Comebacks in sports are usually seen as feats of mental strength, resilience, and momentum but empirical evidence to support these perceptions remains limited and sometimes contradictory. This literature review aims to bring together sports-fans perspectives, foundational psychological theory, and existing empirical studies to examine the potential mental and social drivers behind comebacks in sports, with a specific focus on perceived psychological momentum, flow state, clutch state, self-efficacy, and team resilience.

Popular sports narratives frequently emphasize team cohesion as a key motivator in a successful comeback, which raises important questions about its measurable impact across different sports. In community written blog articles, team cohesion shines through as a superlative motivator, widely perceived by fans as a decisive factor in achieving comeback victories.[1] Cohesion appears intertwined with collective belief systems and coordinated action, potentially influencing the capacity to mount a comeback. Academic research further expands on this idea through the concept of team resilience, a dynamic psychosocial process that protects a group from the negative effects of stressors encountered in high stress game-play situations. Team resilience involves more than just cohesion, or being able to work together well, it reflects a group's ability to positively adapt to adversity through shared coping mechanisms which helps them to withstand large deficits and mount comebacks.[2]

Self-efficacy, as defined by Bandura, centers on belief in one's ability to execute necessary actions independent of actual skill level. This belief is reinforced through past successes, verbal persuasion, and the interpretation of physiological arousal.[3] In comebacks, self-efficacy plays a pivotal role: teams may possess the requisite skills but falter without collective belief in their ability to deploy them effectively under pressure. Questions again raise about certain thresholds, how many small successes or how much verbal persuasion might meaningfully shift team efficacy during a comeback attempt.

[1] *Unforgettable Football Comebacks: Stories of Resilience That Changed History,* https://breakingthelines.com/opinion/greatest-football-comeback-stories/

[2] Goldschmied, N., Mauldin, K., Thompson, B., & Raphaeli, M. (2024). NBA game progression of extreme score shifts and comeback analysis: A team resilience perspective, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajsep.2024.10.011

[3] Self efficacy in sport and exercise: Determining effort, persistence and performance, https://members.believeperform.com/self-efficacy-sport-exercise-determining-effort-persistence-performance/

Sports enjoyers also highlight mental factors such as individual resilience, focus on controllable elements, goal segmentation, leadership from coaches or certain players, and belief in preparation.[4] These factors mirror coping strategies suggested in other high stress non-sport contexts, like workplace challenges or academic projects. Similarly, the flow state, described as a sense of immersion in connection with an activity or experience, is also often mentioned in connection with comebacks. However its distinction from a clutch state, characterized by intentional, high-effort performance under extreme pressure, prompts a deeper inquiry that this study does not cover. Similarly, the concept of psychological momentum, the sense of sustained success, and these states remain debated.[5]

Multiple studies challenge the belief that comeback efforts generate meaningful psychological momentum. Morgulev et al. found no empirical evidence that NBA teams staging a comeback before overtime are more likely to win the extra period. Instead, home advantage and overall team strength better explained outcomes. The study highlights confounds such as exhaustion, tension relief during breaks, and heightened focus of opponents whose lead was erased.[6] A survey-based study, also conducted by Morgulev et al., confirmed that players, coaches, and fans hold strong—but empirically unsupported—beliefs in comeback momentum. Familiarity with basketball correlated with stronger belief in this perceived momentum.[7] A study of NBA extreme deficits (1997–2022) reinforced these findings: even when teams tied the game after a large deficit, no statistical evidence supported increased chances of victory after. Instead, team resilience and structural factors like game timing (e.g., earlier deficits allowing more comeback time) emerged as more meaningful[8]. Lastly, soccer and win-three-set sports analyses similarly showed that maximal comebacks are rare, and momentum

[4] *Unforgettable Football Comebacks: Stories of Resilience That Changed History*
[5] *Unforgettable Football Comebacks: Stories of Resilience That Changed History*
[6] Morgulev, E., Azar, O. H., & Bar-Eli, M. (2019). Does a "comeback" create momentum in overtime? Analysis of NBA tied games. Journal of Economic Psychology, 75(Part B), 102126. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joep.2019.102126
[7] Morgulev E, Voslinsky A, Azar OH, Bar-Eli M. Biased perceptions about momentum: Do comeback teams have higher chances to win in basketball overtimes? Judgment and Decision Making. 2020;15(4):545-560. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1930297500007488
[8] Goldschmied, N., Mauldin, K., Thompson, B., & Raphaeli, M. (2024). NBA game progression of extreme score shifts and comeback analysis: A team resilience perspective. Asian Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 4(3), 75–81. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajsep.2024.10.011

effects are often illusory. Instead, sport-specific factors (e.g., scoring rules, match structure) and social factors (e.g., crowd size) influenced outcomes.[9]

While momentum may lack empirical support, the concept of team resilience offers a more promising explanatory framework. Other social elements of a game—such as home advantage, crowd support, verbal persuasion, and cultural narratives—further shape the comeback experience. Although difficult to quantify without direct survey data, these influences likely interact with psychological constructs (e.g., self-efficacy, arousal interpretation) to affect comeback potential.[10] [11]

Despite the richness of comeback stories, the empirical study of mental states driving comebacks remains underdeveloped. The role of sporting culture and media framing in shaping perceptions and possibly influencing outcomes has received minimal scholarly attention, particularly in comparing male and female sports. Comebacks are celebrated as triumphs of mental and social strength, but empirical evidence challenges the assumption that psychological momentum drives them. Instead, factors like team resilience, self-efficacy, and contextual variables appear more consequential. Existing research has largely focused on either performance data or perception studies, often overlooking how these dimensions intersect, and has paid minimal attention to gendered differences or the precise temporal dynamics of comeback aftermaths. The present study builds on and extends the literature by attempting to address these gaps. By comparing the NBA and WNBA, analyzing both performance data and media narratives, and focusing on the critical aftermath period following a tie, this research provides a mixed-methods perspective on how comebacks are experienced on the court and portrayed by those who watch it.

A Note on Reflexivity: It is important to say that I approach this research without a personal interest in sports as a fan or participant. This position allows me to engage with the material from a neutral, analytical perspective, focusing on the psychological, social, and narrative dynamics of comebacks rather than on any attachment to specific teams, players, or outcomes.

[9] Goldschmied, N., Lidor, R., & Raphaeli, M. (2024). Win three-sets sports: Game patterns, gender comparisons, and comeback analysis. International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/17479541251333924
[10] Morgulev, E., et al., Does a "comeback" create momentum in overtime? Analysis of NBA tied games.
[11] Goldschmied, N., et al., NBA game progression of extreme score shifts and comeback analysis: A team resilience perspective