“I Would Rather Advance Without an Asterisk”

Omer Tal was one of the nicer surprises this season. He came with the goal of progressing leagues, and succeeded with a little help from the coronavirus. “We would have progressed even without the coronavirus,” he says. “We were one of the two best teams in the league.”

In these difficult times of isolation, when we are able to go no further than 100 meters from our homes, I have constructed a walking path which I walk a few dozen times in a day. I left the house, circled the elementary school next door, and just like that I have a walking path with a radius of about 100 meters. When I passed by the open basketball court in the school I saw a young guy shooting some hoops. After going over a month without sports, even to watch someone for a few minutes shooting hoops was fascinating for me. I noticed that the guy kept scoring. At some point I called over to him, “Listen, nice shot. You should play in the major
leagues. The guy answered me, “The truth is, I have a contract for next season in the major league.” That is how I learned that the young man playing on the asphalt court where the kids play, was none other than Omer Tal, basketball player for Hapoel Haifa, that when he signed a contract with Hapoel in the start of the season, made sure to extend the contract another season in case of progressing to the major league.

Tal, 26 years old, who stands 1.89 meters tall, was one of the nicer surprises of the season, and I am not just saying that because he lives in the building next to mine and I am likely to bump into him on my never ending walks around the school. This season was Tal’s best season yet. He became a pretty consistent starting five player, with very good performances with very solid output in a league in which the foreigners dominate. He finished the season with over ten points per game, close to three rebounds, and his big bonus, nearly four assists per game. In short, he provided what was expected of him, even a bit more. And at the moment the eyes are fixed on the major league.

You acted very wisely when you added a clause in your contract that keeps you for another season, in the case of upgrade to the major league.

“In the summer I knew exactly what I was doing. I’m already 26 years old, I’m not going to have an bust-out. My only chance to make it to the major league was by progressing there, thus in the summer I searched for a team with whom I could advance leagues. I realized that Hapoel Haifa is exactly the right team to join, because this is a team who’s goal at the beginning of the season was to advance leagues, and that is what happened.”

With a little help from the coronavirus, I must add.

“I would prefer to advance without an asterisk. I am certain we would’ve advanced without the coronavirus. We were one of the two best teams in the league, after Herzliya. We were better than teams who were next to us in the tables, we were in great shape, with great momentum, the team was connected, and there is no reason we wouldn’t have advanced after a playoff.”

Last year, with Kiryat Motzkin, you made it to the playoffs as the second place, and in the moment of truth you failed.

“It is true that the playoffs are their own thing altogether, and you really do start from zero, but I am sure that if a playoffs were to happen, Hapoel Haifa would have advanced. We had a great roster, excellent foreigners, choice Israelis, lots of experience, our coach Elad Hasin succeeded in bringing us together in an exceptional way, and the most important, we were winners all season long. We came back from many deficits late in the game, we took all the close games, we won a lot of games at the buzzer, this winner mentality is the most important thing we would have brought with us to the playoffs.”

How do you sum-up the season?

“This is a season which started in a very bad way, and it changed wonderfully as the season went on. We started the season very poorly, with a few embarrassing losses, we changed out a foreigner, things started to connect, and then we went into a great winning streak. As the season went on, we got better and better. At some point Noam Leish joined too, the rotation increased, and we became an excellent team. There is no doubt that we were one of the two best teams in the league, and we were in a much better momentum than other elite teams, like Afula for example, who started to lose some of their stature. This was a very good
season, we looked good, we performed good basketball, we were winners, it is really a shame it stopped in the middle.”

**Were you happy when the decision was reached not to renew the league and they announced you as advancing?**

“I took this with mixed emotions. On one hand, my goal was to move up to the major league, and I accomplished that. On the other hand, I wanted to do it in a real playoff. The playoffs are my favorite part of the season. There is a bigger audience, there is more excitement. The playoffs is when it all explodes, there is tension, action, excitement, a wild crowd, there is nothing like it throughout the whole regular season. All season you are waiting for the playoffs to win and to advance leagues, and then suddenly a plague comes and ruins all of it. It’s a big shame, but at least I can find comfort in the fact that next season I will be playing in the major league.”

**Will we see you in the major league?**

“To the best of my knowledge, Hapoel Haifa will be a team in the major league. Officially speaking, it was already announced that there will be two teams advancing. In terms of establishing a team, there are excellent people in the club and I am sure they will be able to draft sponsors to establish a quality team in the major league. The major league really needs Hapoel Haifa. The time has come for Hapoel to return to its glory days as in the eighties.”

**How do you pass the time during the coronavirus recess?**

“I try to stay in shape. I do shooting drills on the school’s empty court, I train on my porch on days with a lockdown, I wait for them to open up the gym sometime, it’s not so easy but I am trying to get used to this new reality.

“Apart from this, I study psychology at the Open University, such that somehow the time passes. But obviously nothing is like the real thing, and that is the leagues in season.”

**Next year will be the Haifa derby in the major league. Do you understand what this means?**

“I wasn’t born in the eighties, but I heard legends about the mythological derby games in Haifa in the eighties and start of the nineties. Basketball in the world is changing, it is not the same thing it once was, I heard about one time in the Haifa derby the entire city was shut down. I don’t know if in next season it will be like those days, but I am sure that the Haifa derby in the major league will add a lot of color to Israeli basketball. At the moment we are busy dealing with Covid-19, the club is busy creating a budget to fund a team, and we hope that basketball will return as soon as possible to center stage. Also for me, it is really lacking. 1