

PRO BASKETBALL

Playing in Israel,
Biding His Time

Scheyer Clings to N.B.A. Hope

By BEN STRAUSS

TEL AVIV — Before Chinese-Americans had Jeremy Lin, Jews had Jon Scheyer. Nicknamed the Jewish Jordan as a high school phenomenon in the Chicago suburbs, Scheyer personified the hoop dreams of a people with few basketball role models.

Scheyer, a 6-foot-5 guard, helped lead Duke to a national championship two years ago, but his N.B.A. aspirations were delayed by a devastating eye injury sustained during a 2010 summer league game. This season, he landed where many analysts during his college career predicted he would: Israel.

With nearly a full season at Maccabi Tel Aviv behind him, Scheyer has found his basketball identity and his Jewish identity to be on different wavelengths, if not at odds entirely. Living in Israel has been an edifying experience, Scheyer said, yielding a connection to the country and its people, while on the court he is starved for playing time at one of the top clubs in the Euroleague.

“I’ve been told for a long time I need to come to Israel, and it’s great to be here,” Scheyer said recently, sprawled on a couch in his Tel Aviv apartment. “It’s been frustrating, too.”

Scheyer’s move to the Middle East last summer is inextricably linked to his Judaism, aided largely by the Israeli Law of Return, a doctrine that offers citizenship to all Jews, coupled with a cap on foreign players for domestic league teams. Scheyer, who is 24, plays for Maccabi under the Israeli citizenship he received upon immigration.

The Maccabi president, Shimon Mizrahi, was one of many Israelis to recognize the potential of a Jewish standout and followed Scheyer closely at Duke. “We

watched for a long time and were in touch as soon as he had an agent,” Mizrahi said.

After graduation, Scheyer rebuffed Maccabi’s overtures, instead pursuing his N.B.A. dream. A bout with mononucleosis kept him out of predraft workouts and he was not drafted, but he signed to play for the Miami Heat’s summer league team. In just his second game, a seemingly routine poke in the eye left him with a partly torn optic nerve, a traumatic injury that typically results from a serious car accident.

After surgery and seven months of rest and rehabilitation, interrupted by an unsuccessful tryout with the Los Angeles Clippers, Scheyer averaged 13 points and 4 assists in 24 games for the Rio Grande Valley Vipers of the N.B.A. Development League. With the N.B.A. locked out last summer and still looking to prove himself after his injury, Scheyer signed with Maccabi for \$250,000 this season. (Nets guard Jordan Farmar, who is Jewish, also joined Maccabi during the lock-out.)

Scheyer may have thought in basketball terms, but others did not resist the narrative of a Jewish star in the Jewish homeland. Upon his arrival in Tel Aviv, one local newspaper proclaimed, “‘Jewish Jordan’ Makes Aliyah,” using a Hebrew term for a Jewish person immigrating, or literally rising, to Israel.

Scheyer, who grew up practicing Reform Judaism, had a bar mitzvah, and he led a high school state championship team that had five Jewish starters. Living in Israel, he said, has put his faith in a starkly different context.

In the town of Sderot, on the Gaza border, Scheyer received an up-close look at playgrounds equipped with bomb shelters,



BERNOIT BOUCHEZ/EB VIA GETTY IMAGES

Jon Scheyer, above right, is an American playing for Maccabi Tel Aviv this season. Two years ago, Scheyer and Duke celebrated a victory over Butler for the N.C.A.A. championship.



JONATHAN DANIEL/GETTY IMAGES

and outside a stadium in Istanbul, he witnessed an anti-Israel demonstration. He often eats Sabbath dinner with a Tel Aviv

family.

“It’s not that I suddenly want to pray more or be more religious, but I recognize that Israel

is a very tight-knit community,” Scheyer said. “The life I’m living shows me there is a lot more to the country than the stories about Gaza I saw as a kid.”

The basketball transition has not been as smooth. Duke Coach Mike Krzyzewski said he “loved Jon’s move to Israel” because of what Europe’s more physical style of play would mean to his development. But so far any progress has been difficult to measure. Scheyer, who was a second-team all-American, is averaging 2.5 points per game in a handful of minutes.

When Maccabi clinched a berth in the Euroleague’s final eight Feb. 23, Scheyer was the only Tel Aviv player not to enter the game.

“It puts the pressure on me because he’s a fan favorite and they want to see him do well,” said the Boston-born Maccabi head coach, David Blatt. “Jon will be a

very high-level European player one day, but it’s tough to adjust.”

While the team speaks in terms of his making a home at Maccabi, Scheyer remains focused on the N.B.A. After his lost year and adapting to the European game, he waits for his opportunity quietly, if not patiently.

“I’ve always proved my doubters wrong on the court, so it’s hard,” he said.

Scheyer opted out of his contract’s mutual option for next season, but he will not rule out a return to Maccabi. Should he move on, the Jewish Jordan considers himself fortunate that his basketball career took him to Israel even if he is prepared to let it lead him away.

“I couldn’t have this life experience anywhere else,” Scheyer said. “But I don’t just want to be a Jewish basketball player, I want to be a good basketball player.”

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