
Israeli Sports – From National Pride to Political Hostility

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Sports in the State of Israel have always vacillated between two conflicting planes. One is national sports which have been a central component of national identity and a source of national pride. The other is political sports which, as representatives of opposing political sectors in the country, have divided the country and have engendered a great deal of hostility and recurrent violence leading to dysfunction. The tension between national sports as a tool serving national ends and sports for grinding political axes underlies the entire history of sports in Israel, and only in recent years seems to be gradually dissipating.

Sports were created in Pre-Mandatory Israel at the start of the 19th Century and continued developing throughout the Mandate period. With the establishment of the State of Israel, sports came under state authority. Representative sports served the young state's national interests. All-star teams and sports matches became tools for strengthening Israel's international recognition, expanding contact with other countries, increasing ties with Jewish communities in the Diaspora, and attaining prestige and honor. In the early years of the state, Israel's representative championship teams were a source of pride and identification despite their unimpressive results on the playing fields. People still remember the soccer games between Israel and the Soviet Union in 1956. At such encounters Israel was defeated twice. Nevertheless, such games were of great national value, as they strengthened political ties with the former Soviet Union and with Jews behind the "iron curtain" during the Cold War.¹

Despite the new official status and national-functional relevancy of Israeli sports, their sectarian nature remained essentially the same. Politicization in Israeli sports had already begun in the formative years of the new Jewish community in Pre-Mandatory Israel and persisted with the establishment of the State. Sports centers established at the time were direct products of the political camps: "Hapoel" for the socialist camp, "Maccabi" for the bourgeois camp, "Beitar" for the national right camp, and "Elitzur" for the religious parties.² Despite Ben-Gurion's (Israel's first Prime Minister) shift "from class to nation" (that is, from working class to state interests) and Israeli sports' new official status as representative sports, political differences and deep hostility still characterized Israeli sports clubs. Ideological-political camps still flourished in the early fifties. Israeli sports remained expressions of political rivalry; the mutual resentment between opposing clubs occasionally resulted in the paralysis of sporting events in the young state. The struggle took place mainly in sports institutions such as the Sport Association, Soccer Association, and Olympic Committee, and often frustrated the opening of regular leagues.³

The need to organize sports and athletic leagues forced the sports centers to work out a *modus vivendi*. The "fifty-fifty" arrangement was signed in 1951 according to which the management of the Sports Union would operate on a rotational basis (six members from "Hapoel" and six from "Maccabi", to the exclusion of "Beitar" and "Elitzur" This arrangement was also binding on the Olympic Committee and remained in force until 1963, except for the Soccer Association which decided on proportional representation in its institutions in 1954. The "fifty-fifty" arrangement was a clear political arrangement but, taking into consideration the atmosphere in the country, it was a pragmatic pro-

gram that ushered "peaceful co-existence" into the various sports institutions and allowed leagues to be established.⁴

The politicization of Israeli sports was felt in all aspects of sports life in the first years of the state. The centers seem to be tied to the umbilical cord of their political power bases. "Hapoel" continued to be glued to the *Histadrut* (the professional political union that centralized all worker unions) which was at the zenith of its power during this period of the *Mapai* (Eretz-Israel Worker's Party) "Maccabi" formalized its links with the General Zionists (a liberal, middle-of-the-road party); "Beitar" was tied to *Herut* (a nationalistic, right-wing party) and regarded "Maccabi" as its ally (just as the General Zionists and *Herut* were political allies in the Knesset); and "Elitzur" continued to be identified with Religious Zionism (*Hamizrachi* and *Hapoel Hamizrachi* parties). Sports centers were installed and financed by their respective political centers. The parties viewed the centers as a means of gaining political power and as magnets for drawing young people and new immigrants into their camp.

The players and fans also chose their sports clubs according to political ideology. Sports were quite amateurish in the 1950s, and players tended to select their teams according to political orientations. This often worked to the benefit of the sports centers. "Hapoel" was a top-notch team, for example, because of its ability to provide employment to its players in *Histadrut*-run workplaces. The transfer of players from one club to another was practically impossible. The few who wished to switch clubs had to enter a "quarantine" period (a period of non-activity from one to three years) and very few chose this track. Fans, too, chose their favorite teams primarily on the basis of political identification. "Maccabi", "Hapoel", and "Beitar" fans generally voted for the party that supported their sports centers.

The close identification between sports and political centers and the rivalry for control over Israeli sports created numerous problems. The choice of sports delegations and the composition of all-star teams, especially soccer teams, were often made according to political interests rather than according to professional standards. Israeli sports were rife with "favoritism". When teams from the same center played against one another, the stronger team would let the weaker one score so that it would not be "knocked down" to a lower league. Over the years many attempts were made to combat this phenomenon by freezing the leagues or holding "friendly family" games (teams from the same center would first play against each other, and only afterwards would teams from different centers compete), but none of these attempts managed to overcome the widespread phenomenon.

In the mid-1960s, Israeli sports began to lose their political-sectarian identity. The transition from a "political" sports federation to an "economic" one was linked to the political, social, and economic changes that Israeli society underwent and the radical changes that took place in world sports.

Political blocs during the Mandate and early years of statehood were clearly defined and demarcated. Each party's ideological platform related directly to social, economic, and security issues, and each party was engraved with an unmistakable socio-political identity. After the Six-Day War (1967) it seems that the parties' ideological identities and the lines that differentiated between parties began to blur. The main issue that concerned them (as it does to this day) was the future of the territories captured (or liberated) in that war. This issue has been so intense in Israel that it has overshadowed and almost blotted out the debate over the nature of the society being created. The question of Israel's economic future ended with a triumph for capitalism, another "victory" that has made formerly clear differences between political parties extremely difficult to discern. The main difference between today's "radical left" and "radical right" lies in their position on the territories rather than on their socio-economic outlook. Israeli society is still sectarian, but for all practical purposes the ideological-political divisions are based on ethnic, religious, and economic differences, and minority rights.

The ideological muddle in Israel has also influenced the relations between the political sports centers. The centers have kept their organizational power but have gradually stopped serving as a focal point for party strength and political recruitment. The "fifty-fifty" arrangement has disappeared; players no longer choose their teams according to political affiliation but according to economic and personal interests; transfer from one center to another proceeds smoothly. Fans, too, no longer choose

their team out of political identification but according to "community", geography, or team performance. Excluding isolated cases, such as "Jerusalem Beitar" (and even this to a limited extent), teams no longer represent a particular "political" line. Most of the traditional symbols, however, have been retained (such as the color red for "Hapoel") but no one sees them as having any real meaning other than the "symbol and color" of their favorite club.

Another reason for the fading of political boundaries has been the dramatic economic changes that Israeli society has undergone. Since the late fifties the Jewish state has gradually become a capitalistic society. Industry's expansion at the expense of agriculture has resulted in greater government aid to the private sector. The *Histadrut's* status as a public employer has gradually diminished, the private sector has become increasingly dominant, and the power of the managerial class and white-collar professions has risen. In the 1950s Israel was an egalitarian society compared to other Western societies. But each decade since then has seen a gradual widening of the social gap and an increasingly unequal distribution of wealth. The process climaxed in the 1990s with the privatization of the state economy and the demise of the *Histadrut's* economic clout.

These processes have had an unprecedented impact on Israeli sports. The political model in which players were only amateurs who played for a "symbol" has disappeared. In an economy that encourages professionalism and offers hefty financial rewards, athletes also relate to their profession as a special skill and demand certain benefits, such as the right to switch teams, regardless of their ideological inclination, when a higher salary is involved. The shift from amateur to professional leagues has been a long process in Israel. It has been riddled with endless potholes because of the gap between the market forces that led to professionalism, and the vested interest of sports centers to retain their political-economic control and preserve the appearance of sports as amateur games. By the 1990s, Israeli sports resembled the rest of the Israeli economy that was intent on privatization and merchandising. The sports centers lost the bulk of their government support, and the *Histadrut* lost its economic assets, forcing it to release its protégé – "Hapoel". Control and management of teams and players passed into the hands of private owners and businesses (or to local authorities who accredit urban clubs with "community" values) where a political signature is completely irrelevant and foreign ball players have come to dominate Israel's professional teams.⁵

Changes in Israeli sports have also been influenced by world sport developments. Mass sports have become a global phenomenon that some observers term the "religion of the 20th Century". The globalization of sports has contributed to the breakdown of cultural barriers. Sporting meets that are simultaneously broadcast throughout the world tend to obscure tribalism, provincialism, and nationalism since support for players and championship teams (most of which are already multi-national) cuts across cultural and class boundaries.⁶

There is no room for political-sectarian differences in the age of the globalization of sports. Israeli sports are part of the global village. Today the management of teams is dictated mainly by economic, professional, and media- and achievement-oriented considerations; ideological inclinations and party affiliations are utterly anachronistic variables. The political considerations that countries still take into account in the world of sports are of a national nature. That is, they pertain to foreign relations, prestige, propaganda, and so forth.

The political sports centers – "Hapoel", "Maccabi", "Beitar", and "Elitzur" – that formed the unique phenomenon of Eretz-Israel and Israeli sports have not entirely disappeared; in fact, they still wield some influence in various sports institutions. The organizational structure of institutions such as the Olympic Committee and Soccer Association still includes representation according to a key in the by-laws of the traditional centers. In practice, the key's significance is only instrumental. Sports centers are no longer closely linked to political parties as in the past, and while the competitive clubs preserve their traditional names, the names have no political or economic meaning. For all practical purposes, the political divisions in Israeli sports no longer exist and what remains is only a pale shadow of the past. Paradoxically, the loss of the traditional centers' political power has enabled them to concentrate more on the special goals that they took responsibility for when they were first established, and which

became secondary interests because of the centers' involvement and dominance in competitive sports. This means that "Hapoel" can now devote its time and energy to sports in work places and to sports "for the masses"; "Maccabi" can strengthen its ties with Jewish teams outside Israel; "Elitzur" can develop physical education among religious youth; and "Beitar" can boost athletic activity in the nationalist youth movement.

With the gradual disappearance of political sports in the last decades the ring has come around full swing as sports have returned to developing a national consciousness – its original goal. In recent years, and especially since the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the traditional ethos that shaped Israel's collective identity in the first years of the state has been on the wane. Sectarian "tribalism" that characterizes different social sectors today impedes formation of the "glue" necessary for uniting the disparate parts of Israeli society. When this "glue" appears today it is generally the result of dramatic, often tragic, events that elicit a sense of common destiny.

The "positive" events that are engraved in Israel's collective consciousness and that evoke feelings of shared identity are few and far between – and the majority of them are connected with sports. Maccabi Tel-Aviv's feats on the basketball court and the Israeli athletes' Olympic medals have awakened national pride more than any other events and have created a collective identity among all Israelis that are unparalleled.⁷

In summary, the tension between the national use of sports for the needs of the *Yishuv* and state and the particularistic use of sports for the needs of political parties is the leading theme in the history of sports in Eretz-Israel and the State of Israel. The political tension in sports has dissipated only in recent years. Today, most Israeli clubs have lost their overtly sectarian identity, and are almost totally free of a particularistic identity, or at best have a muted community identity. Hebrew sports have returned to their origins and now serve as the prime source of national pride.

¹ See H. HARIF, *Sport and International Politics, the Political Functions of Representative Sports in the Yishuv and the State of Israel 1898–1960*, Ph.D. diss, Ramat-Gan 2002, pp. 129-251 [Hebrew]; see also H. HARIF, "We Must Clobber the Gentiles: The National Implication of the Soccer Games between the Israeli and Soviet All-Star Teams in the Summer of 1956", in: *Cathedra* 109(2004), pp. 111-130 [Hebrew].

² H. KAUFMAN, "The Founding of Hapoel Sport Federation", in: *Cathedra* 80(1996), pp. 122-149 [Hebrew]; H. KAUFMAN, "Maccabi versus Hapoel – the Creation of the Political Split in Eretz-Israel Sports", in: H. KAUFMAN/H. HARIF (Eds.), *Physical Culture and Sport in Israel in the Twentieth Century*, Idan 22 Netanya/Jerusalem 2002, pp. 89-112 [Hebrew]. On sports in "Beitar" see S. REZNIK, "The Sports Clubs in Beitar: Political Sports in a Divided Society", in: KAUFMAN/Harif, *Physical Culture and Sport in Israel*, pp. 184-185.

³ A. ALPEROVICH, "Israel and the Olympic Movement – Not Only Sports", in: H. KAUFMAN/H. HARIF (Eds.), *Physical Culture and Sport in Israel in the Twentieth Century*, Idan 22 Netanya/Jerusalem 2002, pp. 302-304 [Hebrew]; H. KAUFMAN, "The founding of the Israeli Olympic Committee", in: E. BERTKE/H. KUHN/K. Lennartz (Eds.), *Olympische bewegt, Festschrift zum 60. Geburtstag von Prof. Dr. Manfred Lämmer*, Cologne 2003, pp. 129-135.

⁴ For a version of the agreement, see Wingate Archives, 1.10/23; see also I. GIL, *The Story of Hapoel*, Tel-Aviv 1977 pp. 263-264 [Hebrew]. On the meaning of "fifty-fifty", see also A. BEN-PORAT, *From Game to Merchandise – Israeli Soccer: 1948–1999*, Beer-Sheva 2002, pp. 91-108 [Hebrew]; A. BEN-PORAT, "The Commodification of Football in Israel", in: *International Review for Sociology of Sport* 33(1998), pp. 269-276.

⁵ For a discussion on these processes in Israeli soccer, see BEN-PORAT, *From Game to Merchandise*, 127 ff.

⁶ J. MAGUIRE, *Global Sport*, London 1999; O. ALMOG, "From the 'Conquest of the Mountain' to Scoring a Goal: The Revolution in Professional Sports in Israel and its Influence on the Culture", in: *Mifneh* 23(1998), pp. 32-37 [Hebrew].

⁷ H. HARIF, "A Shadow Beclouds National Pride", in: *Panim* 25(2003), pp. 66-72 [Hebrew].