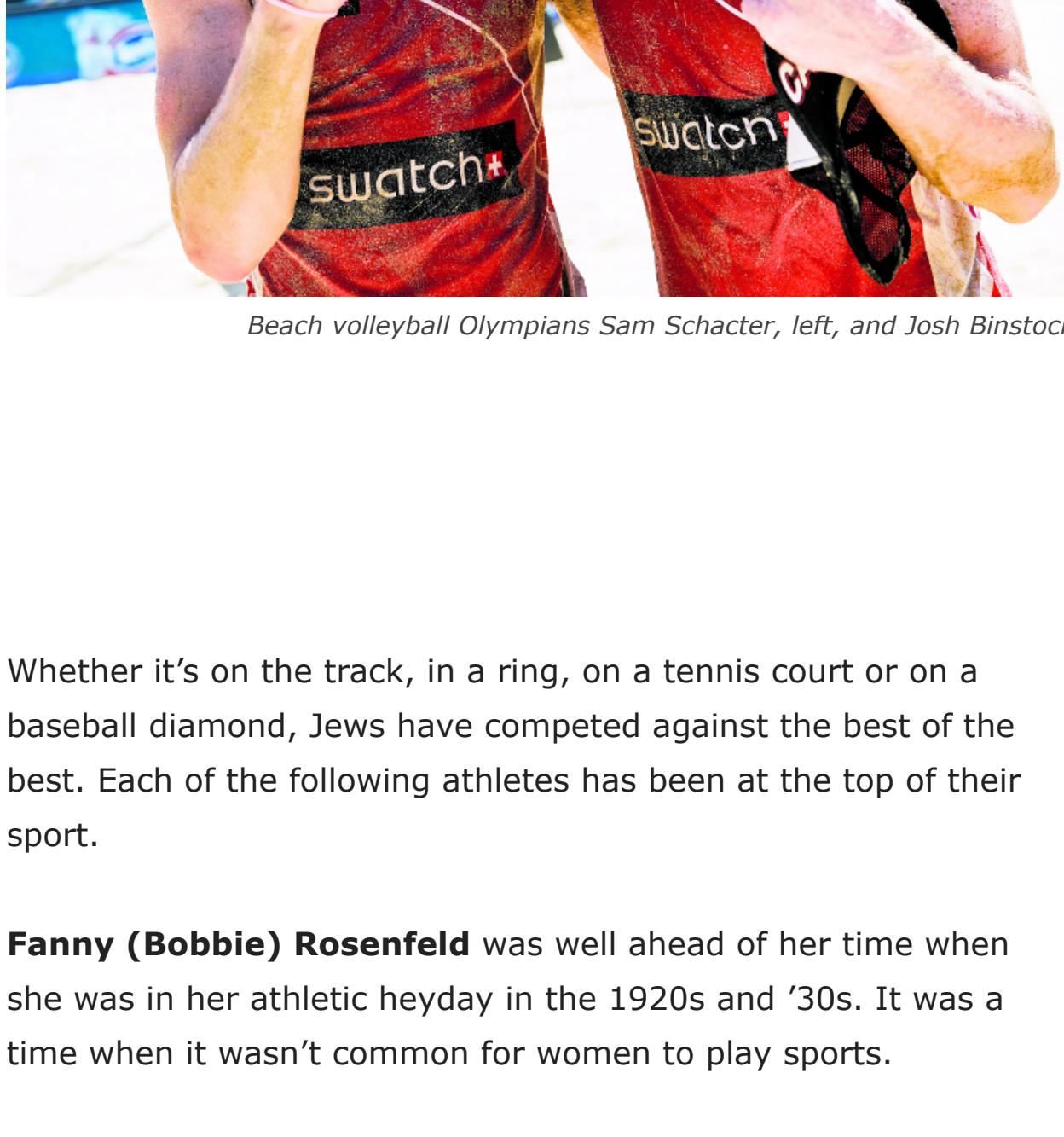


# WE ARE THE CHAMPIONS: A LIST OF THE BEST JEWISH ATHLETES

By Paul Lungen, Staff Reporter - May 22, 2019 > 11720 > 0



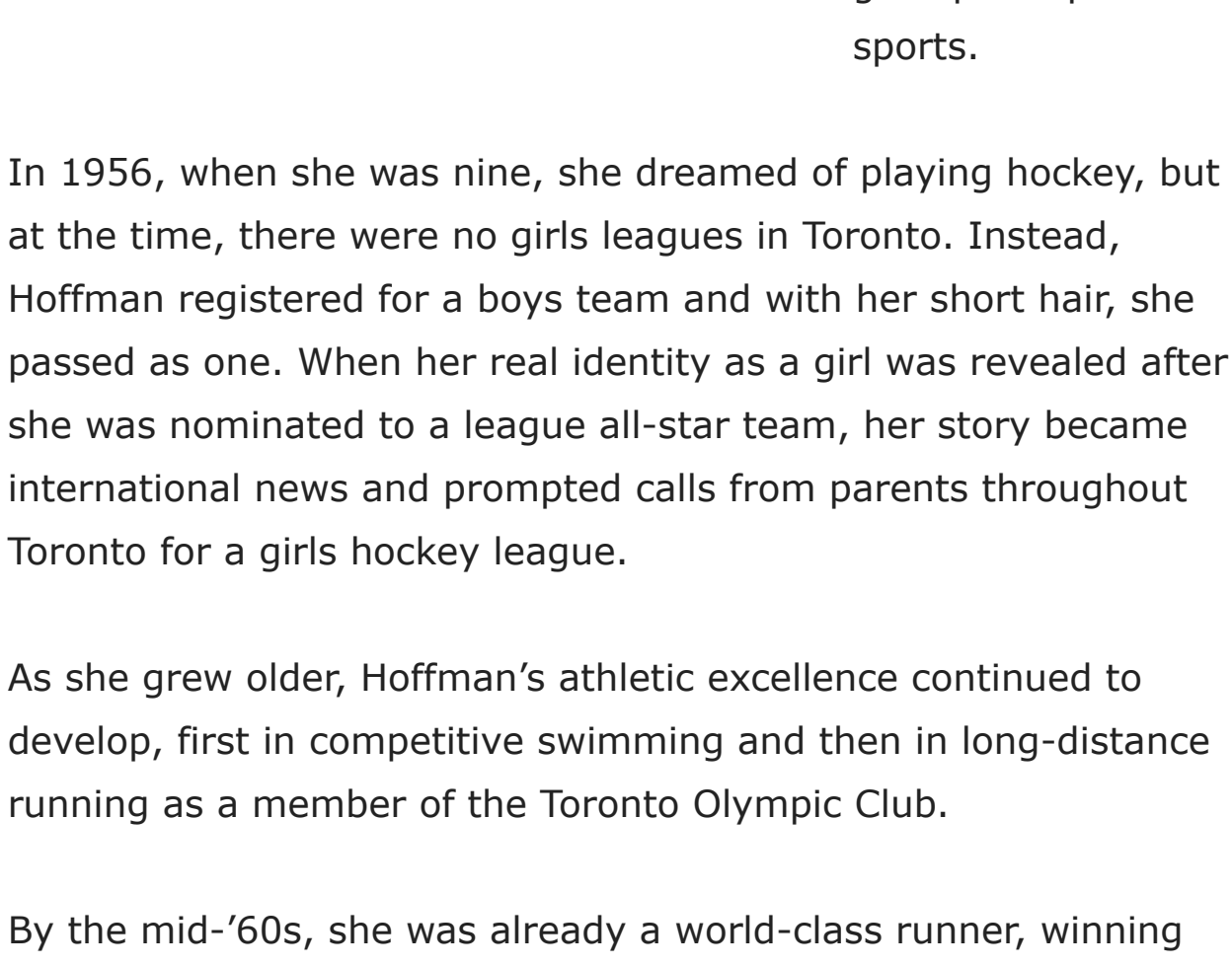
Beach volleyball Olympians Sam Schachter, left, and Josh Binstock

Whether it's on the track, in a ring, on a tennis court or on a baseball diamond, Jews have competed against the best of the best. Each of the following athletes has been at the top of their sport.

**Fanny (Bobbie) Rosenfeld** was well ahead of her time when she was in her athletic heyday in the 1920s and '30s. It was a time when it wasn't common for women to play sports.

Track events were only introduced in the Olympic Games in 1928 and Rosenfeld was there in Amsterdam as a member of Canada's "Matchless Six" female team. She competed in the discus throw, ran in the 100-metre race, where she came second and earned a silver medal, and won gold in the 4 x 100 metres relay.

Rosenfeld was a multi-sport athlete who excelled not just in track and field, but in hockey, golf, tennis, basketball and baseball, as well. She was named Canada's Female Athlete of the First Half-Century.



Bobbie Rosenfeld, seen here at the 1928 Olympics

**Abigail (Abby) Hoffman**, 72, was born a generation or two after Rosenfeld first made an impact on women's sports, but she too faced an uphill challenge in overcoming social barriers that limited girl's participation in sports.

In 1956, when she was nine, she dreamed of playing hockey, but at the time, there were no girls leagues in Toronto. Instead, Hoffman registered for a boys team and with her short hair, she passed as one. When her real identity as a girl was revealed after she was nominated to a league all-star team, her story became international news and prompted calls from parents throughout Toronto for a girls hockey league.

As she grew older, Hoffman's athletic excellence continued to develop, first in competitive swimming and then in long-distance running as a member of the Toronto Olympic Club.

By the mid-'60s, she was already a world-class runner, winning national track championships and breaking records. She won gold medals at the 1963 Pan American Games and the 1966 Commonwealth Games. She competed in four consecutive Olympic Games, carrying the Canadian flag at the opening ceremonies in Montreal in 1976.

In Tokyo in 1964, she competed in 400-metre and 800-metre races; in Mexico City in 1968, she ran in the 800 metres, finishing seventh; in 1972 in Munich, she finished eighth in the same race; and in Montreal, she closed out her career running the same distance.

Her trophy case includes silver and bronze medals from the World University Games, a gold in 800 metres from the 1971 Pan Am Games, as well as two gold medals at the 1969 Maccabiah Games in Israel.

**Mark Berger** came to Canada from his native Ukraine in 1977 and quickly made a mark for himself at the top echelons of the Canadian Judo scene. In 1978, he won a gold medal in the Western Canada Summer Games and then went on to win national titles in 1980, 1981, 1983, 1984 and 1986. During that period, he represented Canada at the 1984 Olympic Games, where he won a bronze in the heavyweight division. He also competed for Canada at the 1983 Pan Am Games, where he won a gold medal, and at the 1985 Commonwealth Games, where he earned a silver. He won gold medals at the Maccabiah Games in 1981 and 1985, when he served as Canada's flag-bearer.

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**Sam Schachter and Josh Binstock** teamed up to represent Canada in beach volleyball at the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio. Binstock, now 38, is nine years older than Schachter and, with a different partner, also represented Canada at the 2012 Olympics in London. Unfortunately, the duo finished only 19th in Rio, but Binstock did a little better in London, placing 17th.

Binstock and Schachter were a team at the 2015 Pan Am Games in Toronto, where they finished eighth. In 2013, the two were part of the Team Canada indoor volleyball team at the Maccabiah Games in Israel, where they won a silver medal.

**Sharon Fichman** made an immediate splash on the Canadian tennis scene when, at 15 years old, she won two junior Grand Slam doubles titles, while also reaching the quarter finals in singles at the junior Australian and U.S. Open.

Sharon Fichman

At 15, she was ranked fifth in the world.

The year before, she represented Canada at the 2005 Maccabiah Games, winning three medals, including a gold in women's singles. At her best as a professional, Fichman was ranked 77th in the world in singles and 48th in doubles.

Fichman, 29, still competes internationally and is ranked 396th in the world.

**Jesse Levine**, at his best, in 2012, was ranked 69th in the world in tennis. Born in Ottawa, Levine moved to the United States at age 13 to train at the Chris Evert Tennis Academy and the Nick Bollettieri Academy. With a 21-0 record, he was the number 1 player at the University of Florida for one season, before turning pro in 2007.

In 2012, Levine, now 31, became eligible to represent Canada in the Davis Cup competition. With a 31-64 record in singles competition and 17-21 in doubles, Levine's lifetime earnings on the ATP Tour were over \$1.1 million, but he hasn't been active on it since 2013.

**Andrew Sznajder** was a key member of the Canadian Davis Cup team from 1987-93 and again from 1995-96. A native of Toronto, Sznajder reached a career high of number 46 on the ATP World Tour in 1989.

Sznajder was the Tennis Canada Player of the Year in 1986, 1988 and 1989 and Tennis Canada's Most Improved Player in 1985.

**Mike Belkin**, 73, was born in Montreal and was Canada's top-ranked player five times between 1966 and 1972.

Belkin won the singles titles at the Canadian closed championships in 1969, 1970 and 1972. Belkin had a career 17-12 record at the Davis Cup, including a 14-7 record in singles.

**Vicki Berner**, who died at age 71 in 2017, was the Canadian under 18 national champion in 1960 and 1961.

A native of Vancouver, Berner competed at Wimbledon and the U.S. Open and was ranked Canada's number 1 female player in 1971, to go along with a dozen Top 10 rankings. In 1969, Berner was the runner up in singles competition, but she was a doubles champion in 1963 with Susan Butt, and from 1965-69, with Faye Urban. She also won the national mixed doubles titles in 1963 and 1966, partnering with Keith Carpenter.

**Denis Shapovalov**, 20, was born in Tel Aviv. Shapovalov's mother, Tessa, was on the Russian national tennis team. The family moved to Israel when the Soviet Union was collapsing. His mother is Jewish and his father is a Russian Eastern Orthodox Christian. Shapovalov is currently ranked 20th in the world, after finishing as a semi-finalist at the Miami Open tournament, which ended on March 31. According to his mother, "Denis identifies with his father's religion, but I consider him Jewish."

**Ben Silverman** a native of Thornhill, Ont., plays on the PGA Tour, the pinnacle of success for elite golfers. In 2018, he recorded his best finish in a PGA event, tied for seventh in the Sanderson Farms Championship. This year, he recorded his best finish with a tie for 12th in the Corales Puntacana Resort & Club Championship.

Silverman started playing golf when he was 16. His score of 118 in his first Canadian Junior Golf Association tournament gives amateurs hope that they too can persevere and live their dream as professional golfers.

**Goodwin (Goody) Rosen** and **Adam Stern** were the only two Jewish-Canadians to play in Major League Baseball.

Rosen (1912-1994) was the son of Jewish-Russian immigrants and played youth sports in Toronto's playground leagues, including two years with the Elizabeth Playground team (the Lizzies). He also played in Toronto's Jewish Fraternal Softball League.

From 1937 to 1946, Rosen played outfield for the Brooklyn Dodgers (1937-39 and 1944-46) and the New York Giants (1946). He batted and threw left-handed.

Over the course of his Major League career, he had 22 home runs and 197 runs batted in, giving him a .291 average.

In 1945, his best year with the Dodgers, he finished 10th in voting for the Most Valuable Player Award with a .325 batting average, third in the National League.

That same year, he was named to the All-Star Game, becoming the first Canadian to get that honour.

Stern – who was born in London, Ont. – is Jewish on his father's side. From 2005 to 2010, the left-hitting outfielder played 54 games for three Major League teams – the Boston Red Sox, Baltimore Orioles and Milwaukee Brewers. In 43 at bats, he had one home run, five hits and a .116 average.

Stern was a member of the Canadian team at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens and played for Team Canada at the World Baseball Classic on several occasions.

**Harry Eckler** (1916-2011) was considered to be one of the finest hardball and fastpitch softball first basemen in Canada. In the '40s and '50s, he played first base on fastball teams that represented Canada in four world tournaments. A native of Toronto, Eckler was elected into the Softball Canada Hall of Fame in 1991.

**Sage Usher** played four years of basketball with the University of Toronto Blues before turning pro in Israel in 2018 with Ra'anana of Israel's National League.

Before that, Usher represented Canada at the Maccabiah Games in Israel and twice more at the Maccabiah Pan Am Games in Chile and Argentina.

**Jeremy Fraiberg** grew up in Montreal but arguably made his biggest splash in squash while attending Harvard University. He was selected First Team All-Ivy three times and was named the Ivy League Player of the Year in 1991 and 1992. A three-time All American in 1990, 1991 and 1992, he won the individual Intercollegiate Squash Championship title in 1992. Before that, he played for Canada at the world junior championships and won the Canadian national junior title.

**Joseph Kibur** immigrated to Canada from Ethiopia in 1983 as an 11 year old. Kibur excelled at track. He competed in the junior Maccabiah Games in 1986, in the Pan Am Maccabiah Games in 1987 and in the Junior Maccabiah Games again in 1988.

While on a scholarship at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, B.C., he won several cross-country races. In 1991, at age 19, he won gold in the five-kilometre race at the Pan Am junior track and field event.

In 1993, he was the Canadian cross-country champion. He represented Canada at the world cross-country championships as a junior in 1989 and 1991, and ran in the senior division in 1994. At the 1993 Maccabiah Games, Kibur won three gold medals.

**Sasha Golish**, 37, is a competitive runner who has excelled at the Maccabiah Games, winning a gold medal in the half-marathon at the 2013 Maccabiah, as well as gold medals at the 2017 Games in the 800-metre, 1,500-metre and 5,000-metre events.

Competing in the 1,500 metres at the 2015 Pan American Games in Toronto, Gollish won a bronze medal.

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**Dave Edge**, 64, is a former long-distance runner who represented Canada at two Summer Olympics in the men's marathon. At the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, he did not finish. Four years later in Seoul, he finished in 67th place.

**Daenon Gyimah**, 21, is a volleyball middle blocker who plays for the UCLA Bruins. A native of Torontlo, Gyimah was a member of the 2017 Canadian men's junior volleyball team. According to *World of Volley*, Gyimah has a spiking reach of 3.72 metres, which makes his attack virtually "unstoppable."

**Sherman Greenfeld**, 56, was a multi-year Canadian and international champion racquetball player. The Winnipeg native won 10 Canadian championships between 1986 and 1998, 20 provincial titles, captured a pair of world titles in men's singles in 1994 and 1998, was a three-time winner at the Pan American Games (1990, 1994, 1998), was a two-time winner, in 1994 and 1998, of the Jewish Athlete of the Year award at Winnipeg's Rady sports dinner, was inducted into the Manitoba Sports Hall of Fame in 2001 and was presented with the Ivan Velan Award in 2000. Greenfeld was inducted into the International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame in 2015.

**David Finkler** was a champion softball player who died in 2008 at age 50. Finkler was a member of the winning team at the Canadian Senior Men's Championship Softball tournament in 1981 and represented Canada at the Maccabiah Games in 1985, 1989 and 1993.

**Mark Bendahan**, a pitcher with the Toronto Gators, helped propel the team to International Softball Congress World Championships in 1993 and 1995. At the Maccabiah Games, Bendahan led the Canadian team to gold medal victories against the U.S. team in 1993, 1997 and 2013.

**Sammy Luftspring**, the son of a bootlegger, grew up in St. John's Ward, a tough Toronto immigrant neighbourhood.

He began training as a boxer at the Brunswick Avenue YMHA. He competed in 105 fights and lost only five, winning Golden Glove tournaments in weight classes ranging from bantamweight to welterweight, according to the Ontario Jewish Archives. By 1933, he had claimed the Ontario lightweight title.

In 1936, he was set to represent Canada at the Olympic Games in Berlin, but Luftspring and other athletes joined the boycott movement and fought in an alternative competition, the Popcort Olympiad, in Barcelona instead.

He was joined in Barcelona by **Benjamin Yakubowicz**, more popularly known as Baby Yack, who fought as a bantamweight.

On his return, Luftspring turned pro and, in 1938, won the Canadian welterweight championship. He held the title for two years until 1940, when he was blinded in one eye during a fight in New York, which brought his career to an end. He was inducted into Canada's Sports Hall of Fame in 1985. Baby Yack also turned pro after Barcelona and became the fourth-ranked bantamweight in the world.

**Maxie Berger** (1917-2000) was a Montreal boxer who fought mostly in the lightweight and welterweight divisions. He represented Canada at the 1934 British Empire Games, winning a silver medal as a flyweight.

As a pro, he took the Canadian lightweight championship in 1937 at the Forum in Montreal. One month later, he successfully defended the title. In 1939, he captured the World Junior Welterweight Championship.

**Adam Braz**, 37, is a Montreal soccer player who now serves as technical director of the Montreal Impact. He played professionally from 2002-10. In 2004, he helped the Impact win the USL A-League Championship.