The Politics of Israeli Soccer: A Guide for the Perplexed

Politics and sports? In America, most sports loyalties seem to be based on local loyalties – go Knicks, Rangers, etc., if you live in New York (sorry, as an old Brooklyn Dodgers fan I can’t include the Yankees in this list). Or the anti-fans – beat LA, or in the latest version – anti-Miami Heat/LeBron James, particularly in Cleveland.

However, in much of the rest of the world, politics and sports are very much tied together. Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi owns the A.C. Milan football (soccer) team, while Lazio (one of the two Rome teams) was Mussolini’s favorite, and some of its fans are still neo-fascists. When I went to see a Lazio game with my son Adi at the famed Olimpico Stadium in Rome, he warned me that we shouldn’t speak Hebrew in the stands so that we wouldn’t be identified as Jews and Israelis. The fans of other Italian clubs, such as Livorno and Perugia, wave red flags and Che Guevera shirts.

In Spain, Real Madrid was Generalissimo Franco’s team, while FC (Futbol Club) Barcelona is a bastion of Catalan culture and nationalism, and some of the players participated in the Spanish Civil War on the Republican side. The president of the club was even murdered by the Falangists.

In Israel, which began as a highly politicized society, the origin of most sports teams was also political. There were two major sports associations – Hapoel and Maccabi. Hapoel was founded by and associated with the Histadrut Labor Federation and the Socialist-Zionist movements, while Maccabi was associated with mainstream (centrist) Zionism.

In general, a cultivation of sports and physical activity was part of the Zionist philosophy of creating a new, modern Jew, who could both work the land and defend himself when necessary. Members of Hapoel teams actually marched in the annual May 1st parades, and Knesset Speaker MK Reuven Rivlin recently related that when he played as a youth for Hapoel Rishon L’tzion (because there were no Maccabi or Beitar teams in the area), his father arranged a special contract that exempted his son (a member of the right-wing Revisionist Beitar youth group) from having to march on May Day.

There was a much smaller Beitar sports association, associated with the Irgun and the Revisionists, and independent sports associations like the famed Hakoah Vienna football club, which actually won the national Austrian soccer championship in the pre-Nazi period (today a remnant exists in the Hakoah Ramat Gan football club).

In recent years, in the age of privatization, the associations have weakened, and most Israeli teams now have private owners. However, elements of the old allegiances still exist. The Maccabi teams today are associated with bourgeois elements, while the Hapoel teams and their fan base tend to be associated with the left. Many teams have also dropped the Hapoel and Maccabi
Maccabi Tel Aviv, particularly in basketball, likes to claim that it is “the national team”, a claim which angers many of the fans of the other teams. While the Hapoel Tel Aviv fans, particular in soccer – a team which has been very successful in the past decade and is the current national champion and Israeli representative in the European Champions League – refuses to accept the national mantel. “We represent Hapoel Tel Aviv, and not the nation”, the fans declare. The color red dominates at Hapoel games – particularly those of Hapoel Tel Aviv (soccer and basketball) and Hapoel Jerusalem (basketball), whose fans seem to believe that Che Guevera once played for the team.

The antithesis of Hapoel Tel Aviv is not their bitter rival Maccabi Tel Aviv, but Beitar Jerusalem, the only team in the top league which has never had an Arab player (due to the opposition of its right-wing, racist fan-base). Some of Beitar’s recent owners said they were ready to sign a worthy Arab player, but backed down when fans threatened to boycott the team if they did. Given that context, and the racist taunts that Beitar fans throw at Arab players, Hapoel Tel Aviv fans like myself gained particular pleasure last June when Hapoel won the championship (beating out Maccabi Haifa) with a goal in the last minute of the season, at Beitar’s home grounds, Teddy Stadium in Jerusalem, and the championship cup was raised by Hapoel team captain Walid Badir, a Palestinian-Israel from the town of Kfar Kassim. Of course, the fact that Beitar Jerusalem plays in a stadium named after the historically famous Jerusalem mayor, Labor movement stalwart and Ben-Gurion aide Teddy Kollek is a delicious irony in itself.

Another very interesting phenomenon in Israeli soccer is the success of Bnei Sakhnin from the Lower-Galilean town of Sakhnin during the past decade. Sakhnin is the town where six Palestinian-Israeli citizens were killed in 1976, protesting against Israeli land confiscation, which is the origin of the annual Land Day commemoration ceremonies in the Israeli-Arab sector. The team is owned by local Palestinian-Israeli businessmen from the town of Sakhnin, and half of the players are Arab and half Jewish and international. As a counterpoint to the situation at Hapoel Tel Aviv, the longtime captain is the veteran Jewish goal-keeper Meir Cohen from the nearby town of Beit Shean. The team won the Israeli National Cup in 2004, and former owner Mazen Genaim is now mayor of the town.

My colleague at the Palestine-Israel Journal, development officer Pierre Klochendler, and his filmmaking partner Jerold Kessel (former longtime CNN Middle East correspondent) made a fascinating documentary about the Bnei Sakhnin club called “We Too Have No Other Country”, a paraphrase of a famous song by the late Ehud Manor “We Have No Other Country” (Ein Lanu Eretz Acheret), which the right tried to “nationalize”, but which Manor himself stressed was actually a protest song against the first Lebanon War. The film is really about the status and aspirations of Palestinian Israelis, and as Klochendler notes, is “a film about soccer in which you never see a soccer ball.”

Today there are many leftists who support Maccabi, definitely in basketball, but also in soccer, though Hapoel Tel Aviv is clearly the preferred team of
the left and the liberal artists and intellectuals, as well as of the Arabs and Jews who live in the Jaffa-Tel Aviv-Bat-Yam area. Many of the team’s homegrown players come from the poorer neighborhoods of Jaffa and nearby Bat-Yam. The Arabs in the north tend to root for Maccabi Haifa, which has featured many star Arab players from nearby Shfaram and the Galilee in recent years, beginning with scoring champion Zahi Armeli, continuing with Biram Kiyal who now plays for Celtic in Scotland, and on to today’s regulars Mohammad Ghadir and Ali Otman.

Incidentally, when they tried to check the political preference of all the soccer players before the last elections, the only one who openly declared he was voting for Meretz was Dor Malul of Maccabi Tel Aviv. Michael Zandberg, last year with Hapoel Tel Aviv who in the past had said he supports Meretz, was only willing to say that he “leans toward the left.” His sister Tammy Zandberg is a member of the Tel Aviv City Council on behalf of Meretz.