

A Talented 'Guard' in G-d's Army

The devout Tamir Goodman is now fighting to find his place in the world of professional Israeli hoops.

Tzitzit dangle from beneath Tamir Goodman's No. 9 uniform jersey during pre-game layup drills. The blue kippah is clipped to his head, with the initials *tzadi-heh* for *Tzivot Hashem*—G-d's Armies, the logo for Chabad Lubavitch, with which he identifies. The red patch on his scalp remains cropped short atop the familiar lanky body.

Now playing for the Israeli team Maccabi Givat Shmuel, Goodman is four years beyond the 35-points-a-game glory days for Baltimore's Talmudical Academy high school, when a national sports magazine dubbed him "The Jewish Jordan" (as in "Michael," not "River").

The 20-year-old reserve shooting guard remains a polite kid who's passionate about basketball and Judaism and is comfortable as a symbol for melding the two. Only now it's as a salaried athlete, fighting for playing time and for his place in a profession where, as he said, players are working "to put food on their tables." Goodman is struggling, too, to overcome both the effects of a nearly two-year layoff from competitive basketball and the doubters who believe he's more hype than game.

Goodman's self-confidence is undiminished. He means to keep playing as hard and as well as he can. That would validate the Divine plan for him in the world.

"I'm living my dream," he said following the October road game at Tel Aviv's Yad Eliyahu Arena, steering home the Peugeot that came with his three-year contract, a standard benefit for foreign players. "My talent is basketball, and I ask G-d's blessing for it. I can't believe I'm playing professional basketball. I couldn't believe I was playing in college, and I couldn't believe I was playing in high school. I've always gone where G-d wanted me to."

Israel wanted him, too—a good thing, considering that the University of Maryland, which signed Goodman amid much publicity, reconsidered

accommodating his refusal to play on Shabbat, prompting Goodman to retreat from the commitment; and after leaving Towson University's team two years ago following a run-in with his coach. Maccabi Tel Aviv, Israel's premier club, signed Goodman last summer and immediately loaned him to Givat Shmuel (located just outside Tel Aviv), where, presumably, he'd be able to play more.

That hasn't happened yet. On this night, his second pro game, Goodman was on the court just 14 of the 40 minutes. He missed all three shots—including an ugly brick that he threw up backwards when a huge opponent stood his ground to thwart a fast break. Goodman scored only on two foul shots with 11 seconds remaining as Tel Aviv crushed the visitors, 100-64.

"I still believe in myself, in this team, and I keep plugging," he said when the game ended, before ducking into the shower. The smaller Givat Shmuel club actually had led, 15-6, midway through the opening quarter. But then, said Goodman, "we became selfish" and took bad shots that led to numerous Tel Aviv baskets. Givat Shmuel was also victimized by bigger and quicker players. Goodman hustled on defense and played through screens, but frequently was exploited on give-and-gos and lob passes that left his men with easy layups.

Givat Shmuel's coach, Ariel Bet-Halachmi, is impressed with Goodman's work ethic and court sense. When Goodman comes off the bench, he's "like a ball of energy," who gives his teammates "a good push," especially on defense, he said. But Bet-Halachmi doesn't foresee Goodman cracking the starting lineup, certainly not at his old point guard position, because he's "not a great penetrator" and "has to improve his shot selection."

Bet-Halachmi sees better days ahead and plans to increase Goodman's playing time as the season progresses. But asked whether Goodman could improve

Continued on page 65

By
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SPORTING LIFE

Continued from page 57

I could see hundreds of miles or more, and the horizon was a thin, gray smudge. I looked north and sat perfectly still as my quiet desperation passed. Then I yawned and stretched my arms, having surrendered myself to the world.

As I stood up to leave, a group of hikers began to clap, and I noticed a man coming up along the Appalachian Trail. Battered, grizzled and carrying a worn walking stick, he approached the ledge of Katahdin slowly before grinding to a halt at the cliff's edge. I began to clap, too, uncertain why, as the man squatted down on a rock and took a drink of water.

He looked back and smiled, and it occurred to me that he had just completed the whole trail—all 2,167 miles of it. He turned back, leaned forward, and took in his first view over the cliff side.

Thoreau was a slight man, I knew, but I had no distinct vision of him, no memory of a face. Something about this man, worn by miles of determination, seemed fortuitous and real to me. Since then, each time I imagine Thoreau reaching the top of Katahdin, I think of this man—a pilgrim passing in the wilderness.

As I descended the trail, I turned around and noticed he hadn't moved or taken off his backpack. He was perched on a rock, leaning forward, staring down the mountain—having arrived at the end.

That evening, I stopped at a diner in the town just outside the park. I ordered a burger special and a Caesar salad with chicken. I felt weak and faint, and dove on the meal as soon as it arrived. Bite by bite, my body drew closer to a state of normalcy. When I finished both dishes, the waitress slipped the bill under one of the plates. Beneath her name, she'd written, "What an appetite!"

As I walked across the parking lot, I could see the broad apex of Katahdin over the hills. It seemed impossibly far, and yet the aches in my arms and legs felt intimately tied to it.

I climbed back into the car. As I turned the key, hoping the heater would kick in soon, I glanced up at the mountain from the driver's seat and realized I was still hungry. ■

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ANGLE ON ISRAEL

Continued from page 60

enough to play for Tel Aviv, Bet-Halachmi said, "I hope for him that he can make it. To be honest, I don't think that he can be at that level in the next two years. Maybe as a 12th man."

Criticism isn't deterring Goodman or those who come especially to see him play. As Goodman reached a corridor outside the hosts' locker room at Yad Eliyahu, fans encircled him, patted his green, long-sleeved T-shirt and grabbed him for snapshots. "Tamir, wanna come over for Shabbas sometime?" asked an American teenager wearing a kippah. A reporter for *Galei Zahal* (Israel Defense Force Radio) held a microphone for a few comments about Goodman's Israel experience to date. "I have lots of work to do. I'm taking it one year at a time," he answered in Hebrew.

Everyone wished him *b'hatzlachah* ("good luck"). As the arena door opened and Goodman exited, 100 young people clapped in unison, many wearing kippot. By the light of the street lamp, Goodman signed his name on basketballs, programs and scraps of paper, mostly in Hebrew.

"It's a *Kiddush Hashem* to see a good boy, wearing a kippah, signing autographs, who treats people with respect," said Shlomo Schrader of the town of Hashmonaim, formerly of Baltimore. "He doesn't have to be nice, but he is."

Goodman is more than that, said Walter Weinberger, a basketball junkie and resident of Brooklyn, N.Y., who was in Israel on business. He called Goodman a "bridge" between the secular and religious in Israel, just as he'd represented Judaism to non-Jews while in America.

"The average basketball star is interested in girls and coke. There's this dualism because your hero is not necessarily a moral hero," said Weinberger. "[Goodman] shows that you can have someone who's a moral person. Let's face it: He's pretty short, and he's not on a very good team. But a symbol is a big thing."

It's a role Goodman is content to continue playing, including in the Jewish state, where he finds it "amazing" to see an Israeli flag hanging from arena rafters. "I love Israel. I'm happy here. I love the people," he said. "Here in Israel, it's so political that they put stereotypes on you: the kind of kippah you wear, what reli-

gion you are. I'm here to say that every Jew is a diamond."

Goodman carries an Israeli identity card, which he received personally from Interior Minister Eli Yishai. He is a media favorite and frequently visits terrorism victims and addresses schoolchildren. Goodman bonded with teammates during a monthlong preseason training camp. He knows their preferences on the court, where they like to receive the ball. Some players host him for meals and offer advice on banking, and treat him like a younger brother, Goodman said.

Even the employees of the pizza shop across from Goodman's high-rise building look out for him, so much that the owner hopped on a delivery moped to track down a young hoodlum who'd just pilfered Goodman's cellular phone.

Best of all, his grandmother, Shoshana Sheffer, lives close by. She is "everything, my role model," Goodman said, someone with whom he spends "every free minute." And why not? Sheffer prepares schnitzel, potatoes and cake for her grandson to take home and heat up—just like Goodman's mother, Chaya, did back in Baltimore, loading Goodman up with tins of delicacies for team road trips where kosher food was unavailable.

Chaya is visiting now, having arrived for a month shortly after Sukkot. She is staying with her ballplaying son in the apartment the team also provides—the one, he points out proudly from the pizza shop, with an Israeli flag hanging from the living-room window. A week before, his best friend and high school teammate Shaye Guttenberg had visited.

"He always believed that I'd have an apartment [earned] through basketball and that he'd sleep in it," said the young ballplayer.

"I'm extremely happy about my situation in Israel," he continued. "I'm in a great situation. My teammates are absolutely great, both on and off the court. My relationship with the coach is growing. Every day is getting better and better. I'm growing as a person and as a player, and I'm really happy about that." ■

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