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ROMANIA

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## “Sports For All in Romania: *Mens Insana in Paix Insana*”

By Cristina Merrill

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BUCHAREST, Romania—Five months into my stay here I have concluded that anyone who practices recreational sport in Romania is either mad or completely out of touch with the all-consuming life in this post-Communist country — or both. Attempting something as simple and relaxing anywhere else as jogging could become an unconventional act punishable with a wide array of exotic consequences, ranging from verbal pestering by construction workers to ankle-twisting on unpaved roads or dog-biting from strays — not to mention cold stares of disapproval that would make public stoning a preferred castigation. A lifetime of Muesli and good physical condition could not prepare a Scandinavian friend for a run here recently. Less than 30 minutes of Bucharest’s polluted air made this man, so spry in forests outside Copenhagen, gasp uncontrollably to a quick defeat.

Most ordinary days, especially in the capital city, have the curious effect of depleting every ounce of one’s energy. It’s queuing up for the bus, at the supermarket, the bank — to pay in cash for cell, phone or electricity invoices — or at various government offices to get all kinds of signatures, approvals and papers attesting rights to exist. It’s the frequent worry that hot water, gas or electricity won’t run on any given day. Service interruption is rarely announced in advance by the providers — unless the media give out the names of general areas due to experience stoppage — though I’m grateful that my relatively new apartment building has far fewer maintenance problems than many Communist-era residences. However, when I complained to the building administrator about no hot water for a whole week, she said the disruption in an entire complex happened because the two new fancy villas, being built nearby, had to be piped into the water system.

I often worry that the computer will fall prey to another Romanian virus or the Internet connection won’t work again. I’ve recently gone for almost two months without online service. The new company that took over from the old one delayed sending a team to install a new modem. Having to discover Bucharest’s many Internet cafes has been quite interesting, in fact. There are plenty of them, and they are affordable (about \$1 an hour) but smoky and crowded, with screaming teenage boys playing loud computer games while conversing across the room and adolescents chatting with help from online cameras. Webcam technology hasn’t been perfected, so people’s faces get quite distorted. I find it fascinating that people still get the inspiration to say presumably nice things to one another — even send romantic messages in this age of online dating — when each other’s mug shot moves across the screen like haunted creatures from the *Blair Witch Trial*. But it’s nice to see that in some respects Romania has joined the global marketplace.

Maybe I’ve read too much Orwell (or remember my Ceausescu-era childhood here all too vividly), but I always get the feeling I’m being watched by Big Brother, especially in government-owned institutions, most of which have po-

lice-uniformed security guards. Romanians and even foreigners attempting to change Romanian currency into foreign money are asked for proof of where they got the cash — a legacy of Communist-era laws that forbade Romanians from even carrying foreign money. Bucharest residents are also expected to carry and show their city permit (yes, one needs permission to live here), while foreigners are sometimes asked to display passports, which sometimes are copied for unknown reasons. Besides the main train station (dirty, free of information signs and surrounded by aggressive cab drivers asking for ridiculous fares), the post office is one of my least favorite places (long waits, unpleasant workers, unclear signage). International mail receives great scrutiny, and at one branch I had to go to in order to pick up a large envelope from France, I was questioned by a severe chief clerk: “How come, as a US citizen, you get letters from France?!” How could I possibly answer that query with a straight face or a polite smile?

It’s also the constant noise, made by an extroverted people who have no problems approaching strangers to share all kinds of opinions about life, poverty and especially ill health, and sell everything they can; it’s the street dogs, ongoing construction and aggressive cars. Cars are public enemy number one in this city. Drivers do not respect traffic signs and speed through intersections and even onto sidewalks. Bucharest’s tiny streets hardly provide room for people, never mind vehicles, but drivers have developed a special skill of jumping bordered pavement at high speed and parking in odd places or shaving past pedestrians, sometimes without honking, though thankfully the clanking old madams can be heard before they attempt narrow maneuvers. Perhaps I lost Romanian survival genes when my parents and I left our native country two decades ago for a comparatively cushy life in the United States, but I wonder who except resilient Romanians, could cope with the chaos that is life here 15 years into the transition to democracy. As Mircea Badea, the presenter of a nightly media wrap-up, likes to say at the close of his show, “We live in Romania and it takes up all of our time.”

### Sports in the Underground

It’s a wonder that anyone finds time to think about or engage in exercise under these conditions, but of course there are brave souls in Romania. It’s becoming somewhat trendy among a small elite to go to the “sala,” or gymnasium, and fitness spaces are popping up in many places. Tae-boo, a type of kick-boxing, is becoming popular, but aerobics is still the preferred exercise activity among women — though instructors say Romanian women do not like to perspire, out of fear their make-up will be ruined.

Sweating is just not a very feminine thing to do in this culture, where women are expected to look and smell fresh. Perfumes and body sprays are big sellers. One of the most popular gifts men buy for loved ones is perfume, which I appreciate as a nice gesture, even though my latent feminism tells me there is something in it for men as well; many men buy perfumes *they* like. During a recent visit to see me for the first time in many years, my first tennis coach, who now lives in Germany, brought me an expensive bottle of perfume spray, whose essence is nice but too strong for my taste. I’ll do what many Romanian women here do and add it to my perfume collection. Criticism of this obsession with appearances aside, it is a pleasure to stroll the capital’s streets in the wake of fine scents of Romanian women.

Exercise in the open air is still uncommon, especially in Bucharest. I once had a taxi driver stop me during a run to ask if I needed help. He thought I was “foreign,” since only foreigners run. On my routine circuit around the large parliament building, the only route I find relatively well-paved and lacking mad traffic, I have met and befriended an older woman, a former teacher of Romanian language, who walks her Pekinese dog on the same 2.5-mile course I use. Interestingly, she has started jogging since we met.

She said she admired me for being “unconventional,” a similar category she found herself in a couple of years ago when she first started to walk her pooch outdoors. Owning a domestic pet has become acceptable only in the last few years. The practice started with good-hearted people adopting street dogs (some of whom have unfortunately kept their old aggressive habits) and has evolved into a real race, among the well-heeled, to display expensive breeds.

It will take a while for recreational sport to become



as cool as owning a dog or cat. Until then it remains an underground pursuit in Romania. Performance sport is an entirely different matter, as I explained in my previous newsletter. Public money is invested in helping top athletes train, though the fact that athletes spend most of the year preparing in special sports camps, called "*cantonamente*," segregates them from contact with the public. They qualify as special people, and as a result sport is considered by many Romanians as something reserved for competitive athletes only.

Aurelia Suci, Secretary General of the Romanian Federation Sports for All, about whom I wrote in the last newsletter, is working hard to plant recreational exercise in Romanian minds. She has been doing it for 40 years, much of the time under Communism, when her role was easier because the old regime forced sports on the masses. Widely admired, she is also pitied for difficulties she faces at the hands of an unmotivated public and officials in perpetual inertia. She accuses them of paying lip service to sports. One type of event popular with officials and sponsors is a short footrace, typically no more than 2.5 miles, at the end of which T-shirts and prizes are given away. The promotional aspect, in fact, seems to be the only important part of the marketing for these events.

Samsung, the Romanian Lottery, the phone company and the two main cell providers (Orange and Connex) are some of the key sponsors of these events, often referred to as "mass races" or "*crossuri populare*." Organizers think that Romanians need promotional incentives to take part in athletic meets, neglecting in the process the athletic part of the so-called sports event. "We charm people with a T-shirt, chase them around for a few kilometers and then kick them in the behind until the next promotion," says Ms. Suci. Indeed, nobody seems to worry about helping Romanians stick to a training regime or obtain equipment, which is in short supply, and expensive. I have looked but have yet to find running shorts for women. (My mom took pity on me and sent a large selection of Asics shorts, to last me through the fellowship). I found plenty of trendy, shiny long pants and tiny tops — even bikini-length work-out gear — for \$40 and up per item (and this is a country where the average income hovers around \$200), but nothing plain and practical. I was disappointed to see more of the same at a newly opened sporting-goods store — plenty of sexy stuff, but nothing to really sweat in. The saleswoman apologized, saying, "unfortunately we Romanians care more about looks than anything else. Since we don't really exercise for the fun of it, at least we try to have the right look." The store carried some running equipment when it first opened in early summer but it sold out quickly.

### **Romania's Sport Chronicler: Cristian Topescu**

To better understand Romanian attitude about sport, I met with venerable commentator Cristian Topescu. As anchor for the main public television network, he has echoed Romania's athletic successes for forty years, the first



*Romania's most popular sports commentator, Cristian Topescu, says the transition from Communism hasn't been good for sport.*

25 under Communism and the rest in transition. To many, he represents a golden era of Romanian sport. I grew up listening to Mr. Topescu's impassioned commentaries that made gymnast Nadia Comaneci's achievements memorable in 1976 at the Olympics in Montreal. The Davis Cup tennis matches in the early 1970s between Romania and the United States, and the rivalry between Stan Smith and Romania's Ilie Nastase, at that time among the best tennis players in the world, are fondly remembered as some of Mr. Topescu's finest commentary.

Mr. Topescu is now a freelance anchor for TVR and a director and columnist for *ProSport*, a popular sports daily newspaper. He said the transition from Communism has not been very good for Romanian sport. For one thing, team sports such as volleyball and handball, in which Romanians excelled two and three decades ago, have lost their appeal to audiences who now prefer soccer. Soccer players are some of the highest-paid athletes in Romania, and their off-the-court bad-boy behavior provides good fodder for media gossip pages. Mr. Topescu said that the transition from Communism has unleashed people's most primitive tendencies. "Soccer sells newspapers while the sports that once brought us success have been marginalized. Scandal and sex are the things we care most about at this time. Now our only motivation is money. And we love to read all about those who have it, even though they're not respectable. We went from one extreme during Communism, when we read what we were told, to the other — where we can't stop reading [the wrong things.]"

Mr. Topescu's voice lost resonance as private channels entered the media market. Also, viewers today prefer watching soccer exclusively, which he said is not the best forum for sophisticated commentary. He admits that his own newspaper focuses mainly on soccer, though he has been pushing management to extend coverage of other sports when the paper expands to 16 pages next

month. He said his own transition from broadcaster to newspaperman has been awkward. He has struggled to create the same kind of voice in writing as the one he became famous for over the air. He broadcasts only projects he chooses — such as the summer and winter Olympics.

Mr. Topescu, now a septuagenarian, grew up in an athletic family as the son of a top equestrian competitor — and he became one as well, until he gave up sports in 1964 to begin his television career. He started as a specialist on horse races, expanded into soccer and then became the main Olympics commentator. Because the TV station didn't have enough funds, he reported on the 1968 Olympics in Mexico from Romania — and was the only Romanian commentator at the 1976 games in Montreal, at a time when even the other Communist bloc countries had splurged on sports reporters (the Russian delegation had 40, the Hungarian 12 and the Bulgarians sent eight). Because he didn't have enough money to rent a car, Mr. Topescu was forced to travel by Montreal public transport. In fact, he got in trouble with Romanian authorities for announcing live at the end of a track and field event that he might be late transmitting from an upcoming swimming event because he had to take the subway.

Mr. Topescu got in trouble a lot, and was taken off the air several times for upsetting the former regime. He was suspended one time simply because he described, as anchor for the European Cup soccer final, how Italian workers had traveled by bus all the way from Torino to Belgrade to support their team. The Communist Party media chief took the observation to mean that Mr. Topescu implied that Romanian workers could not afford to travel abroad to support their teams. In a memoir he published a couple of years ago, *“Events, Successes, Sanctions at the TV Mike,”* Mr. Topescu described in detail his struggles to avoid bruising the fragile egos of the former party chiefs. Criticized for cheering too loudly for the Americans and not enough for Romanian athletes, for example, he learned to be careful not to say. The wrong and “unpatriotic” thing. One time he was forced to provide commentary for a soccer match and was warned that he was not to say anything about the country and city where the game was played, nor the stadium, the two teams' supporters or the money they were making. The party's grievances against him having piled up in a secret file, he was finally fired in 1983 — but not allowed out of the country until 1989.

Even in person Mr. Topescu has plenty to say, he has done and seen a lot. He told me that he was especially impressed with the Scandinavians' love of sport. In his book he wrote about the Japanese public's wonderful enthusiasm for athletes that he noticed at the Winter Olympics in Nagano. “Their model should be followed by the Romanian public, which quickly switches from support to throwing insults, jeering and whistling at opponents,” he writes.

I asked him if he felt he could speak more freely now

than during Communist days. He said he did in some ways, but not in all respects. He said that when he reported on soccer games in the past, he had to be careful not to upset different ministries behind the competing clubs involved in matches. As in Russia, the Army, the Party and other power centers had their own athletic clubs. “Now I need to think about business patrons of the club, whoever is financing the team and who, through their connections in the media, could cause me trouble if I said something unpleasant about them.”

Mr. Topescu took a long-term view on recreational sports in Romania. For one thing, he said the infrastructure isn't there to encourage exercise *en masse* — there aren't enough gyms, equipment is expensive, people worry about other things before thinking of their own health. He also said that it will take a while for the mentality of Romanians to evolve. The Revolution changed some things but not a way of thinking for a whole nation. “Romanians are not an athletically-minded people, in the sense of practicing sport recreationally,” he said. “We are armchair sports people. Our best results were achieved by incredible talents, like Nadia Comaneci and Ilie Nastase. They were exceptions, people like that are born every 50 years or so.” But, he added, “Romanians have a talent for sport when they put their mind to it. Hopefully they will see the need to do more.”

## Woman Insana

The fact that Bucharest has put on a marathon for 13 successive years proves that demand exists, even for a long-distance race. I entered the October 3<sup>rd</sup> Bucharest International Marathon thinking that it would be nice to run my fifth marathon in my native city. I also knew it would be different from any of the others I had run in New York, Boston, Chicago and Big Sur, California. A friend who had previously participated warned me that conditions are far from ideal and that in the past some runners had cheated by taking taxis part of the way in order to claim top prizes. Little could prepare me for the actual experience, however.

The marathon has been managed for the last four years by Best Sport, a Romanian sports-events company that organizes beach volleyball championships, diathlons (combination bike and running races) and roller-blading marathons. It has also bought rights — pending a long-awaited distribution agreement — to transmit professional championships in wrestling, golf and tennis for the first time in Romania. Best Sport is also planning a 2006 marathon in Transylvania, an idea I whole-heartedly support after my Bucharest experience.

Eager to meet the heroes who'd found the energy to organize a marathon amid Bucharest's sports inertia, I made an appointment to meet with one of the key coordinators, Mihaela Draghici. I instantly took to Ms. Draghici, a Romanian beauty with a Cindy Crawford-like strawberry mark above the lip. I learned that public

officials, especially the mayor and the police, are putting up all sorts of obstacles in her way. "They don't get the marathon and have made it plain that they don't want it," she said. Because the police don't want to close off traffic for a race they don't understand, they are loath to work with organizers to designate a convenient route. As a result, the route has changed several times in the last decade. It actually had to change a week before this marathon because the chief of traffic police decided at the last minute that the main highway in and out of Bucharest, where about half of the marathon was to take place, could not be made available to runners. Early October is prime time for grape picking, he said, and thus Romanians returning from their country farms would be stuck waiting in traffic on a Sunday. Best Sport appealed to the mayor, notorious for not supporting sports, who deferred to the police chief's wishes. As a result, an international referee was called in at the last minute to measure the 26.2 miles (or 42.195 kilometers) of the distance. "They're playing with us as with marionettes," she said of the Romanian officials.

Another headache she had to deal with was making sure that participants from such African countries as Algeria, Nigeria and Ethiopia were in fact actual runners. In the past, some Africans had signed up just to get entry into Romania — they didn't run the marathon and never returned home. I was amazed to hear that some foreigners defect in Romania. To avoid troubles this time, Ms. Draghici asked potential runners to send proof of having run in previous marathons or a security deposit of 2000 Euros to guarantee a flight back in case they would be repatriated. Apparently all 12 African men who signed up for this year's marathon were genuine runners. One of them, an Ethiopian, even came in second in the semi-marathon.

Because she liked me and because I was the first to pay the entrance fee (all of \$4.50), Ms. Draghici offered me the first number, "001." I've run enough races to know I don't merit an honor usually reserved for elite runners — but this being Romania, the land of undeserved possibilities, I resigned myself to this bit of vanity. I then went home and announced to all my friends they were to call me "Agent 001," a play on James Bond's "007." Joy was short-lived — again, I should have known that. Romania is, after all, "Simply Surprising," as the travel literature touts. Ms. Draghici invited me to attend a marathon press conference, scheduled for two days before the race, and subtly suggested I bring my number so she could use it as a photo opportunity with one of the honored guests, Camelia Ponor, a gold-medal-winning



*"I wasn't to hold on to the number I received upon registering for the marathon."*

swimmer at the Athens Olympics. Of course, I agreed, thinking that my number would be touched by one of Romania's golden girls. "Don't worry, you'll get it back," Ms. Draghici said.

I should have stayed home. The event was to be held at the headquarters of the Romanian Federation of Track and Field, not easily reachable by public transportation. I walked to a taxi station near me and jumped into the first cab I saw — without noticing that he was one of the bad guys I usually try to avoid. Even though he had the right yellow colors, he was missing a company medallion, which would have given him the right to park in a taxi station. Only when I came close to my destination did I look at the meter, which showed a rate five times the regular one. I argued that he had misrepresented himself to me and he said that he was a "private" driver and therefore entitled to charge as much as he wanted. I said that he never warned me of that, to which he responded that I "had never asked." Had I had time, I would have called the police and argued that he had illegally parked in a spot reserved for taxis working for companies with rates approved by the city — but I was late for the conference and didn't want to explode in anger.

After the taxi incident I hurried up the stairs to the conference room, only to hear that the Olympic swimmer had had an accident that morning and couldn't make it to the event. Ms. Draghici and the head of the Romanian Track and Field Federation, Nicolae Marasescu, began the press conference on a mournful note, bemoaning the fact that some of Romania's top marathon runners had chosen to compete elsewhere on the day of the Bucharest race (some ran in Budapest, which puts on a better-organized marathon, and some in New Delhi, which is part of the World Marathon Championship).

They then described the obstacles placed in their way by city officials, especially Mayor Traian Basescu (now running for President), “for whom sport has never been a priority.” One of the gripes athletes have against Mr. Basescu is that he is the only mayor in the country not to have given a public welcome or special award to Bucharest residents who won medals at the Olympics. Smaller cities made their athletes “honor residents,” and some gave them thousands of dollars and apartments in recognition of their success.

A representative of the main sponsor, Alpha Bank, gave a short speech, after which a Korean participant and race participant, Woo Ill Lee, was invited to speak. Mr. Lee maintained the downbeat tone by saying that he had hoped that Romania would have more sports races than it does — giving as an example his country, where in any given year 20 long-distance races take place, and are all well attended. He said he’d looked hard before finding the Bucharest marathon website or any information about it. Indeed, I have met many Romanians who don’t know that a marathon has taken place here for the last 13 years. City officials aren’t the only ones to blame. The press, sensing the lack of enthusiasm for this kind of running, barely mentions race results. “Romania has fantastic conditions,” he continued. “If you could combine a marathon with other tourism attractions you will benefit greatly. Please make better programs for your marathons.”

As much as I agreed with Mr. Lee’s comments, a few minutes later I grew to, well, resent him. Caught unprepared by the last-minute no-show of the Olympic swimmer, Ms. Draghici decided to present Mr. Lee with a T-shirt bearing *my* number. I smiled proudly as he took photos with it, keen to get it back as soon as the event ended. Maybe you can imagine my surprise, and disappointment, when at the end Mr. Lee tucked away the T-shirt, and number, in his brief case. The little child in me screaming with passion on the inside, I looked in desperation at Ms. Draghici, who looked surprised as well. I went to talk with Mr. Kim to diplomatically clear up the misunderstanding. Defiantly, he said that the number had been offered him and he was going to take it. We made friends later, and even took pictures together the day of the race, but on that press-conference day I confess I was planning his demise. Ms. Draghici apologized profusely and even did the unthinkable — remember, no rules hold in Romania — and decided to give men and women different numbers, so I could have “001f,” with the “f” signifying woman competitor I did take my revenge, more diplomatically, at the finish line. I came in ahead of Mr. Lee by 30 minutes.

At the press conference I was also surprised to learn that the Romanian Track and Field Federation was using the Bucharest International Marathon for its own national marathon and semi-marathon championships — an arrangement that apparently ensured that some Romanian runners received financial awards. The prize money was \$800 for both men and women first-place marathon win-

ners, and \$200 for top finishers in the half marathon.

## The Race

I approached the day of the race with trepidation, not knowing what to expect. My summer of training, if it can be called that, had been anything but typical — but good for toughness. I won’t bore readers with the trinity of complaints they’ve already endured— the dogs, the construction workers, the poor roads. I often thought I was mad to be doing this here.

My Romanian friends giggled when I told them of my intention to run, while my best friend in America, Mark, asked what kind of time I was aiming to finish in — a world of difference in mentality. But I made some nice acquaintances while “training.”

The dog owner mentioned earlier was a fan, and so were some of the guards posted outside ten of the parliament’s buildings. A few even made conversation. I learned, for instance, that they work 65 hours a week, and often don’t feel appreciated — they are elite members of the Romanian Police but even their monthly (yes) salary (starting at about \$200) isn’t enough to support a family. One officer confided that he looks forward to turning 35 in six years and taking early retirement, so he can get his pension and maybe go abroad. He has a friend in Chicago who may help him and his family settle in the United States. “I feel like an old man and I have nothing to show for at 29,” he said. “I can barely feed my two children.”

I arrived at the starting line 15 minutes before the race due to begin in University Plaza in Bucharest’s city center. The various national athletic clubs (identified by club colors and some by the Romanian flag colors, which meant serious runners), were intimidating. It was also unnerving to see a huge crowd of unruly runners (mostly children and young adults) lining up to participate in a smaller, 2.5 mile race that was also starting at the same time as the marathon as part of this whole marathon festival. Worried that not enough runners would show up, organizers boosted the starting line with novices lured by free T-Shirts and prizes (watches, cell phones, sports equipment). The short races are like circuses — very loud music, played sometimes by Romanian star performers, and announcers screaming prizes to excite the crowd.

For a little while before the start of the Bucharest marathon I felt like I was in a gladiator arena — a victim of the Romanian crass indifference toward the true merit of recreational sport and their bacchanalian love of loud spectacle. Last month I attended another “celebration,” the opening of the Romanian Special Olympics. Thanks to a \$500,000 gift from the US government, Romanians kicked off the first nationally organized games for people previously marginalized by this society. Even so, the significance of the event was diluted by the entertainment



*Even though I lost the original number the organizers made up a special one just for me.*

show that followed the speeches of the organizers. Pop musicians and starlets in miniskirts paraded around the stage for the better part of two hours, taking the spotlight away from the real stars of the games, the athletes themselves. I got the same feeling when watching a morning show where the guest, legendary rower Elisabeta Lipa who has competed in five Olympics, was interrupted countless times by unrelated entertainment, including the awarding of small prizes to listeners or the reading of horoscopes and weather by sexy announcers.

Back to my own show. The start to 172 marathon runners, 53 half-marathoners and countless others in the “popular race” was finally given at 10:35 a.m. by one of my new idols, Ionela Tarlea, a wonderful athlete who came from behind in the last few moments in the 400-meter hurdles to win a silver medal in Athens. Incidentally, her presence was one of the few things mentioned in the next day’s papers. And no publication I read bothered to list the winning times — a telling omission.

If I hadn’t been forced to focus on the race, I would have laughed at the spectacle we must have presented — a bunch of loonies rushing through Bucharest’s busy streets, slaloming in and out of traffic only sparingly directed by a few policemen. Ms. Draghici doesn’t know how many officers turned out; the chief refused to tell her. We made our way at first on the capital’s main arteries, and later on an alternate route out of Bucharest — a narrow and poor replacement for the main highway that had been originally intended for this race, before police officials switched signals. At 75 degrees, the weather only worsened the smell and the fumes of cars unashamedly whizzing by. I recall being honked at numerous times by annoyed drivers who narrowly passed. At one large intersection, a frustrated “paid volunteer” (true volunteer-

ing at sports events is still unheard of among Romanians; Best Sport paid \$17 apiece to 60 workers to help manage traffic) shouted at us to run faster in front of cars that had unwillingly stopped and were threatening to start. “Please show them why we’re holding them,” she said.

Save the barking dogs and a sprinkling of people who paused from errands to gawk, we had no spectators. We heard no cheers; if anything, criticisms were thrown our way. At one point the route took us twice through a five-kilometer loop in a forest surrounding the zoo — a crowded spot, and not just with people wanting to see animals. This is a popular Sunday destination for Romanians who want to leave the capital for fresh air but seem unable to let go of the traffic, the noise and each other. I’ve never been to Calcutta but I imagine that running through her streets couldn’t be too different from what I experienced here. Hundreds of cars and people mingled furiously close to the zoo entrance, while on the side of the road merchants touted everything from plastic toys for children to fast-food. I heard one annoyed seller shout, “Enough running now,” while a miffed driver told us to “run in the mountains next time, not here.”

By this time my nerves were raw enough to take issue with a group of runners who cheated their way out of the second loop (too few officials were on hand to keep an eye on the race). What under international regulations would have been considered “assisting” and thus illegal: accompanying runners on bikes or pulling close to them in nondescript old cars, like evil characters in a cartoon movie, offering support and refreshments. I was surprised to be overtaken suddenly, well into the race, by a runner who showed no signs of sweat — and to find that I didn’t remember being passed by two of the women who won the semi-marathon in supposedly better time

than mine half-way through the full marathon. Maybe the tales I’d heard before made me paranoid, but the conditions were such that I imagined the worst. Water wasn’t all that plentiful, though I don’t think organizers had anticipated the day’s heat. But how I missed the Gatorade that flows so freely at races I’ve attended in the U.S., or the thick rows of cheering crowds gathered to keep runners motivated! I now understand why Romanians don’t run for the joy of it — there wasn’t much joy in the Bucharest marathon.

Nevertheless, I managed to finish in pretty good time, 3:20:46, which won me a decent fourth place. More chaos awaited us at the final lap in the stadium, as organizers were busy giving away small prizes for participants in the short race — this way, marathon finishers had a cheering gallery even though it wasn’t really for them. More mayhem ensued



*Loud entertainment shows kick off the opening of many sports events, even the Special Olympics.*



*Running the Bucharest marathon sometimes felt like running in Calcutta.*

as runners, eager to receive diplomas emblazoned with their names, rushed to referees to obtain their own time — then take it over to diploma scribes and plead with them to write theirs first. In all the chaos I missed the award ceremony, which seemed to get lost in the noise announcing prizes for the short-race participants and the commotion caused by runners shuffling between the diploma desk and the spot where one sponsor, a popular music station, was reluctantly giving out T-shirts. The T-shirt guy had obviously never been near to someone who had just run 26 miles, and he seemed anxious not to touch a sweaty runner.

A few days after, Ms. Draghici was relieved the race was over but frustrated with city officials. “I aged ten years trying to persuade them to come around,” she said.” Authorities are making it harder and harder each year for us to hold a marathon. I argued with them that it would look good in the European Union’s eyes if we had a successful marathon, but it fell on deaf ears. We told them that in other countries the marathon is seen as a celebration. Look at cities like Budapest, where traffic is stopped for the sake of the race. They do things in a civilized manner elsewhere, but not here. We threatened never to hold it again here, and they basically said that nobody will miss it.”

As for me, I’ll run in Transylvania, but not again in Bucharest. Of course, my lungs are fit enough for a race in Chernobyl. □

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