Beyond Stereotypes

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Israel made a smashing debut at the 2014 World Lacrosse Championship in Denver, finishing seventh overall out of thirty-eight teams, with a 6–2 record. The team’s two losses were each by a single goal to Australia and England, both of which have been playing the sport for a century and have competed in every World Games since 1967 (“Israel Rallies past Japan”). According to the “lacrosse news website laxpower.com,” which publishes exacting quantitative analyses of lacrosse results, Israel’s performance ranked fifth in the field, based on comparative scores and strength of schedule (“Computer Ratings for Teams in the FIL World Championships”).

Whether fifth or seventh, the 2014 results of Israel’s team, composed of men, who learned lacrosse in the United States, raises the question of how Jews came to be so proficient in this sport? While the story of Israel’s lacrosse team is recent, its players would not have been so successful at the World Lacrosse Championship had there not been a cadre of excellent American Jewish lacrosse players and coaches. Thus, the story of Israel Lacrosse in 2014 has two major components: the story of the Israeli team, itself, and its origins in decades of Jews having lacrosse success in America.¹

Lacrosse originated with the native peoples of North America. Europeans first encountered it during colonial times and adopted the sport in the mid-nineteenth century, after which it continued to have a limited following in the US, Canada, Australia, and the British Isles. Until the mid-twentieth century, lacrosse was overwhelmingly limited to elite prep schools, the nation's
military academies, and some of the more selective colleges and universities in the northeast. Because lacrosse requires a large playing field for practices and games (current dimensions are 110 yards by 60 yards) with enough surrounding buffer space so that errant shots and passes do not damage structures, windows, or passersby, it has been a sport played in suburban locations much more so than in cities with little open space such as New York or Philadelphia.

Israeli Lacrosse got started due to the efforts of a young New Yorker, Scott Neiss (“Scott Neiss”), as a product of his 2010 Birthright experience—through which he along with thousands of other Jewish young people from all over the world have received a free trip to Israel so they can learn more about the country and its relationship to their Jewish heritage (“About Taglit-Birthright Israel”). At the pivotal moment of reflection to those young Jewish men and women who have come to visit Israel, often for the first time, the Birthright trip leaders pose a fundamental question, “What are you going to do for the Israel you have just encountered?” Scott Neiss answered, “I’ll bring lacrosse to Israel.” Then a young executive, who had worked for several American professional lacrosse leagues, now a Tel Aviv resident and Israeli citizen, Neiss recruited coaches and players with World Championship experience and established lacrosse training centers in Israel. He also combed the country for Aliyah-niks (that is, recent immigrants to Israel) who had played the sport in North America, established Israel Lacrosse as the national governing body for the sport, and raised the financial resources (more than $700,000) to enable Israelis to compete at the highest levels of the sport. Unlike Tal Brody, the American basketball All-American who led Israel to the European Cup Championship in 1977 (“Tal Brody”), Neiss is not a very proficient lacrosse player; instead, he led from the sidelines rather than the playing field.

A year after Neiss’s initial Birthright experience, I went to Jerusalem to referee “the first ever lacrosse match on Israeli soil,” as the advertising poster for the game declared. In July of 2011, Larry Turkheimer, a Los Angeles businessman (and one-time lacrosse All-American at the University of North Carolina), enlisted me and Jeff Alpert, then a UCLA student, as a l’dor v’dor (that is, “generation to generation”) refereeing duo (I was sixty-three then, Jeff was twenty-one). Maybe “draft” is closer to Larry’s approach than “enlist.” “Israel has just been admitted to the Federation of International Lacrosse (FIL), even though there’s never been a game played there. The first game is next month and they need a ref. You’re a teacher. You’ve got the summer off. Use some frequent flier miles and do the game.” So I figured that if an international sports governing body had admitted Israel without bureaucratic fuss or any
global political nonsense, and it was the governing body of the sport in which I had more than four decades of experience, then I’d better go and do the game.

Why was Israel admitted to the FIL in the first place with so little experience or infrastructure in lacrosse? This wasn’t a gesture of philo-Semitism; rather, it happened because of the FIL’s pragmatic desire for international expansion. Indeed, Israel was not the only country with an infant lacrosse program that was embraced by the FIL. It also reached out to similar fledgling programs in Hong Kong, Bermuda, and Thailand. Estonia, Russia, and Uganda are examples of the FIL’s associate members (“Members by Member Type”).

Fast forward to July 2014. Jeff and I received a similar offer to serve as referees, but this time to officiate Israel’s pre-tournament games immediately before the World Championships in Denver, Colorado. The Israeli team, like all national teams, was assembled specifically for this quadrennial event. The pre-tournament games, as well as games at the Vail Invitational over the July 4th holiday and during a preceding Birthright Lacrosse pilgrimage in June, provided the setting for player selection and also served to facilitate the building of team cohesion (“Israel Shocks No. 10 Sweden”). Whereas the 2011 game in Jerusalem had been ragged at its best moments, the 2014 Israel contingent in Denver, comprising two teams—designated “championship” and “development”—along with coaches, managers, trainers, photographers, and an entourage of parents, siblings, and other supporters, showed how far Israel lacrosse had come in less than three years.

The rules for international lacrosse differ enough from those of the American collegiate game, with which the Israel team members (including coaches) were most familiar, that Neiss tasked Jeff and me with helping the players learn the international rules (“A Table of Differences”).

Israel’s first pre-tournament game in Denver pitted the team against the Iroquois Nationals, whose Native American ancestors, as noted above, created the sport millennia ago. Although the two teams did not meet in the tournament—the Iroquois finished third and Israel was seventh—their first scrimmage demonstrated convincingly that Israel could compete against the teams in the tournament’s power pool.

That first scrimmage was our introduction to the 2014 Israel team. After the scrimmage with the Iroquois, Jeff and I remained on the playing field and answered the Israeli players’ questions about the rule differences. We expected them to view us as partners in preparation for the tournament, in part because we wore referee striped shirts with an Israeli flag patch above the left pocket, instead of the Stars-and-Stripes patches we wear when working games in the
Those Star of David flag patches did not inhibit the Iroquois players from joining our informal post-game rules seminar. What mattered most was the competence Jeff and I had shown on the field in administering the international rules, not the symbols on our shirts. This was all the more remarkable since many of the Iroquois players had extensive experience with the international rules, having played in under [the age of]-nineteen competitions; and some of them were coming off fabulously successful seasons in American college lacrosse. Two of the Iroquois players, brothers Lyle and Miles Thompson, had shared the 2014 Tewaaraton Trophy as the best college players in the land (The Tewaaraton Award).

The Israeli players, more than half of whom are now full-time residents of Israel, concentrated on their competitive responsibilities during the games, but the tumult arising from the most recent Gaza conflict was never far from their thoughts. Neiss set the tone with a message to the team and its supporters on the eve of the international competition:

. . . we press forward, and continue onward with our mission to bring joy to the communities of Israel through sport during this difficult time. Our youth camp has continued this week despite threats in Tel Aviv. We’ve scholarshipped children from the South of Israel who have been relocated to the center, away from the border with Gaza. We will continue with our lacrosse camp in Ramla next week unless the IDF’s [Israel Defense Force’s] Home Front Command Unit instructs otherwise. It’s with this attitude that we press forward, and make our debut in the World Games. . . . We will not be deterred.

Since the Israel players have roots in the United States, their connections to the site of the World Games may explain some of Israel team’s success. But no level of emotional attachment or organizational competence will prevail in the absence of talented and experienced players who are well coached and well led.

As previously noted, many Americans tend to view lacrosse as a niche sport. The word “lacrosse” may be associated by most Americans (even those who are sports fans) with a line of Buick sedans, rather than a ball-and-stick field sport. Those slightly better acquainted with the sport may know that football great Jim Brown was a lacrosse star at Syracuse University in the 1950s. Nonetheless, in the twenty-first century, lacrosse has spread rapidly. In fact, lacrosse has become the fastest growing team sport in America since 2001, with a seventy-percent increase in the number of high schools offering boys’ lacrosse. Lacrosse now rates fifth among team sports (after football, basketball, baseball, and soccer) in high school student participation, with a 155 percent increase in
participation from 2001 to 2014, that statistically overshadows the participation growth in basketball (0.2 percent), baseball (7.1 percent), football (8 percent) and soccer (25.4 percent) (“2014 High School Lacrosse Sponsorship”).

While there are no official statistics that track religious identity against participation in particular sports in the United States, Jews appear to be disproportionately numerous among the most accomplished lacrosse players. Notably, two members of the US national team, Jesse Schwartzman and Max Seibald, are Jewish. Schwartzman has been recognized twice as the most valuable player in the NCAA championships and has the most wins of any goalie in Major League Lacrosse. Seibald was the 2009 winner of the Tewaaraton Trophy.

A number of successful Jewish lacrosse veterans rallied to the Israel team. Head coach Bill Beroza was captain of the winning US team in the 1982 World Championships (“William S. Beroza”). Defensive coach Mark Greenberg was his teammate in 1982, when he was recognized with a spot on the tournament’s “all-world” team (“Mark J. Greenberg”). The team’s development director, Larry Turkheimer, was an All-American at North Carolina (“Larry Turkheimer”). Howard Borkan, the team’s general manager, played at Cornell and is a multiple honoree of the Long Island Metropolitan Chapter of US Lacrosse, the sport’s national governing body (“Howard Borkan”).

Besides these leaders, there are veteran players on the Israeli National Team, who originally played on American college and in some instances professional teams. Midfielder Ben Smith is assistant coach at Harvard, where he also played as an undergraduate. Back-up goalie Reuven Dressler is a forty-one-year-old Tel Aviv physician who starred in the NCAA tournament while at Yale. Attackman Ari Sussman, who played collegiately at Dartmouth, and midfielder Casey Cittadino from Towson State University in Baltimore, are veterans of Major League Lacrosse, the fourteen-year-old professional league started by Jake Steinfeld, a Jew from Long Island, NY, whose brief collegiate lacrosse career at Cortland State in New York preceded a successful Hollywood career, first as an actor and personal trainer, later as an entrepreneur and philanthropist (Rosenfeld).

Still, we may well wonder how lacrosse became such an attractive sport-of-choice for Jews, first in America and more recently in Israel? Why have Jews had success in a sport normally associated with Native Americans, prep schools, Ivy League universities, and the service academies? When, why, and how did lacrosse become, if not the new Jewish game, certainly a game in which Jews are notably successful?
As noted above, lacrosse has experienced explosive growth in the twenty-first century. When it comes to Jewish interest in this sport, among the several factors to be considered is geography. For example, on Long Island, NY, which has a disproportionately large Jewish population compared to the rest of the country, lacrosse had already started on its growth spurt in the mid-to-late twentieth century. For this reason, the number of boys’ high school teams on Long Island increased only from ninety-three to ninety-seven between 2005 and 2014. By comparison, in the rest of New York State over the same decade boys’ high school lacrosse grew by 32.9 percent. In the seven states (and also including the District of Columbia) with the greatest Jewish population in 2010, (California, Florida, Illinois, Maryland and DC, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania), high school lacrosse grew by 46.3 percent (49.9 percent if Long Island is excluded). These eight states accounted for seventy-two percent of the US Jewish population in 2010. In the other forty-two states, comprising twenty-eight percent of Jewish population but 60.5 percent of total population, lacrosse in high schools grew by 64.2 percent from 2005 to 2014. These data support the conclusion that lacrosse had its deepest penetration into American sports, at least as measured by the number of high schools offering the sport, in those parts of the country with the greatest proportionate number of Jews.7

As noted, this has been particularly so on Long Island. For many Jewish families, Long Island was the suburban escape path from New York City during the post-World War II period; so baby boomers and their children grew up in a locale where lacrosse had begun to take root. Other regions of concentrated lacrosse development in the mid-to-late twentieth century, such as the Boston and Baltimore-Washington suburbs, also had significant Jewish populations. At the World Lacrosse Championship in Denver, there were several instances in which the players’ fathers would introduce themselves to me and recount the stories of their lacrosse careers. Overwhelmingly, these stories were told in the distinctive regional speech of Long Island’s Nassau and Suffolk Counties, with an occasional voice having a Baltimore accent.

Hence, despite being thought of as a sport with Native American origins, a favorite of tony prep schools, an Ivy League college specialty, or a sport with deep roots at the nation’s military service academies, lacrosse has also turned out to be attractive as a path to assimilation for the children and grandchildren of Jewish immigrants. The settlement houses and YMHAs of the Lower East Side did not sponsor lacrosse (though some of their latter day successors do in this decade). As Ari Sclar has shown elsewhere in this volume, those institutions
sponsored basketball (also boxing) as an activity to promote American values of fitness and manliness. But for the next generation of American Jews, and specifically those who moved from city to suburb, and who might wish to immerse themselves in an identifiably American activity through which their immigrant legacy might be shed, or at least de-emphasized, lacrosse provided a superb vehicle for assimilation. Like any process involving people with dissimilar backgrounds and traditions, American Jews who took up lacrosse encountered all sorts of reactions from their teammates and competitors: embrace, anti-Jewish remarks, prejudice affecting game participation, or simply being treated as just another player on the team. For those who could not safely or confidently proclaim their Jewish identity, the success of Israeli lacrosse, though a generation removed from their own experiences, led some of the parents and other supporters of the team to see it as a reversal of the hard memories they had from unpleasant moments in their athletic careers.

The athletic requirements of lacrosse may also have contributed to the engagement of American Jews with the sport. Speed, skill, and power are essential attributes in virtually every athletic endeavor, though not in similar proportions. Lacrosse players tend to be significantly lighter and shorter than their counterparts in football and basketball, for example. Note, in this respect, a comparison of the 2014 rosters for the three sports at Duke University—the 2014 NCAA Division I lacrosse champion, but also an institution with successful teams in the other sports: Lacrosse participants, on average were 4.8 inches shorter than their basketball counterparts and forty-one pounds lighter than their football brethren. Since the lacrosse team averaged six foot, one-half inches in height and 188.8 pounds in weight, these were not small or slight men (though thirteen out of forty-five players on the roster were under six feet tall and fourteen weighed less than 180 pounds). In comparison to football and basketball, however, lacrosse would appear to be more egalitarian in terms of size and mass.8

The absence of a professional field lacrosse league for most of the twentieth century and its paltry salary level when once established (less than $20,000 per season for most players in 2014) tended to support the participation of Jews in lacrosse in two ways. Those athletes who sought a substantially more remunerative career in sports tended to try other activities—baseball, football, tennis, golf, basketball—limiting to a considerable extent the number of transcendentally gifted athletes playing lacrosse and thus enabling Jews to have an increased potential for success.
In this respect, the experience of Jim Brown, the famous football Hall of Famer mentioned in passing above, is illuminating. Not only was Brown a virtually unstoppable force in college football before turning professional, he was likewise impossible to overcome in lacrosse. Predictably, after college he chose to play football due to its earning potential. Still, more than once he remarked that he played football for money, but preferred lacrosse as a sport. Brown's after-sports career may more subtly illuminate another aspect of why lacrosse may appeal to Jews. After he left football for work in film, Brown also engaged himself for long years in social justice campaigns. Thus, both professionally and personally, he sought a life that had a greater meaning beyond the narrow confines of the playing field. Jews in a similar fashion have never tended to look at the pursuit of sports and the fame and money it might earn them as their ultimate goal. Other values have always been deemed to have greater significance—especially the well-known emphasis on higher education in Jewish families. Hence, the absence of a professional life in lacrosse was not a disincentive for young Jews who wished to make it their sport of choice (McLaughlin).

The prevalence and popularity of lacrosse at prestigious colleges and universities contributed to athletes' family support of lacrosse. Whether Ivy League or Little Three (Amherst, Wesleyan, Williams), lacrosse has had a home at the sort of colleges striving Jewish families hoped their children would attend. Even though lacrosse is as rugged as the other male sports (though not as physically dangerous as football, by any means), the likely options for continuing a high school lacrosse career into college were much more attractive to aspiring Jewish families in terms of higher education attainment and social value than many of the universities offering football, basketball, and baseball.

All of these factors contributed to American Jews' embrace of lacrosse and by extension contributed to Israel's success at the 2014 World Lacrosse Championships—thanks to Israeli players who learned the game in the United States. Those factors have operated for many years and have created a critical mass of Jewish athletes and coaches accomplished in lacrosse, upon which Israel will continue to be able to draw for the foreseeable future. There is no reason to expect that this circumstance is likely to change much in the years ahead, even though the future growth rate for lacrosse participation in the United States most likely will be in states with a relatively smaller proportion of Jews. This reflects the case noted above for Long Island in macrocosm. That is, since lacrosse has already deeply penetrated most of the areas where Jews live, the most likely areas for the sport's further growth are beyond those enclaves. One
might idly speculate whether lacrosse could ever become a multi-billion-dollar sports cartel like the National Basketball Association or the National Football League with Scott Neiss (at least in Israel) becoming the next David Stern or Pete Roselle. Probably not. Far more likely, lacrosse will remain a niche sport for suburban and prep school athletes who are not aspiring to a multi-million-dollar professional sports career (however illusory those aspirations may be). It will continue to attract athletes of all sizes and shapes, creating a far more athletically egalitarian cohort of players. Highly accomplished players will find their collegiate athletic opportunities concentrated at institutions that genuinely expect athletes also to attend to their studies. In sum, Jews will continue to choose lacrosse and excel at it for the reasons that have prevailed for much of the late twentieth and now into the early twenty-first century.

Moreover, beyond the obvious benefits for Israeli lacrosse, there may be a benefit for American Jewish culture as well. In fact, the comprehensive growth of programs to support Israeli Lacrosse has the potential to work both ways—not only as a benefit for Jews in Israel but also as a benefit for Jews in America. It is important to note the establishment of lacrosse in Israel does not end with the national team. The same people who brought lacrosse competition at the highest level to Israel have also led the development of lacrosse programs for Israeli children (both Jewish and Arab). A program in Ashkelon, the centerpiece of Neiss’s organizational efforts, has been on the leading edge of an effort that involved one thousand children in the summer of 2014 (“U.S. Volunteers Stick Out Conflict”). Part of the staffing for those lessons has come from forty participants in a lacrosse-themed Birthright trip that took place in June 2014. Equally divided between men and women, the “Lacrosse Birthright” participants were all active lacrosse players in college varsity programs. The trip sought to use lacrosse as a platform to educate, engage and energize various Israeli communities while gaining a better understanding of what Israel and the region have to offer in sports. As Neiss notes:

We’re big believers in using sport as a platform to help connect [American] Jews with Israel. Many players with aspirations to compete at the NCAA level are justifiably so focused on training and attending recruiting camps, so Israel takes a backseat. This is a great opportunity for Jewish athletes to take a free trip to Israel, while spreading their passion for the game internationally. (“Lacrosse Players to Tour, Teach and Train”)
The upshot of this engagement of American Jews in a Birthright lacrosse program will undoubtedly have a rebound effect. Neiss and his fellow Jewish lacrosse enthusiasts and players desired to bring lacrosse to Israel as a direct response to the Birthright challenge: What can you do for Israel? But, in doing this, they have also brought a deeper connection with Israel back to a dedicated cadre of American Jewish athletes. In view of the origins of lacrosse with the Iroquois and other North American indigenous peoples, it may be fitting to speak of a transfer from America’s equivalent of a deeply engrained culture to the native-born sabras of Israel that then bounces back to America’s Jewish athletes with profoundly enriched understanding of and engagement with Israel.
Notes

1. This analysis does not address women’s lacrosse. Women’s and men’s lacrosse are distinct sports that share a name and some of the same equipment.

2. On the Native American origins of lacrosse, see Conover. For a more detailed study, see Vennum. For more recent developments, see McPhee.

3. In a forum-post about adding lacrosse as an Olympic sport, Steve Stenersen (who has been the President and CEO of US Lacrosse since its founding in 1998 and was executive director of its predecessor since 1984) revealed the motive for international expansion: obtaining public funding for lacrosse in the rest of the world:

   However, IOC [International Olympic Committee] recognition of lacrosse would be game-changing for the sport’s international development. The ability to associate lacrosse with the five rings would bring instant credibility to the sport in developing lacrosse nations and likely qualify lacrosse governing bodies for public/governmental funding . . . in all nations except the US, of course, because the USOC [United States Olympic Committee] and its member NGBs [National Governing Bodies] receive no direct public support. The FIL has already been accepted as a member of SportAccord and the International World Games Association, which are closely allied with the IOC, and high ranking officials from both of those organizations, as well as the World Anti-Doping Association, attended the world championship in Denver.

4. According to Bill Beroza, head coach of the “championship” team, and Pete Ginnegar, head coach of the “development” team, the championship team comprised the top twenty-three players who were eligible according to FIL regulations. The development team comprised players who were younger, often still living in the USA without a fully developed commitment to living or working in Israel, or who were not as accomplished as the top twenty-three. Some of these younger players on the development team—young men still in high school or early into their college careers—might have made the championship team, but they or their families were not ready to make the kind of commitment to Israel (including possibly service in the Israeli Defense Forces) that might have arisen from meeting the FIL eligibility requirements.

5. The rules differences are overwhelmingly technical—timing factors (running time rather than the stop time system used in the US), penalty administration, penalty enforcement with regard to the sequence of penalties, size of teams (limit of twenty-three), stalling—but the devil is in all the details. While not part of our story, the outcome of the championship game between the US and Canada was determined in part by the failure of the US coaches to understand how the FIL timing factors and
stalling rules dictated a different tactical response than would have been successful in the US college game.

6. The source for these data are from the National Federation of State High School Associations, the range of whose membership is limited and does not include approximately 1250 boys lacrosse teams and 650 girls lacrosse teams. So, if anything, these data understate the growth of lacrosse.


8. Rosters were accessed from GoDuke.com. While it is often the case that height and weight information on athletic team rosters are notoriously unreliable, using data from a single institution allows for an analysis, in which we can hope that inaccuracies and exaggerations are consistent for all sports.
Works Cited


