

## ***Hapoel*: Israel's Worker Sport Organisation**

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## ISRAEL

This country east of the Mediterranean Sea, with its internationally recognised borders established in 1967, covers an area of 20,667 km<sup>2</sup>. In the same year, 2.65 million people lived in Israel.

Zionism, as the wish of Jewish groups for the establishment of a national homeland, was born out of necessity in the face of the swelling tide of anti-Semitism in Europe at the end of the 19th century that led to pogroms in Eastern Europe. The first important success of the movement occurred in 1917 when British Foreign Secretary Balfour, motivated by the hope of greater Jewish backing for the Allied cause, especially from American Jews, wrote to Lord Rothschild declaring the support of his government for "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people." That this was on no account support for a Jewish state that could only be achieved to the detriment of the Arab population became clear when, in 1922, the League of Nations gave Britain the mandate over Palestine. London was only willing to allow entry to Jews wishing to immigrate and to establish a "Jewish Agency" to advise its mandatory power.

The growing bitterness of the native population over the incessant flood of immigrants led to regular bloody clashes between Arabs and Jews after 1929. The suggestions offered by various commissions of experts sent to Palestine were coloured by the momentary political interests of the British. In 1936, for example, there was still talk of splitting the mandate, yet in 1939, on account of the growing German influence in Arab circles, the aim was to create an independent Palestine state. After the war, the British government kept to the latter plan, thus provoking increasing terror from extremist Jewish groups as well as pressure from the pro-Zionist Truman administration.

Consequently, the issue was taken to the United Nations General Assembly that voted, in November 1947, to split Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state. The Arab world announced at once that it would oppose this decision by force, and the fighting began immediately after the state of Israel was proclaimed on 14 May 1948. The passage of arms produced a clear victory for the Israelis, and the armistice agreements signed in the summer of 1949 left them in possession of all the areas they had so far captured. The remaining parts of the previous mandate were given to the present Jordan.

The Arab world would not accept the existence of a state that had come about by a flagrant violation of the right of self-determination of the indigenous population. This, together with the Israeli refusal to retreat to the borders settled by the United Nations in 1947 and to allow the return of Palestinians who had fled or had been expelled, not only excluded the possibility of a peace agreement that went beyond partial settlements, but also made further armed clashes inevitable. These clashes led to the Israeli-Arab wars of 1956, 1967, and 1973, as well as the invasion of Lebanon in 1982 that aimed to destroy the bases of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), feared because of its uncontrollable paramilitary activities.

National politics in Israel stood, until 1977, completely under the banner of the *Mapai* (Labour Party), that, as the strongest faction in various coalition governments, was able to nominate the prime minister. Under this leadership, the state followed socialist economic and social ideals. These found particular expression in the development of cooperative villages (*kibbutzim*). The dependence on foreign economic aid that grew with every new rearmament programme pushed socialist concepts more and more into the wings. This loss of profile, the worrying economic development, the deep shock over the relatively poor showing of the Israeli troops in the 1973 war, and the political awakening of conservative important positions—led to the electoral victory of the right-wing coalition under the leadership of the *Likud* party in 1977. Fifteen years later, the population's realisation that the right was incapable of starting serious peace talks with the Arabs brought the parliamentary left, led by the *Mapai*, back into government.

Although the beginnings of an organised worker sport movement in Palestine (Eretz-Israel) date only from the mid-1920s, the sources of the movement were present in the years prior to World War I. At that time, the Maccabi sports organisation existed in Palestine, and it had a socialist ideology. Its statutes banned employers from joining the association, and, when some employers were permitted to join the Petach Tikvah Club—one of Maccabi's largest members—it provoked a split. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that, before the war, Maccabi clubs had an avowed socialist philosophy, particularly in collective settlements.

All the same, the organised-labour sport movement, *Hapoel* (The Worker), only came into existence in 1926 at a time when Maccabi succumbed to right-wing control. When exactly the first *Hapoel* club appeared is under contention; evidently, just such a club had existed for a short time in Tel Aviv in 1923, but the club that formed the basis for the national movement came into being in Haifa in April 1924. The national movement followed 2 years later, and its initial slogan—"Alufim ve'lo Alufim" ("Thousands Not Champions") indicated clearly that *Hapoel* valued mass activity above all else. The only exception was soccer, in which *Hapoel* competed from the very first day of its existence because the British mandatory government had tried to promote the sport and to establish a national soccer association. We, therefore, find *Hapoel* among the founders of such an association in 1928, whereas it avoided contacts with Maccabi in all other sports.

A year after its founding in 1927, *Hapoel* joined the Socialist Worker Sports International (SWSI), but the considerable geographical distance from northern Europe effectively prevented direct international contacts until 4 years later. This took place when *Hapoel* sent an 81-strong delegation to the second Worker Olympics in Vienna in 1931.

Even before 1931, *Hapoel* had arranged two national festivals (1928 and 1930); 780 athletes from 10 clubs took part in the first, and 1,200 athletes from 36 clubs took part in the second.

Because *Hapoel* avoided an emphasis on winning and champions, we find in the first festival only the names of clubs to which the winners belonged, whereas 2 years later the names of winners were added to the list. A re-orientation of *Hapoel's* philosophy came in 1932 when the Maccabi World Union staged the first Maccabiah Games, and *Hapoel* expressed a wish to take part. *Hapoel* was eager to prevent a situation occurring whereby Maccabi would be the only representative of Jewish sport in the diaspora; nonetheless, it did not want to join the Maccabi World Union because it preferred to retain its independence in Palestine. However, the Palestine

At the second international Zionist conference in Basle (1898), Max Nordau coined the phrase "muscular Jewishness" ("*Muskelfjudentum*"), following the British notion of "muscular Christianity." The idea to take matters in one's own hands, to not accept any pogrom or latent anti-Semitism, was so popular that in the same year the first Jewish sport club, *Bar-Kochba*, was founded in Berlin. It became the centre of the German-Jewish Turner Federation. In 1912, the first Maccabi clubs were founded in Palestine.

The Maccabi World Union (CSR) was founded at the 1921 Zionist World Congress in Karlsbad. It was soon joined by bourgeois-Zionist Turner and sport clubs from other European countries. This resulted in the formation of non-Zionist sport organisations, such as *Schild* (Shield) in Germany—which was Jewish-German national by definition and had its basis in the German-Jewish war veterans of World War I—and in nonbourgeois Jewish sport organisations, such as *Hapoel*.

Maccabi rejected *Hapoel* by serving an unacceptable ultimatum on it that *Hapoel* should leave the SWSI; it based its demand on the statutes of the international federations to which Maccabi belonged.

*Hapoel's* response was to attempt to establish *Hapoel* organisations all over the diaspora. It succeeded in Latvia (1932), Lithuania (1934), and Poland (1925), yet *Hapoel* never managed seriously to rival the well-established Maccabi. Similar attempts after World War II and in more recent times met with failure.

So *Hapoel* had to be satisfied with its own internal events and with participation in SWSI tournaments. As many as 2,500 athletes took part in the third *Hapoel* festival of 1932, after which the worker sport movement in Palestine really flourished. In 1935, *Hapoel* succeeded in attracting as many as 10,000 athletes to its fourth festival, a number that clearly demonstrated that within 9 years it had become the largest sport organisation in the country. It had sent a contingent to the 1934 festival of the Czechoslovak worker sport organisation in Prague; apart from this, no regular meetings with SWSI athletes took place.

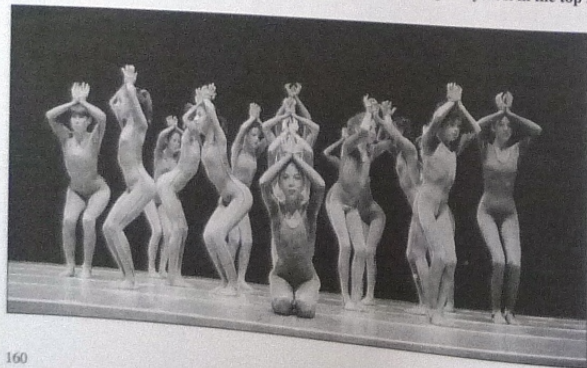
*Hapoel* was also unsuccessful in its attempt to be represented at the second Maccabiah Games in 1935. All the same, the games had repercussions that radically altered the nature of *Hapoel's* organisation. Following the



Scene from the opening ceremonies of the 10th *Hapoel* Games, 1979.



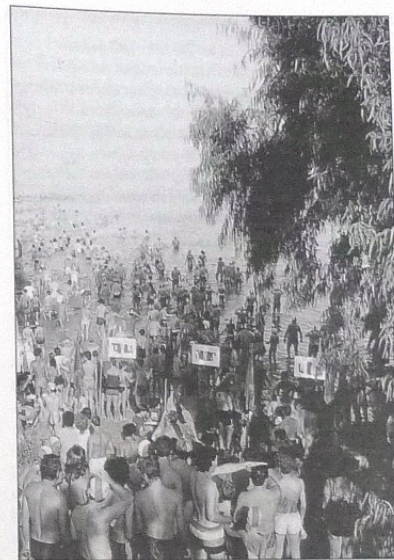
A marksman at the *Hapoel* Games. Note the *Hapoel* symbol in the top left corner.



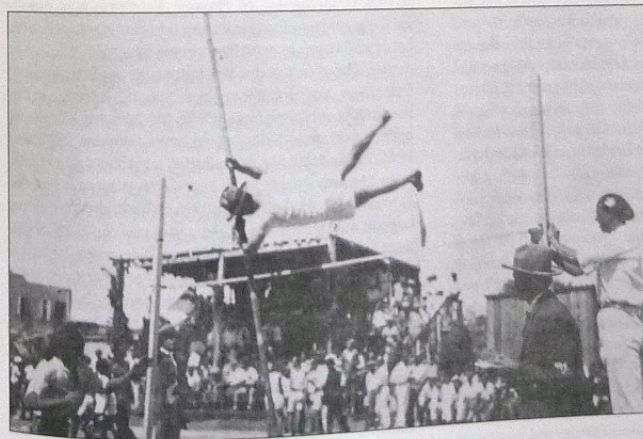
The "Thuatron," *Hapoel's* national modern dance group.



A mass hike organised by *Hapoel*.



The annual noncompetitive crossing of the Sea of Galilee, organised by *Hapoel*.



Pole jump.

The first Makkabiah in Tel Aviv had participants from 16 countries, the second, in 1935, from 27 countries. The third, planned for 1938, did not take place. The first international Jewish Winter Games took place in Zakopane (Poland) in February 1933; they were retroactively called the first Winter Makkabiah. The second Winter Makkabiah were organised in Banska-Bystrica in February 1936.

second Maccabiah Games, hundreds of skilled athletes remained in Palestine illegally, and many joined the ranks of *Hapoel* once they realised the bourgeois character of Maccabi. Like many others from working-class families, they had belonged to the nonpolitical Maccabi World Union clubs and saw their natural, social home with *Hapoel*.

However, insofar as these athletes had grown up in an atmosphere of competitive sport, they now expected to find—or at least to establish—a similar milieu within *Hapoel*. Their effect on *Hapoel* was so marked that within a few years *Hapoel* had altered its slogan to “*Alafim we’ Alufim*” (“Thousands and Champions”), meaning that competitive sport was now considered officially as important as mass sport activity. It was not long before *Hapoel* seriously rivalled Maccabi in sport results; in fact, within 15 years it became both the largest and the strongest sport organisation in the country. This ideological *volte face* caused a bitter and protracted debate between the extreme wings of the labour movement, the left accusing the right of neglecting mass activities at the expense of competitive sport. Fifty years later, this dispute still continues. In the spring of 1936, the Arab population of Palestine launched a campaign of political disturbances that were to continue until the outbreak of World War II. The relatively small Jewish population had to defend itself, and, among the Jews, there began a fierce discussion between the labour movement and the right wing about how to react to the problem. *Hapoel*’s reaction to these political developments was to set up the *Plugot Hapoel* (*Hapoel* squads), analogous to the Austrian *Schutzbund*. The squads were under the command not only of the trade unions (the *Histradrut*), like the entire *Hapoel* movement, but also of the official Jewish underground movement (the *Haganah*). The squads were active until World War II, when most of their members were recruited into the British Army. After the war, attempts to revive their activities failed.

Despite the political disturbances in Palestine that greatly restricted sport activities, *Hapoel* did its utmost to maintain contacts with SWSI. For example, it dis-

patched a delegation to the Worker Olympics in Barcelona in 1936 (the games had to be cancelled at the last moment because of the Franco coup). A year later, in July 1937, *Hapoel* sent a large group, including soccer, basketball, and handball teams, to the third Worker Olympics in Antwerp.

In spite of the troubles, very few contacts developed between the Jewish sport organisations within Palestine (soccer being the only exception). Maccabi continued to do all it could to hamper *Hapoel*’s international relations outside the framework of SWSI, a fact that naturally restricted the worker sport movement that by now was also emphasising competitive sport in its activities. In the winter of 1938-1939, *Hapoel* founded, along with independent clubs not affiliated with Maccabi, the Palestinian basketball and volleyball federations. The volleyball federation gained immediate international recognition because Palestine had not hitherto been represented in the international federation. The basketball federation, on the other hand, ran into difficulties because the basketball section of the Palestinian Amateur Sports Association, which had been set up by Maccabi back in 1931, had already been recognised by the Fédération Internationale de Basketball (FIBA). All the same, *Hapoel* succeeded in gaining provisional recognition of its federation “until the problem ha[d] been resolved.” The resolution occurred after the war. All the same, the provisional recognition by FIBA was regarded at the time as an important breakthrough for *Hapoel* into a Maccabi domain.

Paradoxically, the tragedy of World War II caused a further strengthening of *Hapoel*. Palestine was practically cut off from Europe during the war years, and most sport activities in wartime revolved around military teams. These teams did not belong to an international federation, and, for them, there was no difference between Maccabi and *Hapoel*. So the two organisations operated on more or less equal terms between 1939 and 1945. Beyond that, the limited sport activities forced clubs from both organisations to cooperate, often against the express wish of their leadership. Although the mutual boycott still existed on paper, more and more competitions in the various sports were taking place between *Hapoel* and Maccabi. At the end of the war, the picture changed once more; but there was no way back to the pre-1939 situation. An objective analysis would show the further growth and strengthening of *Hapoel* in wartime, largely because the worker sport movement had better means of organisation at its disposal.

Following the war, *Hapoel* became one of the 11 founder-members of the successor to SWSI—the *Comité Sportif International du Travail* (CSIT), established in May 1946. At the first CSIT meeting, *Hapoel* proposed

“There is hardly any worker sport federation in the SWSI which has to overcome as many difficulties as our comrades from the *Hapoel* in Palestine. Far away from their European comrades, entirely depending on their own vigour, they lead an heroic struggle for the spreading of worker sports and by this for the socialist movement. While all other federations of the SWSI can support each other by visits and international competitions, our comrades in Palestine have to depend upon themselves. Only once has it been possible to send an Austrian worker soccer team for some matches with the support of the SWSI. There is a particular lack of technical experts and physical education specialists which can put some proper content into the ever increasing number of members of the *Hapoel*. The main events are *Turnen*, free exercise, track and field, and swimming. The great enthusiasm with which our comrades in Palestine are following the SWSI could be observed by their strong participation in the second Worker Olympics in Vienna. This enthusiasm was transferred to their own 3rd Federation Meeting in Haifa, Oct. 21-23, 1932.

Already on the 1st and 2nd October the water events took place. Because of the geographical conditions, there is special emphasis on swimming which is part of the training of all sailors. There were 3,000 spectators at the swimming in Haifa harbour. The swimming basin was enclosed by commercial vessels which also served as stands for the spectators.

The actual meet took place in Tel Aviv in front of 10,000 spectators, which regarded this as a popular festival which included dancing in the streets. 84 percent of the members of *Hapoel* took part. . . . Ben-Gurion, the secretary of the *Histradrath* delivered the final speech and under the singing of the *Internationale* and the *Techezakno* (the hymn of the trade union of Palestine) the last part of the federation meeting was ended. This final manifestation made a big impression on the participants and it showed that the meeting of the *Hapoel* was not only a sports meet but a reunion of all the Jewish workers in Palestine. Aware of the support of all Jewish workers of Palestine *Hapoel* will progress and prosper.”

K. Bühren, “Arbeitersport in Palästina,” *Sportpolitische Rundschau* (Berlin), 6 (1933), 2, p. 30.

that independent worker sport organisations should continue, but that they should try to integrate themselves into the sport activities of their own countries. Contrary to SWSI precedent, CSIT did not try to intervene in the internal sport activities of countries containing its member organisations, so the way was clear for *Hapoel* to continue its own internal sport policies. Internationally, *Hapoel* has continued to play a major part in the work of CSIT.

Another path opened for *Hapoel* in international sport when it affiliated with the World Federation of Democratic Youth, and the federation decided to include sport in its first festival held in Prague in 1947. *Hapoel* sent a large group of athletes to Prague, yet once again ran into opposition from Maccabi. Although the Prague festival was not under the auspices of an international federation to which Maccabi belonged, it was intent on participating out of fear that *Hapoel* would increase in membership and influence. Maccabi, therefore, appealed to the supreme Jewish agencies in Palestine, claiming that, to ensure the strongest possible representation of Palestinian Jewry, its athletes should be part of the delegation sent to Prague. Under pressure from the General Council of Jews in Palestine (*Va’ad Le’umi*), the sport group sent to Prague had to include Maccabi athletes; as a result, they were the only bourgeois athletes to take part in the Prague festival. For the first time, we find the Maccabi movement on the defensive, and this was a sign that *Hapoel* had overtaken its archrival in the quality of its work as well as in numbers.

On 29 November 1947, the United Nations approved the partition of Palestine and the establishment of a Jewish state. On the following day, Arab-instigated political troubles broke out that developed into Israel’s War of Independence. Cooperation among all Jews became a necessity; this applied to sport as well. On 30 March 1948, *Hapoel* signed a pact with the Maccabi-led Amateur Sports Federation, according to which no side would boycott the other, and international representation would henceforth include the best athletes of both organisations. Nonetheless, another 3-1/2 years were to pass before the official sport bodies were to be established in the state of Israel.

Israel came into being on 15 May 1948. Yet even during the War of Independence, the structure of the country’s future government had been discussed, and that included a ministry responsible for sport. Following a debate within the government about which ministry would be responsible for sport, labour Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion approached *Hapoel* in 1949 to make its recommendations. *Hapoel* subsequently called a special conference that recommended that sport should come under the Ministry of Education and Culture, not the

Ministry of Defence. This was accepted by the government. Ben-Gurion's approach to *Hapoel* and the government's acceptance of its recommendation indicated the status of the worker sport movement in the new state of Israel.

In 1950, the Maccabi World Union staged the third Maccabiah Games, at which the state of Israel was represented, according to the 1948 agreement, by both Maccabi and *Hapoel* athletes. *Hapoel* athletes won 56 of the 85 medals gained by Israel, which demonstrates how strong *Hapoel* had become. At its 25th anniversary in 1951, *Hapoel* was rightfully able to proclaim itself the largest and strongest sport organisation in the country.

The stronger *Hapoel* became, however, the more the bourgeois sport organisations opposed it. Only after the government had threatened, in secret negotiations, to nationalise sport was an agreement between the two rival organisations signed in October 1951, according to which national sport bodies were set up on a basis of parity in representation. Even though by this time *Hapoel* was much larger than Maccabi—and represented an absolute majority of Israel's sport—it was nevertheless content to have gained access to organisations recognised by the international sport federations. Previously, both sides had formed their own national Olympic committees, neither of which was recognised by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). It was only in 1952 that the united National Olympic Committee was accepted by the IOC.

Israeli athletes entered the Olympic arena for the first time at the 1952 Helsinki summer games. Altogether, Israel was represented by 26 athletes, 15 of whom were from *Hapoel*. In subsequent Olympics, *Hapoel* continued to dominate Israel's athletic representation; out of the 192 athletes who represented Israel in Olympic Games up to 1992, as many as 119 were members of *Hapoel*. A similar situation appertains to Israeli teams in the Asian Games, in which Israel participated from 1954 to 1974. Thus, *Hapoel* athletes gained 11 gold, 7 silver, and 8 bronze medals in individual events at the Asian Games, and in the Olympics they gained the best placings among all Israeli athletes; one of the two Olympic medals and 10 of the 13 athletes that placed in the first 8 in their events were from *Hapoel*. On a more sombre note, of the 11 Israeli athletes and coaches murdered during the 1972 Munich Olympics, 9 were members of *Hapoel*.

*Hapoel* celebrated its 25th anniversary in 1952 one year late. The anniversary coincided with the organisation's fifth festival, renamed the International *Hapoel* Games. Whereas the first four festivals had been national events, the fifth festival was international through the participation of some CSIT associations and a number of Turkish track-and-field

athletes. *Hapoel* was determined to make its games the biggest in the country and a rival to the Maccabiah Games.

The 1952 games were followed by further festivals in 1956, 1961, 1966, and 1971. Since 1971 the games have been held quadrennially, in the year preceding the Olympics. In the 10 International *Hapoel* Games held up to 1992, athletes from over 50 countries on all five continents, including many world and Olympic champions, have taken part. Since 1966, official CSIT championships have become part of these games that also feature folk games and mass activities. Whereas the Maccabiah Games developed into a Jewish national celebration, the *Hapoel* games are both international and the major sport event in the country.

Although the 1951 pact between Maccabi and *Hapoel* was originally for a 3-year period, Maccabi asked in 1954 for a prolongation. *Hapoel*, on the other hand, was keen to scrap the parity representation and hold democratic elections to all sport federations. Because Maccabi refused, it was only in the Israeli Soccer Association that democratic elections were held (1954); Maccabi boycotted this election. Ten years were to pass before democratic representation extended to all Israeli sport federations. Following such elections, *Hapoel* won an absolute majority (as high as 70 percent) in all federations, a position it has maintained to this day.

At the beginning of the 1960s, *Hapoel* launched an assistance programme for developing countries. Athletes from such countries had taken part in the *Hapoel* games and had been impressed by the organisation. Following a number of requests, therefore, *Hapoel* sent specialists to Congo-Brazzaville, the Central African Republic, Cameroon, Chad, and Senegal. The assistance came to an end during the 1967 Six Days' War, when practically all African states severed diplomatic relations with Israel; the one exception was Malawi, which continued to receive sport and physical education assistance.

It may be said that *Hapoel* reached its peak in the 1960s but lost some of its ideological commitment since then. Ideological debate on the organisation's activities has continued, but competitive sport has gradually thrust aside the formerly dominant mass activities. In 1962, it is true, *Hapoel* did exclude boxing from its activities on medical grounds, but, on the whole, competitive sports have dictated the movement's progress. Competition against bourgeois sport organisations has required more and more finance that is available only through the nationalised Sports Betting Board. Inasmuch as bourgeois sport organisations tend to spend these funds on their relatively small number of clubs, *Hapoel* has had to follow suit, mainly at the expense of its mass activities (although this has

never been admitted officially). The impact of bourgeois sport on *Hapoel* can also be seen in the readmittance of boxing to *Hapoel* activities in 1984. *Hapoel* simply was reluctant to leave the sport in bourgeois hands, preferring political to medical arguments. Organisationally, *Hapoel* split its directorate of sport activities in 1965 into one department for competitive sport and one for mass activities. This bifurcation did not, however, resolve the problem of mass activities because the division of funding continued to favour competition.

One possible solution to the mass sport problem was to hold mass competitions. Hundreds of teams from various sports were created at workplaces, and special leagues were formed for the teams to compete. The problem was that these activities suited only a certain age group and were, for all practical purposes, restricted to males. Another possible solution was to organise individual mass events in such recreational activities as hiking, cross-country running, swimming, orienteering, and cycling. The number of such events that *Hapoel* organises runs into well over 100 every year, with as many as 10,000 people taking part in the largest of them. All the same, the *Hapoel* member who looks for regular recreation in a *Hapoel* club has found the opportunities more and more limited.

For a long time, females felt neglected by *Hapoel*, and it is true that the organisation plays a much smaller part in Israel's women's sport than it does in men's sport. Over the last two decades, however, the worker sport movement has tried to establish a social women's sport section; these attempts have been unsuccessful, primarily because of the stringent financial allocation to sport. There were no funds marked for women's sport. It has to be admitted, further, that women are little represented in *Hapoel* committees. Often only one woman has been present to represent women's sport.

Over the last two decades, actual professionalism has existed in Israel's top soccer and basketball leagues. This professionalism has been growing rapidly and has now obtruded into other sports, such as volleyball, handball, and table tennis. It has to be said that *Hapoel* has had complete control of all the country's sport federations while this development has taken place. Yet, it has not found the strength to oppose it. *Hapoel* suffers from the situation much more than the bourgeois sport organisations do because it is practically impossible to run trade union worker sport clubs as private businesses. For this reason, there are now fewer *Hapoel* teams in the national soccer and basketball leagues than there used to be.

Despite all the difficulties, *Hapoel* remains Israel's largest and strongest sport organisation—70 years after the founding of its first club. It is perhaps the only worker sport organisation actually controlling its country's sport. This has naturally led to a number of compromises in adjusting to the modern world of sport, yet, despite the problems, *Hapoel* has succeeded in leading Israeli sport in the direction it has desired.

## References

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