

SPORTS

As in most of the world, sports are both an important part of Israeli society and a big business.

The most popular sports in Israel are soccer and basketball, though Israeli athletes have excelled in a wide range of sports and some have even advanced to the most advanced levels of competition in Europe and the United States.

Israel has taken part in every summer Olympics games since 1952, has qualified for the World Cup once and the UEFA Champions League four times, and has won the Euro-League basketball championship five times.

In addition, Israel hosts the quadrennial Maccabiah, or International Jewish Olympics, which have become an worldwide spectacle drawing some of the finest Jewish athletes.

Major Sports in Israel

Soccer and basketball are far and away the most popular spectator sports in the country and Israeli teams have taken full advantage of their opportunity to compete in both national leagues and in Europe.

As in the rest of Europe and the Middle East, soccer is king in Israel. Israel's most impressive soccer achievement came in 1970 when the country qualified for the World Cup finals in Mexico for the first — and so far the only — time. At that time only 16 teams reached the finals and the side performed honorably, forcing draws with Italy and Sweden, though going out in the first round.

The Israeli domestic soccer league, called the Israeli Premier League, was founded in 1999 and has 16 teams from around the country. In 2012, the Israeli Premier League placed seventeenth in UEFA rankings, its highest placement since 2005 when it was ranked 16th. This league has been won by Maccabi Haifa seven times, by Hapoel Tel Aviv twice and Beitar Jerusalem twice. The winner of the Israeli league gets an automatic placement in UEFA Europa League third qualifying round.

The Israeli Basketball Association, Israel's professional basketball league, is comprised of eleven teams based mostly in cities in the center of the country, including Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Herzliyah, though there are also teams in Haifa, Ashkelon, and Ashdod. Maccabi Tel Aviv is the most successful of these teams and has historically dominated the league. Maccabi Tel Aviv has also won the Euroleague championship five times, in 1977, 1981, 2001, 2004 and 2005.

Women's basketball is also a flourishing sector and major matches can attract several thousand spectators. The championship is usually fought between Elitzur Ramla and Elitzur Holon.

Baseball was attempted to be introduced into Israel through the Israel Baseball League in 2007. The IBA became the first professional baseball league in the Middle East, but in its first season it failed to draw better athletes and more fans and was disbanded after just the inaugural season.

Israeli Athletes Internationally

[Omri Casspi](#) is currently the most famous Israeli athlete on the international scene. Casspi, who began his professional career in the Israeli Basketball Association, became the first Israeli-born player to be drafted by a team in the United States' National Basketball Association (NBA).

In 2009, the Sacramento Kings took Casspi with the 23rd overall pick in the first round of the draft and the Israeli debuted in October of that same year. In 2011, Casspi played in all of Sacramento's 71 games, starting 27 of them. On June 30, 2011, Sacramento traded Casspi and a future draft pick to the Cleveland Cavaliers.

[Shay Doron](#), currently playing in professional basketball in Israel, was a big star in womens colleg basketball in the United States and is one of the best players in the history of the University of Maryland Terrapins in the NCAA. In 2006, Doron led her squad to a national championship over arch-rival Duke Blue Devils. Doron is ranked in the top 10 for field goal attempts, assists, steals, three-pointers, and three-point attempts in school history and she started more games than anyone else in Maryland women's basketball history. In 2007 she was drafted into the WNBA by the New York Liberty.

[Yossi Benayoun](#) is one of Israel's most famous international soccer stars, currently playing for Arsenal, on loan from Chelsea, in the English Premier League. Benayoun, a midfielder, is nicknamed the "Diamond from Dimona" (Dimona is his birth city in Israel) and also plays for the Israeli national soccer team. From 2005 to 2012, playing for West Ham, Liverpool, Arsenal and Chelsea, Benayoun scored 28 goals in 174 appearances on the pitch.

Israel at the Olympics

Israel has competed in the Olympic games since 1952 and the country's participants have medalled seven times.

In the 1988 Seoul Olympics, Eitan Friedlander and Shimshon Brockman finished fourth in the 470 sailing category and would certainly have won a medal had the duo not refrained from participating on [Yom Kippur](#), thus forfeiting one crucial race.

The country won its first Olympic medal at the 1992 Barcelona games, when judoka Yael Arad (women's under 61 kg. category) took a silver medal and Oren Smadja (judo, men's under 78 kg. category) won a bronze medal.

At the [2004 Athens Games](#), [Gal Friedman](#) won Israel's first, and so far only, gold medal, when he placed first in mistral sailing. That year 36 Israeli athletes competed in 13 different sports and Israeli judo champion [Ariel Ze'evi](#) also took home a bronze medal in Men's Half-Heavyweight (100kg) Judo.

At the most recent summer games, the [2008 Beijing Games](#), 39 Israeli's competed in 10 sports, making it the second largest Israeli delegation to the Olympics, one less than the team that went to the [2000 Sydney Games](#).

Tragically, however, Israel's greatest impact on the Olympics was during the [1972 Munich games](#), when PLO terrorists brutally massacred 11 Israeli athletes and coaches, in what has come to be known as the "[Munich Olympic Massacre](#)."

The Maccabiah

Held in Israel every four years, the [Maccabiah Games](#) is named for Jewish warrior Judah Maccabe who fought against the ancient Greeks.

The Maccabiah Games are now considered the third largest international sports competition in the world.

Many notable athletes have competed in the Maccabiah, including swimmers [Mark Spitz](#) and [Jason Lezak](#), gymnast Mitch Gaylord, golfer Corey Pavin, basketball players [Ernie Grunfeld](#) and Danny Shayes and tennis player [Dick Savitt](#).

The first Maccabiah games, held in 1932, were nicknamed the “White Horse Olympics” because [Tel Aviv](#) mayor Dizengoff led a parade honoring the games through the city streets while riding a white horse. Approximately 390 athletes from 14 countries participated in the competition.

The most recent games, the 18th incarnation held in 2009, featured approximately 6,000 athletes from 53 countries in addition to 3,000 athletes from Israel. Predictably, Israel took home the most medals (367), with the United States (146) and Russia (34) placing second and third respectively.

