

## Pin-free yarmulke closes safety flap for Jewish athletes

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In South Florida, where religious tempers often wear thin, the Kippah Affair threatened to get ugly fast.

For decades, it was an annual pre-season ritual that South Florida's several Orthodox Jewish high schools wrote to the Florida High School Athletic Association, seeking permission for their male athletes to wear the kippah, or yarmulke, worn at all times by Orthodox Jews.

And for all those years, the FHSAA sent back its bureaucratic blessing.

But before the 2006-07 school year, state officials informed the Jewish high schools that they had deemed the pins or clips that keep yarmulkes in place a potential hazard.

Rabbi Perry Tirschwell, head of the 185-student Weinbaum Yeshiva High School in Boca Raton, has spent many a basketball game picking hair clips and bobby pins off the court. Still, he was alarmed by the development.

Formed in 1920, the FHSAA governs ath-

See YARMULKE, 6A ▶



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Kaweblum, athletic director at Weinbaum Yeshiva High School in Boca Raton, found a creative solution to a ban on pins and clips.

## Rabbi opts not to charge discrimination

▶ YARMULKE from 1A

letics for all state high schools, public and private. Because its word is law on athletic matters at 670 schools, it is an august and powerful body and no stranger to controversy.

During the latest legislative session in Tallahassee, some private schools proposed seceding from the organization, which has been characterized as arrogant and biased against religious schools.

Not that Tirschwell was looking to secede. He values the exposure his athletes get by playing against teams from other areas and backgrounds.

But the ancient traditions of Judaism are not to be trifled with, either.

"It's a very emotional issue," Tirschwell said. "This is something people give their lives for. I wear a yarmulke everywhere, and no one ever bothers me. It's one of the greatest joys for Jews in America."

Tirschwell offered to fly to Gainesville to make his case. To buttress his arguments, he contacted the Yeshiva High School Athletic League, which governs Jewish school athletics in New York City.

"I asked the director, 'Has there ever been a case of death by bobby pin?' They

He uses the non-litigious outcome to teach a life lesson.

told me no, not in 40 years and 30 teams," he said.

Tirschwell knew it would be easy enough to argue religious discrimination by the FHSAA, but he decided not to go down that road.

Then Jon Kaweblum, the school's athletic director, got an inspiration that can only be called divine: Why not attach small plastic hair combs to the inside of the kippah to secure it? His inspiration was the combs that secure the wigs worn by Orthodox Jewish women, who must cover their hair in public.

It was a tangle-free solution to a hairy problem.

He did his own field testing, wearing the Klipped Kippah for several weeks while playing basketball.

"It worked great, so in October I started making a couple for my players," Kaweblum said. "They loved it. We sent the prototype to (the FHSAA) and they accepted the compromise."

Kaweblum, 26, who grew up in Boca Raton and lives in Aventura with his

wife and 20-month-old son, applied for a patent and set up a Web site selling his kippahs in a variety of styles, colors and materials, including velvet, suede, sporty denim and even one that resembles the nubby orange hide of a basketball.

"They work extremely well — even when I got a short haircut," satisfied customer Anosh Zaghi, a junior and two-year starter at Weinbaum Yeshiva, told *The Miami Herald*.

The basic model starts at \$10, with the price varying based on materials and quantity purchased. Kaweblum says he has sold about 1,500.

"Once you use them, you can't go back," he said, already sounding entrepreneurial.

Ever the rabbi when it comes to spotting a teachable moment, Tirschwell was delighted with the non-litigious outcome.

"This is more than clips on a yarmulke," he said. "I told the children, 'Don't let this lesson be lost on you. There will be obstacles, but you can keep true to your faith and your principles and participate in the American experience.'"

Staff writer Andrew Abramson and *The Miami Herald* contributed to this story.

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