

December 22, 2011, edited August 1st 2016

Sport in America; Our Defining Stories

A Personal Narrative from a Pivotal Moment in Sports History

By Zaq Harrison, Submitted to HBO & Sports Illustrated, sportinamerica.com

“They’re All Gone”

I love sports. I grew up like most boys in the US playing sports. I still love to play and compete. When my kids were old enough I couldn’t wait to help coach their teams. I enjoyed it so much I continued coaching after they were done. This is my story of how a moment in sports history changed my life.

I lived in the small Appalachian town Williamsport, PA, the birthplace of Little League. It was August 1972, the Olympic Games were on. What a thrill to see the world on parade in my living room. So many sports, many I knew nothing about and some I couldn’t take my eyes off of, especially swimming. I loved baseball but I was a swimmer. I was a fish and loved competing. I had a new “idol.” Mark Spitz, the new King of the sports world. Spitz was the *trifecta* - #1 the greatest athlete on the planet, #2 a swimmer and #3 most importantly he was Jewish. Just like me. My own Jewish Superhero. The joke in our small community was after Spitz won those medals it was said the last Jew that had this much gold was King David.

As a child I heard the stories about the war and the death camps. Mom’s family wasn’t far removed from Europe, the ones who left before the war lived the ones who didn’t perish.

My father was in the US infantry under Patton. Pop lived through Bastogne, he crossed the Rhine and helped liberate the Bavarian slave labor camp in Eggen. But summer 1972 was a new day in Germany. The Nazis were gone and the superstar of these games was Jewish. Here in the very same country where Hitler hosted the 1936 games. This was too good to be true. God has a sense of humor my mother said.

September 4th we watched at home when Jim McKay broke the story on ABC Sports. The initial reports of terrorists taking Israeli Olympians hostage. Then fear as the story dragged on. I was glued to the TV. In the Olympic Village eleven Israelis were being held hostage in their quarters at *31 Connelystrausse*. What was going on? Why was this happening? This was the Olympics, why were terrorists live on my TV? Mr. McKay seemed to have stayed on non-stop from the beginning until the end. At one point I looked over at my parents, I saw something different in their eyes. The Munich Games were not that far removed from the war years for them. They knew this wouldn't end well.

I looked and looked at the TV screen through my eight year old eyes. This just didn't seem right. A year before the Munich games we travelled to Israel for my brother's Bar Mitzvah. My father gave us a very strong Jewish Identity in an Appalachia that wasn't always kind. It was important to him that we see certain things through his eyes and his heart. The Israel I experienced in 1971 was full of people that were tough as nails. The heavy security at the airport was still fresh as was the memory of the soldiers with rifles in the streets during our visit. The Israelis were so tough it seemed that every pretty girl had an Uzi. At that moment, on my TV, this was supposed to be the Olympics, this was supposed to be sports. I knew something was wrong but I just didn't understand. It felt like ketchup on ice cream.

I am one of those guys who doesn't cry much. The birth of my children and the death of my father. In the Williamsport, PA, the birthplace of youth baseball, of 1939 growing up my father just missed being part of the very first "Little League" season. Sports was a big deal in my relationship with him. In 2006 I found myself living in Israel and the Manager of the Israeli National "Little League" team, life had truly come full circle. With war raging in Israel we were in a small town in the Czech Republic competing for the European baseball championships.

During the tournament's opening ceremonies we entered the stadium to the sound of Hatikvah. I stood there next to our teams 2nd baseman, my son and without warning I began to sob, tears poured from my heart and down my cheeks. At that very moment it was all coming back to me. In August 1972 I watched on live TV the opening ceremonies of the Munich Olympic Games. I will never forget how the Israeli Olympic delegation with Hatikva playing marched into that Stadium in Munich. *Marching into their stadium just like I was marching at that moment into mine.* In Munich they all knew what it meant a generation after the Holocaust to be able to walk into that stadium, in Germany, behind the Israeli flag. As we watched at home in August 1972 those Israeli Olympians suddenly became our Olympians. They marched into that stadium in Munich carrying all of us on their backs, the living and the dead. None of us could have imagined what was to happen. *Man plans, God laughs.*

Until that summer I never knew how much Munich had affected me. During the lead up to the baseball tournament I assigned the players a project. They drew lots and were each given an envelope with the name of a world class Jewish athlete who had made sacrifices but never compromised their identity. I included the Munich 11. The kids were to research their athlete on the internet and write a one page bio on what made their athlete special. Taking full advantage and being kids they set off to copy and paste from where else WIKIPEDIA.

I arranged during our meals at the tournament for the sixteen kids, eleven and twelve year olds fourteen boys and two girls, to give a short talk about “their athlete.” Over the course of that week one by one they took their turn. Many of the parents who had travelled to the tournament to watch their kids play were visibly moved by what the players wrote. When the last presentation was completed I finally stood and spoke. We called the team “Big Blue” in part of the Blue and White they proudly wore but also because of their never, ever give up big blue heart. As their manager I was so proud in their children’s accomplishments on the field, we got the bronze, we were 3rd in all of Europe, at that point our best finish ever. I wasn’t done. I then told the parents about the contributions off the field. I wanted them to know that when we began this project only two of the Munich 11, David Berger and Andre Shpitzer, had listings on Wikipedia. That had changed, because of the work the entire team did we updated Wikipedia to include the biographies of all eleven of the men. Now anyone in the world could with internet access could look up the Munich 11 on Wikipedia and learn who they were. These kids with a few simple keystrokes made sure we would never, ever never forget. Third place in Europe was amazing, 1st place in life is forever. Through sports these kids had made a difference.

As our trip in Czech wound to an end I bid goodbye to the team as my son and I took the short flight to Munich. The Olympic grounds are still impressive. The pool where Mark Spitz electrified the world is still majestic. We walked and walked eventually we found our way to where the Olympic Village once stood. *31 Connelystrausse*. I immediately knew where I was. I was shaking. I looked and there on the building was the reminder of what happened. Written in Hebrew on a small plaque were the names of the Munich 11. I leaned forward, I put my hand out. I touched the plaque and for a brief moment the soul of an 8 year old boy. I brought my hand back and kissed it gently. I was standing with my son on hallowed ground. My

journey from Williamsport to Israel to Czech and finally Munich. This was my ground zero, this is where my childhood ended. This is where sport transcended the arena.

After the tournament I read that Jim McKay was in declining health. I wrote his son asking him to thank his father for the heartfelt reporting during the event that changed my life. I shared my story of the baseball team in Czech, of Wikipedia and wished his father well. I received a touching letter in return. We exchanged short notes when his father passed in 2008 and again when my father passed in 2009. Years later in a final reincarnation of my swimming career I found myself as a coach for a nationally ranked US college team. I had no idea when I began my year with that team that my final journey in swimming would end at our school's collegiate league championships. That year the meet happened to have been held at George Mason University in the Jim McKay Natatorium.

As that 8 year old sitting in Williamsport heroes in sports won races, scored the winning basket at the buzzer, hit home runs and ran for touchdowns. As an adult, I know what a hero really is. On that fateful night in Munich as the terrorists were breaking into their rooms Yosef Gutfreund woke up and threw his massive body against the door desperately trying to block it, screaming, trying to buy time so his teammates could flee. Later Moshe Weinberg and Yosef Romano heroically attacked the terrorists with their bare hands.

In my heart the real heroes are Moshe Weinberg, Yosef Romano and their nine other teammates who died in Munich:

I love sports and in my life I've seen plenty of amazing moments on live TV - Willis Reed, Franco Harris, Dr J & Carlton Fisk in their immortal moments. I've seen others live - an epic Rose Bowl - McGwire's 62nd – An NCAA Final that went down to the last play - The Israeli National Football Team beat Liverpool, in baseball I was even at the *Bartman* game.

I also was witness on live TV to the most profound sporting experience that changed my life. A ball wasn't thrown, a race wasn't won and my team didn't win the championship. When I was a kid I wanted to be an Olympian just like Mark Spitz. I was eight when that dream died that September day along with a small part of my soul. I mourned as best as any 8 year old could. On TV we saw the 11 Israeli flags, each white, two blue stripes and a blue Star of David, hugging those 11 simple pine boxes. In September 1972 I made a promise that till this day is seared into my heart. I promised that my 11 heroes from Munich did not die in vain.

If I close my eyes right now I can still see Jim McKay's face. I remember how terrible he looked. I can still hear him like he's standing next to me. I still cry as I've always cried whenever I am reminded of the words he spoke 5th September, 1972:

"When I was a kid, my father used to say "Our greatest hopes and our worst fears are seldom realized." Our worst fears have been realized tonight. They've now said that there were eleven hostages. Two were killed in their rooms yesterday morning, nine were killed at the airport tonight. They're all gone."