Sport, National Identity, and Media Discourse over Foreign Athletes in Israel

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This article looks at the perception of Jewish-Israeli nationality and the boundaries of the Israeli collective, as reflected in the media coverage of foreign basketball and soccer players during the years 2002–2006. We show that while foreign athletes play a central role in the efforts of Israeli sport clubs, they remain largely excluded from the Israeli collective. At times they are partially included in the collective via discourses that emphasize their contribution to the “common good.” However, this inclusion remains provisional and incomplete. Much like in other countries, it is contingent on excellence on the court. We also show the dominance of a unique ethno-Jewish discourse, demanding that foreign and naturalized players, especially if they are not Jewish, constantly pronounce their loyalty to the state and demonstrate familiarity with the Jewish people and their religion, language, and traditions.

On 1 May 2004, the Israeli basketball club Maccabi Tel-Aviv won on its home court the European championship after defeating the Italian club Skipper Bologna. During the following days, Israeli public and media enthusiastically celebrated the Jewish victory over “the Gentiles.” Such enthusiasm is hardly surprising. As in many other countries, the Israeli national team and the leading Israeli clubs are often seen as national symbols, and winning an international championship is perceived as a national achievement. But the Maccabi victory had an interesting twist: Most of the team’s stars were Gentile themselves, giving an ironic flavor to the nationalistic emotions.

Two days before the final game, Israeli Minister of Interior Security, Tzachi Hanegbi, wrote a column in the most popular daily, Yediot Ahronot,
making comparisons between the game and Israeli independence in 1948: “Then, like now, we all stayed by the radio/television. Then, like now, we are all Jews.” “We are all Jews” (kulanu yehudim) is a linguistic device often used by Jews in Israel to bridge over ideological controversies and social rifts, and it is used casually even in such an occasion when the Israeli club’s heroes are not Jewish. During the final, when Maccabi’s win was already guaranteed, Rami Weitz, the commentator of the public television channel, began to count the number of Israeli players on the court. The fact that the heroes of the victory were foreign players clearly made him uncomfortable, and he was desperately looking for local heroes. In his count of Israelis, Weitz did not include Maccabi’s naturalized players, David Bluthenthal, Derek Sharp, and Dion Thomas. A “real” Israeli is clearly a Sabra, a Jew born in Israel.

The contradiction between local-patriotic feelings and rhetoric, on the one hand, and the cosmopolitan nature of present-day international sports, on the other hand, highlights important questions about the place of nationalism in what some see as a transnational world. This contradiction is not unique to Israel. Many studies have shown the close relationship between sport, the nation state, and ethnic and religious identities. Bairner emphasizes, however, that the nature of this relationship differs greatly according to the political context: in Scotland sport is used to underline its distinct nationality within the UK, in the Republic of Ireland sport is an arena of competing nationalist views, and in Sweden sport is less related to nationalism due to the lack of struggle and challenges regarding the identity of the nation. This variability calls for more research, and, given the centrality of Jewish nationalism within Israeli ideology, one may expect Israel to provide an intriguing case study. In particular, it should be interesting to see how strong nationalist sentiments are maintained in the face of the cosmopolitan nature of Israeli professional sports.

In this article, we thus study the popular understanding of Jewish-Israeli nationality and the drawing and redrawing of the boundaries of the Jewish-Israeli collective as reflected in the media discourse on foreign basketball and soccer players. Former studies have emphasized the centrality of ethno-religious identities in the definition of the Jewish nation. These studies have focused on official rhetoric in the form of curricula, political writing and speeches, the construction of memorials, court decisions, and so forth. We focus instead on the construction of the collective in a discourse that does not consciously address “crucial” political questions. Looking at this seemingly innocent discourse has the potential to reveal how the nation is unconsciously conceived of by people who are not professional producers of national identity. In this regard, we follow the recent trend among scholars of nationality of examining conceptions of nationality in everyday life, and, more specifically, in the field of sport.

We show that while foreign athletes play a central role in the efforts of Israeli teams, they remain largely excluded from the Israeli collective.
Their large contribution to the success of Israeli clubs in the European arena makes them part of “us” as opposed to “them”—teams from other nations. However, this broadening of boundaries remains provisional and contingent. The inclusion is always missing, deficient, and incomplete, conditioned by excellence on the court as well as by pronounced loyalty to Israel and familiarity with the Jewish people and their religion, language, and traditions. While the demand that foreigners show athletic excellence is not unique to Israel, the centrality of the ethno-Jewish discourse adds another layer of demands and barriers for those who wish to become Israeli citizens or become part of the Israeli collective.8

Israeli Collective Identity

Scholars of Israeli political culture have often argued that the Israeli collective is mostly delimited by ethno-religious boundaries. Sammy Smooha defines Israel as an “ethnic democracy,” committed to formal democratic principles and to civil rights, but also formally favoring its Jewish citizens to other citizens.9 Oren Yiftachel argued in response that such a pervasive and well-entrenched favoritism of Jews disqualifies Israel as a democracy, and he therefore characterizes it as “ethnocracy.”10 Despite their disagreements, both Smooha and Yiftachel agree on the centrality of the ethno-Jewish component in the definition of the Israeli nation and collective. Baruch Kimmerling, who shares this view, writes that, according to the dominant Jewish perception, Israel belongs to the whole Jewish people, including those who reside outside its boundaries but not to its non-Jewish citizens.11 This is most evident in the Israeli Law of Return that allows all Jews to instantly become citizens while Palestinians are almost invariably denied even the option to become resident in fear of opening the discussion over the Palestinian refugees’ Right of Return.12

Yoav Peled and Gershon Shafir distinguish between three major discourses of citizenship and inclusion in Israel, which we will show may also be useful to understand discourses of citizenship and collective identity in other countries: liberal, republican, and ethno-national. Each of these discourses sets different criteria for full acceptance to the Israeli collective. The liberal discourse sees citizenship as a set of rights that defend citizens from both other individuals and the state. The republican discourse conditions citizens’ rights on their contribution to the “common good” as it is defined by Israeli dominant ideology. Finally, according to the ethno-national discourse, citizenship is first and foremost a prerogative of members in an ethnic community. Peled and Shafir argue that in Israel all three discourses are found but the latter two dominate. The dominance of the Jewish ethnicity and the frequent identification of the common good with this ethnicity turn the republican and the ethno-national discourses into tools used for the exclusion of non-Jews in Israeli society.13
These dominant conceptions of the Israeli collective not only determine how different citizens are treated but also guide policies regarding the inclusion of new citizens, that is, immigration policies. Rosenhek and Cohen claim that Israel’s immigration policy is “based on ethno-national principles which officially discriminate between Jews and non-Jews. While Jewish immigration is ideologically defined as the founding rationale and as the reason for the existence of the Jewish state, the immigration of non-Jews is perceived not only as unwanted, but also as essentially contradicting the very foundations of the Jewish state.”

While this Jewish hegemony has dominated Israeli public life for many decades, the perceptions it disseminates are by no means essentialist, rigid, and unified across the various sectors of the Jewish community. Quite to the contrary, studies have shown considerable variation across different times and social fields.

In this study, we examine a phenomenon that violates the hegemonic assumptions: the media representation of non-Jewish athletes. While these athletes are not part of the Israeli collective as it is defined by the hegemonic ideology, they are recruited to assist with the efforts of Israeli sports clubs, which represent Israel in the international (mainly European) arena. Our study tries to identify fundamental assumptions regarding the nature of Jewish-Israeli “us,” revealed by the sports media treatment of these athletes. Through the ways in which the writers and reporters talk about these “foreign” athletes we detect the nuances of the different discourses of citizenship discussed by Peled and Shafir.

Our work thus adds to a growing body of literature studying fields, artifacts, and practices that reproduce national consciousness through established routines such as museum exhibitions, telling and retelling myths about the pioneers, drawing of maps, and reshaping a city’s look by replacing Arab-style buildings with European ones. These and similar studies attempt to understand what Katriel calls the “mechanisms through which the social consensus is generated and orchestrated, by means of an ongoing discourse over meanings, values and representations.” They are important not because they prove the Jewish character of Israel but because they decipher the symbolic and discursive practices that characterize Israeli nationality in various historical moments and trace the genealogy of these constantly changing national perceptions. The sports arena is another important, yet largely neglected field, in which national identities are expressed and reproduced.

Sport, Media, and Collective Identities

Sports events are rituals that provide an arena for the expression of individual and collective identities. Identifying with a local team or with the
national team provides the individual with a sense of belonging to a certain community. Nation-states use sport to establish their international legitimacy. The success of local athletes or sports teams symbolizes the success of the nation, or, in the famous words of Eric Hobsbawm, “The imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people.”

This study will examine a facet that complicates and at times challenges these common images and national emotions—foreign athletes who play for teams that represent the “nation.” By looking at the media coverage of these players, we seek to understand how Israeli media people perceive the Israeli collective and nation and track their contribution to the entrenchment of hegemonic tendencies. Antonio Gramsci observed the central role of the media in creating and preserving the hegemony, because of the journalists’ interest in maintaining the status quo and their affinity to the ruling elites. Other scholars believe that in modern society the part of the media in reproducing hegemony is constantly growing.

The media is especially influential in constructing nationality. In fact, some scholars argue that the media takes the central role in the production, conservation, and reproduction of modern nationalism. The media facilitates contact between the different members of imagined communities, thus contributing to the fortification of collective identities. The social construction of nationalism is especially salient in the field of sport. Hargreaves notes the presentation of national symbols during international sports events and the frequent participation of national figures in these events. These practices provide both participants and spectators with a chance to identify with the nation through sport and to sharpen the distinction between the national “us” and the “otherness” of opposing nationalities.

Social and media studies of Israeli sport have grown substantially over the last decade. Some of these former studies examined the media representation and coverage of Arab athletes and sports teams in Israel, and their findings are illuminating. Sorek, who conducted an extensive study on Arab soccer in Israel, examined the discourse of the Arab sports newspapers focusing on the social identities of enclave—“a social sphere that is ruled by a liberal-integrative discourse of citizenship.” Shor and Yonay examined the discourse of the Hebrew media around Arab athletes. They found that the expressions of these athletes are closely monitored by the Jewish-dominated media discourse. The players are expected to share the dominant Zionist ideology and when they express the sentiments of their own ethnic group they are often policed and silenced.

These former studies make a significant contribution to our understanding of media coverage of the largest non-Jewish ethnic group in Israel—the Palestinians—demonstrating their marginalization in the Jewish media. However, none of these previous studies examined the media discourse about another highly visible non-Jewish group—athletes with a foreign nationality. While the latter are very different from the Arab citizens, both groups share
the status of non-Jews in a Jewish state. Our study focuses on the way Hebrew media talks about the relationship of foreign athletes to Israeli society, seeking to understand what Katriel terms the “national grammar” that guides this discourse. The anomaly of an athlete representing a foreign nationality provides an opportunity to penetrate “social and media patterns that serve as the common cultural foundation for many Israelis.” Examining the media representation of foreign players we try to learn about the hegemonic media and public perception of what it is to be Israeli, as well as on the way in which patterns of citizenship, belonging, inclusion, and exclusion are being molded in Israeli society.

Foreign Athletes in Israel

Foreign players have been a part of Israeli basketball leagues since the 1970s and of the Israeli soccer league since the late 1980s. Officially the players are “foreign workers”; that is, work immigrants who are allowed to work in Israel for a limited period and only in the position for which they are recruited. But in many ways they are very different from other foreign workers. Their salaries are much higher and they are more aware of their employment rights (which are also enforced by strict regulations). The players are also very visible and their athletic abilities help them win the respect and even admiration of sports fans, awarding them with a social status that is much higher than other foreign workers. In 2002–2003, three foreign players were allowed in each basketball major league team and five in the major soccer league.

During the early 1970s, most foreign basketball players were American Jews, but with time the number of non-Jewish players grew substantially, largely due to the processes of globalization and commercialization in international sports. To bypass quotas on the number of foreign nationals in a given team, many of the players became Israeli citizens, often through fraudulent fictive marriages to Jewish-Israeli women or through fast-lane conversion into Judaism (Jewish immigrants are entitled to immediate Israeli citizenship). Most foreign basketball players come to Israel from the United States, leading to the Americanization of Israeli basketball. In soccer, most of the players come from developing countries (most commonly in Eastern Europe, South America, and Africa). In total, there are over 100 foreign athletes playing in the major Israeli basketball and soccer leagues in any given year.

METHODOLOGY

The sampling includes news reports and articles about, and interviews with, foreign athletes who have played in the major men's soccer and basketball leagues. We examined all the articles and interviews that appeared in the
major Hebrew newspapers, television channels, and Internet sites between July 2002 and June 2006 and focused on foreign athletes. Data were systematically gathered from:

1. **Daily Newspapers**: Articles and interviews were collected from the three major Hebrew daily newspapers: Yediot Achronot, Maariv, and Haaretz. In addition, all the weekly Maariv-chain local newspapers were thoroughly searched for relevant articles.

2. **Television Channels**: Articles and interviews were gathered from the following channels: Channel 1, Channel 2, Channel 5, and Channel 5+. The first two were the largest Israeli public channels at the time. Both broadcast daily sports news reports. Channels 5 and 5+ are sport channels, broadcasting daily half-hour sport news magazines.

3. **Internet Web Sites**: Daily articles and interviews from the following Web sites were examined: Sal-news.com, Sport5.co.il, Safsal.co.il, One.co.il, and Ynet.co.il. The first four sites on this list are exclusively sports sites. Ynet is a general news site, with a large section dedicated to sports.

   Overall, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of 273 long reports, articles, and interviews from the written press, television, and Internet Web sites. In addition, we examined 40 profile articles and long interviews with Jewish players, randomly sampled for comparison purposes. We also watched over 200 broadcasted sports news magazines and about 100 full basketball and soccer matches, randomly sampled throughout the years of the study.

   In order to examine Israeli nationality and citizenship discourses, the current article relies mainly on reports and interviews that focus on naturalized players or on foreign players who wished to become Israeli citizens. The most notable example of such articles during the years of our study came from the illustrative discourse surrounding Giovanni Rosso’s request for Israeli citizenship (see below). We expand on this case and focus much of our discussion on it because of the large volume of coverage it attracted and, consequently, the fascinating debate that ensued. This debate, we argue, is emblematic of the underlying currents in Israeli discourse of citizenship and collective identity. Although not unique to Rosso’s case, these currents were most lucidly and blatantly put forward by writers and public figures in the case of Giovanni Rosso.

**FINDINGS**

Israeli media is preoccupied with the relationship between foreign players, the Israeli nation, and Judaism. The loyalty of the players to Israel is a constant source of debate. It is presented as a touchstone for their suitability
to become part of the Israeli collective and to represent it worldwide. Playing on Israeli teams that frequently represent Israel in international arenas, the place of these foreign players within the collective is quite controversial. Although they help the collective to compete with other nations (either by playing for Israeli clubs or, if they are naturalized, by playing for the national team), they largely remain foreigners in the consciousness of many in the Israeli public.

We begin our findings section by looking at the discourse around players who naturalized in Israel. We identify the media reporters’ refusal to see them as “real” Israelis and the constant questioning of their loyalty not only to the state but also to the Jewish people. Next, we bring the case of one player, Giovanni Rosso, a Croatian who in 2002 applied for Israeli citizenship. The debate that developed following this application demonstrates the primacy of ethno-national and republican citizenship discourses in Israel. Finally, we identify the list of demands on the foreign players, especially those who want to become citizens. These include pronounced loyalty to Israel, knowledge of Jewish culture and symbols, and evident contribution to Israeli society beyond the field of sport.

Naturalized Players

Since the early 1970s and climaxing in the early 1980s, the naturalization of foreign players in Israel became a common practice. The new Israeli citizens, mostly of American origin, played a major part in the success of Israeli basketball clubs and of the Israeli national team at the end of the 1970s. During the 1990s, naturalization of athletes substantially decreased, and, by the beginning of the new millennium, there were no more than 10 naturalized players in the major Israeli basketball league, and even fewer in the major soccer league.

The Hebrew media expect the newly naturalized players to reward the state for awarding them citizenship by continuously announcing their devotion and gratitude. The players are constantly suspect; they are expected to show gratitude for their inclusion in the Jewish nation, to which they can never fully belong. A clear illustration is the changing attitude towards Derek Sharp, an African American who played for the Israeli national team. At first he was highly praised: “Sharp is not the first new citizen to play in the national team, but he is the one who showed the highest level of enthusiasm about the honorable mission. He doesn’t do it as a favor, and doesn’t complain.”38 Yet this positive view is conditional. When half a year later Sharp asked to extend his summer vacation in the United States due to family issues and to miss the beginning of practice for the 2003 European Championship, he was harshly criticized: “We thought Sharp would occupy the position saved for a new citizen in the national team for a long period.
But he doesn’t connect to the national team like the Sabras [Israeli-born Jews]... We certainly expected more of him.”

Sharp’s status as an outsider is brought up with a sense of betrayal, although he was already a citizen at that moment, indicating that non-Jews who naturalize are not fully accepted in spite of their legal status.

For many in the media, the “Israeliness” of the new citizens is not a set status but rather a permanent test that must be passed time and again. Having an Israeli passport is not enough; the players must also feel and act as Israelis. A report on David Bluthenthal, a naturalized Jewish-American basketball player, playing for Maccabi Tel-Aviv opened with the following: “I know that he is playing on an Israeli slot, but I’m not sure if he also feels that way.” Although it is unknown how an “Israeli” must feel, the reporter demands that the naturalized player proves he feels that way.

Watching basketball games on the television and reading commentary columns in newspapers on these games one gets a clear message, which repeats in virtually every commentary: The commentators prefer the Sabras. They demand that the coaches let them play more and emphasize their contribution, even when this contribution is modest. The naturalized players, on the other hand, much like foreign players, in general, are required to show special skills, as if they must make up for “robbing” the place of “true” Israelis.

When the Sabra Doron Shefer returned to play basketball three years after his premature retirement from the game, one of the commentators wrote: “This is a fresh breeze... an experienced player, pure blue and white,” referring to the colors of the Israeli flag commonly used to symbolize homemade products and national pride.

What, then, is “impure” blue and white? The answer for that comes in an article on Maccabi Tel-Aviv basketball club, entitled “The Fake Passport of Israeli Basketball.” Publicist Amir Bugan presents his view on the team and its players:

They say that Maccabi represents Israel in Europe against a cruel and anti-Semitic world. Huffman, Parker, MacDonald, Sharp, Brisker, Louis, Goree, Vujcic, and Bluthenthal are all citizens of the world, and even a bit Israelis (in heart or in passport). Maccabi prefers these foreign workers to the locals.

The reporter knows that some of the players on this list (in italics) are Israeli citizens. However, he believes that this is not enough. They have an Israeli passport, but not a full Israeli heart. Later on in the article, he also includes the team’s coach, David Blatt, in this list of “dubious Israelis,” although the latter has been playing and coaching in Israel for more than 20 years. A person is Israeli, it seems, only if one was born and raised in Israel. Furthermore, a team that prefers “foreign workers” is no longer a true representative of the Israeli spirit.
The Public Debate over Giovanni Rosso and his Attempt to Become an Israeli Citizen

The case of soccer player Giovanni Rosso epitomizes the media perception of the Israeli collective, as well as its approach to players who wish to receive Israeli citizenship and to foreign players more generally. Rosso, a Croatian citizen, played for primary league clubs for over a decade during which he was considered one of the best players in the country. In mid-2002, he applied for Israeli citizenship, citing his love for the country and his desire to stay and live in it. Rosso, known for his polished technique on the field, was also famous for his “big mouth.” He was a “colorful” interviewee, providing the media with many attractive headlines and creative quotations. This colorfulness, combined with his appealing physical appearance, his charming playful style, and his excellence on the field, had turned Rosso into a very popular interviewee, winning ample media attention even before he applied for Israeli citizenship. However, following that application Rosso moved from the sports columns into the center of media attention.

Between 2002 and 2004, one could not open a newspaper, an Internet site, or a TV channel in Israel without running into a discussion about Rosso and his request. Among those responding to it were the Israeli President, ministers, parliament members, reporters, commentators, fans, and other media figures. The opinions were approximately evenly divided between those who supported giving citizenship to Rosso and those who opposed. In the context of this article, it is especially interesting to examine the arguments made by both camps. While opponents relied mainly on claims drawn from the ethno-national discourse and the republican discourse, supporters used mainly the republican discourse. The liberal discourse was almost completely absent.

Those employing the ethno-national discourse (about a third of the opposing articles) emphasized the fact that Rosso was not Jewish and did not intend to become one. Ari Shamai, a journalist and one of the louder opponents to Rosso becoming a citizen claimed, for example, that “if the Croatian-Catholic Giovanni Rosso receives citizenship, violating all proper procedures, Eli Yishai, the Minister of Interior, will not be able to refuse similar requests from numerous soccer players who covet the Israeli passport.”

Although most writers are secular, they often referred to religious symbols. Shamai, for example, wrote that “[Rosso] does not study Maimonides and has not decided to tie himself to the holy land.” These religious allusions are a clear sign of the ethno-national discourse. Those who desire Israeli citizenship, if not from the “right” ethno-national origin, are expected to be familiar with the Jewish tradition more than their Israeli-born teammates who can hardly be expected to have learned Maimonides.

On 9 October 2002, Rosso was invited to meet with Minister of Interior Eli Yishai from the ultraorthodox Shas party. The meeting received wide
media coverage, and many of those covering it collaborated with and implicitly accepted the tendency to link Israeli citizenship with Judaism. When Rosso arrived at the meeting, the reporters greeted him half-jokingly: “Giovanni, where is your yarmulke?” and “If you can’t shorten the process, you can always shorten something else (a hint to circumcision); Giovanni, you know what the shortest way to get Israeli citizenship is?” These comments, amused and lighthearted as they were, reinforced the ethno-national discourse. The ethno-national line was also evident in the meeting itself. The minister questioned Rosso about the history of the Jewish people, in what the reporters described as “a quiz in Judaism.” At the end of the meeting, Yishai said: “I was impressed by Rosso’s relationship to the people of Israel and the Land of Israel . . . I was also happy to hear that he visited the holy sites.”

Most writers and commentators who objected Rosso’s naturalization based their objection on the republican discourse of citizenship. This discourse dictates that an individual seeking to join the Israeli collective must contribute to what the Jewish-dominated state defines as “the common good.” Hence, many of the reporters justified their objection by claiming that Rosso did not contribute enough to Israeli society. Most Israelis still consider active participation in the Israeli military effort as the ultimate contribution. Indeed, many of the writers (even some who supported Rosso’s request) compared the case of Rosso to that of non-Jewish soldiers who serve in the Israeli army, but their families are nevertheless declined Israeli citizenship. Publicist Shai Golden demonstrates this rhetoric:

> For each Giovanni Rosso, campaigning for an Israeli passport, there are thousands of parents to soldiers, who are in a constant battle over their Israeli status. Their admission ticket to Israeli society goes through a tragedy—the death of their son during his military service.

Associating the case of Rosso with that of individuals who serve in the Israeli army puts a price tag on Israeli citizenship. As long as this citizenship is not awarded to those who “pay with blood,” it seems obvious that it should not be given to those who “pay” in less heroic ways. Rather than using the case of Rosso to claim citizenship for other worthy candidates, many writers chose to use the inverse logic, using the refusal of the state to give citizenship to soldiers’ parents to delegitimize Rosso’s citizenship. The writers who supported Rosso’s application also drew their arguments mainly from the republican tradition. Most commonly, they talked about the player’s potential contribution to Israeli culture, society, and state. TV commentator Avi Meler said during one of the shows: “I don’t get it. At last someone who contributes and wants to be an Israeli. What’s the big deal?” Some journalists also specified the ways in which Rosso contributes or is expected to contribute to the state:
He lives here for seven years, assimilated, talks the language, contributes
to the local culture, brings people a lot of joy, and is willing to give up his
cultural and professional roots in order to stay here. Is it more important
to be a good Jew than being a good person?52

In this quote, Tzipi Shmilovich challenges the ethno-national discourse
of citizenship. However, this discourse remains in the background. Those
who are not Jewish not only need to prove themselves through special con-
tribution to the state but also “give up their cultural roots” and assimilate into
the local culture, dominated by ethno-Jewish symbols and traditions. Avra-
ham Poraz, who replaced Eli Yishai as Minister of Interior at the beginning of
2003, is a declared proponent of this view (Poraz represented a party whose
main agenda was anticlerical). A few months after coming into office, Poraz
raised a stir declaring his intention to change the criteria for awarding Israeli
citizenship. He declared that he was about to give citizenship to foreign
athletes who have “shown a special contribution to the state.” In his media
interviews Poraz explained his new doctrine:

It's time to set a committee that will look at each case separately. The
criterion I support is first and foremost contribution to the state, be it
through sports, science, or medicine. I don't intend to open the gates to
the whole world. The main path to getting Israeli citizenship was, and
remains the Law of Return. But those who contribute to Israeli society
deserve the reward of citizenship.53

A few months later, true to his declared policy, Poraz rewarded a few
outstanding foreign soccer players with Israeli citizenship. At first look, it
may appear that Poraz was suggesting a changeover in Israeli citizenship
policies. However, examining Poraz’s words carefully puts this “revolution,”
as defined by reporters and by Poraz himself, in perspective. Although he
alludes to the republican discourse (“those who contribute to society”), Poraz
does not deny that the main way to get Israeli citizenship is the Law of Return,
or in other words being a Jew. In fact, he explicitly proclaims that this is, and
should remain, the primary criterion for becoming a citizen. Only those few
athletes or scientists who have “shown a special contribution” may become
citizens; others who might have lived in Israel for many years and have made
“normal” contributions do not have this right even according to Poraz’s logic.

A rare exception to this dominance of the ethno-national and republican
discourses may be found in the words of sports and political analyst Ofer
Shelach:

In any normal country Giovanni Rosso would have already received
citizenship for the obvious reasons: he’s lived in Israel for a few years
and sees his future here … but in Israel nothing is that simple, and a
hundred years of Zionism must be thrown into the mix. . . . Until last week
Rosso was outside for the usual reason: he is not Jewish, and therefore a suspect. This is how it goes here. Being just a good and law-abiding person is not enough. Bringing national pride is a whole different story. Only in this odd way, one should hope, will Rosso get the citizenship that should have been granted to him as a simple and natural act.\(^5^4\)

Shelach bases his arguments mainly on the liberal discourse of citizenship. In this discourse, the right for citizenship is not conditioned upon one’s ethno-national origin or one’s contribution to the state and the nation. Individuals, even when they are not Jews, stand above the “common good,” as defined by the state and the dominant hegemonic groups. However, as aforesaid, this is the exception to the rule. Most media people adopt the common perception of Israel as belonging first and foremost to Jews. They willingly or subconsciously employ either nationalistic-religious logic to prevent the entrance of “foreigners” or a republican one to limit such intrusions to the very few who have committed exceptional service to the nation.

“One of Us!”: Loyalty and Familiarity Trials

Foreign players, whether they wish to become Israeli citizens or not, go through a set of trials, in which they are repeatedly expected to prove their loyalty to the Israeli state and the Jewish people and their familiarity with the two. These include loyalty to the place, knowledge of the language, knowledge of Jewish culture and symbols, and contribution to Israeli society.

**LOYALTY TO THE PLACE**

The primary loyalty trial is the players’ future intentions. In almost all interviews and articles players who wish to become Israeli citizens are asked where they intend to live when their professional career is over. For example, the controversy over Giovanni Rosso’s application for citizenship drew the following comment:

Rosso said that he sees Israel as his home. But it’s hard to determine whether he will really stay in Israel following the end of his soccer career. Officials in the Ministry of Interior remind us that two years ago soccer player Vasily Ivanov submitted a similar application. But despite declaring that he wished to keep living in Israel, Ivanov *deserted* the country.\(^5^5\)

The case of Ivanov is a self-fulfilling prophecy: The state had denied the player citizenship, claiming that he was not going to stay in Israel, and when, consequently, he left, his move was admonished as “desertion” by the self-appointed guardians of the collective, the sports journalists. The demand
that the players stay in Israel following the end of their career is primarily
directed toward candidates for citizenship who are not Jews. Later on in
the above article, the authors report two ceremonies in which citizenship
was awarded to Jewish athletes who immigrated to Israel (basketball player
David Bluthenthal and soccer player Guillermo Israilevich). In their cases,
neither the reporters nor the Ministry of Interior asked whether they intended
to stay in Israel; as Jews their right is unconditional.

Staying in Israel during hard times is for the media reporters a testi-
mony for the player’s solidarity with the Jewish state and people. When
covering the departure of some foreign players prior to the war in Iraq in
March 2003 most reporters used deprecating terminology. Expressions such
as “escaped,” “flew away like missiles,” “got cold feet,” “evaporated,” “ran
away,” or “deserted” were the most common. The other side of the same
coin was that foreign players who chose to stay despite the threat of the war
were granted a warm media embrace. They were described as “patriots who
did not desert,” “taking things in proportion,” and “one of us.”

Interestingly, the foreign players often chose to cooperate with the me-
dia terminology. Giovanni Rosso, for example, said that “even if missiles fall,
I’m not going to run away.” Soccer player Rodrigo Goldberg, in a promo
for a televised interview with him, said that “if we run away, we support
the wrong people.” It is no wonder then that Rosso and Goldberg were
partly adopted into the collective consensus, talked about by many reporters
as Israeli de facto, by spirit if not in by passport.

KNOWLEDGE OF HEBREW

A good command of Hebrew is another sign for the serious intent of foreign
players to become “real” Israelis. The issue of language appears in many
articles and interviews, and the reporters enjoy testing how much Hebrew
the player knows (“What can you say?”). Those who have been playing
in Israel for many years and prefer not to speak Hebrew in interviews are
censured. This is perceived as testimony for their lack of efforts to integrate
into the surrounding environment. An example of this approach is a long
interview of journalist Yonatan Haleli from Maariv with Giovanni Rosso:

HALELI: An Israeli citizen must know Hebrew, and you do. Why do you
choose to speak English in interviews?
ROSSO: I speak English because it’s more convenient. I know of a lot
of people in this country who speak Hebrew, but don’t like us. [Rosso
apparently refers to the Palestinian citizens.]
HALELI: Who do you mean “us”? You and your friends, the foreign soccer
players?
ROSSO: No; us Israelis, the Jews.
HALELI: You’ve been here for seven years. You should have acquired
perfect command of Hebrew by now.
ROSSO: I know a lot of Jewish-Americans, Israeli citizens, who speak very little Hebrew.62

According to Haleli, good command of Hebrew is not only an indicator for assimilation to the Israeli collective but rather a condition for receiving citizenship. The candidate must not only know Hebrew but also repeatedly and publicly demonstrate his command of the language. Another noteworthy part of the dialogue above is Rosso’s self-presentation as part of the Jewish collective; as someone who is in the same boat with the Jews in their fight against the Palestinians (“they don’t like us”). Haleli rebuffs Rosso’s gesture and demands more efforts before he allows the star to become part of “us.”

“CITIZENSHIP TRIALS”

Another way to test the loyalty of foreign players to the state is looking at their knowledge of Jewish-Israeli culture and its symbols. For example, in a TV documentary following the success of Rosso’s soccer club, Maccabi Haifa in an international game broadcasted on Channel 2 on 15 April 2003:

INTERVIEWER: Why do you wish to play for the Israeli national team?
ROSSO: For the flag, the anthem, and the people.
INTERVIEWER: Do you know the words of the Israeli Anthem?
ROSSO: No, only the end of it.
INTERVIEWER: [Citing the first two lines of the anthem]: As long as deep in the heart, the soul of a Jew yearns.63

The interviewer does not accept Rosso’s statement at face value and finds it difficult to believe that the Christian Rosso would wholeheartedly identify with an anthem expressing Jews’ yearnings. The journalists expect foreign players to identify with Jewish symbols, but, when the latter profess to do so, they do not believe them, thus conveying their inner belief that only Jews belong here. Rosso’s interview with Yonatan Haleli, mentioned above, brings another clear example for this pattern. Haleli sees the interview as an opportunity to test Rosso’s eligibility for citizenship as he defines it. One of his main requirements is a thorough knowledge of the Jewish religion. Below is an exemplary passage:

HALELI: Are you a Christian?
ROSSO: That’s right.
HALELI: Do you pray?
ROSSO: When it’s needed, I go to church. There’s nothing wrong with that.
HALELI: Have you ever been to a synagogue?
ROSSO: Yes, I have.
Haleli: Do you know who Rabbi Ovadia Yosef is? [A revered rabbi and political leader]
Ross: Yes, I’ve heard of him. He’s the father of the religious people.
Haleli: Yom Kippur [Atonement Day] is coming soon. Are you familiar with the meaning of this day to the Jewish people?
Ross: I wasn’t born yesterday. I know.
Haleli: [Not content and pushes further] What is Yom Kippur?
Ross: You don’t eat, don’t drink, don’t watch TV, pray for atonement, and God forgives.
Haleli: Do you intend to watch TV on Yom Kippur?
Ross: [Evasively] My TV is broken.

Haleli is obviously well aware of the fact that Ross is Christian, but this does not prevent him from demanding that the player would be well familiar with Jewish religion and even follow some of its laws. Ross has not converted into Judaism; neither does he intend to. He is nevertheless aware of the demand to be familiar with Judaism and perhaps even follow some religious practices and does not challenge this demand. The diligent reporter takes it upon himself to find out the level of Ross’s Jewish devotion. Like others in Israeli media, Haleli cannot let go of the common view, emphasizing the centrality of the ethno-religious route to achieving Israeli citizenship.

CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIETY

While Haleli is mainly motivated by the ethno-national perception, others emphasize republican loyalty trials, as in the following example:

Although he declares that he wishes to live in Israel, make it his home, and stay in it, Ross does not invest his fortune in developing the country.... Instead, he prefers to send his money abroad.... Although he wishes to join the local community, Ross does not use his position ... [to] contribute to a library for the blind or to a children’s oncology section.

This quotation demonstrates once again that those who were not born in Israel and are not Jews must prove their entitlement to Israeli citizenship repeatedly and incontrovertibly. No one would recommend examining the investment portfolios and philanthropy of Sabra players, but a foreign player seeking Israeli citizenship needs to show that he invests in Israel, both financially and philanthropically.
CONCLUSION

This study examined the boundaries of Israeli collective and Israeli citizenship discourses by looking at the media coverage of foreign and naturalized athletes. The findings demonstrate the duality of this coverage. While the foreign athletes play a central role in the success of Israeli teams, they are never fully accepted into the Israeli collective. The official status of the foreign players is that of foreign workers. However, the distinction between them and the larger group of foreign workers in Israel is clear. In addition to generous salaries, they also have the potential of becoming national heroes when helping their teams to win international matches. Their vital contribution to the success of Israeli clubs in the European arena makes them, in the eyes of many in the Israeli media and public, part of “us,” as opposed to “them,” teams from other nations. The republican discourse of citizenship thus allows the inclusion of non-Jews when they add to the “common good” as defined by the hegemonic Jewish ideology, but this inclusion is provisional and contingent. Their Israeliness, when naturalized, or their inclusion in the Israeli collective otherwise, is missing, deficient, and incomplete.

Our findings demonstrate how the Israeli political and ideological discourse infiltrates into the seemingly apolitical sports field. The “natural” way in which sports journalists thoughtlessly express the expectations that naturalized soccer and basketball superstars should master Hebrew, Judaism rules, and Jewish history reveals the centrality of Judaism in the Israeli collective mind. Those who are part of the Israeli collective are expected to share the same cultural knowledge, largely dominated by Jewish history, tradition, and religion. This is why journalists feel entitled to administer admission tests that require a Christian-Croatian player to master the traditions and rules of religious ceremonies and events.

The findings of the current study join those of former scholarly research looking at the media and public discourse around foreign and naturalized athletes in the United Kingdom, Spain, Canada, Japan, and elsewhere. English and Spanish soccer fans and commentators, for example, often rue the growing influence of foreign players in elite clubs such as Arsenal, Liverpool, Real Madrid, and Barcelona. Peter Millard, who studied message boards of English soccer clubs’ fan sites, found that fans tend to blame foreign players especially following team failures. Players of foreign nationals were much more heavily criticized than players who hold a British nationality. Millard concludes that acceptance of foreign players by the English fans and media is conditional. “When results are not as good, it is outsiders such as foreign players who are the first to be blamed by fans.”

Research done on foreign and naturalized athletes in Canada and Japan is especially revealing in the context of the present study. Steven Jackson looked at the media discourse surrounding sprinter Ben Johnson during the
1980s and the 1990s. He traces Johnson’s shifting media image: During the first years following his immigration to Canada in 1976 and his naturalization in 1980, Johnson was referred to as “Jamaican” or “Jamaican immigrant.” In the years that followed, as his athletic success grew, Johnson was relabeled as “Jamaican-Canadian,” and finally simply as “Canadian.” This process culminated following Johnson’s victory in the 100-meter race in the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games over Carl Lewis from the United States. The Canadian media described the race as the victory of Canadian national modesty—personified in Johnson—over the U.S. arrogance, glitter, and artifice—personified in Lewis. However, shortly after the race Johnson tested positive for performance enhancement drugs, his gold medal was revoked, and he quickly fell from grace. Canadian media consequently went back to calling him “Jamaican-Canadian,” often emphasizing negative racial stereotypes.68

Naoki Chiba et al. have observed similar patterns in Japanese society. They examined the media and public discourse surrounding foreign and naturalized athletes in Japan and argued that most Japanese would consider “blood” (or ethnicity) as the primary factor in determining who they considered as Japanese. In other words, sport stars of Japanese ethnicity who hold another nationality (often born and raised in another country) would most likely be considered as more “Japanese” than foreign athletes who have naturalized in Japan. Chiba et al. also show that Japanese media often describe naturalized foreign players who reach athletic success as “more Japanese than Japanese.” However, according to the authors this is actually an empty expression; a self-congratulating practice that sees naturalization and Japanese-like behaviors as demonstrating the excellence of Japan and Japanese culture.69

In Israel, as in the countries described above, the adoption of athletes into the collective is conditional; it largely depends on their athletic success and their contribution to the success of local clubs or the national team. What Peled and Shafir call “a republican discourse of citizenship” is thus by no means unique to Israel. Other democracies also view entitlement to citizenship, rights, and collective belonging as largely contingent upon an individual’s contribution to “the common good.” However, in Israel, similar to Japan but unlike England and Canada, ethnicity and the ethno-national discourse of citizenship are central. In both countries ethnicity (Jewish or Japanese) trumps formal national affiliation when it comes to being regarded as part of the collective. As in Japan, foreign players in Israel are still rewarded with some of the glory and may be partially accepted to Israeli collective when they bring victories. But this requires the Jewish public to suspend the national ethos and to expand the limits of the collective. Even then, boundary broadening is limited, partial, temporal, and criticized by those who mourn the sin of indulgence in foreign work (in sports and in other fields). The artificial distinction between “us” in the sports field and “them” outside it requires a great deal of effort, denial, and repression and is
therefore continuously breached. Non-Jewish players are always left in social limbo between inclusion and exclusion, between belonging and otherness.

NOTES

1. Tzachi Hanegbi, “We are All Jews,” Yediot Ahronot, 29 April 2004, D-3 (emphasis is ours).
8. Studies on foreign and naturalized athletes in Britain (Maguire, Global Sport; Millard, “True Cosmopolitanism”), Canada (Jackson, “Life in the [Mediated] Faust Lane”), Japan (Naoki Chiba, Osamu Ebihara, and Shinji Morino, “Globalization, Naturalization and Identity: The Case of Borderless Elite Athletes in Japan,” International Review for the Sociology of Sport 36:203–221 [2001]) and elsewhere show the demand that foreign and even naturalized players perform exceptionally if they wish to avoid criticism and be considered as part of the local collective.
13. Peled and Shafir, Being Israeli.
16. Peled and Shafir, Being Israeli.
17. Tamar Katriel, Keywords: Patterns of Culture and Communication in Israel [in Hebrew] (Haifa: Haifa University Press & Zmora-Bitan, 1999).
33. Shor and Yonay, “‘Play and Shut Up.’”
34. Katriel, *Keywords*, 9.
35. Ibid.
36. Maguire, *Global Sport*.
40. Interestingly, a few Sabra players who also asked to be relieved of their national duty were not denounced in the same way.
41. Hagai Segal, “A Man within Himself,” *Maariv*, 2 May 2003, E-8. Playing “on an Israeli slot” means that he is not counted with foreign workers, whose number in one team is limited, according to the rules of the Israeli league.
45. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
49. Many immigrants from the former Soviet Union who arrived to Israel during the 1990s were non-Jewish spouses of men and women with Jewish origins (not necessarily Jewish according to religious standards or by their own faith). While their children are automatically eligible for Israeli citizenship, the parents do not have such entitlement if their marriage is terminated.
53. Chen Shalita, “Civil Revolution Ltd,” Yediot Ahronot, 16 May 2003, C-24–C-30. The Law of Return gives all Jews the right of immediate Israeli citizenship with very few restrictions on the ground that they “return to their true homeland.”
56. Israel was not involved in that war, but many were afraid that Iraq would retaliate to the American attack by firing long-range missiles on Israeli cities as it had done during the first Gulf War of 1991.
60. Haleli, “Maccabi is Ready for the War” (emphasis added).
63. Documentary on Maccabi Haifi, Channel 2, 15 April 2003 (emphasis in original).
64. Haleli, “Sometimes I’m a Small Tembel.”

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