

Muscular Judaism and the Jewish Rugby League Competition in Sydney, 1924 to 1927

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The existence of a Jewish rugby league competition in Sydney in the 1920s is an interesting and little-known phenomenon. I discovered its existence when looking for the origins of Jewish soccer in Sydney discovering that this rugby league competition preceded the Jewish adoption of the round ball code by at least a couple of seasons. The Jewish rugby league competition, conducted under the auspices of the Maccabean Hall, was restricted to Jewish teams and lasted only three seasons.

This brief Jewish flirtation with rugby league raises a number of particular issues about Jewish sport but also some wider questions about ethnic sport in the 1920s. Who organised the Jewish rugby league? Why was this code chosen? Why was an ethnically-exclusive competition established? Why did some Jews choose to play in this competition rather than in local, ethnically-mixed competition? Why did the Jewish rugby league competition fail? What does this episode reveal about the Jewish community's use of sport in the 1920s and about ethnic sport in the 1920s?

Muscular Judaism

The emergence of organised community sport in the Jewish diaspora and in Sydney in the 1920s was substantially influenced by the philosophy of *Muskeljudentum* (Muscular Judaism). After the second Zionist congress at Basle in Switzerland in 1898, some prominent Zionists advocated that benefits would be gained by developing a Jewish equivalent of Muscular Christianity. Max Nordau gave birth to this idea when he declared at Basle that 'we must aspire to create again a *Muskeljudentum*'.¹ Nordau contended that sport was the key to breaking down the stereotype of the Jew as weak and water-shy.

The first Jewish *Turnverine*² was formed in Berlin in 1898 and by 1904 twelve other groups had sprung up around Germany. It was a

product of Nordau's philosophy, the popularity of the gymnastic movement in Germany and the subsequent exclusion of Jews from gymnastic clubs. The new movement produced its own journal, *Judische Turnzeitung*,³ which argued that Muscular Judaism could both strengthen the Jewish community and enable it to confront anti-Semitism. It contended that:

We want to restore to the flabby Jewish body its lost tone, to make it vigorous and strong, nimble and powerful. We want this, however, in a Jewish *Verein* [sports club], so that we strengthen in it at the same time the disappearing feeling of cohesiveness and elevate (our) sinking self-consciousness. We want to restore value and honour to the old Jewish ideals for which our youth appear to have lost understanding almost completely. Courageously and with energy we want to confront anti-Semitism, which indeed has today laid aside its uproarious form but has gained intensity. We want to foster a noble national feeling which is free from all vanity and by no means (do we) exclude work for mankind as a whole. Openly, before the whole world, we acknowledge our nationality, to which we preserve loyalty, as we conscientiously and faithfully fulfil our civil duties.⁴

The idea of forming Jewish sports clubs in Europe was inextricably linked to political Zionism. It was a conscious effort to promote the idea that Jews were different only in terms of their religion. Jewish gymnastic clubs soon spread throughout Europe, the famous Hakoah Wien being formed in Vienna in 1909. By 1913 there were twenty-nine clubs in Europe with a membership of 4500.⁵ As a result of this upsurge of sporting activities, the 13th Zionist Congress, at Carlsbad in 1921, formed the World Maccabi Union. The Union's aims were clearly defined: 'To foster physical education, the belief in the Jewish heritage and the Jewish nation and to work actively for the rebuilding of our own country and for the preservation of our people'.⁶

The choice of the title Maccabi hearkened back to the legendary biblical Jewish patriots who fought against the Syrian invaders of Israel in 168 BC and 'pointed to a continued sense of unshakeable commitment to Zionism among the Jewish people'.⁷ Mike Ticher maintained that *Muskeljudentum* resulted from specifically Zionist thinking on the utility of participation in sport amongst Jews: This was the entirely practical desire to prepare young Jews physically for the hard manual labour

which they would be required to undertake following emigration to Palastine'.⁸

Jewish Sport in Australia

Jewish amateur sport had been conducted in New South Wales from the 1880s and by 1912 there were six Jewish sporting organisations in Sydney. Jewish clubs pursued sports, such as athletics, cricket, tennis and swimming, which were popular in the wider community because the majority of Australian Jews viewed themselves in Anglo-Australian terms. This occurred in part because Jews were a tiny minority: the Jewish population in New South Wales was only 10 150 in 1921.⁹

The opening of the Maccabean Hall on 11 November 1923 and the creation of the Maccabean Sports Union stimulated the growth of Jewish sport in the 1920s. The Maccabean Hall (also known as the Jewish War Memorial) was opened in Darlinghurst Road Sydney by the prominent figure Sir John Monash with great fanfare.¹⁰ It was built as a memorial to those Australian Jews who had served in World War I—an affirmation of the solidarity of the Anglo-Jewish establishment with Australia and the British Empire. The purpose of the Hall was to centralise social, educational and sporting interests of the community and to also assist with the integration of Jewish immigrants.¹¹ In his opening speech Monash elaborated the role of the Maccabean Hall:

it has a symbolic purpose, for behind it has the aim of keeping the Jewish people together and preserving the creed, perpetuating the faith; it is to prevent the regrettable drift that is making many of our people cease from owing allegiance to the religion of their father's.¹²

The opening of the Maccabean Hall helped stimulate community sport along the lines of *Muskeljudentum*. While there was a division among Australian Jews over the issue of Zionism, most saw the benefit of involving young people in organised sport.

By the 1920s the notion of a physically-active Jewry had filtered through to Australia though *Muskeljudentum* was adapted to suit the ideals of Australian Jews. In Australia, unlike Europe, many Jewish leaders sought a form of limited assimilation, maintaining the integrity of their culture while retaining a harmonious relationship with wider society. They wished to avoid accusations of forming an undesirable social subgroup. There was also a fear that extended Jewish organisations

might lead to an upsurge in anti-Semitism, a problem which had been minimal for Australian Jewry. Sir Isaac Isaacs, one of the most prominent of Australian-born Jews, was vehemently opposed to Zionism for this reason. His biographer, Sir Zelman Cowen, recounted nothing was more calculated to provoke his subject to anger than any suggestion of tension between Jewishness and Britishness. Isaacs was insistent that Jewishness was a matter of religion, not of race or nationality.¹³ This denial of ethnic distinctiveness was common amongst Australian Jews in the 1920s.

However, sport was viewed as useful for the Jewish community in the 1920s in that it promoted the idea of the healthy body, through Muscular Judaism, thereby re-focusing the social intercourse of the community's youth. Australian Maccabi historian Brian Kino suggested that intermarriage was a major concern for Australian Jewry in the 1920s and that Jewish elders viewed sporting clubs as a means of countering intermarriage.¹⁴ Sport, then, was used as a defensive mechanism, a means of placing some limits on the ethos of assimilation. It was also an attempt to consolidate an Australian Jewish culture within the boundaries of Anglo-Australian society.

There was an inherent tension between the need for acculturation and the desire to maintain an ethnic identity. While 'ethnic self-distinctiveness' was viewed by many as undesirable, the maintenance of a community based on its religiosity led to the definition of the community in ethnic terms. This ethnicity was enhanced by the emergence of a vibrant sports movement from the 1920s.¹⁵ Susanne Rutland outlined the background which produced this contradiction:

assimilation, meaning both acculturation to Australian ways and the disintegration of ethnic distinctiveness, was one of the dominant features of Australian Jewry before 1933. Jews felt at home with the predominant cultural habits of dress, language and behaviour of the majority gentile community, and outwardly became the same as their neighbours. At the same time, the community risked the loss of structural separateness in its primary relationship, which included family, friends, and social clubs. Once structural assimilation occurs, this tends to lead to marriage outside the community, resulting in the eventual disappearance of the ethnic group.¹⁶

The establishment of the interstate Maccabi Games in 1924 flowed enhanced social mixing within the Jewish community. The idea of

‘romance in the evening’ was heavily promoted in games literature¹⁷ as was the suggestion that involvement in sport facilitated socialising. Kino has suggested that the social side of the games was given as much emphasis as the sporting. This perspective is confirmed by Rutland:

the limitations of the synagogue were realised by communal leaders who believed that the establishment of communal centres and the fostering of sporting and social activities for young people would provide a rallying point for the unaffiliated and so help reduce the rising intermarriage rates.¹⁸

While the immediate rationale behind the building of the Maccabean Hall was the desire to commemorate the deeds of Australian Jewish servicemen, in practice the memorial aimed to heighten the awareness of the Jewish community. By building a community-centred memorial Sydney Jewry could at once demonstrate their loyalty to Ring and country and at the same time provide a focus for Muscular Judaism.

The establishment of the Maccabean Hall provided the headquarters for the myriad of Jewish sporting and social activities that sprouted in Sydney during this period. While religion clearly defined a sense of peoplehood for Australian Jews which set them apart from other Australians, differences were minimised by adopting Australian modes of dress, manners and behaviour. Rutland has argued that this represented a quest for group invisibility.

This invisibility was being threatened in the 1920s by an influx of Yiddish-speaking migrants fleeing from persecution in Eastern Europe. While the arrival of these migrants was feared by some Anglo-Australian Jews, their arrival, according to Rutland, was an important factor in maintaining the viability of Australian Jewry.¹⁹ Though restrictions were placed on the entry of Eastern European Jews in 1928,²⁰ their impact on Jewish culture in Australia was vital and a precursor to the influence migrants and refugees would have on the community after 1934.²¹ The arrival of ‘new’ Jews acted along with a changing awareness of Jewishness, fostered by an increasing interest in Zionism, led to a new identity for Australian Jewry.

The Jewish Rugby League

The first mention of a Jewish rugby league competition occurred on 18 April 1924, six months after the opening of the Maccabean Hall. The

notice, under the heading 'Football', read: 'Institute members desirous of playing under the "Rugby League" code are invited to attend a meeting at the Hall next Sunday evening at 7 pm to discuss the formation of a Football section'.²² The rules under which any Maccabean sporting competition were to be played were clearly defined under the heading, 'members who wish to form a section'. Each sport was administered as a section or unit of the greater sporting body overseen by the Maccabean Union.

The enthusiasm of the organisers was not wasted. On 4 May 1924 the first rugby league match between Jewish teams took place in Moore Park. It was a friendly played between The Maccabean Sports and Athletic Club (MSAC) and the Young Persons Hebrew Association (YPHA). The match was won by the latter by 21-0. The stars of the game were A Davis who 'shows a splendid ability as a centre three-quarter possessing a fine swervy run' and D Marks a five-eighth who 'is a hard tackler and also makes use of a strong fend to ward off his opponents'.²³ The success of this match served to fuel an early enthusiasm and it was decided to begin a competition by 18 May which it was hoped to begin with five teams. The Maccabi looked like fielding two teams, YPHA, Jewish Amateur Athletic Association (JAAA) and the Randwick Coogee Social club. However, the unavailability of Moore Park meant that the competition finally got under way on 1 June 1924 with four teams—Randwick-Coogee being absent. The event was hailed in the Jewish press:

Jewish sporting history was made last Sunday when the interclub football competition made a sensational beginning. It was an echo of the great athletic meeting of last January and the greater swimming carnival of February, only the echo was louder and more thrilling. Play throughout was brilliant and was a delightful treat to spectators while the results of both matches were remarkable.²⁴

The prime mover behind the Jewish adoption of rugby league was Alex Brodsky, a prominent Jewish sportsman, aided by his brother Isadore.²⁵ Alex Brodsky was a fine rugby league and champion billiard player and an athlete who represented NSW in the 100 meters at the Maccabi Games. He later became manager of the NSW Maccabi team at the interstate Maccabi Games. Alex Brodsky was assisted in the institution of the league by L J Toffler, general secretary of the Maccabi Sports

governing body. By all accounts Alex Brodsky was a talented secretary and it was the League's loss when he decided to step down at the end of this first season and was replaced by his brother. This occurred partly because of work commitments but also because of decision to concentrate on athletics and the interstate Maccabi carnivals.

The particular reasons for the founding of the Jewish Rugby League competition can only be inferred from newspaper reports. The disproportionate coverage given to rugby league in the *Hebrew Standard* can be attributed to the general popularity of rugby league in Sydney and reflects accurately the way the NSW Rugby League was reported in the popular press in comparison to other sports. By the 1920s rugby league was well established in Sydney, as the pre-eminent winter sport. The sport had established itself in government and many Catholic schools though rugby union was the preferred winter sport of most private schools. Myer Rosenblum²⁶ has suggested that rugby league was by far the most popular of the two codes in the 1920s, especially in the Eastern Suburbs where the Jewish competition was centred.²⁷ Eastern Suburbs and South Sydney were clubs which were very strong during this era, no doubt reinforcing the popularity of the code in the area.

The creation of the Jewish Rugby League competition may also reflect the hope of its leaders that providing younger Jews with access to a game that loomed so large in the popular consciousness was as good a tool as any in promoting social intercourse. Myer Rosenblum stated that the whole point of the Maccabean Hall, the Sports Union and the rugby league competition was to provide a point of contact for Jewish youth.²⁸ This may have been the primary reason why Jewish teams competed against each other rather than outside the community.²⁹ Great emphasis was placed on after-match activity back at the Maccabean Hall and in the press the extent and content of coverage suggests that the competition was being promoted as a spectacle which could attract spectators. Undoubtedly a prime objective in encouraging sport in the Jewish community was to promote social intercourse and marriage within the confines of the community. Playing football extended the social calendar of young Jews and was linked with other forms of social intercourse. For example when the Combined Association of Jewish Football Clubs held a dance in the Maccabean Hall to raise funds for football the event was being given from two columns to a full page in the Jewish press.

The emphasis on 'manliness' was another facet of newspaper

reports on Jewish football and drew on Nordau's philosophy of using sport to fashion muscular Jews. By participating in one of the most masculine sports, which involved violence and body contact, Jews were proving themselves on the toughest sporting battlefield. One of the writers in the Jewish press, 'Javelin', commented that 'as a winter pastime Rugby League is regarded by Red Blooded young men as second to none'.³⁰ The idea of 'rugger' as a masculine sport had been advanced before the Jewish rugby league competition had been established:

It is indeed unfortunate that the JAAA [Jewish Amateur Athletic Association] are not placing a rugger team in the field. They are only a young club, the majority of their members being of slight stature and as rugby calls for a deal in the way of weight, their decision is perhaps best.³¹

Once the Jewish rugby league competition had begun there was a conscious attempt on the part of the Hebrew Standard sports writer, 'Segok', to promote some players as tough local heroes:

Fools rush in where angels fear to tread. Ab Davis is no fool on the football field but when the face and fame of the Mac's fullback looms in front of anyone, who wouldn't drop the ball. When David Marks junior tackles a man on the football field, he gives him a shaking reception. He just gathers him caressingly in his long arms and shakes him and it's either the man's life or the ball.³²

The article went on to suggest that the JAAA had a good soccer team which was seeking games. This is the first evidence of an interest in Soccer in the community. It appears the JAAA were unsuccessful in attracting opposition and for the time being rugby league held sway as the preferred winter sport for Jewish young men in Sydney.

The Competition

Four teams competed in the 1924 competition: the Maccabi Institute, Maccabean Sports and Athletic Club (MSAC), Judean Social Sports Club (JSSC), and the Young Persons Hebrew Association (YPHA). At the end of the 1924 season the champions were the Maccabi Institute.³³ They had been the most consistent team during the short season losing only one game. Meanwhile earlier in the season a Possibles versus Probables game had been played to select a team to play against the Undergraduates

of Sydney University. In the event the Combined team defeated the undergrads by 18-8. The standard of play was high and at least one player with first grade premiership experience, Issey Sender, played for the undergraduates. 'Segok' reported:

The men from the different faculties didn't seem to mix well. In the front row alone, there were two dashing medicos, a gentle student of arts, an argumentative law student and a rotund greaser the last two of whom used their weight effectively.³⁴

In the following season the students entered a team in the regular competition. The annual report of the Jewish War Memorial noted that 'satisfactory progress is recorded in the establishment of sectional activities catering for the physical and intellectual development of members'.³⁵ The activities of the sports section had the stamp of approval after one year of activity. No doubt the Jewish Rugby League contributed a good deal to this success in 1924.

The Jewish Rugby League competition was promoted with great enthusiasm by 'Segok' who early in the season appealed for both male and female supporters:

Barrackers are wanted for the football matches, particularly the fair barrackers, for it is hardly creditable how much their presence acts in the way of a reviving spirit and influence. Don't forget the football dance in the Maccabean Hall on July 2. Its going to be a grand affair with your support. We (the NSW Jewish Football Association) need your money.

While the football dance attracted 200 'Segok' urged greater activity from the organisers of the four clubs: 'Rally round the club. The football competition is nearing its finale, still enthusiasm is deplorably lacking in players'.³⁶ A lack of player enthusiasm was to become a constant theme over the next three years as the competition struggled to maintain itself.

Before the start of the 1925 season the Hebrew Standard decried the apathy of Jewish rugby league players:

Footballers wake up! It is only through your own apathy that a competition has not been arranged. A board meeting of the Jewish Rugby League called for recently was cancelled because of the non-attendance of delegates.

At Coogee there is a lot of small talk about forming a team.

Why not send delegates to the board meetings. The premiers of 1924 are ready, but they cannot make a comp on their own.

Co-operation is needed-let all clubs take note. On Tuesday the 28th April the board will meet positively for the last time. All clubs are again invited. The place of meeting is the Maccabean Hall. Wake up! Wake Up!³⁷

Despite this apathy, journalists such as *Wing Forward* attempted to promote an interest in the competition:

Keen Jewish footballers are like good diamonds. Hard to find. This sentence aptly sums up the position. Although a blackboard lecture was announced in these columns in the previous issue only four enthusiasts in the persons of Messrs Kline, Sender, and the Brodsky twins were present. That efficient referee Mr G Wirth who so ably officiated last year strongly depreciated the apathetic attitude of our footballers and expresses the hope that players will turn out early on Sunday morning when he will deliver a short address on the fundamental principles of the game.³⁸

When the 1925 competition began on 31 May there were two new teams, Randwick-Coogee and Sydney University but only two teams, Maccabean Institute and Judeans, survived from the four that played in the 1924 competition.

The two new teams proved a big disappointment to the organisers, once again emphasising the difficulty of fielding league teams week in week out from a small base-in the mid-1920s there were just over twenty Jewish undergraduates at Sydney University.³⁹ The performance of the established teams was not much better. The premiers could only field eleven men for their first match yet defeated Randwick-Coogee by 11-2. As the weeks went by teams had more trouble fielding full sides or starting games on time when players turned up late. On Sunday, 21 June, only sixteen players representing four clubs bothered to turn up in wet conditions. The only Randwick-Coogee player to appear was its captain, Abby Davis. *Wing Forward* castigated the absent players:

Are our players afraid of mud? The majority of footballers preferred their warm beds, but sixteen players, representing four clubs, turned out, and indulged in a very scraggy bung rules game. Expressions of disapproval were in evidence and the fine weather players will be in for a hot time this

Sunday. It is very disappointing to postpone matches, as footballers should be prepared for all sorts of weather.⁴⁰

Clearly the enthusiasm for the game was conditional on the part of the players and the ability of the league to impose sanctions on players was non-existent because of the scarcity of numbers. Despite such setbacks, the competition finished with Judeans being the undefeated champions with I Cohen and L Cohen the stars for the team. Once again a Possibles versus Probables game was held to select a representative team but, as 'Wing Forward' noted, a number of selected players did not appear:

Of the twenty-six players selected for the Possibles versus Probables fixture, only nineteen were available, and the services of four reserves had to be requested. This still left a shortage of three men [for each side] and consequently both teams had to take the field with depleted teams. The action of the absentees is to be strongly depreciated and I hope that the Rugby Board will debar them from future representative matches.⁴¹

However, there was no representative fixture in 1925 because it clashed with the Maccabi tennis tournament, again highlighting the problem of lack of numbers to sustain a viable Jewish league competition.

Despite the problems with numbers during the previous season the 1926 season was keenly anticipated in the Jewish press. 'Wing Forward' wrote that 'in a few weeks time, football will be in full swing and some stirring games should be witnessed'.⁴² The 1925 premiers, Judeans, disbanded but a new team bearing the same name took their place. The Maccabi Institute participated in the competition but Randwick-Coogee did not. Sydney University entered a team, renamed Undergrads, though by the time the competition began they were unable to field a side. The Jewish students of Sydney University received stinging criticism in the community press:

The Undergrads seem to be the worst offenders in this respect...It is to be deeply regretted that the members of our faith who are up at the Varsity should exhibit such deplorable apathy, and it is quite on the cards that this team will be conspicuous by its absence.⁴³

They received further criticism when the team pulled out of the league:

As forecast in these columns last week, the nomination of the University team for the Lieberman Cup has been

withdrawn. This attitude is indeed typical of the spirit which permeates the atmosphere of the University. Perhaps it is just as well for the other teams, as poor sportsmen are entirely unnecessary in the realm of true sport.⁴⁴

With the introduction of a new club, Harris Hall, there were only three teams when the competition began even though the Board of the League had redoubled its efforts to make the competition more attractive to potential players. The patron of the Maccabi sports section of the Maccabean Institute, M A Lieberman, donated a cup to be presented annually to the winners of the league. In addition a medal was struck, the De Groen medal, to be awarded to the season's highest points scorer. However, the medal was later withdrawn, the Jewish league deciding to conform to a policy of the NSW Rugby League:

that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery is exemplified by the wise decision of the officials of our competition to withdraw the De Groen medal which was to be awarded to the highest point scorer in the competition thus following the good example of the NSW Rugby League, who recently refused an offer from The Sun Newspaper Ltd to present £25 to the winner of the point score and the most consistent player in the competition. This is a very laudable view, as by encouraging the players with valuable prizes, it makes them very greedy when in possession of the ball to the detriment of the team.⁴⁵

Although no official link with the NSW Rugby League (NSWRL) and the Jewish Rugby League has been discovered the Jewish league organisers were mindful of changes in the game. Rule changes concerning the play the ball area and the introduction of replacement footballs adopted by the NSWRL in 1925 were publicised in the Jewish press and lectures were given by referees to acquaint players with the changes.

When the competition began on 23 May 1926 it was immediately evident that it was in trouble. The only fixture on that day in a three-team league was played between depleted teams: Harris Hall managed to field seven players while the Institute fielded ten. Wing Forward' was scathing in his criticism:

What is the matter with our young sportsmen? Do not let it be said that they are lazy. Without fear of contradiction it is maintained that a game of football on Sunday morning is undoubtedly the finest method of stimulating the blood.

Now then you young men don't be a lot of cake eaters. Stir up that sluggish liver and help to make the competition a success.⁴⁶

However, this attack on their masculinity did not stir players from their beds on subsequent Sunday mornings when bad weather further dampened player enthusiasm.

About this time soccer begins to emerge as a serious alternative to rugby league and is mentioned several times in the Jewish press. An MJSC team organised a friendly game with the Balmain Waratahs but the latter team did not turn up. There was newspaper talk of a game between MJSC and JAAA, and a competition was mooted.⁴⁷ From this time on rugby league fought a losing battle with soccer to gain the support of Jewish players.

In the return rugby league match between the Institute and Harris Hall on 13 June, the latter team failed to appear. When the competition ended on 27 June most matches had been played with below-strength teams. An exception to this was the last game of the season between Judeans and Institute when both clubs fielding full sides. 'Javelin' commented that although the standard of football had improved over three years 'footballers continue to exhibit what appears to be a characteristic trait of apathy'.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, with characteristic optimism the Jewish press looked forward to a season 'replete with thrills' in 1927. However, the Institute crowned premiers for the second time in 1926, were the last champions of the Jewish Rugby League. As in previous seasons a representative team was chosen and they played the erratic Undergrads of Sydney University. True to form only eight students appeared and a replacement game against Eastern Suburbs third grade was hastily arranged. The combined side won this match 15-5 indicating the calibre of the Jewish players. Following this success a game was arranged against Railways with the combined side again winning, 14-12.

These forays against local junior league sides teams serve to demonstrate that a Jewish team might have competed in local competition successfully. The few friendly games played in 1926 and 1927 against non-Jewish teams gave the good players a chance to test themselves against strong opposition.

If *Muskeljudentum* as a philosophy influenced Jewish sporting organisation it did so in terms of engendering an athletic spirit and in the

case of rugby league the idea of expressing masculinity through participation in a robust game. It drew on the positive aspects of the 'healthy mind, healthy body' ethos aiming to reinvigorate youth. It was used as a defensive mechanism within this group to reinforce a sense of ethnicity. The Jewish leaders were striving for a balance between asserting their own ethnic identity and acculturation. Occasional friendly games did not disrupt this aim in the way that competing weekly as a 'Jewish' team in a robust sport may have. The team would have been institutionalised as the 'Jewish' team—as Hakoah Soccer Club⁴⁹ became in the post World War II era—in an essentially tribal environment.

The Death of the Jewish Rugby League

Following the success of these friendly games a knockout competition was organised, but it was never played. *Wing Forward* commented on the state of Jewish rugby league at the end of the 1926 season:

Football is dead. Long live cricket.

The foregoing phrase aptly summaries the position. On Sunday the knockout competition was due to commence, but the majority of players were conspicuous by their absence.

The great heat induced lassitude amongst those present with the result that a very slow game was indulged in.⁵⁰

The Board approached the 1927 season with its usual optimism and received good support from the Jewish press. The Lieberman Cup competition was well advertised and players were offered individual medals. Isadore Brodsky was installed as chairman and it was announced that the affiliation fee would be 7s 6d. The board clearly advertised its rules; matches were to commence at 10 am and each half was to last for thirty minutes with an interval of ten minutes. Each club had to nominate one member to act at the grounds. The games would be played at Moore Park at the Cleveland Street junction. In addition, a new set of longer goal posts was purchased. The expected teams were: Institute, Judeans, Randwick-Coogee and the Undergrads.⁵ In the ensuing weeks rugby league was given extra coverage in the Jewish press: there were articles on the rules and on player fitness. However, as the weeks went by the attendance to practice was small. *Javelin* was critical of the Undergrads:

To the casual onlooker, it seems the attempts to form an Undergrad's Rugby League team are of the milk and water variety. Just why this problem exists is one of the problems

of local sports. Over twenty Jewish young men attend the Varsity, and yet it is found difficult to find a team which only requires thirteen players. It is high time they showed a little of the Varsity spirit.⁵²

When the practice matches failed to draw players a match was played against the Evening News team by a Combined team and won by 18-11. Finally the Board gave up and the Rugby competition was abandoned. 'Javelin' castigated the Jewish rugby league players:

Footballers may come and footballers may go, but Jewish footballers go on forever—mm, yes—lying in bed.

Uppermost question in active sportsmen's minds is 'Are our Jewish young men (collectively) degenerating into a race of spineless jellyfish'?

Judging by the attendance at football last Sunday the answer is an emphatic yes!

For the past three weeks, the average attendance has been about sixteen—not enough for a pick and toss game.

Now the cake eaters policy of laziness has been definitely delineated and adopted, the Maccabean Sports Union has with apparent unwillingness, cancelled the competition for 1927. 'And that's that!'

And further: Local footballers have turned down the proposal of the MSU to provide 'Yellow Cabs' for their transport to the football ground, owing to the arrangements, in reference to morning tea and attendance of valets falling through.

And again: Sydney. Sunday—Jewish footballers today were granted affiliation to the 'Cake Eaters' and 'Lounge Lizards' association.⁵³

For the remainder of the winter of 1927 the Institute team organised social games against local opposition. In all they played three games against the Evening News, three against Fosseys and one with the much-maligned Undergrads. This arrangement was considered unsatisfactory by the *Hebrew Standard*:

This year after a flourish of trumpets that seemed likely to rekindle the old flame, the competition, which proved an undernourished baby compared to previous ones succumbed early. Matches against outside bodies were substituted, but

apart from the desire to win, all other aspects were conspicuous by their absence.⁵⁴

The Jewish Rugby League had made a valiant attempt to promote the game within its own community. Over and above that it had provided an arena for those talented at the game within the community in which to perform and it had actively tried to impress on Jewish young men the desirability of the inherent toughness of the code. In doing so it tried to achieve all of this in the context provided by the Maccabean Sports movement. There were enough talented players to form a single competitive club and there were some excellent players as is evidenced by the success of Issey Sender and Alex Owen as first grade players for the University. From the middle of 1927 soccer began to get extensive coverage in the *Hebrew Standard*. On 12 July 1927 the demand for soccer led to the founding of the Sydney Judean Soccer League. The soccer league filled the void left by the demise of the rugby league competition and was readily accepted by the Jewish sports community with the M A Lieberman Cup being passed on to the soccer fraternity for the winners of its annual competition. The Judean Soccer League functioned successfully until the formation of the Hakoah club in 1939.

Conclusions

In retrospect it seems clear that the Jewish Rugby League was doomed to failure and a community-centred competition was not viable. Given that the ideas of *Muskeljudentum* had permeated Australian Jewry by the 1920s, perhaps the Jewish rugby league represented a flirtation with the sport which seemed to fit best more extreme and aggressive forms of that philosophy. However, while the more militant adherents of *Muskeljudentum* in Europe--elements within Hakoah Wien⁵⁵--channelled their aggressiveness towards an oppressive Gentile enemy; such an outwardly aggressive philosophy was not adopted in Sydney because in Australia institutionalised anti-Semitism was limited.⁵⁶ The degree to which the Jewish community had been 'Australianised' mitigated against an adoption of *Muskeljudentum* on the European model.

Were there other cultural reasons which can explain this flirtation with the 'game of thirteen'? If, as Myer Rosenblum insists, the rugby league was just another manifestation of the 'socialising of the youth philosophy' of the Elders at the Maccabean Hall then it is easy to understand how the maintenance of such a robust competition within a

small community proved impossibly difficult. Despite the efforts of the Brodskys and the enthusiastic support of 'Wing Forward' and his colleagues at the *Hebrew Standard* the competition soon foundered. The clubs were poorly organised and struggled to put teams in the field from week to week. Syd Einfeld maintained the players simply grew older and nobody emerged to take their place. This theory, however, ignores the emergence of soccer as a community sport and its comparative longevity, the success of the Maccabi Games and Jewish involvement in many other sports. There is more evidence that the football-playing younger generation were more attracted to soccer because of its less robust nature.⁵⁷

Culturally perhaps, soccer was a more attractive game. The arrival of European immigrants may have increased soccer's popularity in the community. It should be noted that the rise of the Sydney Judean Soccer league coincided with the rise of the powerful Melbourne Hakoah club. While the Sydney Judean League continued the Jewish rugby league tradition of playing within the community, Melbourne Hakoah played in the Victorian Soccer League. Soccer also grew in the Newcastle Jewish community and intercity and interstate games were possible by 1929.⁵⁸ Perhaps this was an added incentive to play soccer.

The promotion of sports by the Maccabean Hall in the 1920s provides a classic example of the link between sport and ethnicity. The ideas of *Muskelijudentum* appealed to Jewish leaders as a way of furthering community goals to maintain a balance between community assertiveness—to counter the threat posed by intermarriage—and acculturation. The birth of the Jewish rugby league may be attributed to the successful assimilation of that generation to Australian society and the resultant desire to play the most popular Sydney football code. Its containment within the boundaries of the Maccabean Sports Union sat easily with the views of the hierarchy and as Syd Einfeld said 'the playing of rugby league could not directly stop intermarriage but it contributed through socialising during and after matches'.⁵⁹

The failure of rugby league was not a failure of Maccabean policy but a matter of logistics. Soccer became the winter sport for Jewish young men within the parameters of the community. Phil Mosely and others have identified the utility of soccer for post-World War II immigrants and sport with the Jewish community developed along similar line.⁶⁰ Playing soccer within the confines of their community

was an expression of ethnicity that did not broach accepted boundaries.

The literature of sport and ethnicity has largely focused on the post-World War II period when the arrival of many non-English-speaking immigrants raised the issue to one of considerable importance. While the debate on ethnically-based sporting clubs took on wider significance in the 1950s, this article demonstrates that many issues about sport and ethnicity were raised in the 1920s and 1930s, though on a much smaller scale. Although the Jewish Rugby League competition ultimately failed, it succeeded in promoting a lively debate and sport and ethnicity.

If nothing else the Jewish Rugby League competition enabled some prominent Sydney Jews to participate in this sport for three seasons. Lionel Von Praag, who played for the Institute, became world speedway champion in 1936; Isadore Brodsky, from the same team, published several books on the history of Sydney and Syd Einfeld, who appeared for JSSC, became a prominent state politician.

APPENDIX: The Jewish Rugby League Competition in 1924

The teams, which competed in the first round of the first season of the Jewish Rugby League competition, were:

YPHA: H Don, D Marks Snr, D Davis, A Davis (c), J Friedman, D Marks Jnr, E Cohen, C Rosenberg, J Karpin, B Don, H Marks, I Rosenberg, M Newman.

INSTITUTE: I Cohen, L Glasser, I Brodsky, A Lipman, J Goldman, D Solomans, M Cohen (c), G Goulston, S Goulston, A Segal, M Quintner, L Von Praag, A Brodsky.

JSSC: H Adams, A Davis, Sol Einfeld (c), J Fernandez, J Lazerus, L Fernandez, S Davis, S. Cohen, L Einfeld, W Dryan, W Lieberman, Syd Einfeld.

MSAC: L Cohen, A Owen, W Q Levy, N Bergman, A Goodman, J Cohen, P Davis, S Weinberg (c), L White, D Pearlman, M Kline, J Jacobs, S Nathen.

A quick survey of the above teams reveals the names of several men who were to represent the Jewish Community with distinction in the years to come. Sydney Einfeld of JSSC became a NSW politician and a champion of consumer rights, Lionel Von Praag world speedway champion in 1936 and Isadore Brodsky a prominent physician and Historian.

Final Table - Jewish Rugby League, 1924

	Played	Won	Drew	Lost	Points
Maccabi Institute	6	4	1	1	9
MSAC	6	3	1	2	7
YPHA	6	2	2	2	6
JSSC	6	1	-	5	2

NOTES:

- 1 M Nordau, 'Muskelijudentum', *Judische Turnzeitung*, vol. 1, no. 2, June 1900, pp. 10-11.
- 2 Turnverein, literally gymnastic club. The German Turner movement emerged in the mid-nineteenth century. However, Turner clubs were more than gymnastic clubs—they also acted as forums for political theory and the inculcation of a love of the 'Fatherland' in German youth. By the end of the nineteenth century Jews were being

- excluded from many of these clubs. Jews acted by forming their own Turnverein.
- 3 This can be translated as Jewish Gymnastic Gazette.
 - 4 Nordau, 'Muskeljudentum', p.11.
 - 5 Macabi Newsletter, mid-Year Edition, Sydney, 1992, p. 2.
 - 6 M Swibel. 'Birth of the Maccabi Movement', Hakoah Star, vol. 5, no. 6, Aug. 1981, p. 12.
 - 7 *Maccabi Newsletter*, p.2.
 - 8 M Ticher, 'Jews and Football in Berlin', unpub. MA Hons Thesis, UNSW, 1994.
 - 9 W D Rubenstein, *Judaism in Australia*, Melbourne 1995, p. 23.
 - 10 S Rutland, *Edge of the Diaspora*, Sydney 1988, p. 155.
 - 11 Rutland, *Edge of the Diaspora*, p. 155.
 - 12 *Hebrew Standard*, 16 Nov. 1923.
 - 13 Z Cowen, *Isaac Isaacs*, Melbourne, 1967, p. 226.
 - 14 Kino, Interview, Nov. 1993. Brian Kino is a Melbourne-based historian of the Maccabimovement in Australia.
 - 15 For the purpose of this study I am defining the Jewish community in Australia as an ethnic group. John Goldlust quotes Sklare on this issue: The Jewish religion is extraordinarily ethnic in its thrust-it may in fact be the prototype of an ethnic religion. One aspect of such ethnicity is the feeling that whatever differences exist between Jew and Jew, they share more in common than does any Jew with any given Gentile. They are members of a single clan-an extended kinship group.' J Goldlust, *The Melbourne Jewish Community: A Needs Assessment Survey*, Canberra, 1993, p.26.
 - 16 Rutland, *Edge of the Diaspora*, p. 141.
 - 17 Kino, *The Carnivals*.
 - 18 Rutland, *Edge of the Diaspora*, p. 154.
 - 19 Rutland, *Edge of the Diaspora*, p. 106.
 - 20 H L Rubenstein, *The Jews in Australia: A Thematic History, vol. 1 1788-1945*, Melbourne, 1991, p. 151.
 - 21 About 10 000 Jewish refugees arrived in Australia from Austria and Germany after 1934 in the wake of the implementation of the Nazi's anti-Jewish policies. Rubenstein, *Judaism in Australia*, p. 7.
 - 22 *Hebrew Standard*, 18 Apr. 1924.
 - 23 *Hebrew Standard*, 9 May 1924.
 - 24 The results of these first two games were: JSSC defeated MSAC 6-5 while in the YPHA versus Institute game a 0-0 draw was played! The latter game was described as 'a great game worthy of the highest traditions of football'. *Hebrew Standard*, 6 June 1924.
 - 25 The Brodsky brothers at this time were students at Sydney University and were prominent in the Sydney University Athletics club. In his 1978 history of the club David Branagan devoted a chapter to 'The Brodsky Era'. Isadore Brodsky supplemented his income in his student days by writing athletics reports for the *Telegraph*. After becoming a prominent physician he returned to writing and produced several books on the history of Sydney including *The Press Gang: A History of the Sydney Press*, 1974.
 - 26 Interview, Myer Rosenblum, 9 Aug. 1996. Rosenblum is an important figure in Australian Jewish sporting history. He represented Sydney University, NSW, and Australia in athletics and rugby union. He represented Australia in the hammer throw at the 1938 Empire Games in Sydney.
 - 27 Maccabean Institute drew its membership from the following suburbs. The number of financial members appear in brackets: Bondi (117), City (80), Waverley (65), Paddington (62), Potts Point (52), Bellevue Hill (52), Randwick (51), North Sydney (43), Darlinghurst (39), Redfern (38), Centennial Park (38), Coogee (32),

- Woollahara (30), Marrickville (21), Elizabeth Bay (16), Stanmore (14), Kensington (14), Rose Bay (14), Hurlstone Park (14), Darling Point (13) Leichhardt (10), Newtown (10), Botany (10), Ashfield (10), Double Bay (10), other suburbs and country (100). Source: *Hebrew Standard*, 14 Aug. 1925.
- 28 Interview, Rosenblum.
- 29 Rugby league clubs, as well as other sporting clubs, were formed around locality-based youth groups or groups attached to a particular institution, such as the Maccabean Hall.
- 30 *Hebrew Standard*, 24 July 1926.
- 31 *Hebrew Standard*, 9 May 1924.
- 32 *Hebrew Standard*, 6 June 1924.
- 33 See appendix.
- 34 *Hebrew Standard*, 25 July 1924.
- 35 *Hebrew Standard*, 8 May 1925.
- 36 *Hebrew Standard*, 11 July 1924.
- 37 *Hebrew Standard*, 24 Apr. 1925.
- 38 *Hebrew Standard*, 15 May 1925.
- 39 *Hebrew Standard*, 22 Apr. 1927.
- 40 *Hebrew Standard*, 26 June 1925.
- 41 *Hebrew Standard*, 24 July 1926.
- 42 *Hebrew Standard*, 20 Mar. 1926.
- 43 *Hebrew Standard*, 14 May 1926.
- 44 *Hebrew Standard*, 21 May 1926.
- 45 *Hebrew Standard*, 14 May 1926.
- 46 *Hebrew Standard*, 8 June 1926.
- 47 *Hebrew Standard*, 8 June 1926.
- 48 *Hebrew Standard*, 2 July 1926.
- 49 Hakoah was formed in Sydney in 1939 by Austrian refugees. Hakoah Vienna had been the most prominent Jewish sporting club in Europe after its formation in 1909 and until it was disbanded by the Nazis in 1938. Its soccer team was one of the most powerful on the continent during the 1920s. Sydney Hakoah became the most successful club in Australian soccer and was a driving force in the game. It withdrew its professional team from the National League in March 1987. The author is currently writing a thesis on the history of Hakoah.
- 50 *Hebrew Standard*, 24 July 1926.
- 51 *Hebrew Standard*, 8 Apr. 1927.
- 52 *Hebrew Standard*, 22 Apr. 1927.
- 53 *Hebrew Standard*, 20 May 1927.
- 54 *Hebrew Standard*, 19 Aug. 1927.
- 55 See J Bunzl, *Hoppauf Hakoah: Jüdischer Sport in Österreich*, Vienna, 1987.
- 56 Some institutionalised anti-Semitism in pre-World War II Sydney was reported in golf for instance. See C Tatz and B Stoddart, *The Royal Sydney Golf Club: The First Hundred Years*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1993.
- 57 Interview, S Einfeld, 23 Mar. 1995.
- 58 *Maccabean* vol. 1, no. 33, 2 Aug. 1929, p. 6 and vol. 1, 20 Sept. 1940, p. 6.
- 59 Interview Einfeld.
- 60 P Mosely, *Ethnic Involvement in Australian Soccer: A History 1950-1990*, Canberra, 1995. This work contains a valuable bibliography of research into important work being conducted in Australia in this field.