

Playing Hoops in Palestine: The Early Development of Basketball in the Land of Israel, 1935–56

YAIR GALILY

Israel's basketball achievements have been substantial: in 1977, 1981 and 2001 Maccabi Tel Aviv won the European Club Championship, while in 1979 the Israeli national team finished as runners-up to the Soviet Union in the European National Championship. Nonetheless, Israeli basketball is a unique case: it is located geographically in Asia, competes in the European arena, and is dominated by imported American players.¹ Clearly, the game has come a long way from its frail beginnings in the 1930s. By adopting a developmental approach, this article traces conceptually and historically the multifaceted nature of the early days of Israeli basketball and the process by which Israeli basketball became one of the most popular games in the land of Israel. The development of Israeli basketball in its early years has to be seen as interdependent with the broader political economy of what later became Israel and in conjunction with the close relationship between the developing sport organizations and the development of an Israeli state. Moreover, it is argued that the development of sport in Israel in general, and especially of basketball, can be understood adequately only by presenting it in its historical context. The processes of state formation, population growth, urbanization, militarization and, most germane for present purposes, the development of sport are not isolated but rather interdependent and therefore of importance when discussing the development of sport in general and basketball in particular.²

Sport Associations and Party Affiliation

Sport in Israel was first assimilated into the ideological framework of Zionism when Zionist parties appropriated sport clubs as tools for partisan competition. From the early 1920s football clubs were incorporated into nation-wide sport associations that were affiliated to a specific political organization: Hapoel was an organ of the General Federation of Labor (Histadrut), Maccabi was affiliated to bourgeois political parties, Beitar was

associated with the right-wing 'Revisionists' and Elizur was related to the religious-Zionist party.³ The early days of Israeli basketball in the 1930s and early 1940s were characterized by disunity between the two major sport organizations in Palestine at that time, Hapoel and Maccabi. The battle for hegemony between these organizations in many of the sport branches, but mainly in basketball, delayed the establishment of national leagues and a national team.⁴

The game of basketball was not popular at the beginning of the 1930s. Handball, for example, was one of the most popular games, alongside soccer. A group of immigrants from the United States introduced the new game of basketball to the local inhabitants and slowly helped the game to gain popularity in the neighbourhoods of Tel Aviv.⁵ The first ever formal basketball game to be played in Israel took place in 1935. The second 'Maccabiah' games (the first was held in 1932),⁶ the 'Jewish Olympic games' organized by the world Maccabi organization, hosted Jewish delegations from around the world. In the basketball tournament, four Jewish teams from Syria, Egypt, Turkey and Palestine participated in the games. Aside from the men's tournament, a women's tournament also took place, where delegations from France, Poland and Palestine played official women's basketball for the first time. The first basketball club, Maccabi Tel Aviv, was founded in 1935 and an outdoor basketball court was built in the centre of the new city of Tel Aviv. A new immigrant from Poland, Dov Prosek, founded the second, rival basketball team: Hapoel Tel Aviv. The first basketball games at that time were derby games between Maccabi Tel Aviv and Hapoel Tel Aviv. In the first derby, in 1936, Maccabi won 37:5. The first official basketball game where tickets were sold was held in February 1938 and there, too, Maccabi Tel Aviv won, 34:33.

Many basketball courts were built as the new nation grew and the game of basketball gained popularity. Basketball quickly became popular partly because the court was cheap and simple to build and required no special equipment aside from rims and a basketball. The game spread to the north of the country, which was sparsely populated at the time, where another immigrant from Poland, Dolk Ouimshuf, promoted the game in the recently built kibbutzim.⁷ The first Israeli basketball tournament took place in 1939 and was organized by Dov Prosek. The games were, in fact, a Hapoel championship, since only Hapoel teams were able to participate. A total of 14 Hapoel teams from around the country took part in the tournament. The absence of Maccabi teams was another sign of the antagonism between the sports organizations in these early years. However, it was the Maccabi Tel Aviv team that first represented Israeli basketball overseas, because of its ties with other Maccabi branches

overseas. In 1939 Maccabi Tel Aviv was invited to Egypt and five years later, in 1944, the same team played in Lebanon, becoming the first basketball team to play outside Palestine.

The 50/50 System

Given the hegemony established by the Histadrut and the labour bloc and given that it had preferential access to new immigrants and was therefore able to recruit members, Hapoel became the largest sports organization in the Yishuv and was able to build up its facilities and infrastructure. On the other hand, Maccabi, though older and more established both inside and outside Palestine, was handicapped and marginalized by its lack of association with any large political bloc within the Yishuv. It survived because of its tradition and the great influx of middle-class supporters and professionals from Germany and Austria who escaped from Hitler in the 1930s.⁸

In 1947, the struggle between the members of the various sport organizations reached its peak. It was the Maccabi organization which dominated the Amateur Sport Organization in Palestine, but the Hapoel organization established its own programmes for basketball and volleyball while trying to gain international recognition. It was the Hapoel organization which eventually received an invitation to the youth sport festival in Prague in 1947. The appearance at the festival was of immense significance, not only at the sporting level but at the political level as well. The establishment of the new state of Israel would be declared on 29 May 1947, and the team's appearance at the sports festival along with 67 other countries was of great propaganda value to the state-to-be.

The bitter negotiations between representatives of Hapoel and Maccabi about the composition of the team – specifically, how many players from each organization would take part in the festival, indicates the kind of relationship that existed between the two clubs. The solution, later dubbed 'the 50/50 system', would determine the selection of Israeli national teams in the early days of the new state. Fourteen players were chosen to go to Prague: seven from Maccabi and seven from Hapoel. Two basketball coaches were nominated to the team: Joshua Rosin from Maccabi and Dolk Oimshuf from Hapoel.

The war of independence (1948–49) brought sport activities in Israel to a halt. The athletes, like the rest of the population (both men and women), were drafted into the recently assembled army and helped to protect the country from Arab invasion.⁹ Surrounded by enemies and faced with the task of integrating thousands of immigrants into the new state, David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister, attempted to make the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) the new unifying symbol of the fledgling state.¹⁰ He realized

that the socialist ideas of the Histadrut would not solve the problems facing the new state. Above all, Israel needed a unity of purpose, which in Ben-Gurion's thinking could only be provided by a strong army that would defend the country against its enemies and help assimilate its culturally diverse immigrants. Consequently, Ben-Gurion added to the socialist ethos of the Histadrut and kibbutz movements an aggressive Israeli nationalism spearheaded by the IDF. Two of the 14 players who were members the first Israeli basketball team in Prague, Eliezer Shevet and Joshua Weisman, were killed in the War of Independence.

The state sport institutions established in the 1950s continued to enhance party affiliations established during the British Mandate period. This was reflected in the attempt to preserve a consensus regarding representation of the federations in the sports organizations. At first, this consensus was characterized by the equal representation of the Hapoel and Maccabi federations, though during the 1950s this consensus became based on the proportional size of the federations. This system created a clear advantage for Hapoel. Not only was it the sports federation of the ruling party, but it also sought to establish a foothold in as many communities as possible. This policy was one part of a larger world-view of the Labor movement, that is, sport for the masses as opposed to achievement-oriented sport. Another ideological aspect expressed through policy was the emphasis placed by the Labor movement on pioneering and on a move from the urban centres to the peripheries. During the 1950s a status quo was reached by which Maccabi would be the lesser of the two federations, but would take part in the management and organization of sport. The co-operation between the two major federations reflected the balance of power and coalition politics between the patron parties within the political system proper.¹¹

The migration to Israel of Nat Holman,¹² member of the first Boston Celtics basketball team and a senior basketball coach in the United States, gave the game of basketball in Israel a 'Booster'.¹³ Holman, a proud Zionist, was the one who actually established an institutional framework for Israeli basketball. By teaching basketball in Tel Aviv and forming a basketball school, Holman laid the foundation for the development of Israeli basketball. Holman brought with him from the United States modern coaching techniques and taught those techniques to people who were to become future coaches of Israeli teams.

Due to the geopolitical situation at the time, which prevented Israeli basketball teams from competing in their geographical area, in 1950 the secretary of the Fédération Internationale Basketball Association (FIBA) invited the Israeli Sports Association to take part in the European Women's basketball championship in Budapest, Hungary. Dolk Ouimshuf from Hapoel and Baruch Shpeling from Maccabi were chosen to select a

women's team that, as was customary, would comprise equal numbers of players from Hapoel and Maccabi. This, however, prevented the Israeli team from sending its strongest team, which would have enabled it to establish its credentials as a sporting nation through basketball.

Israel's men's basketball team competed in the international arena for the first time in 1952. The International Olympic Committee invited the Israeli Sport Federation to send a team to the pre-Olympic basketball tournament. Israel's Prime Minister at that time, David Ben-Gurion, hosted a reception for the players in his chamber and explained to them the importance of representing the young state in the international arena. Ben-Gurion was thereby anticipating Elias' observation that 'Contemporary forms of regulated sport have come to serve as symbolic representations of a non-violent, non-military form of competition between states'.¹⁴ Similarly, Stoddart explains that:

Sport is a form of cultural capital, a resource which can be exchanged for honour and respect on the world stage. Sport is a weapon in the 'Culture Wars' that take place as nations compete, not in the market for goods and materials, but in the market for prestige. A scarce resource, prestige is highly sought after by nation-states, for gaining recognition and respect on the world stage is one of the most crucial means for states to legitimate their sovereign powers. Being admitted to compete in the prestige economy, and competing successfully within it, is thus very important for national elites, and of considerable popular appeal to a nation's citizens. Culture wars are no substitute for real wars, or for economic competition, but they are by no means insignificant. In all likelihood, informal cultural ties such as those forged by sporting competition, become more important where formal, political ties have atrophied it.¹⁵

The nomination of the American Maurice Raskin to coach the new women's team raises two major points. First, it indicates a temporary 'cease-fire' between the Hapoel and Maccabi organizations, at least as far as coaching is concerned, but second and more importantly, it marks another phase in the process of an early Americanization of Israeli basketball.

The influx of Jewish immigrants from the neighbouring Arab countries at the beginning of the 1950s brought thousands of new members to the Zionist youth movement who settled all over the new state. Among them were a number of basketball players from Egypt, where basketball was already well established. One of them, Eliah Amiel, had even played for the Egyptian national team. The Hapoel organization, with the help of the ruling Labor party, fighting for hegemony in basketball with the Maccabi organization, allocated these players to Hapoel teams around Israel.

In May 1953 a second invitation (and the first addressed to a men's team) to take part in the European championship in Moscow, was sent to the Israeli Sports Federation by FIBA. Still committed to the principle of 50/50 in team selection, the Israeli team left for the championship in Moscow with equal representation from Hapoel and Maccabi. The Moscow event was much more than just a basketball tournament. The geopolitical situation in the Middle East, where the Soviet Union sided with nations hostile to Israel and prevented hundreds of thousands of Russian Jews from emigrating to Israel, made the basketball tournament something more than a sporting competition. Sixty thousand people, among them thousands of Jews, crowded into Dynamo Moscow's stadium to watch the opening game of the championship between Finland and Israel. According to Ralph Klein, the victory of the Israeli team, 60-36, was a landmark in the history of Israeli basketball, not only because of the victory but also because the Israeli flag was raised over the stadium and the Israeli national anthem was played in Russia for the first time.¹⁶ Thousands of Russian Jews stood in the pouring rain (the stadium was roofless at that time) and sang the *HaTikva* (The Hope), the Israeli national anthem. The Israeli team finished in fifth place with the same number of wins and losses as the Hungarian team who took second place. Many consider this European championship performance one of the most significant achievements in the history of Israeli sport. Israel beat Yugoslavia, Italy, Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia, all considered much stronger teams prior to the tournament. During the championship Egypt and Lebanon refused to play Israel, preferring to forfeit the games on technical grounds.¹⁷ While memories of the war of 1948-49 and the tense situation in the Middle East were the official reason, some claim that the fear of being beaten and humiliated was the actual motivation.¹⁸

Fifth place in the European championship guaranteed the Israeli team a place in the World Championship held in Rio de Janeiro the following year, 1954. Twelve players, six from Hapoel teams and six from Maccabi teams, represented Israel. Despite winning only two games (including one in the preliminary round) and losing seven, Israel finished in a respectable eighth place, ahead of Yugoslavia, Chile, Paraguay and Peru. The international recognition that Israeli basketball achieved was one of the most important outcomes of this world championship.

The First Israeli Basketball League

The popularity of the game of basketball, partly prompted by these successes at international level, convinced those who still doubted the necessity of setting up a local basketball league. Basketball players and coaches at the time claimed that establishing a basketball league would

further promote the game, improve playing standards, intensify competition and attract more spectators to the game. Although there had been previous attempts to establish such a league, the animosity between Hapoel and Maccabi frustrated every effort. Eventually an eight-team test league was founded in 1954, with four teams from Hapoel and four from Maccabi. In 1955 the number of teams in the league grew to 12, evenly divided with six teams from each club. With the establishment of a second division, teams could for the first time be relegated or promoted, thus challenging continued equal representation of Hapoel and Maccabi teams.

In October 1956, at the same time as the Suez crisis, Israel invaded the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula. Israeli forces withdrew in March 1957, after the United Nations instituted the UN Emergency Force (UNEF) in the Gaza Strip and Sinai. Due to the Sinai operation, the 1956 basketball season was cancelled and basketball games were not played again until 1957 when athletes returned from the conflict zone.

The Sinai operation might be seen as part of a process of state-formation and provides an example of how this process was intertwined with the development of basketball in Israel. Other developments, such as population growth and urbanization, provide examples of overlapping interdependent processes that also affected the development of Israeli basketball. The small numbers of players in growing kibbutzim constrained teams to unite in order to survive in the league. Mandatory military service between the ages of 18 and 20 (and later until 21) forced teams which relied on these recruits to unite or to collapse. Financial problems facing some of the teams in the early years forced them to come up with practical solutions. Small teams, mainly the ones from the far north and the kibbutzim, would make only one trip to a particular city and play two consecutive games over the weekend: one on Friday and another on Saturday. The arrangement not only saved some travel expenses but, and most importantly, allowed players who also worked during the week to miss out on neither work nor games.

Conclusion

This article has set out to chronicle the development of professional basketball in Israel, by identifying the significant changes and interlocked processes that took place between the years 1935 and 1956, from professional basketball's modest beginnings, progress and struggle for survival to, finally, international recognition. It has shown the important role of the major sporting organizations in Israeli sport and how they affected the early development of sport in Israel in general, and basketball in particular. This process can only be understood adequately by presenting

it in its historical context. While the development of Israeli basketball in its early years was closely related to the broader political economy of Israel, these processes were significant, not only in terms of the development of basketball but in terms of international recognition of the state of Israel.

Zinman College, Wingate Institute, Israel

NOTES

1. For further discussion see Y. Galily and K. Sheard, 'Cultural Imperialism: The Americanization of Israeli Basketball, 1978–1996', *Culture, Sport, Society*, 5, 2 (2002), 55–78.
2. In the preface of their book *Barbarians, Gentleman and Players*, Eric Dunning and Kenneth Sheard use the term 'social configuration' to refer to the structures and patterns formed by interdependent human beings. Moreover, they stressed that they would use terms ending in the suffix '-ization' to refer to the processual aspect of these configurations and to emphasize that such configurations change over time. See E. Dunning and K. Sheard, *Barbarians, Gentleman and Players: A Sociological Study of the Development of Rugby Football in England* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1979), p.ix. Similarly, the use here of terms such as 'professionalization', 'secularization', 'urbanization', and 'militarization' is intended to emphasize the processual nature of the development of basketball in Israel.
3. A. Ben-Porat, 'The Commodification of Football in Israel', *International Review of Sociology of Sport*, 33, 3 (1998), 271.
4. U. Simri, *The Sport Associations in the Land of Israel from World War I* (Netanya: Wingate Institute, 1968).
5. I. Paz and S. Jacobson, *Basketball: All You Ever Wanted to Know About the Game* (Ramat-Gan: Masada, 1982).
6. In 1932 the first Maccabiah, the international Jewish Olympics, sanctioned by the International Olympic Committee, were held in what was then Palestine. They attracted 500 Jewish athletes from 23 countries. The second Maccabiah took place in 1935 with similar participation; many athletes stayed in the country, preferring not to return to a Europe threatened by the Nazis. See S. Griver, *Sport in Israel* (1999); Israel ministry of foreign affairs internet site: www.mfa.gov.il.
7. A unique social and economic framework based on egalitarian and communal principles, the kibbutz grew out of the country's pioneering society of the early twentieth century and developed into a permanent rural way of life. Over the years it established a prosperous economy, primarily agricultural at first, later augmented by industrial and service enterprises, and it distinguished itself through its members' contributions to establishing and building the state.
8. N. Reshef and J. Paltiel, 'Partisanship and Sport: The Unique Case of Politics and Sport in Israel', *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 6 (1989), 305–18, 309.
9. Following the United Nation's vote establishing the new state (33 nations were in favour, 13 against and ten abstained), local Arab militants, helped by volunteers from Arab countries, launched violent attacks on the Jewish community in order to prevent the establishment of the Jewish state. On 15 May 1948 the state of Israel was proclaimed. Violence immediately erupted between armies from neighbouring Arab nations and Jewish communities that gathered to organize military forces. On 28 May 1948 David Ben-Gurion, then Prime Minister, founded the Israel Defense Force (IDF), the Hebrew name of which, Zvah Haganah Le Yisrael, is commonly abbreviated to Zahal, and proscribed other armed forces. The war for Israel's independence was the most costly it has fought; more than 6,000 Jewish soldiers and civilians died (one per cent of the total population at that time). Although no official peace agreement ended the war of independence, in 1949 four

- armistice agreements were negotiated and signed in Rhodes between Israel and its Arab neighbours: Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. The end of the fighting resulted in a 50 per cent increase in Israeli territory, including western Jerusalem.
10. A key element of Ben-Gurion's policy was the integration of Israel's independent military forces into a unified military structure.
 11. I. Nevo, 'Sport institutions and ideology in Israel', *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 24, 4 (2000), 334–44.
 12. Emigrating to Israel is called 'aliya', literally 'ascension' since many newcomers consider coming to the Holy Land to be an 'ascension'. In effect, it is a translation of the Biblical phrase 'ascending to my house', which English renders as 'a pilgrimage'.
 13. The American word 'boost' which means 'push' is a common term in Israel and is one example of how American phrases have penetrated the Hebrew language. At the same time it can be argued that Nat Holman's operations laid the foundation for the process of Americanization of Israeli basketball. See also Galily and Sheard, 'Cultural Imperialism: The Americanization of Israeli Basketball, 1978–1996'.
 14. N. Elias and E. Dunning, *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).
 15. B. Stoddart, 'Sport, Culture and Postcolonial Relations', in G. Redmond (ed.), *Sport and Politics* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1986), p.125.
 16. Personal communication with Ralph Klein, a basketball player on the Israeli team at that time.
 17. The teams from Egypt and Lebanon were also invited to the European Championship, making a total of 17 teams.
 18. I. Paz, *Basketball in Israel 1948–1968* (Netanya: Wingate Institute, 1968).