

Chapter 4: An Olympic Effort



Olympic Stadium in Rome

<http://arielnet.com/ref/go/1053>

The day finally arrived for the Israeli athletes to board the airplane for Rome and the Olympic Games. Friends and family members were there to wave goodbye, and wish everyone success. It was a special moment for me to see my friends there. These were the friends who had initially laughed at my statement that I was going to compete in the Olympic Games, but were now proud and excited for me. I carried my official Israeli Olympic bag, filled with the competitive and dress uniforms which all the members of the team had been given to wear at the Games. My long-held dream of representing my country had finally materialized.

The Rome 1960 Olympic Games were the 14th occurrence of the modern Games. Surprisingly, Rome was hosting the games 54 years later than they had originally been scheduled. The city had been awarded the 1908 Summer Olympics, but nature had other ideas. After the 1906 eruption of Mount Vesuvius, Rome was forced to decline the opportunity of hosting the Games and passed the honors to London.

However, no volcanoes had interfered with these Games. An Olympic Stadium was newly constructed, which was home to both the opening and closing ceremonies as well as the track and field competition, and a Sports Palace was constructed for events such as basketball. Several ancient sites



Wilma Rudolph winning the sprints

<http://arielnet.com/ref/go/1052>

had been restored and were to be used as venues. These sites included the Basilica of Maxentius for the wrestling competition, and the Baths of Caracalla were the site of the gymnastic events. The marathon was to be run along the Appian Way and end under the Arch of Constantine.

In addition to our relatively small Israeli delegation, more than 5,000 athletes representing 83 countries participated in the Rome Games. There were competitors who were well-known prior to the Games, but many amazing events occurred to make the Games miraculous achievements for others. The track and field competition would star Abebe Bikila of Ethiopia, who, with his victory in the marathon, would become the first black African to win an Olympic gold medal. Women's athletics would be dominated by American sprinter Wilma Rudolph. Wilma Rudolph had formerly suffered from polio, but she would win three gold medals in sprint events on the track. She would be acclaimed as "the fastest woman in the world". The American Cassius Clay would win boxing's light-heavyweight gold medal. He later changed his name to Muhammad Ali. Jeff Farrell would win two gold medals in swimming for the United States. Amazingly, Jeff had undergone an emergency appendectomy six days before the Olympic Trials. The decathlon would feature a tightly

contested battle between Rafer Johnson of the United States and Yang Chuan-kwang of Taiwan, close friends who both attended the University of California at Los Angeles and trained under the same coach. Although Yang outperformed Johnson in seven events, the American's dominance in the throwing events made the difference and he outscored Yang by 58 points to win the gold medal. Middle-distance runner Peter Snell of New Zealand would win the first of his three career gold medals. The United States men's national basketball team would be led by future Basketball Hall of Famers Walt Bellamy, Jerry Lucas, Oscar Robertson and Jerry West and capture its fifth straight Olympic gold medal.

Another amazing feature of the Rome Olympics was television coverage. This was the first Summer Olympic Games to be telecast in North America. In addition to CBS in the United States, the Olympics were telecast for the first time in Canada, on CBC Television, and in Mexico, through the networks of Telesistema Mexicano. Since television broadcast satellites were still two years into the future, CBS, CBC, and TSM would have to shoot and edit videotapes in Rome, feed the tapes to Paris where they would be re-recorded onto other tapes, which were then loaded onto jet planes to North America. Planes carrying the tapes would land at Idlewild

Airport in New York City, where mobile units fed the tapes to CBS, to Toronto for the CBC, and to Mexico City for TSM. Despite this arrangement, many daytime events were broadcast in North America, especially on CBS and CBC, the same day they took place.

CBS paid \$394,000 (\$3,150,000 in today's dollars) for the exclusive right to broadcast the Games in the United States. The TV rights have become more expensive with each successive Summer Olympics. In comparison, fifty-six years later, NBC Universal paid \$1.226 billion for rights to the Rio Games, slightly more than the \$1.18 billion it paid for rights to London four years ago, and well above the \$900 million it paid for Beijing.

When the Israeli plane landed in Rome the week before the Games began, I was oblivious to external events such as

media coverage, and could only anticipate the many amazing performances and records which were to come. I knew that I had to concentrate on my own performance and was anxious to begin practicing.

However, there were many new experiences for me and for most of my Israeli friends on the team. For example, we Israelis were shocked and unprepared for the vast quantities of food available to all the athletic competitors in the athletes' cafeteria. In the athletes' cafeteria, there were long tables with huge mountains of food representing types and flavors from every part of the world. It was an Olympic Games of food and preparation!

At Hadassim and in most of Israel, at that time, we had never had very much food. During most of my childhood, there had been food rationing. However, in Rome, any com-



Cassius Clay, alias Muhammad Ali
<http://arielnet.com/ref/go/1056>





Carrying the Israeli flag at the Rome 1960 Olympic Games

<http://arielnet.com/ref/go/1051>

petitor could eat anything and everything. Shockingly, it was also possible to have second and third helpings. All the Israeli athletes were foolish in how we filled our plates. In the long run, it may have been delicious, but was probably detrimental to our collective performances. I would never blame anyone else for my performance, but I believe that we should have been “coached” not to overeat or eat unfamiliar dishes. I know that I stuffed myself with too much delicious food; I could hardly walk, never mind try to throw a shot or discus. In retrospect, I was definitely an Olympian in food consumption.

Another unique feature for the athletes was our alarm clock. Every morning in the Olympic Village, we were awakened by the Tarzan yell provided by the American pole vaulter, Don Bragg. At six o'clock in the morning, Don would belt out the Tarzan yell and each athlete knew it was time to wake up. Don went on to win the gold medal for pole vaulting although he never became Tarzan.

Prior to the competitions, athletes could train every day at the training stadium which was open to all competitors. Many observers came to watch the athletes and here was where I was able to meet, face-to-face, some of my childhood heroes. I met the world record holder in the shot put, Perry O'Brien, as well as the world record holder in the discus throw, Al Oerter. Both of these American throwers had been long-term residents in pictures on the walls of my dorm. Al Oerter had won the gold medal at the Melbourne 1956 Olympic Games, and Perry O'Brien had won two gold medals in 1952 and 1956.

It was thrilling to train with them, but I was embarrassed to see how much better they were than I was. I had known for many years that these throwers could throw greater dis-

tances than I could. But to be on the same field, with my eyes wide open, the distances they could throw were mind-boggling. Oerter was throwing the discus about 200 feet while my practice throws were only about 170 feet. Prior to the Games, my best throw was the 173-foot Israeli record, which I previously set during the Olympic trials.

I had no illusions that I would actually win a medal in the Olympics, however, I had dreamt of being there and participating in this thrilling adventure. I had dreamed and trained for nearly eight years to represent Israel at the Olympic Games. I had achieved my dream which is probably the ultimate achievement for any Israeli discus thrower and shot putter to be part of Olympics. Actually, I was an example of the Olympic ideal that participation in the Olympics is the most important criterion. I suspect that in every competitor's heart, there is an undeclared yearning, a secret passion, to win the gold in spite of overwhelming odds. I know that I wanted to win, to get the “gold”, and to prove to myself and everyone else that I could win. These dreams and yearnings aside, I knew that realistically the mere fact that I was participating was my “gold”.

The week before the Opening Ceremony, which is the official beginning of the Games, was filled with a variety of events for the participants. One unique event was an invitation for the athletes on each country's team to visit the Vatican and to meet the Pope. Needless to say, this was a rather unusual opportunity for the Israeli team. There were athletes representing some 15 countries on the day we were scheduled to visit the ancient cathedral and to meet Pope John XXIII.

When the Pontiff came into the small white room to bless us all, everyone knelt as His Holiness went from athlete

to athlete, putting his hand on each person's head and saying a prayer. The Israeli team had been previously instructed not to kneel or bow since Jews kneel only to G_d.

When the Pope approached me, I decided to kneel. I do not know why I did it since I had not considered it before that instant, but I did not want to be different from everyone else in the world. My friend and teammate, Amos, kept pulling on my arm to stand up, and I remember telling him, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do."

After the ceremony, the head of the Israeli delegation lectured me about this inappropriate and unacceptable behavior. I told him again that when in Rome, I wanted to be like everyone else. We could give respect to the Pope without betraying our own sacred Jewish beliefs. He agreed with my argument, and the case was closed.

Finally, the day for the Opening Ceremony arrived. The Israeli Olympic Committee had decided that I would be the athlete to carry our country's flag. As I led our athletic delegation into the stadium, my heart pounded in my throat. On that momentous day in Rome in 1960, I held the flag with one arm, and waved it high above my head as we marched

into the Olympic Stadium. The Israeli delegates walked in their dark suits behind me as we proudly represented a country that had not even existed when I was born.

I could not believe I was actually marching among men and women who had individually excelled in their chosen sport, and who were here in Rome with me and my friends to participate in this glorious adventure. Even more awe-inspiring to me was that many of these athletes had been my childhood heroes. To carry the flag for my country, to stand in the oval of the stadium, shoulder-to-shoulder with all of these marvelous athletes, was so unbelievable that I had to pinch myself to know whether this was the most marvelous dream I had ever dreamt or whether it was actually happening! It was only six years since I had asked my coach, Yariv Oren, if he thought that I could compete for Israel in the Olympic Games. His affirmative answer had inspired me to train with enthusiasm and devotion and now here I was!

Although I was proud to represent my country, I believe the humanistic teachings at Hadassim had influenced my perceptions. For example, everywhere I looked there were flags of different countries, here a Russian flag, there an East



Abebe Bikila winning the marathon barefoot

<http://arielnet.com/ref/go/1055>



German, and so on, for country after country. It seemed that this carrying of flags was a bit like war. This nationalism reflected in the blatant separation of countries into competing units seemed to me to be inconsistent with the ideals of the Olympics. The Olympic Games should not be about nationalism, but mirror the original Greek philosophy which focused on athletic strength and skill. In fact, the ancient Greeks were to set aside all wars and conflicts for the duration of the competitions and, in fact, performed in the nude so they would not be identified as representing a specific state. The goal for the ancient competitors was just that—competition. Nonetheless, I loved my country and considered carrying the flag and being an athletic representative as an honor. I was ecstatic to have this opportunity and I continued to enjoy the thrills I felt that wonderful day in Rome.

The achievement, effort, and years of work were part of the preliminary Olympic experience. Being introduced to

Ilana



the world in the Opening Ceremony was a fantastic event. Now that the Games had officially begun, I would have to focus my training while waiting for the day of my event to arrive.

I went to the training stadium every day to practice my throws. One day, while I was training, one of the coaches who had been allowed into the stadium, introduced himself. He inquired about my future plans. I told him I wanted to study in the U.S., but that I would have to complete the mandatory three-year Israeli Army service first. He nodded and said that if I was still interested after the army and had made progress in my throws, I should contact him. I immediately assured him that I would love to compete for his university. Deep down in my heart, I feared this would be a missed opportunity, since who knew what would happen in three years. However, a chance to study at a university in the United States would be a dream come true. It was almost a bigger dream than competing in the Olympics, so why should I stop dreaming now?

I continued to practice until the first day of the discus throw arrived. The order of competition in the Olympic Games differs from ordinary meets. Normal competitions have all of the athletes throw 6 times and the longest throw wins. Olympic events are organized with all throwers initially having three throws to qualify. Then the 18 throwers who threw the longest distances advance to the next round. In this round, all of those athletes throw three times and the 6 throwers with the longest distances advance to the final round. The three top throws in the final round are awarded the gold, silver, and bronze medals.

Finally, it was my turn to compete in the discus event. I was extremely nervous, despite having received a papal blessing! I was unprepared for the sequence of events that occur in Olympic discus competition. I did not know that you had to warm up before your turn came to throw and then wait, frequently more than an hour, before you had your next throw. I was familiar with the smaller meets in which all of the throwers completed the six throws within an hour. I warmed up for my first throw and threw terribly. I had been nervous before competitions in the past, but nothing prepared me for this major stage in front of huge crowds and with my childhood heroes in the same event.

I may have broken records in Israel, but the strain of the fierce rivalry in Rome, the newness of everything, the vast amounts of food, the pressure I felt from my childhood, and the hopes of my entire country, were enormous burdens. The pressure was more than I could cope with and, unfortunately, I proceeded to have one of my worst performances.

I was devastated by my atrocious performance but was elated that my hero, Al Oerter, won the discus gold medal.

He threw 194.16 feet and set the Olympic record as well. The silver and bronze medals were also won by Americans.

I also competed in the shot put event. Unfortunately, I did not perform as well as I had hoped in that event either. My results were less than I had thrown in other meets. My Olympic performance could only be described as woeful. I was disappointed, but hardly surprised, since even my 53.37-foot throw which I had made before going to Rome, was far shorter than Bill Nieder's gold medal put of 64.56 feet.

I do not try to make excuses for my poor results. I had gone to the Rome Olympics and fulfilled my long-held dream to do so. But I was disappointed in myself for performing poorly, and embarrassed that I had let down all of my friends and fellow Israelis. I could only hope to return home and redouble my efforts to perform well in the future.

Upon my return to Israel, I received vigorous and relentless criticism in the newspapers and from my coaches about my abysmal performances in the Games. However, in the next competition in Israel, I broke the discus record again and, once more, received favorable headlines.

In Israel, military service is mandatory for all men and women at eighteen years of age. On my eighteenth birthday, I had received a deferment to attend Wingate College and to compete in the Rome Olympics. After the Games had ended and I returned to Israel, it was time for me to join the army.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has a unique rank structure. Because the IDF is an integrated force, ranks are the same in all services. In other words, there is no differentiation between army, navy, air force, etc. The ranks are derived from those of the paramilitary Haganah developed during the British Mandate period (1920 to 1948) to protect the villages. This origin is reflected in the slightly compacted rank structure; for instance, the chief of staff (in Hebrew rosh ha'mate ha'klali, or ramatkal) is seemingly only equivalent to a lieutenant general in other militaries.

In my case, I was not interested in becoming an officer since I did not foresee the military as being a suitable future profession for me. Since I had graduated from Wingate College and was a physical education teacher, I was assigned to a special location at the Tel Hashomer Hospital complex and was classified as a non-commissioned officer. I was assigned the rank of "Rav samal rishon". "Rav samal" translates as "chief sergeant" and is a career NCO rank equivalent to a British or Commonwealth "staff sergeant" or "sergeant major"/"warrant officer". It can also be translated as "chief sergeant first class".

At Tel Hashomer, my assignment was to help rehabilitate injured soldiers through the use of fitness exercises and physical therapy. I had all the physical equipment necessary

to work with them and these wounded soldiers improved greatly.

As an Olympian and a bit of a celebrity, I was also assigned the job of fitness training for the top paratroopers, the Special Forces frogmen, as well as the elite officers in the Army. Every morning, from 7:00 to 8:30 a.m., there would be the somewhat surprising sight of the entire parking lot filled with armed soldiers standing at attention. These soldiers were amassed as a security detail to protect the generals that I was training for their fitness. Some twenty-five men attended my fitness class.

I paid little or no attention to the names of those officers in this fitness class since my only goal was to ensure that they worked hard and followed my instructions. I was aware that one of them was Moshe Dayan, who was then chief of staff. Another officer, now a well-known and recognizable individual, was Ariel Sharon. General Sharon only trained three

Israeli Army



times per week, but since I was not the one to command him to attend, I merely did my job for all of the officers who were there. These men would have to stretch, run the obstacle courses which I designed, and then train with resistance exercises. We also played indoor soccer, volleyball, and tennis. There were no easy workouts for these men, despite their elevated ranks. It was more important that they be fit and healthy, rather than spoiled and out of shape. Many of these military leaders, Sharon, Dayan and others, were heroes to me and to nearly everyone in Israel for what they had done to save our country in the many wars we had to fight. Therefore, I felt especially honored and appreciative when they took the time to compliment me on my own tenacity and athletic successes. It made me feel that I truly was on the correct path.

I continued to conduct this officers' class for nearly two years. In 1990, I happened to visit Tel Aviv on business, and took the time to go to the fitness facility in my hotel. It was a pleasant surprise to encounter one of these generals as he left the gym as I was entering. This former general, who had served Israel for nearly 40 years, assured me that he continued to train according to the same plan which I had instructed him those many years before. The fitness plan which I had devised some 30 years before was the one that he had continued to follow during these intervening years. He explained, with a wink in his eye, that since I had been so insistent when he participated in my army fitness classes he was afraid of my wrath should he be less diligent now. Despite the expression on his face, I was unsure whether he was serious or joking, but since he was working out, I was pleased that my message had resonated.

While I trained the officers and the injured soldiers at Tel Hashomer and as my army duties, I continued to practice throwing the discus and shot. The army allowed me to compete in events throughout Israel and neighboring countries. I competed in Greece and Turkey and won several competitions. At this point, I had set my sights on the next Olympic Games to be held in Tokyo, Japan in 1964. I was preparing for these Olympics and planned to perform better there.

Army life had little appeal to me and it was certainly not a career option. I was then and continue to this day to be a dreamer, an entrepreneur, and an inventor. There is no place in the army where I could synchronize my skills and temperament with the tasks of a soldier. Other than my job of training the officers and helping the wounded, I had no other military obligations. This relatively light work load meant that I could spend time on my own athletic training. However, most of the days were boring, tedious, and uninspiring.

One day, my boredom was alleviated by the appearance of a beautiful blonde girl who had come in search of a person she identified as Aluf Geva. In Hebrew, "aluf" has two meanings, "champion" and "general". I answered her by say-

ing "Aluf Geva is not here, but Aluf Ariel is." The beautiful girl had a puzzled expression on her face when she asked, "Who is Aluf Ariel?" I pointed at myself and replied, "There are many alufs who are generals, but there is only one aluf who is a champion. I am that aluf."

She laughed and, fortunately for me, was not offended by what some would consider arrogance. Her name was Ilana, and soon this girl, who was a nurse and an officer, became my good friend. To this day, she remains one of my best friends. During our army days, we went to the movies, talked hours into the evening, and I greatly admired her mind, talents, and friendship. She would bring me vitamins from her hospital, since I was as health conscious then as I am now. We enjoyed the beaches, spending time with friends, and the nightlife of Tel Aviv. This wonderful friendship alleviated some of the dullness and boredom of being in the army.

I was afraid to take our relationship beyond friendship. Ilana was a wonderful, kind, and fun person and I have always valued her contribution to my life. I think I was affected, to some extent, by my family experiences. This is the only explanation I have for my preference for women. Of course, life frequently does not follow a logical or reasonable path.

After one competition in the northern part of Tel Aviv, a few of my fellow athletes and I were walking back to our homes. On the way, Ayala Hetzroni, a female Olympic shot putter, was walking with another woman. This woman was extraordinarily beautiful, quite tall, and with long blonde hair. "Who is that?" I asked Ayala.

"That's Yael. She's a dancer with the Inbal." The Inbal Dance Theater is Israel's first and oldest modern dance company. The company was founded in 1949, and acquired international acclaim. I tried talking to Yael, probably boasting about this exploit or that, but with little success. She did not seem to be particularly interested in me or my conversational offerings. She was probably used to men being interested in her wherever she went.

There was another factor which I had to consider. Although I was not close with my father, I knew one thing: he looked down on Sephardic Jews, which most of the Middle Eastern Jews typically were. My father had already met my friend Ilana, a respectable beautiful Ashkenazy nurse, who had been born in Poland. He could not say enough good things about her. Indeed, Ilana remained in close contact with my father long after I had gone to America. I knew that my father would not have the same positive reaction to Yael, who came from a Sephardic background, and would harbor more than mere resistance to her Middle Eastern heritage.

Yael continued to seem bored with me and we had few common interests. Hollywood movies have generated millions of dollars with stories of attractions based on looks and

feelings. Sometimes these obsessions on beauty or behavior become the only things that matter. Perhaps some of Yael's allure was that my father would not like her, but mostly, it was her beauty and the pride I felt when other men turned looking at my girl. Unfortunately, youth rarely recognizes the costs that poor decisions eventually garner.

In those days, there were few personal telephones. If you wanted to contact someone, you had to travel to the person's house. Yael had told me where she lived so I walked half way across the city of Tel Aviv to ask her for a date. To my amazement, she agreed.

For our first date, we went to see the movie "Psycho".

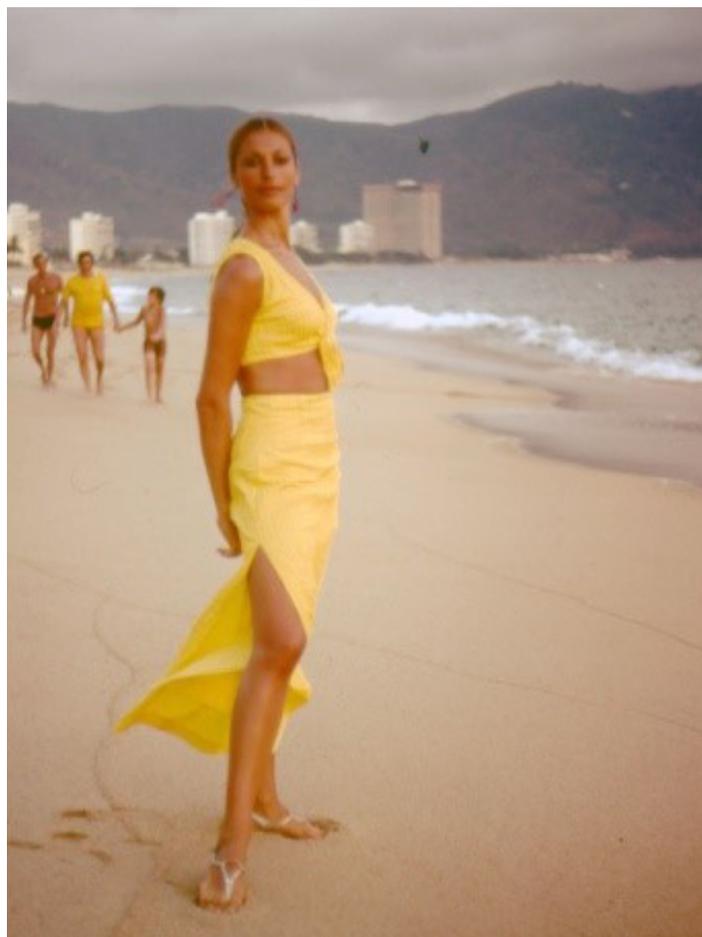
"Psycho" was a 1960 American psychological horror film directed and produced by Alfred Hitchcock and starred Anthony Perkins and Janet Leigh. It had just been introduced to Israel and was the must-see movie at that moment. Neither Yael nor I knew much about the movie before we went. We only knew from friends that the film centered on the encounter between a secretary, who ended up at a secluded motel after stealing money from her employer, and the motel's disturbed owner-manager, Norman Bates. It was an exciting thriller, and caused our hair to stand up in our necks and our heart to leap into our throats. It was surely an exciting and nerve-racking show.

I attempted to be a perfect gentleman and kept a respectable distance because, fundamentally, I was shy. However, throughout the movie, Hitchcock's dramatic events managed to provoke surprise or shock and Yael would grab my hand or arm! I was surprised but elated as well.

After the movie, we walked back to her home. Just as she turned the key in her door lock, I jokingly tried to scare her by saying, "Watch out! Tony Perkins is behind your door". She whirled around and slapped me across the face. Not only had my joke failed miserably, but, unfortunately, I did not recognize this response as less than an auspicious beginning.

At that time, Yael was only 19 and I was 21. We were relatively unsophisticated in our dating practices, but I continued to date her and soon we were a couple. I must admit, I liked how all heads turned when we walked into a room. Here I was with this woman whom others could only stare at in admiration.

I was not particularly drawn to her personality and she had no interest in academic pursuits for me or herself. She was artistically talented in dancing, painting, and crafting jewelry, whereas my artistic talents were mainly restricted to observing these activities. I knew that she had family problems, but, since I had a background of personal difficulties, these problems were of little interest to me. She was beautiful and that was sufficient to mesmerize me.



Yael

<http://arielnet.com/ref/go/1057>

Now my life was filled with complications and enjoyment. I was busy with my army job, my daily exercise routines, the discus and shot put training activities, and with two interesting women. One of them, Yael, was beautiful and difficult, while the other, Ilana, was a beautiful, lovely, smart, and caring friend.

While I was enjoying this feminine duality of the heart, Yariv Oren, at one of our training sessions, mentioned to me that they had received a letter from the U.S. Department of the Interior that Israel was qualified to send two athletes to the U.S.A. for training. The United States government would pay all the expenses. He told me that I was one of the candidates they were considering.

In Israel, there are two athletic clubs, the Macabi and the Hapoel. There would be one athlete chosen from each club to be sent to the United States for this training. The Macabi had already selected an athlete by the name of Amos Grodjinovsky. Amos was a friend of mine since childhood. He was a sprinter and long jumper who had also represented Israel in the Rome 1960 Olympic Games. The other leading



Meir Yaacobi and I, friends and competitors

candidate was Meir Yaacobi, a hammer thrower, who had just broken the Israeli record in the hammer.

Unfortunately for me, Meir and Amos were the ones who had been selected for the three-month exchange program. I was devastated at losing an opportunity to go to the United States. But my coach, Yariv Oren, was unhappy with the selection and used his influence to replace Meir with me. I was ecstatic. Although Meir was my good friend, these decisions were not ours to make or challenge. Therefore, I joined Amos for the trip to the U.S. in March of 1963.

Forty-five years later, in 2004, I traveled to Israel. As usual, I met with my old friend and mentor, Yariv, and another long-time friend, Gilad Weingarten. We were all invited to Meir Yaacobi's home near the Sea of Galilee. Meir's family had originally come to Israel from Iraq so he cooked a delicious Middle Eastern dinner for us. After the meal, when we were sipping our Turkish coffee on the patio, Meir said to

Yariv, "Yariv, I have wanted to ask you a question for nearly 45 years and have never asked you."

I interrupted Meir and said, "Meir, I know the question and I know the answer. You're going to ask, 'Why was Gideon selected to go to the U.S.A. and what happened to me?'"

Meir was astonished. "Wow! That is my question," he said. "What is the answer?"

"Well, I guess an injustice was done to you and I have never forgotten it," I told him.

Yariv was quiet.

"Well, Yariv, what do you have to say?" Gilad asked.

Yariv's answer was, "No comment." We all laughed and enjoyed another cup of strong, sweet Turkish coffee.

Amos and I readied ourselves to go to the United States for this exchange program, and on March 8, 1963, I was ready to leave. However, I needed to receive an early discharge from the military before I would be allowed to fly to the United States. Luckily, Yariv was there to help me again. He persuaded the military to discharge me two months earlier than my actual completion date so that I could represent Israel in this exchange program. What a dear friend he was, and how fortunate I was that Yariv was there to help me in so many ways and for so many years.

When we arrived in NYC, representatives from the U.S. Department of the Interior came to receive all the athletes from approximately 30 countries around the world. When they called my name, it was Mr. Yaacobi, since they still had Meir's name, rather than mine. I corrected them and explained it had been a last-minute change. They put each of us in a luxury hotel and we attended lectures on how to behave. Soon, each of us was informed of the name and location of the university we would attend somewhere in the U.S.

Before we flew to our assigned universities, all of the exchange athletes were taken on tours of New York City. We saw the Statue of Liberty, went to the top of the Empire State Building, and appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show. I feel sure that our ratings were lower than those of the Beatles!

New York had seemed like another planet despite my having traveled to Rome and other large cities outside of Israel. There was nowhere like New York City. This huge, bustling city with its tall buildings and endless concrete seemed like a science fiction movie. The energy on the streets was contagious and it gave life to my fantasies of America being a place where anything was possible.

Amos was assigned to the University of Louisiana, and I was assigned to Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colorado. After I had arrived in Colorado, I was housed in a dorm with regular college students. I began training every

afternoon with the track and field athletes who represented Colorado State University in their athletic conference.

I asked the coach if I could attend regular college academic classes during the times when we were not training. The school officials readily agreed so I joined the physiology and anatomy class in the pre-medical program. It was an amazing experience although I had some difficulty with the English language, and lacked some of the background material for the topics being discussed. However, I was confident that I would do well as a student in an American university if only I had the chance to try.

The coach at the Colorado State University was Mr. McCone. Coach McCone was a dedicated coach who helped me with my technique. During one of the practices, I asked him if he knew any university which could give me a scholarship to continue to study in the U.S.A. I tried to tell him about my encounter with an American coach in Rome, but coach McCone had no idea who that might have been. A few days later, he called John Walker who was the coach at the University of Wyoming. Since both Colorado State University and the University of Wyoming were in the Western Athletic Conference, the two coaches knew each other well.

I was surprised, when two days later, Mr. John Walker, the coach from the University of Wyoming, appeared at the training stadium. He watched me throw while I was practicing the discus. Then he asked about my shot putting, so I threw some shot puts as well. During this meeting, it became clear that my recent throwing results were better than the current Wyoming record in the discus.

"Gideon," coach Walker said, "What about a full scholarship to study and represent the University of Wyoming in dis-

cus and shot put? You will be able to receive your Bachelors of Science there. Do you think this would interest you?"

I was thrilled. "Absolute, you can count on me," I said excitedly, even though I did not quite know how I would make this dream into a reality. But, exuding confidence, I said, "When school starts in September, I will be there!"

"Fantastic!" he said, patting me on the shoulder. I will send you a ticket and the required university paperwork for your visa in the mail to your home in Israel. Just give me your home address. I will take care of everything else for your arrival in September.

I was in shock and joy for the remainder of the training session in Fort Collins. I could not believe this fantastic opportunity to study in the United States was practically a reality. I continued to train as hard as possible and to study diligently. My mind, however, continued to swirl about this fantastic opportunity.

As soon as I returned to Israel, I went to see Yariv. By then, Yariv had been appointed as the Minister of Sports. I was extremely nervous. This man had done much for me, but I knew he was a strong Zionist. In Yariv's mind, all of the young men whom he had trained and supported were to be the future of Israel. Besides, we had been very close friends for quite some time and I also knew that I held a special place in his heart. I knew that he would not want me to leave.

Yariv was in his office with its windows looking out over Allenby Street. The Mediterranean sun was shining and we could see the ocean in the distance as it flickered and glistened in the sunlight. It was a perfectly lovely day in Israel.

"Shalom, Gideon." Yariv said as he gave me a big hug and a joyful smile. "I am so glad to see you back home."



Coach and mentor Yariv with his wife, Aviva
<http://arielnet.com/ref/go/1058>



“Yariv,” I said, “I am so grateful for everything that you have done for me. I want you to be the first to know that I have been offered a full scholarship to attend the University of Wyoming. I will be on their track and field team, throwing the discus and shot put. I will be enrolled at the university and will be able to earn my Bachelor’s degree as well as competing for the school. In addition, they will pay all of my expenses, including the airfare and travel to get to Laramie.”

He looked at me sternly, “Absolutely not, Gideon. You must now contribute what you have learned to Israel. I did not send you to the United States for you to remain there.”

“I will come back after I finish my studies,” I told him. “Wouldn’t you prefer me to return as a man with a bachelor’s degree rather than as a physical education teacher? This is the opportunity of a lifetime.”

There was no question in my mind that I was going to the U.S. to study and train. “I will return,” I promised, “after I finish my bachelor’s degree.”

Yariv listened to my words warily and then stood up, shook my hand, and gave me a great bear hug. This wonderful man hugged me, as my father had never done. Although he was only eight years older than I was, he had been the one who was behind every success that I had achieved to that date. I owed everything to him and his encouragement. It

broke my heart to see his distress at my leaving but I knew he also agreed that this was the correct decision.

“Don’t forget your promise,” he said.

“I won’t,” I replied.

The next person I had to tell was Yael. We arranged to meet and when she arrived she looked beautiful in her dress and had a big smile.

I began telling her my plan to go to America and study. “I have to go,” I said. “The coach in Wyoming is waiting for me. This is essential for my career and life.” She became upset but I continued to explain how important it was for me.

“Okay, if you have to go at least promise me you will come back to Israel,” she said. “You could study here and be a professor.”

“We have enough professors in Israel,” I laughed.

In retrospect, I do not think I ever really expected to return to Israel. I had many good friends in this special country. Yariv had done more than my own father to help me achieve my goals and to excel. I loved him for the special way that he had guided me and had cherished me like a son. Many people knew my name because of my athletic achievements, even if they did not know me personally. Realistically, there was nothing that I could do in Israel that would be interest-

With coach John Walker, 50 years later at my house and the Ritz



ing to me and beneficial to the country. I had joked that Israel did not need more professors, but I also could not imagine leading classes in physical education either. I did not know what my future academic or professional challenge would be, but I could not imagine to pursue it in Israel.

Israel was also the country where my mother lived in an institution. It was the home where my father would read in the papers about his son performing in the Olympics and breaking records for Israel, but could not tell me that he sneaked to the stadiums to watch my performances. At that time, I believed that my father was ashamed of me and thought that I was—and would always be—a failure. I was unaware that he had saved every newspaper article in a scrapbook or that he was proud of me and of my successes. I did not discover my father's devotion to me and my activities until many years later, after he died.

After explaining to Yariv and Yael my new future ambition to go to the United States, I was not sure that I could get a visa to the States. I had a "J"-stamp in my passport for my exchange program trip to Fort Collins, Colorado. Undaunted, I went to the American Embassy and kept my mouth shut. When I went to the person processing my paperwork, I showed them the invitation and formal documentation from the University of Wyoming, as well as the ticket to fly there. He seemed to give little attention to my passport and I was issued the student visa to study in Laramie. With a sigh of relief, I packed my belongings for the trip to America.

At last, I was on my way. I dreamt of a new, bigger, and unforeseen life. I had not bothered to look at a map to see where Wyoming was physically located in America. I could barely speak English. But I knew in my heart that the "highest university in America" was going to be the start of what was to be a life of peaks as high as the Rocky Mountains.

