

THE MANAGEMENT OF SMALL SPORT CLUBS MUSSO

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to identify the combination of factors that would make small and nonprofessional sports clubs economically and financially viable, despite low revenues and a limited attractiveness to the general public. In this regard, an analysis has been conducted on a sample of 200 clay shooting clubs in Italy. Results show that the main factors that positively affect performance are those most directly related to the core practice, as well as facilities/services supporting practitioners. This research adds to the sport management literature in two ways. First, it provides an in-depth analysis of the connection between infrastructure and organizational features of sports clubs. Second, this research highlights which facilities, services and initiatives can be adopted in order to increase financial and organizational performance of small sport clubs and, consequently, provide a higher attractiveness to practitioners.

Key words: Management, strategy, sport clubs, sport marketing

JEL classification: M

1. Introduction

In the past twenty years, a series of transformations, on and off the field, have reshaped the sport industry (Mullin *et al.*, 2014; Soderman, 2013). The increasing professionalization and “financiarization” of sport worldwide (Mason, 1993; Bose, 2012) have impacted the nature of the industry, as well

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as the components of the sport product and the management of sport organizations. Managers and marketers alike are now aiming at delivering value to fans and at seducing the latter in order to gain access to their disposable income allocated to leisure and entertainment (Richelieu, 2014).

In this context, professional sport organizations are, in general, at an advantage because of, among others, the strong emotional bond they share with their fans (Honsel *et al.*, 2011; Thorne, 2011). Admittedly, not all sport consumers and fans are born equal, mainly because they are not motivated by the same factors in following and supporting a team and / or a sporting event (Fillis and Mackay, 2014). Sport consumers have different needs and objectives they are trying to meet and satisfy in living the sport experience (Thorne and Bruner, 2006). However, even though consumers approach the sport product in different ways, social interaction and entertainment are key components of the sport consumption (Stewart *et al.*, 2003).

For non-profit or voluntary sport organizations and lesser-known sports, the situation is more challenging, mainly because of their organizational structure and financial vulnerability. As stated by Cordery *et al.* (2013, p. 186): “Financial vulnerability is a critical issue for non-profit sports clubs due to clubs’ increasing costs and impediments to generating sufficient income”.

The main objective of this paper is to identify a combination of factors that would make a sport attractive to both the athletes and the general public and more financially sustainable. More specifically, we shall analyse the case of clay shooting clubs in Italy.

In order to achieve our goal, we shall proceed with the following sections: i) The literature review; ii) The presentation of clay shooting, in general, and clay shooting in Italy; iii) The research questions and methodology; iv) The analysis; v) The discussion; and vi) The conclusion, implications and future research.

2. Literature review

The literature review will focus on two main sub-sections, namely: i) Sport and the transformation of sport; and ii) The management of sport clubs.

2.1 Sport and the transformation of sport

Sport is multi-faceted. It is a leisure activity that men and women practise on their spare time for fun or in order to stay in shape. Sport is also a professional endeavour that athletes, either professional or amateur ones,

undertake as their main activity. Furthermore, sport is a show presented in modern arenas and broadcasted worldwide (Mullin *et al.*, 2014).

Notwithstanding the angle we choose, “sport is one of the few social activities of human beings that can be recognized in virtually every community and culture around the globe as a vehicle for bringing people together” (Allen *et al.*, 2010, p. 421). Truly, sport offers an opportunity to start the conversation, transcending cultural, socio-economic and political barriers (Mullin *et al.*, 2014; Pimentel and Reynolds, 2004). Sport can help achieve several goals, such as: i) Boosting civic pride, ii) Healing old divides, iii) Increasing community feeling, and even iv) Articulating a place branding strategy) (Desbordes and Richelieu, 2012).

Sport occupies a significant place in today’s society, even more so when the respective sport is strongly engrained in the national culture, as we shall see later on in this paper. But even more striking is the transformation of the sporting event or sport product into the merger of sport and entertainment, where the marketing of a unique emotional and social experience becomes the leitmotiv of the sport offering, which is often depicted as “sportainment” (Richelieu, 2014).

As a matter of fact, we could say that there has been a transformation of the product, management and ownership in sport. Truly, the sport content is now being wrapped up in an entertainment packaging. It is why, as stated earlier, managers and marketers alike are now aiming at delivering value to practitioners and fans and at seducing them in order to gain access to their disposable income allocated to leisure and entertainment (Richelieu, 2014).

2.2 The management of sport clubs

Admittedly, the literature on the management of sports clubs, especially of non-profit and voluntary organizations, is sparse. However, we can refer to the organizational capacity model, which analyses the overall capacity of an organization to deliver the desired outputs and outcomes (Hall *et al.*, 2003). There are five dimensions that need to be considered in the management of non-profit and voluntary organizations, including sport ones. These are: i) human resources, ii) financial capacity, iii) infrastructure and process capacity, iv) planning and development capacity, and v) relationship and network capacity (Hall *et al.*, 2003; Wicker and Breuer, 2014).

First, human resources refer to the ability to deploy human capital within the organization, with both paid employees and volunteers. The latter are

grouped in either core volunteers, who have a formal position within the organization, or secondary volunteers, who only work periodically for the organization. Because they influence the other four capacity dimensions, human resources are considered a key capacity. This requires not only mobilizing employees and volunteers, but also members for sport and social events, hence contributing to the social cohesion and proper operation of the organization (Hall *et al.*, 2003; Wicker and Breuer, 2014).

Second, financial capacity refers to the ability of the organization to develop and deploy financial capital. Because of the traditionally low resources of non-profit sport clubs, the financial uncertainty that these clubs are facing is considered a major issue. However, thanks to a high diversification of revenues (membership fees, sponsorships, subsidies and donations, commercial events, etc.), these non-profit clubs are able to reach a certain level of financial stability (Hall *et al.*, 2003; Wicker and Breuer, 2014). In this regard, a study conducted by Cordery *et al.* (2013) underlines that in order to reduce financial vulnerability, non-profit and amateur sport clubs should rely less on external funding (and more on membership revenues), decrease their debt and control their expenses.

Third, infrastructure and process capacity refers to the ability to deploy or rely on infrastructure and culture. This means, on one hand, the availability, suitability and proper condition of the facilities that sport clubs are using. On the other hand, this also relates to the organizational culture, with values, strategies and policies encompassed within the organization (Hall *et al.*, 2003; Wicker and Breuer, 2014). As presented by Mills and Hoerber (2013, p. 482), “organizational culture typically refers to shared meanings and assumptions that lead to a base understanding about how to operate within the culture”. Values such as tolerance, fair-play, social inclusion are often emphasized in the literature for sport clubs (Frost *et al.*, 2013; Maxwell *et al.*, 2013; Wicker and Breuer, 2014).

Fourth, planning and development capacity is the ability to develop and draw on the organization’s plans. Even though this capacity is essential in the proper operation of sport organizations, only a few sport clubs have strategic plans, according to recent studies (Hall *et al.*, 2003; Wicker and Breuer, 2014). Policies and plans should be elaborated and implemented for the development of the organization and the staff, but also, ideally for the sport (Mackintosh *et al.*, 2014). Indeed, as mentioned earlier, sport as a potentially very strong

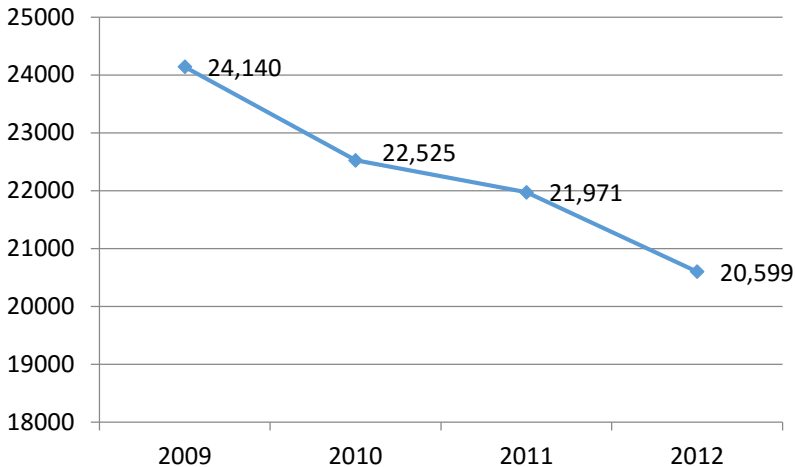
social inclusion potential (Frost *et al.*, 2013; Maxwell *et al.*, 2013; Sotiriadou, 2013).

Fifth, relationship and network capacity refers to the ability to draw on relationships with the different stakeholders of the sport organization, such as members, sponsors, governments, volunteers, other sport clubs, citizens, etc. Sport clubs engage in these relationships to access funding and public facilities, but also with an expectation of reciprocity with other stakeholders (Hall *et al.*, 2003; Wicker and Breuer, 2014).

3. Clay shooting and clay shooting in Italy, an overview

Clay Pigeon Shooting or Clay Shooting is a recreational and competitive activity where participants, using shotguns, attempt to break *clay disks* or *clay pigeons*. The targets are automatically thrown into the air from fixed stations at high speed from a variety of angles to simulate the flight of pigeons.

Figure 1: Number of members of the Italian Clay Shooting Federation. 2009 – 2012.



Source: Italian Clay Shooting Federation (FITAV), 2013.

The three major disciplines of competitive clay pigeon shooting are Skeet Shooting, Trap Shooting and Sporting Clays. There are several types of skeet,

including one with Olympic status (often called Olympic skeet or international skeet) and many with only national recognition.

As an officially recognized sport, clay shooting originated back to the early nineteenth century, when the British invented trapshooting. The purpose was to allow the participants to practice their shooting technique so real pigeons were used. Top hats were used as a trap under which captured pigeons could be put. The hats would be placed at varying distances from the shooter on the ground and when ready the shooter would call: 'Pull'. A string or cable would be 'pulled' and the top hat would topple to release the pigeon.

From England, pigeon shooting developed throughout Europe, many clubs and shooting ranges arose in a few years in France, Germany, Austria and Spain. Later on, the opposition by associations for the protection of animals brought to the progressive decline of this sport, which was later replaced by clay pigeon shooting (Menke, 1963).

Actually clay shooting is included in the Olympic Games shooting sports, being skeet, trap and double trap part of the Olympic program, under the co-ordination of the International Shooting Sport Federation (ISSF), which includes 158 national member federations in 146 countries.

In Italy clay shooting counts 20,599 practitioners with a decreasing trend in recent years (Figure 1), despite the numerous successes of the National Team at international sporting events, included the Olympics, which makes Italy one of the leading nations in this sport.

Among the main determinants of the decreasing of shooters is the general adverse predisposition to the use of arms that discourages the possibility to organize promotional activities, particularly those addressed to young people and school students. Moreover, decreasing in the number of hunters contributes to this trend, since hunters use to practice clay shooting in the periods of the year when hunting is not allowed (spring and summer).

The distribution of clubs in the territory is not homogeneous, both in relation to the number of inhabitants, and to the total surface of the country. Northern regions are those with a lower presence of clubs in relationship with the population (with a rate of 0.10 to 0.36 clubs per 100,000 inhabitants) and, on the opposite, central Italy regions have the highest rates (1.21 to 2.03 clubs per 100,000 inhabitants).

The lack of facilities in several regions of Italy and the prevailing small size of the existing clubs are factors that discourage the practice of shooting

and certainly affect the number of practitioners. Their limited and still declining number makes the management of existing clubs increasingly difficult. Indeed, low revenues are in most cases not sufficient to meet the management costs and make the necessary investments for restructuring and innovation of clubs.

4. Research questions and methodology

The research focused on the clay shooting fields that are actually operating in Italy. The aim was to understand the main characteristics of the existing fields in terms of size, organization and services offered, and the relationship between such characters and the ability to attract practitioners.

An analysis has been conducted in 2013 on a sample of 200 shooting clubs, out of a total of 421 clubs existing in Italy. A web-based questionnaire was addressed to all the shooting clubs, with an e-mail invitation to respond sent to the general manager or owner of each club.

The questionnaire was semi-structured with 78 items, and was divided into 5 sections:

- Structural features and management (localization, extension, n. of ranges, renewal investments, technical characters, n. of employees, organization, age and gender of manager/owner, n. of members, facilities, opening period, days and hours);
- Activities and services offered (shooting specialties, non-core and entertainment services, website, competitions organized, social events, problems occurred);
- Practitioners and supporters (n. of club members, n. of habitual practitioners, shooting habits, agonistic level, share of hunters, social status, past and expected trends in the number of practitioners, typology and attendance of supporters);
- Strategies and difficulties (strength points, weaknesses, need of improvements, obstacles to investments, relationships with practitioners, relationships with the national shooting federation);
- Revenues and profitability (composition of revenues by activities and services).

A five-point Likert scale has been used for evaluation of single items (1 = low importance to 5 = high importance). Responses to open questions have

been categorized. The analysis of responses has been performed through descriptive statistics.

5. Analysis of results

5.1 Structural features and management

Existing shooting clubs are characterized by a prevailing focus on the classic shooting specialties with rather limited cases of those which made an extension to other disciplines related to the use of arms. Among these, the most frequently occurring specialty is the single slug cartridges shooting, available in less than one fifth of total shooting fields (18.8 %). Others specialties are much less popular: target shooting, available in 9.8 % of cases, hunting dog training (8.9%), open field archery (8%) and other specialties (dynamic shooting, speed shooting, muzzle loading shooting, soft air, field target, action shooting) with limited diffusion (less than 5% of the total ranges).

Table 1 – Number of employees per number of shooting ranges

No. of shooting ranges	No. of employees				Total
	No employees	1	2	From 3 to 10	
1- 2	75	9	9	10	103
	72.8%	8.7%	8.7%	9.7%	100.0%
	67.6%	31.0%	37.5%	27.8%	51.5%
3 - 5	30	17	10	15	72
	41.7%	23.6%	13.9%	20.8%	100.0%
	27.0%	58.6%	41.7%	41.7%	36.0%
6 - 10	5	3	5	8	21
	23.8%	14.3%	23.8%	38.1%	100.0%
	4.5%	10.3%	20.8%	22.2%	10.5%
More than 10	1	0	0	3	4
	25.0%	0.0%	0.0%	75.0%	100.0%
	0.9%	0.0%	0.0%	8.3%	2.0%
Total	111	29	24	36	200
	55.5%	14.5%	12.0%	18.0%	100.0%
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The average age of the owner/manager is quite high, since only 14.9% of the total managers is less than 40 years old, and almost one third (31.49%) is more than 60.

The number of employees involved in the management of each shooting club is limited. 37% of managers/owners say they do not have permanent employees and 37.5 % reports one or two. However, on weekends the average number of employees increases to 3 (18.8% of cases) or 2 (17%). Moreover, it must be noticed that a considerable number of clubs (7.2%) involves more than 10 employees in the weekends, when competitions and events are organized. These are cases of larger clubs, those with multiple ranges, to engage the largest number of employees (Table 1).

The age of the clubs is inhomogeneous and equally distributed among the age groups considered. The more recent clubs, with less than 10 years of life, are 18.8% of the total, and the same are those from 10 to 20 years. More than 40% of clubs (42.9%) are more than 30 years old, indicating a well established tradition in this sport in Italy.

The overall level of renovation of clubs is not good; only a little more than half of them (52.9%) underwent some renovation intervention in the past 5 years. In total, more than 30% of clubs did not carry out any renewal in the last ten years.

The geographical location has a rather inhomogeneous distribution. 63.4 % of clubs is located at a distance of over 20 km to other shooting fields and only 11.6 % of the sample reported the presence of other shooting fields less than 10 km away. This means relevant distances that must be traveled by practitioners, with an influence on the frequency of workouts during the week, when the time available is not much.

Opening periods, both in terms of seasonality and weekly days and hours, indicate a widespread irregularity: more than a quarter of clubs is seasonal (28.6%), and many of those that are open all year round, operate only certain days of the week (in addition to weekends, when all are open), or they reduce opening hours (usually in the afternoon) . This issue has often to do with the availability of managers, particularly in the case of smaller clubs, whose managers have another job and cannot therefore guarantee continuity in the opening.

The number of members of each shooting club (to each club a club corresponds, although some larger clubs are home to more clubs) is in more than half of the cases (52.8 %) less than 50, and a quarter of the total is

between 50 and 100 members. Just over a fifth of total clubs have more than 100 members. Larger clubs are those that tend to collect more members, but the relation is not strict and exceptions are numerous.

The club membership fee is under 50 Euros per year in 55.4 % of cases, and almost 40 % of clubs do not require any fee. Also in this case the correlation between club size in terms of number of shooting ranges and cost of the membership fee is not particularly significant.

5.2 Activities and services offered

The services offered are heterogeneous (Figure 2), mainly on the basis of the club dimension in terms of surface. The organization of competitions is almost always offered, since it is a crucial source of revenue. Only smaller structures and those with more operating difficulties (owner/manager close to retirement, or with other jobs, or about to cease the activity) renounce organizing competitions. The respondents that reported this condition are 8.9 % of the sample, and this indicates that a significant part of the existing clubs is in a critical state.

The number of competitions organized varies considerably, even if more than 40% of clubs organize over twenty competitions per year, with frequent cases where competitions are held almost every weekend.

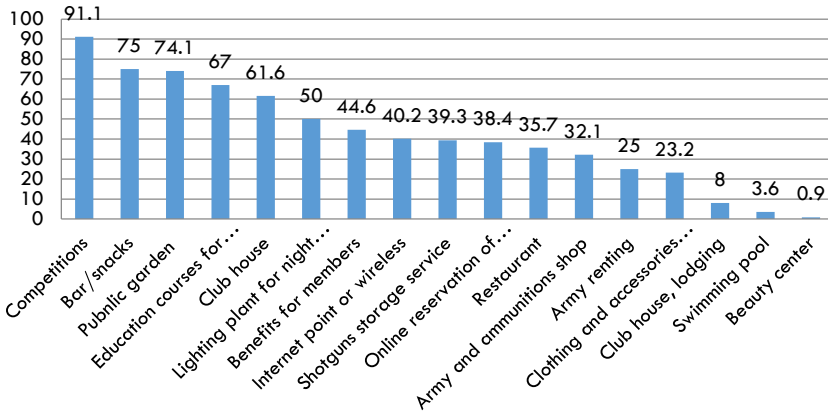
In three-quarters of cases, there is a bar/café that can also provide light lunches, sandwiches and snacks, and in 61.6% of cases a part of the main building (or a room) is dedicated to leisure activities (usually tables and chairs for meetings and card/chess playing, TV and bar).

The army and ammunition shop is present in less than one-third of clubs and a point of sale for clothing and accessories in 23.2 % of total cases. These facilities are present only in larger clubs.

In 35.7 % of clubs there is a restaurant, in some cases managed directly by the club's staff, or contracted out to third parties. Usually the latter choice relates to the bigger restaurants.

The presence of a guest house and possibly other amenities like swimming pool, spa or facilities for the practice of other sport is very low and limited to a few larger clubs.

Figure 2 – Services offered within the shooting club



The average number of clay disks thrown by each club (as an indicator of how intense is the activity) is less than 100 thousand per year in 40.2% of cases. Nearly one-third of the clubs use between 100 and 250 thousand disks. The remaining 27.5% launch more than 250 thousands disks per year, and among them only 11, 3% go over 500 thousands disks per year.

The self evaluation of managers/owners about the services they offer is partially satisfactory: 43.8% of the total respondents believe that the services they offer are more than sufficient to the needs of practitioners. However, more than a third of the interviewees believe that if they could offer more services they would be able to attract a greater number of shooters or increase the frequency of the current members. Significantly, 17% of respondents see a prospective greater number of services offered as an opportunity to attract even members' families and friends.

5.3 Practitioners and supporters

The number of shooters who attend each club is not high: according to one third of the interviewees, 30 to 50 practitioners attend the club in spring/summer. 26.8% of respondents report 10 to 30 practitioners per week. Slightly less than 10 % is the proportion of clubs with a higher presence (more than one hundred shooters per week) and a similar percentage emerges also

among those who report, on the opposite side, a minimum attendance (less than 10 shooters per week).

In winter period, the situation changes dramatically: almost half of the manager/owners reported a weekly average attendance of less than 10 shooters, and 33.7% of them reported an average attendance between 10 and 30.

The average weekly attendance per shooter is 2 times, as indicated by 40.2 % of respondents. In almost a third of cases the average attendance is once a week.

When a shooter goes to a shooting range he usually takes two shooting sessions (25 clay disks thrown per each session), as reported by 68.8 % of respondents, or three sessions (according to 21.4% of interviewees).

Both the weekly attendance and the number of shooting sessions, vary depending on whether the shooter is agonist or amateur. Agonists attend more often the club and perform a higher number of sessions. The percentage of agonist shooters is in the majority of cases (50.7%) less than 20% of practitioners, and this percentage is lowered in smaller fields

The time spent in shooting facilities is usually 2/3 hours, being this behaviour influenced by two main factors: the presence of complementary services (bar/café, club house, meeting room, etc.), and the presence of other shooters involved in shooting sessions. Therefore, even without shooting, or after the shooting sessions, a practitioner likes to remain watching other shooters in their practice.

A significant percentage of shooters, just less than 20% of the total, are used to attend the club to spend their free time, without shooting.

Among shooter there are many hunters that use to practice when hunting is not allowed (spring and summer). According to one-third of interviewees more than 70 % of the total number of practitioners is also a hunter. Another 16.2 % of the interviewees stated that hunters are between 50 and 70% of the total. This confirms how strong is the link between hunting and clay shooting (Musso *et al.*, 2012).

The trend in recent years in the number of practitioners attending shooting clubs is consistent with the figures on the number of shooters (see section 3), and also those on the number of hunters: in both cases they are declining. Interviewees confirm this trend reporting a drop of practitioners in 50.7% of cases in the last four years, and a slight reduction in 36.5% of cases.

9.5% of respondents reported situations of stability, and only 3.4% of them indicated an increase in the number of shooters.

As shown on Table 2, the only clubs that experienced a less critical decline in the number of practitioners are those with a higher number of members (more than 200), among which an increased or stable number of member has been reported in 41,7% of cases.

Table 2 – Trend in the number of practitioners by number of club members

No. of club members	Strong reduction	Slight reduction	Unaltered	Slight increase	Strong increase	Total
Up to 50	40	27	5	1	0	73
	54.8%	37.0%	6.8%	1.4%	0.0%	100.0%
	53.3%	50.0%	35.7%	25.0%	0.0%	49.3%
51 - 100	19	14	7	1		41
	46.3%	34.1%	17.1%	2.4%	0.0%	100.0%
	25.3%	25.9%	50.0%	25.0%	0.0%	27.7%
101 - 200	12	10				22
	54.5%	45.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
	16.0%	18.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	14.9%
More than 200	4	3	2	2	1	12
	33.3%	25.0%	16.7%	16.7%	8.3%	100.0%
	5.3%	5.6%	14.3%	50.0%	100.0%	8.1%
Total	75	54	14	4	1	148
	50.7%	36.5%	9.5%	2.7%	0.7%	100.0%
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Less critical, even if not much optimistic, is the expected trend in the following three years: 66.1% of respondents is expecting a further decrease in the number of shooters, and 25% a stable situation. 8% of respondents indicated an increase.

A significant finding is that on the replacement of shooters that occurs each year: 82% of respondents reported a replacement rate of less than 10%, with the remaining respondents recording higher rates, even higher than 20%. This is an aspect that deserves to be investigated, particularly as regards the causes of abandonment.

Spectators and supporters are very limited in number. Only international championships and Olympics collect some interest from an audience that is

not part of the network of relations of practitioners. All other occasions, which in most cases are club competitions, attract very limited number of spectators, almost all of them being shooters friends or family members.

However, quite often shooters bring their friends or family members to the shooting club. 12.1% of managers stated that this happens also during the week, and 35.4% of them reported a presence limited to the weekends. In 31.5% of cases the presence of family members and friends is very rare, and only in case of competitions, social dinners or other events.

5.4 Strategies and difficulties

The opinion of respondents about the need to make improvements to the structure and qualify / improve the services offered is not homogeneous: the majority of them (55.4 %) believe that better structures and adjunctive or better services are not necessary because shooters are only interested in shooting at the lowest possible cost. If qualifying facilities implies the need to increase membership fees or costs for the shooting sessions, there is a real danger of losing members instead of increasing them.

The aspects that are considered to be improved, however, have mainly to do with the club structures, which in one third of cases are considered inadequate. 17% of managers/owners also indicate the need of improving the restaurant/catering services and 14.9 % of them indicate of the renewal of trap machines.

Facing these prospects, however, the lack of resources emerges as a critical obstacle for upgrading the facilities, as 53.4 % of respondents stated. In addition, a further concern is given by those who express doubts about the possibility of continuing to their business because of the increasing regulatory obstacles and bureaucratic constraints. 27.4% of managers/owners expressed these fears.

5.5 Revenues and profitability

The average level of revenues is less than 200,000 Euros per year in 89.7% of cases. 7.9% of clubs have revenue between 200 and 500 thousand Euros and only 2.4% of total clubs overcome the level of 500,000 Euros per year. The composition of revenues, according to the statements of respondents (Table 3), shows an average share of 59.6% of turnover resulting by the shooting sessions and 22.9% by the organization of competitions. Together these activities provide more than 80% of total revenues.

The profitability is low and the majority of managers/owners reported difficulties in obtaining a satisfactory income. On average, clubs with a size of at least 3 shooting ranges, all year and daily opening, and a rich program of competitions organized are those that better can safeguard profitability. Economic advantages come also from the offering of complementary services, among which is the restaurant, which can greatly contribute to a more satisfactory management.

Table 3 – Composition of revenues

	Avg. %	Std. dev.
Shooting sessions	59.55	37.361
Competitions	22.89	30.612
Café/Bar/snack	5.88	11.328
Restaurant	4.28	12.993
Army and ammunition shop	2.58	9.212
Sponsors	2.01	10.951
Training/Education courses for beginners	1.89	7.841
Guest house, lodging	0.37	3.527
Clothing and accessories shop	0.34	1.541
Army storage service	0.12	0.914
Army renting	0.09	0.587
Swimming pool	0.04	0.425
Beauty/wellness centre	0.04	0.553
Total	100.00	.000

The lack of profitability is the primary factor that hinders the modernization of facilities and inhibits innovation. In many cases, this weakness makes difficult even simple maintenance tasks, such as the painting of buildings and equipment, or taking care of green spaces.

6. Conclusion

Clay shooting is facing some critical issues due to a decline in the number of practitioners and a weak attractiveness of clubs, which don't encourage non-shooters to take interest in this sport, and to difficulties in

maintaining the necessary turnover level for covering operating costs and supporting investments. The research carried out on the Italian case was based on a desk analysis about the density and geographical distribution of clubs, and a survey on club managers/owners. Results show an unbalanced and poorly capillary geographical distribution of clubs, making it difficult, in some areas, for shooters to have an assiduous practice because of long distances. In addition, a strong heterogeneity in formats and combination of services offered emerged. This makes the entire industry not easily identifiable in terms of positioning, as it is not able to present a unique image. Although in many cases the model of other sports (e.g. golf) is taken as a reference for the facilities and services offered, most of the clubs only offer the shooting practice, being rather insensitive with respect to usability, comfort and aesthetics of the environment in which the shooting sessions are performed. Given these conditions, it is hard to think of attracting new practitioners, especially among young people, or extend the public attending the clubs to family and friends of shooters.

The implications for management are numerous and they can be extended to small clubs of other nonprofessional disciplines. First, the fact that the excessively small size is not economically sustainable and only the core activity is not sufficient to ensure financial balance. Moreover, management of clubs should have an entrepreneurial and not voluntary character, in order to make possible the achievement of a minimum structural and organizational size that is essential to ensure an economic balance.

Second, with reference to the activities and services offered, greater versatility and eclecticism should be pursued: in addition to the core practice, other entertainment activities, achievable in large green spaces and in touch with nature, could be offered. This may facilitate attracting a different audience.

Therefore, and third, more openness to external public should be pursued, as existing structures are basically only accessible to practitioners. Practice sessions could be offered to non-shooters as an entertainment activity, e.g. to tourists or company conventions. This could represent an adjunctive market to which promotional and communication actions could be addressed.

Fourth, in relation with promotion, specific initiatives should be planned with reference to the proper target of each club. Given the lack of resources to make investments in communication, the use of social networks should be privileged for the opportunity to reach specific target audience and especially

to young people, who should be encouraged and attracted. Indeed, the many changes which in recent years are rapidly emerging are also those that affect the way of enjoying free time, and the way in which individual passions are cultivated. Thinking about new generations and young people, it must be considered that even a very technical and traditional sport like clay shooting may need to be presented with appealing characters, emphasizing the open-air environment and the entertainment side of its practice. Tradition must therefore be combined with innovation, and changes must possibly be exploited, more than contrasted. With this being said, we come back to what we underline in the literature review: the marketing of a unique emotional and social experience becomes the leitmotiv of the sport offering. Consequently, the challenge for managers of small sport clubs seems to be to redefine what their value proposition is, to both practitioners and non-practitioners.

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