

L.A. teen athletes going for Maccabi gold three-peat

By Ashley Zeldin | PUBLISHED Jul 19, 2011 | Community

Winning a second consecutive gold medal at the JCC Maccabi Games in Omaha, Neb., last year brought with it both excitement and disappointment for Michael Totten and his teammates on Westside JCC's 16U boys' soccer team.

“We had two gold medals already, and we were pretty sure we could win another, given the chance,” he said. But much of the team, including Michael, would be too old to compete in the 2011 tournament, as competitors must be between 13 and 16.

Yet Michael, who turned 17 earlier this month, and his teammates will get their chance at a third gold medal. First-time host Israel joins Philadelphia and Springfield, Mass., as a site of the 2011 JCC Maccabi Games and ArtsFest, and the age range for the Israeli component was raised to between 14 and 17.

“The kids were very emotional last year, realizing it was their last Maccabi together,” said co-head coach Dan Sulzberg, whose team also won gold in San Antonio in 2009. “The change made it possible for all my kids to have one last Maccabi together.”

Sulzberg's team members are among 900 athletes from across the country and Canada, including 177 from Southern California, who will compete in the Jewish homeland July 24-Aug. 5. When the annual athletic and artistic showcase continues Aug. 14-19 in Philadelphia and Springfield, 216 Southern Californians will be among 1,800 participants.

“Knowing we would be playing in Israel motivated us to train even harder,” Totten said.

Goalie Ari Simon called Israel the “best place” to go for the three-peat.

“It’s the epitome of the JCC Maccabi Games,” said Ari, who with his twin brother, forward Asher, turned 17 in May.

Dan Deutsch, director of the JCC Maccabi Experience, said that holding the JCC Maccabi Games and ArtsFest in Israel was a goal of the program since its inception in 1982.

“It’s been a dream from the beginning and demonstrates our commitment to bringing as many teens to Israel as possible,” Deutsch said. The program will provide participants the opportunity to immerse themselves in Israeli culture.

“It’s always important to keep our roots,” said Shay Diamant, the Israel delegation head for the JCC at Milken who will oversee 44 athletes on two boys’ and two girls’ soccer teams. “It’s a great opportunity to meet new kids and have fun.”

The JCC at Milken’s Team Los Angeles will have 55 competitors in Philadelphia and 45 in Springfield across baseball, basketball, soccer, swimming, table tennis, tennis, and track and field.

The Westside JCC is sending 80 athletes total to all three sites, including 23 to Israel, comprising baseball, basketball, soccer, swimming and tennis teams. The ArtsFest participants from Westside JCC are joining the Orange County delegation in Israel.

Many Westside JCC and JCC at Milken teams are favorites to three-peat, including Sulzberg’s soccer team.

“I feel like the Lakers, going for three in a row,” Ari said. “We want to live up to expectations. We’ll come together as a team and handle everything the way we always do.”

Team Westside’s 16U basketball team is also looking to live up to expectations, going for a third consecutive gold medal in Philadelphia.

“We play better under pressure,” said JoJo Fallas, a 16-year-old shooting guard from Shalhevet. “We believe that we’re going to win. Our goal is always to win gold, and we’re expecting no less.”

JoJo, one of four core returners, said East Coast basketball features a more aggressive, attacking style, but his team’s success comes from its finesse.

The golden legacy isn’t limited to the Westside.

The JCC at Milken’s baseball team will be pursuing a third win in Philadelphia, following gold medal campaigns in San Francisco and Denver.

“We play the best baseball in the country,” said catcher Trevor Weiss, a Calabasas High junior. He attributes the team’s success to familiarity. “We know what to expect from each other.”

Newcomers to the JCC Maccabi Games experience also will be making cross-country treks.

“I’m really excited to be in a new place,” said Dani Klemes, a 14-year-old swimmer competing in four events in Springfield for the Westside JCC along with twin sister Allison.

The Beverly Hills High sophomores have high hopes for the competition but value the experience above all.

“I’m looking forward to staying with [my host] family to see what life in Springfield is like,” Dani said.

Being first-timers doesn’t mean that competitors won’t be contenders.

Adam Bobrow, a JCC Maccabi baseball, soccer and table tennis alum, will be accompanying two table tennis talents, Sam Bernstein and Isaac Halfon, to Springfield.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if Sam takes the gold,” Bobrow said. “He’s an exceptional player.”

Both Sam, 14, and Isaac, 15, who has taken lessons at the Westside JCC’s Gilbert Table Tennis Club for only a few months, will compete for the JCC at Milken, despite living on the Westside.

Bobrow, a professional table tennis player and actor, took over coaching the JCC at Milken table tennis team as a last-minute replacement, just as he did in 2008.

“It would’ve been the first year that there wasn’t a team at all,” said Bobrow, whose late father, Jerry, was a JCC Maccabi Games delegation head for 18 years. “In the past, kids used table tennis as a back-up [sport] to make the trip, but I want to build the team. I would like table tennis to be their first choice.”

The JCC Maccabi Experience mission is “bringing together Jewish teens from across North America and internationally, and giving them an opportunity to explore their Judaism through a lens of their own special interest,” Deutsch said. “The experience gives a sense of klal, of Jewish peoplehood. They experience being Jewish together.”

Or, in the case of Sulzberg’s co-head coach, Neil Sadhu, what it means to be Jewish at all.

Upon meeting Sadhu four years ago, the Westside soccer players thought he was a Sephardi Jew; actually, he's Indian.

“Kids have wrapped tefillin with him and taught him all about Jewish culture,” said Sulzberg, who added that Sadhu's jersey will have “Sadhustein” printed on the back. The team considers Sadhu an “honorary Jew.”

Bobrow, who was involved in the recent 40th anniversary celebration of “Ping Pong Diplomacy,” likens the JCC Maccabi Games to the way table tennis united American and Chinese players.

“They're learning how to balance friendship and competition,” he said of the athletes. “It's on a smaller scale, but it's making and improving relationships between these kids. The concept is very much the same: strangers being friendly with each other.”