

By Ronny Feldstrom

A shopping center in Ramat Gan, a suburb of Tel Aviv. Eight minigolf courses are installed on a parking area. Gerhard Zimmermann is holding a bat and inspecting the system. Young families put off their shopping bags and watch Zimmermann's way of putting a whole in one. They might know football, tennis, basketball. But minigolf? They have not heard much yet in Israel. Zimmermann and his colleague Noam Zeichner want to change that.

For more than forty years, Gerhard Zimmermann has devoted his life to minigolf. The 57-year old has collected dozens of titles. He has coached the national teams of Germany, including those of Switzerland, Greece and Denmark. Since 2003 he heads the German minigolf Federation, since 2011 the world federation. He is always on the road to promote his sport. One of his most important destinations: the holy land.

The public perception of minigolf is reduced to holiday and fun, for Gerhard Zimmermann minigolf is a full time challenge, perhaps even a science. „As a player you have to understand where to use what kind of ball“, Zimmermann says. „Because of different weather conditions the material reacts differently. It is a tricky job. It is perfect for people who like to deal with themselves.“

Gerhard Zimmermann reports this story on his tour in Israel. The pharmacist is now sitting in the office of the mayor of Ashdod, together with Noam Zeichner, the head of Israel's minigolf association, which was incorporated in 2011 as the youngest member of the world federation. „We have a great chance of including a sport into society's hobby and sports culture“, Zeichner says. The smart and eloquent business man is in touch with many local authorities, media and potential investors. His cell phone rings every five minutes.

In mid of 15th Century the Chinese emperor Xuande played a kind of golf. Centuries later, an ordinary 18-hole golf course claimed around 50 hectares. The costs grew, the most active players were from upper classes of society. So the idea was born of creating a smaller and cheaper solution. At the Olympic Games 1904 a minigolf similar discipline was introduced. In the 1920s and 1930s many small golf pitches were built, on these pitches were mounted obstacles, fairytale figures, windmills networks. From the 1950's minigolf established in Central Europe. In 2011 on the 3000 German pitches 20 million visits were registered. „That is a impressive number“, Noam Zeichner says. „We will not go that far in Israel, but I know the people will like what we have to offer“.

One of Zeichner's important partner cities is Ashdod, south of Tel Aviv. Zeichner and his colleagues are building one of the world's most advanced miniature golf courses, on a hill with a spectacular view on the sea. 3.4 million people have traveled to Israel in 2011, this number is increasing rapidly. „Minigolf could be another great attraction for our guests“, Ahuva Zaken from the tourism ministry says. And Zeichner adds: „Everybody can play, disabled people as well. That makes our sport from the base very wide.“

From the sixties a controlled minigolf mode was established, with individual and team discipline. On different sizes of pitches the same goal: to move with few strokes the ball into the hole. For decades the Germans are the world leaders. At the 2011 World Championships in Stockholm they won ten out of 14 possible medals. „It is a long way to compete this quality“, Noam Zeichner says with a smile. He is interested in coaching talents and offer them a friendly environment on the several planned minigolf courses around the country. Zeichner wants to include the sports system into an event culture: „Our guests and players should feel like home“, he says. „Therefore we open restaurants and bars“.

Zeichner takes his German colleague Zimmermann to the Old City of Jerusalem. „I am totally impressed“, Zimmermann says. „It is important that we have different cultures in our federation. It makes the exchange and competition more exciting“. So far, minigolf is primarily a European sport with few branches in the U.S., Japan or Australia. Zimmermann's federation organizes 1500 tournaments a year. He wants to establish a network among government, business and sports organizations in order to create more event courses. Most recently in Turkey, Kosovo and mainly in Israel. But good equipment is expensive. So Noam Zeichner is looking for more investors.

„One of my main tasks is to expand our current 44 member nations“, Zimmermann says. „Some day we would like to become a recognized sport of the International Olympic Committee, perhaps with the big goal in mind, someday to participate with the Association of Golf in the Olympics.“ The passion of his friends from Israel will help him a lot.