

SIT ON THE COUCH OR GO FOR A RUN?

“According to the Eurobarometer 2022 on sport and physical activity, 56% of Italians declare they are not physically active at all. This figure is an improvement on the 2018 Eurobarometer when in Italy it was 62% of citizens who did not exercise at all.”

Telos: In February 2020 you were nominated Chairman and CEO of Sport e Salute SpA. This company was founded in 2018, but few know its origins and tasks. Could you tell us about it?

Vito Cozzoli: The two words, Sport e Salute (TN: Sports and Health), highlight its soul and purpose: to promote sports and healthy lifestyles among the general population. The State created Sport e Salute SpA to send a signal that Italy is changing by giving importance to sports and by making sports an instrument of social policy.

It is a limited company whose sole shareholder is the Ministry of Economy and Finance, which plays a strategic role in coordinating and integrating institutional bodies, stakeholders, sports figures and companies. It implements sports development and sustainability policies by providing services in the general interest to promote sports, according to the recommendations of the relevant government Authority.

However, Sport e Salute is also tasked with and strives to modernise the Italian sports system, especially when it comes to promoting the social function of sports and broader issues like the elderly, schools, social marginalisation and welfare.

It sponsors initiatives to help people adopt healthy lifestyles and improve their own state of health through sports.

The company has launched a media campaign called “Basta una goccia di sport” (TN: Just a Drop of Sport), involving nationally renowned experts and Italian sports champions who no longer compete and are part of its “**Legends**” programme, aimed at promoting healthy lifestyles and communicating the benefits of adopting a new model that is healthier for individuals and more sustainable for society.

One very interesting aspect is its approach to sports, not only from the outdated point of view of the Italian National Olympics Committee CONI, but because it also uses the word “salute” (TN: health), the company becomes a sort of link between the Sports and Health Ministries. What forms does this aspect take?

People need to understand that today high-level sports and general sports represent two sides of the same coin. First, let’s look at some figures. The European Commission recently published the fifth Eurobarometer on sport and physical activity to monitor the practice of sports in Europe.

According to the survey, 56% of Italians declare they are not physically active at all. An improvement of 6% points, compared to the 2018 Eurobarometer when the share of citizens in Italy who did not exercise at all was 62%.

This is what has happened especially in recent years: increased awareness has started a virtuous cycle, which, when translated into practice, changed people’s perspectives on sports representation and intermediation.

Representation because today it is a key factor in political choices. Intermediation because sports have taken on social connotations that can help us redesign life in our cities. And without sports, movement, physical wellbeing, life isn’t the same.

These figures shouldn’t just allow us to sit back and relax; however, the merits of the Italian sports system need to be recognised, especially those of the network of grassroots associations and, if I may, even of Sport e Salute. This outcome is the fruit of a series of important investments and sports policy with two focuses: society and business.

You arrived at a particularly challenging moment in history, both for sports and for health: the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. What did you find yourself having to deal with right off the bat in these almost three years?

It was not easy to promote sports without any usable space. During the time when people had to practice physical and unfortunately also social distancing, if it had not been for sports, today society would have even more problems.

If it had not been for technology, we would have lost a lot of people along the way, who instead practiced physical fitness and movement, first, in their homes and building spaces, and then in the squares, parks and in the open.

The pandemic forced us to rethink the importance of ourselves, our loved ones and our communities. It caused us to think about a better future, starting with our present. The government bonuses have allowed us to sponsor over 197,000 sports collaborators, i.e. all those instructors and experts who work with our sports associations.

Even before the pandemic, there were huge margins for improvement in Italians’ state of health. The company set aside over 2.6 billion euros to safeguard the sports system and citizens’ practice of sports to foster a new educational and motor-skills model in elementary schools (the “Scuola Attiva” project involving almost 2 million students), to support sports initiatives in the Regions and Local Governments and to develop and foster new forms of physical and sports activity to improve citizens’ and communities’ quality of life.

It did this by forming partnerships and alliances for sports and for cities, to search for solutions aimed at citizens’ wellbeing and social policies through sport, especially for young people, vulnerable people and seniors over 65 to build networks

between cities to develop sports in urban areas through the “Sport nei Parchi” project.

Thanks to our Memorandum of Understanding with the Association of Italian Municipalities, our projects have spread throughout the country, bringing physical fitness culture to all citizens. For Sport e Salute, sports are an extraordinary investment tool, not only for our human capital but also to foster inclusion, integration, cultural growth and socialisation.

Through these projects, Sport e Salute promotes and values physical fitness, sports and “free” assembly in the 50 suburban areas of our cities where sports are an extraordinary bulwark against youth problems, in nearly 100 city spaces to promote youth leadership, in the facilities of almost 450 associations that have opened their doors free of charge to over 100,000 vulnerable people, in almost 100 Italian prisons for adults and juveniles.

How does it do all this? We learned this especially during the pandemic: by creating networks and systems have been the key to keeping the Italian sports system alive. A sports system that has turned out to be of key importance to daily socialisation and has shown its own traditional limits in terms of innovation.

In these two years, the focus has been on combining “investment and needs”. The project “WeSportUp” at the Foro Italico sports complex, an incubator to grow the best Italian startups in the areas of sports and wellness that attracts foreign talent in collaboration with the system’s main players, aims to foster the development of these needs through technology as an ally in this challenge.

We are focusing on innovation to enhance growth in sports from all points of view.

You have a very long career in the institutions, from Parliamentary Official with tasks of increasing importance, to Head of Cabinet in various Ministries – and let’s not forget that you are also a High Court of Cassation lawyer. Could you describe how these experiences have impacted you?

The tangibility of and ability to believe in innovation, merit and the responsibility to serve the State and *others*, first and foremost. I have figured out that the difference between doing something and doing it well mainly lies in the ultimate goal. When you do something well, you do it for others. This is why my initiatives and the choices that distinguish Sport e Salute even today have always been rooted in the community. Constant value in every area: from the Chamber of Deputies, to the Government to Sport e Salute. And what better than sports convey the message of unity and inclusiveness our country needs? Sports for everyone means breaking down walls and creating opportunities for collaboration, that capillary network we are building so no one gets left behind and to give everyone the same opportunities, regardless of where they were born. When I think of what I do every day, I think of all those realities that, as Sport e Salute, it is our duty to help while following one, principal logic: the common good.

Marco Sonsini

Editorial

So, the Italians are no longer sedentary? We may still be, but we’re getting better. Three years ago we were the fifth most sedentary country in Europe. Now, we’re the eleventh!

“A slight recovery has begun.” That’s what the Eurobarometer survey of the European Commission says. *“And this has allowed us to get ahead of some of our noble neighbours like Germany, Holland, Luxemburg, Belgium, not to mention Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Estonia, Latvia and Malta. In the last five years, about 3.5 million people have started doing sport.”*

This is what our February guest for PRIMOPIANOSCALA, Vito Cozzoli, Chairman and CEO of Sport e Salute S.p.A., wrote in his speech at the “Calcio & Welfare” (TN: Football & Welfare) forum in Naples last December. Naples is a candidate to be the 2026 European Capital of Sport and, again according to Cozzoli: *“(…) is ready. Its candidacy has strategic meaning and underscores the importance of doing sport for health, education, innovation and as a driving force for the economy.”*

Yet what would cause a jurist - born in Bari, and educated in his adoptive city Rome, with over 30 years as civil servant in a variety of roles under his belt - to agree to lead a state-owned company that promotes sport and healthy lifestyles? Maybe, as he confides in our interview, it was figuring out after these 30 years that *“the difference between doing something and doing it well mainly lies in the ultimate goal. When you do something well, you do it for others (…).”*

This vocation of doing things for others is an integral part of the company’s mission. *“The two words, Sport e Salute (TN: Sports and Health), highlight its soul and purpose: to promote sport among the general population and healthy lifestyles.”*

Last 1 February they **presented** their Plan for social sport to President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella and we are sure it was a crowning moment for Cozzoli and everyone at Sport e Salute after all the effort they made during these difficult years for the sector due to Covid. Their plan entails putting sport at the service of society in order to break down the walls that prevent people’s access to sport and implement the principle that everyone has the right to do sport.

To our question about the challenges faced in these three years, Cozzoli answers by *flipping* the perspective. He acknowledges that in the first two years at the height of the pandemic, promoting sport when people could not actually do sport was complex. At the time, it was important to economically support the 197,000 workers in the sector, and that moment of *suspended time* allowed them to focus on planning the restart.

For example, *“by forming partnerships and alliances for sports and for cities, to search for solutions aimed at citizens’ wellbeing and social policies”* or through Progetto Quartieri (TN: the Neighbourhood Project), an inclusion project where Sport e Salute penetrated even the toughest neighbourhoods where sport is about more than just physical fitness; it is a tool for mental fitness. Cozzoli does more than just identify, approve and further these initiatives; he personally *strives* to ensure that they bring results.

He is a constant, tireless ambassador, bringing the contribution, no matter how small, of the company he leads to every nook and cranny of our country with his dazzling smile. In this interview, he tells us about its genesis and aims, his best, most memorable experiences, the challenges and successes.

And he does this using the tone and impassioned words of a man who really believes in what he is doing. Do you want to bet whether our refined jurist, our *distinguished civil servant* has found a mission that takes him outside the halls of power he has haunted for years and involved him 100 per cent? His ever-smiling face leads us to suspect that he has.

Even the cover of the February issue of PRIMOPIANOSCALA features our new graphics where we use the face of our guests to create something akin to museum merchandising. Each month you will find a personalised article featuring the black and white face of our guest.

Our guests look truly iconic, just like the articles from a museum gift shop featuring art masterpieces like the Mona Lisa, Raphael's two chubby cherubs in the Sistine Madonna or Van Gogh's starry sky... They are *so iconic* they become like pop stars, singing on social media.

For Cozzoli, we have chosen the best selling article, one any visitor to any museum in the world would expect to find: a mug. In the musical version of the cover dedicated to him - another important element of our 2023 graphics - the song is inspired by sport and is a true classic: the score of the first film about sport to win an Oscar. Check it out!

Mariella Palazzolo



Vito Cozzoli has been the Chairman and CEO of **Sport e Salute SpA** since March 2020. He holds a Degree in Law from Sapienza University of Rome. Since 1991 he has been a parliamentary official at the Chamber of Deputies, where he held many different offices, including Chief Service Official and Head of the Office of the Legal Counsel (2006-2014). Since 1992 he is a lawyer admitted to practice before the Court of Cassation, enrolled in the Special List of Lawyers for the Chamber of Deputies.

From 2014 to 2016 he was Head of Cabinet for the Minister of Economic Development and from 2017 to 2018, Head of the Security Department Services at the Chamber of Deputies. From 2018 to 2019 Cozzoli went back to being the Head of Cabinet for the Minister of Economic Development and Labour and Social Policies, and from 2019 to 2020 held the same post for the Minister of Economic Development.

Since 1991 he has taught at the university as a Professor of Public Law in the Economics Faculty of the Libera Università Mediterranea Jean Monnet in Bari and in the Master's programme in "Parliament and Public Policy" at LUISS-Guido Carli University of Rome, where he is also the Director of the Specialisation course in "Corporate Crisis Management".

His offices include: President of the Second Tier Commission for UEFA licenses for the Italian Football Federation and President of the **Amerigo International Cultural**

Exchanges Programs Alumni Association.

He has been a freelance journalist since 1988 and has authored scientific essays on Public Law of the Economy and corporate crisis.

What does he do in his free time? He plays tennis and roots for the Inter football club. He is also a 14th-century art enthusiast. He has three children. The oldest lives in the US. The second, after living in the US, returned to Italy and studies communications. The youngest lives in Rome and attends an international school.

Marco Sonsini