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CHANGING THE GAME

Tamir Goodman's adjustment to a hype-free life.

By Hillel Kutler

To Tamir Goodman, “What if?” is a foreign concept. “Never, never, never,” Goodman exclaimed when asked whether he harbors any regrets over a basketball career that peaked in the late 1990s, when, as a Baltimore high schooler, he was dubbed the “Jewish Jordan” and signed



HAWK RISING: TAMIR GOODMAN GRABS A REBOUND FOR THE MARYLAND NIGHTHAWKS.

a letter of intent to play at the University of Maryland.

"My formula is: What do I think Hashem would want me to do? To come here and be a kiddush Hashem [one who sanctifies God's name] and be the first professional player to not play on Shabbos ... I'm so happy," said Goodman, now dividing his time between Baltimore and Israel. "I'm healthy. I have such an amazing family, such an amazing wife. It's the biggest b'racha. I'm 26 years old and already have played professional basketball six years, coached thousands of kids. How can I thank Hashem enough?"

Goodman now plays as a guard on the Premier Basketball League's Maryland Nighthawks—just a few miles, yet so far, from the Washington Wizards of the NBA. Then again, Maccabi Givat Shmuel, a third-tier team that Goodman had never heard of before his signing with them, was hardly in the class of Maccabi Tel Aviv, the Israeli powerhouse that dropped him in 2002 shortly after he arrived in the country.

But playing for Givat Shmuel led to Goodman's meeting his future wife, Judy, who attended nearby Bar-Ilan University, and the two were engaged a few weeks later. "It was 100 percent from Hashem," said Goodman, now a father to daughter Oriah and son Matanel. "Hashem got me traded to Givat Shmuel so that I could meet her. So the moral is: 'Don't ever be sad.'"

With the Nighthawks' training camp not beginning until November, and with only 22 games on the team's schedule, Goodman has plenty of time to devote to a related career: teaching basketball to teenagers and speaking to synagogue and youth groups. Along the way, Goodman explained, he utilizes basketball to glorify God and to enhance kids' social interaction.

This summer featured a busy schedule in Pennsylvania summer camps alone: two weeks of teaching basketball at the Yesh Shabbat program, held in King of Prussia, and three weeks in the Poconos at Camp Ramah.

In June, he launched the Tamir Goodman Athletic Leadership Basketball Camp, a weeklong program at Baltimore's Jewish Community Center. The camp drew Jewish and African-American high school players from across the country.

Goodman sold them and their parents on his basketball acumen—and much more. He wanted to celebrate what they had in common—sports—and to help them spread their gifts to others.

Three afternoons at the camp, Goodman hosted area coaches as speakers, including his Nighthawks coach, former NBA player Lawrence Moten. The speakers stressed to the campers the need to take care of their bodies, be studious, appreciate the advantages basketball provides throughout life and prepare for college.

On camp's first day, Goodman welcomed to the gymnasium seven guests—Aaron, Shimi, Moshe, Mordechai, Chedva, Gail and Gideon—Jewish youngsters with special needs, including one boy with Down syndrome.

Goodman put a hand on Mordechai's shoulder. "Choose a player you want to shoot with," he said. Goodman divided the other children and players into small groups and dispersed them throughout the gym. For the next hour, they held intimate shooting, passing and dribbling drills. A tall African-American player hoisted the littlest Jewish boy by the armpits so he could attempt a dunk.

Goodman rotated to each group. Gail complained that she would not do well and didn't like basketball. Goodman reassured her. "It's okay,"

he said. "It'll be fun. You'll do great." Moments later, she passed the ball behind her back 10 times in a row, drawing cheers. Gideon, sporting two prosthetic legs and sitting in a motorized cart, ably dribbled a basketball on the hardwood 10 times.

The hourlong session, Goodman said later, accomplished his objective of teaching the players "to share their talents."

Nathaniel Oaks, a member of Maryland's House of Delegates, said that he admired Goodman for his having "devoted his time to try to give back some of his skills to kids who can use him as a stepping-stone to better themselves."

Oaks and other sponsors defrayed the camps' cost so that players attended for free. Oaks, an African-American, has watched Goodman since the latter and two other white players regularly ventured to an East Baltimore recreation center for a serious game of ball.

"One of his nicknames was 'White Chocolate.' I saw that he had skills. I liked him and went to his games," Oaks said.

One camper, Jameille Williams, was glad that his high school coach, who'd been matched against Goodman's Talmudical Academy teams, had recommended the camp.

A forward heading into his senior year in Washington, D.C., Williams wanted "to get better as a basketball player and learn things about not only basketball but teamwork and life in general. Basketball is not everything. Things you do on the basketball court you can incorporate into daily life."

Goodman is a stickler for doing things right. Near the end of the day's session, he blew his whistle, halting action. Goodman chided the players for slacking off.

"We have eight more minutes," he told them. "You have to take every shot as if it's a game shot."

Goodman hadn't considered becoming a teacher—he is eight classes short of completing a degree in communications—but acknowledged that he might have evolved into just that. Goodman estimated that he has taught 20,000 kids at basketball clinics since he was 15, including at schools, camps and one in Gush Katif shortly before Israel evacuated the Gaza Strip in 2005.

"I'm blessed that I can do what I love to do: that I can live, play, teach. I've been around the world because of basketball, met amazing people because of basketball, established a close relationship to Hashem because of basketball," Goodman said. "I love watching the kids grow. I want to keep growing, too."

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