

Long Island Q & A: **Ron Carner**

Mobilizing American Athletes for the Maccabiah Games

By BEA TUSIANI

RON CARNER was really annoyed when he heard at one point in the Broadway show "Falsettos" a remark made that Jewish boys were not very good athletes.

As head of the United States delegation that will take 500 Jewish athletes to the 1993 Maccabiah Games in Israel, he knows that's not true.

A general litigation lawyer who lives in Port Washington and has a law office in Commack, Mr. Carner became involved in the Maccabiah Games 20 years after he graduated from Loyola School of Law. His entire was basketball.

Inspired by his early playing days at James Madison High School in Brooklyn and as an undergraduate at Brandeis University, Mr. Carner initially volunteered to help out the American Maccabiah team in that sport, and went on to serve as basketball chairman for the 1987 Maccabiah Pan American program and in the 1989 Masters event.

As National Sports Chairman, his team, along with those from 50 other nations, will convene in Israel next summer to take part in what has become the third largest international sports competition after the Olympics and Pan-American games. The Maccabiah Games, held every four years the year after the Olympics, involve competition in 36 tournaments, including chess and bridge.

Mark Spitz, the 7-medal Olympic swimmer; Ernie Grunfeld, the former basketball player, and Mitch Gaylord, the former Olympic gymnast, have all been participants.

Named after Judah Maccabee, who in 167 B.C. swept Israel of invading Roman armies, the Maccabiah competition was started to reflect physical strength and heroism. Though originated in 1932, the events of World War II forced a postponement of the games between 1938-1950.

A milestone was reached in 1989 when the Maccabiah celebrated its 13th, or "bar mitzvah" year. As it enters maturity, the 14th Maccabiah, slated for July 1993, is expected to flourish with the infusion of world-class Jewish athletes from eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Q. Were the Maccabiah Games established to preserve religious or national unity?

A. Israel wasn't even established in 1932, it was Palestine. So the games were obviously created for the intention of promoting a greater worldwide Jewish identity.

Q. Did discrimination against

the Jewish people have anything to do with founding the games?

A. I get the impression there might have been a special effort to include the Jewish athletes in the 1936 Berlin Olympics but once there, there seems to have been an underground movement to exclude them from participating. Marty Glickman was a member of the U.S. track team then and he was specifically excluded from a particular event because the German government was not happy about his participation.

Q. Is the emphasis solely on sport?

A. Sports is the medium we use to bring Jewish athletes to Israel for educational and cultural purposes. We like to believe we're fooling the athletes. They think they're coming for worldwide competition, and of course we try to bring the best athletes we can, but really they're coming there for a cultural immersion within the state of Israel.

Q. How is that accomplished?

A. We bring the athletes one week prior to the events and call it a pre-camp. We have a four-day program that emphasizes culture and education through discussion groups and visits to historical sites. We started it at the last Maccabiah in '89 and now other countries such as Australia, Canada and the British are talking about doing it.

Q. Can non-Jewish persons participate?

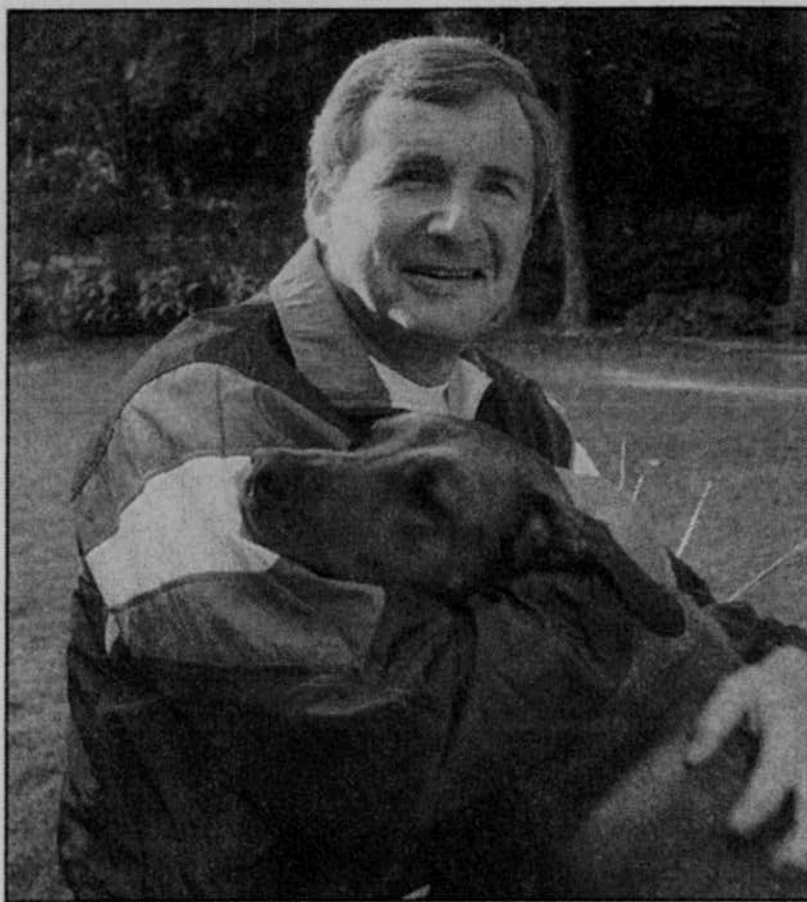
A. Since we're bringing people together for a greater Jewish identity, not only with their roots but with the state of Israel and to meet other Jewish athletes from around the world, we select only Jewish athletes and coaches. This may sound exclusionary, but it's not meant to be. There are five and a half million Jews in the U.S. and they're slowly being lost to assimilation. We're just trying to provide a means by which they can maintain their ties. This is not done by the government of Israel, but by organizers who are not government affiliated.

Q. How are the athletes chosen?

A. It depends on the sport. The team sports, like tennis and rugby are chosen by tryouts. For swimming or track and field we use certified times or distance.

Q. Is there an age limit?

A. I'm chairman of the Open Program, which is the regular Olympic type program. We call it open because if you make the team, no matter how old you are, you make it. We also have a Junior Program for those up to 16 and a Masters Program for older participants. There may be a



Susan Harris for The New York Times

Ron Carner, head of the United States delegation taking 500 Jewish athletes to the 1993 Maccabiah Games in Israel.

junior gymnast or a master golfer who might qualify for the Open program but that's very unusual. We're bringing 500 Open athletes, 60 Juniors and 110 Masters to the games next summer. We also have disabled athletes who take part in the Maccabiah Games in their own events.

Q. Who are the great Jewish athletes?

A. Hank Greenberg, a former Detroit Tiger, hit two home runs short of Babe Ruth and they wouldn't give him a pitch to hit in the last month of the season to break Ruth's record. The greatest wrestler in the history of sport is Henry Wittenberg; Sandy Koufax is considered the greatest pitcher that ever lived. Ernie Grunfeld was a former Knickerbocker and the Baer Brothers were famous boxers. Dolph Schayes is a Basketball Hall of Famer and his son, Dan, has played in the N.B.A. since 1986.

Q. Are most Jewish champions Israeli Jews or Jews from other lands?

A. At this time, mostly from other lands. In the future, as a result of the

emigration from and to Israel from the Soviet Union, you're going to see a lot of Jewish athletes developing. Israel has developed terrific coaching facilities and they've brought in some of the finest coaches from around the world. Hopefully, we'll see some medals from Israel in the upcoming Olympics.

Q. What Jewish athletes from the U.S. will be in this year's Olympics?

A. We're following it closely. Some haven't been selected yet. Tamara Levinson made the rhythmic gymnastics team, Ken Flax will be throwing the hammer, Charlie Harris is on the water polo team and Damon Keeve will be competing in judo. Also, the U.S. Olympic track and field coach is Mel Rosen, and Theresa Grentz will be coaching women's basketball.

Q. Do you scout these athletes for the Maccabiah?

A. Most of them know who we are, but we'll look for the better athletes. We already have over 5,000 applications for a 500-person team.

Q. At the Maccabiah there are opening and closing ceremonies, the lighting of the torch and bronze, silver and gold medals are awarded. How do they differ from the Olympic games?

A. The athletes are housed by sport not by nation. So the American rugby players will be housed with all the rugby players participating in the sport. This way they get to know there are Jewish kids named Pablo Goldberg — Jews like themselves whose ancestors made a left instead of a right.

Q. Which events are the most popular?

A. Basketball seems to draw the biggest crowds, surely for the finals, which is normally U.S. vs. Israel. You'll see nice crowds for rugby and soccer. The preliminary games are held all over Israel. The finals are held in the larger arenas in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv.

Q. How is the Maccabiah funded?

A. The organizing committees in each country pay the host nation for housing, room and board, transportation and cultural requirements. Also, I'm sure the Maccabiah World Union raises money in other ways.

Q. How can the athletes afford to participate?

A. Athletes, coaches and trainers are given scholarships. Our cost next year is going to be about \$4,300 per participant. We raise that money mostly through individual donations in categories that range from \$4,000 to \$25,000. We also hold 20 to 22 golf tournaments around the country.

When I became the sports chairman I increased the size of the team from the '89 games by 25 percent by selecting new sports for the U.S. to participate in. I'm very interested in women's sports so I've introduced an 18-person field hockey team. The problem is by increasing the size of our teams our costs also rise, and we may have to cut the team back a little bit.

Q. Why did you become involved?

A. In 1985 I said to my wife, I'm busy practicing law but there are other things in life to do. I told her I had an interest in four things: kids, the Jewish people, the state of Israel and travel. The only thing I knew about that combined the four is the Maccabiah. Six weeks later I met the national chairman at a party and was soon involved as basketball chairman in both the Pan American and Masters Programs. If I can make it through 10 more Maccabiahs, I'll be there.

Q. What is your responsibility

Using sports to bring Jewish athletes together.

as Open Sports Chairman for the upcoming games?

A. The tryouts have to be fair, the selection process has to be fair. We won't take a kid if it means his father will pay for him and he is not qualified. When I was growing up I'd heard that there was some favoritism connected with that process. It's my job to make sure that it is fair, and it will be fair.

Q. What is the significance of the International Olympic Committee's recognizing the Maccabiah?

A. Credibility. If we have an athlete who sets a record, it's recognized as an official world record. We do things the way they're supposed to be done, with proper equipment and officials according to the guidelines of the Olympic Committee.

Q. What countries will be competing for the very first time in the 1993 games?

A. There are 350 athletes coming from the C.I.S. [Commonwealth of Independent States, the former Soviet Union]. Of that group only the Lithuanians were issued visas in 1989 and they were introduced as athletes from the Soviet Union. South Africa has now been admitted back into the international Olympic movement; Czechoslovakia, Paraguay and Turkey will send athletes for the first time.

Q. What ideas are being discussed for future Maccabiah games?

A. I'd like to involve more women. Here in the U.S. you can do anything. I can find women cricket players if I had to, but other nations don't have the same kinds of resources for athletes. We can send teams in every sport but we have to have competition so we can expand only within the framework of the capability of other nations.

Q. Will the 1993 games be televised?

A. In Israel, yes. Hopefully we're going to have them televised here. There's a cable network that's interested and we're working on that now.