



A hockey motif permeates Metulla's Canada Centre, where Solai Klaf and her brother Orazi, shown with mother Gabi along with their sister, come to play.

By HILLEL KUTTLER

THE PLAYERS passed, scored, and defended at a sports center in the Galilee, in northern Israel, last summer. The opposing coaches, Bobby Holik and Mike Mazeika, directed the cohort of 9 to 14-year-olds. In the stands, the players' parents encouraged and snapped pictures. Most spectators wore long-sleeved shirts and jeans, and a few periodically gripped their own shoulders to retain body heat while watching.

To others, the extreme air conditioning felt refreshing. This, after all, was a hockey rink.

The setting was the Canada Centre, a recreational complex in Metulla standing a few hundred yards from Israel's border with Lebanon, a most unlikely spot to house a sport associated with frozen ponds and misty breath.

This was the concluding day of a weeklong hockey camp for 45 youngsters that's been held every summer since the year-round youth program, the Canada Israel Hockey School (CIHS), began in Metulla in 2010. Holik, who enjoyed an 18 year-career as a center in the National Hockey League, has been flown in the past two summers to instruct the kids on the country's only regulation-size rink.

## Hockey's synonymous with the North—but northern Israel?

The experience, Holik told *JUF News*, makes him a better coach for high schoolers with whom he works near his home in Jackson Hole, Wyo. That's because the Israelis often play inline roller hockey in an unstructured environment, and then transfer those skills to the ice; by contrast, he said, American youth tend to be over-coached from the start.

"You can't only learn the game; you have to *feel* the game. When you're directed every step of the way, you lose that creativity," Holik said. "I see far more team play, game sense, than I see in the United States."

The sport remains in its infancy in Israel. In the Canada Centre's program, 420 youth now play hockey on ice and another 600 youth play inline hockey.

Israel's next-largest program, in the Tel Aviv-area town of Kfar Sava, has approximately 800 players, including inline. At a Netanya-area moshav, Israel's second regulation-size ice rink will open this autumn. An ice rink in Holon, just south of Tel Aviv, is used primarily for skating, with hockey played only in off-hours; it's smaller than regulation, but reportedly will be expanded. In Maalot, an even smaller ice rink operates. A shopping mall in Eilat hosts recreational ice skating and figure skating but isn't equipped for hockey. In Ashdod, an indoor basketball court was converted to an ice rink for hockey this summer.

Adults play in recreational leagues, too, with many making the approximately three-hour drive to Metulla from the country's center on Thursdays to play late-night games. They include immigrants from hockey-mad countries, like Canada and former Soviet republics.

Their progeny are helping the sport expand in Israel, said Mazeika, a Toronto native who teaches in the Metulla program. That can be seen in the level of play in Metulla's 21-and-over division, which he said has "improved dramatically." A new division was formed for ages 13-17, and it will add a fourth team next year, Mazeika said.

"I see a big growth happening," Mazeika said. "As more kids try it, their friends will want to. We get a lot of kids that way."



Israeli 16-year-old Denis Superfin, shown with visiting ex-NHL player Bobby Holik, attends Metulla's hockey camp most summers.

He added: "With new rinks in the [country's] center, it'll grow more."

One player who plays both inline and ice hockey is Denis Superfin, 16. Denis makes the 90-minute drive to Metulla every Sunday from Nazareth Illit to train with his CIHS team. July's camp was his seventh of the nine Metulla has held.

"It's fun to play, to meet new people, to succeed at new drills," Denis said.

Gabi Klaf enrolled her son and two daughters in the CIHS for these reasons: one was bullied in seventh grade, one was "a computer addict, a comatose zombie," she said, and one was overly shy.

"Hockey toughened her up to deal with normative human relations," Klaf, a Houston, Tex., native who lives in Kiryat Shemona, said of the shy child. "Hockey gives you your voice: 'This is my space; I deserve self-respect.'"

She continued: "Hockey is the kind of sport that, if you've had a bad day, you're going to be a great player. It's a great energy sport. It empowers girls. Sometimes, they give the boys a shove."

Her 13-year-old daughter, Solai, credited hockey with teaching her to make decisions under pressure, like when to pass the puck and what to do as an opponent approached.

"Being on the ice, it's an adrenaline rush," said Solai, who plays on an age 9-15 team and practices in Metulla three days a week. "It's not a common thing in Israel." Benefits extend beyond the rink, Solai explained.

"You have to stay healthy and eat right if you play hockey, because otherwise you won't be in shape," she said.

At an awards presentation held as the Metulla camp concluded, Mazeika thanked Holik for coming.

"And now you can't get rid of me," said Holik, who hopes to return next summer with his wife and daughter.

"The perspective around the world is very anti-Israel," Holik said later. "When you actually get to know Jewish people and Israelis, it's, 'What's wrong with the world?' because this place is magical. Coming to Israel, it's a life-changing experience." ■

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