



Former Red Sox star Kevin Youkilis will serve as a coach for Team Israel in the World Baseball Classic.

‘Youk’ swings for the fences with brewery, spot on Team Israel coaching staff

BY STEVE MARANTZ([HTTPS://JEWISHJOURNAL.ORG/AUTHOR/STEVE-MARANTZ/](https://JEWISHJOURNAL.ORG/AUTHOR/STEVE-MARANTZ/))

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Kevin Youkilis tells a story about his Jewish ancestry, his bootlegging great-uncle, and his California brewery that illuminates his hire as hitting coach for Team Israel in the upcoming World Baseball Classic.

It also hints at why he was a valued contributor to the Red Sox World Series championship in 2007, and why he's among the all-time best Jewish ballplayers.

"My grandfather was one of 11, lots of kids in that family, in Romania," Youkilis said. "The oldest, my great-uncle Morris, came to the U.S. first. He came through Canada and then came down to Cincinnati.

"Morris got involved in bootlegging and running numbers out of Cincinnati. He was able, one by one, to bring all his family members over, including my grandfather. Then eventually he brought my great-grandparents over."

As a child growing up in Cincinnati, Youkilis said, Morris's bootlegging history was a rich vein of family humor. When Youkilis retired as a ballplayer in 2014 and bought the Loma Brewing Company in Los Gatos, Calif., the spirit of his great-uncle came with him.

"We have a beer called Youks Kolsch," he said. "On the can we have the words, 'It's legit.' That's our way of saying we've come full circle and now we have a legitimate alcohol business."

Jewish struggle, aspiration, humor, and pride animate Youkilis's story and career. Especially pride. When Youkilis was asked by Team Israel manager Ian Kinsler – another Jewish former Major Leaguer – to join the coaching staff, he didn't hesitate.

“For me it’s the pride of the Jewish community,” Youkilis said. “My father taught me, and his father taught him, that no matter where you scale on Reform, Conservative, or Orthodox, there’s pride in being Jewish. So for me it was a no-brainer when Ian asked me to help the team.”

Before he signed on, Youkilis got a green light from New England Sports Network, for which he will be the primary color analyst on Red Sox broadcasts in 2023. The gig bookends a Red Sox affiliation that began on May 15, 2004, when Youkilis homered in his first game as a rookie. A three-time All-Star and a defensive standout at first and third base, his career peaked in 2008, when he hit .312 with 29 home runs and 115 RBIs and finished third in American League MVP voting.

In 2010, Youkilis was voted the top Jewish ballplayer of the decade, finishing ahead of Shawn Green and Ryan Braun, in online balloting by Jewish Major Leaguers, a Newton-based organization.

Boston traded “Youk” to the White Sox in June 2012. He finished the season in Chicago, played 28 games with the Yankees in 2013, and 21 games in Japan in 2014 before hanging it up.

By then, Youkilis was long past the ironic nickname that accompanied him as a rookie: “The Greek God of Walks.” The moniker was applied by author Michael Lewis in his 2003 book, “Moneyball,” which explored the nascent awakening of analytics. Youkilis was celebrated – and promoted for his ability to draw walks and thus produce a high on-base percentage.

It didn't matter that Youkilis wasn't Greek, or that most fans thought he was, when he broke in with the Sox. Didn't matter that he was bar mitzvahed in a Conservative synagogue. The surname was assumed by an ancestor who landed in Greece in the 1800s after fleeing a Romanian pogrom. When the family returned to Romania, the surname stuck. Which was prologue to Morris the Bootlegger, Youkilis's childhood in suburban Cincinnati, and his Yavneh preschool.

"My mom always told a story that I would come home from Yavneh upset because no one would play baseball with me," Youkilis recalled. "And my dad would always say, 'Don't worry, these Jewish kids are going to go on and be lawyers and doctors. You keep playing your sports and having fun.' That was a running joke with our family and friends: 'Man, how did you make it to the major leagues?'"



Kevin Youkilis at his California brewery.

Youkilis chuckled at the memory. Also, when reminded of a beer-promotional podcast he did in 2020 with actor Adam Sandler in

which he referred to himself as "a fat Jewish guy."

"The fun part of being Jewish is the humor that comes with it," he said. "Adam likes to joke about the anomaly of a Jewish athlete making it to the top."

Wikipedia lists 199 Jewish Major League Baseball Players, notably Hall of Famers Sandy Koufax and Hank Greenberg. Peter Ephross, co-author of “Jewish Major Leaguers in Their Own Words: Oral Histories of 23 Players,” said that historically, baseball has been important to Jewish identity and acceptance in America.

“It’s been a way for Jews to feel more American and for non-Jewish Americans to understand more about Jewish life,” said Ephross. “Baseball was called America’s game for a lot of the 20th century, when Jews were wanting to fit in, and they could look with pride at Jewish players, from the great ones to the lesser-known ones. And for a lot of Americans who didn’t know Jewish people, when they learned a player was Jewish, and he looked and acted like everybody else, and they cheered for that player, and maybe they read an article that talked about what it meant to be Jewish, that helped.”

Jewish ballplayers experienced outward antisemitism on the field until the 1960s, Ephross said. He recounted an incident in which Al Rosen, Cleveland’s star third baseman and 1953 AL MVP, was taunted on the field. After the game, Rosen went to the opposing team’s clubhouse and challenged all to fight.

“Rosen had been an amateur boxer,” Ephross said. “Nobody took up the challenge.”

Koufax won three Cy Young Awards with the Los Angeles Dodgers and a National League MVP, and was revered by Jews for refusing to pitch the first game of the 1965 World Series because it fell on Yom Kippur. Youkilis feels a special connection to Koufax, in part because he, too, sat out Yom Kippurs, but also because Koufax preceded him in the University of Cincinnati baseball program. “I went all four years

[1998-2001], and Sandy, I think, played one [1954] before he became a bonus baby for the Dodgers,” Youkilis said. “We joke around that we produce some of the best Jewish ballplayers at U-C.”

When Youkilis said he regretted not having seen Koufax pitch, I had to tell him of my first Koufax sighting, as an 8-year-old fan. In May 1960, my father took my big brother and me to Forbes Field in Pittsburgh to see the Pirates host the Dodgers. Koufax, at 24 not yet established as a star, overpowered the Pirates with a one-hitter.

“The Pirates pitcher, Bennie Daniels, got the only hit,” I told Youk. “Through the hole to left. We didn’t know how great Koufax would be.”

“Wow, very cool,” he said.

The fifth World Baseball Classic is scheduled for March 8-21 with 20 teams, with the semifinal and championship rounds to be played in Miami. Team Israel’s coaching staff, along with Kinsler and Youkilis, includes former Major League catcher and manager Brad Ausmus, and former Major League coach Jerry Narron.

Until camp opens Youkilis will be in California managing his brewpub. He’s content with the restaurant, which is upscale-casual featuring smoked meats. But he wants to expand his beer production for distribution nationally.

“Maybe someday we can get there,” Youkilis said. “We produce beer styles for everybody. Hoppier beer, but also light alternatives.”

“Can Jews bless with beer instead of wine?” I ask.

Youkilis chuckled. “We’ve got a hazy IPA called Jew-jitsu. Kind of a fun play on words, good Jewish humor.”

“So I can bless with beer on Shabbat?”

“Sure, why not?” Youkilis said. “It’s fermented and has alcohol, so it works. Switch over to Jew-jitsu instead of Manischewitz and actually enjoy it.”

Read about reliever Richard Bleier who will pitch for Team Israel:



Red Sox reliever pitches in for Team Israel

Boston Red Sox fans might feel kinship with Team Israel in the upcoming World Baseball Classic, with former All-Star Kevin Youkilis on the coaching staff and newly acquired reliever Richard Bleier in the bullpen. Bleier came to the Sox in January in a trade for Matt Barnes after parts of seven seasons in the Major ... [Continue reading](#)

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