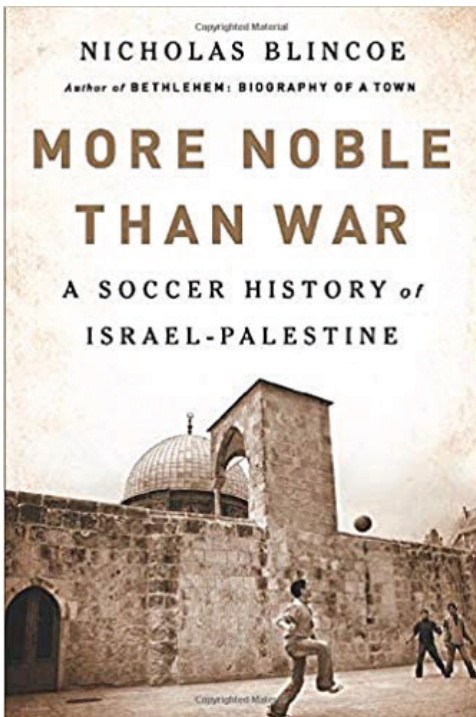


Footballmania

Review by Roberto Mazza

Nicholas Blincoe, *More Noble than War: A Soccer History of Israel-Palestine*. 304 pages. New York: Bold Type Books, 2019. \$16.99 paperback. \$2.99 ebook.



Keywords

Football; Beitar; Maccabbi; FIFA; sports.

What can one learn from a football game? Football is certainly bigger than the game itself and is often a metaphor projecting reality on a pitch. Nicholas Blincoe, playwright and screenwriter, had been living in Palestine, mainly in Bethlehem, for a number of years and by 2004 had become a football fan. Blincoe not only developed a love for the game but, more importantly, an interest in the history of football in Palestine. While the work of Issam Khalidi on the history of sport and football in Palestine remains unparalleled,¹ the recent work of Blincoe is an interesting and entertaining narrative that discusses both the history and the contemporary question of football in Palestine and Israel.

The first part of his *More Noble than War* is an historical account of the development of football in Palestine from the late Ottoman period through the Mandate and the creation of the State of Israel. The second part of the book is a contemporary journey through Israeli-Palestinian football (Palestinian football in the West Bank and Gaza is only briefly mentioned) that illuminates the complexities beyond the game. The second section is also more engaging as Blincoe recounts his trips observing various teams over recent years. He reflects on the question of Palestinian players playing for Israeli teams and Palestinian teams playing in Israeli competitions – and the matter of racism, especially as exhibited by the supporters of the Beitar Jerusalem team, also known as “La Familia.”

Football arrived in Palestine with British missionaries in the early nineteenth century, but the game did not develop until the beginning of the twentieth century when the first team was created at St. George's Anglican School in Jerusalem in 1908. The outbreak of the First World War halted football games, and then, following Britain's conquest of Palestine and the establishment of the Mandate in 1920, football became an arena for the emerging division between Palestinians and Zionists. The story told by Blincoe reveals that there were two football scenes in Palestine, one played by Palestinians and one by Zionist settlers, with little if any interaction between them. The British attempts to administer a multiethnic and multireligious country while at the same time favoring the Zionists, indeed also impacted this area.

The example of Alfred Mond, a football enthusiast and retired parliamentary member, demonstrates the extent of British commitment towards the Zionist cause even in the sports arena. Mond sponsored the application to the world football governing body FIFA of the Maccabi organization, which would have represented football in Palestine. While the application was rejected, this anecdotal story shows that Palestinians would have had an even more difficult time with admittance to FIFA.

The detailed story of football in Palestine, presented by Blincoe in nineteen chapters in the first part of his work, contextualizes the emergence and competition between two organizations, Zionist and Palestinian. While the British certainly played a major role fostering the former, this story also marked the relationship between football teams and fans post-1948. Two of the most fascinating stories to follow are those of Yosef Yekutieli, the founder of Zionist-Israeli football, and Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky, the ideologue who led Zionist football to adopt, to some extent, a fascist ideology, such as that represented by the Beitar organization and today by Beitar Jerusalem, the team that does not allow Arabs.

Blincoe's account of his personal journey through Israeli-Palestinian football focuses on the issues facing Palestinians living in Israel and the ways in which they negotiated their identity and presence on the pitch and in the organization of Israeli football. The author notes that the language of football is Hebrew, even for Palestinian teams, an important consideration in light of the fact that out of 221 teams in the Israeli leagues, ninety are Palestinian, or a full 40 percent of the leagues. Israeli media and politicians often point this out to show what Israel should become. This was noted during discussions of Sakhnin's win in the Israel Cup in 2004, when many, despite the historical context, believed that the future was promising and Israel could become "a happy place." Sakhnin fans, however, were determinedly waiving the Palestinian flag, reminding Israelis that coexistence is not based on the success of a football team.

Reality, however, is very different and the investigation of Beitar Jerusalem and its hardcore "La Familia" section of fans, shows that while Palestinian teams may be increasing their presence and chance for success, the football world is still rife with racism. Beitar Jerusalem, linked to the Likud and other right-wing parties, has essentially marketed racism and become the symbol for anti-Arab attitudes in Jerusalem and Israel. It will be interesting to see what transpires if the sale goes through of 50 percent of the club to an Emirati group.²

Football mirrors society, as some like to say, and Blincoe's narrative shows just how the situation of Palestinians in Israel has been one of subjugation and limited opportunity in Israeli society. The book concludes by pointing out that although Palestinian teams make up 40 percent of Israeli football, they are still considered second class: many Israeli teams prefer to hire Jewish players from abroad rather than from Palestinian grassroots. Football, then, is just one aspect of the Palestinian history of exclusion.

Unfortunately, Blincoe does not address the way football also serves as a forum for solidarity, diplomacy, or international politics of Palestine-Israel, as suggested by the visit of Barca in their 2013 "Peace Tour,"³ or Maradona in commenting, "In my heart, I am Palestinian,"⁴ or how Palestinian flags feature in Irish football. With football as an international sport, viewing Israel-Palestine through its lens opens up many interesting questions and perspectives.

More Noble Than War is a poignant and well-written narrative – one that shows the importance of looking beyond politics and diplomacy, to focus on the daily and the routine. Yet inevitably, the narrative once again emerges, that even football – despite dreams of it being a great equalizer – is not an equal field and Palestinians, even when they win, continue to be "second class."

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Endnotes

- 1 Khalidi, Issam. *One Hundred Years of Football in Palestine* (Amman: Dar al-Shouk 2013); Issam Khalidi, "Palestine Sports and Scouts: Factional Politics and the Maccabiad in the 1930s," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 63-64 (Winter 2015): 87-94.
- 2 David Halbfinger and Adam Rasgon, "Israeli Soccer Team, Infamous for Anti-Arab Fans, Has New Co-Owner: a Sheikh," online at www.nytimes.com/2020/12/07/world/middleeast/israel-soccer-uae-beitar-jerusalem.html (accessed 2 March 2021); Toi Staff, "Beitar Jerusalem Sale Frozen amid Disclosure of UAE Sheikh's Iffy Finances," *Times of Israel*, online at www.timesofisrael.com/beitar-jerusalem-sale-nixed-amid-disclosure-of-uae-royals-iffy-finances/ (accessed 2 March 2021).
- 3 See Barcelona's "'Peace Tour': Visit to Palestine," 4 August 2013, online at www.fcbarcelona.com/en/news/1136726/peace-tour-visit-to-palestine (accessed 3 March 2021).
- 4 "'In My Heart I Am Palestinian': Maradona's Activism, Remembered," *al-Jazeera*, 26 November 2020, online at www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/26/in-my-heart-i-am-palestinian-maradona-backed-palestine-cause (accessed 3 March 2021).