Beyond Stereotypes
Sclar, Ari

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Editorial Introduction

by Ari F. Sclar, Guest Editor

This volume focuses on a close examination of the relationship that American Jews have with sports. Granted, the stereotypical assumption is that Jews and sports are an oxymoronic pairing. Indeed, this relationship, and in fact, the very idea of a Jewish athlete, is one that remains distant from the broader consciousness of American Jewish life—even among many American Jews. As in the movie Airplane!, jokes about the absence of Jewish athleticism, often made by Jews themselves, are what most frequently comes to mind when the topic of Jews in sports is brought up. The stereotype of (generally male) Jewish physical inferiority has reinforced the belief that Jews focus on intellectual pursuits at the expense of physical activities. That is to say, a belief persists that they all tend to take after the biblical Jacob, favored by God, a momma's boy and one who kept to the tents, rather than his far more brawny and presumably more athletic brother Esau.

This assumption has its origins in the years after the Civil War, when white Anglo-Saxon Protestants became concerned that American men were not as rugged and masculine as their colonial and “frontier” forerunners. As Jewish immigration increased in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American Jews, anxious to emulate such nationalistic ideals, tried to overcome this stereotype by promoting Jewish participation in a masculine, American sporting culture that was generally open and amenable to their involvement. This was not done without some controversy and concern. While some Jews viewed sports as a symbol of modernity’s threat to traditional Jewish culture and religion, others believed Jewish athleticism would serve as a positive development and would help produce full acceptance and integration into American society. Eventually, sports became one of many activities used to
construct a modern American Jewish identity and, while acceptance was obviously not without struggle, Jews throughout the twentieth century (and now into the twenty-first) have participated and succeeded in the American sports culture as athletes, coaches, owners, managers and fans. As this volume intends to illustrate, the stereotype of the physical Jew may have drawn many Jews into the sporting world, but the broader connection between American Jews and sports goes well beyond such stereotypes.

Until recently, the study of Jews and sports was generally left to those with a narrowly focused interest in celebrating heroes—the “usual suspects” such as Sandy Koufax, Hank Greenberg, Sid Luckman and the like. The Bar Mitzvah gift books, celebrating famous Jews, always have left a little room for a few, select athletes, as has also been the case for various versions of the “Jewish Hall of Fame,” web sites celebrating the accomplishment of Jews, and the occasional article in a Jewish magazine or newspaper about long celebrated or long forgotten heroes as well as contemporary athletes. Much of the celebratory history was dictated by an Americanization narrative that focused on the power of sports to overcome anti-Semitism and illustrate and facilitate the general tolerance of American society. The participation and success of Jewish athletes was seen as a means to dispel the stereotype of the weak Jew as a product of the large influx of eastern European Jewish immigrants and helped further advance Jewish acceptance in American society.

By the mid-twentieth century mark, as Jews moved into the suburbs, it was concluded that their socio-economic success meant that they no longer needed to play competitive sports in order to assimilate into American culture. Granted, the occasional Jewish star might emerge and attract national attention from Jews and non-Jews alike; but, as this narrative concluded, Jews had so successfully integrated into society that the stereotype no longer really applied. This narrative, while not necessarily incorrect, contains silences and absences that have inhibited our seeing a more complete picture of Jewish athleticism. Over the past twenty years, however, academics have begun to look more closely and seriously at this narrative and in doing so, have begun to look beyond the stereotypical viewpoint to see a more nuanced and subtle picture of Jews and their relationship to sports.

Not content merely to challenge the stereotype or celebrate the individual Jewish athlete, a number of scholars have worked to integrate the study of Jewish athleticism into the broader scholarship on American Jewish identity, community, and culture. This volume reflects this scholarly growth, as the discipline has moved beyond the need to overcome the idea that Jews are simply
“People of the Book,” who never put the Book down to go out and compete in athletic events. Despite the continued belief that Jewish religious or cultural identity remains somehow distinct from the American idea of the “athlete,” this collection of essays aims to demonstrate that American Jews have a close connection, and, indeed, have made highly significant contributions, to American sports, both on and off the field of play.

When Lisa Ansell, the Associate Director of the Casden Institute for the Study of the Jewish Role in America Life, first approached me and asked me to consider serving as guest editor for this volume, it was clear to me that she had her doubts whether the topic was sufficiently viable and expansive to merit an entire volume of studies. I assured her that, while Jews and their connection to sports unfortunately remain marginal topics in the minds of many academics and laypeople alike, it is nevertheless one that is attracting serious interest and active scholarly research. Our aim in this volume is to add substantively to this growing body of literature within the discipline, as it contains both articles that highlight the discovery of unknown history and those that offer fresh perspectives on seemingly well-established history.

The contributions in Volume 12 of the Casden Annual Review paint a broad—and at the same time highly detailed—picture of Jewish participation in sports and further examine how Jews viewed the business, religious, racial/ethnic, and identity questions associated with the athletic world. The complexity and diversity of the overall volume (with topics running a considerable gamut from tennis to lacrosse) underscore an essential concept: that Jewish athleticism cannot be defined by one athlete, sport, or context. Of course, this volume can hardly hope to cover all aspects of Jews and sports. Rather our aim is to examine and illustrate how research regarding American Jews and sports is moving in exciting and even surprising directions.

As with much of the literature on American Jews, the focus has remained fixed on how American men confronted anti-Semitism and the “90-pound weakling” stereotype, while unfortunately leaving women on the sidelines. For years, Linda Borish has worked to illustrate the important contributions of Jewish women to American sports and broader constructs of American Jewish identity, community, and culture. Examining a wide array of Jewish women in her many studies, Borish has challenged gendered understandings of what it meant to be an “athlete” and has helped sharpen the focus on women in sports. In this volume, she makes another important contribution—examining Jewish women in the early decades of the twentieth century in a sport not normally associated with Jews during that era: tennis. This former country club
sport, which became popular with the wider sporting public during the inter-
war period, provided Jewish women with an opportunity to compete and be
recognized on a national and international level. As Borish explains, this also
allowed the Jewish press to celebrate women alongside their male counterparts
in the American sports world. Although often condescendingly gendered by
the press, female players achieved considerable success on the tennis courts
and thus proved that Jewish women could define Jewish athleticism just as
much as Jewish men have done so.

While Jewish women have rarely received the attention they deserve,
Jews in ownership and/or management positions have received a bit more—
but hardly sufficient—attention from scholars. Despite the stereotypical belief
among many people that Jews are better suited to be owners rather than play-
ers, the extent of Jewish participation in management in a variety of sports
prior to World War II remains relatively unexplored. Thus Rebecca Alpert’s
excellent examination of Negro League co-owner Effa Manley—a non-Jewish,
biologically white female, who identified herself as African-American—shows
how this formidable woman viewed Jewish owners in the Negro Leagues before
the color bar was broken by Jackie Robinson in Major League Baseball. The of-
ten tense relationship between blacks and Jews, that is reflected in the original
correspondence between Manley and her Jewish contemporaries uncovered
by Alpert, spotlights issues of power, race, ethnicity, and finance—all of which
still have a major impact on sports. As Alpert illustrates, Manley’s attitude was
complex and often ambivalent, depending on the situation, which in some
ways mirrored African-American attitudes, and the attitude of Americans as a
whole regarding the place of Jews in society. As Alpert notes, Jewish whiteness
was implicitly recognized as acting as a wedge between Manley and the Jewish
owners; and further highlights how their participation in the Negro Leagues
reflected the extent to which Jews found the sporting world both open and
closed to them. Jewish ownership of professional sports teams is now com-
mon, but in the early decades of the twentieth century, it proved more difficult
for Jews to gain access to executive power in sports. Nonetheless, in relation to
African-Americans, America’s racial hierarchy tilted the power dynamic in the
Jewish direction.

The secular demands of athletics have often proved to be an impediment
for religious Jews, who desire to participate fully in the competitive culture
of American sports. As Jeffrey Gurock has argued elsewhere, religious lead-
ers often viewed sports as threatening to traditional Jewish values. But as he
explains in this volume, overcoming traditional constraints to participate is
not the end to the struggle. Orthodox Jews are limited in their ability to compete at the highest (or even middling) levels of competitive sports due more to religiously imposed internal restrictions than to external discrimination. This unique aspect of Jews in sports is one that other ethnic and racial groups have not generally confronted and adds a layer of complexity to the broader study of Jewish athleticism. As Gurock points out, this religious dynamic makes Yeshiva University basketball unique and interesting in a sporting world where all too frequently, competitive or commercial concerns predominate. Yeshiva competes, and has often competed well, but the school’s struggles—as reflected in the trials and tribulations of its long-time basketball coach—reflect the difficulty for religious Jews, who despite having increasingly been accepted and celebrated in sports, remain at a disadvantage due to restrictions that secular Jews and non-Jews do not confront.

While many of the articles provide new information or capture previously unknown parts of Jews and sports, Joe Dorinson’s provides a fresh perspective on a part of the sporting world that has long fascinated Jews: baseball. Using Martin Abramowitz’s card collection as the point of departure for his study, Dorinson traces the long and vibrant history of Jews in baseball, from the earliest players and owners through Hall of Famers Hank Greenberg and Sandy Koufax and concludes with a glowing take on one of the most important figures in professional baseball history, Marvin Miller. Dorinson’s narrative, which is adapted from an original oral presentation, illustrates the close relationship Jews have had since the beginning of the sport in a variety of ways. Yet, while Dorinson looks at America’s national pastime, Neil Kramer examines a less well-known sport that has attracted Jewish players in recent years: lacrosse. Taking Israel’s surprising success in the world lacrosse championships as his starting point, Kramer examines how lacrosse, like other sports, has helped facilitate Jewish integration into American society and how some hope that the sport will help better connect Jews with Israel. Lacrosse’s appeal on an international scale may help construct the emerging American Jewish identity of the twenty-first century, which is shaping up to be quite different than the twentieth century.

I myself have contributed an article that considers many of the issues regarding Jews and sports noted above—in this case as seen in microcosm through the rise and fall of basketball at the 92nd Street Young Men’s Hebrew Association (YMHA) in New York City. In its heyday, basketball was so closely identified with Jewish athletes that it was commonly called the “Jewish game,” especially during the inter-World War period. Various conflicting views about
how Jews should conduct themselves in sports led to a dilemma: the question was whether the Jewish version of basketball should focus on promoting the popularity of athletic stars or should instead pursue the selfless cooperation that were inherent in the ideals of the game? Due to an unsuccessful effort to resolve this dilemma at the YMHA and elsewhere, what was once the Jewish game became the Jewish game no more.

I want to thank Bruce Zuckerman, Myron and Marion Casden Director of the Casden Institute for the Study of the Jewish Role in American Life at the University of Southern California, and Lisa Ansell, Associate Director of the Casden Institute, for the opportunity to serve as the guest editor of this volume of the Casden Annual Review. The willingness and openness of both Bruce and Lisa to consider a volume on Jews and sports indicates the importance that the Casden Institute invests in expanding the broader understanding of the challenges and triumphs of American Jewry. As I worked closely with both of them, I saw their appreciation of the subject matter grow; and they, in some ways, represented the benefit the broader public would gain from such a volume. It also allowed me to work closely with a number of scholars whom I admire and respect and whose work both informs my own and challenges my understanding of the nuances and complexity of Jewish athleticism from a variety of perspectives.

Finally, I want to thank my wife, Rachael, for her support not only in this endeavor but throughout the years as I continue to examine the meanings associated with Jewish athleticism.