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The Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry publishes commentary and analysis on Jewish identity and culture. You are welcome to share your thoughts on our Perspectives with us: cst@tauex.tau.ac.il. We are glad to share with you the forty-fourth issue of Perspectives.

Offside

I love football. I love Judaism. Something was bothering me and I searched for answers

Noah Abrahams

Rabbi Jonathan Hughes is founder and CEO of the Abraham Effect, an organization that works with secondary schools across Britain to provide Jewish pupils with Jewish education and support. That includes Eton and Harrow.

When a teenager, Rabbi Hughes dreamed of another career. He wanted to be a football (soccer) player.

It wasn't that far-fetched a dream. He played for the Swindon Town FC academy and then for the Reading FC academy.

Then, at the age of 16, he decided to prioritize his A-levels.

Hughes wasn't a very conscious Jew growing up. "I had no Jewish identity. I knew my mother was Jewish, but I had no Seder, no Yom Kippur, no bris, no bar mitzvah, nothing. I only knew that my mother lit Chanukah candles once a year. We lived among my father's non-Jewish side of the family and I had no Jewish friends. My Jewish

identity when I was a footballer was virtually non-existent, so there was never a clash between Shabbat and playing.”

I approached Rabbi Hughes and other experts because of something that has bothered me for a long time.

I am a big football fan, although even as a child I was never good enough on the pitch to delude myself that I have a chance of becoming a pro. At 16, I started a career in radio journalism that later landed me with the BBC as a football reporter, a position from which I resigned shortly after October 7, 2023, in protest of the network’s anti-Israel bias.

Today I sojourn in California and work as an analyst for San Diego FC, a Major League Soccer (MLS) club. But much of my heart is still with the green fields of Britain and its Premier League. It will always be.

I am also a passionate Jew. I love my people and my culture, and take pride whenever I hear about an achievement of a fellow Jew or of the State of the Jews.

So here’s what bothered me: where are the male British Jewish football players?

In the 33 years that the Premier League has existed, only two British Jews have played at the top level of English football. Since the turn of the millennium, only six British Jews were good enough to play in one of England’s top four professional divisions.

I am aware that there are more pressing questions in the world at the moment. But it doesn’t make this one less intriguing for me.

Jews have made huge contributions to football before the Second World War (if you speak Hebrew or Spanish, visit the four-part Podcast series on Jews and Football our Center [released almost four years ago](#)).

I asked Rabbi Hughes about this riddle.

“When I was a community rabbi, I would often say to the Bar Mitzvah boy at his ceremony that it’s the day a boy realizes that he has more chance of owning a football club than playing for one,” he said.

“There is a bit of truth to every joke. There is the argument that British Jews have no presence in football because of culture; that there’s an emphasis in the Jewish community on academic progress and learning, and in more religious circles the focus is on spirituality and observing the Shabbat, which means that you can’t run around on a pitch on a Saturday.

“I would also argue that ethnically Jews have not been born with the most athletic of physiques, generally speaking.

“Another issue you have to factor in is that there is only a small number of Jews. It is a very small demographic pool to pick your sporting heroes from [There are

approximately 280,000 Jews in Britain today, making up just about half a percent of the population].

“There is also the argument that you have to have the desperation [for upward mobility] to make it as a professional footballer.”

Dr. Daniel Staetsky agreed with the last point. He is Senior Research Fellow and Director of the European Demography Unit at the UK-based Institute for Jewish Policy Research.

Compared to the general population, British Jews today are 80% more likely to have academic professional qualifications. A study conducted in 2016 by senior economist at HM Treasury, Andrea Silberman, found that average earnings for Jewish households in the UK were approximately 54% higher than the UK average.

Because Jews belong to the middle and upper classes, they are in lesser need to make the big bet of sidelining their A-levels for the small chance of making it as professional players who earn dozens of thousands of pounds a week.

Dr. David Dee is a social historian with a particular interest in the history of race, ethnicity and immigration in Britain and the history of sports and leisure in Western society at De Montfort University, England.

He dismissed the genetic argument.

“If that was the issue, then you wouldn’t have had the previous history of successful British Jewish athletes. History clearly shows that Jews possess the physical and psychological attributes to succeed at an elite level in ‘hard’ physical sports.

“Class and socio-economics are so important. There is less incentive for ‘comfortable’ Jews to struggle to see the value of persisting and working through the ruthless routes of getting into professional football.

“There’s certainly no shortage of participation in football at a younger age amongst the community, and similarly, there is no shortage in interest and knowledge about professional football amongst British Jewry.

“Both of which should have led to more involvement in the professional game. But, British Jews probably have more experience than most minorities in terms of understanding that routes to success exist out there other than through professional sport.”

British psychologist Dr. Julie Scheiner explained: “Jewish kids of this generation don’t need to go out and succeed on the football field because they have most things handed to them by their parents. Unfortunately, British Jews of today’s generation are very entitled.”

Yet there is more. “The strongest [explanation as to why there are no British Jews in the Premier League] stems from looking into what these kids are influenced by. They’re

raised on a diet of social media. And who are their main influencers? Not Jewish footballers, that's for sure. Role models are massively important. Primary role models are ideally our parents and what are Jewish parents encouraging their kids to do? It's not to go and become a footballer."

Dean Furman told me that the absence of British Jews from English football is "the million-dollar question."

Furman, a born and raised Jew, played professional football for the third-division Oldham Athletic. He grew up in the heavily Jewish Edgware suburb of London and attended the Jewish Free School (JFS). His career spanned over 15 years.

Now living in Manchester, Furman works as a Player Services Executive at the Professional Footballers' Association. "I get asked about this all the time. We have to recognize that football is not the most followed professional path for British Jewish school kids.

"I was scouted for Chelsea whilst playing in a non-Jewish league. There are plenty of Jewish leagues [for schoolkids in England], but are there scouts going to watch those leagues? I don't know.

"Ultimately, I'm no six-foot-two sprinter and not the quickest player. I had to find a way to overcome that. Genetics, whilst maybe they stopped me getting to the next level, certainly did not stop me from getting a career.

"I just had to find a way to compete and to find a solution to deal with players who were much bigger and stronger than I was. I know that there are top Jewish talents out there, so why are they not pursuing this path? Do they think that it's not a viable career?

"Maybe parents look at the longevity of a doctor, lawyer or accountant and believe that it is more sustainable than being a footballer, where a career could end abruptly. Maybe long-term thinking from parents is stopping Jewish players coming through."

Maybe.

And maybe those parents are right, if we take the statistics into account. Football is a very risky choice for any boy. Still, all the explanations I heard satisfied me that there really isn't a reason why Jews should not make it in the Premier League, as they do in so many other lucrative fields.

One day I'll be back in England. One day I'll have a son. I have my hopes.

Noah Abrahams is Associate Editor at the Center.