

G ISRAEL

In times of war and peace, one constant in Israel is an unrelenting passion for basketball. Particularly when it's played by Maccabi Tel Aviv. By Jake Appleman

"In the midst of war you don't feel it," Cavs guard Anthony Parker says of Tel Aviv, the sun-soaked city known for its nice beaches and trendy nightclubs. "You go to the mall, you go to school, you're going to the grocery store; everything is normal in that city. Even after a bombing or something, they try to clean it up and return it to normal as fast as possible. It's more of a mentality to say, You're not going to destroy our way of life."

Parker is speaking about what it's like to live in Israel, one of the world's most polarizing countries. In spite of the obvious political undertones, the end of that quote is fascinating because the 6-6 swingman could also be talking about his former team.

"You're not going to destroy our way of life." Every year, for 55 years, all of the other teams in the Israeli Basketball Super League try to surpass Maccabi Electra Tel Aviv.

They've succeeded seven times. In fact, since 1979, the only two years Maccabi didn't win the 15-team league were '93 and '08. If championships won equaled made free throws, Maccabi Tel Aviv would be better, percentage-wise, than Michael Jordan. Need a near guarantee? You'd send them to the line when Rasheed Wallace kicked a chair.

This historical precedent makes a season of Maccabi Tel Aviv basketball a juggling act of sorts: Don't screw up an annual rite of passage while simultaneously striving to win the much tougher Euroleague. The advent of a single-elimination Final Four Tournament in '05 to decide the Israeli championship, in lieu of a best-of-five series, has put Maccabi's continuous quest for domestic dominance into a March Madness-styled pressure cooker. "If your play-



Alan Anderson



Nikola Vujcic, '05

ers come in sick to a game, or one is injured, you know, it's one game, you might lose the championship," says Kings rookie Omri Casspi, who played with Maccabi before becoming the first Israeli to play in the NBA [Turn the page for more on Casspi]. "There's a lot of pressure. I remember us winning last year and the media tried to make everybody think they could beat Maccabi, but at the end of the day Maccabi is still Maccabi."

"Maccabi is still Maccabi" roughly translates to "Has a budget that dwarfs the financial resources of most other teams in the Super League and provides for its players (cars, apartments, etc.) like the elite European powerhouses." This year's squad is looking to improve in the Euroleague despite losing Carlos Arroyo to the Heat, Dee Brown to Italy and Casspi to the Kings, among others. Says team captain, naturalized Israeli citizen and 14-year Maccabi veteran Derrick Sharp, "We've got a lot of guys with more European experience, a lot of hungry guys that have a lot to prove, not just to themselves, but to everyone else, and that's a good thing." So far, so good. As this issue went to press, Maccabi was in first place in the Israeli league at 11-1 and had advanced to the Final 16 of the Euroleague.

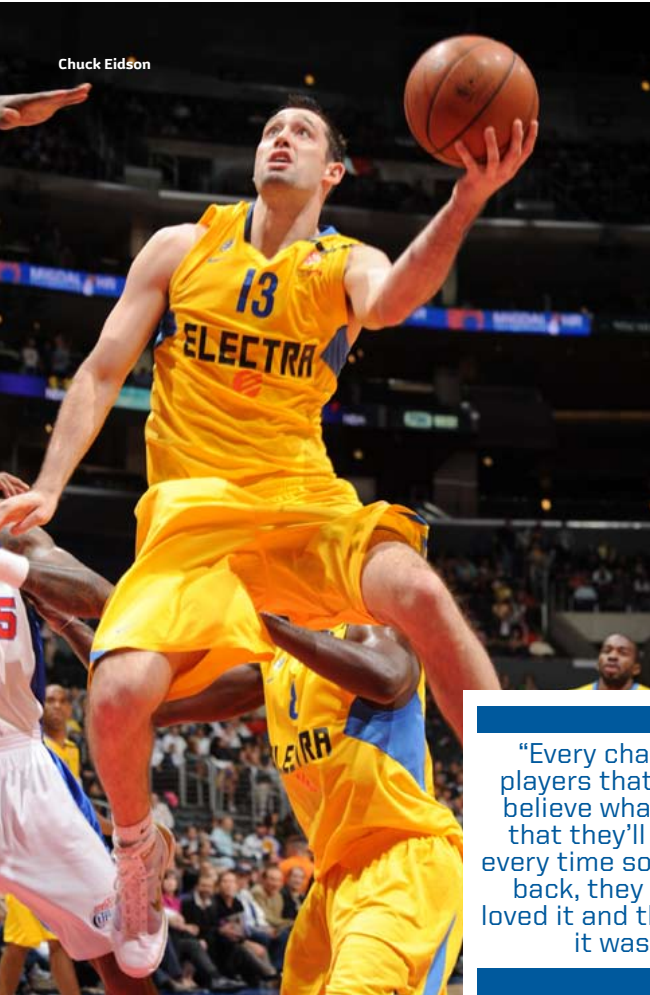
Until Maccabi is able to climb to the upper reaches of the European mountain again—they finished second in '06 and '08—their fans will continue to savor an incredible run at the beginning of the decade. The results—a championship in 2001 and back-to-back titles in '04 and '05—are experiences that Parker cherishes. The two-time Euroleague MVP who brought Maccabi back to international prominence with guys like Nate Huffman, Maceo Baston and

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Anthony Parker, '05

Chuck Eidson



“Every chance I get, I always tell players that they need to go, not to believe what they see on the news, that they’ll love it. And one by one, every time somebody goes and comes back, they tell me how much they loved it and that they had no idea that it was like that.”—Parker

Sarunas Jasikevicius, reminisces happily about celebrating with fans in the streets of Paris in '01 and bathing in the adulation of more than 100,000 screaming people in Rabin Square after Sharp's Christian Laettner-style buzzer-beater propelled them to the '04 chip, played in Tel Aviv. “So far, it's the best basketball experience of my life and holds a special place in my heart,” he says.

Yet the royal treatment that Maccabi players receive from fans and many Israelis goes beyond winning. “Israel, if you look at the news and ask the average person on the street, is more known for its politics, its war,” Parker says. “It's not shed in a very good light in the international media. When I was there, they had the occupation, a lot of the suicide bombings inside of Israel, a lot of sadness. Anybody or anything that does well in that country that garners international attention, people tend to rally around that.”

Indeed, Maccabi and other clubs in the Super League provide their fans with an outlet to channel the stress that comes with living inside a political powder keg. “The fans that we had on our team were nuts, man—it's like college exaggerated,” the Spurs' Roger Mason Jr says of his one-year stint playing for Hapoel Jerusalem. “Because for them

ence draws broad parallels to that of American high school prodigy Jeremy Tyler, who has struggled for Maccabi Tel Aviv's rival Maccabi Haifa this season, enduring public scorn from teammates and coaches for his unrefined work ethic and attitude. Regardless of how Tyler's situation turns out, Haifa's American owner Jeff Rosen has made it clear he wants to help top US prep talent develop in Israel before making the jump to the NBA. This makes more sense when considering that nearly every player we interviewed referred to Israel as a little America, citing cultural similarities and the fact that most people speak English.

Off the court, immersion into a land of such religious and historical significance provides a one of a kind life experience. Parker elaborates on his cultural cross-over: “I came into contact with Palestinians over there, obviously Israelis, and it just kind of breaks down these walls and these things in your head that say, Other people want different things than you. And, at the core, that's not the case.” Adds Mason: “Culturally it was a great experience for me to be able to be at the forefront of all the three major religions.”

During a discussion about the unavoidable bunker mentality that

the passion is so important. There's less games, so each game really, really matters, and they're born into it.”

While Mason used a year in Jerusalem to rediscover his scoring touch after an injury-plagued start to his NBA career, the Pistons' Will Bynum used his time with Maccabi Tel Aviv ('06-08) to discover who he truly was as a player. “Israel was crucial for my career,” Bynum says. “Especially being with a high-level team like that, and being with veteran guys, they taught me the ropes, taught me how to play the game the right way—value the pass, make the right play.”

Not only does Bynum praise the players who helped him improve—Nikola Vujcic, named by SLAMonline's Casey Jacobsen as the best non-NBA international player of the past decade, and Sharp—he credits the Maccabi fans. “Even when we won games, and I would have big scoring games, they would be on me about managing the game,” Bynum says. “Early on, I didn't really understand that, but as I started to play more and more, I started to understand that they were right. It was really crucial for me, I really respect and honor that a lot.”

Did the undersized point guard connect with the small nation that's had to fight for land since its inception? “We had the same kind of mentality: victory or death,” Bynum says. “That was big. I thought I just fit right in with the people.” Bynum's coming of age experi-

permeates a land of such unrelenting controversy, Parker notes that this steadfast passion, whether it comes from fans or people in general, is justified. “You know, here in the States we might have somebody that served in the military or went to Vietnam,” he says. “But I think it's more immediate over there; you have brothers that are actively in Gaza, or in the West Bank. You have uncles, you have fathers, you have so many people that have been touched—and I say touched because I don't know how else to say it—by the conflicts over there, so it's really, really personal.”

“The whole country is based on security,” Parker says of Israel, where three years of military service is mandatory for non-Arab males over the age of 18, including national treasures like Casspi. “There'd be a lot of people out of jobs if they didn't have conflict anymore. So much goes on to let everybody know that it's going to be OK. After a while you're over there and you develop a thick skin to it. I remember my first year over there when something happened I was like, Wow, I don't know how you guys do this. And by my last year, I was telling the new guys, Don't worry, it's nothing, we'll be OK.”

Not only did Parker become comfortable with his tension-filled surroundings, he embraced the country that took him in and made him one of their most treasured basketball sons: “Every chance I get, I always tell players that they need to go, not to believe what they see on the news, that they'll love it. And one by one, every time somebody goes and comes back, they tell me how much they loved it and that they had no idea that it was like that. It's really one of the hidden gems, probably, in the world.”

Not only is Israeli basketball growing in Israel, it's growing in the United States. The Holy Land's appreciation for this holy sport bodes well for the future and imparts a simple message as the world enters the next decade hoping for peace in the Middle East.

It's the love of the game that's truly worth fighting for. 🏀

Additional reporting by Russ Bengtson



Doron Perkins



FIRST UP

The NBA success of hard-charging Sacramento Kings rookie Omri Casspi is making an entire fan base proud.

On the night of June 25, '09, in the Theater at Madison Square Garden, David Stern announced that the Sacramento Kings had made Omri Casspi the 23rd selection of the '09 NBA Draft. Not far from Stern, in the crowded seating area, flags danced in the air, as throngs of Israelis tugged at the corners of their country's emblem. Elsewhere in the green room, somewhere between Stern and the crowd, a swelling of pride filled my heart, and a tear escaped my eye. My phone came to life with the vibrations of celebration. Maccabi Tel Aviv's Omri Casspi, a 6-9, 21-year-old from Yavne, had done it. Israel had done it. A native of the country was finally going to be suiting up in the NBA.

Thirteen years earlier, I was in Israel when the Clippers made Doron Sheffer Israel's first player selected in the Draft—albeit the second round. The news was greeted with jubilation. Men acted like children celebrating their birthday and children acted like Maeauly Cullkin in the first hour of *Home Alone*. For a country constantly ensnared in violence, the historic sports news provided a needed respite. Unfortunately, Sheffer never played in the NBA, and much of the pride his drafting would fade.

Two years later Oded Kattash was set to play in the Association. A decorated player in Europe, the Israeli agreed to sign with the Knicks. The feelings of national pride and honor were once again renewed. It was '98, though, and the ensuing NBA lockout robbed him of his historic opportunity. In the '06 Draft, two Israelis were chosen in the second round (Lior Elijah and Yotam Halperin). They didn't make rosters, however, and the belief that Israelis were destined to never play in the NBA took root in my heart.

Then Omri Casspi's name rang out, and all was forgotten. A national hero was born. Years of failed hopes melted away into late night dancing throughout a Mediterranean country, and 6,500 miles away in MSG, flag waving and crying.

Honestly, it would have been enough if Casspi had merely played a few minutes for Sacramento. But as OC proved on opening night by scoring 15 points, that wouldn't be nearly enough for him. More than halfway through his rookie season, Casspi's reputation as a tough-as-Brillo player has entrenched him as a fan favorite—even among non-Israelis. With pre-All-Star break averages of 12 points and 5 rebounds in 27.7 minutes per game, Casspi earned a spot in ASW's Rookie Challenge. And though he may never make the real All-Star Game, Casspi is already shining brighter than Polaris does on a clear night in Yavne in the eyes of at least this writer and one entire nation. —TZVI TWERSKY