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**Tennis and journalism in the post-modern society.
A book about the struggle to succeed on your own in
a treacherous environment**

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Abstract: The initial stages of the training process and the first official competitions are crucial for the future career of a young tennis player. It is a make or break period filled with great expectations, but also threatened by some tricky situations that can come up in certain circumstances, when wrong decisions are made and an unbearable pressure is put on the emerging players. Renowned sports journalist and famous comedy writer and actor, Adrian Fetecău describes his experience as parent of a young tennis player in a book which reveals some of the unpleasant aspects of a sport that attracts millions of people around the world. The author makes us see beyond the glamorous image constructed around a sport that is a continuous striving to overcome not only the opponents, but also one's own limits. It is a book about the struggle to succeed on your own and about the efforts, hopes and disillusions marking the life of a young tennis player.

Keywords: tennis, sports, journalism, book, Adrian Fetecău

Sports journalism was once considered by some exegetes only a form of “soft” journalism, which was definitely a sheer understatement that would be refuted by the more and more relevant articles, columns, commentaries, and books that did justice to this special segment of journalism. The ever-increasing success of this kind of journalism, the improvement of its means of expression, and the more and more visible stylistic evolution have caused a change of vision when analyzing this specific media section. Raymond Boyle wrote about this understatement and about what he called the inner paradox of sports journalism: “A paradox exists at the heart of sports journalism. On one hand, it has over the years often been viewed as the poor relation within journalism, lacking the integrity that journalists often like to associate with their self-image. Sports journalism has been characterized as a form of “soft” journalistic practice, without the rigor and credibility of other forms of “hard” journalism. It was an area of journalism that was viewed as an uncritical booster and promoter of sport and its culture rather than a sector that called the powerful in sport to account. It was a journalism that was more often going to ask the easy and banal question, rather than the penetrating and pertinent one. At the same time, and here lies the paradox, sports journalism was often one of the most commercially important parts of the newspaper industry. Simply put, while other journalists and academics often decried the lax journalistic standards that they argued could be found in the “back of the book”, it was sports journalism’s ability to deliver readers, particularly young male readers, that made it such a crucial and integral part of the commercial success of many newspapers”.⁶ Regardless of the critics, sports journalism has followed its own path and it is

⁶ Boyle, Raymond, *Sports Journalism. Changing journalism practice and digital media*, Digital Journalism, Vol.5, No.5, Informa UK Limited, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21670811.2017.1281603>

not disregarded anymore, gaining the respect it deserved from the very beginning.

Adrian Fetecău has been a well-known figure in the last decades in Romania. And despite his technical formation, he has been perceived as a genuine man of letters, a fact that can be easily noticed in all his intellectual endeavors that can be grouped into three main areas of professional activity: sports journalism, humoristic texts, and literary works. Adrian Fetecău has been a sports journalist at Radio România Actualități for 25 years. He is also the founder of one of the most successful comedy groups in Romania, *Vouă*, an authentic cenacle that has filled venues around the country for the last 35 years. He has a sharp, lucid, and convincing pen, and this is to be observed best when he writes about the most relevant fields of interest and expertise in his life. And his latest book, which has a rather intriguing title, „Tennis: sportul inventat de diavol” (“Tennis. The Sport Invented by the Devil”), is a perfect example in this respect. Regarding the title of the volume, the author wants to set the things straight from the very start and assures his readers that he had no intention of shocking them, it is not a tabloid-like title, it is just a metaphor meant to intensely suggest the main topic of the book: the never ending almost Sisyphean striving of a young tennis player to get into the top ranking of a sport discipline that requires constant hard practice and huge expenses. And the players and their families are simply on their own, with little or even no support whatsoever from the responsible authorities.

Adrian Fetecău’s flow of narration is fast and smooth, he transmits his thoughts in an authentic manner, with apparently little subsequent polish. Each line induces the sense of sincerity with himself and his readers, that is why the naked truth about the world of juvenile tennis that he delivers to us is even more disturbing, especially for those who know little or nothing about the long and

painful way to performance in sports, particularly tennis, which is known to be a discipline in which the support from clubs and other structures is almost inexistent, the young tennis players relying only on their own and on the help of their families. Adrian Fetecău writes in an engaged and personal manner about the flip side, the other side of the coin, the “dark”, “devilish” part of this noble sport, of royal origins, the continuous struggle to overcome one’s own limits, and the difficulties encountered almost on daily basis. Obstacles which are often of external origin and not related only to the natural physical limits of the human being.

The pressure, the emotional stress can damage the mental balance of a young player beyond repair sooner than expected. That is why the coach, and especially the parent must act cautiously in order to not excessively press and stress a player in the making: “Individual competitive sports like tennis usually teach the youngsters to work hard, to learn to manage stress, to perform under pressure, and test emotional and physical balance. However, they can also impose pressures which are damaging if handled wrongly. Sometimes competitive junior tennis can be especially difficult for both parents and children because there are many factors which affect this competitive environment which are usually new for everybody. For parents, competitive tennis can become a complex experience, especially if they themselves have not played at a competitive level before. For youngsters, problems occur because, too often, the demands that competitive tennis place on them seem to lie beyond their control and abilities”.⁷

⁷ Crespo, Miguel & Miley, Dave, *Being a Better Tennis Parent. Guidelines to help the parents of young tennis players*, published by the ITF Development Department, The International Tennis Federation, ITF Ltd, 1999, <http://old.tennishk.org/docs/NTS-TG/ITF%20Parents%20Do%20&%20Don't.pdf>

Adrian Fetecău is aware of these strategical threats, and he manages to permanently avoid this perfidious trap. He has always tried, as written in the book, avoiding to increase pressure on his daughter beyond the acceptable level. And the author knows very well that parents have an essential role even in the sportive life of their children, and they can unconsciously, unwillingly harm just as much as they can help: “You know that it is not easy to be a good parent and, it is even harder to be a good parent of a tennis player. To know what is best to do to help your child and also when and where to do it, is not easy. There are a lot of questions to ask but it is difficult to know who to ask and for the most part, there are no clear answers or guidelines to follow. Many problems occur because parents are unsure as to how they can best help their child and so use their natural instincts. In doing this, they go wrong far more often than they go right. Interestingly enough, research has shown that the support and interest of the parents is crucial to the child’s continued participation in tennis. However, it has also shown that much of the physical and emotional stress affecting the games of junior tennis players is caused by their parents. The consequences of excessive stress in junior competitive tennis are uniformly negative and often lead to burnout”.⁸

The author vividly describes his daughter Irina’s terrible efforts to surpass the painful situations arising during the initial stages of her tennis career, such as injuries, disillusion, and defeats, the struggle to continuously gain points by competing at a pace that can exhaust even the most resilient adult persons in the world, being forced to make sacrifices and to always depend on

⁸ Crespo, Miguel & Miley, Dave, *Being a Better Tennis Parent. Guidelines to help the parents of young tennis players*, published by the ITF Development Department, The International Tennis Federation, ITF Ltd, 1999, <http://old.tennishk.org/docs/NTS-TG/ITF%20Parents%20Do%20&%20Don't.pdf>

her own resources and the parents that always stand by her side. Adrian Fetecău used to play performance tennis as a teenager and that experience is invaluable when dealing with designing the career of his daughter, and also when making considerations about this sport, both as a radio commentator and an author of books referring to tennis. That is why there is a constant sense of relevance while reading this book, and the fast-paced style can only enhance the desire of the reader to find out more. The approach is very personal, a confession-like narration that tries to take a glimpse not only of the tennis world and its somehow hidden facets, but also of the flawed components of a society in its entirety, those detestable characteristics of the contemporaneity that dooms all the decent efforts of an entire nation to move forward. And this toxic phenomenon can be noticed and assessed in almost all the fields of activity in Romania today. Sports included.

The 14 collected correspondences, sometimes called “letters” by the author, are meant to reveal in a personal manner the opinions and the feelings of the author about the experience of being the parent of a young tennis player, about the tricky situations that sometimes are present inside the world of tennis, and about the toxic actions and the harmful attitudes to be found within the sports phenomenon, such as doping. Adrian Fetecău doesn’t dissimulate his bitter disappointment with regard to the lack of concern and involvement of the competent bodies and influential persons, including former great tennis players, in the process of development, in the first training stages of the young players trying to follow in Simona Halep’s footsteps. It is a rather bleak conclusion that the reader is left with when finishing a book consisting of well-written texts and metatexts (interviews, annotations) that can operate also as a wake-up call for the decision-makers involved in this hard, but fascinating sport.

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