Answering to a Different Authority in Sports: The Trials of Coach Jonathan Halpert and the Limits of Yeshiva University’s Athletic Success in Basketball

by Jeffrey S. Gurock

It was a contest that was emblematic of Coach Jonathan Halpert’s forty-two years at the helm of Yeshiva University’s (YU) men’s basketball team. On November 26, 2013, he led his Maccabees onto the court of their home gym in Washington Heights against the Golden Eagles of St. Joseph’s College, a middle-level opponent within the New York Metropolitan area’s Skyline Conference. In prior years, St. Joe’s had ended up near the top of the heap; in fact, two seasons earlier, when they finished first in regular season play, they had beaten Yeshiva handily. Their most decisive victory was a 32-point blowout on the “Macs’” home court (Skyline Conference).¹ But the Golden Eagles’ last two recruitment classes had not been nearly so successful as in past seasons. Such is the cyclical calculus of success vs. failure for most clubs in NCAA Division III competition, and this gave the Macs some real reason to be hopeful. Indeed, at first glance, the all-Jewish team, made up mostly of secondary day-school youngsters, matched up physically pretty well against a squad of former public and Christian parochial school players, who hailed predominantly from the vicinity of Patchogue, Long Island. In fact, Yeshiva boasted of having the biggest man on the court—a six-foot, six-inch center—and, not surprisingly, YU controlled the opening jump-ball. But during the first ten minutes of the game, the Macs fell behind by as many as ten points, as the visitors drove hard to the hoop and supplemented this inside game with a barrage of three-pointers. Meanwhile, Yeshiva muffed
too many makeable shots. However, as the first half drew to a close, Halpert’s well-structured motion-offense began to click, particularly his “back-door” patterns which capitalized on the over-aggressiveness of St. Joe’s athletes, who looked to steal the ball and rush down court for an easy lay-up or spectacular dunk. By halftime, the gap had been pared down to just two points. A large crowd of home team supporters—it was “Mac Madness” give-away night—cheered on their schoolmates vigorously.

During the second half, it became progressively clear that St. Joseph’s quintet had no answer for Halpert’s charges and their “moving without the ball” strategy—another way of characterizing plays that left confused defenders leaning the wrong way while Yeshiva’s men faked and then slid toward the basket. For those in the know, the Macs were playing old-style New York City basketball; a style unfamiliar to their opponents who prefer to run and shoot. Most noticeably, Halpert’s star player scored repeatedly with uncontested lay-up shots, thus showing that he had internalized well his mentor’s fundamental teachings. In the meantime the six-foot, three-inch small forward capitalized on St. Joe’s confusion by “stepping out” and making his own three-point shots once his defender became preoccupied with trying to block the “back-door.” Yeshiva’s number-one play-option would net twenty-eight points that evening. Still, the Golden Eagles had their own weapons at hand, and that kept the game close. Throughout the second-half, they unrelentingly pushed the ball towards the basket, relying on their own superior quickness to gain an advantage; often earning free-throws from the “charity” stripe.

Several times, the Yeshiva starting center and his equally tall replacement blocked initial efforts, only to have St. Joe’s salvage the play with second-chance points. And when Yeshiva players were back on their heels, St. Joe’s own sharpshooters made their three-pointers count. Throughout the last twenty minutes of regulation play, the contest see-sawed back-and-forth with neither team gaining a decisive edge. As the clock ran down, St. Joe’s held on to the ball hoping that the final drive to the bucket would secure victory. But their shot fell short. Players for both squads scrambled for the ball and the second half ended with the contest unresolved.

For YU’s fans, the game was a classic case of strength vs. guile, and they hoped that Halpert’s system would win out in the end. During the opening minutes of overtime play, Yeshiva’s approach seemed to have gained the upper hand as the Macs grabbed a four-point lead. But the Golden Eagles responded, and through a series of field goals and foul shots they pulled ahead by two points with just seconds left to play. A crucial turnover had contributed
decisively to St. Joe's ever-so-slight advantage. During his final time out, Halpert drew up a last-ditch play for his attentive young men that looked to get the ball in his star's hand for hopefully a winning three-pointer. Before the game resumed and after watching YU's five set themselves on the court, St. Joe's coach called his own time out to strategize against his opponent's scheme. Despite this, Halpert's plan succeeded in giving his best shooter the chance to vindicate his team and exhilarate the crowd with a victorious effort. But a quick double-team by the Golden Eagles forced an off-balanced attempt that bounced off the side of the rim. YU's star slumped to the floor in momentary despair but soon arose to join Halpert and his teammates in the post-game handshake line. Yeshiva's mentor and players left the gymnasium assured that they had done their best—still, their efforts had proven to be just not quite good enough.

A look at the numbers behind this game suggests why and how the Macs lost. For one thing, YU's bench did not have much in the way of depth of high-caliber subs to call in when the top players needed a break. As a result, Yeshiva's number-one star logged forty-three out of a possible forty-five minutes in the overtime game. His teammates on the starting five played a total some 186 of the 225 minutes (82.5%) on the court. (And it would have been more, but one of the stalwarts fouled out in the closing minutes of regulation time, limiting his appearance to thirty-one minutes.) In contrast, the opposition could rely on its top seven contributors who accumulated together almost all of St. Joe's playing time. But beyond the "fatigue factor," there is also the overall performance of the "supporting cast" to consider. While the big man at center hauled in an impressive twenty rebounds—thirteen off the defensive board—he blocked only one shot and failed on six of his ten shots from the field, near or under the basket, and missed three of his six free throws. And then there was the problem of turnovers. The statistics told a grim tale. While Yeshiva surrendered the ball only twice more than the visitors, when these miscues occurred, St. Joe's quickly cashed in with baskets. Superior athleticism gave them a decisive edge. The Macs rarely were able to capitalize on their steals. The margin of St. Joe's edge was a telling fifteen to two.

Of course, there were bright spots to consider, too. Looking ahead, Halpert and his fans anticipated hopefully that their first-year point-guard would increasingly take on a leadership role. The coach had to have been heartened that this former Jewish high school league star scored seventeen points and relinquished the ball only twice. This was a significant improvement. A week earlier, the guard had scored but eighteen points in his first two games.
combined, while committing nine turnovers. In the match that followed—a Yeshiva win—he netted nineteen points, but along with this there were also six giveaways. Clearly, for this star of the future, the maturation process was going to take a little more time. Still, it was an encouraging sign that this youngster was becoming increasingly attuned to Halpert’s “system.” He was becoming aware that he could not always take “the ball to the basket” with impunity against talented athletic defenders the way he had so successfully beaten less skilled, less experienced opponents that he had been able to dominate before entering college ball (“Men’s Basketball Loses Exciting Game to St. Joseph’s-Long Island”).

After the Thanksgiving break, the Macs returned to action at their Max Stern Athletic Center against a far more talented foe, the Panthers of the College at Old Westbury. The home team played courageously and intelligently, but it was unable to overcome the gap in athleticism and quickness that favored the Panthers. Yeshiva lost the encounter 80–64. Early on in the game, their disadvantages became readily apparent. While Yeshiva had to work hard for its baskets, Old Westbury scored quickly and turned every mistake the Macs made into two points at the other end. At halftime, the visitors led by twelve points. During the second half, Yeshiva made strong runs at the lead—even at one point cutting the deficit to six points—only to commit crucial turnovers, which Old Westbury was quick to convert to points. As with the St. Joseph’s game, YU’s turnover ratio that led to quick baskets showed itself to be of critical importance. The Panthers outscored the Maccabees 18–6 in that crucial statistic. A fundamental coaching axiom was fully evident here: It is obviously important that a mentor inspire his charges to give their all and provide strategy within the context of an appropriate system. But in the end, athletic ability remains the most important component in sports success. Indeed, it is only when two teams are closely matched physically that the elements of motivation and intelligent play-calling become the determining factor (“Men’s Basketball Loses to Old Westbury”).

This unavoidable coaching reality was likewise in play—but this time in YU’s favor—when three days later the Macs easily defeated NYU-Poly, one of the weakest teams in the Skyline Conference. Indeed, over the years, Halpert had mentally marked the “Brooklyn Poly Game” (Brooklyn Poly was the opposition’s name until 2008, when it was absorbed by New York University) as a contest where his club did hold a physical advantage over the opposition. Even during his most difficult won-loss seasons, he counted on that match-up as a game that the Macs should win. In four decades of coaching, he had lost to Poly
only nine times out of the seventy-two games they had played against the Macs. And beginning with the 1993–94 season, the record was 33–1 against this opponent.² For Yeshiva, on this early December night, their mentor’s system was not a significant factor in their triumph, even though the Macs easily won by twenty-six points. Most notably in this case, it was they who capitalized on their superior quickness and general athleticism to turn Blue Jay mistakes into Maccabee baskets by a two-to-one margin. And much like the Old Westbury game, the losers attempted at several junctures to cut into the winners’ early lead. But every time Poly came close, Yeshiva ran off a series of baskets to deflate their opposition. A 21–4 run in the middle of the second half sealed the triumph for Yeshiva (“Men’s Basketball Win over NYU Poly”).

These three games played over ten days set a pattern for the rest of the year. Predictably, Yeshiva triumphed both home and away against the two lowest ranked teams, Poly and New York Maritime, even if it rankled Halpert that the second time the teams met his club played listlessly against an under-manned Blue Jays squad that dressed just seven players. Unable to capitalize on a fatigue factor that in this contest was in their favor, the Macs prevailed by a mere three points. The offense was in sync but a porous defense kept the contest competitive longer than should have been the case (“Men’s Basketball Uses Balanced Scoring”). Conversely, Halpert’s team had no answers for the league’s five top teams. But the coach had to have been gratified that the Macs lost on the road by only eight points to Old Westbury, although he was frustrated by a last-second loss at home to third place SUNY-Farmingdale (“Feld Scores 28”).

The “system” worked, but a missed final-second lay-up shot doomed Yeshiva’s chance at an upset against the favored visiting Rams (“Four Players Score in Double Figures”). Thus, a successful season—defined as reaching the playoffs—hinged upon winning two successive home-and-away games, the first against a traditional rival, the Dolphins of the College of Mount St. Vincent at home and the second an away game against St. Joe’s, and, along with that the potential, added bonus of getting even with a team that had previously beaten them. Optimism about a post-season berth had abounded in December when the Macs rallied in the second half in their first meeting against the Dolphins and pulled out a six-point win.

The Macs’ two stars sparkled that night with the newcomer guard having a particularly strong game, netting twenty-seven points and making eleven of his fourteen free-throws; many of them in the hotly-contested final minutes (“Men’s Basketball Powers Past College of Mount Saint Vincent”). But when the opponent from neighboring Riverdale visited Washington Heights seven
weeks later, the Dolphins own late game surge brought them to victory by five points. The compelling statistic in that defeat was the star guard’s off-night, as he made only three of his thirteen shots from the field; and neither he nor any of his teammates got to the foul line. The outstanding forward did somewhat better shooting 5–13. One of the problems these two outstanding players faced that night (and in other games) was the “combination” defenses that were arrayed against them. Essentially and effectively, opponents focused their energies on stopping Yeshiva’s standouts; sometimes double-teaming them, neglecting the other players, who never proved to be much of a factor in these games.

Interestingly, Yeshiva’s best player that evening against the Dolphins was its center who went 7–13 from the field and grabbed twelve rebounds (“Twenty Lead Changes and Eleven Ties”). The big man continued to develop an increasing ability to follow Halpert’s strategic patterns. Indeed, on a wintry evening late in February against St. Joseph’s, he had another “double-double” (seventeen points and ten rebounds), complementing the mercurial guard who that night scored a game-high twenty-one points. However, Yeshiva failed in its mission to Patchogue, as the Golden Eagles came back from a first half three-point deficit to prevail by ten points (“Men’s Basketball Led at Halftime”). As a result, the Macs finished behind these two middle-level opponents and were eliminated from a playoff appearance.

Though the 2013–14 season ended on a disappointing note with an overall record of 7–18 (5–13 in conference play) what transpired that year on the court was highly representative and acutely reminiscent of the ups-and-downs of Halpert’s entire four-decade coaching career that ended in March 2014. Though he was understandably proud of his 416 victories (although, admittedly these stood against 552 losses) and of a fifteen-year span (1987–2002), where his club finished .500 or above annually, only occasionally did his Macs triumph against the highest rated conference teams or more powerful out-of-conference opponents, even if they often frustrated the eventual victors. On the other hand, when Halpert’s well-structured tactical approach was run properly, his charges rarely lost against teams of comparable or lesser athletic ability. Thus, on balance, his teams made the playoffs eleven times in the fourteen years that the Macs played in the Skyline Conference. Even more impressively, four times in his career, Halpert’s system helped Yeshiva cobble together enough wins to earn a first-round spot in a regional Eastern College Athletic Conference (ECAC) post-season tournament. Still, even in the best of years, victories were rarely achieved with ease. Remarkably, in less than 45% of their triumphs, did Yeshiva win by more than ten points. Rarely was the coach
able to sit quietly on the bench with legs and arms folded, calmly watching the game-clock run down. And through all the years, the Macs never won an in-season or post-season tournament or a conference championship (Jonathan Halpert). Perhaps the closest Yeshiva came to reaching that apogee of its competitive success was in 2000. Then the Macs—with a 16–6 regular season record—were seeded second in the Skyline Conference post-season tournament. It was their highest league-ranking ever. But they lost a home game to Mount St. Vincent, whom they had defeated twice in regular league play. Seemingly, Yeshiva, with prospects of securing an NCAA bid, had difficulty being touted as a favorite, especially when one of its star players was hampered by an injury, as was the case that year. After a last second shot by the Dolphins gave them a 53–52 victory, a stunned Coach Halpert sat for a moment on the bench with his head in his hands before rising to congratulate the winning team, after which he walked off to console his demoralized athletes.  

A decade later, Halpert sat down with a local newspaper reporter and waxed philosophical about the difficulties and joys of his efforts at Yeshiva. Projecting himself as a teacher of values through sports, he contended that “if you really want to learn how to coach, lose” and then explained that “losing forces you to learn how to really teach, how to motivate, organize and prioritize.” And yet, in an unguarded moment, it became apparent that there
resided within the coach, the frustration of never reaching an athletic pinnacle, as he ruefully admitted, “I want it [a conference championship], badly” (Richardson).

Several interrelated, endemic problems have always conspired in limiting the extent of Yeshiva’s athletic success. The program has had to deal with the ever-improving nature of the opposition, the narrowness of its own talent pool and, most notably, the distinctiveness of this Orthodox Jewish school’s temporal and academic challenges. Taken together, these constraints have seemingly left Halpert to pursue what might almost seem a quest for a championship that has always been foredoomed to failure. After all, due to the inherent nature of the kind of academic institution Yeshiva is, the Macs have had to face up to challenges that their competitors have not had to deal with, and these have always made it more difficult for them to finally get to the top of the standings.

To begin with, among most teams that Yeshiva faces in Division III basketball, it has only taken the recruitment of one or two star players for a club to quickly ascend to championship-level status. Such was the case, for example, with SUNY-Purchase, which joined the Skyline Conference as of the 2007–08 season. In its initial campaign, the Panthers finished last with a 2–16 conference mark (3–22 overall). They did, however, split their two games against Yeshiva. The following year, Purchase was on the rise, as they won ten conference games and ended up in the middle of the pack. Their breakout year took place just a season later in 2009–10, when the Westchester-based club won the Conference post-season championship and garnered an invitation to the Division III NCAA tournament. The following year, the Panthers won it all, as they captured both the regular season title with a 17–3 mark (24–5 overall) and the post-season tournament. Once again they capped off their season with an invitation to the NCAA tournament (Skyline Conference). Interestingly, during that first championship run, Yeshiva twice upset Purchase by six- and then two-point margins. This achievement earned Halpert “Coach of the Year” league-honors. It was publicly noted that “Halpert who completed his 38th season as the Maccabees’ head coach had always gotten the most out of his players and this season was no different.” However, during tournament time, Yeshiva succumbed to the Panthers by fifteen points and their opponents emerged as the Skyline Tournament champion to become an NCAA qualifier. In the four years that followed, Yeshiva dropped every Purchase game by an average of over fifteen points as SUNY-Purchase became a dominant power in the league (“Skyline Men’s Basketball All-Conference Team Unveiled”; “Skyline Conference Men's Basketball Report 2009–10”).
Arguably, the key to the Panthers’ rapid rise to success was the unanticipated, but warmly-welcomed, arrival on campus in 2008 of an exceptional player. As a top high school player, Marvin Billups from Chester, New York was widely-recruited by many Division I teams. As Purchase lore has it, this “Gatorade All-American” was ticketed for St. John’s University until a serious illness caused the Red Storm to back off from their pursuit of him. A frustrating freshman year at University of New Haven, a strong Division II school, left Billups anxious “to play right away.” This was, not surprisingly, a commitment that Panther-coach Jeff Charney was happy to honor. Billups, in turn, demonstrated his own dedication to the program, as he brought with him to Purchase two New Haven teammates, his cousin Corey Orgias and Charles Thompson. With these three stellar scorers in the line-up, success was all but assured. During the two championship years, Billups twice garnered the Skyline Conference’s “Player of the Year” designation, and in 2011 he was honored as a Second Team All-American. Perhaps, more important for his school, Billups and his two teammates began to establish a winning tradition, upon which Coach Charney could then build. After graduation, Billups went on to play professional basketball in Puerto Rico (Ciafardini; “Former Purchase Standout Marvin Billups Shining in Puerto Rico”).

Of course, Yeshiva has not been entirely lacking when it comes to its own well-plumbed recruitment streams. But rarely do these personnel sources provide Halpert with the type of elite player who can help the Macs compete on a level with opponents like Panthers-star Billups. Most Yeshiva athletes come to Washington Heights from out of the network of Jewish day-schools across the country, as well as the many Orthodox Jewish schools in the NYC metropolitan area. These are rarely the places to find athletic stars.

Annually, the best competitors come to campus on a recruitment trip courtesy of the “National Jewish” Red Sarachek Basketball Tournament. This event is named for Yeshiva’s legendary coach—who also served as Halpert’s mentor—when he patrolled the sidelines from the 1940s to the early 1970s. This athletic gathering, held since 1992, has brought literally thousands of players to Halpert’s attention and thus given him the opportunity to look them over in-person. In its wake, the “Sarachek” has been emulated by any number of regional day-school tournaments, some of which Halpert has attended to scout the best of the yearly crop. Over the years, many of the players who have showed off their abilities at Yeshiva’s Sarachek Tournament have returned to New York after high school graduation and a “gap-year” of Torah study in Israel. However, only the most skilled of these standouts within the
circumscribed yeshiva sports world have had the ability to match up against the foremost opponents on the college's schedule. While in its twenty-three years of competition, forty-three players from the tournament have played one or more years at Yeshiva, only one ever earned the Most Valuable Player award from the Skyline Conference while two others gained significant recognition as rookies of the year (Yeshiva University 23rd Annual Red Sarachek Basketball Tournament; Jonathan Halpert).4

Whatever their natural abilities, their success on this next level is undermined by having rarely played as school-boys against top-flight non-Jewish competition. In the case of the Metropolitan area schools situated in and around New York City, Long Island, Westchester New Jersey—where, as of 2014, there were some eighteen clubs in their league—almost the entire schedule pits them against one or another local, fellow day-school athletes. The only exception is when they are invited to out-of-town tournaments, where they do get a chance to face comparably skilled or weaker teams.

These New Yorkers are the best of the local talent. Such athletes and the others with national Jewish day school reputations also stand out when they play on counselor teams at Orthodox-run summer camps in the Catskills or the Poconos. They are the luminaries in the Orthodox versions of the legendary “Five Star” Basketball camp, where the top-flight school boys come from all over the US to upgrade and display their abilities in front of scores of eager Division I coaches (Metropolitan Yeshiva High School Athletic League; Five Star Basketball). But New York day-school athletes are not part of this elite warm-weather mix and, much like their narrowly-based winter season, they have no such opportunities that might help them to gain confidence through competition against stronger foes.5

In comparison, Orthodox day-school athletes in Dallas, Miami, Chicago or even Los Angeles (which has the nation’s second largest Jewish community), not to mention those from Kansas City or Memphis, do not maintain exclusive leagues of their own but instead regularly match themselves up against non-Jewish clubs. Still, although some of these teams have won a lot of games and even some championships in their areas, generally they have defeated small private schools that also draw upon their own limited student bodies. Accordingly, most day-school recruits do not possess the athletic pedigree to stack up well against formidable players of Billups’ caliber and the other top-flight conference competitors that YU must face.6

It has remained for the exceptional ball player, who has the talent and competitive background and has hailed from outside the day-school “system,”
to carry forward Halpert’s dreams of a championship. Actually, Yeshiva’s quest for the so-called “public-school kid” dates back a generation before Halpert assumed the Macs reigns as head coach. In 1949, Marvin Hershkowitz, who as a school-boy was the captain of the De Witt Clinton varsity, which in his junior year captured the New York City Public School basketball championship, presented himself to Sarachek (“Bronx Five Victor at Garden, 49–44”). As Yeshiva lore has it, Hershkowitz initially enrolled at City College of New York (CCNY) a year earlier in 1948 and was a member of its highly-touted freshmen team that its coach Bobby Sand boasted was “the greatest [class] ever to come to the college” (“Lavender Freshmen Heading for New Heights”). Replete with many all-city stars, this club would form the core of CCNY’s unparalleled triumphant team that in 1950 captured both the NCAA and National Invitational basketball tournaments and thereby became the toast of the town. Sadly, however, a year later, several of these stars would be implicated in a point-shaving scandal that shook their alma mater and the Big Apple community that loved their Beavers to its core.

Hershkowitz, however, was gone from the St. Nicholas Heights campus during both these glory and then scandal-ridden days at CCNY. The issue with the college’s program that triggered his departure was not athletic but religious. As a maturing teenager, he had become increasingly attached to Orthodox Judaism and had come to realize that athletic achievement on a rarified level and fidelity to his faith were incompatible. What would he do about non-kosher training meals and games that took place on the Jewish Sabbath? Yeshiva offered him the chance to continue to compete—although at a lower level of play—and still maintain Orthodox observance. For Sarachek, Hershkowitz’s decision to come to YU was a godsend; and given the star forward’s growing religious commitments, the school tailored a religious studies program for a young man who did not have a day-school educational background. This conformed well with Yeshiva’s academic standards for athletes, since the school has always required that all students take a dual curriculum of general and Jewish studies to earn their graduation credits (Gurock, The Men 174–75).

In the years that followed this elite player’s arrival, Sarachek was able to recruit additional top-flight Jewish public-school players. The school initially helped the coach along by developing further the curriculum that Hershkowitz followed (he would become an observant Orthodox Jew) into a rudimentary “Jewish Studies Program.” With a better brand of athlete on the squad, Yeshiva basketball had its heyday in the mid-1950s. In the 1955–56 campaign, the club went 16–2, and over a four-year period (1953–57) they won fifty-one games
against only twenty-seven losses. But while Sarachek basked in his success, some faculty, administrators and a goodly number of students were displeased with the direction the “Program” had taken. For unlike Hershkowitz, who was already committed to Orthodoxy before he arrived on campus, many of those who followed him were not. And in fact, they never did buy into the religious strictures of the yeshiva-world. Critics derisively came to refer to the new curriculum as the “Jewish Sports Program,” and the word on Amsterdam Avenue was that “these were guys who would shoot baskets, take the college courses and go home.” Simply put, they had a hard time fitting into Yeshiva University’s religious culture. By the end of the fifties, the Jewish Studies Program’s protocol was, “if you are not already committed, you would not be admitted” (Gurock, The Men 176–79; Halpert, 228).

By the time Halpert began coaching at Yeshiva, not only had the welcome-mat been pulled out from under the sneakered feet of potential public-school kids, but the actual number of such athletes was steadily declining. In many communities the sports of choice among Jewish youngsters had become golf, tennis and even swimming—country-club athletic pursuits that had been off-limits to their parents and grandparents (Ringer 114–15, 213–15 [Eds. Note: also see the article by Ari Sclar in this volume.]). With the talent-pool shrinking fast, Halpert made a few concerted efforts to bring in a bumper-crop of elite players in 1977–79, when he organized Yeshiva University’s High School Jewish Basketball Tournaments. He brought to campus forty-two stars from around the country, including Dan Schayes who would eventually become a professional in the National Basketball Association (NBA). But only four of these players signed up to play for the Macs, and they were day-school youngsters from Long Island and Atlanta, Georgia who were already planning to come Yeshiva anyway. For these Orthodox athletes, Halpert’s offer of the opportunity to play college hoops without having to face the dilemmas of Sabbath play and non-kosher food was highly inviting. Moreover, they already had the educational background to handle the university’s rigorous dual program of study. The other ballplayers were fundamentally disinterested in Yeshiva’s strictures and obligations. Over the more than thirty years that followed, only two American Jewish public-school players would compete under Halpert (Halpert 236–41).

Over the past 15 years (1999–2014), however, there were two much publicized day-school players who could have bolstered Yeshiva’s squad but who opted instead to try their hand at big-time college basketball within programs that promised, nonetheless, to respect their religious concerns. In 1999,
Answering to a Different Authority in Sports

there was the immensely ballyhooed saga of Tamir Goodman—dubbed by an intrigued media as the “Jewish [Michael] Jordan”—whom the University of Maryland courted for a while. In his initial deliberations with the Terrapins’ coaches, this star guard from the Baltimore Talmudic Academy was ostensibly promised that he would not be obliged to play on the Sabbath, would be provided kosher food and might even be able to continue his religious studies through U of M’s Chabad (the Lubavitcher Hasidim outreach specialists), who offered to step up as potential on-the-road tutors. There was even some talk of moving the dates of the multi-million dollar Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) tournament away from Saturday to accommodate this Jewish player whom his promoters said was “the emes” (in Hebrew, literally, the “truth” or, in other words, the “real deal”). At the apogee of the excitement over this unanticipated development within the Orthodox community, Goodman became a symbol for how tolerant and accommodating America had become towards Jews, in general and Orthodox Judaism, in particular. Seemingly, he would not have to deal with the dilemmas Hershkowitz might have faced half a century earlier. Clearly Goodman did not have to—and clearly he did not want to—play at an Orthodox school to compete as a collegian. Eventually, however, Maryland’s coaches backed away from their implicit commitments, as they discerned that Goodman was not quite the star they had initially thought him to be. Ultimately, Goodman played for one year at Towson State University, a Mid-Major Division I school that agreed to schedule around the Sabbath. A year later, Goodman was living in Israel, where he had an undistinguished career on one of Israel’s minor league professional teams (Gurock, Judaism’s Encounter, 160–70; Gurock, “The Crowning of a ‘Jewish Jordan’ ” 161–74).

In 2013, the sports world also took notice of Aaron Liberman, a graduate of Valley Torah High School in California, who was not recruited but walked on to the Big Ten’s Northwestern University team. Although standing 6 feet 10 inches, he was not viewed by the coaches as a potential star for the Wildcats. Still, many were intrigued by his desire not only to wear a yarmulke but also zizith (the fringe garments worn by observant Jewish men) during games. Orthodox Jews were impressed that the Wildcat coaches accepted him on their squad—although there was no talk in Evanston, Illinois about altering the basketball schedule. Liberman determined, after consultation with a sympathetic rabbi that he would walk to Saturday practices and games since in his view “actually, playing basketball is not breaking any of the 39 laws of the Sabbath. But I’ll only be taking cold showers afterward because you can’t use hot water.” Or for that matter, he would not be using a vehicle to get where he needed to
be to practice or play games. Still, others within the Orthodox community did not concur with that halachic (religious legal) decision (Strauss).

Ultimately, Liberman remained more a curiosity than a major contributor to the team. Nonetheless, when he was put into his first game for one minute during a blowout loss against Michigan, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency ran a story entitled “Against Michigan, Aaron Liberman’s Kippah Makes Hoops History.” This report, which was circulated to Jewish newspapers nationwide, also noted that after a home game, in which Liberman did not play, he spoke to the crowd about “what it’s like to be an Orthodox Jew playing major college hoops.” To add to the spirit of the game, “the school handed out approximately 200 purple yarmulkes with an N printed on them to people who attended” (Socolof). Back at Yeshiva, Coach Halpert’s take on Liberman—as had been the case with Goodman—was that these Orthodox youngsters belonged at his school and could have helped his program, even if he was unconvinced that either of them would have been the consummate answer to his recruitment needs (“Nachum Welcomed YU’s Coach Jonathan Halpert to JM in the AM”).

Rather, since the mid-1980s, Halpert has largely put his faith in recruiting Israeli “public school kids.” Much like the big time programs that have looked overseas (including in the Jewish State) for talented athletes, Yeshiva’s coach has looked high and wide for the type of skilled, battle-tested and mature player that could bolster his team. Ironically and perhaps fittingly, Marvin Hershkowitz, who migrated with his family to Israel in the 1970s, has been among those who have helped identify ball players who possessed the right combination of personal, religious and athletic qualities to succeed on both the court and in the classroom in Washington Heights.

The best possible candidates have been those who grew up in and did well within Israel’s pre-professional club system before fulfilling their three years of active military service. (Yeshiva’s admissions protocol has tacitly prohibited recruiting those who might wish to avoid the Israel Defense Force by seeking admission to YU.) As youngsters, Israeli athletes have competed in more challenging settings than have their day-school, Orthodox counterparts state-side. These players typically, however, have not been of Division I pedigree; for if that were the case, a school like the University of Connecticut would have had a better chance to attract them with an athletic scholarship. What the Macs’ program could offer was the chance to play college basketball in the United States, while also being educated in a quality American university—sometimes with partial need-based financial aid. Halpert did not demand complete Orthodox religious commitment or conformity from these foreign
players; only openness to the Jewish studies curriculum, which was the usual deal-breaker if he ever sought to corral an American public-school recruit. To be sure, the Israelis certainly had a leg up over any conceivable domestic candidate when it came to dealing with Yeshiva's educational demands. For one thing, they had no problem in the Hebrew language courses, which obviously were taught in their native tongue.

Though the recruitment saga and strategy differed in each individual case—and not every foreigner adjusted easily to Orthodox Jewish university life—over a twenty-one year period, twenty-six Israelis, including ten captains and the school’s all-time leading scorer (a Hershkowitz protégé) contributed significantly to keeping Yeshiva competitive. What they gave the program, beyond their standout statistics, was a physical and mental toughness, so necessary for Yeshiva to win close games that they inevitably faced. It was often said that a player who just a year or so earlier had faced opponents across the Lebanese border or in the Gaza Strip would hardly blanch at having to make a crucial foul shot in a mere basketball game. When the Israelis’ skills were melded adroitly into Halpert’s system, supplemented by the one or two outstanding American day-school teammates who had been cherry-picked from “the Sarachek,” Yeshiva habitually beat the lower level clubs in their conference and more often than not the team held its own against the middle of the pack in their league. And conversely, perhaps the difficulties that the 2013–14 team experienced, when it was ultimately edged out for that final Skyline playoff spot, may be attributed in significant part to the absence, for the first time in a generation of any foreign-born players. The two star-players and the ever-improving center all came out of the day-school system and the Sarachek tournament. In all events, over the years, with this combination of domestic and foreign born players working together, Yeshiva won enough games to be invited to the aforementioned ECAC post-season tournaments. Still, even in their most victorious years, the best Yeshiva might offer was never sufficient to defeat teams that boasted high quality players, nor were they ever able to secure a conference title and with it a coveted NCAA national tournament bid (Halpert 82–87).

Less noticeable than star opponents, but also very much in play in undermining Yeshiva’s championship quest, is, ironically Orthodox Judaism’s own revered clock and calendar. This temporal problem stems directly from the very religious distinctiveness of which the school is most proud. For in the end, notwithstanding the Goodman and Liberman unique personal scenarios, Yeshiva really is the only school in America where an observant Orthodox Jew
can play college-level basketball without violating or severely challenging his Sabbath scruples. Yeshiva basketball is so different, when compared to other colleges with which it competes, that in February 2014 newspaper sports pundit Phil Mushnick was moved to wryly observe: “Aside from being the longest one-school college coach in NYC history, Halpert holds a record that never will be surpassed: His Yeshiva teams never have lost a Friday night or Saturday afternoon game.” But with Friday, and most of Saturday out-of-bounds, the Macs have had to cram their games, not to mention their limited practice time, within the confines of the five remaining weekdays. To their credit, opponents have not objected to playing Sunday games, even if they might prefer to have that day off for rest or additional training. Moreover, the NCAA recognizes Yeshiva’s right—as it does under similar circumstances for Bingham Young University, whose majority of students are members of the Church of Latter Day Saints—not to have to play on its Sabbath. Such is the enlightened sports policy of a religiously-tolerant United States today. Still, attempting to win back-to-back games or to triumph four times over a week’s period, regardless of the opposition, has always posed a daunting challenge to YU. Often that strain has led to injuries among these overworked and under-practiced athletes (Mushnick; Worthen 128–29).

Mushnick also could have noted an additional scheduling dynamic and dilemma that contributes to an unavoidable fatigue factor. Due to the annual series of September-October Jewish holidays, the school suspends classes for effectively two to three weeks in the middle of the fall semester. Consequently, student-athletes, along with the rest of their schoolmates, finally take their end of semester exams in early to mid-January and then have an intersession break over the remainder of that month. Most other schools take their winter break before and after Christmas in December through the beginning of January. Effectively, this means that Yeshiva has to play what amounts to two half-seasons: December and February (but never on Shabbat, of course), thus leaving them little time for practice and rehabilitation once the season starts up again. To make matters worse during the unsuccessful 2013–14 season, a series of actuarial “acts of God” also interfered with Halpert’s schedule, which had been designed and carefully drawn up precisely to mitigate these difficulties as much as this could be done. A series of unanticipated snowstorms during February in the Metropolitan area forced cancellations of what otherwise would have been more properly spaced games. As a result, twice during this period, Yeshiva was forced to play back-to-back games. And during one eight-day period, which extended over two Friday nights and Saturday, the Macs played five games with
almost no practice time in-between. They were unsuccessful in every one of these nine engagements (Yeshiva University Maccabees. Schedule 2013–14).

Finally, Yeshiva basketball is challenged by the rigor of its academic requirements. No school on its schedule, (except perhaps NYU-"Brooklyn" Poly) requires its student-athletes to attend such a full complement of classes (which can mount up to twenty-nine hours a week) to the extent that is required by this Orthodox academic institution. This reality undermines practice and recovery time in much the same way as the Orthodox calendar does. Even the regularly scheduled practices cannot begin until after 7 pm in deference to the academic program. Over the years, the Macs have played teams on its out-of-conference schedule from some excellent academic institutions and top Division III clubs—NYU, MIT, Brandeis and Emory, for example. But even they do not insist upon the same daunting attendance hours in school as does Yeshiva. Thus in recruitment, Halpert has been stymied by the so called “demands of the dual program”—perhaps as much as the kosher and Sabbath regulations, regardless of whether the candidate is an American or an Israeli.

Still, Coach Halpert is abundantly proud of the recognition his athletes once received from an opposing school that took note of what he and his young men face in attempting to be Orthodox Jewish scholars and athletes. One of his prized mementos from the 1997 ECAC invitation was a sign that was taped to his visitors’ locker room door: “Due to class commitment of the Yeshiva student-athletes, our game will tip-off at 8.p.m.” Yeshiva lost the game to a more athletic and better-conditioned College of Staten Island team. But in retrospect, the coach would contend that the locker room “announcement remains far more meaningful that any ECAC trophy” (Halpert 30).

Thus, ultimately, for Halpert, the calculus of a once-expressed frustration about his inability to win a championship balanced against his more often reconciled appreciation of Yeshiva basketball realities bespeaks the program’s long-time mission ever since a group of students started the team more than eighty years ago. Like the school they have represented, these Orthodox collegians have aspired to live harmoniously within their country’s and their faith’s cultures, dealing as best they can with the conflicts that inevitably ensue in tentatively embracing a world that is not inherently akin to theirs. As athletes, they pursue the dream of victory—the secular quest for a piece of immortality that comes with raising a trophy high. But, also as committed Jews, they have a higher goal to fulfill the millennia-old vision that their conception of Judaism places before them. For forty-two years, Coach Jonathan Halpert did all that he could to win while still listening to that higher authority (Gurock, “The Beginnings” 157–72).
Notes

1. In the 2011–12 season, St. Joseph’s went 17–1 in the regular season, only to be upset in the conference championship game by SUNY-Purchase. Nonetheless, the Golden Eagles were selected for the Division III NCAA tournament. The next year, St. Joseph’s record in conference play was 4–14.

2. For year-by-year statistics on Yeshiva’s wins and losses to Poly, see Jonathan Halpert.

3. As of the end of the 2013–14 season, Yeshiva won during Halpert’s tenure, 188 games by more than ten points: twenty-seven times in total. Brooklyn Poly was the Macs’ most unfortunate victim. Two other opponents, Bard College and Pratt Institute lost eighteen and fourteen times respectively by more than ten points. When these games—played against, arguably, their weakest traditional opponents—are factored out, Yeshiva otherwise won by ten points or more only thirty percent of the time. On Halpert’s feelings about the loss opportunity vs. Mount St. Vincent, it should be noted that more than a decade later, he would note that “it was the most disappointing loss in my forty-one-year career.” He would also note the injury that hampered one of his star players. See Halpert 123.

4. Interestingly, not all of the best players from this cohort have opted for Yeshiva as their college. An informal survey of the recipients of the “Most Valuable Player” awards by the tournament assistant director and statistician indicates that only four of the winners enrolled at Yeshiva. See Bandler.

5. There are in existence several kosher basketball camps for observant youngsters that emulate what Five Star does generally. See, for example, Step It Up, which boasts that players come from eighteen states and ten foreign countries to be offered its glatt-kosher cuisine, sports and religious studies. But, here again the Orthodox youngsters are playing against one another.

6. Perhaps the best out of (New York) town school over the past few decades has been the Yeshiva University of Los Angeles [YULA]. For example, The 2012 YULA Panthers varsity basketball team went 27–7 overall, winning the Cooper, Milken, Hillcrest Christian and Sarachek Tournaments. See on their recent record, “Sweat Equity.”

7. During the years of the Sarachek tournament, three other day school players “walked on” and played sporadically at Division I programs, although with less notoriety. See Jonathan Halbert.

8. In addition to the Israelis, who were recruited from overseas in the 1980s on an annual basis, Yeshiva also recruited two brothers, who were originally from Israel but who had moved to the US with their parents, after playing club-basketball back in their original home. They proved to be effective, if unusually acquired “American” public-school players, who found their way to Yeshiva through friends of the school, residing in Atlanta, GA. These two helped lead the school to the ECAC tournament. Finally, an Argentinian recruit, who had played higher-level youth basketball in his own country, likewise aided the program in the early 2010s. See Halpert 76–77, 78–81.
Works Cited

Bandler, Jonathan. Email to Jeffrey S. Gurock. 26 Feb. 2014.


———. Personal interview. 3 Feb. 2014.


