

Lauren Michelle Buchman - Girls 18-and-under Volleyball Israel 2005

For as long as I can remember, my main goal and greatest desire has been to represent the United States in the Olympics. I imagine making the winning play that earns my team the first place finish. I aspire to be the girl on the podium around whose neck the gold medal-adorned red ribbon is placed as the Star Spangled Banner plays to the roar of a cheering crowd. This dream has motivated me to spend much of my free time in the gym working hard twelve months a year to be the best volleyball player I can be.

Volleyball, in turn, led me to an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity as a member of the US Junior Maccabiah Volleyball team playing in the 2005 Maccabiah Games in Israel. This experience changed me forever. The Maccabiah Games, held in Israel every four years, rank as the third largest international sporting event in the world. I was part of a team of twelve girls from across the USA, unknown to each other until our first practice on the courts of New York University the day before departure for Israel. We were joined by over 8,000 Jewish and Israeli athletes representing 52 countries I might struggle to identify on the globe, competing in international sports, some of which I'd never heard of before, ranging from netball, to football (soccer), to cricket. Lesson one was that I truly am part of a global society with myriad cultures and pastimes I'd never even imagined.

The Opening Ceremonies was the most amazing experience I've ever had. I was awestruck to be on a staging field with 8000 other athletes from around the world. More languages were spoken than I even imagined existed; yet we were all part of something that united us, something bigger than each of us or our individual countries. Learning that an Israeli Arab won the first medal of the games earlier in the day brought us all a greater understanding of the tenuous democracy that Israel struggles to support. After many hours of waiting, we were called into the stadium full of over 20,000 earsplitting fans. Finally, "USA" bellowed over the loud speaker. As we started to walk forwards, I realized I was part of a sea of white warm ups with "USA" printed on the jacket backs in enormous navy letters, with red and navy lines of embellishment. I felt like I was famous, and I had never had such a strong feeling of national pride and unity.

By then it was nighttime, and as I got closer, I could see the stadium all lit up. It was full of dancers, performers, fans, and all the other countries called ahead of us. After I passed through the "Participants' Gate," a huge amount of energy surged through me. I was about to enter the stadium, and it felt so surreal. I even got goose bumps despite how hot it was outside. All the fans cheered for our country, and as I walked into the building I looked back onto the movie theater-sized TV. On the screen were our flag bearers, Mark Spitz and Lenny Krazleburg, both Olympic gold medalists. They were leading our delegation with a large American flag. I could not believe my good fortune to have earned a spot on the US team.

After taking a lap around the stadium, trading clothes with the Australians and South Africans, and watching glittering performances, the most remarkable day of my life came to an end. I truly felt like I was a participant in a reality T.V. show and even had to pinch myself to make sure it was real. I will never forget walking into the stadium with the big USA on my back, and how everyone was so happy. I will never forget how ironic this seemed considering all the conflicts around us in the State of Israel. Though

I am still working hard as an athlete, bringing home the silver medal from the Maccabiah Games might be the closest I come to an Olympic experience. With a more global perspective, an understanding of life in the Middle East, and new friends around the world, I am blessed to have had this life-changing opportunity.

Abigail Tufts: Girls 18-and-under Volleyball Israel 2005

"Walking into Ramat Gan stadium with my USA teammates was the proudest moment of my life. I never felt more accomplishment as an athlete, and as a Jew, than when I walked around the track screaming USA."

Carmelle Kiesler: Girls 18-and-under Volleyball Israel 2005

"The Maccabiah is an experience that cannot be explained. Walking into the opening ceremonies, you connect with all the other athletes to become representatives of the United States. It is indescribable and therefore becomes the triggering force of lifelong friendships. I cannot imagine my life without the few weeks I spent in Israel participating in the Maccabiah!"

Nadia Stefanik: Girls 18-and-under Volleyball Israel 2005

"Participating in the Maccabi Games has been one of the best experiences I've ever had in my life. I would do it again in a heartbeat. In only a few weeks, I was able to meet so many Jewish athletes from the U.S. and all around the world, and I have made some really great friendships- I still keep in touch with most of my old Maccabi teammates to this day. The international competition at the athletic level was great, but what was even more special was the cultural experience of being in Israel and learning more about what it means to be a Jew. (Oh, and the food was wonderful!) If you are a Jewish athlete, you MUST participate in the Maccabi games! You will have some truly unforgettable experiences, and you will never feel more proud to be a Jewish athlete."

Yasmin Kofman: Girls 18-and-under Volleyball Israel 2005

The Maccabiah games helped me so much to learn new methods in volleyball as well as enhance those skills I already had. Besides that, it was such an overall great experience to be in the company of thousands of Jewish athletes that shared my love for sports, the Jewish faith, and Israel.

Kimberlea Karper: Girls 18-and-under Volleyball Israel 2005

"The experience of walking into Ramat Gan Stadium for the Opening Ceremoines is a memory that will stay with me the rest of my life. Walking into the stadium alongside my fellow American athletes, with all the lights and the roar of the crowd, I felt ten feet tall! I felt proud to be an athlete, proud to be Jewish, and immensely proud to be American. Being a part of the 2005 Maccabiah Games was, without a doubt, the most enriching and amazing experience of my life and there is not a day that goes by that I do not reminisce about the Maccabiah Games!"