Social Entrepreneurship and Sport in Romania: How Can Former Athletes Contribute to Sustainable Social Change?

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Received: 27 April 2020; Accepted: 1 June 2020; Published: 8 June 2020

Abstract: Social entrepreneurship is an underrated subject in the field of sports. For Romanians, the fall of communism opened up new opportunities in the entrepreneurial domain. At the same time, entrepreneurship began to intersect with sports, and the results were often productive. Sport is seen as a domain that could inspire entrepreneurship through its principles. The similarities between these two fields have created the perspective of common action in sport and entrepreneurship, and this coexistence has improved during times of social change. After 1989, Romania was confronted with many challenges at the societal level, and sport offered a way to address and to tackle social problems. Through sport, some athletes decided to contribute to issues of individuals or communities. They assumed the status of a social entrepreneur, and developed activities that could inspire others. This paper intends to gather examples of such social entrepreneurship from Romania, and to identify the elements that lead to success. The research takes into consideration case studies from various domains, and this diversity helps us to better understand the challenges of Romanian sport when it interacts with social entrepreneurship.

Keywords: social entrepreneurship; sport innovation; social change

1. Introduction

Social entrepreneurship first became an important research subject in the 1990s; however, to date, even the definition of this concept and its dimensions are still not easy to shape. The difficulty of outlining this phenomenon is apparent in the variety of definitions for the term “social entrepreneurship” that are available. This concept was used for the first time by Howard Bowen in 1953, but it was made popular by Bill Drayton, the founder of Ashoka, in the 1980s [1]. More than 10 years later, J. Gregory Dees considered that even though social entrepreneurship was a new concept, its area of action was well-known and it was accepted as an interdisciplinary field; any definition can help the audience to better understand the concept, and at the same time extend its usability [2].

Researchers from various geographical areas and from cultures with different views on entrepreneurship have offered contrasting definitions for the concept of social entrepreneurship [3]. In basic terms, social entrepreneurship signifies the capability to apply business knowledge within the nonprofit sector [4,5]. Generally, social entrepreneurship could be considered “a broader range of socially innovative initiatives in a spectrum, from for-profit to voluntary organizations” [6]. At the
same time, other specialists have pointed out that the attempt to define social entrepreneurship is an entrepreneurial endeavor in itself, considering that a unanimous consensus about the definition does not exist [7]. Recent bibliometric analyses indicate that studies on social entrepreneurship have significantly increased in number but theoretical and descriptive research is still prevailing in the literature [8].

In relation to innovation and its capacity to improve lives, social entrepreneurship has, as its main purpose, the aim to change negative social aspects.

The dynamism of this process is completely satisfied by the sports field, in that it can become a driver for the achievement of this aim. Some authors have mentioned that “social entrepreneurship within sport comprises three elements that need to be qualified: the social element, entrepreneurship, and sport” [9]. They are emphasizing that from this triad, the social aspects are represented by problems like poverty, hunger, illiteracy, social exclusion, and so forth. Alongside these aspects, each society presents specific challenges for which even specialists from sport are unsure of feasible solutions. Entrepreneurship represents an innovative approach that assures development and economical sustainability [10]. The concept of sustainability refers to the ability to continue an activity or process over a long, indefinite period of time. From an economic point of view, researchers have theorized sustainability in terms of welfare maximization in the long run since the 1970s, but the purpose of a social enterprise is different, meaning that, unlike a regular business, the social entrepreneur does not only think of profit, but also of solving the social problem [11]. In this context, the idea of sustainability also has a social dimension [12].

The social entrepreneur differs from the classic type of entrepreneur by motivation and the way of acting. However, they both want the longest path possible for their projects; in other words, sustainability. Sustainability of the venture, as part of the social entrepreneurship process, can facilitate sustainability of social change [13]. Social entrepreneurs are aware of the problems faced by the community to which they belong and get involved in solving them. Unlike commercial entrepreneurs, social entrepreneurs believe that their mission is to convey certain principles, to create and support social value. The social mission is fundamental for social entrepreneurs, and this aspect leads them to behave as agents of change. They do not give up when facing challenges and are willing to share their experiences [14]. Social entrepreneurs are also more innovative and inventive in identifying resources. Even if their entrepreneurial projects are profitable, profit is only seen as a tool to produce social change [15]. Therefore, the social entrepreneur has a different perception of the financial component in the activity carried out compared to the commercial entrepreneur.

Through its creative dimension and openness to new ideas and efficiency, entrepreneurship contributes to the progress of sport in various aspects, influencing culture and sports consumed by spectators [16], innovating sports’ technological applications, developing sports materials and sports facilities, and more. Sports entrepreneurship manifests itself when an organization is operating in sports to develop this domain through innovation, proactivity, and risk taking [17].

For the third element of this triad, the following question arises: How can sports offer resources and inspiration to innovate through social entrepreneurship and to tackle social problems? More and more specialists have linked social entrepreneurship with sports in recent years. Some of the premises that allow these approaches are:

1. Sport is innovative by itself, and it means to put in evidence a value or a valuable action that can make a difference between people, situations, or opportunities.
2. Sport is an adapting activity and it is addressed to different categories of people, not depending on the level of their abilities. Sport is organized in very permissive subsystems that allow different categories of ages, abilities, and gender to participate.
3. Sport is in continuing evolution, being characterized by a power to develop new forms of practice for physical exercise.
4. Sport is an interdisciplinary field in which a lot of sciences gather in a specific way, including economics, public health, sociology, psychology, and so forth. This means that various specialists are finding in sport a domain that makes possible the application of knowledge,
principles, and methods from other domains. Sport connects with social aspects like no other domain, and in this way contributes to the identity of entrepreneurial activity.

In recent years, specialists have analyzed the complex connections between social entrepreneurship and sport. Significant work in this area was undertaken by Ratten who completed a structured examination of the social entrepreneurship phenomenon, its processes and mechanisms, its strategies, and the perspectives of this approach in sport [18].

At the same time, social changes have imposed new ways to valorize sport through social entrepreneurship. This phenomenon, developed in the last three decades, has become an emerging domain of research. For example, Reid presented the cases of some sport clubs in Scotland that are being encouraged by local government to become social enterprises through the transfer of their sports facilities to community groups [19]. This is a way to promote social innovation and to solve, through sport, various problems regarding social integration.

Bjärsholm makes a substantial contribution by making an inventory of what has been written about sports and social entrepreneurship [20]. The author highlights the main contributions in this field, but also interprets the theoretical positioning of studies on sports and social entrepreneurship. Bjärsholm notices that studies on the individual, the social entrepreneur, are fewer than those on organizations, while much research is focused on the goals and activities of a social enterprise.

On the other hand, sport for performance represents a relatively short period in the life of sportspeople, and many athletes are concerned about how they can continue professional activity in the same domain [21,22]. A successful sports career permits the initiation of some personal businesses, in which former sportspeople could themselves become employees [23]. Additionally, sportspeople have always been symbolic of modernization, talent, and temerity, qualities encountered often among entrepreneurs. These similarities can explain how champion sportspeople can become role models for children and young people.

For entrepreneurs, sport is a domain that offers visibility, and it is a space to engage communities for social change. Each entrepreneur of this type is focused on society and its reality as they try to impose sports principles. One of these principles is social cohesion, which is particularly important when a business is being developed. Sport remains a popular domain and, in many ways, it can be approached as a business. Such a direction of research was applied to 11 fitness entrepreneurs and has demonstrated that sports entrepreneurship differs from non-sports entrepreneurship, although similar principles are used [24]. Another example is found in the study conducted by Griffiths and Armour, who analyze the case of volunteer sports coaches. For these coaches, the social and educational value of sport matters, and not necessarily the sport result [25]. This study is also useful for the current approach to examine the profile of Romanian social entrepreneurs who are also coaches.

Considering these aspects, this paper intends to answer to the following question: How could former athletes contribute to sustainable social change in Romania? In this sense, using the theoretical support presented above, the objectives of this paper are to highlight the psychological profile of athletes who have built social enterprises in Romania, the way of designing projects so as to ensure their continuity, and the challenges encountered when implementing them.

In Romania, sport became an essential tool for the promotion of communist regime policies; however, the fall of communism presented many opportunities for the Romanian people. Social entrepreneurship became a new field of interest for some of those who were open to exploring the opportunities of a new society. In the same context, sport was related to entrepreneurship, and because sport had a social component, many people glimpsed the profitability of such a partnership.

Social entrepreneurship developed in Romanian society as a response to social needs, and the phenomenon increased because some individuals trusted in its mission to accomplish social good. Some participants were former athletes, who, at the end of their career, were considering investing their social capital and money into social projects with an economic component. The main purpose was to respond to a social challenge, but do so by using a sustainable business model, which was also something new for Romanian society after 1989. The difference between a traditional business and a
Social entrepreneurship is often associated with the idea of credibility, and an athlete who starts a project with a social cause transfers their social capital. These former athletes who turn to social entrepreneurship contribute to improving community life and are interested in engaging with civic issues. At the same time, they act as role models for communities.

Within social entrepreneurship, role model characteristics transfer to other people, not always in a direct manner—through the similarity of contexts and activities—but due to mediated influence, where only the personal traits of the model are perceived by others. In this context, this paper analyzed cases of how sport has expressed itself in relation to social entrepreneurship in Romania, with the aim of identifying the elements that have helped the implementation of these projects, including the difficulties and opportunities associated with these examples.

At the same time, because the case studies are in different domains, it is useful to observe the dilemmas and solutions found by initiators used to evolve their projects. The nature of evolution indicates that it is exceedingly difficult for any new activity in Romania to succeed if it is not closely tied with social problems about which people are already knowledgeable. In this context, sport is a facilitator for society to find solutions through the participation of athletes or former athletes. This illustrates how champions are capable of managing projects in various geographical areas within Romania, with different domains of interest and distinct objectives. In this contrasting space, their common goal is to respond to some social needs.

2. Method

The intention of this article is to emphasize the competencies of social entrepreneurs that come from sports areas and the specific ways in which they are revealed under the action of cultural, economic and social factors. The first aspect addressed in this study is related to investigating the knowledge, abilities, and experiences that generate social entrepreneurial ideas. Usually, these activities can influence social change in various sports and in domains where institutions fail. Therefore, this paper seeks to explore the social entrepreneur profile in a Romanian context, focusing on finding its characteristic elements. Considering that some cultures could be more favorable for social entrepreneurship [26], this paper also emphasizes the connection between the cultural dimension, entrepreneurship in Romania, and the sport figures’ openness to social change.

Given that a new and less well-known field is being addressed, a qualitative study would be most appropriate to provide data that could lay the basis for the subsequent operationalization of concepts, the emergence of hypotheses and the initiation of further quantitative research. Consequently, this article is based on four cases represented by the projects of some social entrepreneurs which have existed for at least five years and offered the possibility to observe and analyze each project in depth.

Choosing the case study as a qualitative research method is justified by the fact that it allows the analysis of contemporary phenomena in which researchers cannot intervene. [27] The case studies method is typical for a young domain, as is the case for social entrepreneurship in Romania. In other countries, this kind of approach is often based on a maximum of five case studies [28]. The significance of the presented case studies is in the good-practice models they represent, and they offer useful insights for the aim of the paper. Indeed, much can be learned from these four cases, and this is the main criterion mentioned by Stake discussing the selection of cases. [29].

The four social entrepreneurs agreed to answer questions related to their activity for this study, and their consent was a criterion in choosing the subjects, considering that the list of possible case studies was quite narrow. As Eisenhardt demonstrates (1989), the low number of case studies restricts the generalization of certain conclusions [30] but has the advantage of allowing the in-depth analysis of each social entrepreneurship profile. In fact, the case studies presented in this paper aim to increase the understanding of the specific way in which former elite athletes can become social entrepreneurs through their implemented projects. Such an approach is specific to the instrumental case study, which allows indirect access to the investigated phenomenon [29].
To ensure the validity of the research results, the paper used data triangulation [31]. The collection of analyzed data was based on conducting open interviews with the four initiators and gathering information from the case studies (i.e., newspaper articles, annual reports, social media presentations).

The text analysis was combined with ethnographic work. Given that social entrepreneurship is a practice-oriented field, the qualitative method is recommended; in relation to this, comparative analysis had a central role in this research. Interviews with former athletes were considered essential as regarding their participation in social entrepreneurship.

The interviews were conducted in 2019; they were built around five central questions that aimed to identify: the athletes’ reasons to focus on solving a social problem, what qualities helped them succeed, what knowledge they had about that field, what challenges they encountered in implementing their projects, and how they managed their projects in financial terms. Starting from these questions, the interviewer had a free conversation with additional questions, depending on the received answers, in order to obtain as much information as possible about the mentioned issues. Such an unstructured interview is flexible, allows both parties to enjoy some freedom, and provides the opportunity to develop certain questions or answers [32].

To ensure data triangulation, the face-to-face conversation was complemented with observations on the social context to understand how it influences the attitude and behavior of social entrepreneurs and how, in turn, they influence the social context.

In addition, the information was validated through the data available in the online environment, such as video material, newsletters, and articles from mass-media resources based on the four social enterprises. The selection of information about the social entrepreneurs was made by correlating the names of the four with the names of their projects, and a second search included the entrepreneur’s name and the term “social”. For each search, the Google engine provided over 5000 responses, so the information was then selected according to relevance. Sources giving details about the analyzed projects were kept and duplicate papers were removed. Thus, at least 50 papers about each of the analyzed cases remaining after filtration were reviewed. In addition, the official project websites and social media accounts were considered, as they also represented a relevant research resource [33].

This paper tracks the relationship between social entrepreneurship and the economic development of Romanian sport, the cultural influences on different entrepreneurial approaches, and how different types of capital, social, emotional, and leadership [23] factors are favorable for the development of social entrepreneurship. The premise was that, in the research of social entrepreneurship, these are some particularities that should be considered. One of them is the particularism of each project and the need to treat each one differently. Another aspect is related to the credibility of the entrepreneurs and the relationship between researchers and subjects. The entrepreneurial projects are detailed because it is not recommended to anonymize case studies due to their unique character, and because their exemplification is helpful to others.

3. Case Study Relevance

In order to understand the cases proposed for analysis, it is important to present the characteristics of Romanian society. In this regard, Hofstede gives us the opportunity to understand each nation through cultural indicators, which influence the values, attitudes or behavior of the members of a society [34]. Thus, according to Hofstede Insights, Romania is a country with a tendency to pessimism that is still influenced by the legacy of the past but is struggling to meet the challenges. Romanian society prefers safety, which has generated a high degree of rigidity and some resistance to innovation. Romania is considered a collectivist society, according to the same Hofstede Insights, which explains the low number of entrepreneurial initiatives and all the more the number of those who engage in social entrepreneurship, although Romanian society is open to solidarity [35].

In the media, it is difficult to find stories about social entrepreneurship. A focus on sport makes the search even more complicated. However, after the fall of communism, Romania was considered a country with difficult social problems. The number of non-profit organizations increased, and they tried to promote social entrepreneurship and valuable principles like care, solidarity, and respect. An
environment where sportspeople were invited to participate due to their celebrity and social influence was created. Often, champions associated their image with social causes. Some of them took this a step further and became involved in social entrepreneurship to support the development of a modern society in Romania.

This article gathers the few available cases of former athletes involved in this phenomenon in order to understand their contribution to Romanian social entrepreneurship and their objectives within this kind of business approach. Former sprint canoeist Ivan Patzaichin, former footballer Viorel Kraus, former climber Claudiu Miu, and former footballer Gheorghe Hagi are the examples used to present how sportspeople from different domains consider the ways in which their abilities can be applied to investing time and money into enterprises with a social impact. They could be considered as founders of a new domain of Romanian society.

One of the first observations is that the following initiatives have arisen to correct existing social failures (sedentary phenomenon, poor economy, difficulties of people with limited abilities, different types of discrimination, etc.), for which the Romanian Government has not found solutions, by proposing sustainable approaches to real life problems. Their actions confirm the idea that “social entrepreneurship is an integral part of a process that continuously reinvents itself by offering alternatives to local communities, to the state, and to different companies, for various troubles society is facing” [36].

These social entrepreneurs are aware of their role as change agents. In the case of Romania, they were asked about what principles guide them in their entrepreneurial activity. Their motivation was to create social value, to innovate and adapt to the needs of Romanian society, and to maximize resources in order to create new opportunities. These entrepreneurs have a positive perspective on their projects, acting as social change makers in situations where the state and its institutions fail [37].

3.1. Ivan Patzaichin and “Rowmania” Project

One of the agents of social change is Ivan Patzaichin, a globally known canoeist with seven Olympic medals. After the fall of communism, ecotourism became a business area with potential in Romania. The former Olympic champion Ivan Patzaichin invested his resources in this direction. In 2010, he founded an association called “Ivan Patzaichin—Mila 23,” combining his name with the name of his hometown, Mila 23, which is a little village in the Danube Delta. This association promotes ecotourism and canoeing in the Danube Delta. Using his national reputation, Ivan Patzaichin offers, through this association, various tourism packages for companies that want to offer special experiences for their employees. In this way, he has succeeded in promoting small businesses from the Danube Delta, and in encouraging the practice of water sports like rowing, canoeing, and swimming. When Ivan Patzaichin started this project, he also decided to promote his ethnic group of origin in order to increase their visibility and to strengthen their identity and the accountability of local communities of Lipovans (a Russian-speaking ethnic group that settled in Romania in the regions of Dobruja and Eastern Muntenia). He called this project “Rowmania,” a result of blending the terms “to row” and “Romania,” with the intention of developing this project at the national scale. In 2011, through the Rowmania project, an innovative boat, called a “canotca,” was created—a hybrid between a sports canoe and a traditional fishing boat known as a “lotca” in the Danube Delta. In this way, local craftsmen became involved; “In this kind of business, partnership is essential, but the culture of partnership is just at the beginning in Romania” [38] Ivan Patzaichin and his collaborators succeeded in designing and implementing an entrepreneurial démarche that reflects “viable self-sustaining and self-regulating mechanisms” able to resist the specific economic context and to reflect the real entrepreneurial personal traits of the initiator [39].

3.2. Gheorghe Hagi—Founder of the Football Academy

Former footballer Gheorghe Hagi oriented his ideas and resources with the same results. He initiated various projects using his experience in sport. For instance, Gheorghe Hagi opened his own football academy to respond to the need for young talented people to benefit from the highest education in terms of football. The former captain of the Romanian football team invested his own
fortune into building, from scratch, a top academy in the Constanța Region, built on land that used to be a corn field. From 2009, his project became a national success, gathering children with great potential from various social categories. Gheorghe Hagi’s club became an organization that covers two essential elements that characterize a social enterprise: the need for society to have a sports academy for elite players, and Gheorghe Hagi’s intention to make the project profitable. The success was quite remarkable, and the academy flourished. An important aspect of this business is represented by its social scholarships; the goal of this policy is to aid children whose families are struggling financially in such a way that their ability to begin or continue their football training is not compromised. Gheorghe Hagi and his staff regularly analyze cases of talented children for whom the academy can offer its support. Four years after its establishment, Gheorghe Hagi’s academy made a profit for the first time, but the former footballer says that he does not think of his project as a classic business. He prefers to talk about the fact that the athletes trained through his program played or are playing for the national teams of Romania.

3.3. Both Viorel Kraus, Father and Son as Football Promoters

The name of Viorel Kraus is known to Romanian football fans because he played for important clubs such as Rapid Bucharest, FC Arges and Sportul Studentesc. His son, with the same name, played football, just like his father, at Sportul Studentesc, but after the fall of communism, he left the country and coached in the United States for many years. In 2013, he came back and founded his own club, VK Soccer, to help children of poor social status (for example, children from single-parent families or whose families have financial difficulties) to play football and to improve their social skills.

The Kraus family wanted to build a sports project that would represent the principles for which they were campaigning. Their initiative quickly became well-known in Bucharest and they succeeded in creating football teams for adults and youth competitions. Without charging fees, Viorel Kraus—son also promoted women’s football and trained girls of all ages. To support his project, he applied for funds and tried to attract sponsors. Viorel Kraus—father has become a pro bono club counselor and gives children advice or deals with identifying social cases that might reach the club. In addition, through their reputation, the two Viorel Kraus promote the image and opportunities offered by VK Soccer.

3.4. Claudiu Miu “Climb(s) Again”

A different motivation to initiate a social project was held by the climber Claudiu Miu, former national champion. An accident was the starting point of his NGO, founded in 2013. Named the “Climb Again” Association, this organization helps people with disabilities to practice sport and to improve their condition. He called his club a therapeutic place reached through climbing. Alongside climbing classes, Claudiu Miu’s club offers other facilities to answer the needs of his clients, such as kinesitherapy or psychological support. To manage such a project, the former athlete obtained an MBA from the Erasmus University of Rotterdam (Holland) and became a constant presence in the media to persuade people to join him. At the same time, he became an “ambassador” of the idea of social entrepreneurship.

This phenomenon grew swiftly, and other former sportspeople, clubs, and federations began to see social entrepreneurship as an opportunity. Recently, The Romanian Football Federation launched a program to develop social entrepreneurship. Under the title “Football and the Social Economy,” this organization proposed a three-year program to educate 125 people in social entrepreneurship. The cost of the project is three million euros.

Considering these aspects, it is important to identify which elements have contributed to the success of the projects presented above, and to discuss the opportunity for other athletes to become social entrepreneurs. There are a few specific aspects that characterize these Romanian case studies and how they are related to social advantages generated by social entrepreneurship, as well as the professional background of former athletes.
4. How Social Entrepreneurship Succeeds

During the interviews with the former athletes mentioned above, the first observation is related to the motivation declared in their initiative. These social entrepreneurs explained that their gesture was done through a desire to “give something back” to society. Each of them has oriented mainly to the well-known domain in which they have played their part. “The ones like Hagi or me, who know the problems in sports and particularly in football, can easily understand how things work in this area and how solutions can be found for social issues”, considered Viorel Kraus, when describing his thoughts toward social entrepreneurship. As former athletes, they were in a good position to observe the gaps in their domains. At the same time, their foreign experience helped them to observe similar models in other countries. This aspect confirms the fact that many social enterprises in Romania are inspired by ideas that were successful outside of Romania. Each of the social entrepreneurs mentioned above indeed researched similar projects in other countries; Gheorghe Hagi was influenced by the football academies in Spain, Viorel Krauss used his knowledge of the American system, and Claudiu Miu studied NGOs undertaking similar activities in Europe.

The four entrepreneurs have in common a positive attitude toward the opportunity. They are optimistic about their capability to succeed in their activities, and that they can find the resources they need and access them. This kind of mindset around successfully launching an enterprise could be interpreted through intention-based models to explain entrepreneurial intention [40]. Intention is an important part of an entrepreneur’s philosophy, and it is influenced by social norms [41]. In the Romanian case, social norms operate rather like constraints for social entrepreneurs. The four entrepreneurs mentioned “social pressure” as a form of provocation for their enterprise. At the same time, the reputation of each of them contributed to decreasing this burden.

The individual perspective of analysis [23,42] offers some essential details about the skills used by former athletes to succeed in social entrepreneurship. The progress of these projects was determined, to some extent, by the individual competencies of the initiators. They called it “an entrepreneurial spirit”, but analyzing the key words of their speech, a larger set of attributes could be identified that the social entrepreneurs consider to be essential to achieve their goals.

One of these attributes is assertiveness, which explains the confidence of these people in their project. Another quality is self-discipline, which they had in abundance, both as athletes and as social entrepreneurs. This is a management competence, and the ability to prioritize and the willingness to make sacrifices in order to succeed in their entrepreneurial plan could be considered in the same category, as was the case during their sports activity. Like assertiveness, other self-regulated qualities that were mentioned by these social entrepreneurs included the ability to negotiate and the capacity to cope with stress. Some competencies have a social character; for instance, the social entrepreneurs mentioned their open attitude and the fact that they can listen and learn from others, because these qualities make it easier to build a social enterprise and to help others.

These competencies are strictly related to some of the qualities developed during their sports careers. Various specialists have studied the role of the personality characteristics of entrepreneurs, alongside other components that condition this phenomenon (e.g., environment, education, experience). They established similarities between the profiles of entrepreneurs and those of performance athletes [43–45]. Sportspeople are naturally attracted to entrepreneurship, and they have the skills to respond well to its challenges [45]. As it is characterized by pressure, uncertainty, stress, ambiguity, and periods of relative stability, entrepreneurship creates comparable contexts to those experienced during the sporting life of these individuals, as the four former athletes recognized. They confessed that they are living those moments of “peak performance, peak experience, and flow,” which are similar to sensations of sporting activity at the highest level [46].

The training process, with its long duration, practiced in difficult conditions of volume and intensity and with restrictions in living style, develops in athletes some personality virtues that are essential in entrepreneurship. These include qualities like resilience, self-control, self-realization, stress-resistance, and initiative [23,47–50].

At the same time, athletes and entrepreneurs are communicative, extroverted, emotionally stable [49,51], diligent [45,52], and oriented toward taking risks [49]. These characteristics create the premise
for mechanisms specific to role models. These aspects are in accordance with findings from the literature, which highlight the fact that the presence of models increases the self-efficacy of the observers; in our case, the athletes and what motivates them to perform. According to Bandura, the likelihood that modeling facilitates observers’ behavior depends on the similarity between the models and the observers [53]. In the relationship between sports and social entrepreneurship, the process of role modeling could be perceived as a two-stage operation: From entrepreneurs to athletes, and from athletes to the community. In this way, the athlete becomes a key element of a mechanism capable of generating sustainable changes, and in the long term, this could produce social value.

However, the contextual perspective on sports and social entrepreneurship must be discussed. A common challenge mentioned in every one of these cases was how to increase the interest in each project. The former athletes all invested their own social capital; this was considered the most valuable ingredient for success, because their fame helped them to promote these projects. In particular, for Gheorghe Hagi and Ivan Patzaichin, social capital was helpful to attract sponsors. Usually, through personal contacts, former athletes can access several types of funds, especially from private companies, which is a less bureaucratic process compared with seeking funds from the Romanian state. At the same time, the need to have a stable budget to run projects obliged them to transform themselves into good negotiators. Each of them was confronted with this challenge, and was thus driven to develop skills like networking, planning, or assessing community needs.

Another aspect that helped these social entrepreneurs to succeed was the solidarity generated by the project. For the “Rowmania” project, local solidarity helped the initiators of the NGO; the project was aimed at helping the local community, and this promoted the solidarity of the people from the Danube Delta. For the “Climb Again” project, solidarity around the community of visually impaired people was observed. Each project sensitized a significant group of people, and each social entrepreneur tried to establish partnerships with local and national actors in sport. Indeed, a critical factor for the success of social entrepreneurship is the ability to initiate collaborations with various stakeholders from sports, the economy, or other civil society organizations.

An important element identified in the success of the social enterprises mentioned above was their ability to promote their message through the media. With a simple search on the Internet, the message of each of the social entrepreneurs included in this article is easily identifiable. Each social entrepreneur was involved in social media; their involvement in the promotion of their social mission was consistent, and this aspect increased their audience. Additionally, their social enterprises have their own platforms where information is disseminated, and the contact details and the strategy of each project are displayed. This is especially important for their essential objective: to engage young people and to encourage them to become involved in social activities.

Social entrepreneurship could become a long-term initiative, as the case studies taken into consideration in this research show. Gheorghe Hagi’s academy has been in operation for over 10 years and has consistently improved its performance throughout this time; the same has been noted for Viorel Krauss’s club (created in 2011), for the NGO and club belonging to Claudiu Miu (started in 2013), and for Ivan Patzaichin’s association (created in 2010). Their projects are positive examples of how an organization can evolve. A process like this can be determined by interactions, good strategies, developed networks, and the environment [54]. During this time, through their activity, each social project described earlier has built trust into their mission and can be considered as models for others. In fact, Gheorghe Hagi, Ivan Patzaichin, and Viorel Krauss have all encouraged others to create similar projects.

In order to succeed, social enterprises should have a viable financial plan. Because the projects that have been analyzed here are so different, it is impossible to find a common pattern from an economical point of view. Gheorghe Hagi’s academy is the most profitable because it has a club in the first division and produces football players that are sold to other clubs. For NGOs like “Climb Again,” the main source of revenue is represented by sponsors and donations. However, like the others, its activity is based on a financial plan created the year before. In the case of Ivan Patzaichin’s association, it is a mixed situation, because the project “Rowmania” gathers sponsors, but people interested in the project can also pay for tourism services and sports activities [42]. In Viorel Krauss’s
case, he has associated his image with the partnerships he creates in order to assure the continuity of his football club.

The financial implications assume risk taking, of which social entrepreneurs are aware. Risk management is an essential tool for each entrepreneur, and the mentioned former athletes chosen as case studies all asked themselves before starting whether their project could realistically materialize. With a sports background, these social entrepreneurs were better trained to manage failure, even though they were missing an economic education. Social entrepreneurs must accept that if at specific times their project has difficulties, the process and the learning that accompanies those challenges can eventually lead to success. Each of them built a business plan, which was useful to measure the challenges. The projects were also adapted over time to various contexts, which shows the willingness and the ability of social entrepreneurs to adjust their plan, but to also carry on.

5. Discussion

The examples discussed in this paper show that former athletes are capable of being social entrepreneurs in Romanian society, for which they can use some of the key elements that helped them as sportpeople [55]. Their social capital is important because it helps with the transfer of charisma from the competition to the business domain. Social capital is related to the networking attribute; at the same time, in social entrepreneurship former athletes test their leadership attributes. This is a key component because it helps former athletes to lead a social mission, but also to inspire others. This phenomenon could be explained through the popularity of the athletes and the reduction of the social distance toward the communities with which they interact, including in the school environment.

Social entrepreneurship can be innovative, and the cases presented above provide something new in their corresponding domains; this could be a specific aspect for former athletes. For them, innovation is part of the game, because in competition most of them are required to create opportunities to defeat their opponents, and their innovation as athletes helps them to react to and resolve problems in the entrepreneurial environment. Innovation goes hand in hand with endurance; former athletes are used to hard training and perseverance, which they can transfer into the business field. In the interviews with those in our case studies, their will to “fight” and to accomplish their social mission in the entrepreneurial domain was obvious. They are also often available to dedicate more time than other entrepreneurs to developing their social enterprises and have a greater capacity to focus on their projects and to increase their chances of success.

Each project selected for review contained physical activities and incorporated social values; at the same time, these entrepreneurs allocate resources for education purposes. Each of them could be considered an altruistic person. This form of entrepreneurship is not based essentially on profit, but it has another component that is more important for its leaders, namely, intangible profit, represented in our case studies by the happiness and the opportunities created for those who are in need. The entrepreneurs needed to give something back to the communities from which they came, and this was a trait that was also identified in Romanian social entrepreneurs’ profiles [56]. At the same time, the former athletes confirmed that they had the capacity to change and redirect the objectives of people, which was both a source of inspiration for them, and could trigger some corresponding behaviors by encouraging people to act in accordance with new life ideals [57].

These case studies confirmed that the process of social modeling associated with the figures of former athletes could be explained through the three qualities of the model they represent. The first aspect is goal embodiment (i.e., integration of personal objectives from the perspective offered by the model), the second is attainability (i.e., connected to the processes of restructuring negative stereotypes and overcoming internal barriers, with the intention of being similar to the model), and the third is desirability (i.e., the will to succeed, for professional accomplishment and social reward, similar to the model) [57].

The durability and the relevance of role models in the life of children in difficult circumstances can be explained through the stereotype inoculation model [58]. This indicates that negative mental representations about one’s own condition will eventually become a factor that holds back personal
development. People in difficult situations have a tendency to develop negative self-stereotypes, to underevaluate themselves, and to fail to accomplish something professionally. For this reason, the examples presented above are important to help build sustainable social change. Role models operate like motivational vectors and help people to exploit their potential intellectual and socio-emotional skills to orient their energy toward valuable activities and to choose educational solutions and careers [57]. Some authors see role models as a solution to overcoming situations of social inequity [59], which is often found in Romanian society. Considering these aspects, the actions of social entrepreneurship associated with sports have a chance to impact society through the influence exerted at the personality level of these people.

From a social perspective that emphasizes their capacity to recognize opportunities and to exploit them, social entrepreneurs can be categorized into three categories: social bricoleurs (with a local impact, resolving small-scale problems), social constructionists (with a broader impact, resolving small- to large-scale problems), and social engineers (bringing systemic change, resolving national- to international-scale problems) [60]. The four cases presented above could be included in the first two categories, which are specific to Romanian social entrepreneurship. Even though Gheorghe Hagi founded a football academy with a national impact and Claudiu Miu created a national system to facilitate access to climbing for people with disabilities, they are social constructionists. On the other hand, Ivan Patzaichin and Viorel Kraus are more like social bricoleurs because their social projects are oriented toward resolving a social problem at the local level.

An athlete has the ability to become an entrepreneur, but the process does not follow a particular pattern. Each transition of this kind involves many variables, such as the desire for success, the appropriateness of decisions, the ability to build a plan, etc. [61] Depending on the personality traits, the knowledge and abilities gained during their sports and educational careers, and the subsequent socio-economic working environment, athletes are able to optimally exploit the action of all these variables.

From the previous analysis, it can be emphasized that building a sports-based social enterprise in a Romanian-specific context involves the engagement of a successful elite athlete and a consistent economic approach. The elite athlete comes with personality traits as a guarantee for hard work, initiative, risk-taking, but also with a strong social network capable of attracting financial support. The solidarity they can generate around their own ideas, supported by media involvement, is based on subtle psychosocial resources that appeal to patriotism, devotion, empowerment, happiness, empathy, as fundamental human values that leave their mark on the communities.

On the other hand, the involvement of specialists in the economic-financial field is essential in order to turn that investment into a self-supporting enterprise capable of development. In this way, the self-generation of financial resources and the attraction of new sponsors are the mechanisms through which the opportunities for supporting social causes are multiplied.

6. Conclusions

Each case is unique but they all have the same ambition: To innovate a project through sport and to solve a social demand. This study indicates that social entrepreneurship is an initiative that requires a deep understanding of Romanian society. Even though the cases presented herein were successful, the overall number of social entrepreneurship projects is small. This is a systemic problem, but the promotion of these models and the knowledge of the elements of success, challenges, and difficulties could encourage other former athletes to start their own social enterprises. This does not mean that the risk of failure does not exist, but the examples and the elements identified above could represent some indicators of which qualities are needed to cope with the challenges of such an initiative, of how to innovate, and how to create a social enterprise.

Ivan Patzaichin, Claudiu Miu, Viorel Kraus, and Gheorghe Hagi could be considered pioneers of social entrepreneurship in Romanian sport. Reflecting on these cases, it has been identified how social entrepreneurship could function in Romania, how it is hard to succeed in a country with a high level of bureaucracy, and what the perspectives of such initiatives are. However, research into these social entrepreneurs reveals just some of the various forms that social enterprises can take, and the
fact that they respond to similar pressures and compete for similar resources. The four cases presented in this paper indicate that social entrepreneurship works beyond individual perspectives, and that an individual leader could build a collective representation through their social enterprise.

Such successful social enterprises create good practice models, and as a result of the psychological and social mechanism described earlier, athletes or former athletes can start to learn from Ivan Patzaichin, Claudiu Miu, Viorel Kraus, or Gheorghe Hagiu’s experiences in designing and implementing different sustainable social projects. Even if a project has a lot of potential, like those mentioned herein, it may cost more than a social entrepreneur is capable of investing in terms of money, time, emotions, and so forth.

This paper highlights the growing interest of Romanian sports researchers in the phenomenon of social entrepreneurship and reveals the need of the Romanian society to identify new resources for change and development. It should be noted that several limitations were identified throughout the research, which were mainly related to the reduced number of case studies analyzed. Although relevant to the field, they provide a partial picture of the studied phenomenon. At the same time, they concern different sports disciplines, which does not currently allow for an analysis of the relationship between the entrepreneur’s sports background and the direction of social action.

Further research on the topic of athletes’ ability to act in the field of social entrepreneurship could deepen the analysis of their personality traits in relation to the sports discipline practiced and professional success, but also the action of economic and political factors. At the same time, athletes and former athletes who embrace this kind of initiative could be important promoters of social entrepreneurship. Their celebrity status and the network created around them could help to develop this phenomenon. This could be particularly relevant for female athletes, because their participation as social entrepreneurs in sport is rare in Romanian society, and this aspect could also generate further research.

This study strengthens the notion that athletes have the skills to succeed in social entrepreneurship through their experiences, discipline of work, and (pro)active social behavior. Although this paper is the first serious attempt in Romania to unravel the complex relationship between sports and social entrepreneurship, more elaborate research needs to be done to achieve a more complete understanding of this phenomenon. Even though the case studies mentioned above could be considered as successful, social entrepreneurship in Romania has a high rate of failure compared to other types of entrepreneurship, although the percentage is hard to evaluate [62]. More research is needed on this and related topics between sports and entrepreneurship [63]. If such a development in social entrepreneurship through sport is taking place, the findings presented in this article could be compared and generalized in the future.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.S.; methodology, P.-N.C.; analysis of resources, P.-N.C., R.S., and M.S.; writing—original draft preparation, P.-N.C., R.S., and M.S.; writing—review and editing: P.-N.C., R.S., and M.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was conducted as part of the project “Athletes becoming social entrepreneurs! Developing a gamification based social entrepreneurship training program for athletes” (Erasmus+ Sport, project number 603312-EPP-1-2018-1-NO-SPO-SCP).

Acknowledgments: This study was carried out with the support of the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (European Commission).

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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