

Original Article

Romanians At The Basis Of Soccer Development In The United States Of America

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Long before the Strategic Partnership between Romania and the United States was signed on 1997, the two countries were already working closely together in the realm of soccer. Although the soccer movement in the United States began much earlier than in Romania (in 1620, according to the U.S. Soccer Timeline on the U.S. Soccer Federation's website), and the early achievements were in favor of the Americans (winning silver at the 1904 Olympic Games and bronze at the inaugural World Cup), Romanian soccer during the communist era excelled in both organization and tactical gameplay, asserting its dominance. Despite differing political ideologies and the significant distance between the two nations, collaboration began as early as the 1970's. Given that communist laws severely restricted the emigration of Romanians and that successful athletes were regarded as ambassadors of the regime-valuable assets not to be "exported"- legal exchanges of best practices were effectively impossible.

1. Introduction

In the late 19th century, thousands of British immigrants arrived in the metropolitan areas of the United States, settling in the East, Midwest, and along the Pacific Coast. These communities, often centered around textile factories, shipyards, quarries, and mines, formed soccer teams primarily composed of immigrants—a pattern seen globally during the Industrial Revolution. Initially, the rules of the game were inconsistent and varied from one region to another. The first organized soccer match on U.S. soil is traditionally considered to be the game between Princeton and Rutgers universities on November 6, 1876 (US Soccer Official Website, 2024). However, despite its historical recognition as the first soccer match, the game was quite different from modern soccer. Players used their hands to move the ball,

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making it more akin to American football influenced by rugby. It wasn't until the establishment of the first American Football Association in Newark, New Jersey, that the rules were standardized, paving the way for the structured development of soccer in the United States.

The first major competition in the United States open to teams from various leagues was the America's Cup, organized by the American Football Association (the first U.S. soccer governing body) in partnership with the Football Association of England. The inaugural tournament took place in 1885, and the final edition occurred in 1924, with teams primarily from the northeastern U.S. participating. Notable winners included Paterson True Blues, West Hudson A.A., and Bethlehem Steel F.C. Internal conflicts over the organization of soccer competitions eventually led to the dissolution of the American Football Association and the establishment of a new entity: the American Amateur Football Association. This association was recognized by FIFA in 1913, the same year the National Challenge Cup—now known as the U.S. Open Cup—was first held. The U.S. Open Cup has been held annually since 1913, apart from the 2020 and 2021 editions, which were canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With a history spanning 111 years, the U.S. Open Cup is the third oldest continuously running soccer cup in the world. Over time, following several name changes, the American Amateur Soccer Association evolved into the United States Soccer Federation we know today (Reese, 2023).

Football was introduced in Romania by sailors from the military ship H.M.S. Cockatrice, which anchored in the port of Sulina in eastern Romania, in January 1866 (Motoc, 2018). For many years following its introduction, there were no official competitions, only informal matches organized by enthusiasts of this new sport. The first officially recognized championship took place in 1909 with the establishment of the Romanian Football Federation. On Saint Nicholas' Day, according to the Orthodox calendar, amid bitter cold weather, two Bucharest-based teams, Olympia and Colentina, faced off in the inaugural match for the Herzog Cup (Oprîșan, 2016, p.8). Prior to June 21, 1921, championships were conducted regionally, by counties or cities, without a national framework. On that date, all sports societies in Romania unified under a single governing body, leading to the creation of a national championship. *Chinezul Timișoara* emerged as the country's first soccer champion and went on to win the next five consecutive titles. Other prominent teams of that era included United Ploiești, Venus Bucharest (an eight-time champion), Polonia Cernăuți, Maccabi Cernăuți, Brașovia from Brașov, and Victoria from Cluj-Napoca. The national football championship continued uninterrupted during peacetime, with pauses only during the First and Second World Wars (1916-1919 and 1941-1946).

Soccer in both the United States and Romania developed largely through the influence of players from England and other European countries with colonial ties, such as Italy and Spain. As a result, the earliest football teams in both nations were predominantly composed of foreigners. Notably, Jewish communities were particularly successful in organizing their own teams, leading to the formation of clubs like Bethlehem Steel F.C. in the U.S. and Maccabi Cernăuți in Romania.

The first international results appeared in the 30's of the last century, when both national teams qualified for the FIFA World Cup in Uruguay (1930) and Italy (1934). The following years saw a period of decline, driven by non-sporting factors such as the loss of many footballers in the battlefields of the Second World War. Additionally, the shift in the sports paradigm brought new dimensions to football.

During the period 1950-1965, soccer was undergoing major transformations both in the U.S. and in Romania.

As the Cold War began, American society sought new cultural institutions to strengthen national identity and ensure that the community was physically prepared in case of a return to arms. American football emerged as a sport that embodied the nation's character: it was a uniquely American invention, symbolizing the essence of the country, and it required strong, vigorous men, reflecting the strength and power of America. In addition to American football, other sports with American origins gained popularity, such as baseball, basketball, and bowling (University of Illinois, 2009). These sports were leveraged by Americans to showcase their athletic dominance over the Soviet Union. They promoted sports as a cultural force that exemplified the American way of life, emphasizing free expression and effective cooperation across racial and ethnic boundaries (University of Illinois, 2009).

In Romania, August 23, 1944 marks the beginning of the country's communist era. In the early years of communism, political leaders largely ignored the sports movement. However, by 1947, significant and controversial decisions began to impact domestic football. For example, Unirea Tricolor, which had won the last pre-World War II title, was forced to merge with another Bucharest team, Ciocanul, to form a new departmental club under the Militia, named Dinamo. This merger was driven by ethnic and ideological motives: Ciocanul was associated with the Jewish community in Bucharest, while Unirea Tricolor had connections to the legionnaires, who were staunch opponents of the communists. Similarly, Carmen Bucharest, a team owned by the wealthy industrialist Mociorniță, was disbanded to make way for the Army's departmental team, Steaua.

Professionalism, a capitalist remnant, was banned in 1948. All those involved in the sporting phenomenon overnight became amateurs or, better said, professionals in disguise (officially they were employed as officers, grads, miners, workers, so as not to contradict the official dogma of amateurism, but in fact they were 100% athletes) (Adam, 2020). Transfers of players between clubs were prohibited until 1953. Still there were some exceptions, such as Steaua and Dinamo clubs that had the possibility to regiment. Nicolae Ceaușescu's accession to power transformed sport into a propaganda tool, as it was in other parts of the communist countries. The awareness of the political importance of soccer as a vector of external image has led to major investments in sports infrastructure and research. It took time and money to get results. In 1970, the Romanian soccer team succeeded to qualify for the FIFA World Cup in Mexico, represented a real surprise for everyone. In a short period of time, extraordinary results were also achieved at the level of club teams, all culminating with the winning of the most important European trophy, the European Champions Cup, in 1986 by those from Steaua Bucharest.

If in Romania the 70's represents the beginning of soccer development with visible results in the eighth decade, a similar thing also happened in the United States of America, but not having the same outcome. The arrival of Pele (perhaps the greatest soccer player of all time) in 1975 and Beckenbauer in 1977 produced an indescribable hysteria in the soccer phenomenon in the US. New teams appeared, new sponsors were attracted, and American soccer was becoming an industry that rivaled the already established NBA and NHL. Seeing this soccer "paradise", other famous players wanted to enter in the American Soccer League. Johan Cruyff, George Best, Gerd Müller, Teófilo Cubillas, Eusébio, Giorgio Chinaglia took this step. Soccer had become more popular than ever. A record that still stands was set in those days: 77,691 spectators came to a soccer match played as part of a stage of the domestic championship (New York Cosmos - Fort Lauderdale Strikers on August 14, 1977). The magical framework did not last over time due to uncontrolled expansion, salary costs, but also the appearance of other more attractive competitions for the American public (indoor soccer is one such example). Unfortunately, at the end of the 1984 season, the bankruptcy of the national league was recorded (Reese, 2023).

The gradual focus on developing young football talent through centers of excellence, such as Lucefărul in Bucharest, transformed Romania's top football league into a formidable competition capable of challenging those in Western Europe. In contrast, in the U.S., bringing in world-renowned stars towards the end of their careers generated significant media attention but lacked a solid foundation and long-term strategy. Although these high-profile signings drew crowds, the absence of proper infrastructure, dedicated soccer centers, and future planning meant that fans had no viable way to engage with the sport beyond watching games. This led to a lack of sustained interest and growth in the number of players. Consequently, as new sports emerged, the public's attention shifted away from soccer to these new trends.

2. Material and methods

This article highlights the significant impact Romanian coaches and players had on the growth of soccer in the United States. Romanian coaches and their effective training methods garnered interest from American soccer representatives, who sought to collaborate with them by offering substantial salaries and the promise of a comfortable lifestyle. Romanian footballers from the 1970s and 1980s, such as Dudu Georgescu, a two-time European top scorer in 1975 and 1977, and Romulus Gabor, named the best player at the 1981 Under-20 World Championship in Australia, were highly sought after by leading global clubs. Sports agents and even politicians, including French President Georges Pompidou, who negotiated with Ceaușescu the transfer of Voinea and Pârçălab to Nîmes during Ceaușescu's visit to France in June 1970, actively worked to secure opportunities for these players to compete abroad (Cojocaru, 2011). However, the Ceaușescu regime only permitted players over 30 who had served "the country and the party" to leave. As a result, many top Romanian players missed opportunities to join prestigious teams like Real Madrid, which offered a then-record \$2 million for Nicolae Dobrin, or Juventus Torino, where President Agnelli prepared a significant financial offer and even

proposed building a FIAT factory in Romania to secure Gheorghe Hagi's signature.

The topic is really interesting considering the following aspects:

- This is a fitting moment for reflection, as we have recently marked the 30th anniversary of Romanian football's greatest achievement at the national team level, secured on American soil during the 1994 FIFA World Cup;

- The Major League Soccer from United States of America is an important target for Romanian coaches and players, taking into account the investments made in recent years and the transfers of world stars such as: Lionel Messi or Sergio Busquets (the current period having many points in common with what happened in the 70's-80's, time interval analyzed in the lines below);

- Each society looked at football differently and it is interesting how these visions "collided" in the attempt to apply European working methods in a sport that was not in the foreground of everyday life in the United States of America.

These hypotheses crystallized the structure and architecture of this article, highlighting a series of fulfilled objectives:

- Highlighting the impact of soccer players from Romania in the emancipation of the soccer movement overseas;

- Identifying soccer as a mass phenomenon with a significant global influence;

- Characterization of the association between European football, represented by Romanian coaches and players, and North American soccer;

- The evolution of soccer as an image vector in Romanian and North American society;

- Determination of the most important factors in the modernization of soccer.

All this research would not have been possible without a good knowledge of the specialized works and without the use of the most innovative work methods. As it is an interdisciplinary work, I used methods specific to humanities studies (theoretical and exploratory), as well as applied methods (evaluative, descriptive research etc.).

3. Results and Discussions

In the mid-60's of the last century, Romania was on the verge of being politically isolated because of the way the Ceaușescu regime perceived the relationship with the Soviet Union, but also because of the visible distance from typical Western democratic values. Ceaușescu realized faster than other political leaders, that for a state the size of Romania, a radical position and placement in a certain camp can bring many disadvantages (Nistor, 2021). Therefore, it was necessary to cultivate good relations with the Arab states, which created the premises of economic gains, but also of image, transforming the Romanian state into an important "player" in the international arena. This change of paradigm also led to an influx of Romanian specialists who had to provide consultancy and advice to the representatives of the new friendly states. So, whether we are talking about petrochemical engineers or soccer coaches with notable results, many of them had to be relocated for a period of time by the representatives of the Romanian Communist

Party in the partner countries: Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, etc.

Ted Dumitru - "Master Ted" or "Mr. Magic" - as he is known in international soccer, started his coaching career at Știința Craiova, one of the most beloved teams in Romanian soccer. Immediately after the experience in the south of Romania, he returned to Bucharest to guide the steps of the new generation of soccer players from the position of coach of the Romanian student soccer team. From this position, he manages to win the bronze medal at the World University Championships in Spain (1967), adopting a tactic never seen before - Mosaic Training (Gazeta Sporturilor, 2010). This new method of training provided for the observance of some tactical principles that required good coverage of the field and efficient management of the game on the flanks. The notoriety of this method made the Romanian Football Federation receive a significant number of requests that had "Master Ted" in the foreground. In 1968, Ted Dumitru is sent to Istanbul to hold seminars in front of an audience of Turkish coaches.

"Once we got there, the people in the country asked for more money and changed the conditions. I didn't like what was happening and I used this opportunity to stay away from the country. It wasn't easy. They sentenced me to 20 years of hard labor. I was chased by the Security. They even wanted to kidnap me! The Americans hid me and changed my name from Teodorescu to Ted. All this because I could not bear the terror and the humiliation." (Filoti, 2010)

We learned from Master Ted himself what the circumstances were that led to his "desertion". After two years spent on the shores of the Bosphorus, he chooses to emigrate to the United States of America, where he is enthusiastically received (Democrat and Chronicle from Rochester, July 24, 1974) by the representatives of the university team in Texas (Texas Longhorns). In another interview given by Ted Dumitru to the Romanian press, he explains what was the biggest regret of his career: "I probably made a mistake by accepting to work in the NPSL, in the USA. The conditions were excellent, but the challenge was not important enough from a professional point of view" (Gazeta Sporturilor, 2010). Obviously the status of the soccer player in the United States (amateur), but also the fact that Ted's expectations about American soccer were somewhat exaggerated, made the North American experience not an exciting one. Fortunately, the same was not shared by the American side, who were extremely pleased to have been able to convince a "star" of European football to cross the Atlantic to teach them the new trends of the "king sport". Before starting the "African experience" (he coached from 1977 to 2009 in this region of the world) he moved to the East Coast of the United States of America to coordinate managerial activity at the Rochester Lancers club. And here he wrote history!

He was the first coach of the team founded in 1967, which undertook a soccer tour in Europe. In the European journey he met top teams such as: S.S. Lazio, A.S. Rome. Thanks to the attractive soccer played by the players coached by Ted, the fans stormed the stadium, breaking all attendance records. The match played on June 27, 1975, against Pele's team, the New York Cosmos, was attended by 14,562 spectators (Democrat and Chronicle from Rochester, June 28, 1975), well above the annual

average up to that time of 2,500-3,000 people. The results obtained should not be neglected either, the Rochester Lancers being one step away from winning the ultimate trophy of football in the USA, in 1975. They dominated the championship until a few stages before the end, when, amid financial problems and continuing disagreements with competition organizers (Democrat and Chronicle from Rochester, June 14, 1975), they lost six consecutive games (Democrat and Chronicle from Rochester, August 11, 1975), finishing the championship in fourth place.

After achieving remarkable success in American soccer, Ted Dumitru took his talents to Africa to advance the football movement there. He coached national teams in South Africa, Zambia, Namibia, and Swaziland, as well as club teams such as Orlando Pirates, Manning Rangers, and Kaizer Chiefs, with whom he secured numerous national titles. He passed away at the age of 76 from a heart attack in a Johannesburg mall (DigiSport, 2016), far from both his birthplace in Bucharest and the American city of Rochester, New York, where he was celebrated by the local fans.



Fig. 1. *Ted Dumitru and Collins Mbesuma during the Africa Cup of Nations match between Zambia and South Africa at Alexandria Stadium in 2006 (Soccer Laduma, 2020)*

Vintilă (Virgil) Mărdărescu had a similar fate, who after a career full of domestic success (finalist of the Romanian Cup with Dinamo Pitești, promotion to the first league with three different teams) was appointed trainer of the national Olympic football team of Romania. The international exposure and results he achieved as coach of the Romanian Olympic National Team (The Rec.Sport.Soccer Statistics Foundation, 2024) made the Moroccan partners request his support. Thus, in the summer of 1974, he was appointed coach of the Moroccan national football team.

Twenty-two years after gaining independence from the French Protectorate and nineteen years after the establishment of the Moroccan Football Federation, soccer in Morocco had not achieved any notable results. The national team made its

debut in the African Cup in 1972 but failed to advance beyond the group stage. However, in the African Cup qualifiers, just three months after his appointment, Vintilă Mărdărescu achieved remarkable success. He led the team to impressive victories over Gambia (3-0) and Senegal (4-0) and secured a decisive penalty shootout win against Ghana in the crucial match held in Casablanca (Berceanu, 2022). Not only did Mărdărescu guide the team to qualify for the African Cup, but he also led them to win the trophy after an outstanding final tournament. To date, it remains Morocco's only continental title, and Mărdărescu is the sole Romanian football coach to have won a continental trophy.

Following the success achieved in Morocco, the Romanian government approved the reunification of the Mărdărescu family, unaware that they had different plans. Inspired by the "American dream," the Mărdărescu family decided to emigrate to the United States. Shortly after arriving in America, Vintilă Mărdărescu was appointed coach of the NY Greek American Atlas Astoria, a top club that had won the National Challenge Cup in 1967, 1968, 1969, and 1974 (NY Greek American Soccer Club, 2024). He took over from Ted Dumitru and successfully continued the team's winning trajectory throughout the championship. Mărdărescu's career in the U.S. also included collaborations with various American colleges and universities. In addition to his on-field work, he contributed significantly to the academic side of football, writing numerous articles about soccer.

With the opening of the Romanian borders (after the fall of the communist regime in December 1989), Vintilă Mărdărescu boosted the professionalization of the American football championship and the attraction of as many Romanian football players as possible. He was perhaps the most important contributor to the Romanian national football team during the 1994 FIFA World Cup, describing in detail the functionality of American soccer. Thus, he is considered to be one of the architects of Romania's victory on 27.06.1994 against the USA.

Vintilă Mărdărescu's son, Gil, debuted in Romania's first football league for the Politehnica Iași team, being coached by his father himself. With his father's departure to Morocco, Gil follows him and plays for two seasons for the Wydad Casablanca club. The American mirage incites him and he decides to go overseas to continue his soccer career. He plays alongside the great Pele at the New York Cosmos (Crișan, 2022), but after only five matches he leaves for the team coached by Ted Dumitru – Rochester Lancers. In 1980 he returned to New York, also under the tutelage of his father. Although his contribution cannot be compared to that of his father or his mentor, Ted Dumitru, Gil Mărdărescu made his contribution through assists to teammates in the team's victories in the 1980 season, being highlighted by the sports press (Cassata, 1980).

Alexandru Sătmăreanu, born Sándor Szatmári (Hungarian ethnic) and known in Romanian football as Sătmăreanu II (there was another Sătmăreanu who played for Steaua Bucharest in the period 1965-1975), is another example of a Romanian player who chose to continue his sports activity overseas. He made his professional football debut for the team from his hometown, Oradea, in 1969. After two seasons, he was transferred by the Dinamo Bucharest club, where he spent most of his career.

He wins three championship titles with the Bucharest team and plays important matches in European cups (he faced teams such as: Real Madrid, AC Milan, Atletico Madrid, etc.). Also after an international match, played in Frankfurt in torrential rain on October 24, 1979, the young Sătmăreanu decides to stay in Germany (Dragut, 2011), influenced by the sports agent Berger (the one who would also convince the great Romanian player Marcel Răducanu to take refuge in West Germany two years later). The decision was based on the fact that "chauvinism and the violent Romanianization carried out by the Ceaușescu regime made living in Romania impossible" (OrangeSport, 2022).

After two years of suspension dictated by the European football forum - UEFA - following the request made by the regime in Bucharest, he is regimented by VfB Stuttgart, and in the two seasons spent there he manages to score three goals in 32 games (even if this he was a defender). The fear emanating from the possibility of revenge by the Romanian state through assassins, led Sătmăreanu to run as far as possible: *"I was careful about everything I did and everything I said. With the death of Lutz Eigendorf in Braunschweig in a car accident that happened under strange circumstances (Allegedly killed by East German secret police - STASI - because he chose to settle in West Germany, following a match played by BFC Dynamo in Kaiserslautern), I started and realized that I have to leave here"* (OrangeSport, 2022).



Fig. 2. You can see the effects of the accident suffered by Lutz, as a result of which he died. (Norddeutscher Rundfunk, 2023)

Thus, he ended up sharing the same dressing room with Teófilo Cubillas and Gerd Müller - "Der Bomber" in the team from Fort Lauderdale. During his time with the Fort Lauderdale Strikers (1982-1984) he managed to win a divisional title (Southern Division) and remained in the hearts of fans in the city on the Florida Coast as one of the most formidable defenders on the East Coast of America.

The decision to move the team to Minneapolis (it was renamed Minnesota Strikers) led Sătmăreanu to leave United States and return to Germany, where he continued his career at FSV Salmrohr. The transfer of a player with over 30 appearances in the Romanian national team meant an image boom for American soccer, his arrival being discussed intensively in the specialized sports media.

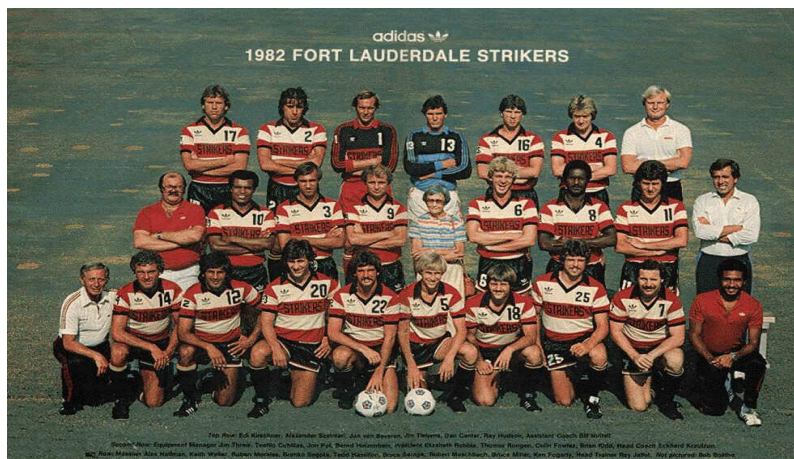


Fig. 3. The Fort Lauderdale Strickers squad at the start of the 1982-83 season. Sătmăreanu is the one with number 2, placed on the top row, second from left to right. (Morrison, 2024)

4. Conclusions

As we have seen, soccer in the United States thrived due to the influence of European expertise, particularly from Romania. Romanian coaches with impressive European credentials brought their knowledge to help advance American soccer. On the field, players like Gil Mărdărescu—one of the few mentioned by Pelé in his autobiography—and Alexandru Sătmăreanu, who played over 200 matches in Romania's top league, captivated American audiences with their skillful passing and precise tackles.

It is important to remember that these soccer "heroes" made tremendous sacrifices to leave Romania and reach the United States. All the athletes mentioned were declared fugitives and sentenced to harsh prison terms by Romania's communist regime. Their relatives, friends, and neighbors were interrogated by the secret police of the Socialist Republic of Romania, facing threats and surveillance as potential enemies of the state. Despite these challenges, Mărdărescu (both father and son), Dumitru, and Sătmăreanu overcame their fears and laid the groundwork for the eventual "conquest" of the American soccer market by Romanian players, culminating in the success of Romania's "Golden Generation" in 1994.

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