

QUALITY MANAGEMENT IN SPORTS AND LEISURE SERVICES

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ABSTRACT

I wrote this material based on an old grievance: how rarely we treat sport and leisure as a serious business with clear procedures and responsibilities, and how often we leave it to improvisation and goodwill. Quality management doesn't need factories to work—it works just as well, perhaps even more visibly, on an ice rink or a ski slope, where a mistake is immediately visible, in a child's bruised knee or a disgruntled tourist's complaint. The text follows the idea through several strands: a lesser-known story about the Romanian roots of quality management, an honest comparison between winter sports and other economic sectors from us, the eight classic principles of quality put on anyone's understanding, some real examples — good and not so good — from Cluj-Napoca, Baia Mare and the mountain resorts of Maramureș and proposals for efficiency aimed at the legislative framework.

KEYWORDS: *Quality management, winter sports, skating, skiing, sports services, free time, Cluj-Napoca, Baia Mare, Țara Lăpușului, sports financing.*

J.E.L. Classifications: L15, L83, Z20, R11, H71

1. WHY QUALITY MATTER IN A SPORT AND LEISURE BUSINESS

It is well known that Romanians spend much more on foreign holidays than on domestic ones. It is estimated that Romanians spent more than ten billion euros annually abroad on vacations. There are many factors involved here, but one seems to be mentioned more often and consistently. The quality offered.

When we hear "quality management", we usually think of factories, assembly lines, an ISO certificate hanging somewhere on an office wall that no one reads anymore. It's a pity, because the basic meaning of the notion is much simpler and, I would say, much closer to everyday life than it

seems: quality is the difference between a service that turns out well once, by chance, and one that turns out well every time, because that's how it was thought from the start (**Marian A.S. 2011**).

A good instructor can save a skating class or a bad ski lesson through kindness and improvisation. But a well-designed system makes that time good even when the instructor has a cold, the ice is not perfect, the snow is gone and it's pouring rain outside. This difference matters especially in sports and leisure, where the customer cannot "return" a bad experience — he already paid, came with the children, took time off from work; if things go wrong, the only beneficiary of the lesson is the next customer, not the damaged one.

This is where the universality of quality management starts: it is not a tool reserved for industry, but a way of thinking that can be applied to any organization that offers a product or service, be it a car, a medical operation, an ice-skating lesson or a descent on skis.

What changes from one domain to another is not the principle, but the object you apply: a checklist for a refrigeration plant does not differ, in its logic, from one for a chair lift or for an industrial machine — it's just what you check that changes.

However, the subject should be all the more debated and treated seriously in the sports and leisure services because it involves the public image, the reputation that influences an entire area or branch. A highly predatory parking service in Sinaia can send your customers skiing in Austria, Bulgaria or Slovakia. The exaggerated price of umbrellas and the dirt on the beach sent Romanians to Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Spain and more recently Albania.

2. AN UNEXPLOITED ROMANIAN CONNECTION AND THE RESEARCH METHOD

It is worth asking a direct question: did Romania have any contribution to the birth of modern quality management? The answer is surprisingly affirmative, although the story circulates little in our country.

Joseph M. Juran, along with W. Edwards Deming, is considered one of the two “fathers” of modern quality management. He was born in 1904 in Brăila, into a family that would later emigrate to the United States. He became an engineer and, later, the author of some fundamental works — including the famous “quality loop”, a model that describes the path a product or service takes, from design to the hand of the final customer. His ideas, along with Deming's, were massively adopted by Japanese industry in the 1950s and contributed to Japan's post-war economic

reconstruction — and from there they returned, through ISO standards, to the whole world, including today's Romania.

I do not think this story should be told as a textbook curiosity, but as a very practical argument for sports students and sports facility managers: the idea of quality as a system, not as luck, is not culturally foreign to us. Its roots also touch Romanian soil, literally.

2.1. Methodological benchmark and research approach

The experience and knowledge elements acquired during the development of my thesis "Costs and social benefits in mountain tourism in Maramureș" were also decisive for this research and effort to popularize, in essence, quality management. To carry out this work, we opted for a mixed methodology, predominantly qualitative, designed to unite the theoretical framework of quality management with the realities on the ground in the sports and leisure sector.

The analytical approach was carried out on three complementary levels:

- Documentation and content analysis: We re-evaluated the applicable regulatory framework (ISO 9001 series standards, national regulations in the field of sports and public administration), as well as the specialized literature dedicated to public management and risk.
- Comparative case study: We selected and analyzed sports facilities and leisure projects from large urban agglomerations (Cluj-Napoca, Sector 4 Bucharest), medium-sized urban centers (Baia Mare) and mountain or rural destinations (the resorts of Maramureș and the micro-destinations of Țara Lăpușului). The selection criteria targeted the diversity of ownership forms, management models and operational vulnerabilities.
- Direct observation and secondary data analysis: Information on the condition of the infrastructure, customer flow, and litigation history was collected by consulting local and national press reports, institutional releases, as well as through direct on-site assessments conducted during 2020–2026.

3. COMPARISON WITH OTHER COUNTRIES — AND WITH OTHER SECTORS IN ROMANIA

3.1. Landmarks regarding the situation in the West

In many clubs and leisure complexes in Romania, quality remains a formality — an opinion from the Public Health Directorate, an ISU authorization, a paper from ANPC — not a daily philosophy. Rarely does a gym or rink manager measure customer satisfaction in numbers: how

many customers return, how long they wait at the checkout, how many incidents are reported in a month.

In Western Europe and the United States, the same things are part of the organization's governance—written safety procedures, periodic internal auditing, continuous feedback—and quality certification often becomes a condition for advantageous commercial insurance.

The difference is not necessarily about money. It costs just as little to put a daily ice or cable check list on a wall as it does to not put it up—the only difference is if someone decides it's worth the time to write it and, most of all, stick to it.

3.2. Sport and free time, face to face with other Romanian sectors

It is instructive to put sports and leisure alongside sectors that have already gone through this path. The car industry in Argeş, Cluj or Timiş has been forced by the big companies to adopt strict quality standards (**IATF 16949**) since the 90s — not out of conviction, but because otherwise they would not receive orders. The result: today, a worker in an auto parts factory works under stricter quality procedures than the manager of a private sports center in the same city. The IT and BPO industry was quick to copy Western client standards (data security, documented processes) simply because it could not work with them otherwise. HoReCa has been pushed towards a kind of "public pressure" quality management — review platforms immediately punish any fall in standards.

Sports and leisure do not yet have this mechanism as developed, although online reviews are starting to play a similar role.

The conclusion is simple: the Romanian sectors that embraced quality management did not do so out of philosophical conviction, but because someone from the outside—a big client, a platform, a law—forced them. Somewhat despite appearances, quality management is also quite present in public order and safety structures, both in the Police and in the Gendarmerie and in the fire brigade (**Marian & Bunea 2012**). Sports and leisure do not yet have this "outsider" as present, which means that managers who choose quality themselves have a real edge, not just an image one.

4. A PROBLEM SO IMPORTANT THAT IT MUST BE “TRANSLATED” TO EVERYONE

To avoid remaining just textbook terms, here is the simplest possible explanation that anyone can understand:

Quality management means doing things right the first time, repeatedly, not by luck — and, when something goes wrong, not being satisfied with fixing it once, but making sure it doesn't happen again.

It's a bit like having a good food recipe and writing it down, step by step, for your children, instead of hoping that each one of them will, by chance, get the same proportions as you. A written recipe doesn't guarantee culinary genius, but it does guarantee a consistent result that anyone can learn and repeat.

Three simple questions sum up the whole philosophy, whether we're talking about an ice rink, a ski slope, or a holiday camp: What happens here, the same every time? Who is responsible if it doesn't happen again? What do we do, specifically, to prevent a problem from happening again? If you can clearly answer all three, you already have a functional quality system — even if you've never heard of ISO 9001 (an international standard that sets the requirements for a quality management system (QMS), helping a company provide good products and services, satisfy customers, and constantly improve (**Marian, 2011**).

Why does it matter? Because a parent who brings their child to the ice or snow evaluates not only how well the instructor skates or skis, but also whether the ice is free of holes, whether the chairlift is checked, whether the locker room is clean, whether there is a clear plan in case of a more serious fall. All of this is quality — not marketing, not luxury, but minimum decency conditions of service, the lack of which is immediately visible in the business's reputation.

5. THE EIGHT PRINCIPLES OF QUALITY MANAGEMENT, PUT ON ICE AND SNOW

The classic form of the ISO standard formulated eight principles of quality management. They remain a good tool for thinking, even though more recent editions have regrouped them into seven (**Marian A.S. 2026**).

Here's what each looks like, translated into a winter sports business — rink or slope alike:

1. Customer orientation

The customer of a skating lesson or a ski pass is not a "passerby". There is a parent who wants the child safe, an adult who is looking for exercise without injury, a tourist who wants a beautiful memory. Being customer-centric means periodically asking — via a short form, a QR code, a straight talk — what went well and what didn't, instead of assuming you already know.

2. Leadership

The one at the top sets the tone. If the patron personally checks the ice in the morning or goes up the slope himself to see the snow condition, the employees will do the same. If management is absent, any written procedure remains a dead letter. From a managerial perspective, leadership in sports and leisure services should not be reduced to a simple physical presence on the field or to current administrative management. In modern organization theory, we talk about transformational leadership and leading by example. In spaces with high operational risk (such as ski slopes or ice rinks), the leader is the one who builds a safety culture.

When senior management personally prioritizes the rigor of technical checks over immediate short-term profit, the signal sent to the team is that quality and user safety are non-negotiable. Effective leadership formulates the quality policy and provides the necessary resources so that the procedures are not perceived by employees as unnecessary bureaucracy, but as a shield of institutional protection. (**Marian, Risk management, 2026**).

3. Staff involvement

Instructors, cashiers, chairlift or ice machine operators are the first to notice a problem — a hole in the safety net, a slippery area, an aggressive skater or skier. They need a simple reporting channel without fear of repercussions. At one point, the BBC television channel reported that with the establishment of the famous Turkish resort of Antalya, 750 million dollars were spent on staff training. An amount that saves us from other motivating explanations.

4. The process-based approach

Instead of treating each day as an isolated case, you think of the rink or slope as a chain: opening and checking, ticketing, equipment rental, supervision, maintenance, closing.

Each link has a person in charge and a clear way of doing it. The process-based approach involves decoupling service performance from chance or the simple individual goodwill of staff.

In leisure services, the process represents a logical sequence of interconnected activities – from receiving the client and equipping him, to supervision on the sports surface and intervention in the event of an incident.

5. The systemic approach

Ice or snow, facilities (fridge, chair lift, snow cannon), staff, tickets and marketing are not separate things. A failure in the cable installation directly affects safety, which affects reputation, which affects next year's sales.

6. Continuous improvement

After each season, a serious business should ask itself what accidents or complaints it has had and what it can change: the schedule of the series, the number of supervisors, the type of protections on the slope. It is the most succinctly described principle, but it has extraordinary significance and long-term effects and explains the success of the field in Baia Mare or Cluj, but also the regression of some famous areas at another time - the Romanian coast, some traditional resorts (**Băile Herculane, Vatra Dornei, resorts from Secuime**).

7. Fact-based decision-making

Instead of deciding “on the fly” how many instructors are needed or at what time the ice or slope is crowded, you note, for a few weeks, the tickets sold per hour and decide based on these figures. Fact-based decision-making shifts the management paradigm from empirical intuition to analytical rigor anchored in real data. In mountain tourism and winter sports, data-based decisions prevent both waste of resources and exposure to risk.

This involves the systematic collection and continuous analysis of two categories of indicators:

1. Operational and safety data: frequency and typology of incidents/accidents per hour, peak hours of occupancy, average waiting time at the box office or at cable car facilities.
2. Perception data (beneficiary feedback): assessing the degree of satisfaction through quick tools (QR surveys, sentiment analysis on review platforms).

Basing decisions on concrete data allows for dynamic adjustment of the number of instructors or supervisors, reconfiguration of the maintenance schedule of sports surfaces, and optimization of operating costs.

8. Mutually beneficial relationships with suppliers

The company that maintains the refrigeration plant or the chairlift, the one that sharpens the skates, the one that insures the building — all are quality partners, not just bills to pay.

A stable relationship is worth more over time than the cheapest bidder of the moment.

6. STEP-BY-STEP IMPLEMENTATION IN A WINTER SPORTS BUSINESS

An entrepreneur starting or already running an ice rink or a small ski slope does not need a quality department like in a factory. He needs a few simple tools, applied with discipline, not additional bureaucracy.

The most handy is a “daily log” — a notebook or a simple digital form, in which, every morning, someone checks the condition of the ice or snow, the functioning of the facilities, the condition of the protective nets and rental equipment, the presence of a first aid kit. Five minutes a day prevents hours of problems.

The second tool is a risk log, not just insurance. Insurance covers damage after it has occurred; the log helps you prevent it. For winter sports, typical risks are falls by beginners, collisions during rush hour, slips outside the ice or snow, equipment failures, overcrowding beyond safe capacity. For each one, write down how you prevent it, who is responsible, and what you do if it does happen.

The third is about people: these businesses often operate with seasonal staff, young people with no previous experience, hired for a few months. This is where quality is most often lost, because each season they “start over” without a written transmission of the lessons of previous seasons. A simple training sheet, given to new employees on their first day, costs little and prevents a lot.

Finally, customer feedback doesn’t have to be complicated. A QR code at the exit with three questions — how was the ice or snow, how was the staff, would you recommend it to a friend — provides a much clearer picture in a few weeks than the owner’s subjective impression.

7. REAL EXAMPLES WORTH LEARNING FROM

7.1. A good administration-sport collaboration: the skating rink in Sector 4

A good example of successful collaboration between the local public administration and the world of ice sports comes from Bucharest: the City Hall of Sector 4 built, in collaboration with the Romanian Ice Hockey Federation, an indoor ice rink, with money from the local budget, after completion the investment will be handed over free of charge to the federation, for the training of performance athletes and for competitions. It's a simple model, but rarely found in our country: the administration assumes the investment cost, and the national sports structure ensures the know-how, the competition calendar and continuity, without the town hall turning itself into a sports operator. This kind of partnership would also be interesting at the level of a small or medium-sized city, adapted to scale — not necessarily an Olympic ice rink, but a seasonal base, built by the mayor's office and managed by a local structure.

7.2. Cluj-Napoca: a stable private model, a seasonal public one and a lesson to avoid

In Cluj-Napoca, a large private ice rink has been operating for more than a decade, set up in the parking lot of a hypermarket — a business model that has proven to be sustainable in the long term, with a constant schedule and affordable rates. In parallel, the municipality organizes, during the holidays, a public skating rink in the central area and one on the set of the Sports Hall, integrated into the Winter Fair. The coexistence of the two shows that there is not one correct recipe, but at least two distinct markets: the private rink customer pays for a consistent experience year after year, while the Winter Fair visitor comes for the festive atmosphere, not necessarily the performance.

The existence of several quality skating rinks cultivates an audience that will get used to using these facilities, they are not competitors, they support each other in forming a more numerous and stable clientele. Poisoning a child at one of the rinks with bad food, or not being able to take emergency action will be a stain with long-term effects on an entire field.

Also in Cluj we find a less pleasant but useful lesson. An ice rink in the Mărăști neighborhood, once built and managed by a private company under a contract with the Autonomous Public Domain Authority, ended up, after the termination of the contract, in a dispute that lasted for a decade in the courts, resulting in compensation of hundreds of thousands of lei paid by the public institution to the former operator for its investments and equipment.

Beyond the legal aspects, the case is a direct lesson in contractual risk management: any public-private partnership for a seasonal sports base — ice rink, slope, beach — must clarify from the start, in writing, what happens to private investments in the event of termination and who owns the equipment. The lack of these clarifications can cost not only money, but also whole years of blockage (**Marian A.S. 2026**).

7.3. Baia Mare: a local-county partnership that recovers its costs

Baia Mare organizes, through the "**Băimăreană Winter**" event, held in partnership between the town hall and the Maramureș County Council, several seasonal ice rinks, one of which is right in the old town center. The financial model used — the partial recovery of costs from sponsorships and the rental of commercial spaces in the perimeter of the event — is useful for any small or medium-sized municipality interested in developing such a seasonal infrastructure without considering it a pure cost from the local budget.

The large number of participants speaks for itself both about the quality offered and about the inspiration of the authorities who initiated such collaborations.

7.4. Not just skating: skiing in Maramureș, an already consistent field

It would be a shame to talk about winter sports in the area and stop only at the ice — Maramureș actually has a serious skiing area, with three resorts less than an hour from Baia Mare. In Cavnic, the SuperSki, Roata and Icoana complexes operate, with slopes totaling almost six kilometers, served by chairlifts and ski lifts, plus a tubing slope for non-skiers.

At Șuior, the slopes add up to 3.6 kilometers, with artificial snow installed at night on a good part of the route and a conveyor belt dedicated to beginners and children — a quality detail in itself, precisely thought out for the safety of the most vulnerable customers. The Izvoare resort, at the foot of Vârful Igriș, is also being renovated, with slopes complemented by guided horseback rides, a relaxing alternative to skiing, suitable for families — proof that the two worlds, of mountain sports and horse riding, can coexist naturally in the same place, under the same management umbrella.

From the perspective of quality management, all three resorts already offer the basic elements — approved facilities, ski monitors present on the slope, rental equipment — but exactly here there is room for more: a common incident reporting system between the three resorts, a daily published checklist (not just internal), and a closer collaboration with local authorities for the joint promotion of the "Maramureș ski area" as a single tourist brand, not as three competing resorts.

8. WHAT LEGISLATION COULD DO FOR THESE BUSINESSES

Small operators in sports and leisure — skating rinks, small slopes, horse riding centers, mineral spring lookout points — often encounter an approval system (DSP, ISU, ITM, ANPC, environmental permits) designed more for large units, with fixed compliance costs, similar regardless of the size of the business (**Marian 2026**).

For a seasonal business, operating three to four months a year, these costs weigh disproportionately compared to a permanent base. Several directions deserve, I believe, serious discussion by decision-makers.

- A simplified authorization regime for seasonal facilities (skating rinks, tubing tubes, small slopes), with a standardized checklist instead of multiple and redundant approvals.

- Tax incentives for operators who voluntarily obtain a quality or safety certification — a “bonus” for those who exceed the legal minimum, not just sanctions for those who do not reach it.
- Extension of the Register of Approved Sports Facilities, administered by the Ministry of Sports, to temporary seasonal facilities, accessible to the general public.
- Framework contracts for public-private partnerships on seasonal sports facilities, developed by the ministry or by associations of city halls, precisely to avoid situations like the Măraști skating rink dispute.
- Specific support for the exploitation of small but valuable natural resources — mineral springs, trails in protected areas — through funds dedicated to tourism micro-infrastructure at the commune level, not just large investments.

None of this necessarily requires new laws, but rather better coordination between the institutions that currently separately control the same business, and a real proportionality between the size and duration of a business and the compliance costs imposed.

9. BENEFICIARIES AND DECISION-MAKERS

There are several categories of beneficiaries. For entrepreneurs, the simple system described above can be put into practice in a few days, without expensive consultants, and directly reduces the risk of accidents, claims and unforeseen expenses — exactly the costs that erode the margin of a seasonal ski or skating business.

Instructors, physical education and sports teachers, the framework of the eight principles provides a common language between the world of management and the world of sports, useful both in the classroom and in organizing their own competitions or camps.

For students of the Faculties of Physical Education and Sports, but not only, the examples in this material — the ice rink in Măraști, Fiesta Sport, the collaboration of Sector 4 with the Hockey Federation, the Cavnic, Șuitor and Izvoare resorts, the borcut in Poiana Botizii — can become starting points for undergraduate or dissertation papers related to verifiable case studies, not abstract literature.

In the most important group, the decision-making one, for local administrators, the models from Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca and Baia Mare show different ways, all functional, to bring recreational infrastructure without assuming all the financial risk from the local budget — through a stable

private operator, in connection with a seasonal partnership with partial cost recovery or through a collaboration with a national sports federation.

10. AVAILABLE FUNDING PROGRAMS AND PROJECTS

For those interested in developing or modernizing a sports or recreational infrastructure, there are currently several active funding directions in Romania, useful both for local authorities and, in certain schemes, for private operators or sports clubs.

- The National Investment Company (CNI), under the Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration, runs national investment programs in sports facilities, gyms and sports complexes — one of the main ways through which a city hall can obtain funding for permanent infrastructure.
- The Ministry of Sport, through the National Agency for Sport, annually finances public utility sports programs and national federations, and the legislation was recently amended to allow the financing of private children and youth clubs, not just public structures.
- The European Erasmus+ Sport program finances cooperation and capacity building projects in the field of sport, including for small clubs and local organizations, with a focus on social inclusion and education through sport.
- The European Structural and Cohesion Funds, through regional programs, can finance, in certain programming cycles, tourism and leisure infrastructure at local level — including facilities related to mountain tourism, health or protected areas.

The practical recommendation for an interested entrepreneur or mayor remains simple: the first step is not to write the project, but to directly check, on the official websites (sport.gov.ro for the Ministry of Sports, cni.ro for the National Investment Company, the erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu portal for European funding), the lines opened in the current year, because these programs change from one year to the next.

CONCLUSIONS

Quality management in sports and leisure is not a conceptual luxury artificially imported from other sectors — it has, as the story of Joseph Juran shows, a very Romanian root, too often forgotten.

The transfer of ideas from more “disciplined” sectors to winter ice and snow does not require huge investments, but discipline and consistency: a daily checklist, a risk register, a training sheet for seasonal staff and simple feedback from customers can make the difference between a business that lasts ten winters and one that dies after the first difficult season. Of course, this requires effort, resources, time and perhaps that is precisely why it is appropriate, in the spirit of the popular proverb, to prepare the winter business from the middle of the year. Otherwise, quality could not be ensured and this shows its effects over time.

Real examples — from the collaboration of Sector 4 with the Hockey Federation, in Cluj-Napoca, Baia Mare and the mountain resorts of Maramureş — show that the Romanian market has already experimented with several models, each with its own lessons, including the painful one of a decade-long litigation.

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