

## Dave Blackburn, Venice, CA



Dave Blackburn pioneer streaming at the ISC. First with audio only, then with video – guiding the ISC into self-production – assembling the equipment and leading the production team in the early years, Dave got the ISC “on the air”.

In August 2010, Maccabi USA team member Blackburn was nearly killed when his car was hit by an SUV on an Arizona highway, en route to the American national championship for players over 40. He was helicoptered to the hospital unconscious, in critical condition, with serious injuries all over his body.

Born in Hammond, Indiana, Blackburn took after his father and became a fast-pitch softball pitcher. At the age of 50, after the decision to induct him into the International Softball Congress Hall of Fame, the man who had pitched dozens of no-hitters and stared down opponents on the field found himself in a new battle — for his life.

“Two broken legs, a broken ankle, broken wrist, nine broken ribs and the sternum on one side,” his brother Jay said at the time. “His pelvis was broken, he had a hole in his colon that was torn, a hole in his lung and subsequently, the lung collapsed. It’s one of those never-gonna-be-the-same accidents. It’s hard imagining him ever walking normally again without assistance for a long time.”

But Blackburn managed to battle through. He lived, and he didn’t give up on his love of sports — or his will to participate in the Maccabiah. In July, he’s due to arrive in Israel as part of team USA for the seventh time, adding yet another appearance to his record-holding resume.

“It was a head-on collision,” the 53-year-old resident of California described the accident to The Times of Israel in a 2011 interview. “I broke 27 bones, [was] in a coma for 54 days and suffered nerve damage in my lower body... I haven’t been able to walk since the accident and lost my right leg.”

Being an amputee doesn’t take away Blackburn’s love of sport or his commitment to the Maccabiah Games. “Maccabi USA wanted me to throw the first ceremonial pitch” at the 2013 softball event, Blackburn says, “to be there as a VIP.” But the fact that there are parallel games for disabled people

provided Blackburn with another chance to play. “I got a call, asking if I knew how to play table tennis.”

And so, after six Maccabiah experiences as the primary pitcher, Blackburn will participate in the 2013 Games as a table tennis player. “It’s going to be different for me. I’m going to miss the camaraderie of 14 teammates and fellow Jewish brethren on the [softball] team.”

As far as Blackburn is concerned, Jewish identity and friendships are the focal points of the Maccabiah. He participated in his first Games in 1985, when the US decided to send a fast-pitch softball team. “The US had to identify its best fast-pitch softball players,” he recalls. “I made the team. I was the primary pitcher.” From that moment, he says, his relationship with the Jewish world changed.

Since 1985, Blackburn has come to Israel every four years for the Games, missing only the 2001 Maccabiah during the Intifada, when “the softball team fell apart.”

Most of the guys were married and their wives didn’t want them flying to a war zone, he explains. The last straw, he says, was “the Dolphinarium suicide bombing,” in which 21 teenagers were killed. “It took place right next to the hotel we were supposed to stay at. You can’t play softball with six players.”

The friends, the experiences, the Jewish heritage “couldn’t have happened to me in another arena of my life,” he says. “I didn’t have a lot of involvement in my town’s Jewish life,” but since that first Maccabiah experience, “I found a way to connect.” Blackburn, with some friends, joined the board of directors at a new Hall of Fame for Jewish athletes in Southern California. “I gave thousands of hours to the community in a way I could relate to.”

“There’s a terrible misconception in the world, of the Jewish non-athlete... It’s hard to imagine the contribution Jews have had on the world of sports.” This is why he’s volunteered at the Hall of Fame. “Players, athletes, managers, writers, agents — Jews have done it all.”

“The Maccabiah spirit burns deeply in my heart,” he says. Pushed on what he means by that “spirit,” he pauses for a moment before answering. “Wonderful warmth, love and respect. There’s a battle on the field as hard as [in] any other sport competition. But, when it’s over, you feel like one big family. Part of the 12 tribes. One big mishpucha. There’s a different feeling than at other settings where I’ve competed.”

That Maccabiah experience he cherishes is something Blackburn wants to pass on, and he hopes his 18-year-old nephew, participating in his first Games as a wrestler, will feel the same. “I love the feeling of being here for the Games. Having my nephew with me on his first [Maccabiah] after being in it for so long, is like closing a circle, since it was his father who told me about the tryout in 1985.”

Over the years Blackburn has seen much of Israel, including Masada, the Dead Sea and other historic and heritage sites the Maccabiah participants usually travel to. However, when asked to name the place he loves the most, he chooses a location along the beach many Israelis have never heard of: a cave house, built into the cliff — by a man who lives there to this day.

“We asked a cab driver to take us somewhere outside of Tel Aviv and the city, so he dropped us off at the beach, and we started walking... We saw a strange structure in the side of the cliff,” Blackburn tells of how he befriended Nissim Kachalon, also known as the Herzliya hermit. “We befriended the guy.”

Since meeting Kachalon in 1985, Blackburn has visited him on every one of his trips to Israel. In fact, “he hosted the entire softball team,” and though he doesn’t like to venture away from his home — built nearly 30 years ago out of rocks, ruins, and what others thought was garbage — “he came to watch one of our games in 1989.” This trip, Blackburn hopes to see his friend, but knows getting to the house isn’t really an option. “It’s hard to go through sand in a wheelchair... but hopefully I’ll get together with him again.”

Israel has changed over the years, Blackburn says, almost 30 years since his first trip to the Jewish state: “It’s more modern” and “high-tech related.” He describes the visual changes, as well as the changes in government and social life. Nonetheless, he feels that the warmth and love he first felt as a Maccabiah athlete “walking through the streets” with a badge and team uniform “haven’t changed.”