

Horia Pop - Fifty years serving Romanian female basketball **Horia Pop - Cincizeci de ani în slujba baschetului feminin românesc**

Ildiko Manasses¹, **Mariana Bagiu**², **Aurora Dragoș**³

¹ "Babeș-Bolyai" University, Cluj-Napoca, Faculty of Physical Education and Sports

² Mary Club S.R.L, Cluj-Napoca

³ Polyvalent Hall S.A. Cluj-Napoca

Abstract

The authors, on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of Horia Pop's professional activity, wish to pay homage in an article that reviews the defining moments of this exceptional figure's basketball career in the city of Cluj-Napoca, and the track record of the teams coached by him throughout the years.

The first part of this writing is dedicated to his early professional development. Next, a list of achievements of Horia Pop's coached teams in children and junior domestic basketball competitions is presented, as well as his contribution to training the Universitatea Cluj-Napoca female basketball team as either a secondary coach, main coach or technical director, and the team's results in the national championships and the European Champions Cup. He was responsible for numerous wins of the Romanian female basketball players, as a coach for the cadets and junior national representatives. As a token of appreciation for his longstanding activity and prestigious accomplishments, he was awarded the title of honorary coach. Finally, his academic didactic activity is presented.

Keywords: coach, female basketball, Cluj-Napoca.

Rezumat

Autorii, în preajma aniversării a cincizeci de ani de la debutul activității profesionale a lui Horia Pop, au realizat un articol omagial, care trece în revistă principalele momente din activitatea acestui specialist de excepție al baschetului clujean, precum și rezultatele obținute de echipele pregătite de el de-a lungul anilor.

În prima parte, lucrarea se referă la formarea sa profesională inițială. În continuare, sunt prezentate realizările echipelor antrenate de Horia Pop în competițiile naționale de baschet pentru copii și junioare, contribuția sa la pregătirea echipei feminine Universitatea Cluj-Napoca ca antrenor secund, antrenor principal sau director tehnic, rezultatele acestora în campionatul național, Cupa Campionilor Europeni. De asemenea, ca antrenor al loturilor naționale de cadete și junioare a fost artizanul a numeroase succese ale tinerelor baschetbaliste din România. Ca o apreciere a îndelungatei sale activități, a rezultatelor de prestigiu obținute, a fost distins cu titlul de antrenor emerit. În final, este prezentată activitatea sa didactică universitară.

Cuvinte cheie: antrenor, baschet feminin, Cluj-Napoca.

Introduction

Cluj-Napoca is one of the Romanian cities with a rich economic, cultural, scientific, artistic and sports activity. Sports, considering the achieved performance and the popularity they garner, represent one of the major fields of activity that help promote the city both nationally and internationally. Basketball is one of the most popular sports. Following the results attained by the Universitatea Cluj-Napoca team between 1981 and 1993, Cluj-Napoca was rightly considered the Romanian capital of female basketball. (Cacoveanu, 1991; Radu et al., 1993)

Not many people know, except for insiders of this sport, that the Viitorul School Sports Club teams, through the results obtained in junior I championships, national junior II, junior III, and minibasketball contests, dominated

over the years juvenile female basketball in Romania. The principal designer of this success was the honorary coach Horia Pop. Now, on the eve of the anniversary of half a century since he began his work in the service of female basketball in Cluj-Napoca, we deem fit to illustrate the exceptional career of this emblematic expert in this particular field of sport.

Childhood and initial professional training

Horia Pop was born to a family of intellectuals, with strong connections to physical activities, which influenced his entire childhood and then his years as a pupil and a student. He was raised in a sport specific environment. Ever since his middle school years, the dynamics of life channeled his interest towards basketball.

Following his baccalaureate exam, he attended the

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Address for correspondence: Faculty of Physical Education and Sport, "Babeș-Bolyai" University, Pandurilor Street. No. 7, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

E-mail: ildi.manasses@gmail.com

Corresponding author: Ildiko Manasses: ildi.manasses@gmail.com

Sports and Physical Education Faculty of the three-year Pedagogical Institute in Cluj-Napoca. He combined the curricular activities required by that higher education institution, which he took very seriously, with performance sport practice, as a member of the Știința Cluj basketball team, having teammates such as Horia Demian, Mihai Albu, Matei Rühring, Imre Vizi (Bodea et. al, 2009).

During his college years, aspiring to become a good professional, constantly striving to improve himself, he aimed to be diligent, to learn and acquire as much knowledge as possible in order to become a physical education teacher. Of great use in the coaching profession, practical and theoretical specialization classes, sports training theory and methodology, physiology of physical exercise, sports psychology and other courses helped him understand the mechanism behind the movement gestures learning process, the function and interaction of training factors in preparing and managing a team, the effects of exercise on the athletes' bodies and their role in achieving performance. He accomplished his initial professional training at the Bucharest Institute of Physical Education and Sports, from which he graduated in 1970.

Over three decades of remarkable results in domestic basketball competitions for children and juniors

After graduation, the coaching career option followed naturally, taking into account his experience as a basketball player, the level of competence attained in college and the fact that a lot of his personality traits were formed in a performance driven environment. He was appointed in the city of Satu Mare and one year later, he transferred to the Cluj-Napoca Sports School for Students.

In exercising his profession, he did not look for a convenient working situation and instant, momentary gratification. He enthusiastically started his coaching career, proving special skills for this line of work, demonstrating a great work capacity. With an extensive experience as a player, he quickly adapted to performance rigors. At first glance, his professional activity followed a regular course, without standing out excessively from that of his colleagues of the same generation.

However, when considering it in terms of achievements, one can understand what it means to have a calling, to show professional dedication, to make a difference in one's job, to leave behind a valuable and long-lasting work legacy, to enjoy the appreciation and recognition of colleagues, sportsmen, members of the basketball family and of the community alike.

Displaying ambition, tenacity, professionalism, he put his knowledge and capabilities to good use, starting with the first generation of players he worked with, completing good selection and training, which facilitated the results that propelled him, in only a few years, alongside coaches such as Gheorghe Roșu, Viorica Bot, Gheorghe Benone, among the specialists with the best results at junior team level of that time (Albulescu, 1981).

A first exceptional outcome was the School Sports Club Cluj-Napoca team's win of the gold medal in the 1971 edition of the Junior II Republican Contest (***, 1971). The following year, the team composed of Luci Cobârzan,

Mariana Merca, Irina Szekely, Liana Jichișan, Viorica Moraru, Veronica Patora, Hajnal Horvat, Maria Perde, Eva Zsoldos and Marilena Covaci became a national junior I champion, thus rewarding more than six years of hard work (Radu, 1993).



(Merca-Bagiu, 1966-1985)

Fig. 1 – The players of the School Sports Club Cluj-Napoca team, winner of the 1st place in the 1972 Junior I Republican Championships. Back row: Veronica Patora, Hajnal Horvát, Viorica Moraru, Horia Pop, Éva Zsoldos, Marilena Covaci, Liana Jichișan; Front row: Maria Perde, Irina Szekely, Luci Cobârzan, Mariana Merca.

Even if he already had experience, gained during the years when he proved himself to be a valuable and skilled coach, and he tried to make the generational leap relying on players with basketball skills, work orientation and performance drive, going to great lengths and training them to the best of his ability, in the end, Horia Pop's second generation team only partially confirmed the expectations. The official competitions won were the National Minibasketball Criterion, in 1977, and the Junior III Republican Contest, in 1979 (Radu, 1992). Moreover, none of the players in this generation managed to establish themselves in a senior first division team.

The real fulfillment of his work as a trainer at junior level came in the period 1981-1987, when teams under his leadership ranked first eight times and won top places on many other occasions in minibasketball, junior III, cadets and junior I competitions (Radu, 1993a).

Table I
Ranking of the Viitorul School Sports Club Cluj-Napoca female basketball team in minibasketball, junior III, cadets, and junior I competitions, between 1979-1987.

Year	Competition level	Place of the match	Ranking position
1979	Minibasketball II	Tulcea	VII
1980	Minibasketball I	Târgoviște	IX
1981	Minibasketball I	Târgu-Mureș	I
1982	Junior III	Constanța	II
1983	Junior III	Focșani	I
1983	Junior II	Târgu-Mureș	I
1983	Junior I	Cluj-Napoca	III
1984	Junior II	Arad	I
1984	Junior I	București	III
1985	Junior II	Tulcea	I
1985	Junior I	Constanța	I
1986	Junior I	Timișoara	I
1987	Junior I	Oradea	I

(Cacoveanu, 1991; Dragoș, 1987)

Over the years, Horia Pop proved himself as a trainer with a good knowledge of his players, who in time got to feel their game disposition, state of mind and had the capacity to maximize their potential for their own and the team's benefit. Although he was known to be exacting throughout his whole career, and some even considered him harsh, most of his players, who are not few, esteem, respect and appreciate him for the way in which he guided their steps, for all they learned from him, the basketball and life lessons taught, for everything they accomplished thanks to him.

Contributions to the Universitatea Cluj-Napoca female basketball team's top performances

Starting with the summer of 1985, training of the Universitatea Cluj-Napoca female basketball team was assigned to Nicolae Martin, main coach, and Horia Pop, secondary coach. Thus, fate made it possible for these two valuable specialists to work together for several years. Apparently, they were incompatible. Having different character traits, their principles concerning the training and management of the team, their opinions and behavior regarding interactions inside the group contrasted. Despite all these differences, like true professionals, they realized that they had common goals – training of the team, achievement of the objectives in the internal championship, and participation of Universitatea Cluj-Napoca in international interclub competitions. During their six years of collaboration, they complemented one another, each offering valuable expertise, which led to the competent training and management of the team, to the winning of six national championship titles (Stănculescu & Iovan, 1986; Stănculescu, 1987; Stănculescu, 1988b; Iovan, 1989; Stănculescu, 1990b; Stănculescu, 1991) and to important international results.

In the fall of 1991, at the time when Nicolae Martin started facing serious health problems, which prevented him from continuing his coaching activity, Horia Pop proved to be providential for the team. Due to his extensive experience as a secondary coach, his good knowledge of the players, his long-lasting and productive collaboration and good personal and professional relationship with Nicolae Martin, taking over the team as the main coach came naturally, with no incidents. So, the team continued its winning streak at national level, with another two gold medals, in 1992 (Radu, 1992b) and in 1993 (Radu, 1993a).

Given that after 1993 organizational issues and financial difficulties arose, Horia Pop continued his work as either a main coach or a technical director. Even though championship titles were no longer won, the team still remained, for a few years, among the top ones of the domestic championship. In the 1993/1994, 1994/1995 and 1995/1996 seasons, the female players trained by Horia Pop and Elena Popescu won the silver medal in the national championship (Bodea et al., 2009).

In the autumn of 1996, Horia Pop gave up his role as a coach of the Universitatea Sports Club, decision which later turned out not to be definitive. For a brief period of time, he returned as the technical director of the academic team, collaborating with Simona Mușat and Călin Pop (Bodea et al., 2009).

His professionalism is also backed up by positive results in official international interclub competitions. Between 1985-1993, the Universitatea Cluj-Napoca team faced sixteen national champion teams in the European Champions Cup, a total of forty matches taking place. Except for the 1988/1989 edition, Universitatea Cluj-Napoca managed to pass the first phase of the European Champions Cup, eliminating teams such as Tungsram Budapest (Stănculescu, 1985), KS Lodz (Vasiliu, 1986), Elizur Tel Aviv (***, 1987), Slavia Banska Bistrica, Elmes Sibenik, Partizan Tirana (Radu, 1989; Stănculescu, 1990a), CTU Tbilisi (Iovan, 1992) and SC Tirana (Radu, 1993c). Horia Pop was instrumental in obtaining important victories against teams with a rich history of winning international competitions, such as Levski Spartak Sofia, Liliana Ronchetti Cup winner, Primigi Vincenza, European Champions Cup winner, Partizan Belgrad (***, 1986b; ***, 1986a), and Steaua Roșie Belgrad (Stănculescu, 1990a). The top performances were achieved in the 1985/1986 and 1986/1987 editions, when the team reached the quarter-final phase of the European Champions Cup (***, 1986b; Radu, 1989).

In 1992, as an acknowledgment of his professional excellence, the work put forth and the results attained, Horia Pop was presented with the highest distinction awarded to specialists in the field of physical education and sports in Romania, the title of honorary coach (***, 1993).

As a coach of the Romanian junior national team

After years in a row when teams of the Viitorul School Sports Club Cluj-Napoca won junior I champion titles, ranked among the top teams in national cadets and junior III contests, and the players Viorica Moraru, Irina Szekely, Jichișan Liana, Aurora Dragoș, Tünde Enyedi, Manasses Ildiko were promoted in the national junior team, at the proposal of the Central College of Coaches, the Romanian Basketball Federation Board appointed Horia Pop the national junior team's coach. As he displayed an ambitious nature, willing to maximize professional achievements, this position came not as an honorary title, but as a renewed prospect of working under great responsibility.

In the period 1971-1973 and 1985-1990, he was the coach of the junior national teams. The Romanian team finished on the fifth place in the 1985 edition of the Cadets European Championships, with Alexandru Moise as main coach and Horia Pop as secondary coach; also fifth in the 1987 edition, with Horia Pop as main coach and a team including Aurora Dragoș, Gabriela Petre, Ildiko Manasses, Gabriela Pandre, Antoaneta Barbu, Tünde Enyedi, Magdalena Manea, among others. In the 1989 edition, with main coach Horia Pop and secondary coach Georgeta Rusu, the national cadets team ranked fifth, with players such as Margareta Veres, Simona Morar, Angela Szenes, Daniela Moroșan and Laura Nițulescu standing out (Popescu, 1989).

Horia Pop had a productive collaboration for several years with Adriana Niculescu. In this period, the young female basketball players from Romania had a series of successes in official international competitions, notably ranking second in the Cadets European Championships in 1989 (Stănculescu & Aldea, 1989b) and winning the gold

medal in the Prietenia Tournament (Stănculescu, 1989a), finishing third in the Juniors European Championships in 1990 (Niculescu, 1990), results that range among the top performances of the junior national basketball teams in Romania.



(Adriana Niculescu, 1990)

Fig. 2 – Romania’s team, winner of the silver medal at the Cadets European Championships, 1989, or EC 1990, Spain. Back row: Horia Pop, main coach, Lascu, Moroşan, Ambrus, Niţulescu, Borusz, Simion, Cocârlan, and Adriana Niculescu, secondary coach; Front row: Jiroş, Laţco, Ciupe, Ioan, Tocală and Simon.

As a university professor

Reforms of the educational system after 1989 were aimed at changing not only institutions, but also human resources, specifically those people in charge of implementing them, for the purpose of carrying out an instructive-educational process at high quality standards.

Pop’s professional profile and achievements recommended him for a teaching position in the physical education and sports higher education system. Using his knowledge and vast practical experience in training junior and national cadets teams, he added a new dimension to and generated a growth in the quality of practical-methodological lessons and courses taught to specialization groups.

As a university professor, Horia Pop contributed to the early professional training of students at the Faculties of Physical Education and Sport of the “Babeş-Bolyai” and “Avram Iancu” Universities in Cluj-Napoca. He attended numerous methodological conferences and scientific meetings. He authored many articles published in prestigious journals or in volumes of scientific communication sessions of higher education institutions in Romania. He co-authored a manual with Gheorghe Roman, “Baschet - teorie şi metodică”/“Basketball – theory and methodology”, a valuable work, appreciated by experts in the field as well as students (Pop & Roman, 2003). Also, he collaborated with Magdalena Muşat to write a tutorial book for learning basketball, “Învăţaţi baschetul fără profesor”/“Learning basketball without a teacher” (Muşat & Pop, 1996).

Conclusions

1. The quality of his work, his professionalism, the gold medals and the high number of top places won in

official national competitions by the minibasketball and junior teams he trained, all place Horia Pop among the coaches with some of the best track records in Romanian juvenile basketball.

2. As a secondary coach and, later, as a main coach, he played a part in the Universitatea Cluj-Napoca female basketball team’s win of eight national champion titles. Between 1985 and 1993, he was also involved in the training and management of the team in international interclub competitions, which secured valuable results in the European Champions Cup.

3. He had a long and fruitful activity as a coach of cadets and junior I teams, with which he achieved remarkable performances: silver medal in the Cadets European Championships in 1989; first place in the Prietenia Tournament in 1989; third place in the junior European Championships in 1990.

4. For his professional excellence, he is praised by players, colleagues, heads of various sports organizations he worked for, and many basketball supporters. For his merits, at the proposal of the Romanian Basketball Federation, the Ministry of Youth and Sports awarded him the title of honorary coach in 1992.

5. Through his valuable expertise, he contributed to the early professional training of many generations of graduates of the Faculties of Physical Education and Sports of the “Babeş-Bolyai” and “Avram Iancu” Universities in Cluj-Napoca.

6. For all these reasons, Horia Pop is rightly considered the most important coach of juvenile basketball in Cluj-Napoca and an emblematic specialist in this sport in Romania.

Conflicts of interest

Nothing to declare.

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This writing is part of a series of articles on the evolution of the Universitatea Cluj-Napoca female basketball team. It recognizes Horia Pop’s professional merit and serves as an homage from all the players he has trained over the years.

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