

Israel Prepares For 12th Maccabiah Games

by Simon Griver
World Zionist Press Agent

The countdown is on for the 12th Maccabiah Games which will be held in Israel from July 15-25, 1985. In an era when politics and sport are unhappily mixed up, the coming Maccabiah promises to demonstrate that the spirit of sportsmanship which is so frequently lacking in contemporary international sport, is alive and well in the Jewish Olympics.

According to organizers Michael Kevehazi and Arie Rosenzweig, this Maccabiah will be the biggest and best ever. More than 4,000 competitors are expected to represent the Jewish communities of 35 countries in 30 different sports. This Jewish sporting 'extravaganza' will open at Ramat Gan's Kfar Maccabiah stadium, where several million dollars have been invested in renovations for the occasion, with a spectacular show of lasers. The sporting events themselves are scheduled to take place in stadia in all parts of the country. The closing ceremony in Jerusalem's Sultan's Pool will include a sound and light show in this picturesque and incredibly popular setting beneath the walls of the capital's old city.

veterans will also be in Israel for an international conference for those who took part in the first six Maccabiah games. The first Maccabiah was held in 1932. Then 309 athletes came from 17 countries. The games were such a striking success that the second Maccabiah in 1935 attracted 1,700 competitors. These became known as the 'aliya' games because many of the participants stayed on in Palestine, preferring not to return to a Europe threatened by Hitler.

The next Maccabiah was not until 1949, the first to be held in the independent State of Israel. But the halving of entries to 800 reflected the tragedy that had befallen the Jewish people in the Holocaust. The number of competitors has steadily climbed since then — 2,700 came in 1977, 3,500 in 1981 and the 4,000 mark will be topped this time around.

For the first time a team from Zaire will attend the Maccabiah. A Soviet team has been invited but the offer will certainly be declined in the current political climate. It is hoped that Romania will send a team for the first time since 1935 and an invitation was sent personally to President Ceausescu.

Israel from the world over to compete under the various flags of their countries. However, participants are housed together without references to countries of origin and no sense of national rivalry is felt in the Maccabiah. Furthermore, spokesman Zvi Eyal stresses that the Maccabiah movement is not about holding a meet each four years. It is an ongoing entity. In August, 1983, the European Maccabiah was held in Antwerp; in February, 1984, there was a Latin tournament in Sao Paulo and this coming August the American Maccabiah takes place in Detroit. Meanwhile the Maccabiah world movement is at work everywhere promoting sport, cultural and Zionist activity (the movement is affiliated to the World Zionist Organization).

Dr. Israel Peled, Chairman of the Maccabiah World Union, describes it as one of the most important organizations in the world. "Through it 300,000 members maintain close ties to their Jewishness and Israel," he says. "In some communities Jewish life revolves around the Maccabiah sports club. In Perth, Western Australia, all 300 members of the Jewish community belong to the club.

Buenos Aires has five big clubs boasting 20,000 members."

'Superstars'

Over the years a gallery of Jewish sporting 'superstars' have entered the Maccabiah. They include names like Dutch tennis ace Tom Okker and the greatest olympian sportsman of all time, Marc Spitz. Many, like Israel's American born former basketball captain Tal Brody, have decided to make their home in Israel after experiencing the country during the Maccabiah. And none other than President Chaim Herzog, himself, was once the Maccabi boxing champion of Ireland.

Boxing is no longer amongst Maccabiah events. A new sport in next year's games will be hockey, while other events include rugby, softball, yachting, karate, judo and wrestling, as well as track and field athletics, swimming, basketball and tennis. For the less physical minded there are bridge and chess competitions.

In the 1981 Maccabiah, the U.S. topped the medals table with 73 golds, followed by Israel with 59, South Africa 14, Britain 10 and Canada with 9. South Africa would have done considerably better

but because the Maccabiah is recognized by the International Olympic Committee, South African sportsmen are banned from many events. Records were broken last time in almost every branch. Though competition was fiercer than ever, genuine sportsmanship was in evidence everywhere. On the other hand, the level of sport could hardly be compared to top international standards. In part, this is because many of the world's top Jewish stars, particularly in tennis, prefer to enter big money competitions rather than attend the 'no prize-money' Maccabiah — a poor reflection of the way in which sport has become commercialized in our times.

Rivalry Without Hostility

Rivalry at the Maccabiah is keen but not hostile and the Maccabiah really has no 'winners' or 'losers.' Sportsmanship thrives and Jewish youth has an unforgettable experience in Israel, on and off the sports field. For both participants and spectators the Maccabiah is a sporting event which succeeds in generating a spirit characterized by competition and solidarity alike for Jews all over the world.

Then and Now

Innovations for the twelfth Maccabiah include a youth tournament in which some 300 young sportsmen will participate in six events. And thousands of Maccabiah

Tribute

Yet even if no Eastern European representatives are present, the games will be a tribute to international Jewish unity. Indeed some pundits feel it is a contradiction in identity for Jews to come to

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