

Dis-play-ced

Community, Identity, and Continuity: A Century of Sports in Palestine

On Display: August 20 2026 - January 6 2027

Curatorial Statement

What can photographs, documents, and archival records reveal about the histories, communities, and institutions shaped through Palestinian athletic life? Through these materials, Dis-play-ced traces how sport created spaces of community, reflected questions about identity, and carried traditions across generations in Palestine and throughout the diaspora.

This exhibition will explore these histories through three interconnected themes:

Community

Athletic traditions in Palestine are deeply rooted, with organized clubs, leagues, and competitions dating back to the late Ottoman period and expanding under the British Mandate. By the 1920s and 1930s, cities and towns including Jerusalem, Jaffa, Gaza, Ramallah, Nablus, Hebron, Jenin, Tulkarm, Birzeit, and Anabta were home to football clubs, scouting groups, gymnastics societies, and athletic associations.

Organizations such as the Arab Club of Jerusalem (al-Nadī al-'Arabi), Anabta Sports Club (al-Nādī al-Riyādī al-'Anbatawī), and Sareyyet Ramallah (the First Ramallah Scout Group), alongside school athletic programs at al-Ma'aref National College and the Ramallah Friends Schools, became important centers of athletic, educational, and civic life. Religious institutions and community organizations also established sports groups, youth activities, and athletic programs that brought people together across neighborhoods and communities. These organizations created spaces for social connection, youth development, public engagement, and a collective Palestinian identity through sport.

Identity

The growth of organized football also reflected the political inequalities of the Mandate period.

The Palestine Football Association, recognized by FIFA in 1928, was dominated by Zionist clubs, with the intentionality to assert the Jewish national identity over Palestine, leaving the Palestinian Arab clubs as a minority. The Palestine national team that competed internationally during the 1930s consisted exclusively of European Jewish players, despite representing Mandatory Palestine.

In response, Palestinian Arab clubs established the Arab Palestine Sports Federation in 1931, organized their own competitions, and developed networks that supported Arab athletes and athletic organizations. Athletic clubs became spaces where Palestinian communities developed institutions, created networks, and expressed forms of local and collective identity. Although some clubs were established under the auspices of religious institutions, they were generally secular in character and welcomed members from different religious backgrounds. Through sport, Palestinians participated in regional and international competition as a means to assert their national identity while building organizations rooted in their own communities. Athletic life reflected the broader social and political conditions of occupation and displacement.

Continuity

The end of the British Mandate and the rise of the State of Israel, known to Palestinians as the Nakba, marked not only loss of homeland, but of ecosystems, traditions, cultures, heritage, and social life. Many clubs had disappeared, relocated, or were reestablished as Palestinians had become victims to both displacement and institutional loss. In refugee camps and Palestinians in the diaspora, new athletic organizations emerged. Clubs such as Nadi al-Wihdat in Jordan, established in 1956 by Palestinian refugees in Amman, and Club Deportivo Palestino in Chile, founded in 1920 by members of the Palestinian community in Santiago, demonstrated the need for creating institutions to maintain the strength and rootedness of the Palestinian identity.

Under occupation and conditions of displacement, sport has remained an important part of

community life. Clubs, schools, religious institutions, and athletic associations have helped sustain social networks, preserve collective memory, and provide opportunities for Palestinians to represent their communities locally and internationally. At the same time, Palestinian athletes and sporting institutions have faced significant challenges, including restrictions on movement imposed by Israeli authorities, damage to sports facilities, disruptions to training and competition, and the targeting of athletes and athletic spaces.

Because sport is closely connected to Palestinian public identity, community organization, and international representation, athletic institutions have often carried significance beyond competition. Restrictions and disruptions affecting Palestinian sporting life have impacted not only athletes, but also the communities and histories represented through these institutions. The continued participation of Palestinian athletes and the preservation of sporting traditions therefore reflect broader efforts to maintain cultural, social, and collective connections across generations.

The materials preserved in the archive connect these histories to the present. Contemporary moments of international attention and solidarity, including support expressed for Palestine during the 2026 FIFA World Cup, demonstrate the continued role of sport as a space of representation and connection. From historic clubs and local teams to contemporary athletes competing on international stages, Palestinian sporting traditions continue to carry histories of community, identity, and belonging.

Many athletic organizations established during the early twentieth century continue to shape Palestinian sporting life today, while others have been transformed, relocated, or preserved through archival memory. Photographs, documents, club records, and personal collections provide important records of these institutions and the communities that built them. Together, these histories reveal the continued importance of sport within Palestinian communities and institutions, and the ongoing relationship between athletic traditions, place, and memory.

Resource/Citation links:

<https://www.palarchive.org>