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To cite this article: Ilan Tamir & Yair Galily (2020): Older than the state: ninety years of Israeli football through the looking glass, *Israel Affairs*, DOI: [10.1080/13537121.2020.1775934](https://doi.org/10.1080/13537121.2020.1775934)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537121.2020.1775934>



Published online: 18 Jun 2020.



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Older than the state: ninety years of Israeli football through the looking glass

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ABSTRACT

In May 1929, the Israel Football association was officially recognised by international sport organisations, after extensive political efforts. International recognition effectively institutionalised Israel's popular sport,¹ which would eventually become not only the focus of massive interest but also a major actor in the social, economic, and political spheres of Israeli society.

KEYWORDS Sport; football; fans; Israeli society

Over the years, sport in general, and football in particular, have become fruitful fields of research, based on their conception as spaces that faithfully reflect and even play a formative role in historical, social, cultural, economic, political, and other realms. The study of sport as a space of inspiration² that legitimises fans' spontaneous, unrestrained behaviours and emotional manifestations, enables the identification of underlying trends and processes that are concealed, regulated, or obscured in other areas.³

Indeed, in the span of nine decades, Israeli football has become a faithful representation of society and its key developments. The organisational structure of the teams and their ethnic composition, fans' chants and behaviours in the stands, gender-related issues, media involvement, and other issues have reflected important societal trends and transformations. Examples of such trends include a shift from political to private ownership of football teams, a shift from Ashkenazi to Sephardi dominance, increasing diversification of the national team (from exclusive Jewish presence to a significant presence of Arab players, including a non-Jewish captain of the national team), a shift from local-based to global-based fandom.⁴ These changes, reflecting major milestones in the evolution of Israeli football, did not occur in a vacuum but rather were integrally related to broader local and global trends. These effects may have even had a reciprocal nature, where

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developments in the sport sphere also affected the public sphere and prepared the ground for social change.

This special issue focuses on the diverse aspects of the evolution of Israeli football and the social effects of these on-going processes. The establishment of the Association culminated an extended process including efforts extending throughout the 1920s to institutionalise football in Eretz Israel. In the opening article, Haim Kaufman and Ilan Tamir describe these efforts and the phases of institutionalising football in Eretz Israel in the 1920s; the contribution of the Russians, British, French, and Egyptians; and the rivalry between Hapoel and Maccabi, all of which ultimately contributed to the establishment of the Israel Football Association (IFA). The second article by Yair Galily and Tal Samuel Azran document the changing patterns in soccer fandom for the last three decades, since the advent of the so-called era of globalisation, using the case study of Israel. The text documents how, in line with global trends, Israeli fans moved from passive following of sport teams identified with political parties, to becoming active supporters with growing involvement in the teams' management. The article then traces the shift from party politics to patterns of nationalism and ethnocentrism amongst sport fans. Finally, it shows how Israelis moved from supporting local teams to backing foreign teams, mirroring a similar trend in other countries.

In the same manner, Shlomit Guy offers a comparison between management systems of children and youth football departments in England and in Israel. After a series of football disasters, the British authorities were able to reposition football as a game based on aristocratic values like integrity and delicacy and create a well-organised management system. Israeli football, which is particularly inspired by English and European football, struggles to develop similar mechanisms due to a constant state of scarcity. Guy discuss a new programme in Israel, the Shield of Honour, which offers a new model that facilitates and motivates football managers and coaches in youth and children departments to adopt more European-like management practices.

Against the backdrop of global flourishing of women's soccer, Ilan Tamir's article examines attitudes towards women's soccer in Israel, reflected in readers' comments to related sport news items. Analysis of the responses to all the items related to women's soccer posted in 2019 on sports and news websites, exposes mechanisms of fierce resistance that are manifest as disparaging and degrading attitudes towards women's soccer and all the actors involved in this sport. Some commenters emphasised women's anomalous presence in soccer by restricting women to roles in the domestic and sexual spheres, while others explained women's presence on soccer pitches by obliterating the gendered nature of women's football, even to the point of equating the women with animals and beasts. Yet others blamed the women players for the discrimination they experience on the soccer pitches, identifying the cause as 'feminist terror.'

In the next article, Assaf Lev and Shlomo Weinish discuss the phenomenon whereby many team captains or players who were the team's captains go on to become professional coaches. Reality shows that some of them make it as great coaches, and some 'get lost' – failing in the transition from being a leading player to assuming the leadership position of coaching. Their study seeks to understand the challenges in that process, and to identify factors that explain the resulting successes or failures in the process, based on Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Perspective and Leadership models. Semi-structured interviews were held with active and retired Israeli soccer players and coaches. The article identifies two different sets of behaviours that are expected from team captains or team leaders by their teammates, and from coaches by their players, that identify them as successful leaders. In addition, they highlight major factors in explaining the phenomenon of lack of success in the transition – that is, the failure to make the necessary changes in these behaviours during the process.

Or Levental focuses on analysing what fans feel about sports venues and the need to preserve them. Its main goal is to examine this growing phenomenon, which could affect modern preservation trends and the built heritage of sports. The article includes qualitative analysis of fans' internet feedback expressing their attitudes towards preservation of sports facilities compared to preserving buildings associated with other cultural pursuits. In addition, the article features a series of interviews with fans and analysis of articles published in sports sections of newspapers, journals and sports blogs. The qualitative analysis shows that sports fans attribute five heritage values to sports venues as well as assigning them historical community importance, and they do so consciously but primarily unconsciously. Thus, the primary obstacle to the decision to preserve sports venues is not the degree of emotional significance of these places for fans. Rather it is the absence of broad social recognition of the heritage of sports in Israel or of the possible advantages these buildings offer as a tangible expression of this heritage.

The ending of the second decade of the twenty-first century marks the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of the report of the Etzioni Commission, also known by its full name as *The Commission of Inquiry into the Rumours Concerning the Money Payment of in order to Influence the Results of the National League Football Games*. At the time of its publication, the report, exposed severe corruption among football players and even worse, among sport officials, caused quite a stir in the media and shocked the Israeli public. The volume's closing article explores the roots of soccer corruption in Israel in the first decades after independence. A socio-historical analysis of documents, correspondence, and newspaper items reveals the key role played by sports officials in corruption in the soccer industry. Findings of the study indicate that the historical context and a political model of commitment to political centres in which sports in

Israel in general, and specifically Israeli soccer operated, constitute fertile ground for unorthodox conduct and practices that undermined the integrity of soccer matches. These findings challenge various theories that argue that corruption in sports has universal features that are independent of specific historical, social, cultural circumstances.

Notes

1. Jewish settlers played football in Israel years earlier. From the newspapers of the period, evidence of the existence of games can be identified as early as the century, but not in an organised and institutionalised framework.
2. Ben-Porat (Now appears as 1). Eetc.
3. Karen, David, and Robert E. Washington. *Sociological Perspectives on Sport*, PAGE.
4. A recent survey among Israeli football fans found, for example, that the most popular team in Israel is the Spanish team Barcelona. <https://newmedia.calcalist.co.il/seker/>.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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