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JEWISH ATHLETES REPRESENT CANADA AROUND THE WORLD

 By [Holly Ginsler](#) - October 25, 2015 > 3590 > 0

Joel Dembe won a bronze medal at the Parapan Am Games

Two Canadian athletes achieved their dreams in August winning medals in the Parapan Am Games in Toronto.

Alison Levine won a silver medal in mixed pairs in boccia, a precision ball sport related to lawn bowling.

And Joel Dembe won a bronze medal in men's doubles wheelchair tennis. He and national team member Philippe Bedard beat out the United States' Steve Baldwin and John Rydberg. Dembe also competed in the men's singles and finished in the top eight after losing to Argentina's Gustavo Fernandez.

Levine, 24, was born and raised in Montreal. At 12 she started exhibiting symptoms that led to the diagnosis of a degenerative neuromuscular disorder that causes weakness in all her muscles and also affects her breathing.

She enrolled in various sports including therapeutic horseback riding. When that became too dangerous, she tried wheelchair basketball and then wheelchair rugby. She eventually began to play boccia, the only sport suited to her level of disability

Dembe, 31, who lives in Hamilton, was born with a spinal tumour. It was removed at a very young age but left him partially paralyzed. During his childhood, he became active in sports and played track and field, sledge hockey, baseball and golf. He was introduced to wheelchair tennis at 13 by a former top Canadian player, Frank Peter Jr.

"I took to the sport right away," Dembe says. "I had eye-hand co-ordination and the ability to push my chair fast, which helped."

Dembe went to high-performance junior tennis camps and entered world competitions in Europe and North America during high school. He competed around the world and became the top ranked junior in Canada.

Levine has also competed nationally and internationally. She is known for her powerhouse strength and aggressive playing style. Within two weeks of starting boccia, she was recruited to the provincial team along with her current doubles partner, Marco Dispaltra. Within three months she and her partner became the Canadian doubles champions. After six months, Levine was selected to be a part of the national team.

"I firmly believe that my sports background has contributed to my immediate success in boccia. Right from the start, I understood the commitment and dedication that would be required to become an elite level athlete, and I was ready for it," Levine says.

Levine is now ranked second in Canada, ninth overall in the world and the first woman in the world to reach this status. She competes in the BC4 category for athletes with severe disabilities affecting the whole body. She spends four five-hour days a week in the gym training and practising. She also spends many hours with her coach studying videos of past games, viewing her opponents' movements and strategies.

Levine likes boccia mostly because of how quickly the game can change.

"With one shot, your whole game plan can go out the window. You can expect some situations, but then someone will make a crazy shot and you're suddenly up against the time limit. You only have a few seconds to analyze, decide and execute," she says.

Dembe, meanwhile, attended Brock University and studied sports administration but still played tennis on the side. He started working with different tennis coaches and refined his game. He developed his strength working out at a gym and began travelling on his own to different world competitions. By the time he finished university, he was ranked in the top five in Canada.

In 2010, he decided to elevate his game so that he could represent Canada at the London 2012 Paralympics. At that time, he was ranked number 4 in Canada. He left his job working in a financial institution as a market analyst to focus entirely on wheelchair tennis.

Dembe won tournaments in Mexico, California, Vancouver and Montreal. He competed at the 2011 Guadalajara Parapan American Games and became the top player in Canada in 2011. He competed in four continents on his way to getting a spot in the London 2012 Paralympics. Unfortunately, in London he lost in the first round to one of the top British players in singles.

He was also unlucky in doubles, losing to the top British team in the first round.

No stranger to honours, Dembe was the Canadian Paraplegic Association Male Athlete of the year in 2011. He was also awarded the 2012 Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Medal.

In 2014, he was part of a cross-country tour of Canada Cares. This is a non-profit organization that creates a sense of community for family and professional caregivers by increasing awareness and providing encouragement.

He recently joined RBC as part of the RBC Olympians Program. There, he'll be involved in marketing and sponsorship across the Greater Toronto Area. He'll also be involved with coaching as part of Tennis Canada's new junior wheelchair tennis team. He has announced his retirement from competitive tennis.

"My goals are now career-based. I hope to grow the sport of wheelchair tennis, and help develop future stars of our sport here in Canada. I've just become a Tennis Canada-certified instructor and will also be obtaining my next level of coaching this winter," Dembe says.

He has primarily been delivering speeches in schools over the past few years. Now he's focusing on the corporate world. "I hope to motivate anyone on the importance of overcoming obstacles, physical activity and hard work."

At this point, he's not sure if he will participate in the next Paralympics. "I'm still relatively young for a complete retirement," he says, "so I can't give a definite answer about this quite yet." His focus now remains on his post-athletic career.

For Levine, this year has been packed with setting goals and achieving them. She says she keeps on setting more challenging goals as her career progresses. She qualified for the Paralympics in doubles in May, so she now focuses on qualifying for individuals. She will also attend the world championships in China this year. She is currently doing a GoFundMe campaign to raise money for a new wheelchair.

Alison Levine

If not for her disability, Levine says, she would probably never have had the opportunity to represent her country or get to spend her days playing a sport she loves.

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