the 15 high schools in the capital and the near vicinity. “They are sedentary, today’s youth. They care a lot about computers, drugs, night clubs, not health and fitness. We also lack idols.” A former rugby player, Doru says that he was fortunate to have been exposed to sports during Communism. “Playing a sport early on gave me a lifelong taste for exercise. It’s hard to convince today’s young people, who haven’t been exposed to competitive exercise, to love sports. In fact, we see a big difference among those who play sports and are enthusiastic about joining us and those who do not — and couldn’t care less.”



Doru Trasca, president of an eco tourism NGO: “Playing a sport early on gave me a lifelong taste for exercise.”

Doru is one of the few remaining “adults” running EST. In his free time he also puts out about 350 issues of the group’s educational magazine, *Ecoturistica*. Out of the group’s 24 founders, only two remain — Doru, as president, and Gabriel Popa, vice president. Most of the rest have gone abroad. “Young entrepreneurial people leave the country. Those who remain have become blasé. By the time they reach 35 they are tired, they get to be ‘respectable elders.’ I’m almost there,” he quips. Doru is certainly part of the last generation to have received training in ecotourism under the old regime (he was 18 when the Revolution took place), and as such got the mountaineering bug during classes offered back then by an outfit called Biroul de Tourism pentru Tineret (BTT), translated as The Youth Tourism Office. It remains to be seen whether the young people Doru and others like him inspire will continue this type of movement past the transition stage.

#### *Next: democracy with a whip?*

It will be interesting to see how the sports movement will progress over the next few years. Beyond the battle for Romanians’ interest in recreational sport, an atmosphere of chaos exists in terms of the direction the movement should take. At the moment, many of the people in charge of sports programs are of the older generation, from before the Revolution. In the best circumstances, these are people like Ms. Suciuc and Mr. Coadă in the most fortunate of circumstances — former athletes who spent decades in the old system.

All programs, not just sports-related ones, were highly bureaucratic and propagandistic under the old regime. Verbosity has unfortunately survived 15 years later, which makes for good talk but not much action. Many of today’s paper-shuffling “bosses” like to issue directives but don’t follow through on proposals. When

I inquired at the Bucharest Sport Direction about the kinds of events they organize, I was given a stack of papers, directives, and random names of winners at various “activities.” It’s true that the number of organized sports “activities” at the school level have almost doubled in the last two years in Bucharest. Hopefully the increased participation will happen naturally, and not by way of force, though I also agree that the population needs a vigorous push to get out of inertia.

Mr. Coadă thinks that the answer may be “democracy with a whip,” though his views aren’t always welcome among younger staff members, who jokingly refer to him as “Comrade Coadă.” His idea is to push teachers to get more children involved in sports, though the notion of forcing teachers to do anything reminds some of Communism. In the old days, teachers, including my father, were made to spend weekends performing community work with students or organizing marches for Party celebrations.

“I’m not afraid to say that we organized marches back then,” he says. “Writing whole slogans out of hundreds of bodies.” [As part of Communist celebratory marches, performers, dressed in various colors, were trained to spell out different slogans, names or dates by arranging themselves in different positions that involved stretching, bending, waving of their bodies.] “This took serious work and discipline. Marches were a professional exercise — politics came into the equation only five percent of the time... Maybe sports organization before 1989 was forced, but at least it existed.”

Whatever the means, I hope something for the better will happen. I was particularly encouraged when visiting the school that received the first indoor gym. The school is in an area of high unemployment, due to the laying off of thousands of workers from



the “23<sup>rd</sup> of August” factory (which made tanks, among other armaments) after the Revolution. The neighborhood is grim and depressing, a post-Communist slum worthy of a Dickens narrative. And yet the newly painted school, which since 2000 has been twinned with a school in Mexico as part of a city-wide plan, is a pink-walled oasis.

The headmistress, Florentina Iofciu, proudly pointed to the racin plants and walnut trees students are caring for. We then visited the adjacent new gym, also painted pink, built in the place of what Romanians would refer to as a “*maidan*” (a vacant, deserted place). Inside, a new world opened up. The gym smelled new. The late August sun shining through the windows made the place look inviting. Basketball hoops, climbing ladders and benches lined up on all sides of the gym. Various white

and yellow lines denoted the parameters of various sports that could be played here, including basketball, volleyball and tennis.

Best of all was a group of young dancers, between the ages of six and ten, who were practicing under the supervision of a choreographer who’s also the parent of a boy who attends the school. The mother teaches these girls two hours, four times a week, for free.

The girls, who couldn’t wait to show me all their moves, including dances they knew as “The Pink Panther” or “The Egyptian,” were radiant. They looked happy, engaged and healthy. I thought back to the question that woman asked me in the gas station — Why I do I run? Looking at the little girls, I knew the answer: It’s a sign of hope. □



*The new indoor gym at this school is a sign of hope in an otherwise depressed neighborhood.*

# INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

## Fellows and their Activities

### **Alexander Brenner** (June 2003 - 2005) • **CHINA**

With a B.A. in History from Yale in 1998 and a Master's degree in China Studies and International Economics from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Alex in China, focused on the impact of a new government and a new membership in the World Trade Organization on Chinese citizens, institutions and regions both inside and far from the capital.

### **Richard D. Connerney** (January 2005-2007) • **INDIA**

A lecturer in Philosophy, Asian Religions and Philosophy at Rutgers, Iona College and the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Rick Connerney will spend two years as a Phillips Talbot Fellow studying and writing about the intertwining of religion, culture and politics in India, once described by former U.S. Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith as "a functioning anarchy." Rick has a B.A. and an M.A. in religion from Wheaton College and the University of Hawaii, respectively.

### **Cristina Merrill** (May 2004 - 2006) • **ROMANIA**

Born in Bucharest, Cristina moved from Romania to the United States with her mother and father when she was 14. Learning English (but retaining her Romanian), she majored in American History at Harvard College and there became captain of the women's tennis team. She received a Master's degree in Journalism from New York University in 1994, worked for several U.S. publications from *Adweek* to the *New York Times*, and will now spend two years in Romania watching it emerge from the darkness of the Ceausescu regime into the presumed light of membership in the European Union and NATO.

### **Matthew Rudolph** (January 2004-2006) • **INDIA**

Having completed a Cornell Ph.D. in International Relations, Matt is spending two years as a Phillips Talbot South Asia Fellow looking into the securitization and development of the Indian economy.

### **Matthew Z. Wheeler** (October 2002-2004) • **SOUTHEAST ASIA**

A former research assistant for the Rand Corporation, Matt is spending two years looking into proposals, plans and realities of regional integration (and disintegration) along the Mekong River, from China to the sea at Vietnam. With a B.A. in liberal arts from Sarah Lawrence and an M.A. from Harvard in East Asian studies (as well as a year-long Blakemore Fellowship in Thai language studies) Matt is also examining long- and short-term conflicts in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia.

### **Jill Winder** (July 2004 - 2006) • **GERMANY**

With a B.A. in politics from Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA and a Master's degree in Art Curating from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, Jill is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at Germany through the work, ideas and viewpoints of its contemporary artists. Before six months of intensive study of the German language in Berlin, she was a Thomas J. Watson Fellow looking at post-communist art practice and the cultural politics of transition in the former Soviet bloc (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia and Ukraine).

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