

Unsportsmanlike Conduct: Israeli-Arab Conflict Rears Ugly Head at Olympics

I hosted a Christian journalist recently. She wanted to visit a “settlement” to see for herself what life is like—to understand better the Jewish connection to biblical Judea and Samaria and actual life on the ground here in Israel.

What she learned, witnessed and took away is very different from that which is portrayed in the world media, and among those with anti-Israel agendas that delegitimize Israel’s very existence.

At the top of a hill overlooking the adjacent Arab village next to my neighborhood, so close that someone with a good arm could throw a baseball from one to the other, I noted how there was no wall, no fence, and that relations are good. This is because it’s in their interest and because they know that, together, we both thrive. They don’t want a barrier. If there were to be one, they’d want to be on our side of it.

I shared how until the beginning of the second intifada in 2000, Palestinian Arab kids used to walk across the rock strewn hill between our communities to play soccer with the Jewish Israeli kids of our town. (Full disclosure: I never witnessed that, but was told first hand by numerous others who did.) But I did witness my oldest son playing soccer in Jerusalem against other teams, including a really good Arab team, coached by a legendary former member of Israel’s national soccer team. Maybe Israeli Jews and Arabs don’t get along all the time, and more so for our Palestinian Arab neighbors, but we do get along much of the time. Sometimes sports can be a means through which to do so.

Sadly, at the global sporting event that’s so significant it’s

only held every four years and supposed to be the penultimate model of sportsmanlike conduct, a code of behavior that extends beyond the field, any sense of Arabs and Jews getting along is the exception to the rule. While most famous was the 1972 slaying of 11 Israeli athletes in Munich, recognized by the International Olympic Committee for the first time this year in Rio, this year's Olympics have been tarred with Arab unsportsmanlike conduct that we've grown to expect. When it comes to Israel and sports, for most Arab neighbors it's still no holds barred.

As the festivities were about to begin this year, literally with athletes on the way to the opening ceremony, members of the Lebanese team refused to travel on the same bus as Israeli athletes, with some physically attempting to block the Israelis from boarding the vehicle.

"I kept on insisting that we board the bus and said that the Lebanese ... are welcome to leave," Udi Gal, Israel's sailing trainer, reported on Facebook. "The driver opened the door, but ... the head of the Lebanese delegation blocked the aisle and entrance. The organizers wanted to avoid an international and physical incident and sent us away to a different bus."

While reported in June when it happened, in the spotlight of Rio and in the context of overall Arab unsportsmanlike conduct there, Syrian boxer Ala Ghasoun quit the world boxing championship, which was a precondition to qualify for the Olympics for refusing to compete against an Israeli. "I quit because my rival was Israeli, and I cannot shake his hand or compete against him while he represents a Zionist regime that kills the Syrian people," Ghasoun crowed. "If I fight against him, it would mean that I, as an athlete, and Syria, as a state, recognize the state of Israel."

Ghasoun added, "The decision to quit was not mine. It was made by the Syrian Sports Federation and by senior Syrian officials. It was a very difficult decision, because I have

worked hard to participate in the championship. But I serve my homeland—my honor and my loyalty belong to Syria.” He may not have gotten to fight as he trained, but he did deal a knock out to any sense of peaceful coexistence.

Early in the games, a Saudi athlete, Joud Fahmy, similarly forfeited her first-round judo match, in what Israeli media noted was a maneuver to avoid facing an Israeli judo fighter in the next round.

The Saudi team at least tried to mask their intent and not whitewash it in nationalistic pride or anti-Israel rhetoric. They tweeted that Fahmy had sustained injuries while training and was advised by medical staff not to compete was refuted by Israeli TV which reported that Fahmy was not hurt, but simply dropped out to avoid competing against the Israeli.

Though Saudi Arabia does not recognize Israel, an ex-Saudi general led a delegation to Jerusalem recently. Conciliatory moves like this create hope that normal ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia might not be far off. But in this case, the judoka could have been a sharp shooter because all she did was shoot herself in the foot.

Another foul, but surely not the last, came from a tennis player from Tunis. Malek Jaziri was set to play Israeli Amir Weintraub in the Quarterfinal of ATP Challenger Tennis tournament in Tashkent. But he was sent an email barring him from playing. Tunisia’s state news agency boasted that Jaziri received an official email stating, “you are ordered not to play against the Israeli player.”

While Israel sported its largest delegation ever, with 47 athletes competing in 17 sports, the Palestinian Authority also fielded its largest delegation with six athletes. Controversy began early with one of their athletes making a series of slanderous claims that she couldn’t train because of Israel. Claims of “immense training difficulties” by

Palestinian Olympian Mary al-Atrash have rippled across the media over her apparent stretching of the truth.

In June, Reuters reported that the 22-year-old swimmer from Beit Sahour, near Bethlehem, didn't have an adequate pool in which to train. The truth is that she had several places near her hometown where she could have trained. For example, the Murad resort near Bethlehem boasts four Olympic-sized pools.

She could have trained in Jerusalem, but never applied for a permit to do so, as other Palestinian athletes have refused to do in the past. This made her specious claims all the more invalid, that rather than looking to Israel for help or using pools near her home, she chose to blame Israel for something that was a lie anyway, before even dipping her toe in the water.

Lest one think that bad behavior was limited to our Arab neighbors, let me share some "good" news. On opening night a friend in the U.S. noted NBC's lack of coverage of Israel in the opening ceremony. She wrote, "Was I the only one who noticed that almost every country had some combination of intro, map, population, number of athletes, flag bearer's name, and any exciting potential medalists ... oh yeah, every country but Israel! For Israel there was nothing. Israel enters the stadium ... followed by nothing ... less than four seconds and immediately the next country."

The Olympics are still going on, so if you missed these, stay tuned, there's still time for more. However, if an athlete from another country cannot even compete in the same sport as an Israeli without it creating an international incident, there's little hope that we'll be able to reach any kind of long term peaceful coexistence where the pattern of blaming and isolating Israel for all their problems won't just continue. We pray that it will change, but I am not holding my breath, underwater or not. {eoa}

Jonathan Feldstein was born and educated in the U.S. and immigrated to Israel in 2004. He is married and the father of six. Throughout his life and career, he has been blessed by the calling to fellowship with Christian supporters of Israel and shares experiences of living as an Orthodox Jew in Israel. He writes a regular column for 's Standing With Israel. He can be reached at firstpersonisrael@.