

Reshaping sport performers' careers: Lessons from the 2023–2024 war in Israel

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ABSTRACT

The war experience (WE) presents a highly troublesome period for sport performers, with severe effects on their lives and career trajectories. In this article, we initially conceptualize the WE through the scheme of change for sport psychology practice (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011a). The WE is considered a longitudinal, multifaceted, unpredicted, noncontrolled, negative change-event, developed over four distinct stages with specific demands and responses: (a) a pre-war stage, (b) War stage-A accompanied by instability and confusion, (c) War stage-B characterized by active coping or regression, and (d) War stage-C; return to sport activity, modification of activity, or retirement. The development of this change process in sport performers' careers is discussed within the context of the 2023 Israel-Hamas war. Thereafter, we discuss applied practice efforts to support sport performers through the WE. The conclusions offer future avenues for researchers and practitioners when attempting to evaluate and cope with this unique change-event.

A blitz attack

On Saturday morning, October 7, 2023, at 6:30, residents were awoken by rocket sirens in Israel. People quickly sought shelter, following safety protocols. It was later determined that the Hamas terror organization from the Gaza Strip had launched an attack, marking one of the largest terror incidents in modern history (Statista.com, 2023).

Since then, Israeli citizens have been living under the shadow of ongoing conflict, with disruptions to daily life including school closures for many children (as of May, 15th, 2024). Attacks have occurred across the country, with periodic rocket alerts prompting residents to seek refuge. The persistent threat of violence has led to widespread anxiety and vigilance, straining mental and emotional well-being.

The human toll of the conflict is immense, with tragic loss of life and countless individuals facing trauma. Emotional responses vary from fear and anxiety to anger and survivor's guilt. The impact extends beyond immediate physical danger to include profound psychological distress.

The turmoil has also affected various aspects of Israeli society, including sports. Leagues have been suspended, training disrupted, and travel restrictions imposed, akin to experiences during other conflicts such as the Russo-Ukrainian war (Pavlova et al., 2023). Uncertainty looms over the resumption of sporting activities, contingent upon

security considerations (Buckingham, 2023). International participation has been hindered by flight cancellations and safety concerns, leading to the departure of foreign personnel (Buckingham, 2023; Felberg, 2023).

Reflecting on the impact of the conflict on sports' performers is crucial for effective response and support. While some athletes may benefit from the hiatus to recover or improve skills, others face setbacks in their careers. The unique circumstances require a nuanced approach, considering individual contexts and needs (Henriksen et al., 2020; Schinke et al., 2020a).

As researchers and practitioners in the sports domain, we acknowledge the challenge of addressing these issues amidst ongoing conflict. Nonetheless, we aim to provide valuable insights and recommendations to navigate this unprecedented situation, drawing parallels to research conducted during other crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., di Fronso et al., 2022; Henriksen et al., 2020; Pillay et al., 2020). Amidst uncertainty, we endeavor to contribute meaningfully to understanding and mitigating the impact of the current conflict on sports and athletes.

Our study here represents a pioneering effort in proposing conceptual and practical recommendations regarding the impact of conflict on sports performers' careers in contemporary times. Few studies have deepened into athletes' experiences during wartime situations in recent years (e.g., Micheli, 2018; Pavlova et al., 2023), making this

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contribution potentially foundational for future research in this distinct area.

The SCSPP

The SCSPP (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011a) portrays the athletic career as highly dynamic, characterized by the appearance of several types of change-events that can disrupt the athletic engagement status quo, cause instability, and initiate a demand for change. Such events can manifest negative (e.g., injuries), positive (e.g., a major achievement), or moderate (e.g., modifications in sport regulations) emotional profiles, demanding on their perceived significance, perceived severity, emotional and cognitive reactions, perceived control, and effective/ineffective coping (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011b).

According to the SCSPP, when sport performers experience a change event, they initially engage in an appraisal process. Specifically, they consider the event's unique characteristics in the context of their careers, their existing coping resources, and potential solutions. Subsequently, they make an initial strategic decision how to respond: (a) deny/ignore it, (b) cope independently, (c) consult with others, or (d) consult with a sport psychologist. Various factors can affect the athletes' strategic decisions, including their perceived control over the situation, sport motivation, athletic identity, existing coping skills, and available support (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011a).

Sport performers then make conscious decisions to make or avoid the necessary adjustments required to effectively cope with the situation. The "decision to change" is at the heart of the coping process, reflecting the performers' active resolution to make any necessary adjustments (i.e., in attitudes, behaviors, or relationships) required for an effective change to occur. This decision is moderated by the athlete's motivation and capacity for change, the application of the therapeutic processes (independently or professionally), and existing psychological support. Considering their decisions, performers attempt to implement the change in the relevant dimensions of the athletic engagement, thereby feeling in control and assuming responsibility for initiating the change. As a result, they tend to perceive the outcome of the change process more positively. Alternatively, if sport performers do not decide to change, they can feel stagnation and potentially experience a crisis (Stambulova, 2017). However, a probabilistic perspective is adopted, recognizing that various factors can affect the outcome of the change process.

Recently, the SCSPP was integrated into a meta-model of adaptation in sport (MAS-model, Samuel, Stambulova et al., 2023) to more comprehensively account for sport performers' adaptation process when encountering acute events in competitions and change-events in their careers. As part of this framework, the prolonged adaptation track involves the experience of expected and unexpected change-events with specific characteristics which are associated with planned and unplanned pathways, accordingly. The change-events are characterized by sets of demands that sport performers must appraise, then make coping-related decisions (depending on the appraisals) and implement coping strategies to feel adapted. The adaptation process outcomes (i.e., positive-adaptive, or negative-maladaptive) are typically expressed in terms of positive feelings, high motivation, goal attainment, identity investment, performance and professional development, positive relationships, and socio-cultural adjustment. Poor adaptation can be associated with a crisis and a need for intervention (Stambulova, 2017).

The planned pathway typically involves the activation of rational Type 2 processing (Evans & Stanovich, 2013a, 2013b). The unplanned pathway, on the other hand, is characterized by an initial activation of Type 1 processing (Evans & Stanovich, 2013a, 2013b), involving emotional responses and cognitive concerns, and a need to shift to Type 2 processing to make an adaptive response (i.e., make a decision to change).

Samuel et al. (2023) further used the MAS-model to review the research on the career change-events of athletes, coaches, and referees.

Their review indicated that (a) change events and within-career transitions are prevalent aspects of sport performers' dynamic careers; (b) perceived control, athletic identity, and perceived available support are imperative to sport performers' appraisals of change events, (c) the role of athletic identity in adaptation is complex and dynamic, and (d) deliberate decision-making stands at the heart of the adaptation process with most sport performers making a decision to change which is associated with active coping. The SCSPP framework was also used to consult athletes and referees in change processes (Samuel, 2013, 2019).

We as a change-event in Israeli sport performers' careers

Previously, we have conceptualized the Coronavirus experience (CE) as a change-event in sport performers' careers and provided practical recommendations (Samuel, Tenenbaum et al., 2020). Within this framework, the development of the change process was presented along the time plane, the environment plane, the decision-making plane, and the emotional plane. The CE was classified as a longitudinal, multifaceted, unpredicted, noncontrolled change-event. This process resembles a severe injury or illness, which presents itself unexpectedly and forces sport performers to considerably change their sport engagement (see Samuel et al., 2015). Still, unlike an injury, which is an individual experience, the CE presented a shared-cultural and global experience; performers in comparable geographical locations were faced with similar challenges.

Using a similar framework to the CE, we can suggest that the WE can be classified as a longitudinal, multifaceted, unpredicted, uncontrolled, negative career change-event. However, unlike the global pandemic, in the case of a WE the effects are more local and contextual. Sport performers in Israel (and the Palestinian territories) are directly influenced by the situation whereas performers from other nations are not. As part of the WE, the sport performer typically experiences four stages of the change process: (a) a pre-war stage with individualistic career contextual conditions (i.e., stable engagement or a transitional period), (b) War stage-A accompanied by instability and confusion, acute emotional response, cognitive appraisal leading to secondary emotional response (i.e., negative-maladaptive or resilient-adaptive), and initial behavioral responses, (c) War stage-B characterized by active coping or regression, and (d) War stage-C; return to sport activity, modification of activity, or retirement. This process is presented in Fig. 1.

In the pre-war stage (early October 2023), Israeli sport performers were experiencing a stable sport engagement. Depending on their sport discipline, performers were at different stages of their seasons. The ball-game players (e.g., football, basketball, handball) were in the early stages of the season. The Israeli national football team was scheduled to play in the European Championships qualifications (Nachmani, 2023). Athletes from individual sport disciplines were competing internationally or preparing for their seasons. Therefore, in the pre-War stage sport performers were motivated and managed their personal lives accordingly. Some sport performers faced unstable and transitional status (e.g., a transition to a higher league or professional level, coping with an injury, joining the Israeli Defense Forces), which affected their readiness and capability to cope with the new situation. They were required to adapt to these transitional challenges and make career-related decisions under high scrutiny.

In the second stage, the October 7th attack occurred, and the war emerged, and Israeli sport performers were experiencing career instability (War stage-A, see Fig. 1). Israeli sport performers and support staff have faced a significant tragedy. Many athletes were directly killed or injured in this attack (Aharoni, 2023; Maman, 2023); football player Ben Binyamin lost his leg after getting shot. Many were grappling with the loss of family members and friends. For example, former Israeli national head coach in football, Shlomo Sharf, had lost his granddaughter, Mai, who was murdered during the attack (Zanzibar & Borochov, 2023).

According to the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) definition of trauma requires "actual or threatened death, serious injury,

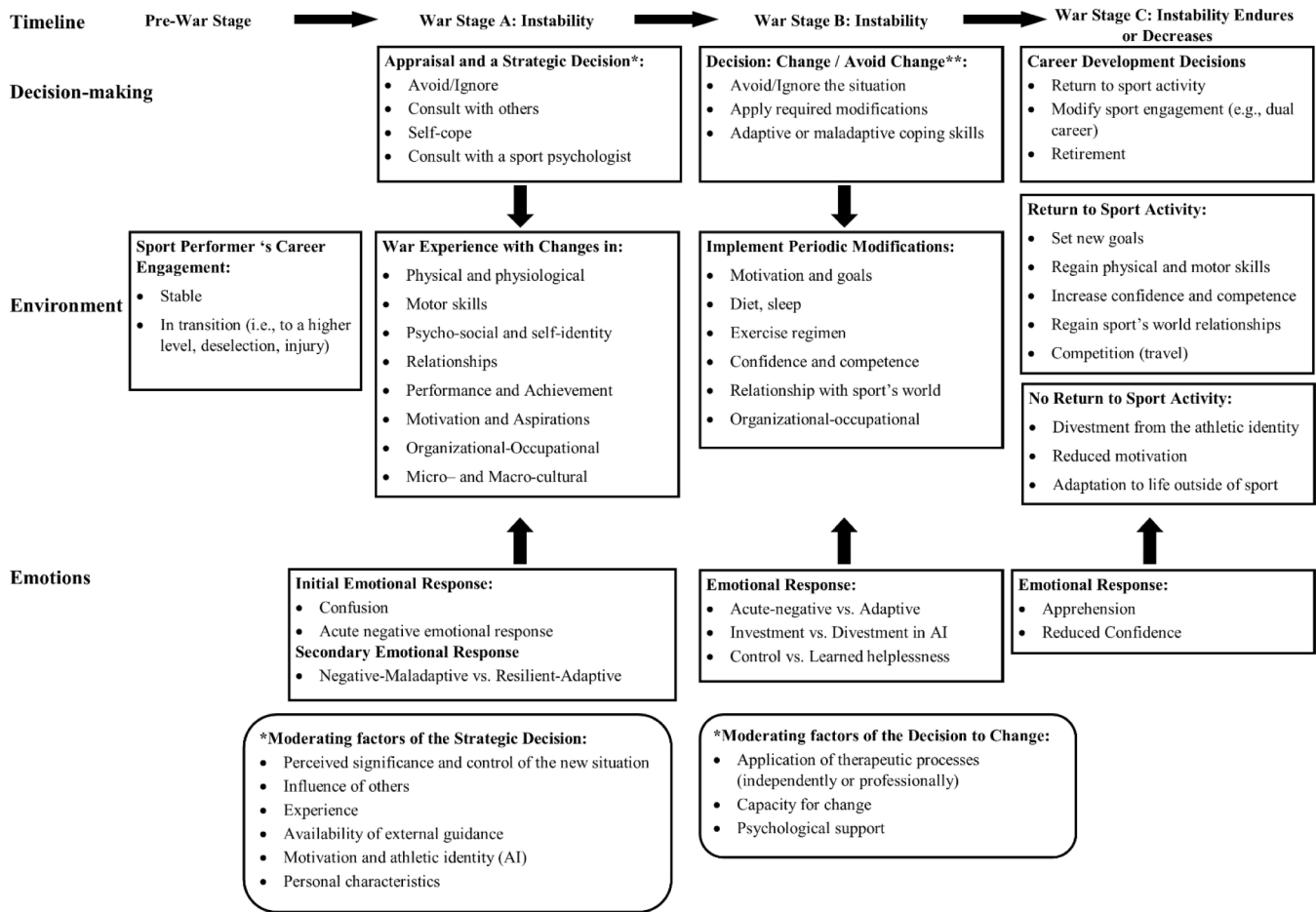


Fig. 1. The War Experience as a Change Process in Sport Performers' Careers.

or sexual violence" (p. 271). Negative emotions, such as fear, anxiety, anger, or helplessness, are often experienced during or immediately after a traumatic or adverse situation (i.e., within the peritraumatic timeframe). Peritraumatic negative emotions typically predict subsequent posttraumatic stress symptoms (PTSS) (Bovin & Marx, 2011) and the development and maintenance of PTSD (Marchand et al., 2015). The traumatic events that occurred on October 7th and throughout the war have triggered a wide range of negative emotional responses (e.g., Lapid Pickman et al., 2021; Pavlova et al., 2023). Alongside a natural human response of shock, fear, anxiety, loss and grief, depression, and tremendous anger, sport performers also felt helplessness and despair that their season was abruptly stopped. We also witnessed expressions of shame and guilt, stemming from staying alive while others were murdered or feeling helpless not being able to help their close ones. Athletes who currently serve as soldiers or those who already completed their compulsory military duty felt bad for not serving as combat soldiers or being able to join the army reserve combat forces.

The emotional responses resembled those reported by Lapid Pickman et al. (2021). The researchers evaluated the emotional responses of 96 Israeli civilians who were exposed to rocket fire during the 2014 Israel-Gaza war. Participants reported higher negative emotions and lower positive emotions during assessment windows with sirens. Furthermore, the data indicated the role of individual levels of peritraumatic negative emotions during a period of continuous stress as a predictor of subsequent posttraumatic stress symptoms as well as depression symptoms. Likewise, Pavlova et al. (2023) surveyed 172 Ukrainian strength athletes during the Russo-Ukrainian war (August–September 2022) concerning their well-being and mental state. Most of them (i.e., 73.3 %) reported stress symptoms and worse quality of life

(77.9 %), and about third reported anxiety and depression symptoms.

Much like during the COVID-19 lockdowns, many Israeli sport performers were confined to their homes during the first days of the war, expecting and experiencing rocket sirens and potential terrorist atrocities. This experience was characterized by intensified feelings of fear and anxiety (Harman et al., 2022). However, unlike the CE, in the WE, remaining at home did not increase the sense of security, as the physical threat was more direct (i.e., the possibility of a rocket attack). Furthermore, many Israelis, including young athletes, were exposed to disturbing footage of the brutal attacks and the kidnapping of civilians and soldiers. The DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) excluded the exposure of people to traumatic scenes through media, television, or social media from its definition of trauma (unless it is work-related). Still, sport performers were severely shocked by these exposures, which deepened their fear and anxiety, affecting their sleep and diet regimen.

Following the initial shock and active survival attempts, we witnessed that coping was diverted in the Israeli sport population to several main channels. People whose close ones were murdered, wounded, or kidnapped felt grief during which they buried the dead, took care of the wounded, and negotiated the return of those kidnapped. Others were wounded in the attacks and required a recovery treatment and time. Other sport performers fled from their homes in the Gaza envelope area or the northern area of the country, due to the attacks, and attempted to find new accommodations. Their attempts mainly focused on establishing reasonable habitat for their families.

In addition, many sport performers focused their coping efforts on volunteering to assist evacuated civilians as well as to support the Israeli Defense Forces. They organized food and shelters and arrived to ease the

anxiety of the evacuated population. Some prominent athletes were engaging in public diplomacy, mainly through social media, to explain what had happened and address fake news and the distortion of reality. Such attempts were also seen by Ukrainian athletes during the Russo-Ukrainian war (Goretti, 2023).

Upon the outbreak of the war, the Israeli national teams were required to make changes to their competition schedules. For example, the men's football national team rescheduled and modified the locations of its matches. They made professional adjustments the players were currently not in active playing form (Nachmani, 2023). Likewise, the judo national team was scheduled to compete in the Abu Dhabi Grand Slam and forfeited this event due to security considerations. In a pre-Olympic year, such competitive losses are even more meaningful (Felberg, 2023).

Therefore, in War stage-A, athletes experienced changes in many facets of their engagement, as indicated in Fig. 1. Depending on their evaluations of the new situation within the career context as well as their experience and personal characteristics, athletes responded with a secondary emotional response (i.e., negative-maladaptive or resilient-adaptive). The latter was certainly not an approval of the WE, but rather reflected an acknowledgment that they can positively or negatively cope with the new situation. A more adaptive, resilient, response was dependent on whether they could properly maintain some of their training and physical skills as well as self-manage their mood state. In a different vein, few sport performers benefited from the suspension of training and competitions; either recovering from an injury or improving their professional skills.

This stage also included active decision-making related to sport performers' initial response to the situation. In this stage, athletes decided to either disregard the new situation (although this response was uncommon), cope with it independently, or consult with others. Among the latter, some also acknowledged the severity of this situation and obtained the advice of a sport psychology consultant. For example, Anastasia Gorbenko, a world-champion Israeli swimmer, reflected on her initial response to the October 7 attack (Gorbenko, 2023):

On that “Black Sabbath,” on October 7, I was in the midst of a world cup in Berlin. That morning I was not scheduled to swim any preliminaries, just the final of the 400-medley race. I woke up to friends' messages telling me what was going on in Israel, or at least they tried to. Usually, I don't read the news, because it doesn't make me feel well, but that morning I opened it and was shocked, I couldn't believe it. Obviously, this was impossible to process, and it doesn't get out of your head, stuck in your thoughts. How did it happen? Why did it happen?

Gorbenko further described her strategic decision to seek support from her psychologist and a fellow team member:

That day I was wondering whether I should compete or not, but eventually, I decided, after consulting with my psychologist, that I would swim that evening. Honestly, I did not think about the race, and I performed automatically, which is relatively new to me. The next day I decided I would finish the competition trying to focus on my strongest race to represent the country even in such difficult moments. I finished third... Luckily during these two difficult days, there was another team member, Denis Loktev, and it really helped that we could share these difficult moments together. He helped me not to think about the situation and we were looking for things to keep us busy instead of being on the mobile all day long because then you read it all and it's depressing.

Likewise, Yael Kadshai, an Israeli Rally Raid motorcyclist, who aims to compete in the Rally Dakar, decided to compete in the Morocco Rally on October 12. She finished 29 overall, and first in the women's category. To maintain her safety, she was introduced as a German competitor, even on the podium. Her decision to participate was not simple, but she wished to accomplish her dream of participating in the Rally Dakar.

She reflected (Gorali, 2023):

It was hard to make this decision, but without this Rally the Rally Dakar would have been delayed to the next season. Despite of the difficulty of putting aside what was happening in Israel, our home, in the days prior to the race I tried to stay detached from what had happened and what was going on and stay focused on the task.

Sport performers' strategic decision was moderated by various factors (e.g., perceived significance, athletic identity, the perception of others, motivation, experience), as indicated in Fig. 1. For example, there were athletes who felt that had already experienced such a situation during the COVID-19 pandemic, and thus knew how to self-manage during this period.

After the initial shock of the first 10 days of the war, the situation changed in Israel. There were still numerous rocket attacks in various areas of the country, but the imminent threat of ground terrorist attacks was beginning to diminish. At this point, the Israeli sport performers moved to the third stage (War stage-B), which required them to maintain high motivation, invested athletic identity, and high perceived control while still facing uncertainty. Their emotional response to the continued WE was either acute-negative or adaptive.

Sport performers then made a conscious decision to change and apply any required modifications to daily and weekly routines and lifestyle, or alternatively remain in a stagnation phase. An adaptive approach also meant that they consumed less news and attempted to remain with positive attitudes and a strong mindset to train, travel, and compete under the shadows of war. For example, Michelini (2018) interviewed four young Syrian water polo players who had fled from their country to Europe following an escalation of the Syrian civil war in 2012. One of them described his decision to migrate from Syria to continue playing water polo: “Yes, and then water polo stopped in 2012 because of the war and there was no water polo anymore. That's also one of the reasons for me to leave Syria. So, I left Syria in 2013 for Egypt” (p. 12). This experience echoed that of the Ukrainian athletes who were forced to flee from their country. Anna Ryzhykova, a 400 m hurdle runner, for example, fled to Oregon U.S., to continue her training. She reflected on her experience (Armstrong, 2023):

In February and March, I was staying at home in my city, Dnipro, and I was scared about the war... I couldn't imagine that I will continue my career. I didn't think anything about sports. I thought, how I can survive and my family and my friends?

Going back to the case of Israeli Olympic swimmer, Anastasia Gorbenko, she further described her attempts to adaptively cope with her new situation (Gorbenko, 2023):

From Berlin, we moved to Athens, and I was the only Israeli there. Many athletes and staff from other countries tried to comfort me, but eventually, they could not really understand what we were going through. In Greece I felt very unsafe, I was scared and almost did not sleep and was very down that week. As a result of the situation, I got ill, and it was difficult to maintain my routine and train. I was hardly functioning. The attempt to maintain routine as much as possible helped and did not allow me to become even more depressed... after much consideration my coach and I decided it was better for me not to compete in Greece, and to continue to the Czech Republic, where my teammate was staying. My coach said that the day I made the decision to fly to the Czech Republic was the first day I smiled since October 7. When I arrived in the Czech Republic my mood really improved, and I returned to full routine. I am training now abroad in the hope that I can return to Israel soon.

The impact of the we on sport engagement

As indicated in Fig. 1, during War stages A and B, athletes experienced a range of changes in their sport engagement, requiring them to

make psychological and behavioral adaptations. Considering the *physical and physiological demands*, sport performers' established routines and preparations have once again been disrupted, mirroring the challenges endured during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Collins et al., 2022; Samuel, Aragão e Pina et al., 2023). They could not practice outside due to rocket sirens and potential terrorist attacks, and they could not train in the gyms and studios, as many of them were locked in the first two weeks (and even afterward in certain areas). Even if possible, they felt it was useless and pointless when facing such a tragedy. Many of them felt emotionally depleted and focused all day long on watching news updates and the horrific videos of the events. In such cases, athletes and referees experience “detraining syndrome –” a clinical condition that might develop when athletes with a long endurance-training history suddenly abandon their regular physical activity. This syndrome is characterized by a mixture of physical (e.g., poor diet and sleep habits) and psychological negative effects (e.g., somatic anxiety and negative mood) (Jukic et al., 2020; Mujika & Padilla, 2000).

Moreover, Israeli athletes and referees were caught in a vicious stress cycle that potentially influenced their eating behaviors (Aoun et al., 2013). During the imminent threat of the first days of the war, and then every time there was a rocket siren, Israeli athletes felt the activation of a “fight or flight” response accompanied by the secretion of adrenalin and cortisol hormones (Smeeth et al., 2023). Whereas adrenalin tends to reduce appetite, high blood cortisol leads to an increased appetite for sweets. Therefore, the sustained stress over days of war may have led to excessive eating (Roberts et al., 2020). This situation made the management of diets very difficult. As their sleep cycles were also disrupted and many athletes stayed up until late hours, their metabolic rates were reduced. The gyms were closed, and exercise was limited, further debilitating metabolic rates. In addition, the athletes' mental resources and self-control strength decreased to some extent, further debilitating athletes' ability to maintain a professional diet regimen during this time.

Considering the *motor skills dimension*, the lack of engagement in physical activity usually leads to reductions in speed, technical accuracy, sensorimotor coordination, and movement flow (Jukic et al., 2020; Tran et al., 2017). There is evidence that only 2–4 weeks of training cessation can cause a significant and marked loss of performance (Sousa et al., 2019). In addition, much like in the pandemic, the longitudinal stress induced by the attachment to the secure rooms, during war stages A and B, might have resulted in a feeling of *learned helplessness* (Maier & Seligman, 2016), with ramifications for athletes' physical and mental health. Such fluctuations in stress and modifications in exercise routines can result in athletic injuries or illness (Ivarsson et al., 2017).

Sport performers also experienced deterioration in the *psychosocial and self-identity* dimensions (Lev, 2022; Lev & Weinish, 2020). They tend to actualize their higher needs, such as esteem, meaning, and happiness, through their athletic engagement. When these are restricted, as a result of war, they experience an existential conflict. This psychological process intensifies in a war situation when sport performers experience a conflict of values between their need to continue their sport engagement and any public scrutiny of such activity. For example, in the case of Yael Kadshai, the Israeli rally motorcyclist, a moral question can be raised: it is more important to compete in one's sport in any possible manner, or is it more important to continue to compete under your country's flag? Such moral issues intensified in wartime, as many Israeli athletes canceled their international competition participation due to security restrictions. Thus, athletes face a conflict whether it is moral and collegial to train and compete during such times, or whether they should better volunteer for the war efforts or maintain their families' needs (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017).

To cope with the new and uncontrollable situation and solve such inner conflicts, sport performers began to distance themselves from their social roles. This process has been demonstrated in athletes following a retirement (Lavallee et al., 1997; Lev et al., 2023) or deselection (Grove et al., 2004). Sport performers might feel a conflict in their self-identity

and social roles during WE. Israel national team and the Washington Wizards basketball star, Danny Avdija, reflected on his personal conflict to open a new season while his family and friends in Israel are at war (Ynet sport, 2023):

It is very difficult. Although I was happy with my contract extension, I am dealing with a tough situation back home. I watch the news all day long, praying for my people, checking on my friends. It's a situation that must be resolved. I find it difficult, and my head is sometimes there, but I must do my job and be a professional. When I have the chance to stand by Israel I will do so.

Maintaining a strong athletic identity (AI) during longitudinal rehabilitation from a severe injury was shown to be adaptive for recovery (Samuel et al., 2015). Likewise, Uroh and Adewunmi (2021) found that athletes with low AI were prone to higher levels of psychological distress during the Nigerian coronavirus pandemic lockdown. Therefore, it is imperative that sport performers maintain their self-association with their sport roles during WE. Thus, it was necessary to remind athletes that their contribution to the war efforts, and to restoring Israel's pride and morale, was through their athletic engagement. Within the Russo-Ukrainian war, this was nicely reflected by the Ukrainian heavyweight boxing champion Oleksandr Usyk (Armstrong, 2023): “I know the guys on the front lines were watching the fight. They sent me videos and I sent videos to them. I know that many boys cheered. This is our joint victory, so I think I cheered everyone up.”

In Israel, prominent athletes such as judo Olympic medalists and world champions Yarden Gerbi and Sagi Muki and rhythmic gymnastics Olympic champion, Linoy Ashram, developed a “Stand with Israel” Instagram videos. Many former and current Israeli international players and coaches, such as David Blatt (the former basketball head coach of the Maccabi Tel Aviv, Cleveland Cavaliers, and the Russian national team), Nir Bitton (football national team and former Celtics player), and Daniel Peretz (football national team and Bayern Munich goalkeeper) bravely made public condemnation statements about the attack and faced the consequences of anti-Israeli public and social media scrutiny (Halickman, 2023). For some players, like Shon Weissman (Granada football club), Liel Abada (Celtics football club), and Daniel Peretz, the situation created difficulties with teammates and/or fans who rather expressed support for Hamas (The Washington Post, 2023; BBC sport, 2023; Ynetnews, 2023). This situation influenced athletes' *relationships with others* and reflected on their future careers as international players, therefore creating a major career trajectory barrier. In addition, most sport performers were required to adapt to abrupt changes in their regular interpersonal relationships, as they were being confined to their homes, mainly interacting with their close ones. Many were anxious to go out or even interact via Zoom with others, thus hiding their emotions. Moreover, sport performers could not regularly engage in a transnational lifestyle and lost much of the sense of freedom they were used to.

Considering the *performance and achievement dimensions*, athletes and referees coped with an abrupt cessation of their seasons and the inability to satisfy their achievement motivation. For many of them, this has happened amid their competitive engagement (e.g., attempting to secure Olympic qualification, or being assigned to officiate domestic and/or international matches). Naturally, the interruption of the local playing seasons and the uncertainty regarding return to compete negatively affected the sport performers' motivation. Uncertainty concerning the future combined with the absence of achievement goals typically results in reduced effort to train and maintained physical ability during time of War, much like during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Pillay et al., 2020)

For the international competitors, uncertainty was one of the most frustrating experiences of the war. Recognizing that their international colleagues keep competing was a very hard experience to cope with. For example, an Israeli senior female couple in acrobatic gymnastics missed the European Championships due to security restrictions, only to realize

that their performance could result in a gold medal. However, for those who were not in their pick form and for those injured athletes, this break could be perceived as beneficial to some degree.

Considering the *organizational dimension*, athletes, coaches, and referees experienced much uncertainty and instability. Israeli sport organizations (i.e., associations, clubs) responded differently to this crisis, depending on the sport discipline and professional level as well as the geographical location of the athletes. While some organizations were maintaining contact with their athletes from the initial days of the war and taking measures to ensure the continuation of their activity, some were very passive in doing so. Several athletes and coaches joined the reserve troops and could not train at all. The athletes in active military service experienced the suspension of their “soldier-athlete” status for the period of the war which debilitated their training to an extent. The foreign players and coaches fled the country, therefore leaving the Israeli teams with limited professional resources. In the lower leagues, some teams began to release the players to vacation without payment. Nevertheless, few organizations (e.g., the Maccabi Tel-Aviv basketball team, the judo Olympic team) maintained practicing to diminish a negative impact on their entire seasons. Maccabi Tel-Aviv, for example, transported its activity for this period to Cyprus (Basketnews, 2023; Felberg, 2023). Therefore, in a time of such a crisis, Israeli sport performers were looking up to their organizational leadership to seek guidance and answers.

Sport performers also experienced stress in the cultural dimension, both globally and

domestically. Globally, they witnessed a battle between supporters of Israel and those who condemned the terror attack and supporters of Hamas who justified the attack and criticized Israeli actions. Anti-Israeli and antisemitism acts (i.e., protests, violence) increased dramatically since October 7, 2023. In the UK for example, an increase of 1353 % such events were noticed (Berski, 2023). This further reduced the Israeli and Jewish sport performers’ sense of safety to travel and compete internationally. As a result, numerous sport delegations were canceled (from and to Israel), leaving Israeli sport in a state of disarray. Israeli and Jewish sport performers were torn between their inspirations to continue their normal activity, their duty to their country, and their desire to remain safe. Liel Abbada, a Celtics player, who is currently injured, chose to refrain from attending his team’s match against Atletico Madrid, knowing that the atmosphere in the stands would be highly pro-Palestinian (Sky Sport, 2023).

Within such a complex context, the Israel-Arabs athletes were particularly in conflict. These athletes were challenged (and even criticized) by both the Israeli and Palestinian public, for not “picking a side” in the conflict. For example, Mohammad Abu Fani, Israel national football team and Ferencvárosi TC player faced much hate on social media after not responding to the Hamas terror attack. He posted the following on Instagram:

First of all, and to make it clear to everyone, I condemn all the events that occurred last week as a human being. I don’t condemn this as an Arab. I say this as a man of peace, who wishes to live in peace with everyone, regardless of race, gender, and religion.... Every time there is an event and people ask Arabs to condemn it as if we are responsible for it, this is unacceptable.... In the end, I am a football player, not a politician.

Finally, much like the Coronavirus pandemic, sport performers were expected utilizing any *technical and technological tools* possible to maintain their connections and training. These comprised Zoom-based sessions, smartwatches, and the use of home-based exercise equipment. However, while adaptation to technological-based coaching was challenging for athletes lacking 21st-century technological skills (Ritter et al., 2018), there was also a feeling of being fed up with the use of such technologies such as the Zoom/Skype/Teams. Many athletes felt tired of

using online tools and chose to avoid such meetings. On the other hand, many Israeli athletes were exposed to footage and witnessed the brutal attacks through social media, which further threatened their mental resilience during such times.

The last stage of the change process (War stage-C, see Fig. 1) is still ahead of us, as long as Israel remains at war. These days, Israeli sport is trying to figure out how to manage the complex situation. Many youth and senior teams returned to active training, and official matches are currently played (some with no crowds). It is unclear if and how the various leagues would come to a conclusion. Indeed, living in such uncertainty is very demanding for athletes, coaches, referees, and sport executives. Maintaining motivation and designing training programs in the absence of clear schedules and goals is extremely challenging (Cleofas, 2021; Pillay et al., 2020).

There are some issues that should be taken into consideration when returning to activity after a WE. First, not all sport performers feel motivated to return to competitive activity, as many experienced a great loss. Some might feel it is somewhat immoral to engage in sports when there is still active fighting, and many Israelis are captive by the Hamas. Sport performers can experience a conflict of values that can lead to increased anxiety and reduced motivation. Schwartz (1992) identified 10 individual basic personal values organized by two orthogonal bi-polar higher-order dimensions. Within this framework, sport performers’ self-enhancement (e.g., achievement) opposes self-transcendence (i.e., universalism, benevolence), while openness to change (i.e., stimulation, self-direction) opposes conservation (i.e., conformity, tradition, and security) (Ring et al., 2023). Such opposite internal forces can elicit moral conflicts and anxiety in sport performers in wartime.

Moreover, performers who choose to return to activity can still feel anxious and apprehension about the situation, which can put them at higher risk for injury and/or illness (Brink et al., 2010; Ivarsson et al., 2017). Competing or refereeing in high frequency, as part of the rescheduling of the domestic leagues, or an attempt to compensate for time lost, might also lead to overwhelming physical and mental demands. In addition, the need to compete in the absence of a crowd can be challenging for those motivated by such factors.

This period is characterized by much apprehension and a need to resume confidence as active performers. Sport performers must set new goals for this period, regain their physical and motor skills, increase general self-confidence as performers and specific skill-related competence, and reestablish their relationships with their sport environment. Then, they regained their competitive edge, either by competing domestically and later by traveling internationally, when flights return, and it is safer for Israeli athletes to compete overseas. In terms of the change process, it is predicted that sport performers who adopt this career trajectory would gradually feel less instability, as they return to the status quo. Alternatively, other sport performers may have used this period for self-reflection ultimately resulting in a retirement decision (Park et al., 2012).

Supporting sport performers in wartime

The Coronavirus pandemic strengthened our feeling that professionals in the sport psychology realm serve as models of resilience and mental strength within their communities, regularly and during crisis (Lundqvist et al., 2022; Maher & Mugford, 2023). When a crisis happens, it is our responsibility to check in on our clients, students, and those under our mental care. While there are several good guiding resources for supporting athletes during a pandemic (Byrd et al., 2020; Hurley, 2021; Samuel, Tenenbaum et al., 2020), we could not find such resources for wartime. Therefore, we had to utilize the applied practice knowledge obtained throughout the pandemic, together with evidence-based resources developed in previous war situations (e.g., Wolmer et al., 2011, 2013) as well as the practical knowledge that was delivered by several mental health organizations.

Our support efforts were directed in several pathways: (a) emotional support and first mental aid for those who experienced loss, fear, and anxiety, (b) emotional and strategic support for those who evacuated from the war zones in the southern and northern areas of Israel, (c) emotional support for those who joined the military efforts, (d) support for those who are confined to their homes and must redesign their routines while maintaining training and fitness, diets, and mental well-being, (e) performance and career-related guidance, and (f) organizational support through messages, lectures, and protocol building.

During War stage-B, Zoom-, text-, and telephone-based short interventions (Hurley, 2021) covered various emotional and coping topics, mainly targeted in attempts to psychologically negotiate the unprecedented situation, and offer mental first aid. We attempted to increase sport performers' resilience by discussing with them their internal (e.g., focusing on a positive memory, being task-oriented, exercising) and external (e.g., receiving support, volunteering, human touch) psychological resources. We also conducted psycho-education sessions to guide the transition from Type 1 processing (automatic, emotional, irrational) to Type 2 processing (analytical, rational, reflective), aiming for better adaptation; reducing anxiety and irrational fear, and focusing on "the here and now" and on regaining a sense of control (see Samuel, Stambulova et al., 2023).

Furthermore, in light of Israeli experience from previous wars, our efforts included working through positive and negative experiences, stress management and control of bodily tension (e.g., controlled breathing, progressive muscle relaxation), identifying positive external and internal psychological resources, affective regulation and processing (e.g., dealing with sadness and anger,), attention control (e.g., practicing mindfulness), identification and correction of negative thoughts (e.g., reframing of fear and anxiety by distinguishing them from imminent danger), and perspective taking and using humor as well as other coping and social-emotional competencies (Wolmer et al., 2011, 2013).

During War stage-B, we further used "cyberpsychology" (see Hurley, 2021), and when possible face-to-face interactions, aimed to normalize the situation by discussing routines and mental resilience while offering empathetic understanding. We applied Samuel's (2013) six-phase consultation framework to support performers in their change process. Specifically, after the initial assessment that focused on how each individual perceived and coped with the new situation, we focused on reaching a decision to change. In the context of the WE, the "decision to change" reflected the athletes' willingness to maintain a sportive routine and lifestyle, despite the uncertainty of when the war will end as well as to preserve high AI and motivation (Michellini, 2018). For example, with athletes who had experienced guilt for not serving in the military (e.g., Lev, 2024), we discussed the idea that their public service was through their sport activity. When they represent Israel in the world of sports they contribute to the national morale and to Israeli international pride. We focused on their responsibility to live and prosper, as Viktor Frankl (1946) called this, "Yes to life, in spite of everything." Likewise, we reminded those who compete domestically, that by engaging in their sport they maintain their well-being and health, thereby supporting their parents' efforts during this challenging period. We also reminded coaches of their role as community leaders and in supporting their athletes' resilience. In these efforts, we provided our clients with a *sense of meaning* that they could attach to this challenging experience and responsibility for their own condition.

While online sport psychology consulting immensely increased since the Coronavirus pandemic and has become a common practice, it has its shortcomings (Hurley, 2021). Within a war context, the consultant and client can find themselves caught in a rocket siren while in session. This option must be discussed in advance, and they must agree on the course of action in such cases, to avoid unnecessary inconvenience. For example, how to proceed in case of repeated sirens that continuously disrupt the session. Both the consultant and client might need a few minutes to gather before continuing the consultation.

Particular attention was given to emotionally supporting women sport performers, because previous research indicated that their emotional response to both the CE and WE might be stronger (di Fronso et al., 2022; Pavlova et al., 2023). Likewise, much care was given to sport performers who were evacuated from their homes or those who fled abroad to maintain their activity. Pavlova et al. (2023) found that one of the factors negatively affecting the life satisfaction of young Ukrainian athletes, who fled from the fighting zones in Ukraine, was the change of residence. In addition, both mobility (i.e., acute cultural adaptation) and migration for training or competition purposes can pose some demands for sport performers resulting in stressful reaction (Ryba et al., 2016; Samuel, Stambulova et al., 2020; Samuel et al., 2021). It is necessary, therefore, to support athletes and coaches who maintain a transnational lifestyle during wartime to monitor their mental well-being and adaptive functioning, as manifested in the story of Anastasia Gorbenko.

Upon returning to active training, we provided sport organizations and coaches with some guidelines and encouragement. This was done as part of our belief that sport is an important social outlet for Israeli athletes and coaches to begin healing from the WE. We therefore "pushed" to return sport activity in Israel. We suggested they set daily and weekly goals for their athletes, focusing entirely on a task-oriented approach and fun (e.g., skill building, reducing competition). In fact, they must be careful not to press a competitive or achieving approach because not every athlete maintains the necessary resources at this period of time. The return of competition can take time, and one must preserve some motivation for the unfolding times. We recommended a gradual return to prevent injuries and balance home, school, and sport. We also advised that some youth could use a displacement and express their frustrations from the WE in violent acts. Finally, we advised coaches to maintain their physical and mental health and communicate with other coaches to gain support.

Within the war stage-C, we assist athletes in renegotiating their self-identities within the realm of their sport engagement, to realize their motivation, passion, and AI (Ryba et al., 2016; Samuel, Tenenbaum et al., 2020). This process entails active decision-making to continue or terminate the athletic career (e.g., Park et al., 2012; Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2013), followed by a need to set new goals and facilitate one's transitional period accordingly. Athletes returning to their sport activity might face difficulties pertaining to travel to competition and feeling safe abroad. Also, they might be challenged by the relationships they share with others in the sports community who oppose Israel or have antisemitic attitudes. As many of the Israeli performers experienced a halt in their competitive season, they will need to regain confidence and mental readiness for competition. Thus, much support is required in several aspects of their return. For those who decide to retire or to modify their sport engagement (e.g., start a dual career) support must focus on the transition out of sport or on rearranging their routines.

Conclusions

This article presents a conceptualization of sport performers' responses to the WE and applied practice considerations. Indeed, to our best knowledge, it is the first article that suggests such conceptual and practical recommendations concerning the WE in modern days. There are very few studies that examined athletes' experiences of war situations in current days (e.g., Michellini, 2018; Pavlova et al., 2023) and thus this article might lend the conceptual grounds and encouragement for future research in this unique domain.

The dynamic nature of this change-event suggests a highly complex and individualized experience. As there are crucial psychological, behavioral, social, professional, and contextual, factors involved in this process, and there are hardly any scientific resources, research effort is required to capture this change-event within the context of the athletic career. Unlike the CE, which was experienced as a global crisis, wars are typically associated with geographical areas and specific contexts.

Moreover, we find it challenging, from an ethical and human perspective, to conduct research on WE while still at war, and it is reasonable to wait before trying to commence any data collection. This is perhaps the reason that we see relatively little research on this issue, usually conducted from a retrospective standpoint. Still, it is vital to examine how do athletes emotionally responded to the WE, how they acted initially and subsequently to adapt to the situation, what was their decision-making process, and whether they used any support resources. This can better be achieved through qualitative inquiry (e.g., Micheline, 2018).

Finally, we believe that the conceptual framework and practical considerations presented can be adopted by sport organizations and practitioners in other areas of the world to support athletes, coaches, referees, and administrators in wartime. Practitioners must acknowledge their own contexts as they have also been experiencing the WE, with each being affected in a unique manner.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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