



Educator's Guide

5 Jewish Sports Legends

From ancient heroes to modern champions, Jewish athletes have shaped sports history in unforgettable ways.

Whether it's Aly Raisman's powerful routines or Mark Spitz's record-breaking gold medals, these five legends proved that being a champion isn't just about winning—it's about courage, resilience, and standing up for what matters.

[Link to video](#)

Resources compiled by Doug Berkowitz

Big Ideas

1. Despite stereotypes of being unathletic, there have been some extremely talented Jewish athletes.
2. Many Jewish athletes demonstrate both great skill in their sports and a high level of Jewish ethics and morals.
3. Sometimes Jewish athletes have to find a balance between religious observance and competing in sports.

Essential Questions

1. How do Jewish athletes choose to display their Jewish identities?
2. Do Jews have expectations from Jewish professional athletes that are above and beyond simply competing at a high level?
3. Does antisemitism in sports negatively affect Jewish athletes' performances and their ability to compete?



Review Questions

- 1.** At the 2012 Olympics, Aly Raisman performed her floor routine to which Jewish song?
 - a. HaTikvah
 - b. Hava Nagila**
 - c. Yerushalayim Shel Zahav
 - d. Oseh Shalom
- 2.** During her career, Aly Raisman...
 - a. Showed pride in her Jewish identity.
 - b. Helped expose the abuse of young gymnasts.
 - c. Executed a piked double Arabian at the Olympics.
 - d. All of the above**
- 3.** At the 1972 Olympics, Mark Spitz set a record for most medals won with...
 - a. 4 gold medals
 - b. 5 gold medals
 - c. 6 gold medals
 - d. 7 gold medals**
- 4.** Yarden Gerbi won a bronze medal in which Olympic sport?
 - a. Judo**
 - b. Sailing
 - c. Table Tennis
 - d. Surfing



- 5.** Which act of Jewish observance did Hank Greenberg follow during his career as a baseball player?
- a. **Sitting out on Yom Kippur**
 - b. Not playing in Friday night games
 - c. Fasting on Tisha B'Av
 - d. Eating hot dogs with matzah during Passover
- 6.** Hank Greenberg was supportive of which other ballplayer who faced hatred from both players and fans?
- a. Satchel Paige
 - b. Sandy Koufax
 - c. **Jackie Robinson**
 - d. Josh Gibson
- 7.** Max Baer's greatest fight was against a star boxer from which country?
- a. Canada
 - b. **Germany**
 - c. Italy
 - d. France
- 8.** What symbol did Max Baer wear on his trunks during his fight with Max Schmeling?
- a. The American flag
 - b. **A Star of David**
 - c. A bald eagle
 - d. A menorah



Discussion Questions

1. Jewish athletes

- Do you think there is a difference between a “Jewish athlete” and an athlete who happens to be a Jew? Explain your answer.
- Do you think you expect more from Jewish athletes in comparison to non-Jewish athletes? What about the Jewish population as a whole? Is this fair toward the athletes to expect more from them just because they are Jewish? Explain your answers.

2. Ask a Jewish athlete

- Who is your favorite Jewish athlete and why? In what ways has this athlete inspired you?
- If you could ask this athlete one question about sports and one question about their relationship with Judaism, what would you ask?

3. Jewish values in sports

The video describes not only these five Jewish athletes’ accomplishments in sport, but also highlights their high moral standards and *mentshlehkeyt*.

- Which Jewish values did you see demonstrated in the athletes’ off-the-field actions (e.g., Max Baer caring for an opponent’s widow and children)?
- Can you think of examples of any other Jewish athletes who have demonstrated Jewish morals and ethics?

Learning Activities

1. Lesson plan



Use our ready-made lesson plan on Jewish athletes [HERE](#).

2. Jewish sports Hall of Fame

The National Baseball Hall of Fame hangs a plaque for each member inducted into its hallowed halls. You can see Hank Greenberg's plaque [here](#). Ask students to select an accomplished Jewish athlete (or Jewish sports team) and design a plaque to commemorate their athletic achievements (and any notable Jewish endeavors). Students can present their Jewish athlete (or team) and plaque to the class, and plaques can be hung in the classroom to celebrate Jewish athletic accomplishments.

3. Designing a Jewish uniform

In recent years, many Major League Baseball teams have unveiled special [City Connect](#) uniforms that “feature different colors, fonts, and graphics than a team’s home and away uniforms, and seek to celebrate each city’s history and culture.”

Using the City Connect technique, ask students to create a Jewish uniform for a sport of their choice. The uniform can be for Team Israel, a Jewish All-Star team, or a fictional team with a Jewish theme. Have students present their uniforms to the class and explain how their designs celebrate Jewish history and culture.

4. Merging Jewish practice and sports

Some Jewish athletes have tried to balance professional sports and religious observance (e.g., keeping Shabbat; dressing modestly). Ask students to choose one such athlete to profile.

Possible choices could include:

- Sandy Koufax and Yom Kippur (Unpacked [video](#) and [article](#))
- Jacob Steinmetz and minor league baseball ([Unpacked video](#) and [article](#))
- Sam Saltz, college football (watch this [Today Unpacked video from 2:10-3:38](#)).



- [Beatie Deutsch, marathon runner](#)

Each profile should include:

- Name and description of the athlete and the conflict they faced over their religious beliefs.
- How they chose to deal with the conflict and whether they were able to resolve it.
- How the athlete might serve as a role model for other Jews.
- A question they would like to ask the athlete.

Bonus: Try to connect with one of these athletes and interview them as a class over Zoom.

5. Give your students our Kahoot on [Jewish athletes](#)!

Reflection Questions

1. If I were a star athlete...

If you were a star athlete...

- Would you choose to publicly demonstrate your Jewish identity? Why or why not? If so, how?
- How would your level of Jewish observance impact your ability to play or compete, if at all?
- How would your upbringing and Jewish values affect the way you compete?

2. Antisemitism in sports

Throughout time, many Jewish athletes have faced antisemitism from fans, fellow sportsmen, and executives (e.g., [Hank Greenberg](#); [Marty Glickman](#)).

- Do you think that antisemitism is a problem in sports? Why or why not?



- Do you think that negative Jewish stereotypes contribute to how people think of and treat Jewish athletes, whether they be professionals or little leaguers? If so, which stereotypes do you think play a role and why?
- Have you or somebody you know experienced antisemitism or racial hatred while playing sports? Share the experience if you're comfortable doing so.
- What do you think is the best way to combat antisemitism in sports?

3. Athletics vs. Jewish literacy

Despite there having been a number of star Jewish athletes throughout history, Jews are not known for their athletic prowess or for becoming professional athletes. Many young Jews who join sports teams have games and practices that interfere with their Jewish education. They are then often forced to choose between their training and their participation in Jewish learning.

- What do young Jewish athletes gain from participating in sports? What might they miss out on by not being able to regularly pursue their Jewish education?
- How might Jews be able to get the best of both worlds, participating in sports and also receiving a Jewish education while not missing classes (often or occasionally) or being forced to choose between the two?

Further Learning

1. Unpacked for Educators:

- [Why Did Sandy Koufax Skip the World Series?](#) (video)
- [Israeli Judoka Wins World Championship](#) (article)
- [Deni Avdija: Exploring the Legacy of Jews and Sports](#) (article)
- [Sid Luckman, Jewish football star](#) (article)
- [1972 Olympics: The Munich Massacre](#) (video)
- [How Yosef Yekutieli, the architect of the Maccabiah Games, birthed Israeli sports](#) (article)
- [Can you play sports on Shabbat? The answer is more complicated than it seems](#) (article)



- 2.** Center for Jewish History, [The Life and Times of Hank Greenberg](#) (documentary)

This compelling documentary examines how America's first Jewish baseball star was a beacon of hope to American Jews who faced bigotry during the Depression and World War II.

- 3.** Olympics, [Aly Raisman's Floor Routine at London 2012 to Hava Nagila](#) (video)

This is a video of Aly Raisman's floor routine to Hava Nagila performed during the 2012 London Olympics.

- 4.** ESPN, [Spitz lived up to enormous expectations](#) (article)

This article provides a short biography and the career highlights of Mark Spitz, who was named 33rd best athlete of the 20th century by ESPN Sports Century.

- 5.** International Boxing Hall of Fame, [Max Baer](#) (article)

This article provides an overview of Max Baer's Hall of Fame boxing career.