

Fighting for Rishon, Playing for Peace

By [Ira Moskowitz](#)

It was Ivy League night at the Premier League: A contingent of about 40 Yale alumni crowded into the sports auditorium in Rishon Letzion on Sunday to cheer for Matt Minoff, a former Yale basketball captain, now wearing the orange colors of Maccabi Rishon. In his second year as a professional player in Israel, Minoff has become a key member of the feisty team that outgunned perennial champs Maccabi Tel Aviv on Sunday.

Basketball brought Minoff from his hometown of Cherry Hill, New Jersey to Israel after graduating from Yale in 2004. He began thinking of a professional career in Israel after participating in the 2001 Maccabiah Games. "It was the first time I was exposed to the idea that a Jewish person could come to Israel, make aliyah and play basketball here as a professional. There were a few guys on the [U.S. Maccabiah] team who were already playing here and they did a really good job of selling it," he explains. "I kind of knew that this was something that I would probably want to at least try."

Minoff had visited Israel once before, on a confirmation trip organized by his local Conservative synagogue in 1996. This initial trip "definitely piqued my interest," he says. "But if you were to pick a Jewish person to come to Israel, it probably wouldn't have been me," Minoff notes with a wide grin.

"To be honest, what brought me here was basketball, the opportunity to play professionally," he says. Minoff, a 6'6" forward, was offered contracts to play professionally in Denmark and Ireland, but wanted to "test the waters" in Israel, where the level of play is higher. He came to Israel and began contacting Premier League teams, and practiced with several - including Maccabi Tel Aviv - before signing with Maccabi Rishon.

Minoff says he completed his paperwork for Israeli citizenship before coming to Israel, realizing that it would be easier to win a spot on a team as an Israeli because of the rule limiting the number of foreign players. Even so, "there was a time I wasn't sure I was going to get a spot on a first-division team, which would have been very disappointing, because I knew that if a team gave me a chance I would prove myself and be a contributor."

Rishon signed Minoff, but during the first half of his maiden season he saw little playing time. However, after Guy Goodes became head coach in mid-season, Minoff started getting more playing time and proved his worth to the team, which asked him to re-sign for a second season. "I felt really proud," Minoff says. "From basically being the last guy on the bench, I had become someone they wanted back."

Minoff has thoroughly enjoyed playing in Israel. "Guys in this league are NBA-caliber

players and it's fun to play against people at that level." And he speaks highly of his coaches and teammates at Rishon: "We've really built a unique team - all a bunch of fighters. I don't know if we have the most talent, but we play together, we play hard and we play to win."

The team is currently in third place and focused on making the final-four season finale. This would be a "huge achievement for us," Minoff says. "And once you're there, anything can happen."

Playing together

Minoff has not yet decided about his plans for next year and "almost definitely" plans to return to the U.S. eventually. Meanwhile, he is helping to establish youth basketball programs in Israel and the West Bank through the U.S.-based Playing for Peace organization, which also operates in Ireland and South Africa. In fact, before coming to Israel, Minoff was offered a job working for the organization in South Africa. "I told them I wanted to be involved somehow, but that I was going to Israel. When I got here, I quickly realized that this was a place that needed something like Playing for Peace."

Minoff and Ryan Lexer, a fellow American who currently plays for Hapoel Holon, launched the Middle East branch of Playing for Peace in August with a one-week overnight camp for 100 Israeli teenagers - 50 Arabs and 50 Jews. A group of seven coaches from the U.S., including NBA coaches Herb Brown and Don Casey, came to work with the campers, together with a local staff of five Jews and five Arabs.

Playing for Peace is now running a yearlong program in various Jewish and Arab neighborhoods in Israel, as well as in the West Bank. In addition to practicing twice a week in their own communities with coaches hired and trained by Playing for Peace, the aspiring basketball players also meet for biweekly clinics with peers from the other side of the cultural divide.

According to the organization's Web site, its basic premise is that "children who play together can learn to live together." Or as Minoff says: "My hope is that we can give the kids in our program the opportunity to meet someone they never would have met before." And why is basketball particularly suited for teaching the life skills the program seeks to impart? Minoff: "Basketball is unique because of the intimacy of the team, with everyone involved in every play - and you really need to work together to achieve victory."