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Jewish Involvement in Sport: Summary Report of a Leeds Case Study

Jonathan Long, Jon Dart, and Chris Webster, Institute for Sport, Physical Activity and Leisure, Leeds Beckett University, December 2019

Introduction

Having done many projects on sport and ethnicity we were interested in exploring the stereotype that Jews are not interested in sport, especially as we personally knew several Jewish people who were very sporty ('loved their sport'). To assess this negative stereotype and whether our friends were 'exceptions' in the Jewish community, we put together a sample of people from different backgrounds and of different ages who had an involvement in sport. This resulted in 20 individual interviews (14 male and 6 female) and two small focus groups, each with four people (6 males and 2 females), conducted in the spring and summer of 2019. Our sample included Orthodox, Reform and 'ethnically and culturally rather than religiously' Jewish people, but did not include Ultra-Orthodox Jews. As the people involved in the study had all been selected specifically because of their involvement in sport and physical activity, in that respect they should not be seen as necessarily representative of Leeds' Jewish community as a whole.

The Jewish community in Leeds (and nationally)

At the outset we were told that the Jewish community in Leeds is the third largest in the UK after London and Manchester, but that it is a population declining in number due, in part, to 'marrying out'. Closer investigation of population data revealed that the Jewish population of Manchester is in fact smaller than that of Leeds; there are larger numbers of Jewish people in Salford and Bury, which is no doubt what leads to that false impression. Over several decades the Jewish Yearbook consistently gave a figure of 25,000 for the Jewish population in Leeds until more systematic fieldwork in 1958/9 produced an estimate of 18,070 (this was for the geographically smaller Leeds prior to local government reorganisation in 1974). The Census for 2001 recorded 8,267, and in 2011 it was 6,847 (estimates from the Jewish Year Book remain at 8000+). Over the same period the numbers of Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus grew, such that the Muslim population in Leeds had become six times the size of the Jewish population.

Nature of Participation in Sport

Historical accounts of participation in sport among Jewish communities in the UK suggest it was concentrated in particular sports like boxing and table tennis. However, even excluding casual involvement as a child, a wide range of participation was mentioned by people taking part in the study, including gymnastics, cricket, basketball, football, golf, rugby, outdoor adventure, ten pin bowling, and hockey. As is only to be expected, older participants were able to reflect on changes in their chosen sports over the years, whether this was their

switching to different sports, frequency of participation, level or role; and in that they corresponded with the shifting patterns of other ethnic groups. While some of this participation had been in solely or largely Jewish environments, some had been where they were the sole Jewish person participating.

Participation as a Jewish Person

Although our participants were aware of the stereotype of 'the non-sporty Jew', and only two participants mentioned a Jewish person among their initial responses to a question about their sporting heroes, this had had little impact on their own engagement with sport. More significant had been observance of Shabbat (from Friday evening though to Saturday evening) when many sports events are held. Even those who did not see themselves as particularly religious had tended not to play on the Sabbath simply because of the cultural expectations, although there was a general feeling that attitudes towards the Sabbath had become more relaxed over the years. New Rover Cricket Club (established by Jewish cricketers), for example, now commonly plays fixtures on Saturdays. While playing in a purely Jewish environment it is quite possible to organise participation so as not to conflict with the Sabbath. However, those who moved on to a higher level of competition had typically encountered situations where they were expected to participate on Friday night or Saturday.

The experiences recounted gave a sense of the variation in people's lives and emphasised that speaking of a singular 'Jewish community' is not possible, or useful. Mark found himself the only Jew on his youth football team because as a non-observant Jew he chose to play on Saturday, but a lot of his Jewish friends did not. Similarly, Alex explained that 'a lot of the time, I was the only Jew in the team, but it was a Saturday when I used to play. No one said to me, "You're Jewish, shouldn't you be at Shul or synagogue?"' John grew up in a 'traditional' family but noted that, although he was never allowed to play on a Saturday, despite reaching a semi-professional standard, the rules were slightly relaxed when it came to watching sport. Lee explained how he had some Jewish friends who played on a Saturday for a non-Jewish team, and on a Sunday for a Jewish team. Samantha's family on the other hand does observe Shabbat and she recognised that her son, a promising footballer did sometimes miss out because he was unable to play in events held on a Saturday. Even those wanting to keep the Sabbath sometimes found ways around prohibitions.

Participating in a Jewish environment.

None of our participants were old enough to have been involved with the Jewish Young Men's Association, but the Jewish Institute, the Judean Club and latterly The Zone all provided opportunities for sporting engagement. However, participation was certainly not restricted to segregated clubs; equally significant in early sporting careers had been the local schools.

Moor Allerton Golf Club was established largely as a response to the rejection experienced by Jewish people at established clubs in Leeds. Commenting in an earlier study of ours in 1997, one cricketer observed, "There's New Rover and they're all Jewish". However, the proportion of Jewish players at both clubs has been declining. While some may have played in a Jewish environment as a result of a conscious religious/cultural decision and some because of rejection elsewhere, for others it was simply a matter of geographical convenience or going along with their friends.

What a Jewish sporting environment offered was a sense of solidarity and less pressure to explain oneself. This had been particularly strongly felt by those fortunate enough to have experienced the Maccabiah Games.

Experiences of Antisemitism

The anti-discrimination campaigning organisation Kick It Out has recorded an increase in reported incidents of abuse in football, and within that a larger proportion of antisemitic abuse. Unless playing for a Jewish team there is no obvious 'marker' that would identify most of our participants as Jewish. Many of their experiences of antisemitism (abuse, prejudice, stereotyping) had happened without any appreciation that they themselves were Jewish. Reflecting reports in the media, there was a general concern that incidents of antisemitism are increasing in UK society. In terms of first-hand, personal experiences most accounted for it in terms of ignorance or joking in poor taste. Antisemitism was seen to be ever-present, though not on a par with what previous generations had endured. However, the current political climate (Brexit, the 'hostile environment' for migrants, events in Israel, anti-Zionism) was seen to have increased incidents and sensitivities.

For the most part, our participants tended initially to minimise the occurrence/severity of antisemitism within sport, believing it to be no more significant than that found in society more widely. It was only in further discussion that details emerged. Some participants instantly recounted incidents of outright abuse; many more referred to supposed 'jokes'. Then, for example, Sharona claimed, "Oh, we've all experienced it, every single member of my family has experienced it". More significant for some is the unspoken antisemitism that still operates, for example at some of Leeds' golf clubs, which continue to restrict Jewish access, though there was no presumption that it is only Jewish players who experience this.

Unpleasant as the anti-semitism had been, most had chosen simply to ignore it.

I think probably about 35 to 40% of the team were Jewish... and we were a hard lot... I didn't encounter a lot [of anti-semitism]. It was there, but it was like anything else, it was just water over a duck's back.

A few had called it out, but complaints during the game were usually dismissed, apart from an incident in a football Cup Final when match officials acted immediately. In two separate situations participants had taken cases of antisemitism to the respective sport's governing body. While Sharona had found the experience 'horrendous', reassuringly Samantha had felt listened to and the case had been acted upon to her satisfaction. Overall, the

perception was that nowadays 'the sport authorities are taking it more seriously' but that there is 'still a lot of work to do', partly because insufficient resources have been made available.

Participants recognised that Jewish sportspeople were less likely to experience antisemitism than those from Black minorities were to experience racism. Whereas 'black' people cannot conceal their blackness, as was noted above for the most part respondents were not readily identifiable as being Jewish (whatever that means), and therefore potentially were not subject to the same kind of problems as people who were visibly 'black' (other), unless playing for a team like Maccabi that proclaims Jewishness.

What To Do?

When asked what sports bodies might do to be inclusive of Jewish participants, there were two main suggestions:

- Make information more readily available, particularly about special holidays like *Yom Kippur* and *Rosh Hashanah*, and encourage leagues and event organisers to be more accommodating to accompanying religious requirements.
- Improve education, not just about Jewish culture, but about the unacceptability of antisemitism. The 'Say No To Antisemitism' campaign launched by Chelsea Football Club was mentioned as a good initiative at elite level. More generally, Lee advocated: "Keep educating the kids and then hopefully when they're a bit older, they will understand that it's not acceptable".

In addition, there were suggestions regarding increasing sanctions against perpetrators of antisemitism.

Conclusion

The research was conducted against a background of a decline in the Jewish population in Leeds, but an increase nationally, set in a more tense political environment. It involved a group of people whose interest in sport and physical activity had not been put off by images of non-sporty Jews, though had had to overcome concerns regarding religious observance or occasional disapproval within the Jewish community. Although alert to the various forms of antisemitism evident within society, there was no real suggestion that these were especially evident within sport.