

Soccer Sponsored by His Majesty

During the years of the British Mandate in Palestine-Eretz Israel (1917-1948), thousands of British joined the Jewish and Arab residents of Palestine-Eretz Israel: government, police and army employees, and during WWII, also foreign soldiers from other countries. While football was played in the geographical space of Palestine-Eretz Israel even before the British arrived, it received a significant push under the nation considered the birthplace of the game, and all three major population groups of Palestine-Eretz Israel participated in it. In each a football team arose (we recall just a sampling: the Paymasters, Shabab al-'Arab and Maccabi Tel Aviv), who competed against each other in cup tournaments.

In 1928, the Football Association of Eretz Israel was founded (at the suggestion of Egypt), and one of the conditions for its acceptance into FIFA was inclusion of all population groups in the country. Therefore, in the association league games were held between Arab, Jewish and British teams, and on principle though not always practically – players from the three sectors were even selected for an all-star team that played against foreign teams.

Common ground

Usually, when we think about the relations between populations groups in Eretz Israel, a dualism emerges, as if there has always been a state of confrontation between Jews and Arabs. A dualist image also emerges from the confrontation between the Jews and the British, mainly if one takes into account the struggle of the Etzel and the Lechi against them, or their treatment of the illegal Jewish immigrants (*maapilim*). However, the athletic ties between Jews, Arabs and the British, as manifested in football, suggests that in contrast to this picture, at the level of civil society organizations, there were not three separate communities, but a complex reality in which collaboration existed between communities. Thus, although national belonging was the key characteristic of sports in Palestine-Eretz Israel, athletic events – and in this case, football games – were the arena for encounter between the communities.

This does not mean that the tension did not affect the relationships between athletes. For example, due to the protests sparked in the Yishuv following publication of the White Papers in 1930, games between British and Jewish groups were halted; and in 1934, in protest against the treatment to which they were subjected, the Arab groups left the Eretz Israel Football Association and established their own association, which did not last long. In contrast, the crowd extended a warm reception to teams from other ethnicities. For example, the report of a game between the Moslem Club of Jaffa and Maccabi Rechovot held at the Rechovot Soccer Field in 1941, stated: "The Arab teams were welcomed with sympathetic cries from soccer enthusiasts in Rechovot"; and throughout the Mandate period, the rulings of the association were made in the spirit of good sportsmanship, and not with an evident bias in favor of the Jewish teams.

A new Middle East

Football was played not only within the borders of Palestine-Eretz Israel, but also in the international arena. The main athletic ties of the Jewish groups with the Arab countries of Egypt, Lebanon and Syria began in 1927; in newspaper reports on these games, no confrontations are described, until the beginning of the 1940s.

Kicking in wartime

If so, considering the football ties between the different population groups in the Mandatory state, it appears that the lens of conflict through which we are accustomed to viewing the history of this place must be removed. Conflict did not always exist, but rather developed over the years, as can be readily observed on the football field. Over time, in the realm of football, a process of separation between the Jewish institutions and teams and those of the Arab and British is apparent. This took place mainly during the period of WWII, when the confrontations with both the Arab and the British teams (as well as the other military teams) intensified.

While ending the games with the "foreign" teams was a natural process, due to the departure of most of the forces and government personnel from the area at the

end of the war, ceasing the games between Jews and Arabs was the outcome of behavior of the Association that deviated from good sportsmanship.

A red card

In the 1942 trophy games, Maccabi Haifa was scheduled to play against the Royal Hellenic Army team in the quarter-finals, but the Greeks left Palestine, and Maccabi Haifa was automatically promoted to the next stage. One of the three remaining games in the quarter-finals, between Maccabi Tel Aviv and Shabab al-'Arab, ended with the victory of the Jewish team, which had added to its ranks two players slated for conscription, which was forbidden according to the rules of the Association. Therefore, Maccabi Tel Aviv was disqualified from the rest of the games. However, it was not the Arab team that benefitted from the disqualification of Maccabi Tel Aviv, but Maccabi Haifa, which had already been automatically bumped up to the semi-finals, and was now being promoted automatically to the finals. Bab al-'Arab's appeal of this decision was rejected by the Association. Following this decision, a conflict ensued between the Arab teams and the Association, leading ultimately to its renouncing membership in 1943, and to the establishment of the Arab Sports Association in 1944.

The story of football in Mandatory Palestine-Eretz Israel well illustrates how at the personal level, hostile relations did not always prevail between the Arab population and the Jewish Yishuv, and between both of these and the ruling British, as manifested in sports encounters. In the 1930s and 1940s as well, Jews, Arabs and others continued to meet on the football field, almost until the end of the Mandate. At the same time, during these years, it can be seen how, gradually, football came to function increasingly as a tool for political struggles between the various populations in Eretz Israel.