

The Story about the famous „Matkot“-players in Israel

## **Meshugas for Matkot**

*With summer just around the corner, Metro sits down with two „Fathers of Israel’s national sport*

by Jerrin K. Zumberg, Jerusalem Post –April 2009

Before 65-years-old Amnon Nissim drifts off to sleep each night, he meticulously packs a gym bag and sets the alarm so he’ll be at Gordon Beach in Tel Aviv by 6 a.m. sharp for the morning matkot match.

„At night, I dream about next day’s game,“ he says with the enthusiasm of a young boy. The fit, tanned Nissim has been playing Matkot, a distinctly Israeli game of beachside paddle ball, for 60 years.

Matkot isn’t just a game for the unmarried only child of Yemenite immigrants – it’s life’s mission.

With the help of his best friend Morris Zadok, the self appointed „father of matkot in Israel,“ Nissim has turned his apartment into the unofficial „Matkot Museum of Israel“. It also functions as the epicenter of the matkot-crazed community for social events and mingling.

He estimates 300-500 „hard-core“ year-round matkot players, as Zadok describes them, are central to his and Nissim’s mission –not only to formalize the game through set rules, competitions and organized community events, but to make it an official Olympic event.

„It’s the most Israeli game there is,“ says Zadok, 59. „It’s a game of peace and togetherness where you aren’t playing against one another, but as partners to reach a goal.

Zadok’s web site is devoted to matkot and promoting his Bat Yam sporting goods store. A letter to prospective players about matkot says, “It’s not just a game, but a way of life, and an excuse to go down to the beach- There’s no better way to get a tan, meet friends and let out some energy.”

The six-year partnership between Zadok and Nissim represents the marriage of the two matkot Meccas in Israel: Tel Aviv and Bat Yam. By joining forces, they centralized where the serious players come to watch rubber balls at each other at menacing speeds.

The flat, wide boardwalk pavement below the Crown Plaza hotel on Tel Aviv's Gordon Beach has been the site of matkot play for almost 70 years and now hosts the best players in the country on a regular basis.

Ever since he first picked up a paddle at age six, Nissim has been part of the establishment of the game. Growing up in Neve Tzedek, once a sandy developing community in south Tel Aviv but now an upscale, boutique-lined oasis, he capitalized on the neighborhood's closeness to the beach to develop his game. Not only did he refuse to put his paddle down for the next six decades. He has devoted his life to the wooden rackets. He calls himself „Amnon the Cannon.“ Zadok is „Morris the Great“.

The two men have introduced rules, organized tournaments and energized the sport's close-knit community, making great strides in the last decade. In 2005, formal annual competition held in Natanya. However, neither man competes, as they both prefer matkot in its purest form – no score and leisurely play on the beach.

To formalize the game for serious players, Zadok created a set of rules. Round of three minutes are spent hitting the ball. Each team of two players stands eight meters apart, trying to get as many hits as possible. Each hit, or point, is earned by the ball going back and forth once. The national record is 178 hits in the three-minute window.

Zadok says that beyond those that „would die over matkot“, the summer sees an estimated 6,000 players filling up Israel's 168-kilometer coastline. Zadok credits the country's geography for allowing matkot to develop as it has, along with the balmy weather and beach culture.

What is unclear, however, is the origin of the game, which remains blurry despite Zadok's best efforts to pinpoint them. He says the only historical clue can be traced to a 1932 Nachum Gutman illustration that was discovered in a museum dedicated to the artist just a few blocks away from Nissim's apartment. In the drawing of a Tel Aviv beach scene, two young men holding rounded paddles are hitting a ball back and forth, looking remarkably like the players on Gordon Beach today. There are similar hobby sports in Brazil and France, Zadok says, but no other country has taken it to the extreme of calling it the „national sport.“

„People really enjoy something that's so Israeli,“ Zadok says of the game's general popularity and the interest shown in Zadok and Nissim's efforts by the Hebrew and European press.

But beyond their attempts to institutionalize the game . a passion for Matkot goes unbridled in Zadok and Nissim's daily lives. The two energetic athletes wear matching necklaces with charms in the shape of a matkot paddle. Zadok even met his wife through the game – a ball tumbled away and she picked it up for him. Many years later, hooked on the same sport. She had a song written and recorded for Zadok and Nissim. Describing their friendship and love for matkot. Six years ago, Zadok and Nissim had heard of one another through the matkot community grapevine, but never met. When Zadok learned that Nissim supposedly had more matkot paddles in his home than Zadok had in his shop, they finally set up meeting.

In March 2002, Zadok entered Nissim's Neve Thedek apartment and found a diligently arranged shrine to matkot paddles, balls and equipment in a two-meter-high glass case.

„Immediately I knew this was a guy I could get along with,“ Zadok says. He considered the memorabilia he has stocked away at his mother's and his own house, his shop, and the 500 paddles he had broken in his career that were lining the walls of a Bat Yam restaurant, took a look around the large room and tall ceilings and proposed a museum.

By then retired from a career in the IDF, Nissim was eager to comply and dedicated himself to the idea of the museum. The suggestion of matkot paddles lining the bedroom wall was a dream waiting to come true.

Six years later, after many late night working with Zadok to get the job done, his apartment doesn't have much space that isn't covered with paddles, homemade t-shirts, memorializing the „greats“, hundreds of related photographs, drawings and trophies. Almost hidden among the decorations are Nissim bed and living rooms boat matkot paddles made of Marble, turned into mirrors and clocks, and dozens bearing written names, dedications and sports insignias. The **purported** largest matkot paddle in the world (2,3 meters long) rest in the middle of the main room.

The windows of the second floor apartment are framed with colorful matkot paddles and lamppost at 61 Rechov Shabazi points out the museum's location and is decorated with sparkling paddles that form a stool on which visitors can sit and rest. Warning: Sitting on the stool often means an invitation from Nissim into the museum is forthcoming.

Zadok says the plan is to find a place where the items can be displayed properly and they are in negotiations with the Tel Aviv Municipality and various possible locations, but Nissim isn't bothered for now.

„One day Ammon went into the bathroom and came out looking at me with long face,“ Zadok explains. At the time there were no matkot decorations in that one room, so Zadok immediately took a few markers and started drawing matkot illustrations on the bathroom walls.

„If I don't collect. Who will?“ Nissim asks- The museum requires no fees, earns no money and has no investors.

Their only concern, they say, is who will continue the legacy they are trying to build for the next generation of players. But Nissim nods vigorously as Zadok says, „We do everything from our hearts and with love, just for enjoyment of it.“

*Web site (Hebrew): [olympicsport.area.co.il](http://olympicsport.area.co.il); Museum 61 Rechov Shabazi, Neve Tzedek; call to arrange a visit: Morris Zadok - 052 277-7188*

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