



CANADA WRAPS UP MACCABIAH GAMES WITH 50 MEDALS

By Paul Lungen, Staff Reporter - July 21, 2017 > 18233 > 0



Liberal MP Anthony Housefather, left, shows off his medal with other medal winners at the 2017 Maccabiah Games in Israel. COURTESY MACCABI CANADA

Who says the only ice Israelis are familiar with is the kind that comes in a glass?

An estimated 9,000 fans, including more than 6,000 Israelis, crowded into the Pais Arena in Jerusalem to watch the gold medal ice hockey game between Team Canada and Team U.S.A., making it the biggest audience for any single Maccabiah event. The game was also broadcast live on Israeli TV, exposing the now classic matchup to thousands more Israelis.

Team Canada won handily by a 7-2 margin, but what made the game so entertaining was the enthusiasm of the largely Israeli crowd, said Daniel Smajovits, chair of Maccabi Canada's Quebec region and a spokesman for the Canadian Maccabiah team.

Smajovits watched the game from ice level and marvelled at how Israeli youngsters clamoured for players' autographs, sticks and pucks. The crowd alternated between chants of "Go Canada" and "Go America."

Thanks to a "brilliant" marketing campaign, "the Israelis really bought into it," Smajovits said.

The hockey gold in the "Open" category was one of 50 medals won by the Canadian team at the Games, which

wrapped up on July 18.

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The tally put the Canadian team in around fifth place overall, said Smajovits (in the medals standings, Canada placed fifth in the Open category, fourth in the Masters category and 16th in Junior).

The Maccabiah Games, also known as the Jewish Olympics, is one of the largest sporting events in the world. Every four years, Jewish athletes from around the globe gather in Israel to compete, while reinforcing their Jewish identity. This year's Games, the 20th since its inception, saw 10,000 athletes from 74 countries gather to compete in 42 sports, making it the largest yet.

They were greeted at the opening ceremonies in Jerusalem's Teddy Stadium by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, President Reuven Rivlin and other dignitaries.

"The sporting spirit, as we feel it, pushes us to break down the barriers of the body and soul. It pushes us to break through existing barriers, to create a new reality, to assess the boundaries and to each time reach higher, be faster, stronger. This is the same spirit from which came Zionism. This is the same spirit from which came the Maccabiah," Rivlin said. "This is the spirit we expect from you also today, here at these Games, in the competitions, on the sports fields, in the swimming pools."

The opening ceremonies were also marked by an unexpected simchah, when Canadian hockey player Avi Steinberg married his fiancée, Rachel Dixon, under a chuppah, which was held up by four other hockey players.

The opening ceremony's Canadian connection was reinforced by a video message from Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who greeted the athletes and wished his colleague, Liberal MP Anthony Housefather, luck in the pool. Housefather competed in a number of Masters (35+) swimming events, winning five medals.



Team Canada won the gold medal handily, defeating Team USA 7-2. COURTESY MACCABI CANADA

At the closing ceremony, Canadian track and field athlete Sasha Gollish, who won three gold medals, was named Female Athlete of the Games and was presented the award by Israeli supermodel Bar Refaeli, who hosted the closing event.

Gollish, who competed for Canada at the 2015 Pan Am Games in Toronto, won gold in the 800 m, 1,500 m and 5,000 m events.

Other gold medal winners for Canada include Masters swimmer Ami Trauber with four, Open category triathlete Kayla Segal, the Open beach volleyball team that consisted of Olympian Josh Binstock and Aaron Nusbaum, as well as Masters athletes Elise Levinoff (50 m freestyle and 100 m freestyle) and Brahm Faber (tennis singles 80+).

Canada's Junior (under 18) boys baseball team won a silver medal, as did Alexander Manuel in the Open 100 m sprint, Danielle Miller in Junior long jump, Sam Barnish in the Open wrestling freestyle 74 kilogram class, the Junior boys track and field 4x100 m relay, the women's Open softball team and the Junior boys hockey team.

The Masters hockey team lost in the gold medal game, dropping a 6-2 decision to the Ukrainian team, which featured a number of ex-KHL and NHL players, including defenceman Alexei Zhitnik.

Smajovits said it's a mystery how the Ukrainian team is put together, though the Canadian team ensures the Jewish heritage of all its participants.

THE MACCABIAH GAMES – (PART 2): COMPETITION AND CONTROVERSY

Christopher Kape received a call from Maccabi officials because of his unorthodox name, but he qualified, as both his parents are Jewish. Kape's was an inspiring story, Smajovits said. Although he didn't medal in the half marathon, it's remarkable he even competed. Kape is a cancer survivor who trained for four years for the Games, but tore a tendon that prompted his doctor to advise him to forgo the Games or risk further long-term injury.

"It took guts and Advil, a combination of them both, but Kape finished the half marathon," Smajovits stated.

Meanwhile, Housefather, 47, won five swimming medals, but because of the competition, he found them more difficult to attain than the seven he won at the last Games four years ago, he said.

To prepare, the Montreal MP gets up early and stays up late, spending 90 minutes to two-and-a-half hours a day training.

He's in the pool six times a week for at least one hour and supplements that with weight training three times a week, along with running and tennis.

The physically fit parliamentarian is most proud of his "open water" silver medal at the Kinneret River near Tiberias.

'THE SPORTING SPIRIT, AS WE FEEL IT, PUSHES US TO BREAK DOWN THE BARRIERS OF THE BODY AND SOUL'

As for the Games themselves, he keeps coming back because of the "pride in being both Canadian and Jewish and the ability to represent my country with people who come from my religious group."

He also enjoys meeting athletes from around the world and learning about their lives, he added.

Housefather's first exposure to the Maccabi movement came in 1982, at age 11, when he competed in the JCC Maccabi Games for teenage athletes, in Memphis.

As far as he and Maccabi Canada is aware, he's the only parliamentarian to ever compete in the Games, although in 2005, then-MP Irwin Cotler played an exhibition table tennis game against the Israeli champion.

Israel's national team participates in the Games, while other elite athletes took part in the opening ceremony, including: Anthony Ervin, a U.S. swimmer who won gold medals in the 2000 and 2016 Olympics; Yarden Gerbi, an Israeli judoka who took the bronze medal at the 2016 Olympics in Rio; Omri Casspi, the first Israeli to play in the NBA and now a member of the world champion Golden State Warriors; Fabien Gilot, a French swimmer and three-time medallist; Neta Rivkin, the first Israeli rhythmic gymnast to win a medal in both the World and European championships; Moran Samuel, an Israeli rower who medalled at the Rio Paralympics in 2016; and Ori Sasson, an Israeli judoka who also won a bronze in Rio.

