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## The long path of us Soccer: From isolation to attraction

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### Abstract

*Introduction.* Over the last 30 years, North American soccer has steadily progressed, reaching levels that even the most hopeful supporters could not have dreamed. In 1996, Major League Soccer had ten registered teams; today, there are 28 teams, each with their own sports complex dedicated solely to the practice of this activity. Years of quick growth were marked by less creative decisions that were easily rejected, as well as reformist moves that "pushed" soccer in the United States to greatness.

*Material and method.* The stereotype of the "retired league" has been lifted, and with the addition of major international talents, the MLS has become a tremendously appealing league for any professional soccer player. Of course, we cannot currently compare this league to the well-known Premier League or La Liga, but reputations are built over time, and involvement can help you accomplish this goal.

*Results.* Romanians were initially skeptical of the MLS, but this view has shifted mostly as a result of increased competitiveness and commercial appeal, as well as huge expenditures from several world-renowned sponsors.

*Conclusions.* If the great Romanian players of the "Golden Generation" rejected MLS approaches, the younger generation is very interested in the North American sports competition. The next paragraphs will explain how this paradigm shift occurred.

**Key words:** soccer impact, history, bilateralism, glory, supporters

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## Introduction

Following World War II, soccer in Romania and the United States of America had similar paths. In both cases, when it comes to representative teams, qualification for the FIFA World Cup was achieved through good circumstances as well as extraordinary generations.

To qualify for the first post-war FIFA World Cup, held in Brazil in 1950, preliminary matches had to be organized. FIFA member states could sign up to participate, with qualification matches arranged by geographical region. Seven teams could qualify from Europe, six from the Americas, and one from Asia. However, the political situation in Eastern Europe, shaped by the imposition of communist regimes loyal to Moscow, led many countries, including Romania, to boycott the tournament. The event was dismissed by the state-controlled press as the "Summer Cup of the Westerners" (Toma, 2021). Yugoslavia, however, stood out by continuing its geopolitical balancing act between Moscow and Washington.

After qualifying for the final tournament, the United States national team achieved a remarkable result by defeating England 1-0 in a Group B match of the World Cup. This victory was a major surprise, as football in the United Kingdom was a professional sport, while in North America it remained largely amateur. Although the win wasn't enough to advance the U.S. team to the final group stage, the performance of the North American players helped lay the foundation for the growth of football in the region.

*"...when I phoned Proini (a newspaper in Greek that was printed in New York) in the evening and said: England midhen, Americhi, ena!, the stenographer didn't believe it. She asked me to repeat. I repeated. She didn't let up. She asked me who actually knocked. I answered: Little girl, dear, write as I told you. Seconds cost money! She started to write, but she still didn't seem convinced. That's how it was in Belo Horizonte, the most fantastic match in soccer history. Since then, nothing can surprise me when it comes to soccer...and that's because I was in the stands. Philatelists brag about their rare stamps, I, as a chronicler, will always brag about having been to Belo Horizonte (where the U.S.A. vs. England game was played)." - mentioned Tassos Verghitsis, journalist of Greek origin, settled in New York (Nazat, 2018).*

While the United States national team remained largely unaffected by World War II, the same cannot be said for Romania's team. Players like Petre Vâlcov, who scored 99 goals in 150 matches for Venus București, and Petre Sucitulescu, a regular starter for Unirea Tricolor over seven seasons, were among the national team members who lost their lives on the battlefield. Compounding these losses was the "Romanization" policy imposed by the communist regime, which excluded players of so-called "unhealthy" origins from representing Romania in official matches. However, there were two notable exceptions: Ladislau Bölöni and Michael Klein. Both were standout players of their generation and excluding them would have caused outrage among Romanian football fans, who were beginning to savor victories by the mid-1970s.

A variety of non-football factors contributed to the delayed success of the Romanian national soccer team. Political influences, such as the communist regime's refusal to allow the team to enter World Cup qualifiers and the ban on selecting ethnic Hungarians or Germans, played a major role. Military factors also had an impact, with many players being called to arms, some of whom lost their lives in battle. Social issues further compounded the situation, as economic shortages forced some players to leave football, where they were poorly paid, to work in factories. A revival finally came in 1970 when the "tricolors" qualified for their third FIFA World Cup, held in Mexico, 36 years after their last appearance in Italy in 1934. Romania earned its spot by winning Group A in the qualifiers, defeating Greece, Switzerland, and Portugal. In the tournament, Romania faced a true "group of death," as labeled by Mexican journalists, with matches against reigning champions England, Pele's Brazil, and one of Europe's strongest teams at the time, Czechoslovakia. Romania finished with one victory (3-2 against Czechoslovakia) and two narrow defeats (0-1 to England and 2-3 to Brazil), leaving the competition with the satisfaction of having won over the Mexican public with their spirited performances.



**Figure 1.** The captains of Romania and England, Mircea Lucescu and Bobby Moore, before the start of the game. (tikitaka.ro)

"we were considered to be the passers of Europe. I could get more from that final tournament. Mihai Mocanu played great on the left side, blocking both Jairzinho and Ball. We were the favorites of the local fans. When we were leaving the stadium to the hotel, there were crowds of fans cheering us. There were no rivalries between us, no envy. We were a very homogeneous team, very close to each other." - emphasized the captain of the Romanian team at that FIFA World Cup, Mircea Lucescu. (Un Podcast, 2024)

The 70's represented an important turning point for soccer in the United States of America, but also for Romanian football. Two distinct strategies were initiated and implemented with different results.

In the United States, a campaign was launched to attract internationally famous soccer players in an effort to shift the public's focus from traditional American sports like baseball and hockey to the "European" game of soccer. High-profile players such as Pelé, Franz Beckenbauer, and Carlos Alberto were lured to the U.S., along with Romanians such as Ștefan Mărdărescu and Zoltan Sătmăreanu. For a brief period, the initiative appeared to be successful: stadiums were filled, sales of soccer gear surged, and television networks saw a significant rise in profits. It seemed like a winning formula for popularizing the sport.

However, the success was short-lived. The influx of star players wasn't followed by sustained investments in developing local talent or nurturing the next generation of soccer enthusiasts. Public interest in playing the sport waned, and the lack of soccer infrastructure further discouraged participation. As a result, the initial excitement faded. Sponsors shifted their focus to other emerging sports, like indoor soccer, and by the end of the 1984/1985 season, the domestic soccer league collapsed into bankruptcy.

In contrast, Romania took a more strategic and long-term approach to soccer development. The focus was on the younger generation, with regional centers of excellence established across the country. These centers identified and nurtured the most talented young players in each area, providing them with top-tier facilities and support to help them grow. The ultimate goal for these players was to reach the national center, called *Luceafărul* (named after a famous star), which served as a gateway to the national team.

This system created a clear, structured pathway to success, ensuring that each stage of a player's development was carefully managed. Romania's approach quickly bore fruit, as the country began achieving significant international victories. The Romanian model of youth development soon became a point of reference for other countries in Europe, Africa, and North America, demonstrating the importance of investing in grassroots soccer to achieve long-term success.

At the beginning of the 90's, the football situation in Romania and the United States of America was antagonistic. Romania represented a world-class force with important results both at the level of club teams (Steaua Bucharest won the European Champions Cup in 1986 and played in the final in 1989) and at the level of the national team (qualification from the groups at the World Cup in 1990). The North American federal state did not have a professional soccer league and the national team had only just qualified for the 1990 FIFA World Cup after a 40-year absence, where they suffered three consecutive defeats, finishing last in their group.

In both states, a "soccer shock" was needed to fill a void in the souls of the population. If Romania suffered economically and the hardships of everyday life made the Romanian citizens extremely dissatisfied with the way the country was doing, Romania's reputed victories in the 1990 World Cup made the Romanian come out from their home, flooding the streets of the capital with their volcanic breath. In the United States there was another source of discontent. A nation of athletes, accustomed to defeat, was considered to be a "training partner" for the great forces of world soccer. In dozens of sports the Americans performed, but in the "king sport" they failed to confirm.

Thus, before the start of the FIFA World Cup in the U.S.A. 1994, in Romania there was an emulation at the level of society making Romanian football a banner of the barely won democracy (Hagi was considered the King of Romania by the supporters), and in the U.S.A. the leadership in Washington was prepared to make significant financial efforts to achieve supremacy in the "king sport" as well.

## **Aim**

The paper aims to highlight the evolution of North American soccer and how Major League Soccer has become a magnet for young Romanian soccer players. If in the 70's, the representatives of soccer in the U.S. managed to bring Romanian footballers and coaches to raise the standard of North American soccer, motivating them with generous salaries and a life without restrictions, the same thing did not happen in the 80's and 90's of the last century. Romanian football had grown in value, and the target of the great artisans of Romanian football was the European West. In a relatively short time, the "tricolors" conquered the football markets from Spain, Italy, France and the Netherlands, both at the level of the technical bench (Ladislau Bölöni coach at Nancy 1992-2000, Mircea Lucescu at Brescia 1991-1996), and on the playing field (Gheorghe Hagi - Real Madrid 1990-1992; Gheorghe Popescu - PSV 1990-1994). The performance of the "tricolors" at the World Cup in the U.S. 1994 made the Americans fall in love with their game provided, but bringing players from Romania to MLS was a forbidden dream for US club managers at the time.

What exactly determined the change of opinion of the current generation of Romanian footballers and coaches regarding North American soccer constitutes the basis of this topic of real interest for all lovers of the "king sport". It also helps to establish the working hypotheses that determined the structure of this article:

- Determining the role that football players from Romania had in the emancipation of the soccer movement from the United States of America;
- Identifying the reasons that led to the change in the perception of soccer by the American public, but also by the practitioners of this sport in Romania;
- Highlighting the stages of modernization of North American soccer;
- Comparing the evolution of the football movement in the two countries and analyzing the causes that led to regression (in the case of Romania) and progress (in the case of the United States of America).

## **Materials and method**

The thesis could not have been completed without knowing in detail the content of the main specialized works and without having the most innovative working methods. The work is interdisciplinary, which led to the use of methods specific to applied studies (through evaluation research) and humanistic ones (processing and interpreting information).

The degree of intervention on the analyzed subject oscillated between the experimental component, when I determined certain reactions (see the personal account of the activity undertaken by Reese at FCM Bacău), and the observational, non-interventionist component, when I based myself on the study official documents and media interviews.

## **Results**

Currently the Major League Soccer it is a magnet for European footballers who want to perform at the international level. Players like Lionel Messi, Marco Reus, but also the younger Riqui Puig and Aleksey Miranchuk have made the level of the championship rise substantially. But how was this success achieved? What has led to the reactivation of this league (after the meteoric rise in the 70's) and the maintenance of its appeal?

The United States government gave a major boost to the soccer movement by deciding to hold a major soccer competition that was known to be a magnet for the American public. This initiative was joined by the big companies in the U.S., which started investing in different American soccer franchises.

The meaning of the 4th of July is well-known, Independence Day, the national day of the United States of America, but it seems that the 1988 celebration had other meanings. On that day, in Zurich, the host country of the 1994 edition of the World Cup was established. After an unsuccessful attempt to organize the final tournament in 1986, the US Soccer Association made every effort to be able to host the 1994 edition. Along with the U.S. Brazil and Morocco have also applied. The soccer advantage was on the side of the Brazilians (the most loved sport in Brazil and with the most practitioners), but the financial one was on the side of the Americans (only the registration file containing 381 pages cost 500,000 dollars). (Lewis, 2015) Government guarantees, major investments in the construction/renovation of some arenas and the integrated transport system were strong

points that tilted the balance towards the North American side. Added to all this was the promise of creating a professional soccer league. Thus, Major League Soccer was born, which still exists today.

On December 17, 1993, the formation of Major League Soccer was announced and the logo of the competition was publicly unveiled at the time of the group stage draw for the FIFA World Cup 1994, hosted in US. This was followed by the signing of financially attractive contracts with the most important North American television stations (ESPN and ABC), and in the midst of the final tournament, the cities that will host first league teams were also selected. After the FIFA World Cup came to an end, things stagnated. Although he was supposed to debut in 1995, things took shape only in 1996. From a list of world stars to be brought to the United States of America, they signed with teams from the M.L.S. only Mexican goalkeeper Jorge Campos and Colombian midfielder Carlos Valderrama. (MLSnet, 2008)

One of the major challenges for American soccer was competing for popularity against well-established sports that already had a large and loyal fan base, both in terms of spectators and sponsors. To make soccer more appealing and exciting, various new rules were introduced specifically for the domestic league. One such experiment was the "35-yard shootout," a unique twist on the traditional penalty shootout. In this format, a player would sprint from 35 yards out toward the opposing goalkeeper, aiming to score within a timed interval of five seconds.

This innovation, first introduced in the North American Soccer League (NASL) in the 1970s, quickly gained popularity with the American audience. It was seen as something different, fun, and distinctly American, adding a level of excitement and spectacle that resonated with the culture. In American sports, ties are often seen as unsatisfying, and Major League Soccer (MLS) embraced this mentality by adopting the 35-yard shootout to avoid drawn matches. While the idea was initially controversial, it was soon embraced by both players and fans alike as a fresh and entertaining aspect of the game.

The concept of Major League Soccer (MLS) was to be formed on a stable and responsible financial basis with slow growth, a completely different approach than what the North American Soccer League (NASL) offered in the 70's and 80's of the last century. (Maurer. 2020) The strategy was a good one, balanced, with tangible results in 10-15 years, but sports consumers, and soccer in particular, were impatient. The appearance of those rule changes did not lead to the conquest of new sympathizers. Thus, at the beginning of the 20th century, American soccer was in a new moment of balance. Will they change strategy and introduce an innovative vision with immediate results, or will they wait a few years and hope that things will work out?!

Three main factors led to the paradigm shift:

A. The American public has been used to idolizing the most important exponents of world sports. In basketball, American football or hockey, the main "heroes" were present in the domestic competition and the contact with them was much easier. In American soccer, there were no such internationally recognized values, and this caused the public to move away from their favorite team (most often fans supported the team of their city of residence).

B. Small number of teams created. In 1996, there were 10 teams in the first soccer league, unevenly distributed, many North American states not being represented. In the following year, two teams from big cities with a significant percentage of immigrants were added (Chicago and Miami). It found that areas sparsely populated with immigrants have failed to be conquered by European football, and a lack of investment has widened this gap.

C. The organization of the 1994 FIFA World Cup on the territory of the USA and the route taken by the U.S. national team in this competition increased American interest in soccer. Unsuccessful participation in the CONCACAF Gold Cup (soccer competition held between the countries of North America, Central America and the Caribbean) and the FIFA World Cup in France 1998 followed the removal of the enthusiasm created in previous years. It didn't just matter that the U.S. national soccer team suffered defeats, but an additional factor was the opponent who defeated them (Iran 2-1 on June 21, 1998 and Yugoslavia on June 25, 1998, both matches counting for the Football World Cup). Geopolitical clashes have moved onto the green grass rectangle, making it not just the US soccer team. to suffer, but a whole country. These things affected the notoriety of soccer and created the conditions for change.

The main changes applied to American soccer at the beginning of the new millennium consisted in:

1. Returning to the strategy of attracting top footballers to practice soccer in the domestic competition (MLS). The most famous players to the American public were those who excelled in the 1994 FIFA World Cup hosted by the USA. Thus, players such as: Romario, Stoichkov, Adolfo Valencia were offered to come and play in MLS. Stoichkov and Valencia immediately accepted, while Romario took a few years to agree the transfer to an MLS team. Not only the 1994 World Cup was a landmark for the enthusiastic owners of North American clubs, but also other international competitions of such caliber as the African Cup of Nations, where Mamadou Diallo had

outstanding performances for the national team of Senegal. Also in the year 2000 were brought: Miklos Molnar - nicknamed by North American fans "Danish Dynamite", Abdul Conteh from Sierra Leone and many others.

2. The construction of new stadiums dedicated to the practice of soccer. The leaders of the MLS recommended that the affiliated soccer clubs had to build their own stadiums, dedicated exclusively to the practice of this sport. The Ohio team, Columbus Crew, was the first to benefit from a stadium dedicated exclusively to soccer, mainly due to the significant financial involvement of Lamar Hunt (the club's owner). In May 1999, the Historic Crew Stadium was inaugurated, which was the home of the Ohio team from that time until 2021, when a new state-of-the-art sports complex in downtown Columbus was opened. The example was also followed by the college soccer teams who, in the same year, inaugurated: Elizabeth Lyle Robbie Stadium on the campus of the University of Minnesota and the Seminole Soccer Complex on the campus of the University of Florida.

3. MLS leadership change. Between 1996 and 2001, MLS lost approximately \$250 million, and financial problems were on the verge of another bankruptcy for the U.S. domestic soccer competition. A change was needed, and it happened in mid-1999, when Doug Logan (who ran MLS from its inception until August 3, 1999) was replaced by Donald Garber, who revolutionized the entire competitive system, with remarkable results.

4. Abandoning "Americanized" rules. FIFA has declared itself against the application of national rules regarding the practice of soccer from the beginning. Thus, the traditionalists, but also the lovers of European football living in the USA, were against the application of rules that created a gap between traditional European football and its "Americanized" version. "Improved" soccer with those bizarre rules failed to win new admirers, nor to keep those who admired European football. At the end of the season held in 1999, new directors of North American soccer made the decision to comply with the rules established by FIFA, abandoning experiments such as: "35 yard shootout".

5. Applying the European model for organizing children and youth centers. A series of partnerships were initiated with important soccer clubs in Europe, and young North American players had the opportunity to familiarize themselves with new training tactics through summer schools held in various European countries. Between 1998 and 2004, on the initiative of Adrian Szasz, the owner of the EuroSoccerAcademy (thebestovernightcamps.com, X) based in Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, training courses were organized for young people between 15 and 23 years old in Romania, Spain and Portugal. The participants had the opportunity to get in touch with the most representative players: Gheorghe Hagi from Romania or Andoni Zubizarreta from Spain. (Ruddick, 1998)

The impact of these changes was rapid, with North American soccer growing rapidly both economically and in terms of the quality of the game. USA National Soccer Team managed a remarkable run at the 2002 World Cup, defeating Portugal in the main groups, knocking out Mexico in the round of 16 and coming close to knocking out Germany in the quarterfinals. Thus, new horizons have opened up for young American players, who are now on the radar of the big European teams. The capital infusion caused by the transfer of players to Europe was reinvested by the owners, thus increasing the level of the North American soccer league.

Things have been constantly evolving, and an important step in achieving current performances was the implementation of the designated player rule, or the Beckham Rule, as it has come to be known in the collective mind. The rule implemented starting from the 2007 season offered the possibility for club teams in MLS to transfer three players without taking into account the financial restrictions that existed since the foundation of the competition in 1996. Thus, other world-renowned players could be transferred such as: David Beckham, Cuauhtemoc Blanco, Juan Pablo Angel and many others.

## Discussions

In the early 1990's, Romanians viewed the North American soccer league as exotic, low-quality, and underdeveloped. Efforts by Ștefan Mărdărescu to convince Romanian players who participated in the 1994 FIFA World Cup to transfer to Major League Soccer (MLS) were unsuccessful. Romanian footballers were more focused on pursuing careers in Western Europe, aiming for traditional clubs or leagues offering better financial opportunities. At the time, North American soccer lacked both the prestige and media exposure to attract top talent, and MLS's operating rules (before the Beckham rule) prevented clubs from offering large salaries. As a result, the league held little appeal for players looking to gain wealth or fame.

Despite this, Romanian footballers were highly sought after by MLS club owners due to their modest financial demands compared to other Europeans and their exceptional technique, earning them the nickname "the Brazilians of Europe." This skill set was seen as a potential draw to boost the league's appeal. However, until the year 2000, no Romanian player made the move to MLS. It wasn't until Alexandru Zotincă's signing that the pathway for Romanian footballers to join MLS was reopened.

"I think Romanian players are very expensive. So, often, it is difficult to bring players from Romania, but also from all over Europe, because they are very expensive!" - declared the coach of Chivas USA, Preki Radosavljevic, in an interview offered to the Romanian television - TVR - in September 2008. (Graur, 2020)

Alexandru Florin Zotincă started his career at the Inter Sibiu club, performing for three seasons at the level of the second league in Romania (1995-1998). A surprising transfer followed to Steaua Bucharest, the most famous football club in Romania, which between 1998-2002 went through the "darkest" period since its establishment, being on the verge of dissolution. In two seasons he manages to play in only 8 matches for Steaua, and from the winter of the 1999-2000 season he returns to the second league at Gaz Metan Mediaș. (romaniansoccer.ro, X) He no longer gets to play in Romania because he decides to emigrate to fulfill his American dream. Once in the land of Lincoln and Washington he choose to play for the Kansas City Cornets (indoor soccer team) until 2003 when he transferred to the outdoor soccer team in Kansas (City Wizards). About his performances in the "Wizards" team jersey, I found numerous articles in the North American press, but very few in the Romanian sports press. Although he has known for his energetic way of playing and his good results (runner-up of the league trophy and winner of the Cup since his first year at the Kansas City Wizards), he remained unknown to football fans in Romania. Only after the proposal from the American coach, Bruce Arena, to play for the national team of the United States of America, did the first news about this player's achievements appear in the Romanian press.

Zotincă, the only Romanian player who passed the milestone of 100 games played in MLS, represented an emblematic player of the North American soccer professional league, but a quasi-unknown to Romanian football fans.

In March 2015, MLS made a significant move to expand its presence in the European market. EuroSport and MLS announced a four-year agreement that would see the sports channel broadcast North American league matches in all the European territories it operated in. This partnership brought North American soccer into the homes of soccer fans across Europe. (hdsatelit.com, 2015)

The 2007 changes in MLS transfer regulations, along with the league's rising competitive level, increased the likelihood of Romanian players making the move to MLS. One such player was Răzvan Cociș, who had over 50 caps for the Romanian national team and had won trophies in Russia and Moldova. Cociș joined the Chicago Fire, where he showcased his talent in 66 games, scoring 7 goals. Before Cociș's transfer to the U.S. in 2017, Romanian footballers had shown little interest in moving to MLS, but his success marked a turning point, and attitudes towards overseas transfers began to shift significantly.

"I wanted to get there for a year and a half. I have been on vacation a few times and I really liked the country. Football is growing and I said to try such an experience. I managed it pretty hard. There were emotions with this transfer. I spoke on the phone with the agents for two months. At one point it was a good situation, then it turned into a bad one and all over again.. In the end it worked out and I was happy." - Răzvan Cociș expressed his feelings in an interview offered to the DolceSport television station. (Nenciu&Spiridon, 2014)

In February 2019, the transfer of Alexandru Mitriță to the New York City team was announced. The most technical player of the Romanian football championship, with the best ratio of successful dribbles, was transferred for a record amount (at the time he was the third most expensive transfer in Liga I) to MLS. From that moment the level of attraction of MLS for the Romanian player had reached a climax.

The transfers of Andreas Ivan (to New York Red Bulls), Deian Boldor (to CF Montreal) followed, as well as valuable players with real growth prospects such as: Alexandru Mățan and Enes Sali. Sali is a man of records considering that he holds the supremacy in the ranking of the youngest goalscorers in Liga 1 history, scoring his first senior goal at the extremely young age of 15 years and 6 months. (sport.ro, 2023) He also holds the record for the earliest debut in the Romanian national football team at 15 years, 8 months and 22 days. (digisport.ro, 2021) Only positive things can be said also about Alexandru Mățan, a complete player, who played in all the levels of junior groups for the Romanian national football team.



Figure 2. Enes Ali Records (academiahagi.ro, 2021)



If in the past Romanian footballers looked to the West when they were projecting their footballing future, now the new trend is to look optimistically towards the MLS. The fact that soccer in the U.S. has constantly evolved and reached an enviable level, it makes us believe that Donald Garber's efforts were not in vain.

## Conclusion

In the 1970's, American soccer attracted Romanian players primarily due to the promise of impressive financial benefits. However, this influx of foreign talent eventually contributed to the league's financial collapse, and pursuing such opportunities was seen as highly risky. Romanian footballers had to leave the country illegally, as legal emigration was impossible under the communist regime. The consequences were often severe: families left behind were harassed by the Securitate, the players themselves were sentenced to prison in absentia and labeled as "traitors." This explains the small number of Romanian players who made it to the American soccer league before the new millennium.

By the 1990's, Romanian football had become a model of excellence, sought after around the world. Following Romania's impressive performance at the 1994 FIFA World Cup, the national team coach, Anghel Iordănescu, received offers from several MLS teams to continue his career in the U.S. Iconic Romanian players from the Golden Generation were also courted by North American soccer, but only Ilie Dumitrescu and Miodrag Belodedici ventured into the region, both opting for teams from Mexico. Their experiences were short-lived, and upon returning, they described soccer in the area as still developing and underwhelming. This feedback dampened the interest of other Romanian players who might have considered following in their footsteps.

Romanian football was praised in the American mainstream press, and for the few talented American players in MLS, Liga 1 was seen as a promising stepping stone to the elite leagues of Europe, such as the Premier League, Serie A, and La Liga. However, only one American player made it to Romania's top division—Steve Reese. He played for FCM Bacău for about three seasons (2000-2003). At that time, I was also playing for the same club, and I remember numerous anecdotes about his time there: stories of his awkwardness during certain drills and his struggles with tactical understanding were frequently shared among the team.

The evolution of MLS has been rapid and impactful, transforming it into a key reference point for footballers, coaches, and investors from Romania. Today, over 40 Romanian coaches are active in soccer academies across the United States. Notable figures among them include Ion "Liță" Dumitru, a two-time winner of the Romanian Footballer of the Year award (1973 and 1975), and Bogdan Onuț, a double winner of the Romanian Cup (2001 and 2003).

Additionally, there are 11 partnerships between Romanian football clubs and educational institutions in the U.S., which help bridge the gap between the two countries' football cultures. (ascotelul.ro, 2018) Investors are also making their mark in American youth soccer, with Laurentiu Reghecampf, a former Romanian national team player, establishing a soccer academy in Las Vegas and inspiring others to follow him. (Dobrescu, 2015)

While Romanian players like Mățan and Sali currently represent MLS teams, there is also a growing interest from North American soccer representatives in other Romanian talents. (Măciacășan, 2019)

These collaborations and exchanges are fostering a closer relationship between Romanian and American football. (Voicu, 2017) The sharing of expertise is leading to noticeable progress, especially evident in the developments within North American soccer in recent years. The growing ties between the two regions are contributing to the advancement and refinement of the sport on both sides of the Atlantic.

*"Know that the Americans have better football than ours. Don't be surprised. There are a lot of Mexicans who play in the first league, good American players, they have good football. If it hadn't been for Gică Hagi to boost Romanian football a bit, to do something, to change something, we would be dead as football."* – Liță Dumitru (Pohoață, 2019)

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