
No Stars, No Champions: Amateurism, Professionalism, and the Jewish Athletic Body in Interwar Palestine

Ofer Idels*¹

¹University of Calgary – Canada

Résumé

In 1928, after Swedish swimmer Arne Borg broke multiple world records, the Hebrew press dismissed his physical excellence not as a triumph of human will, but as a "scientific" abnormality—a "fish bladder" in his belly that rendered his achievements nationally purposeless. This paper explores a paradox at the heart of Jewish modernity: while the Zionist movement sought to forge a "Muscular Jew," it simultaneously rejected the cult of the athletic "star" and the rise of professional sport.

Drawing on Hebrew newspapers, organizational pamphlets, and debates within Zionist physical culture movements, the paper argues that competitive sport in interwar Palestine was reshaped according to a collectivist ethic that emphasized labor, discipline, and moral restraint over individual distinction. Athletic excellence detached from productive work was frequently portrayed as excessive, morally suspect, or socially destabilizing. As a result, both socialist and bourgeois sporting organizations resisted professionalism and attempted to limit spectacle, specialization, and elite status in favor of mass participation and regulated bodily practice.

By situating this case within broader international debates on amateurism and professionalism, the paper demonstrates that such efforts to redefine modern sport were only partially successful. Despite sustained ideological opposition, competitive hierarchies, elite performers, and public fascination with excellence repeatedly resurfaced. The Hebrew case thus reveals both the malleability and the limits of modern sport, showing how attempts to discipline competition and suppress stardom could shape sporting cultures—but never fully escape the logics of distinction, performance, and spectacle inherent to modern athletics.

Mots-Clés: body, Professionalism, Jewish, sports appeal

*Intervenant