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Jewish athletes meet in Akron for sports, fun

Maccabi Games kick off

Israeli girls easily blend with Ohio teammates

By Bill Lilley
Beacon Journal staff writer

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Raz Peles, Lee Maman and Lilach Markovitz arrived Sunday in Akron, met their new teammates on the Akron/Philly girls soccer team and were ready to play Monday morning in the 2008 Akron JCC Maccabi Games at the Copley Road Soccer Complex.

They didn't have any plays.

They didn't know what their positions were going to be.

They didn't have any idea how they were going to adjust to a game that had only six players and a goalie and a field that was about two-thirds the normal size.

But none of that really mattered to three teenage girls from Israel.

"We got to know the names of the other players and that's all that really matters," said Raz, 15, who lives in Kibbutz Hanita in the western Galilee section of Israel near the Lebanon border. "Meeting the new people is a lot more important than winning in soccer."

Some 350 Jewish athletes, ages 12 to 16, have come to Akron this week from around the country, from Hungary and from Israel. They're competing in basketball, soccer, tennis, golf and bowling, and will volunteer in service projects here.

Two contingents are from Israel — a boys basketball team and a mixed group of boys and girls, including Raz, Lee and Lilach.

The Akron/Philly girls team lost its Monday morning match against the Greater Washington team, but Dan Baer, a former Firestone High School player, pointed out that the 0-4 score wasn't that important.

"It's competition," Baer said, "but it's really more about meeting people, and we have to keep everything in perspective. The activities are trying to facilitate the athletes meeting each other and developing new friendships in the Jewish community.

"Actually, it was a lot of fun coaching under these conditions. There is no pressure to win — just to learn the girls' names. We're working just to get a feel where everyone should play and we're doing it in the middle of a game against a true team."

Lilach, 14, a forward from Akko, Israel, said adjusting to new teammates and a changed game was an exciting aspect of the competition.

"I really enjoyed being part of a blended team," said Lilach, who is making her first visit to the United States. "I'm used to playing with different players on different teams all the time, so it really wasn't much of an adjustment.

"It took a little longer to adjust to the smaller field and only having seven players. But that really didn't matter that much because I had a fun time."

The Akron/Philly team did a little better in its Monday afternoon match, scoring three points to Team Baltimore's six. And the improvement the girls showed in the second half left co-coach Brian Sugerman, who also coaches the junior varsity team at Revere High School, optimistic about today's matches against Houston and Chicago.

Baer said he's sold on the concepts of the Maccabi Games, which have been held annually at various cities since 1982.

"I think the whole concept of bringing Jewish teenagers together in an athletic setting is fantastic," said Baer, a 22-year-old recent graduate of Cornell University who played in Maccabi Games in 2001 and 2002.

"They get to play sports and they get to know each other at the same time. Where else can you develop friendships with other

kids from around the world? It's really a unique life opportunity."

Bill Lilley can be reached at 330-996-3811 or blilley@thebeaconjournal.com.

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