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Kaiseler, Mariana  (2025) Transitioning throughout a Transatlantic Solo Row: A Case of a Former Special Air Service Soldier. *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action*. ISSN 2152-0712

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21520704.2024.2439273>

Publisher: Taylor & Francis

Version: Published Version

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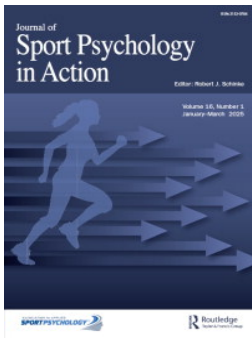
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Data Access Statement: The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author (MK). The data are not publicly available due to restrictions, such as they contain information that could compromise the privacy of the research participant.

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Mariana Kaiseler

To cite this article: Mariana Kaiseler (01 Apr 2025): Transitioning throughout a Transatlantic Solo Row: A Case of a Former Special Air Service Soldier, Journal of Sport Psychology in Action, DOI: [10.1080/21520704.2024.2439273](https://doi.org/10.1080/21520704.2024.2439273)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21520704.2024.2439273>



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Published online: 01 Apr 2025.



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Transitioning throughout a Transatlantic Solo Row: A Case of a Former Special Air Service Soldier

Mariana Kaiseler^{a,b}

^aCarnegie School of Sport, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, United Kingdom; ^bDepartment of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Institute of Sport, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the psychological support given to the first individual to complete a solo transatlantic row of 3,450 nautical miles from New York in the United States of America to the Isles of Scilly in the United Kingdom, relying only on his navigation skills. The client (IR) was a 55-year-old British male former Special Air Service soldier. The intervention was informed by diversified developmental theoretical perspectives, context-driven and person-centered approaches complemented by acceptance commitment therapy and self-determination theory. Psychological support was provided across three phases and focused on helping the client to build effective personal and social resources, increase his cognitive and emotional competence, and plan meaningful social support networks to facilitate a successful adaptation. Autonomy was encouraged by cultivating present-moment attention, fostering self-reflection, and planning for coping with potential crisis scenarios. Lessons learned and the relevance of the meta-model of adaptation in sport are discussed, providing recommendations for practitioners supporting individuals in adapting to high-risk adventures.

KEYWORDS

Adventure performance; development; sport psychology consultation; transition

Every year, several individuals row across the Indian, Pacific, and/or Atlantic oceans in teams or solo, unsupported (i.e., without navigation systems), and aided only by oars. The demands of such a high-risk adventure are numerous and require the ability to adapt to multiple changes, such as being in isolation for months, relying on limited supplies, facing extreme physical and psychological fatigue, and overcoming some of the world's most dangerous and unpredictable environments (Galsworthy et al., 2022). Failure to adapt can have life-threatening consequences; hence, understanding ways to psychologically support these individuals' transition to such unpredictable conditions is an important research endeavor. Despite this need, little is known about the psychological interventions that facilitate adaptation to ocean rowing under real-world conditions, probably

CONTACT Mariana Kaiseler  M.Kaiseler@mmu.ac.uk  Carnegie School of Sport, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, United Kingdom; Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Institute of Sport, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, United Kingdom.

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due to the inherent challenges of investigating such a complex and extreme context.

Change events in an athlete's career are discrete events and longitudinal processes that disrupt the status quo of athletic engagement and create emotional and cognitive imbalances. The athletes require active decision-making and effective coping skills to facilitate their adaptation to these change events and help them deal with added or conflicting sets of demands and maintain a career in sport and non-sport life (Stambulova & Samuel, 2020). The process of adaptation means purposefully addressing stressful situations and includes using effective coping skills in a manner that ensures healthy emotional and physical functioning (Samuel et al., 2024). The novel meta-model of adaptation in sport (MAS model) has been proposed as a useful framework to explain traditional athletes' adaptation to different types of change-provoking events within performance contexts (Samuel et al., 2024). However, the relevance of the MAS model for supporting individuals who are transitioning to a high-risk adventure is yet to be confirmed.

To address these gaps in knowledge, the aims of this paper are twofold: (a) describe the psychological support provided to a former Special Air Service (SAS) soldier transitioning to an unassisted row (of 85 days) across the North Atlantic, and (b) explore the usefulness of the MAS model in explaining adaptation in this novel context.

My applied experiences and professional philosophy

My applied practice and academic career span over 15 years of experience and are informed by my multicultural experiences as a transnational scientist-practitioner underpinned by cultural praxis (Ryba, 2009). At the time of the consultancy with the client (March–October 2021), I was an Associate Fellow and Chartered Psychologist with the British Psychological Society (BPS) and undertaking the BPS Qualification in Sport and Exercise Psychology, Stage 2, to become Health and Care Professions Council registered. My core values are authenticity, compassion, social justice, and kindness. My practice is informed by a holistic person-centered approach, complemented by a context-sensitive awareness of the client's needs while maintaining an open attitude toward learning and development (Poczwardowski et al., 2024). Regarding working with individuals in transitions, my practice is informed by elements of different theoretical perspectives, including the Scheme of Change for Sport Psychology Practice (a three-stage model—stability, instability, and return to stability or remain in stagnation—of career change events; Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011), and the athletic career transition model centered on transition demands, resources, barriers, and coping strategies (Stambulova, 2012). I keep an

open mind when using these frameworks and take a holistic approach that matches my practitioner philosophy, cultural praxis, and sensitive awareness of the client's context and transition needs (Poczwadowski et al., 2024). My practice is also informed by the essential components of acceptance and commitment therapy (self as context, cognitive defusion, acceptance, present-moment awareness, values, committed action; Hayes et al., 2006) and self-determination theory, which proposes that all human beings have three basic psychological needs—competence, autonomy, and relatedness—and their satisfaction is essential for positive functioning and wellness (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

The Case

This intervention case focus on the psychological support provided to the first individual to complete a solo transatlantic row of 3,450 nautical miles, from New York in the United States of America to the Isles of Scilly in the United Kingdom, without using a global position system and relying mainly on a sextant and their own navigation skills. The client (IR) was a 55-year-old British male and former SAS soldier. The consultancy request was made by IR to the university sports science applied performance hub and demanded multidisciplinary support for the adventure. I led the psychology provision, liaising directly with IR, while simultaneously collaborating with the wider multidisciplinary team. The work was underpinned by strong ethical considerations that were discussed with and approved by the client. IR was keen to share his personal story with the public, hopeful that the knowledge could help others prepare for future high-risk adventures. He provided written informed consent to being the focus of this manuscript and has read and provided feedback on it to ensure presentation transparency and trustworthiness.

The intervention lasted approximately eight months and included three main phases that were linked to the row: preparation (three months), adventure (the row; three months), and post-adventure (two months). Regarding communication, the preparation phase was comprised of weekly meetings and email communication, the adventure phase lasted for 85 days, during which communication was by email and/or WhatsApp as needed, and the post-adventure phase was comprised of quarterly meetings. Meetings took place online to account for geographical differences in locations and accommodate IR's travel needs. IR and I quickly developed a strong working alliance built on authenticity and trust.

The preparation phase began by exploring IR's background, experience, motivation, and expectations for the adventure, reasons for selecting the specific transatlantic route, and his relationships, facilitators, and barriers. We discussed his expectations in terms of service delivery and implicit

limitations related to the online mode of delivery, and access to communication during the adventure phase.

I learned about the importance of the challenge for IR, why he selected his route, his motivation, and his decision to search for professional support. We also discussed the health and safety risks and mitigation plans. Although IR's row was unsupported as he relied only on his own navigation skills, he carried a tracking device and basic communication devices for safety reasons and to support progress live tracking dissemination. IR described himself as a sensation seeker who enjoyed physical and mental challenges. He spent six years in commando training, pushing himself physically and mentally to the highest level. He enjoyed discovering new challenges where he could beat his own previous best while considering risks and exploring opportunities. IR stated, "In case of failure, I reflect and learn from it; if I thrive it just gives me the confidence to a bigger project and the certainty of the unknown." IR highlighted his passion for ocean sailing, adventure, nature, and determination to conquer the unknown. I have learned from IR that no one has ever left New York to the Isles of Scilly in a solo row unsupported, so completing this route would make him the first individual to achieve this record.

IR was intrinsically motivated and described this opportunity as the perfect match for his navigation skills, where he could be in contact with nature and fulfill his need to overcome his physical and psychological boundaries. I learned from IR that this journey had a special meaning, offering him a unique opportunity to rely on himself and enjoy his own company. Considering IR's military background, his stories were dominated by strong feelings of camaraderie, a strong anti-individualistic perspective, and the need to put the group first. These are common psychological and sociological performance narratives among military personnel (Woodward & Jenkins, 2011). IR described himself as someone who did not enjoy his own company, so the adventure offered him the opportunity to stop and learn to be with himself in a more peaceful way. He stated:

I want to be able to enjoy the uniqueness of sunrises and sunsets on my own, without being disturbed by negative thoughts and emotions because something went wrong... I want to accept each moment just as it is and enjoy it fully.

I asked IR to explore performance goals driving his adventure; he selected *enjoyment* (i.e., enjoy the journey and be present), *growth* (i.e., personal development), and *giving back* (i.e., helping charities in his community). We discussed how these goals differed from the ones experienced in military performance, which were strongly aligned with effort, defense, and survival. The differences between military versus enjoyment performance marked some of IR's instability experienced during the preparation phase. This was manifested by IR being tough on himself when he faced

setbacks and experiencing difficulty when dealing with frustration. As developmental tools, we worked on IR's ability to observe inner thoughts during challenging times, while cultivating present-moment attention, and non-judgmental attention. IR has defined daily self-empowerment routines to celebrate daily meaningful moments. In weekly sessions, we explored the experiential contrasts between process and outcome behavior, to support IR's reflection on preferred coping resources used and consider more effective options available.

Building on IR's strengths and personal resources, we discussed his previous successful transitions under extreme environments such as war, where he relied mainly on his navigation skills and physical and mental resilience. As an example, IR was kidnapped in Syria and experienced an aggressive climate, while being held hostage and blindfolded. One day, while being moved, he made the most of the confusion and managed to escape and safely reach the border, despite running low on physical and psychological resources. IR's stories highlighted his ability to find a solution, despite unpredictable conditions, by relying on determination and purpose, and maintaining his composure and focus while under pressure. These personal strengths helped IR feel confident through unpredictable times, especially during the preparation and adventure phases.

Building on IR's social support coping resources, he reflected on the type of support offered by each member of his social network and rated how meaningful that specific support was following potential crisis scenarios that can take place during the adventure phase (e.g., storm, injury, lost communication, feeling lonely). Social support planning during the preparation phase for potential crisis scenarios, helped IR reflect on what types of support he needed and who was best positioned within his network to offer that support. This approach facilitated the use of effective social support networks (Norris et al., 2024), fulfilling IR's need for meaningful relationships throughout the adventure phase.

IR faced numerous unpredictable changes during the preparation phase (e.g., COVID-19-related restrictions affecting travel and training, boat shipping delays, items lost). At times, this made him feel frustrated and insecure about his preparedness. Although such events can lead to ineffective coping, crisis, and stagnation (Stambulova, 2017), we used them as development opportunities for debriefing and encouraging self-reflection throughout the preparation phase. IR reflected on his coping resources during these scenarios, assessing the available resources, identifying his preferred ways of coping, and rating their effectiveness while considering alternative ways of coping. Such discussions encourage self-reflection, psychological flexibility, and coping self-efficacy.

All preparatory work led IR to become more confident and autonomous in finding effective ways of coping during *the adventure phase*. This is

evident from IR's WhatsApp messages during the adventure phase after a severe storm that resulted in technical difficulties and his multiple injuries:

I'm now on the move again towards the IOS [...] I have to be honest; I'm feeling very flat after the last week. Any ideas to pick my mood and motivation up? I'm trying everything. But still hovering just off the bottom. Trying to stay in the moment and focus on the now. But, with less than 500 miles to go, my mind keeps wandering. Another two-day storm has just arrived, which I have to admit isn't helping my mood. Ideas?

I came up with [a] solution. I have refocused my thoughts and energies away from the electrics and back to making [the boat] go as fast as possible towards the IOS. There was too much negative energy in the electronics and repair. I've got what I need to make way. The rest can wait until home base.

These messages also highlight IR's ability to become more skillful in applying self-regulation skills; by focusing on the present moment, he independently selected effective ways of coping, while being able to refocus his resources on relevant environmental and contextual factors that helped him build long-lasting successful adaptation (Stambulova, 2017) during the adventure phase.

In *the post-adventure phase*, after safely reaching the Isles of Scilly, IR felt proud and pleased with the experience and his major achievement of being the first individual to complete the adventure. IR's reflections recognized his personal development, growth, and unique achievement which were translated into feelings of being more competent and confident about embracing new personal and professional challenges and strengthening close meaningful relationships. Transitioning through the adventure has been much more than a performance achievement for IR; it gave him the freedom and opportunity to explore and enjoy life in a more meaningful way. My role as a practitioner was more active during the preparation and post-adventure phases, where I created opportunities for IR's self-reflection, active learning, and personal development while offering an outside perspective. During the adventure phase, I supported IR in mobilizing his attention on effective ways of coping, offering perspective-taking and reassurance in alignment with his performance goals.

Discussion of the Case through the Lens of the MAS Model

A narrative review approach was used to understand the usefulness of the MAS model in explaining the adaptation of a military individual to a high-risk transatlantic solo change event. The focus of the analysis is dedicated to the prolonged adaptation track of the MAS model (Samuel et al., 2024). According to this model, the adaptation process has three moderating factors. The first factor is the nature of the event and the related meaningfulness and perception of control over change. In this

case study, the nature of the adventure and mode of completion were self-selected by IR, and aligned with his personal needs, navigation skills, and passion for adventure and nature. Hence, this was likely to result in a strong sense of perceived control and mastery over the event. The second moderating factor is athletic identity (Brewer et al., 2000), which can affect the perceived significance of the event. This was a crucial area of development for IR, mainly because of his strong military performance mindset that presented both advantages and disadvantages for his adventure transition. The advantages related to IR's previous experience, and cognitive ability to thrive while performing under extreme conditions. His disadvantages displayed in anti-individualistic identity and performance goals informed by defense and duty, mostly manifested by him being too harsh on himself during tough times and making it difficult to experience enjoyment. Compensating for disadvantages was a major area of development for IR during the preparation phase. The third moderating factor is the extent and nature of the support resources available (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011). IR's reflections post-adventure highlighted the value of social support networks to facilitate effective decision-making during the adventure phase, particularly when facing critical events. Practitioners working with individuals who are transitioning to high-risk adventures should consider exploring social network resources and the respective functions of support (see Norris et al., 2024).

Regarding adaptation outcomes, the MAS model suggests that adaptation versus maladaptation is determined according to a balance created between the athlete's internal feelings, their beliefs about being skilled and efficacious, and the demands of the proposed event (Samuel et al., 2024). These principles apply to this case as IR's self-selected choice of adventure highlights his confidence and internal beliefs about being sufficiently skilled and efficacious to deal with the proposed demands of the row. Hence, IR evaluated the event as challenging rather than threatening, which positively influenced his self-efficacy and coping strategies. Furthermore, the MAS model highlights the importance of an individual's previous experiences and characteristics in influencing successful adaptation to change. As such, IR's previous performance experience in military contexts, combined with his sensation-seeking personality and determination, were crucial facilitators for his successful adaptation. Finally, similar to previous findings among athletes (Samuel et al., 2024), social media exposition and knowing that the public was watching his progress live acted as a positive motivator for IR post-adventure, providing him with extra strength to persevere through tough moments. IR also valued the benefit of social media in driving his purpose of *giving back* to his community and being able to document his journey in real time.

Lessons learned

As a practitioner working with a client transitioning to a high-risk adventure performance context for the first time, I found it useful to triangulate the information sources to inform my decisions and applied practice. This included having information about the client's specific background and needs, actively learning about multidisciplinary demands and risks involved in the adventure and keeping an open mind about different theoretical perspectives on transition literature. The psychological support offered to IR across the three phases of the row focused mainly on building personal and social resources, increasing cognitive and emotional competence, and developing meaningful social networks for the transition aligned with his performance goals. IR's independence and empowerment were encouraged by cultivating present-moment attention, fostering self-reflection, and planning for coping with potential crisis scenarios. Throughout the three intervention phases, my role was to be a trusted source of information, both as a practitioner and academic, sharing my research findings on stress and coping and translating relevant literature to applied practice. I was not required to provide answers but was available to listen, offer reassurance, and enlighten IR on the resources available for building independence and trust in his decision-making. Usefulness of the MAS model as a lens for the case reflections allows me to recommend this framework for practitioners supporting clients' adaptation to high-risk adventures while acknowledging client- needs and adventure-specific demands.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank IR for member checking and providing feedback on the manuscript. Thank you also to colleagues who proofread the manuscript and acted as critical peers in some parts of the consultancy process.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author (MK). The data are not publicly available due to restrictions, such as they contain information that could compromise the privacy of the research participant.

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