

Ain't goin' to play on Saturday

Israel's Sabbath observant pro baseball league opens June 24

When Boston businessman Larry Baras was growing up, his Orthodox Jewish father did many things religiously on Friday nights. He went to synagogue, blessed the wine, ate his Sabbath meal with the family—then went upstairs to read *The Sporting News*.

“In my childhood,” Baras recalls, “baseball and Judaism were intertwined.”

Now Baras is spreading his love of the sport to a country where Jews are many, but baseballs are few—Israel.

Baras, founder and president of the new Israel Baseball League, has been working for two years to bring professional baseball to Israel. On June 24 his dream will come true when the Petach Tikva Pioneers take on the Modi'in Miracle. It will be an exciting moment for Israel's many immigrants from the U.S., who will be able to see professional quality ball played on their home fields for the first time. The 45-game IBL season will last two months, ending with a championship playoff. An All-Star game is scheduled for mid-July.

Baras has tapped three Jewish former major leaguers—Ken Holtzman, Art Shamsky and Ron Blomberg—to manage three of the league's six teams. But you don't have to be Jewish to play. Dan Duquette, former general manager of the Red Sox and the Expos, will serve as the league's director of baseball. Major League Baseball commissioner Bud Selig and his daughter Wendy Selig-Prieb have signed on as advisors for the new league.

Memories of Koufax

Jewish fans have bittersweet memories of Holtzman, who outpitched their idol Sandy Koufax in Koufax's last regular season game in 1966. The young lefthander went on to pitch two no-hitters for the Cubs before being traded to Oakland in 1972. He retired with five World Series rings in his pocket and “divorced myself from baseball. Being a manager didn't have a lot of meaning for me,” he says.

He continued to volunteer for Little League and college ball, and when the IBL came calling, Holtzman had a change of heart. “The opportunity to promote the sport in a country like Israel is terrific,” says Holtzman, who, like many of the IBL’s 120 players, has never visited the Jewish state before. Holtzman adds that in his playing days, he believed that baseball would become an international sport, and he is excited about managing in the first baseball league in the Middle East.

He will arrive in Israel about five days before the season starts and meet his team for the first time. The league’s players come from nine countries, including the U.S., the Dominican Republic, Australia, Russia and Japan. Tryouts were held last year in Massachusetts, Florida, Los Angeles and the Dominican Republic. In April, the signed players participated in a 10-round draft held at Yeshiva University’s Cardozo Law School in New York. Representatives of the six teams selected their top choices, and the rest of the players were assigned by the league to assure an even distribution of positions. In a sentimental moment, the Miracle used their last pick to draft the 71-year old Koufax.

The disadvantage of the system, says Holtzman is the managers have five days to learn their players’ strengths and weaknesses. The advantage is that all six managers are in the same boat.

Inspired by the minors

Baras was inspired to bring baseball to Israel after attending a minor league baseball game in a Boston suburb. He had been looking for a way to support the Jewish state that didn’t involve sitting on committees, and he became convinced that family-style baseball was the way to go. Unlike fast-moving sports like soccer and basketball, baseball has a leisurely pace not found Israeli culture.

”We’re just trying to have fun and create more links between Israel and the U.S.,” says Baras. Now, just weeks before the opening game, he says he feels like the mother of the bride before the wedding—so wrapped up in getting the details right he can’t feel the excitement yet

“When I first started,” he says, “I had no clue whether baseball or softball existed in Israel. One of the first things I learned was in 1979 the first baseball field was built on Kibbutz Gezer.”

In fact, the Israel Association of Baseball celebrates its 20th anniversary this year with a full schedule of amateur games. Over 3000 Israelis—mainly immigrants from the U.S. and their children—are involved in adult and youth programs. The IBL will be using their three fields.

Along the way, the league made what seemed like a simple decision to Baras, but proved controversial in Israel—unlike Israeli professional soccer and basketball, the Israeli Baseball League will not play on the Jewish Sabbath. Baras was criticized by Israel's secular press and even received an e-mail saying "I will never set foot in any of your games because you made this a religious issue by not playing on shabbos."

The decision was made for practical reasons, insists Baras, including the fact that the Yarkon Complex in Petach Tikva is located in Baptist Village, and the church does not allow baseball on Shabbat in Israel. (They won't be selling beer there either.)

The decision was a blessing for Sabbath-observant players like Dovid Green, second baseman for Holtzman's Pioneers.

Green has been playing baseball for most of his 27 years. He started Little League at the age of eight, then went on to play for Maimonides High School in Boston and Yeshiva University.

Field of dreams

"I dreamed about playing in the majors," he recalls. "I dreamed that the (Boston) Red Sox would be so happy with my playing that they would let me not play on Shabbat."

"It is a very weird feeling to know that my dream is coming true," he adds.

For Sabbath-observant fans like Wharton graduate Jerry Stander, no Sabbath play is an added attraction.

"I miss baseball," says Stander, who has lived in Israel for over 30 years. "I would be very excited to go to the games, even if the quality is no better than American Legion or Class A. Play ball!"

Baras acknowledges that he expects most of the crowd at the first games to be tourists and ex-patriot Americans like Stander. Still, he says, the trappings will be Hebrew and the goal to bring the game to Israelis. Game announcements will be bi-

lingual. The opening game and eight others will be broadcast, in Hebrew, by Arutz Sports, Israel's all sports station. To make baseball more appealing, all games will be seven innings and ties will be determined by a home run derby. Baras says he doesn't expect games to run more than two hours.

"Baseball is an amazing game and a cultural experience," explains Green. "We want to ease Israelis into the culture. It's different from games they've seen before."

To build a fan base, the IBL is opening the Dan Duquette Baseball Clinic in Israel for beginning and experienced players. One of the league's sponsors has donated 1000 balls and bats for Ethiopian-Israeli kids to learn the game. Israel's fields will be upgraded for professional play with financial assistance from the Jewish National Fund, and when the two-month IBL season ends, the fields will be used by local baseball programs.

Baras says the IBL is privately financed and eventually the investors will see a profit. Sponsorships are available and a variety of merchandise is sold on the IBL web site, in addition to game tickets. They hope to enter an Israeli team in the 2009 World Baseball Classic.

Baras has received some criticism in the Israeli media for bringing yet another American cultural icon to Israel. After all, Israel has football and basketball. Who needs a third sport?

"When Ben and Jerry went to Israel," Baras responds, "the Israelis said 'we have ice cream.' Then they discovered that Ben and Jerry was a different kind of ice cream.

"When they see what a departure baseball is, I think they'll fall in love with the game like we did."

Box:

Six teams form the Israel Baseball League:

Bet Shemesh Blue Sox

Modi'in Miracle

Netanya Tigers

Petach Tikva Pioneers

Ra'anana Express

Tel Aviv Lightening

For league schedule and ticket sales, visit the IBL web site,

www.israelbaseballleague.com.

###