

SYMPOSIUM

“Martial Arts for Community Well-being and Health”

Jointly organized by Vrije Universiteit Brussel, UNICA,
and University of Rome “Foro Italico”

Vrije Universiteit Brussel, 20 May 2026

BIOGRAPHIES OF SPEAKERS & CHAIRS

Symposium Chair



Marc Theeboom, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium)

Marc Theeboom is a full professor at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), affiliated with both the Faculty of Physical Education and Physiotherapy and the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, and chair of the Research Group Sport and Society (SASO). His research focuses on sport policy, Sport for Development, and socially vulnerable groups. He has a special interest in martial arts research. He has coordinated numerous national and international research projects, published extensively, and is actively involved as an advisor, speaker, and organiser in international initiatives on sport and social integration.

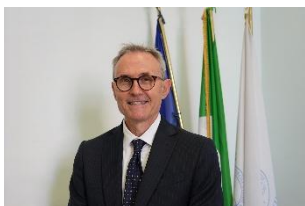
Welcome addresses



Jan Danckaert, Rector, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium)

Jan Danckaert is the Rector of Vrije Universiteit Brussel since 2022, and has been a professor in the Faculty of Sciences and Bioengineering Sciences since 2005. Under the previous rector, he served as Vice-Rector for Education and Student Affairs. As rector, he is committed to strengthening scientific freedom, increasing social impact, and streamlining administrative processes.

To boost the university's strength and agility in today's turbulent times, he focuses on building strong partnerships and scaling up where necessary. Equally important to him are wellbeing, sustainability, inclusion, and diversity — topics he aims to place even higher on the policy agenda. Finally, he seeks to further enhance the VUB's position as an urban engaged university, with deep roots in an increasingly diverse Brussels and Europe.



Massimo Sacchetti, Rector, University of Rome "Foro Italico" (Italy)

Massimo Sacchetti is Professor of Exercise and Sport sciences and since 2025 he is the Rector of the University of Rome "Foro Italico", the only Italian university entirely dedicated to sports.

After the degree in Sports Science, he obtained a Master of Science in Human Physiology and a PhD in Molecular Biology and Physiology at the University of Copenhagen, where he carried out scientific activities at the Copenhagen Muscle Research Centre.

His research focuses on issues related to the physiology of exercise and the relationship between physical activity and health. He is a founding member of the Italian Society of Motor and Sports Sciences (SISMES).



Luciano Saso, Secretary General, UNICA (Belgium)

Luciano Saso (Faculty of Pharmacy and Medicine, Sapienza University of Rome, Italy) coordinated several research projects in the field of pharmacology and has been referee for many national and international funding agencies and international scientific journals in the last 30 years. He has extensive experience in international relations and has been Deputy Rector at Sapienza University of Rome for 8 years (2014-2022).

In the last 25 years, he participated in several projects and has been speaker and chair at many international conferences. Luciano Saso has been Member of the Steering Committee of UNICA for four years (2011-2015) and President for eight years (2015-2023). He took over the role of Secretary General of the UNICA Network in June 2023.

Keynote Lecture: "Developing and promoting good health through martial arts: Cutting with a double-edged sword"



Alex Channon, University of Brighton (UK)

Dr. Alex Channon is Principal Lecturer in Physical Education and Sport Studies at the University of Brighton. His research focuses on martial arts and combat sports, with particular attention to how violence is understood and managed, the anti-violence educational potential of martial arts, and practices of risk management and medical care in combat sports. His earlier work examined gender relations, identity, and inclusion in martial arts contexts.

He is the founding chair of the Martial Arts Studies Association and former editor-in-chief of the *Martial Arts Studies* journal, and regularly works with sports organisations, NGOs, and media to translate academic research into policy and practice.

Abstract: The lecture will critically appraise the notion that martial arts are health-enhancing activities. Exploring the positive outcomes that can be associated with martial arts, it will advocate martial arts as vehicles for positive mental, physical, and social health outcomes, providing some theoretical explanations for martial arts' potentially unique benefits in these regards. The lecture will also point towards some important limitations and drawbacks to this, discussing issues of accessibility and inclusion, physical health risks, and pseudoscientific discourses evident within some martial arts and combat sports communities. The lecture will draw on the chair holder's recent empirical research comparing mental health outcomes of martial arts with functional fitness training for military veterans.

Session 1 - Community well-being and inclusion in martial arts

Moderators



Hebe Schaillée, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium)

Hebe Schaillée is an Associate Professor affiliated to the Sport & Society research group at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB). Her research examines the role of sport in promoting social inclusion among young people in vulnerable situations and in advancing gender equality. This focus originated in her PhD and was further consolidated through her postdoctoral work (2016–2020) on the SBO project CATCH ('Community sport for at-risk youth: innovative strategies for promoting development, health and social cohesion').

She coordinated the BXL Living Martial Arts Lab (2020–2022) and continues to develop interdisciplinary, community-engaged research on sport, including martial arts. Over the past five years, she has been involved as a researcher in several European projects (e.g., GETZ, SPPF, TPS). Most recently, she contributed to the development of an application for an Interdisciplinary Research Programme on youth wellbeing through martial arts, with the ambition to launch it in 2026.



Jessy Siongers, Vrije Universiteit Brussel and Ghent University (Belgium)

Jessy Siongers is an associate professor at the faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) and senior researcher at the Brussels Institute for Social and Population Studies (BRISPO) at VUB and the research group Cultural Diversity: Opportunities & Socialisation (CuDOS) at Ghent University.

She coordinates the interuniversity Centre for Culture Research and as a supervisor of the interuniversity and interdisciplinary Youth Research Platform she has contributed to several large-scale studies on young people's lives. Her research focuses on culture and leisure participation – including sport–, youth, and education, with particular attention to social inequality and wellbeing.

Introductory talk: "Martial arts for personal and community development"

Speaker: Hebe Schaillée, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium) (See bio above)

Abstract: The introduction to Session 1 emphasises the potential of martial arts as powerful tools for personal development and community building across diverse target groups. Drawing on insights into socially vulnerable youth, it highlights how martial arts can engage individuals who often face barriers to traditional support systems, offering structured pathways for growth and inclusion. The diversity of martial arts disciplines enables tailored approaches that resonate with specific needs and contexts. At the same time, the session underscores that achieving meaningful developmental outcomes requires intentional, well-designed practices rather than relying on assumed benefits alone. By moving beyond anecdotal narratives, it calls for reflective, evidence-informed approaches to maximise the social impact of martial arts initiatives.

Panel discussion



Tina Bellemans, Hogeschool Windesheim (The Netherlands)

Dr. Tina Bellemans is Associate Professor (Lector) of Movement, Health and Wellbeing at Windesheim University of Applied Sciences (The Netherlands). Her research emphasises body- and movement-oriented interventions, particularly targeting emotion regulation. She focuses on aggressive behaviour in individuals with mild intellectual disabilities and those affected by psychotrauma. In relation to martial arts, she combines both academic expertise and personal experience.

Her work aims to build an evidence base for the application of martial arts within mental health care and broader care contexts, including projects targeting vulnerable youth and older adults. In addition, she holds a 5th dan black belt in Shotokan karate and is actively involved in teaching.



Emanuele Isidori, University of Rome "Foro Italico" (Italy)

Emanuele Isidori is Full Professor of General, Social, and Sport Pedagogy at the University of Rome Foro Italico, where he also teaches Philosophy of Sport and Olympic Education and serves as Vice-Rector for International Relations and Vice-Director of the Department of Movement, Humanities and Health Sciences. Also, he heads the Laboratory of General Pedagogy and the Permanent Observatory on Sports Ethics and Law. Qualified as Full Professor by ANECA (Spain) in the field of Social and Juridical Sciences, he is a member of the CEFAR Committee for Education of NADO Italy (World Anti-Doping Agency). He holds two doctoral degrees: one in Educational Sciences (University of Perugia) and another in Physical Activity and Health (Alfonso X University, Madrid).

He has held visiting professorships at prestigious institutions such as the University of Leipzig, the California State University Long Beach, and the International Olympic Academy in Olympia. Author of nearly 400 publications, his main research interests include educational research methodology, Olympic Education, Sports Ethics and Philosophy, digital and e-learning pedagogy, teacher education, sports studies, and dual career development for student-athletes—with a special focus on the integration of education, technology, and sport.



Nicole Maussier, University of Rome "Foro Italico" (Italy)

Research Fellow at the University of Rome "Foro Italico", formerly Adjunct Professor. She holds a European PhD in Sport and Physical Education Sciences, a Master's degree in Motor Sciences, a Postgraduate International Master in Rugby, and a specialized Master in Autism. Her research focuses on promoting the social inclusion of autistic people and people with intellectual disabilities through sport, with a particular emphasis on martial arts, a topic on which she has authored several international scientific publications. She is the Project Manager and creator of the KATAUTISM project, promoting the inclusion of autistic children through judo and karate in primary schools.

She is a member of the Scientific Committee of Italian Federation of Judo Wrestling Karate and Martial Arts and serves as Project Lead for Adapted Physical Activity, Disability Sector Training, and Scientific Research.



Zoë Parys, Team Antwerp Piranhas (Belgium)

Zoë Parys is a trainer and co-developer of Talent Aan Zet at Team Antwerp Piranhas. She combines martial arts, body awareness and mindfulness to strengthen personal and social development.

She guides young people and adults on resilience, body language, boundaries and emotion regulation. Her approach is based on connection and "warm boundaries": clear structure with empathy and respect.

Session 2 - Health challenges in martial arts competitions

Moderators and Introductory talk: "Interdisciplinary perspectives on martial arts research"

Paul Wylleman, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium)



Paul Wylleman is full professor of Sport psychology at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel teaching and conducting research on career (transitions), performance behaviour and mental competences, mental health and wellbeing, sport psychologists' competences as well as the quality of (sport) psychology support services in elite sport. Paul heads the university department Topsport and Study, the research team Sport Psychology and Mental Support and the Brussels Olympic and Research Education Centre (BOREC). Paul was expert Performance Behaviour for the Dutch Olympic Committee and team psychologist for the Netherlands' TeamNL at the Rio 2016 and the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. Since 2022 he is the Expert Psychology for the Belgian Olympic Committee (BOIC) and was Team Belgium's team psychologist and Welfare Officer at the Paris 2024 Olympic Games. Paul's a first dan black belt in judo.

Bart Roelands, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium)



Prof. Dr. Bart Roelands is a professor at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) and head of the Human Physiology and Sports Physiotherapy (MFYS) research group. The general research theme is "Exercise and the Brain in Health and Disease". His personal research focus is on Fatigue and the brain, in which he studies the links and interactions between mental and physical fatigue, and what the role of the brain is in this concept.

Prof Roelands was holder of an FWO postdoc position and a Francqui research professor mandate. He is currently vice-dean of the Faculty of Physical Education and Physiotherapy at the VUB.

Abstract: Mental fatigue (MF) can be defined as a psychobiological state that emerges during prolonged demanding cognitive activity and results in an acute feeling of tiredness, with potential decrements in physical and/or cognitive performance. Over the last years, several high-quality systematic review papers have been published that identified significant effects of mental fatigue on subsequent performance capacity. Given the abundance of papers on the performance aspect, there is significantly less information available about the mechanisms behind this reduced performance capacity. Interestingly, the reduction in physical performance in a mentally fatigued state is not mediated by an exacerbation of peripheral factors normally associated with physical fatigue. The negative effect of mental fatigue on exercise performance is mainly attributed to a

higher-than-normal RPE. In monitoring load and recovery in athletes, psychological and social factors also play an important role, not only in measurement but also in guiding these processes. Following an explanation of specific psychological variables and mental processes, it will be described how athlete guidance in martial arts can influence the regulation of these mental processes and how this fits within an interdisciplinary approach within the context of, for example judo.

We will also focus on recent findings from lab-based studies investigating the effect of MF on performance. We will further try to identify potential mechanisms from the literature (for example, the accumulation of adenosine in the anterior cingulate cortex). Finally, some studies have already applied behavioral or nutritional countermeasures in an attempt to negate the negative effects of a mentally fatiguing task. We will explore some of these countermeasures to better understand their potential.

Panel discussion



Luk Buyse, Brussels Human Performance Lab (Belgium)

Luk Buyse is a general practitioner who graduated from KU Leuven (1989) and a specialist in sports medicine from the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (2000). He serves as a board member of the SKA Association of Sports and Medical Examiners and is a member of the Medical Committee of the Martial Arts Platform. Luk Buyse is co-author of a 2021 systematic review published in the European Journal of Sport Sciences on head injury prevention in Olympic boxing. He is Chairman of the Diabetes League and acts as club doctor for elite volleyball and football teams, such as Decospan Menen VT and the Belgian FA U15 girls' programme.



Tijl Lindekens, Flemish Judo Federation, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium)

Tijl Lindekens combines expertise in elite sport and science and is active as Head of Youth Development in judo. In this role, he identifies and supports young talents in their athletic and personal development toward the highest level. In addition, he is affiliated with the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), where he works on biometrics and motor learning. His work integrates practical experience from elite sport with scientific insights to optimize training and development. Through this unique combination, he contributes both to the future of judo and to innovative research projects.



Bob Maesen, Belgian Olympic & Interfederal Committee (Belgium)

Bob Maesen works within Team Belgium of the Belgian Olympic and Interfederal Committee as a High Performance Manager (HPM), supporting and further developing elite sports programmes in an Olympic context. In this role, he collaborates closely with athletes, coaches, federations, and stakeholders to create the conditions for sustainable international success. He oversees several Olympic sports, including boxing, guiding federations and performance teams in areas such as high-performance strategy, selection processes, and long-term athlete development. His approach is analytical and connective, with a strong emphasis on quality, collaboration, and continuous professionalization within Team Belgium.

Session 3 - Shaping martial arts policy: towards coherent and inclusive governance

Moderator and Introduction on “Public Policy and Governance of Martial Arts”

Marc Theeboom, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium) (see bio above)

Abstract: This introductory contribution to Session 3 builds on insights gathered throughout the symposium, highlighting the urgent need for coherent and context-sensitive public policy in martial arts. Drawing from discussions on community well-being, inclusion, and health challenges, it underscores how martial arts intersect with broader societal issues that require governance across local, national, and European levels. The session positions public authorities as key actors in shaping safe, inclusive, and evidence-informed practices within the field. It also reflects on the diversity of stakeholders involved and the necessity of multi-level coordination. Ultimately, it calls for a strategic and balanced policy approach that recognises both the opportunities and risks inherent in martial arts participation.

Panel discussion



Sacha Beck, European Commission, Unit D3 – Sport

Sacha Beck works as Policy Officer in the field of Sport at the European Commission (Directorate-General Education, Youth, Sport and Culture). She contributes to EU sport policy development and the promotion of the European Sport Model. With a background in education—including experience in enhancing transnational cooperation in higher education at EU level—she now engages with stakeholders across institutions, Member States, and the sport sector to advance initiatives that strengthen the role of sport in society.



Anastasiya Khomutova, University of Brighton (UK)

Originally from Donetsk (Ukraine), Anastasiya is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Brighton and an accredited Sport and Exercise Psychologist. Her applied work spans athletes and teams from recreational to Olympic level, grounded in a culturally informed, humanistic approach. Anastasiya's primary expertise is in safeguarding in sport, with a particular focus on cultural contexts and combat sports. She sits on the Safeguarding Review Panel of England Boxing and has consulted on safeguarding with international federations, national Olympic committees, and non-governmental organisations. She has also contributed to international initiatives through FEPSAC, including leading a position statement on safeguarding of athletes in sport.



Wouter Schols, Dutch Institute for Martial Arts and Society (The Netherlands)

Wouter Schols is the Director of the Dutch Institute for Martial Arts and Society (NIVM), the national knowledge and implementation organisation that strengthens the social and pedagogical power of martial arts in the Netherlands. To achieve this, NIVM collaborates with national, provincial, and local governments, as well as various funds and federations. Together with local martial arts providers across the country, NIVM uses martial arts as a tool to support the development of, among other things, mental health and social cohesion.

It connects clubs, coaches, educational institutions, and partners from the social sector, support providers through training and education, and promote vital, open, and safe sporting environments through quality certification systems. It develops and implements interventions around themes such as resilience, participation, inclusion, and equal opportunities.



Fran Vanderstukken, Martial Arts Platform (Belgium)

Fran is coordinator of the Flemish Martial Arts Platform, a non-profit that works together with the martial arts sector to help further professionalize these sports, whilst continuously building on the framework to optimize safety in full-contact martial arts participation. Fran herself is a passionate martial artist, with an extensive background in judo, mixed martial arts and Brazilian jiu jitsu.

Session 4 - Martial arts studies and the evolving discourse of 'martiality'

Speaker: Alex Channon, University of Brighton (UK) (see bio above)

Abstract: The session will offer a concise outline of the concept of "martiality", defined here as the special qualities and properties of martial arts that (among other things) might mark them out as worthy of dedicated study.

It will then take **an interactive and participatory approach**, inviting the audience to engage critically in assessing the purpose and orientation of the field. It will invite discussion over what kinds of questions martial arts studies should address, and what kinds of audiences and collaborators its researchers should aim to work with, to best develop this emerging academic field.