

SoCal soccer stars bound for Aussie Maccabi Games

By Ashley Zeldin | PUBLISHED Dec 22, 2010 | Sports

They are united by country, religion and their love of the beautiful game. Four young men from Southern California will represent the United States as members of the open men's soccer team at the second Maccabi Australia International Games in Sydney, Dec. 26 through Jan. 2.

And they will take the soccer pitch together, along with teammates from across the country, to challenge for the gold medal and national pride.

They have taken divergent paths to the field.

Charlie Paris, a junior forward at Yale, started playing soccer with and against his twin brother, Robbie. But by high school, Robbie had switched his focus to track.

“Being twins, we were always grouped together,” Paris said. “We started going down different roads, but we always supported each other. Looking back, that was one of the defining moments on my path to becoming an individual — Charlie Paris — rather than being [one of] ‘the Paris brothers.’ ”

Paris, who led the California state champion Santa Monica High School soccer team in scoring as a senior in 2008, relishes the chance to represent his country and religion by indulging in one of his biggest passions.

Maccabi open men's soccer coach Preston Goldfarb is counting on Paris' ability to score.

“He’s going to be a big and strong presence up front,” Goldfarb said of the 6-foot-5 scorer. “As a striker, he’s going to deal our opponents’ defenses fits.”

With three solid Southland defenders among its ranks, defense should be a strength of the U.S. team.

Daniel Kohen, a sophomore defender at San Diego State University, and Michael Pourat, who is looking to transfer to a Division I university next fall, will make their second starts as Maccabi players in Australia.

A Beverly Hills High School graduate, Kohen helped the Aztecs to their first double-digit win season in more than a decade.

Kohen, who played with the 2008 Maccabi youth team in Israel, is one of the most experienced players on the Maccabi roster when it comes to playing internationally. His club team competed at the 2008 Milk Cup in Northern Ireland, the first U.S. club team to make the finals, losing to the Manchester United youth team.

Kohen’s forte is fighting for 50-50 balls — when two players from opposing teams both have an equal opportunity to get the ball.

“I’m not a normal soccer player,” he admits. “Most people talk about how they love to score, but I’d rather get an assist than score a goal.”

Kohen’s college coach, Lev Kirschner, calls him “a fierce competitor.”

“I am proud to have Daniel representing our heritage and beautiful game,” Kirschner said.

Pourat may not have the experience of Kohen, but he has an excellent soccer background, Goldfarb says. “Certainly he brings ability and credence.”

Pourat was part of the 1998 Amateur Athletic Union Junior Olympic champion club team from Encino, and helped Taft High School to the city semifinals in 2008.

“As a player, I always try to find the next level,” said Pourat, who played at the 2007 Pan American Maccabi Games in Buenos Aires, Argentina. “Just knowing I can play internationally at my age really got me excited.”

Noah Rothstein is among the oldest of the U.S. soccer contingent and will celebrate his 28th birthday in Sydney. Rothstein’s soccer career had an inauspicious start.

“I was awful at [soccer],” he admitted. That is until his parents sent him to “Jewish sleep-away camp” for eight weeks when he was 7. “For some reason, I decided that for my three activities I would play soccer, soccer, soccer every day. So when I came back, I went from being the worst to the best on the team, and from then on, [soccer] was something I always enjoyed.”

He was recruited to George Washington University but instead focused on academics.

Of the Southern California foursome, Rothstein is the only non-native, having moved to Los Angeles in 2005 to pursue a master’s degree at the American Film Institute.

The players represent varying degrees of Jewish adherence, from Pourat, who attends Chabad services and keeps kosher, to Rothstein, who, despite not being active in the Jewish community, says he has a deep appreciation for his religion. But they all agree that their faith is important in their lives and they value the opportunity to meet Jews from the world over.

“It’s noteworthy when you meet someone who shares the same interests as you who’s also Jewish,” said Paris, who was raised in a Conservative household and

has bonded with a Jewish teammate on the Yale soccer squad.

Paris looks forward to building friendships with his teammates and says that he thinks their similar passion for the sport will help them gel as a team.

All are looking forward to the Maccabi Games.

“Maccabi is a great way to see the world playing soccer,” Pourat said.

Kohen, who was limited by injury this past NCAA season, views the Maccabi experience as an opportunity to improve during the off-season.

“I’m looking to play as much soccer as I can, and this is the perfect opportunity for me to do what I love and represent what I love,” he said.