

Jews, Sports and Society

Dedication. Countless hours of commitment. Sacrifice. Rising to the challenges of adversity. Maximizing one's natural talents. A religiously-infused life and the endeavor of sports have much in common, though often come into conflict. We share with you the latest issue of YU Ideas, "Jews, Sports and Society," featuring essays from Yeshiva University faculty and staff, and invite you to reflect on the myriad ways in which Judaism and sports have intersected, both historically and in our contemporary era.

We dedicate this issue in memory of Bob Tufts, former Sy Syms School of Business Professor and former major league baseball pitcher, who boldly and passionately lived a life balancing faith and passion for sport.



JEWS IN SPORTS: Something to Think About and Appreciate

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There are so many jokes associated with the phrase "Jews in Sports." Most use the typical self-deprecating, good-natured Jewish humor that sustains our people, but inherent in those (self) jabs is likely a feeling that, as Jews, we just don't have the goods to be at the top of the game. Or maybe it's just "pas nisht," not for us—we need to put more effort into our futures and the futures our families.

One need not look any further than the well-known professional players of yesteryear whose stories of triumph and episodes of placing observance above the game thrilled us in our youth and fueled our desire to play, to know that we've got the talent. So why do we put ourselves down? Maybe it's the one-upsmanship game of "my son is

a doctor," "my son is a lawyer," "my son owns a business" over "my son plays college ball"?

Was it about education? Think about how culturally important education has been to our people even before the modern standardized schooling of today. Did our families reason that sports participation would take too much time away from their young ones' studies and therefore negatively impact their ability to make life better for their children and grandchildren? And if it was an issue of time taken away from growing intellectually, were they wrong?

From a practical perspective, perhaps a piece of the puzzle involves the salaries in the early years of professional sports. In the past, professional sports didn't pay as well and could not help one set up future generations to live better than the current one, a staple of the immigrant mindset. By

making sports the target of jokes, did we dissuade young Jewish boys and girls from playing so that they would concentrate on education and be better positioned to improve the experience of the next generation?

From a historical perspective, is it fair to postulate that some representation in pro sports was a boon to Jews? As a people, we have historically tried to fit in in new countries and be viewed as one of the people. Was that a way to prevent anti-Semitism and perhaps prevent violence and expulsion? Wouldn't that make life better for future generations? Certainly, in America, what better way to have the feeling of being "regular" and "one of the guys" or some other measure of acceptance than to excel in the national pastime.

Nowadays, we know the benefits of sports participation. We have empirical evidence that student-athletes have higher GPAs than the student body, better graduation rates and stronger retention rates. YU's numbers reflect that as well. Sports participation teaches lessons that cannot be learned in the classroom, such as how to be both a leader and a follower depending on the

needs of the team—what boss doesn't want someone like that in their employ? Sports participation teaches time management and prioritization techniques that help make student-athletes more successful after they graduate.

Now, throw in the opportunity to play at YU, the only school that won't ever schedule a practice or game on a Shabbat or holiday, the only school to play both Hatikvah and the Star-Spangled Banner before home games, the only school where men can play in kippot and women who choose to can play in skirts. We don't just identify as Jews, we're one step short of being in-your-face about it. We're proud that despite the dual curriculum, the religious obligations, the very different school calendar, the smaller recruiting pool and the dozens of other challenges, we are incredibly successful on and off the field of play, we're incredibly connected to our Judaism and we embrace the dichotomy of being both like and unlike, both the everyman and the only man, both the athlete and the scholar.

In conclusion, I'd like you to leave this little food-for-thought essay thinking about how the concept of Jews in sports should not be the punchline but rather the headline.



TWO RELIGIOUS REFLECTIONS

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Two brief comments on the possible value of playing or following sports in the framework of a religious life:

First, an excerpt from "You Taught Me Musar and the Profit on It," published in Tradition 42:2 10 years ago.¹ As part of a longer critical discussion I wrote:

What remains for most of us who grew up loving sports is the memory of our own modest athletic competence and the vision of true mastery by the elite. The athlete, however gifted, achieves this mastery only through years of incessant training, rehearsing the same set of physical moves and responses for thousands of hours until they become second nature, all the while anticipating the stage of actual performance when he, or she, must

confront a new situation, similar but not quite the same as what was encountered in practice or in previous experience, and meet that challenge, under pressure, with skill and grace. Except for the requirement of grace under pressure, this description uncannily recalls the intellectual combination of constant learning, review and creativity without which one cannot become a serious talmid hakham [student of the sage]. Nor is the element of pressure absent when we must bring our Torah education to bear in the immediacy of the personal encounter, often at moments of crisis.

What survives into adulthood, in a word, is gratefulness for what athletes, in their genuine or affected humility, call their "God-given talent," together with a heartfelt admiration for the persistence and discipline that translates rare gifts of strength and coordination into the magnificence of performance under competitive conditions. Perhaps because athletic excellence, like most manifestations of beauty, is neither necessary for temporal

¹ http://traditionarchive.org/news/_pdfs/0001-00061.pdf

success nor essential to our moral and spiritual existence, and because the attainments of professionals are so incontrovertibly beyond our aspirations or capabilities, our admiration tends to be pure, uncontaminated by the envy or jealousy that so often poison our attitudes towards those superior to us in some department.

For those of us, fifty years ago, who continued our Talmudic studies with R. Aharon Lichtenstein during the break between the semesters, there was the bonus of playing ball with him—touch football in January, basketball in June. If you knew him, you will not be

surprised to learn that he played with the same relentless passion he displayed in the Beit Midrash. In fact, he once confessed that seeing young Torah students play lackadaisically caused him dismay. Here is what his wife, Dr. Tovah Lichtenstein, said after his passing:

I tend to think that he played sports as a young man not only because he enjoyed the physical exertion of basketball and what he called “the moral value” of teamwork, but also because the game allowed him to be part of a team. It gave him an opportunity to belong, to fit in, at least on the basketball court.²



A GRADUAL UNDERSTANDING: The Interaction Between Judaism and Athletics at Yeshiva University from the Coach's Perspective

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Before my tenure at Yeshiva University as a tennis coach, I had little interaction with Jewish culture and religion and even less historical knowledge, but I recalled a graduate seminar I took that touched upon the stereotype of the “unathletic Jew.” More concerned with facts and figures, with brains, books and biblical studies instead of balls and brawn, this social prejudice has supposedly kept Jews out of athletic participation.

The athletic Jew was a myth, an oxymoron. According to Stanley B. Frank, Jews might have had a desire to play sports; however, he “remembered the teachings of his rabbis, who preached that a Jew must be pious... that he must think of his soul and not his body... The Jew... was not inbred with the winning complex so vital to success in sports” (Frank 28). This has to be false. After all, Israel competes in the Olympics and represents both sexes with two National Soccer teams. So obviously, Jews played sports, regardless of what countries they competed in. However, my YU experiences would help me unpack this.

My first introduction to Jews in sports came at training camp from then-captain Shani Hava, one of the most famous and accomplished Maccabees in women's tennis and YU athletics history. Hava, born and raised in Israel,

having trained with Shahar Pe'er and destined for Women's Tennis Association-tour life prior to suffering a series of career-ending injuries, said these exact words: “We're Jews. No one expects us to play sports, let alone be good at it.” Upon hearing this, I scanned the rest of the team over the top of my lunch, slack jawed at her comment. Their silence echoed their agreement. Nothing was expected of them. Not only that, coupled with the fact that we were a women's team, less than nothing was expected.

The separation of the sexes was just as perplexing. It was at my first fall coaches meeting, the ink barely dry on my contract, when Joe Bednarsh, our Athletic Director, explained the new protocol for having women's basketball practice at Max Stern Athletic Center. Joe explained such measures as casually as he might order Starbucks (if it's kosher): “We're going to lock the doors to the gym and locker rooms; no one gets in and no one gets out during practice time. We are going to order huge magnetic images of the players and place them over the gym windows so that no one can see in and no one can see out...” My initial thought on this was, “Did I just agree to work in a police state?” This initial confusion became clearer for me over time.

While Stanley B. Frank provides an explanation for the lack of Jewish women in sports, parents in the Modern Orthodox community today might find his opinion

2 A Life Steady and Whole: Recollections and Appreciations of Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein² (ed. Elka Weber and Joel Wolowelsky, Ktav 2018)

antiquated and misinformed. Frank states that because Jewish parents are primarily concerned with rearing their daughters for marriage, they fear allowing them to participate in sports because it could cause injury so severe leaving them unable to have children. They also think that sports could mutate natural, feminine qualities (Frank 179-180). However, many Modern Orthodox parents might feel that rearing their daughters to become individual, well-rounded people that have a plethora of varying interests and participate in many different activities, including athletics, is of the utmost importance.

Sometimes though, the fundamentals of *tzniut* [modesty] disagree with the notion of Jewish women participating in sports. Over the past couple of seasons, various athletes have told me that “there’s no modesty in sports” and “good Jewish girls are reared to be ‘nice,’” and so many aren’t steered towards athletics. *Tzniut* requires “simplicity, a touch of bashfulness, and reserve ... modesty in dress... discreet habits, quiet speech, [and] the avoidance of... boisterous laughter, raucous behavior...” (Lamm) and some find athletics aren’t *tsnius* [modest].

On the other hand, in *Modesty, An Adornment for Life: Halachos and Attitudes Concerning Tzniut of Dress and Conduct*, Rabbi Pesach Eliyahu Falk encourages physical exercise as long as it is conducted *tsnius*. *Tzniut* in physical activity requires “seclusion of the area from Jewish and non-Jewish males alike and the need for female training personnel... not to wear tight-fitting items... married women covering their hair while exercising... [refraining] from immodest body-movements and coarse accompanying music...” (Falk 544-548). In fact, the text has a specific section for *tzniut* in tennis:

tennis should be played at a time when they know Jewish men and youths do not frequent the area (as they could be attracted to watch Jewish girls play, whilst non-Jews will usually have little interest in watching Jewish girls as they play...) They should be clothed in regular everyday clothes- a dress or skirt without the accompaniment of trousers... Female players must... take care that the skirt they wear and the sleeves of the tee-shirt or the sweat-shirt they wear are sufficiently long to prevent a momentary exposure occurring (Falk 549).

Seeing as *tzniut*, and Judaism on a whole, are spectrum practices, women tend to find themselves on various points along the scale and adhere to what is personally comfortable. But this seems like a mixed message. The women are told “don’t play because it’s immodest” but

also “play, simply for exercise, and be modest while you do it.” Frank goes on to say, “The Jew has been accused of lacking that virtue which academicians with a flair for alliteration call intestinal investiture. In ordinary, working language, this is known as courage; in the grandstand and on the field, it is called guts” (Frank 29). We coaches call it “grit, mettle, knowing what [you’re] made of.” Nonetheless, Jews, women and specifically Jewish women are deemed as lacking this thing, this essential component for competition, making sports a futile pursuit because of the alleged lack of mental and physical fortitude needed to compete. These mixed messages of gender and religious expectations, stereotype and *tzniut* seem to have combined to bar Jewish women from athletics.

However, with all these challenges, it is surprising that Jewish women still pursue sports.

Representation is key for replication. How can girls become athletes if there are no role models? Extensive research by Linda J. Borish assures that the American Jewish female has been quite active in athletic participation since the 1880s, when European Jews were migrating to the United States. Also, various scholars discuss the successes of Jewish female athletes throughout Europe and Israel. So, in order to find representation, one must travel across oceans and time zones or back through history to find athletic archetypes. However, it is important to note that despite the significant achievements of American Jewish female athletes, there is a dearth of academic research on the topic.

Beginning in the 1880s, newly emigrated Jewish women participated in sports for several reasons. First, according to Borish, “Jewish women... strove to participate in a range of sports as part of gaining access to American culture and defying stereotypes of Jewish women as weak, sickly, and disinterested in sports” (Borish, “Jewish Girls, Gender, and Sport...,” 150). Participation in sports allowed Jewish immigrants to integrate into the fabric of American culture while dispelling stereotypes. For working-class Jewish immigrants, participation in sports within Jewish settlement homes and immigrant aid associations provided an escape from the distractions and dangers of urban settings. Jewish girls and young women “wandering aimlessly about the streets and who might be attracted to amusement halls and other places of doubtful influence... [such as] dance halls, saloons, and street life” (Borish, “Jewish American Women, Jewish Organization, and Sports, 1880-1940, 110) could use sports as an escape, just as is done currently.

In addition to promoting health and physical fitness, participation in sports in Jewish institutions allowed immigrants to “maintain Jewish identity within a physical education program” (Borish, “Jewish American Women...,” 130). The development of spiritual well-being and adherence to specific practices would not be sidelined for sports. There could always be a compromise between the two. Furthermore, supporters of Jewish women in athletics “acted as agents of change” (Borish, “Jewish Girls, Gender, and Sport...,” 149). With the participation and promotion of Jewish immigrant women playing sports during the Progressive Era, this laid the groundwork for increased participation and success of Jewish female athletes, particularly in tennis.

According to Borish, “women physical educators considered tennis an outdoor sport suitable for females because it contributed to their physical stamina but did not overtax their bodily health” (Borish, “An Interest in Physical Well-Being...”). “Feminine enough” for female participation and for Jewish women, it was a sport among many in which they succeeded. Players such as Clara Greenspan, the captain-coach-manager of the Hunter College tennis team as well as winner of the Women’s New York State Doubles Championship, Eastern Clay Court Championship and various other tournaments (Borish, “Jewish American Women...,” 126) and Helen Hull Jacobs, five time grand slam winner, leading advocate for dress reform in tennis and rival of 19-time singles grand slam winner Helen Wills Moody (Borish, “American Jewish Women on the Court...,” 55) used the foundation built by their immigrant ancestors to both prove that Jewish American women could participate and succeed in athletics and serve as archetypes and role models that Jewish American women tennis players such as Renée Richards, Julia Cohen, Audra Cohen and current WTA tour player Jamie Loeb could emulate.

Women’s tennis at Yeshiva faces some of the challenges of their immigrant predecessors as well as some unique to their academic, athletic and Orthodox environment. Dr. Jeffrey Gurock outlines many of these challenges in *Constant Challenge: Sports and American Judaism*. Gurock appropriately states, “The Macs have had to face up to challenges that their competitors have not had to deal with, and these have always made it more difficult for them to finally get to the top of the standings...” (Gurock 133). These have included “the often-improving nature of the opposition [and] the narrowness of its own talent pool.”

For the Lady Macs specifically, there is the “‘modesty issue’ – ‘to wear knee length skirts... bike shorts underneath’ and tee-shirts under the uniform tops” (Gurock 110), which I have always been concerned about because with the fluctuating weather during those “dog days” in August and left over summer days in September, the observant women are at risk to overheat. There was also the 30-year ban on women from using Max Stern Athletic Center, enacted “because the general feeling... that the mixing of the male and female genders in a gym setting in exercise attire [is] inappropriate...” (Gurock 114), which is why I was the only one perplexed about the measures for allowing the women into normalized male space following lifting the ban in 2015.

The conflict between the Orthodox clock and calendar of NCAA sports is also something the Maccabees battle. Orthodoxy disallows athletic participation during Shabbat, from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday, and during the high holidays between September and October, (116, 143) causing “the Macs... to bunch their games and... practice time during the five remaining days [of the week]. Attempting to win back-to-back games or to triumph four times over a week’s period... has always posed a daunting challenge. Often that strain has led to injuries among these insufficiently trained athletics” (143).

Also, the high holidays allow for a two- to three-week suspension of classes in the middle of the fall semester, sometimes causing women’s tennis to cram every conference match and, depending when the holidays fall, up to an entire season’s worth of matches, which is at minimum 10, into a 20- to 25-day period. When matches are scheduled between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, our roster has been reduced to skeleton numbers and has forced coaches to forfeit courts because some athletes have already departed for home and/or Israel to observe.

Not to mention that all the intense practice and match play during the regular season goes on pause over the holidays. When the season resumes, the rest of the conference is in forward momentum, the regular season is winding down and heading towards post-season and we have to start all over again. Let’s not forget, tennis is an outdoor sport, and per NCAA requirements, matches occur outdoors. Therefore, every contest is a gamble with Mother Nature because of possible rain and pending darkness.

The gap year that many students take to complete their Jewish studies requirements often takes students from athletic teams and complicates recruitment and

participation because coaches have to wait a whole academic year for potential athletes to try out. And besides the normal rigors of academia, the University has a dual curriculum requirement which “requires its students to attend class up to twenty-nine hours a week. This reality undermines practice and rehabilitation time just like the Orthodox calendar does... regularly scheduled practices cannot begin until after 7 p.m. in deference to the academic program” (144). This is a long day for anyone. While “Yeshiva really is the only school in America where an observant Jew can play... without violating or severely challenging... Sabbath scruples” (143), these unique factors specific to YU athletics are constantly in play and make recruitment and success exacting.

I spent my first season understanding all these extra balls in play. It was at the sports awards dinner, looking around the gymnasium and seeing all the championship banners hanging on the walls, when I noticed the absence of a women’s tennis banner. As I watched men’s tennis receive their awards for winning their second skyline championship, I decided I wanted Women’s Tennis to hang a championship banner in the gym. If no one expected anything from the women, we would do it for ourselves. I looked at the team and said, “we are going to hang a banner in this gym. If the men can do it, so can we.” It wasn’t a cheer, it wasn’t a pep talk, it was an affirmation.

We would go on to win a Skyline championship and hang a banner in the gym. On the road to this success, after the team’s first Skyline Championship in 1999, women’s tennis has made five playoff appearances in the last six years, has Intercollegiate Tennis Association All-American team honors starting in 2013, has had two Skyline Conference Rookies of the Year, two Skyline Conference Players of the Year, six Skyline Conference First team all-conference honors, three Skyline second team honors, several Skyline player and rookie of the week honors, at least two players named to the Skyline all-sportsmanship team, a two-time Coach of the Year, and, in Shani Hava, a four-time Skyline Scholar Athlete, College Sports Information Directors of America Academic Second Team All-American, Most Outstanding Player of the Skyline Conference Championships in 2017, two-time Skyline player of the year, who finished her career with a 29-3 record in singles and a mention in Sports Illustrated (Nov 20-27, 2017 issue). But most importantly, women’s tennis is the first women’s program in University history to make it to the NCAA tournament, having won the Skyline Conference in 2017.

As the current head coach, I had to understand the opposition that exists within the culture in order to build a future for women’s tennis. Understanding our unique position, we are going to take our challenges in stride and eventually hang another banner in the gym.

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TAKING THE FIRST KNEE: Blackbirds Boycott the 1936 Olympics

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The bone-chilling image of more than 100,000 Nazis saluting the Reich and Adolf Hitler himself at the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, Germany, resonates to this day on par with banging a steel drum in a phone booth.

While Jesse Owens, whose skin color and DNA the Nazis told us would put him in a hopeless position on the track, gave the ultimate response by bringing home four gold medals, there was another group of men, mostly Jewish and a few gentile, who displayed a different form of courage and selflessness by voting to not attend the Games.

Back then, before anyone knew of the Blue Devils, the Bruins, the Wildcats and the Jayhawks, there were the Long Island University Blackbirds, which had arguably the most dominant basketball team in the country despite being a tiny school in downtown Brooklyn. Coached by the legendary Clair Bee, LIU went undefeated in the 1935-36 season (25-0). This was a few years before the National Invitation Tournament and National Collegiate Athletic Association came into existence, and the Blackbirds were hailed by many as the national champions. They would have likely brought home the United States' first men's basketball gold medal.

During this period, the nation's top teams were invited to Olympic trials, and the likelihood was that all of the LIU members would have made the team. A few teams decided

to not attend, citing exhaustion and academic concerns, but LIU's president, Tristram Walker Metcalfe, spoke with verve about not directly or indirectly supporting a country that was persecuting Jews. The LIU team decided to hold a secret ballot. If it wasn't a unanimous yes, that meant to them that the entire group would not attend the trials.

To this day, we don't know how each player voted, or if the strong personality of the warm-hearted Bee had a hand in the decision, but we do know that enough voted "No" to not attend. All the members of this team—Jules Bender, Ben Kramer, Harry Grant, Art Hillhouse, Ken Norton, Bill Schwartz, Leo Merson and Marius Russo, who would go on to an outstanding baseball career as a pitcher for the New York Yankees—are long gone, and the children and grandchildren of these giants have limited information on the subject.

Merson, who died in 2001, was Jewish and felt family pressure to not attend the trials. He never uttered a word about this secret ballot until he told his daughter, Melissa, 60 years later while they were visiting the National Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., and standing before an exhibit about the 1936 Olympics and Owens' exploits. His daughter would go on to provide this information to the administration at LIU, which I was a part of. As word soon spread, she was invited to carry the Olympic torch in his honor, and a few years later this human-first group was inducted posthumously into the National Jewish Sports Hall of Fame.



JEW IN SPORTS- BEHIND THE MICROPHONE

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When you talk about Jews in sports, one of their most highly visible roles was in broadcasting. Not many people realize this, but Mel Allen, the “Voice of the Yankees,” was born to Jewish immigrants as Melvin Israel in the early 20th century. Allen was the Yankees announcer for the ‘40s, ‘50s and ‘60s as the team dominated the baseball landscape.

Marty Glickman first entered the American sports scene as an Olympic-level track and field star at Syracuse University in the 1930s. He later became the play-by-play announcer for the New York Knicks and coined such iconic phrases as “Good! Like Nedicks” (referring to the famous cafeteria right outside Madison Square Garden). Glickman also did boxing matches and harness racing before moving into high-profile play-by-play roles for the New York Football Giants and the New York Jets. He is widely considered the most influential sportscaster of his time.

The next generation of great Jewish sportscasters began with Marv Albert (Marvin Aufrichtig), the patriarch of perhaps the “First Family” of Jewish sportscasters. At one time, he and his younger brothers Al (Warriors) and Steve (Nuggets) were calling games for three different NBA franchises. Marv called New York Knicks games from 1967 to 2004, adding “Yes!” and “Air Ball” to every basketball

fan’s vocabulary and, while doing New York Rangers broadcasts, made “kick save and a beauty” a signature call.

Marv’s son, Kenny, began his career as an undergraduate student as play-by-play voice for his college hoop team, the New York University Violets. His career skyrocketed from there to where he is now a featured voice for Fox Sports (NFL, MLB), NBC (NHL) and the MSG Network (Knicks). Rarely does a sports weekend go by without Kenny appearing on a national telecast.

The tradition continues here in New York as Bruce Beck recently won his ninth “New York State Sportscaster of the Year” award. The Ithaca College graduate, who began his career with the MSG Network before joining NBC, has covered seven Olympics for NBC 4 New York.

On a different national stage, Chris Berman of ESPN is perhaps that network’s most famous Jewish studio host. His trademark “back, back, back” baseball call is legendary, and his imitations of Howard Cosell’s Monday Night Football play-by-play calls always stir great memories.

Among the many other Jewish sportscasters currently on the scene are Sam Rosen (MSG, Fox), Steve Levy (ESPN), Mike Greenberg (ESPN), Adam Schefter (ESPN), Dave Cohen (Georgia State University) and Jon Bloom (Phoenix Suns).