

# Fair-weather friendships

The Jordan Valley Kayak Club is again attracting European Olympic hopefuls to train on the Kinneret during the winter







Ilya Podpolnyy has become the country's unofficial ambassador for kayaking. (Ronit Shaked)

# Kayaking for gold on the Kinneret

The Jordan Valley Kayak Sprint Club revives the tradition of training an international cadre of paddling champs

• By ORIT ARFA

**A**t first, the Swiss national champion in kayaking, Fabio Wyss, wasn't sure if Israel would be a desirable place to train for the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. He had received the offer from Ilya Podpolnyy, Israel's hopeful for an Olympic medal, after the two became friends at a competition in Italy. At the time, Operation Protective Edge was raging on. But as the

harsh European winter set in, the drive for an Olympic gold eventually made him choose Israel over South Africa.

"We wanted to go somewhere for a longer time, because we usually do training camps for two to three weeks in the winter. This year is very important for the Olympic Games," Wyss says in the lounge of the Jordan Valley Kayak Sprint Club on the shores of Lake Kinneret, right before their final Friday afternoon training of this five-week-long camp. With a slew of kayaks and paddles neatly

shelved in this warehouse space, which also includes a gym, the club is well equipped for Olympic-level training.

"It's the warmest place within [a] short distance," Wyss continues. "Also, the standard of living is very close to the European standard – probably the same."

Their German-born coach, Ingolf Beutel, the national head coach in Switzerland for kayaking, was also hesitant at first.

"You know what journalists do – they



make an elephant from a mosquito,” Beutel says. “Sure, [Israel] is not like Europe, with [its] wars and such. A lot of the time [the journalists] make it more traumatic than it is.”

European paddlers are often in search of warm winter training destinations. Switzerland is only four hours away by plane, with just one hour’s time difference, which made it easy for Wyss to convince his Swiss teammate, Stefan Domeisen, and the Finnish champ, Miika Von Dietrich, to make the pilgrimage. They stayed at Kibbutz Deganya, which Wyss describes as safer than many streets in Europe.

As Wyss and Domeisen take to the calm Kinneret after the interview, with the Golan Heights and palm trees surrounding them, it becomes clear that training in the Galilee is not only ideal, but idyllic.

“I like the sun the most. The warm weather, the nice waves and the kibbutz food,” says Von Dietrich, who has opted out of training for the day. They train seven days a week, and while they have enjoyed community Shabbat dinners at Kibbutz Deganya, the concept of one day of rest has yet to penetrate their determined athletic psyches.

PODPOLNYY, 20, a Russian immigrant who arrived in Israel at age 15, has become the country’s unofficial ambassador for the sport. Inviting athletes from other countries to train in Israel during the winter is a win-win proposition for him. This past winter, he also welcomed two Danish paddlers (including Jewish European champion



From left: Swiss national champion Fabio Wyss, Israel’s Olympic hopeful Ilya Podpolnyy and Russian national champ Ilya Medvedev. (Ronit Shaked)

Oryon Pilo) and Russian champion Ilya Medvedev. The Swiss team is expected to return next year.

“I see it as helping people,” says Podpolnyy. His sister lives in Haifa, but his parents have remained in Russia. As a lone soldier in the IDF with “outstanding athlete status,” he has special privilege to take time off to train.

“The athletes also come as my training partners,” he says. “I don’t have partners who are on my level.”

The club’s head coach, Roie Lev, believes Podpolnyy will revive the country’s stature in the sport as it looks toward the 2020 Olympic Games. At the Olympics, four out of the seven Israeli

medals have been in either canoeing or sailing (the other three have been in judo). Michael Kolganov took the bronze for canoeing in Sydney 2000.

Lev recalls the international activity the club once enjoyed in the 1990s, when it was rated as one of the best winter training destinations. Since 2005, internal politics have made it less practical for international athletes to train here. Lev is now keen on providing added value for European and Russian athletes so that the club once again becomes a training hub.

“We collaborate a lot during training,” says Lev. “We do joint exercises. We create a social experience. We hang

out together, go out together. We just had a barbecue.” He pulls out his smartphone, eager to show pictures of the good times they’ve had.

The athletes tasted Tel Aviv’s famous nightlife scene for one night, along with a quick kayak in the Mediterranean, but most of the time has been spent training on the pastoral kibbutz near the lake.

“It’s very interesting for me to see this country,” Wyss says. “Also, the people are so open and friendly, and the nature is amazing. I thought most of the country is desert – and I saw mostly green country.”

Training in Israel is always a highlight for Ilya Medvedev, the Russian champ and Olympian competitor who joined the Europeans for a few weeks.

“Two times we had good parties in Kibbutz Deganya, and for us it was great memories,” he tells *Metro* from his home in St. Petersburg, apologizing profusely for his broken English. But for him, the parties at the kibbutz were balanced by the holiness of the land.

“The whole time when we had practice in the [Jordan] River, after that we have very good conditions because [of] this saintly, magic river,” he says, referring to the Jordan’s religious significance as the site of Jesus’s baptism.

Medvedev, who grew up Christian, even attributes his European medals to training in the Holy Land.

“When I don’t practice in Israel, I don’t get medals,” he says.

Having just returned from Israel, he’s optimistic: “This year, I hope we’ll win medals, too.”



Jordan Valley Kayak Sprint Club was popular in the 1990s, but due to politics, its popularity has dipped since 2005. (Orit Arfa)