

FEATURE

Making contact

Israeli and Palestinian youths met for the Ultimate Peace event in Tel Aviv recently, where they were taught how to play Ultimate Frisbee by professionals from the US

• By Aimee Neistat

HAYARKON PARK, TEL AVIV – Thursday, April 2. One-hundred and twenty Palestinian and Israeli youths gather on the grassy soccer fields to learn and play Ultimate Frisbee – one of the fastest growing sports in the world.

The youths were brought to Hayarkon Park under the auspices of Ultimate Peace, an organization that promotes tolerance, mutuality and fairness through Ultimate Frisbee. The first project was a non-competitive UF tournament that ran from April 1 to 5.

“Sport has the unique ability to overcome obstacles of language, politics and religion... Especially Ultimate Frisbee, which emphasizes fair play, teamwork and mutual respect,” says Gal Peleg, director of sports at the Peres Center for Peace.

Ultimate Frisbee, a non-contact sport invented by US high school students in 1968, is styled after American football, played in two teams of seven people each, and combines fast-paced action with a need for exceptional team coordination.

Five values comprise the sport’s core: mutual respect, friendship, non-violence, integrity and fun. But perhaps the most unique element of the sport is that there are no referees – players are responsible for calling all fouls and goals and for resolving all disputes.

Ultimate Peace is much newer, initiated and co-directed by Dr. David Barkan, Dori Yaniv and Linda Sidorsky and held in cooperation with the Peres Center for Peace and the Tel Aviv Municipality’s sports department.

Barkan, a facilitator and social change consultant from the US, has been playing UF for over 20 years and has captained an American all-star team. Yaniv met Barkan when the latter brought his team to the first-ever Israeli-hosted international UF tournament, “Boulaflow,” which Yaniv helped organize in October 2005. Yaniv, an industrial and management engineer who works in marketing and education, had envisioned for years using UF as an educational tool that could bring Palestinian and Israeli youths together. Sidorsky, who managed and produced the World Junior UF Championship 2006 in Boston, shared Barkan’s vision, and the two teamed up with Barkan to found Ultimate Peace.

They began working on Ultimate Peace toward the end of 2008 and



FREE STYLE. This kind of spirit – peaceful and in fair play – really fits in with the whole idea of our project,' explains Tami Hay, program manager of the Peres Center's sports department. (Courtesy)

within six months had raised enough donations to bring the first Ultimate Peace project in the Middle East to life.

The organization claims that UF, by its nature, promotes not only athleticism, but also character and sportsmanship. When the responsibility for resolving difference is placed solely upon the players, they must learn to listen to others' points of view and find common ground. Learning these values through sports at a young age can have a lasting impact on a UF player, says Yaniv. "For years I've been giving Frisbee workshops to various audiences... and I see the positive influence this sport has on communication, unity and understanding between people."

This month's Ultimate Peace event was completely volunteer-run, and they came from all over – Israel, the US, Sweden and Germany.

Wednesday, April 1, the event's first day, was open to the public. World champion UF players from the US offered Frisbee workshops, hosted a UF tournament, played show matches and gave Frisbee demonstrations. But the event really kicked off the day after, when the 120 young people showed up at the park.

The first busload arrived at 10:30 a.m. They had woken up at about 6 to be at the Tulkarm checkpoint early enough to ensure they would get through on time. As soon as they were off the bus, they began throwing Frisbees around with the UF coaches, US champions who had flown to Israel especially for the event.

The rest of the buses trickled in, carrying Palestinian players from Jericho, Beit Sahur (southeast of Bethlehem), and Ein Rafa (west of Jerusalem), and Israeli players from the southern towns of Sderot, Be'er Tuviya, Kiryat Gat and Kiryat Malachi.

All the youths, aged 10-15, are trainees at the Peres Center's "Twin Peace Basketball School," under whose auspices they train twice a week in their own home towns and once every three weeks have an Israeli-Palestinian training session with a "twin village." So some of the UF players had already met.

The players were split into 12 teams of eight to 14 participants each by age and gender. Every team included both Israelis and Palestinians from different areas. Since they were used to playing basketball, not Frisbee, the UF coaches had visited the participants over the previous two weeks to demonstrate the unfamiliar sport and engage participants in some basic throwing and catching drills. But other than what they had at these orientations, none of the day's players had any prior experience with UF.

Twelve American UF team clubs donated their logos so that Ultimate Peace could provide all participants

with a jersey and hat.

At the opening ceremony, Barkan welcomed everybody, speaking English that was translated into Hebrew and Arabic. With the help of a skit performed by the UF coaches, Barkan explained the similarities and differences between the new sport the youth were learning and the more familiar basketball.

After some drills and training, the teams broke for lunch. But after eating, they got back to drills and even played a few matches. "It was hot, they were exhausted, they'd traveled a long way that morning, but they were, like, 'more more more more more,'" orientation meetings manager Rebecca Polivy told *Metro*.

As the day neared its conclusion, everyone gathered around and the boys from Tulkarm performed a Palestinian folk dance, the Debka. The coaches followed with a UF "freestyle demonstration," after which everyone exchanged thank-yous. The players all received take-home packages that contained, among other souvenirs, two Frisbees –

one from Ultimate Peace and one from each team's sponsoring American team, signed with personalized messages from that team's members. By 6:30 p.m. everyone had gone home and the volunteers were tidying up.

But there were two more days to the Ultimate Peace tournament. The fields buzzed with a carnival atmosphere as Ultimate Peace again opened its activities to the wider public. On the fifth and final day of the event, the UF coaches visited the Palestinian villages to promote the growth of UF in these areas.

"It's important for coaches to see where these kids come from and what they have to play with. When you're teaching Ultimate [Frisbee] to people who don't have these giant green spaces, you need to think of ways to support their growth with [the game] with whatever resources they've got," Polivy explains.

Sunday's meetings were hosted on the basketball courts where the youths regularly train. Ultimate Peace invited family and friends to attend, to "gain support, show them who we are and what we're doing, connect and make sure they see we're trying to offer their kids a fun new sport and game to play," notes Polivy.

Tami Hay, program manager of the Peres Center's sports department, said the Center hopes to continue running UF alongside its existing basketball program. "During Thursday's event we watched the kids' reactions to the sport. It was amazing how [much] they loved it. They kept asking if we would continue running [UF] and have more activities like this," she said. "At the end of the day, it was hard to get them away. They wanted to stay there and keep playing with each other and their Frisbees," she added.

Same Qubaa, an 11-year-old participant from Jericho, said he would be very excited to continue playing Frisbee in his hometown. So would Bisan Mousa, 15, from Beit Sahur, who said she planned to teach her little brother to play Frisbee.



'FOR YEARS I've been giving Frisbee workshops to various audiences... and I see the positive influence this sport has on communication, unity and understanding between people,' says Dori Yaniv. In photo: Dr. David Barkan with Yaniv (right). (Ameel Neistat)



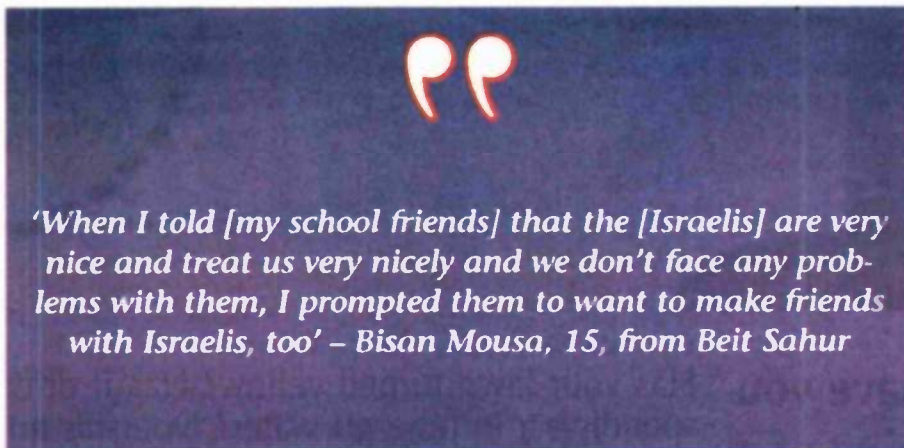
PLAYERS ARE responsible for calling all fouls and goals and for resolving all disputes. (Courtesy)

Mousa said she had wanted to participate in Ultimate Peace "because I believe in peace and I want to let all the people know that we and the Israelis can live together in peace and without violence."

She already had some Israeli friends prior to Thursday's event, other youths she met through the Twin Peace Basketball School. It's also important to her to make contact with other girls via online chat, Facebook and e-mail. "When I told [my school friends] that the [Israelis] are very nice and treat us very nicely and we don't face any problems with them, I prompted them to want to make friends with Israelis, too," she said.

Her parents and family don't have a problem with her playing sports with Israeli girls, Mousa says. In fact, they encourage her to do so. "They say that we believe in peace and that peace is the solution to the Palestinian civilians' problem. And if we believe in peace, we'll [achieve] what we want," she says. "We make peace through sport," because sport demands that players "work together and cooperate with [one another]."

Brit Alon, 13, from Be'er Tuvia, says Frisbee appeals to her because it's a sport everyone can understand, has a lot of action, is fun to play and because of "the ideas behind it - like



that there isn't a judge and the players have to solve all the problems among themselves."

"There were a lot of times where girls [made] fouls and someone called the foul and they had to see for themselves whether it really happened. You have to have integrity and not lie," she points out.

According to Alon, UF is less competitive and more light-hearted than other sports, making it more enjoyable to play. "The American coaches explained to us that the point of the game is to enjoy it, not to win," she observes.

Like Mousa, Alon had already met some Palestinian girls through the Twin Peace Basketball School. "With

sports, you don't need words [to connect with others]. So we connected with them in other ways: with glances, smiles, making a good pass to someone you've never spoken to [and by] sitting with them to eat," she notes.

Alon acknowledges that not all Israelis are willing to connect with Palestinians. "It depends on your personal attitude and the home you come from. In my home, there's a lot of tolerance for peace and Arabs," she continues.

Since she can't meet the Palestinian girls outside frameworks like the PCFP, Alon says she blesses the time she gets to spend with them through such sports programs. She

believes that sports is a good way to learn that "not all Arabs have to be enemies; that they can also be our friends... because you can laugh with them and you see there's nothing in them that you don't have in yourself. If people, leaders and prime ministers see [the way Israelis and Palestinian kids play together], they can see that we don't have to live only in war."

The Ultimate Peace founders hope that the Peres Center will continue running UF in addition to its basketball and soccer programs. "[In these sports], everyone knows you have specific rules... [and] you have referees who make decisions for you. But Frisbee is different because the players hold the power to decide what happens. [The sport] involves negotiation, so this kind of spirit - peaceful and in fair play - really fits in with the whole idea of our project," Hay explains.

Together with the other Ultimate Peace founders, Yaniv intends to take UF beyond the Middle East to other conflicted communities. "We have already received calls from India, Columbia and Africa," he says. As for the youths who have participated in Ultimate Peace here, Yaniv hopes that when they meet as adults, their experiences playing UF will have a positive effect.