Processes That Shaped Sports in Israel During the 20th Century

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The development of sport in any country is not a process in and of itself, but rather a reflection of historical, social, economical, political, and ideological processes that continuously shape the character of that country. Sport in Israel is no exception to this rule; therefore, the purpose of this article is to examine how certain historical events that took place during the 20th century influenced Israeli sport in its present state.

The Ideology of the Zionist Movement

The Zionist movement, which was established by Theodore Herzl in 1897, coincides almost entirely with the 20th century. Zionism, which promoted the rejuvenation of the Jewish people and ultimately led to Jewish statehood, was a unique phenomenon in comparison with other liberation movements of its time. It aimed for the self-determination of a nation whose people, for the most part, were not to be found in their historical homeland and were dispersed around the globe. Nevertheless, the majority of Jews around the world maintained a strong historical–emotional awareness and connection to this ancient Biblical land. Although not all Jews immediately and unconditionally accepted Zionist goals and ideology, especially those who were highly religious or most assimilated into the community, the Zionist movement strove to gain legitimacy within the Jewish community by promoting the idea of a national homeland for the Jewish people in Palestine.

Because the population that the movement addressed was dispersed throughout the world, two additional major goals were pursued. The first one was the creation of a new national culture through the revival of the Hebrew language and the creation of Hebrew poetry, literature, theater, and art. These elements were meant to

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reflect the revival of nationalism, thus creating a melting pot for Jewish people of different cultures united at that time solely by their common religion. The second major goal was the formation of the “New Jew,” who was expected to be different from the “Diaspora Jew” in both physical image and values. The expression muscular Judaism, coined by Max Nordau (Herzl’s associate in the Zionist movement), consisted of important ideological elements in the Zionist ethos, such as the desire to refute the image of the “Shtetl Jew” (Eastern European backward Jew) in reaction to racist political theories of the time, the physical rejuvenation of the nation, and the formation of a link between a person and his or her land, thereby building a foundation for national unity.¹

The image of the Diaspora Jew as a weak and powerless person was partly based on reality but was also substantially exaggerated in the Zionist literature. For example, leaders of the Zionist movement such as Nordau, Mandelstamm, and Sokolov themselves described the Diaspora Jew in a derogatory manner.² To paraphrase, the Jew, who is always said to be groaning and coughing, is considered short, pathetic, and scrawny, and his movements are perceived as heavy to the point of misery. The Diaspora Jew is viewed as too “cerebral” and “spiritual,” lacking harmony of body and mind. The internalization of these anti-Semitic claims can be traced back to the Haskala (Enlightenment) movement, another source from which the Zionists obtained these negative images. The fact that these insulting descriptions quite accurately expressed the actual lack of physical activity among Eastern European Jews, however, cannot be ignored. Accordingly, the new Zionist philosophy expressed the desire to break free from the physical image of the feeble Diaspora Jew and to turn the image into a strong Jew who could physically cope with a hostile environment.

Muscular Judaism also aspired to develop military skills as a means of forming an orderly defense force. In the long run, therefore, the Jews regarded their sports unions as organizations of protection in the Diaspora and as a guise for the security activities taking place in Palestine (i.e., pre-statehood Israel). It is worthy to note that the growth of Zionism, together with the emphasis on physical education as a highly significant means for the entire development of the New Jew, occurred simultaneously with the development of the race doctrine in Europe. According to this doctrine, the Jews suffered, as did the entire Semitic race, from inherited physical inferiority.³ Muscular Judaism partially reflected these racist assumptions; for example, in his speech before the Zionist Congress in 1898, Nordau⁴ called for the creation of a new breed of Judaism and went on to promote the romantic notion of a return to the ancient heroic past of the Jewish nation. As a result, the ancient past and its national heroes became a major object of identification, with the newly developing sports unions bearing the names of well-known heroes from the Jewish past, such as Bar-Kochba (Nordau’s own preferred hero, who led the revolt against the Roman Empire in 132–135), Samson, Bar-Giora (one of the leaders of the revolt against the Roman Empire in 69–70), and especially Yehuda the Maccabee (the most important leader of the Jewish revolt against the Seleucid empire in 166 BC).

This new Jewish preoccupation with sport became a central element in Zionist ideology in the creation of the New Jew, but it was also perceived as a unifying factor that was functional in directing the Zionist movement. More specifically, it helped to foster the nurturing of a common identity, team spirit, unity of movement,