

Telling Our Story



Friendships of a Lifetime.

What makes a friendship stand the test of time? Shared interests? Common backgrounds? For most of us, it's both, and sometimes, it's also about defining moments, when you share something rare and special that bonds you in ways that you'll never forget.

Justin Rocke, a senior at Penn State majoring in Broadcasting, experienced such a moment when he and his soon-to-be two best friends – Kyle Beldock and Sam Elias – tried out for the JCC Maccabi Games, an Olympic-style athletic event that annually draws hundreds of teens from around the globe. Coming from different towns and different backgrounds, these like-minded young sports fans might never have crossed paths, but the Games provided a perfect platform for them to play competitive baseball, develop leadership skills, and strengthen their connection to their Jewish heritage. Most importantly, the Games gave them the chance to build close and powerful friendships that they've maintained ever since.

Justin, who will graduate college this fall and is currently interning as a sportscaster for the Brevard County Manatees, a minor league baseball team near Melbourne, FL, claims that the Games and the close friendships he made there are among the most memorable experiences of his life.

"Baseball was our initial connection," says Justin, "but these guys quickly became my closest friends and to this day I am closer to them than any friends I've ever made in high school or college. We roomed together at our first Games in 2006, in Stamford, CT, and won a Gold, which was just incredible, and we continued to participate for the next few years. We really got to know each other and over the years have been there for each other through times both good and bad. The year we were in Detroit for the Games, Kyle's father, who'd been battling cancer, drove all the way to Detroit as a surprise to see his son play. Kyle pitched his best game ever and

then presented his dad with the ball. That was a game, a day and a moment I will always remember."

Justin credits the JCC and the Games for making their friendship possible and for providing a unique framework that brings Jewish kids with diverse affiliations together.

"The Games and the JCC gave us an opportunity to cross paths and connect to friends we would likely not have met otherwise."

"Sam, Kyle and I connect as Jewish friends with a common heritage, though with different observance levels. We also became close friends with other team members like Jack Krule and Donny Secemski, who are Orthodox, and Josh Spielman, who is moderately observant. Now, more than eight years later, we still make every effort to see each other on college breaks or summer vacations. We keep in touch on Facebook, and because we shared such great experiences during our formative years, I have no doubt that our friendships will endure."

Kyle shares Justin's views. Raised in Leonia, Kyle is now a junior at Gettysburg majoring in economics and pitches for the school's baseball team.

"We started out as 'friendly competitive' during the Games but the moment we stepped off the field, we felt nothing but a deep mutual respect that has just kept growing over the years. We go to different schools and are pursuing our various degrees, but nothing has changed. We remain a big part of each other's lives and it's the JCC and the Maccabi experience that made it possible."

Sam, like Justin and Kyle, remains passionate about sports and is grateful for the friendships the Games and the JCC provided. A Norwood native, Sam currently attends Wellesley College in CT, where he pitches for the baseball team and is majoring in economics with an eye toward a career in the sports industry. "I really credit the JCC for providing all of us with such unforgettable friends. I see Justin and Kyle every chance I get and we share some pretty special memories. One year, when we lost to Philadelphia at the Games, Justin brilliantly fielded a game-saving play—a moment that turned a loss into a win. It was a day we still reminisce about and it's sharing and remembering moments like this that will always keep us connected."

These deep bonds were not experienced by the Maccabi kids alone. They were felt by moms and dads; sisters and brothers; coaches and friends. Howard Spielman, Josh's dad, who coached for four years, shares how the Games hold a special place in his father-son relationship and how he keeps close ties with four or five other dads who coached or chaperoned their kids.

"We had a core group of six or seven boys—half Orthodox, half not – who meshed not only through sports, but socially as well," says Howard. "And we dads did, too. The year we played in California, we all went out a few days ahead, visited Dodgers Stadium, and had an amazing time together, fathers and sons, before the Games even began. Those were special times—times I'll always keep close. If I could turn back the clock and do it all again, I would. It meant that much to me. I am thankful that the JCC provided that opportunity to us—and continues to do so for the entire community."



LEFT: The team at the JCC Maccabi Games.
OPPOSITE: Warming up before a game.