
Jews and Sport: A Century of Retrospect

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A special journal issue that is dedicated to the last hundred years of Jewish experiences in sports deserves more than just a perfunctory introduction. Introductions by nature are depthless attempts to present an overview on a subject matter, often forcing us to gloss over underlying issues and subtexts not immediately notable to the reader. A mere introduction would hardly do justice, on the one hand, to the rich texture, fabric, color, and immensity of the past hundred years, with intertwining ethnic and race issues and tensions so characteristic to this turbulent period. On the other hand, Jewish history, with its infinite religio-ethnic nuances and sheer complexity, compounded by a given host-nation's cultural value system, national aspirations, and sensibilities, and its relationship to sport and the Olympic movement, would prove too complex to be crammed into an introduction. Finally, an introduction might not be able to weave the necessary connecting tissue about the nature and extent of Jewish sports participation and complex philosophical, socio-psychological, cultural, and economic forces that made the 20th century so unique. Beyond that, Jewish history of the last two thousand years has been written, or rather dictated, not only by the Jews themselves but also by an intricate and precarious diasporic existence among diverse nations, countries, and circumstances.¹

When one talks about Jewish history in general, it is to accept the fact that it contains several very diverse narratives—historical, emotional, religious, and mental. Sport in Jewish history and culture connects all these diverse narratives because the Jewish experiences in sport are delightfully colorful, diverse, and instructive. In turn, they can provide a valuable comparative palette of colors to other ethno-histories. Not surprisingly, then, there are many issues that one can lump into this introductory essay: philosophical, social, psychological, and cultural—to name just a few. One doesn't need to engage in trendy "postmodernist" deconstruction of Jewish history in order to understand the precarious situation of a marginalized yet economically successful "middle-man" minority—a minority that was hated yet tolerated for its skills in modern societies. Thus this introductory

essay's aim is not only to spell out some of the issues inherent in Jewish participation in sports, but also to dispel some of the carefully crafted and perpetuated myths, which might make us feel good about ourselves but are scarcely rooted in historical reality

A Problem of Definition

Even at first glance, one of the most persistent questions, though rarely asked, is: What is Jewish sport?" After all, how can we explain that there were times, at least labeled so in recent works, when "boxing was a Jewish sport," or when "basketball was a Jewish sport," or when "fencing was a Jewish sport"?² Having put forth so carelessly these phrases, I must almost immediately put a disclaimer on the term "Jewish sport." Indeed, in choosing the title for this issue I felt it would be rather misleading and too provocative to claim that such a thing as "Jewish sport" exists. For me, whose main interest lies in the relationship between ethnicity and race and sport, I should be hard pressed to justify such markers as "Puerto Rican sport," or "Chicano sport," or even, in spite of their successes on the athletic field, "African American sport." These are mere labels because, as Allen Guttmann so astutely delineated in his classical book, *From Ritual to Record*, modern sport by nature is a Western invention.³ It is too transnational an institution to be appropriated by a single group. However, there is a common thread between Jewish history and sport history in that, just like modern sport and the Olympic movement, the historical dispersion of the Jewish people is based, by necessity on the principle of transnationalism with a global outreach. Looking at the compendium of scholarly articles in this issue, their diverse subject matters, their variety of perspectives and approaches, and their multitude of socio-political and economic conditions, I am more convinced than ever that "Jewish sport," unlike Jewish music or literature, did not come from the "psyche" of a people. Neither could "Jewish sport" emerge from a generic Jewish culture because a uniform concept such as "Jewish culture" never existed. If a folklorist would care to spend a little time in studying Jewish folk games, to reinforce my point, he or she would be greatly disappointed. Beyond some fuzzy Chanukah tradition, with the dreydl in its center, there are none.⁴ At best, then, we can claim that there are unique Jewish experiences in modern sport or, playing on words, unique Jewish sporting experiences that were intricately attached to a host country's culture, politics, and industrial development. Thus, a good compromise would be to retain such an expression as sport in Jewish history, culture, and society. We might accept, though, the notion that there are easily identifiable Jewish attitudes toward and rationales and desires for engaging in, relating to, and even rejecting sport.

The Issue of Identity

Scholars have tended to ignore conveniently a rather thorny yet fundamental question: how an individual's involvement and accomplishments in sport can be tied to his or her religious or ethnic identity—especially in light of a rapidly changing community. In other words, how can we address the relevance of Jewishness, or any other ethnicity, to sport participation, or how can we measure

sport's impact on broader issues of Jewish history and culture?⁵ This question opens the proverbial Pandora's box, because it focuses on the philosophical points that have bedeviled social observers on both sides of the Atlantic for the past century. The boundaries, of course, are sometimes blurred in trying to connect some unrelated events. For example, Israeli and overzealous Jewish commentators often characterized the 1972 Olympic massacre in Munich as an act directed against the Jewish people. Yet, it might be argued with equal force that this tragedy was purely an act of political terrorism against Israel. A rather damaging piece of "conventional wisdom" is the assertion that if one's Jewishness has an impact on a person's career in sports, it might be a similarly true deduction that being an athlete also has an equally powerful effect on a person's Jewish identity. I don't believe that anyone ever asked Mark Spitz how his winning more than a dozen medals in the Olympics forged or changed his Jewish self-identity. It would be equally silly to assume that Michael Jordan's achievements on the basketball court might have reinforced his Afro-American ethnic identity. Although this whole assumption seems irrelevant, a fallacy, it doesn't negate the fact that individual Jewish sport successes fostered ethnic pride and cohesion within a given community. That is to say, although an individual might not be effected, the group will be by the individual's performance. Loyalty and belonging to an ethnic group tend to be a more powerful force than an abstract principle.

Part of a related philosophical quandary, both symbolic and practical, is the question of who can be classified a Jew. On a strictly religious foundation (Halakic interpretation), a Jew is one whose mother was Jewish. This matrilineal explanation, however, founders on the rapidly changing definition of the Jewish community from a purely religious to an ethno-based group. Of course, this is an age-old issue that has divided inevitably pundits on two sides of the Atlantic. Several years ago, I became engaged, rather inadvertently, in an intellectual exchange of ideas with Gertrud Pfister, one of the eminent contributors to this issue, about venturing to insist that to a large degree ethnicity is a matter of self-definition. Following our discussion, it finally dawned on me that the European and American perceptions of ethnicity diverge drastically. Americans, who have always been more interested in class structures than race, ethnicity, or gender, are naturally content with a self-definition, i.e., self-identification with a group, as the basis for ethnic identity. Europeans, on the other hand, are traditionally more preoccupied with ethnic, religious, and national classifications in which society at large defines one's religious identity. The crucial point of departure in perceiving ethnicity in the European mind is how a surrounding society formulates a demarcation of an individual's ethnic or religious belonging. Jean-Paul Sartre's postwar work reflects accurately this sentiment about the nature of anti-Semitism. In *Anti-Semite and Jew*, he notes that societal perception and not self-definition predicate Jewish identity.⁶

Gertrud Pfister and Toni Niewerth subscribe to such a definition by noting in their article that "it makes much more sense to acknowledge those individuals as Jews who are recognized as such by their environment." I am instinctively uncomfortable with this European definition of ethnic identity, based more on

biological determinism, in guise of social denotation, than anything else, because we know from experience that this view also led, tragically, to Hitler's decision of who is a Jew and to the consequent Holocaust. Helena Mayer, whose life story is included in this issue, is a good case in point. She obviously impacted rather dramatically Jewish history on many levels, yet for me she is not a Jew—from both a Halakic as well as an ethno-identification point of view. There is no reason to employ rancor or reproach here—though her Hitler salute in the 1936 Olympic Games makes this difficult—for her forceful rejection, both verbally and in action, of any identification with the Jewish people.⁷ The cases of two exceptional Hungarian female fencers is equally illuminating. Ilona Elek, who won gold medals in Berlin and London, has often been portrayed as Jewish (her father being Jewish and her mother Catholic), ignoring her strict Catholic upbringing. Another example is an equally illustrious fencer, Ildiko Rejto-Ujlaki. Following a painstaking inquiry that confirmed her Jewishness, she was elected into the International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame. However, upon direct questioning, she categorically denied that she is Jewish. My view at the time was that it is not a scholar's prerogative to question her motives in denying her ethnic heritage. Equally, it is not a scholar's prerogative to assign this ethnic heritage to her. Subsequently, the Hungarian fencer was removed from the list of honorees in the International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame.

I know that I will not be able to convince some of my European colleagues, and arguments about this issue will continue to rage. Yet, as a guide I like Freud's interpretation of what constitutes being a Jew. In addressing the B'nai B'rith in Vienna, he came effortlessly to the conclusion that being Jewish is *sharing* “many obscure emotional forces, which were the more powerful the less they could be expressed in words, as well as a clear consciousness of inner identity, the safe privacy of a common mental construction.”⁸ (Italics are mine.)

A Question of Semantics: “Muscular Judaism”

One of the stock phrases of rationalizing Jewish participation in sport is “muscular Judaism”—a potent Zionist utterance coined a hundred years ago. Undoubtedly, it is one of the most overused clichés in sport history. The fact that the reader will have a chance to read about it often enough in this issue only emphasizes its allure and power through the years that have captivated, and in many ways still captivate, the Jewish imagination. It conjures images of manly, muscular, and regenerated-rejuvenated-reborn youth willing and able to fight against anti-Semitism and defend the honor of the Jewish people. It became a battle cry for Jewish nationalists and Zionists who wanted to reclaim a “lost” national legitimacy through exercise and sport. More than anything else, it helped Zionists to break away from traditionalist values of the Jewish Orthodoxy. The most important aspect of this breach was the emergence of a political and racial view of Judaism in which Jewish “peoplehood or nationhood” (i.e., race) rather than religion supplanted the central tenet of Judaism. In my mind, it was equally important that it also served Jewish antimodernists who saw in sport participation

a potential means for regeneration of the *volk* in Zionist terms. “Muscular Judaism” provided an important symbol ushering a new era in Jewish history, a new era anchored as much in physical as in spiritual reality. It was a revolutionary statement that promoted Zionist aims. But, then, genuine revolutions have the power to induce a radical cultural transformation through symbols.

Fortunately for sports historians, this fervent wish to “recapture” a mythical “muscular Judaism,” as belated as it was in 1898, is at best misleading. First, it predicated its premise on the assumption that the Jewish people, as a whole, were in physical decline, besieged by corporal and spiritual malaise from which only exercise and sports could lift them. Faced with a barrage of anti-Semitic images of the diabolical Jew and accusations about Jewish physical inferiority—touching upon neuroses, effeminacy, mental illnesses, and other maladies—Jewish commentators, representing almost every political hue, have often felt the need to fuss with these issues by proposing to remake the Jewish people. Of course, many of these efforts to counteract the negative body image were like shadowboxing, never hitting the real opponent. The bodily deformed, inferior Jewish reflection has a long history. Michelangelo’s Moses is descending Sinai with horns. Although attributed to a mistranslation of the Old Testament, the Jew, represented with horns, unwittingly acquires satanic associations or is linked to, Pan, the horned and sexualized minor Greek god of promiscuity. Images, though, are etched into the subconscious.

The second misrepresentation of the “muscular Judaism” myth is presenting Zionism as the only way to regenerate the Jewish people. A scholarly retrospect, coupled with a sober historical reappraisal, would reveal a different picture in the late 19th century. The overwhelming majority of Jewish athletes, in America and Europe, were not politically active and certainly did not identify with Zionism and were not members of Maccabi. At the time of the Second Zionist Congress in Basel, when Max Nordau first uttered this phrase, and the famed Bar Kochba Berlin was established, there were several “neutral” Jewish clubs already functioning in Europe. Simultaneously, a rapidly expanding Young Men’s Hebrew Association catered to Jews in America and German Jews maintained a considerable presence in the *Deutsche Turnerschaft*—on both sides of the Atlantic. And by the turn of the century, the Jewish middle class became the harbinger of the diffusion of modern sport across the world. In 1896, during the first modern Olympic Games, and only two years before the Second Zionist Congress, Jewish athletes, representing Austria, Hungary, and Germany, garnered eight gold medals in Athens.

In underscoring this philosophical discussion, let us turn, for a moment, to the social sciences for a better understanding of the roots of this extensive Jewish preoccupation with sport. By all accounts, the 20th century has been a tumultuous one—for Jewish as well as sport history. Thus, even the early years of Jewish involvement and participation in modern sport—the last two decades of the 19th century—should provide enough substance for intellectual rumination and scholarly introspection. One of the most definitive statements that I can make about this time period is how uniquely a close relationship existed between these two histories: the emergence and evolution of modern sport and its intricately

crafted ties that closely intertwined it with Jewish history. Because they were rooted and molded simultaneously by predictable socio-cultural, psychological, and economic realities, these two histories have also greatly influenced and impacted each other. They evolved at a crucial junction. This was the time when industrialization, economic empowerment, socio-political emancipation, rise of political and racial anti-Semitism, and the ascent of political Zionism coincided with the rise of modern sport and the formative years of the Olympic movement in the last decades of the 19th century. This was also the time of a radical and irretrievable transformation of the Jewish community from a religious to an ethnoculturally based community and identity and the emergence of this community into the ranks of the middle and upper middle class.

It's fair to assume that industrialization and, consequently, urbanization frayed or often dissolved completely the traditional community boundaries and corresponding socio-psychological networks. Yet all this—the relationship between economic history and Jewish participation in sports—is one of the best-kept secrets of the past one hundred years. The majority of Jews, who were especially exposed to a rich mixture of modernization including significant proletarianization in the old countries and America, often reconstructed their Jewish identities to fit the ethnic mold rather than the religious one. The emergence of a subsequent Jewish middle class, which evolved over the span of several decades, did not deviate from this dictum but reinforced it. Thus, the rapidly expanding Jewish small and upper bourgeoisie became simultaneously an agent of change, which was viewed uncomfortably by a conservative and markedly anti-Semitic majority (especially in Germany), in subscribing to the new credo of sport. Also, Jews, who rapidly constituted a significant portion of the urban landscape, consciously cultivated sport as a means for social and psychological integration and acceptance into these newly created communities. It is not hard for scholars to recognize that a Jewish community, straddling two worlds, must develop a unique understanding of, and rationalization for, sport as a social institution. Simultaneously, it must be understood how sport might have been utilized in promoting this community's integration into a modern society. This was especially expedient in a period of social upheaval and economic dislocations as a consequence of industrialization and unprecedented urbanization that resulted in an inevitable melt down in class and status structures. In this rationale, the fact that the emergence of sport as a mass movement, industrialization, and the rise of the Jewish community into the middle class, coincided and naturally impacted and influenced each other becomes rather meaningful.

We need to view the movement of Jewry into the rank of the bourgeoisie not as a discreet or distinct category or a mere classification. Their ascent needs to be interpreted as the setting up of a complex of social relationships with infinite communicative “nerve endings.” This manifested itself in an intricate web of social relationships where sport was to play a crucial role. These lines of communication connected a tentative and precariously balancing “middle-man” minority to a coveted but class-conscious upper class, especially in Central Europe, and a restless and fermenting under class from which the Jews escaped within

only the span of a generation. Thus, in equalizing opportunities on the social and emotional levels, sport's role in creating a sense of community has been—although at best acknowledged but not really understood—most significant.

The Issue of Sport in Jewish Thought

The fact that religious philosophies and attitudes have something to do with how we view and administer our leisure activities through history is one of the best-kept secrets of modern sport scholarship. Every religion creates and promotes a certain orderly arrangement of priorities about the desirability or undesirability of various human endeavors in life. Where sport fits in this list of priorities is based on a given religion's perception of its importance in human existence. The paradox that within Jewish religious ethics its rank is not too high is neither a secret nor an often-discussed item. Writing about Jews in sports is neither a simple task nor a highly regarded human endeavor nor an appreciated occupation. While quite a few sports writers are Jewish, I cannot recall any subject in Jewish culture that could elicit such conflicting emotions, oscillating between a yawningly mild interest, bordering on apathy, and an ardent apologia. One doesn't need to be a scholar to recognize the fact that there has always been an abiding tension between sport, as a bona fide manifestation of human creativity, and Jewish ethos, which has been played out, time and again, with slightly different scripts but an unchanging theme. Conversely, one also doesn't need to look hard to see that in mainstream scholarship analytical works relating to Jews in sports, save a few outstanding examples, are more a matter of curiosity than serious contemplation. A palpable intellectual bias against sport as a bona fide human endeavor worthy of study is definitely not far from the truth. In an almost collusive way, the scholarly community has often vacillated between contradictory epigrammatic sensibilities—between grudging recognition and a desultory dismissal of the idea of Jewish prominence in sports.

Jews, scholars and the general public alike, past and present, have always been uncomfortable with the notion that participating in sports might make the Jewish community less unique in the great scheme of things than they would like to see themselves. After all, the enticing designation of "People of the Book" is much more palatable and prestigious than "People of Brawn." What should be understood is that when Jews ponder sport, like all people, they create an image of themselves as they wish the public to see it. Or, as Erving Goffman put it almost half a century ago, they are engaging in a "presentation of self." It is the image of the self we wish to hold of ourselves and present to the outside world. Nothing demonstrates better this conflict than humor. A rather silly dialogue caught my attention in the movie *Airplane* several years ago. A flight attendant asks a passenger, "Would you like something to read?"

"Do you have something light?"

"How about this short leaflet: 'Famous Jewish Sports Legends?'"

I might not be too far from the truth in assuming that this brief conversation must have been the brain child of a Jewish comedian. On a deeper level, this quip

also portends an intriguing ambivalence for scholars and interested observers alike about an uneasy relationship between sport and Jewish ethics. Manuel Schnitzler commented around the turn of the century that the “Jewish joke reveals the Jewish character, the weaknesses of which are the object of its mockery, But one must not forget, that it is always the Jews themselves who chastise their vanities.”⁹

Scholars whose interest is in humor generally agree that Jewish humor tends to be self-deprecating. Coincidentally, they also agree that the best humor is the one that reflects reality. The question naturally arises, then, why Jewish tradition and culture tend to undervalue and belittle Jewish achievements in sports. In a similar vein, I often have been mystified by people’s reaction—a mixture of amazement that borders on disbelief, and more often from Jews than Gentiles—upon learning I was a boxer in my youth. Needless to say, the fact that my research sometimes covers topics focusing on Jewish sport participation is also greeted with a degree of skepticism and a pronounced indifference among many colleagues whose main interest is in Jewish studies.

Of course, even the myths that simplify reality are not, in themselves, simple. “For stereotypes,” writes Sander Gilman, “like common places, carry entire realms of association with them, associations that form a subtext within the world of fiction.”¹⁰ The fact that this image is not completely overlapping with reality is only recently starting to seep into the public’s awareness and imagination. This came with a realization that this image is not always tenable in light of facts and overwhelming evidence. Indeed, the likelihood that Jews excelled in sports, as quixotic as it might seem at first glance, is too enticing and titillating. After all, what can be more intriguing than the proposition that, contrary to the commonly held belief, there was a time when Jews were not only “accountants” but a dominant force in various sports—and God forbid, even in boxing! It seems almost inevitable that sooner or later a few “sentimental” observers would divulge some of the little dirty secrets of Jewish successes in basketball, boxing, fencing, soccer, and other sports. And, indeed, we might look at the recent spate of books about Jews in sports, by scholars and novelists alike, as an acceptance and reaffirmation of Jewish participation in the world of sports—and not only as owners of professional franchises. Its study, albeit very slowly, finally is becoming a little bit more in vogue.

One hopes to assume that part of the reason for this might be a new historicism that presents a more balanced view of Jewish society and its relationship with the surrounding world. However, it is more conceivable, if not on the intuitive at least on the analytical level, that this surge in rediscovering the Jewish past in sports might be attributed to the dreams, fantasies, and stories that play a vital role in the making of Jewish identities. It relates specifically to the increasingly shifting space of male Jewish identity in contemporary America. My second guess about a recent impetus for the somewhat reluctant acceptance of sport in Jewish intellectual thought is that it is rooted in a nostalgic view of a fast aging and fading community that finds and often romanticizes tough Jews everywhere: anti-Nazi partisans, gangsters, cowboys, athletes, the Mossad, and, of course, the Israeli military

On a side note, though, it’s interesting that somehow most books written about sport by Jews employ a connective tissue of autobiographical commentary,

nostalgic reflections, and personal impressions. In reading many of the narratives by Jewish scholars and novelists writing about sport, I get the impression that they want people to read their work all the way through, as if it were a novel—a sense of drama, nostalgia, and personal involvement. I also came to the tentative discovery that, with rare exceptions, good writers on sport in Jewish society, as few as they are, are mainstream historians who have eyes for the nuances of Jewish history. However, one of the tragic consequences of this historical preoccupation with the subject is that no truly interdisciplinary work has emerged, at least not one that could shed some light on Jewish participation in sports from integrated historical, sociological, cultural, and psychological perspectives. It has always puzzled me why such a universal social institution as sport has never really attracted a “unifying” theory. It is somewhat disconcerting because sport, by the nature of its universality and transnational quality, should be contemplated more scientifically and more scholarly and from a wholly interdisciplinary perspective.

The “conventional wisdom,” a phrase bordering on arrogance, would suggest that although Jews prescribe to a unique religious philosophy, which distinguishes them from other demographic groups, they share and use social institutions in a predictable manner, as everyone else in society. A particularly damaging piece of conventional wisdom is the belief that if a large number of people adhere to an entrenched opinion, it must be true. Even a most scientifically conducted and randomly administered survey would find the general view about Jewish participation in sports is that it is negligible and not worth dwelling upon. Underscoring this attitude, even a casual question about famous Olympic Jewish athletes might elicit only the name of Mark Spitz—and even that only after some hesitation. The names Agnes Keleti and Maria Gorochovskaia, who were among the most successful Olympic athletes of all time, would invariably elicit blank stares.¹¹

The Jewish Experience in a Comparative Ethnic Perspective

“History,” as Richard Holbrooke wrote recently, “is often made of seemingly disparate events whose true relationship to one another becomes apparent only after the fact.”¹² The range of the subject matter from the seven international authors represented in this issue is impressive. They describe the political, economic, social, and emotional dimensions of Jewish sport experiences, from the national-socialist, to the American-progressive, to the neutral Jewish, to the Marxist, and to the Zionist. Of course, in order to understand the evolution of various Jewish communities and their relationship to sport per se, the main factors governing Jewish history must be reconciled with another complex reality that rests on a given host country’s cultural and social memory. Thus, Jewish communities through the ages, their institutions, their socio-ethical value systems, and even Judaism itself with its infinite ethical nuances and sheer complexity were also forged by a given host nation’s cultural value system, its national aspirations and sensibilities, and definitely its relationship to sport. Granted, Jews possess all the essential ingredients of a viable ethnicity, which encompasses a common ancestry and history; a collective memory; a sense of peoplehood; a multiplicity of social, religious, and cultural institutions; and a distinctive cultural

value system clearly evident in language (Yiddish and Ladino), art, music, literature, and many other creative and aesthetic forms. As a general rule, Jews were willing to pay the price for societal acceptance and integration by adopting the host society's goals and cultural imperatives and priorities; absorbing and soaking up national attitudes, temperament, and mentalities along the way. This axiom is applicable not only to modern sport. Often, even the religious hierarchy had to yield to or accommodate the social dictates of various cultural influences. The willing adoption of Greek athletic customs by the Jewish intellectual elite during the Hellenistic period in ancient Israel well illustrates this point. Seventeen centuries later, during the Renaissance, Italian Jewry became equally obsessed with the game of tennis, forcing Rabbi Moses Provencalo, a leading religious authority of the time, to issue a rabbinical edict (*Responsa*) that regulated the widespread playing of tennis during the Sabbath while approving it fully for weekdays. Finally, in the 1890s, one of the leading rabbis of Vienna had to bow to Jewish nationalistic pressures and condone the practice of dueling by Jewish university students who, in order to uphold the honor of the often-humiliated Jewish community, challenged every anti-Semitic fraternity member.¹³

Thus, Jewish responsiveness to and participation in various sport movements, although not wholly unconditional, was a predictable and logical social pattern and often transcended social class dictates. In order to remain relevant to the national consciousness, they responded energetically to the dictates of societal forces, political pressures, and national aspirations. The fact, for example, that Jews became so prominent in sports in Hungary should not be considered a coincidence and should not be attributed solely to the fact that they constituted the virtual middle class in this country. It is also relevant that the Hungarians, as a junior partner in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, pursued their national aspirations with unprecedented zeal through sports. In this light, one should not be surprised that Hungary's first representative to the International Olympic Committee, and a personal friend of Pierre de Coubertin, was Dr. Ferenc Kemeny, a Jewish high school teacher of French. One way to bring home this axiom is to compare the Hungarian experience with that of Romanian Jewry, which, according to Robert Kaplan, "to a greater extent than in any other Eastern European country, formed the country's middle class practically by themselves."¹⁴ Because of the somewhat laggard social development of Romanian society, and because of its unique national mentality and culture, sport played a very minor role in Romania at the turn of the century. Correspondingly, we find a much lesser degree of Jewish preoccupation with sport in that Balkan country than in central Europe.

One of the unfortunate by-products of essential Jewish historicism is that sports history that impacted the Jewish community was written mainly from a Jewish vantage point. Yet, for a balanced and well-drawn picture one needs to look at it from a host-nation point of view as well. Also, one of the cardinal dictates of scholarship is to put the Jewish experience in a comparative context by asking the ultimate question: How were the Jewish sporting experiences similar, or digressive, or even unique, in comparison with other ethnic groups' experiences? My interest is in how the Jewish experience fits into the pattern of ethnicity and

what predictive validity it has for other people's histories. In other words, how much can we learn from the motivation, rationale, and achievements of Jewish athletes, individually and collectively, and how much might it be applicable to other ethnic or minority groups?

Inevitably, there are many similarities, though also some differences. As was indicated earlier, Jewish participation in sport was predicated on some internal—i.e., ethical-religious—guidelines as well as external socio-economic and political conditions. One of the immediate consequences of acculturation and assimilation was a paradigm called ethnic succession—a historical pattern of one group replacing another in occupations, education, employment, residence, and various social institutions—specifically sport. It was, and is, a familiar societal, cultural, and economic journey for all ethnic and emigrant groups. Similarly, ethnic succession provided Jews with a social mechanism that facilitated their ethnic evolution in every area of life, including sports and some unconventional ones such as crime and prostitution. For example, the Jewish reign in the ring neatly coincided with their emergence from the ghetto as well as their involvement with organized crime—the famed Murder Inc. in Brownsville, for example. Concomitantly, boxing became a ticket for Jewish entrance into and social ambitions within the universities in the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁵ Thus, their course of ethnic succession was reflected in the nature and extent of their sports involvement. The Olympic Games are an excellent gauge to ascertain ethnic succession as a historical process. The first three decades of the 20th century are marked by Jewish victories in boxing, wrestling, and fencing (especially from Central Europe). However, by the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, basketball came to the fore. The main contender to represent the United States was a Long Island University team that was two-thirds Jewish. The Long Island team refused to participate. Additionally, the 1940s and 1950s saw the founding of Jewish golf clubs as a direct consequence of Jewish prosperity following the Second World War, and a response to anti-Semitic policies that excluded them from country clubs. In this light, we need not linger over the fact that by 1972 Mark Spitz was able to capture gold medals in swimming. Kerri Strug did the same in gymnastics in 1996. This signifies the fact that the Jewish community reached a point where gymnastics, swimming, and other “country club” sports accurately reflected their socio-economic and political clout.¹⁶

Like all social mechanisms, however, ethnic succession is not a seamless process. The interesting thing that clearly differentiates Jews from other ethnic or religious groups is their perception of the physical and its relationship to the spiritual—relating the former and extolling the latter. Jews have always viewed sports participation as a means for achieving something else—gaining social status or scholarships to universities, or going into business—not an end in itself. Another glaring difference was that while other ethnic groups developed entire sporting families (just like in case of crime, crime families), second generation Jews almost never followed their fathers into the ring or, for that matter, into the mob. That is to say, Jews went through some phases of ethnic succession in sports at a much more accelerated rate and pace, largely attributable to their unshakable belief in education as a chief means for social mobility, than other ethnic minorities.

Although it might sound a little nostalgic, a curious parallel can be drawn here with crime. For example, the notorious gangster Meyer Lansky might have been the head of Murder Inc., yet his children all finished college—one son graduating from West Point. This can rarely be said for the families of Italian mobsters.¹⁷

Another very predictable process, characteristic to all ethnic and minority groups, was the establishment of “parallel institutions” as a response to blatant discrimination and exclusionary policies. Jews, for example, established the Young Men’s (Women’s) Hebrew Association, which later transformed itself into an entire network of Jewish Community Centers—just like African Americans were forced to establish “colored” YMCAs in the South. In America, and to a lesser degree in Australia, parallel to and mirroring Gentile institutions, all-Jewish golf clubs, country clubs, and basketball leagues came into existence in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. In Central Europe, where golf and country clubs were not as prevalent, student dueling fraternities attracted the attention of the Jewish community. Similarly, with the economic ascendance of Central European Jewry, Jewish clubs in rowing, the most prestigious of middle and upper middle class sport, became common in Berlin, Vienna, and Budapest.

This brings forward a unique and salient issue, which has not been adequately dealt with by comparative ethnic research: the relationship of gender and sport as a function of the ethno-subcultural value system and its mainstream societal perception by a given host country and society. To build a practical paradigm relating to the Jewish female experience, let us visualize, for a moment, two concentric circles: one being a woman in a patriarchal society and the other being a Jew in a Christian society. Albeit woefully inadequately documented by social scientists, the fact that the role assigned to women and their potential freedom of action within the Jewish community drastically differed from other subgroups and cultures or society at large is at least recognized on the instinctual level. Nevertheless, the three articles dealing with Jewish women’s experiences in sports aptly demonstrate the national differences among women’s sport in general in America, Canada, and Germany. They bring also a proof of similarity, in that within the ethical dynamics of the Jewish family, the role of women (wives and daughters) has always been radically different than in other ethnic cultures. While in other cultures such as Italian, where the old village aphorism “never educate your children beyond yourself” prevailed, within Jewish families even girls have traditionally been pushed to excel and surpass their fathers.¹⁸ On the other hand, societal pressures, manifested by economic conditions, by anti-Semitism, and by various political ideologies ranging from Nazism to Marxism to Zionism dictated and determined unalterably Jewish attitudes toward and participation in sports.

Epilogue

Although the seven articles included in this anniversary issue present a wide spectrum of Jewish experiences of the past hundred years, they don’t tell the whole story, The range of Jewish history is too immense to be able to accomplish this. Nonetheless, they contain some pivotal events, like the controversy of the Nazi

Olympic Games of 1936 and the story of the Canadian athlete Fanny Rosenfeld, and some lesser known episodes, like the creation of a Marxist-leaning Morgnshtern in Poland, the diverging roads traveled by Jewish women in America, Germany, and Canada, and Jewish sport organizations in the Netherlands and Australia. Thus, this issue at least succeeds in demolishing some of the myths of a “uniform” Jewish history or culture. Sport, as a subculture, is a good medium to do that. And, maybe, a unified history of Jews in sports will never be written for this reason.

I view this issue not as a definitive answer but only as a pathway to a more in-depth and serious examination of Jewish participation in sports. While it might sound like a cliché, in the hidden nooks and crevices of Jewish history there are still many nuggets that need to be found, uncovered, and polished to a shine.

Although there are unavoidable thematic and methodological differences within these seven narratives, there are also many similarities. One is tempted to accept, albeit reluctantly, the new historicism approaches that “categories and values of any human group are a function of their time, the localized product of contingent circumstances.”¹⁹ Indeed, Jewish sports participation depended heavily on a host country’s culture, economic advancement, religion, and ideological foundations. However, Jewish history instinctively proves also that this social version of Heisenberg’s scientific paradox, the uncertainty principle, is not completely true. The last three millennia provide ample evidence of the indestructibility of a “Jewish identity” that rested equally on commonly shared religious beliefs and value system and on external conditions. The examination of the complex relationship between the world of sport and Jewish life and culture through the past century reveals the intersection of complex psychological, economic, and societal perspectives with an irretrievable transformation from a traditional-orthodox to an ethno-cultural based Judaism. Thus, they incorporate the five interlocking and perpetually oscillating principles governing Jewish attitudes toward sport participation. They reflect, to some degree, trends that also shaped Jewish history and society in modern times: (1) Judaic theology, (2) anti-Semitism, (3) emancipation, (4) assimilation-integration, and (5) the Jewish labor movement and Zionism.

Although these five principles do not influence Jewish sports participation uniformly around the world—there are definite variations from country to country—they make Jewish sporting experiences unique. Indeed, I can find very few aspects in common between sport in Palestine of the interwar period and, arbitrarily, that of the Jewish community in the Netherlands, Hungary, or America. But, then, very rarely do two groups’ histories and socio-cultural evolution conveniently overlap. Nonetheless, these experiences have a predictive power that provides us with the ability to draw some parallels, not only between diverse Jewish communities but with the African American, Hispanic, Italian, and Irish, just to mention a few, communities. It is not hard to admit that this special issue, with all its scholarship, will not be correct in everything or be accurate in every detail— from both a Jewish as well as a sport historical point of view. In fact, I find the most important attribute of this issue in the truism that it gives some answers and raises many questions. In many ways, the most desirable consequence

of this anniversary issue might be a spin-off of scholarly arguments, heated discussions, and hopefully an avalanche of articles and books about the hitherto uncharted territory of Jewish experiences in sport.

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1. This essay is based, in some degree, on my article, "Jewish History and the Ideology of Modern Sport: Approaches and Interpretations," *Journal of Sport History* 25 (fall 1998): 482-531.
 2. Allen Bodner, *When Boxing Was a Jewish Sport* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997); Murry Nelson, "Two Paths to Jewish Professional Basketball-Separatism and Assimilation," paper delivered in *Community and Nation: 100 Years of Jewish Sport*, Berlin, October 20-23, 1998; Lajos Szabo, "The Reason of the World-wide Success of Hungarian Jewish Sportsmen," paper delivered in *Community and Nation: 100 Years of Jewish Sport*, Berlin, October 20-23, 1998.
 3. Allen Guttmann, *From Ritual to Record, the Nature of Modern Sport* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).
 4. I had a chance to get involved in a short discussion with colleagues on the Internet about the origin and role of the dreidl during Chanukah. It was indeed a disappointingly short discussion, because beyond the rules of the game, no theories were ever brought up about why there is such a lack of Jewish ethnic folk games in Jewish history or culture.
 5. My problem here is that a mindless list of "Jewish" athletes will not reflect their generic bond with their community. George Eisen, "Some Historiographical Problems in Writing the Sport History of the Jewish Culture," in Uriel Simri, ed., *Proceedings of the Society on the History of Physical Education and Sport in Asia and the Pacific Area* (Netanya, Israel: Wingate Institute, 1977), 21.
 6. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, trans. George J. Becker (New York: Schocken Books, 1995).
 7. An interesting situation arose in the medal ceremonies during the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin. The three medalists on the winners' stand were all half Jewish: Ilona Elek (gold), Helena Mayer (silver), and Ellen Preis (bronze). None of them considered herself or was brought up Jewish.
 8. Quoted by Sander L. Gilman, *Smart Jews: The Construction of the Image of Jewish Superior Intelligence* (Lincoln, Nebr.: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 120.
 9. Manuel Schnitzler, *Das Buch der jüdischen Witz* (Berlin: n.p., 1907), 9.
 10. Sander L. Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 4-5. See also Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), 27.
 11. Agnes Keleti from Hungary and Maria Goročovskaia from the Soviet Union represented their countries in the gymnastic competitions in the Helsinki (1952) and Melbourne (1956) Olympic Games. The two amassed between them seven gold, eight silver, and two bronze medals. Keleti defected from the Hungarian team and immigrated to Israel, becoming the national coach. Goročovskaia hid her Jewishness until arriving in Israel in the late 1980s.
 12. Quoted in the *New York Review of Books* 45, no. 16 (October 22, 1998): 76.
 13. Robert W. Henderson, "Moses Provençal on Tennis," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 26 (July 1935): 1-6. Yitzhak Rivkind, "Teshuvat Harav Moshe Proventzalo al Mishak Hakadur," *Tarbitz* 4 (1933): 366-76. Uriel Simri, "The Responsa of Rabbi Moses Provençal about the Game of Tennis on Sabbath," in Uriel Simri, ed., *The Proceedings of an International Seminar on Physical Education and Sport in the Jewish History and Culture* (Netanya, Israel: Wingate Institute, 1973). Julius H. Schoeps, "Modern Heirs of the Maccabees: The Beginnings of the Vienna Kadimah, 1882-1897," *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 27 (1982).

14. Robert D. Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts, a Journey through History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 88.
15. Steven A. Riess, "A Fighting Chance: The Jewish-American Boxing Experience, 1890-1940," *Journal of American Jewish History* 74 (March 1985): 211-254. Peter Levine, "'Oy Such a Fighter!' Boxing and the American Jewish Experience," in S. W. Pope, ed., *The New American Sport History* (Champaign, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1996).
16. George Eisen, "Ethnicity and Social Class: Historical Trends in American Sport," in J. A. Mangan, ed., *Proceedings of the HISPA International Congress 1985*: 12-37. The most delightful account about the emergence of the Jewish country club was written by Peter Levine, "The American Hebrew Looks at 'Our Crowd': The Jewish Country Club in the 1920s," *The Journal of American Jewish History* 83, no. 1 (1995): 27-49.
17. One of the lesser known sagas of sport history is the extensive Jewish involvement in collegiate boxing in the United States. Interview with Hotsy Alperstein, October 7, 1996, Washington D.C. See again Bodner, *When Boxing Was a Jewish Sport*. For Jewish gangsters, and especially Meyer Lansky, see Rich Cohen, *Tough Jews: Fathers, Sons, and Gangster Dreams* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998). Gerald Sorin, *The Nurturing Neighborhood, the Brownsville Boys Club and Jewish Community in Urban America, 1940-1990* (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 25-27.
18. Maurie Sacks, ed., *Active Voices: Women in Jewish Culture* (Champaign, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1995); Joyce Antler, *The Journey Home: How Jewish Women Shaped Modern America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1998); Riv-Ellen Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans: Jews, Gender and the Anxiety of Assimilation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999). See also George Eisen, "Sport and Gender: Jewish Immigrant Women in the Turn of the Century America: 1880-1920," *Journal of Sport History* 18 (1991): 103-120.
19. Quoted by John Bayley, "What Follies and Paradoxes!" *New York Review of Books* 45 (November 19, 1998), 37.