

Fighters

Doron Shaziri lost his leg when he stepped on a landmine near the Beaufort post, Ziv Better lost his eyesight when he came to his rescue | As we mark 20 years to the IDF withdrawal from Lebanon, Shaziri and Better reminisce and share what it is like to be medal-winning Paralympic athletes | A special reunion

By Oren Aharoni | Photos: Oz Moalem

This past week was particularly emotional for shooter Doron Shaziri and swimmer Ziv Better. Israel is marking 20 years to the withdrawal from Lebanon – the place where their fates were forever linked. This is a story about the heroism of two combat soldiers who paid a heavy bodily price for defending this country, yet managed to grow from their injury, overcome it, and turn into outstanding athletes who bring great honor to Israel.

August 1987. In those days, the IDF controlled the security zone in southern Lebanon, and a routine operation transformed their lives. Shaziri stepped on a landmine near the Beaufort post.

The injury was so severe, part of his leg had to be amputated. Better tried to come to his rescue, but he too stepped on a landmine, and lost his eyesight. The two wounded soldiers sharing a helicopter ride to Rambam Medical Center did not know that they would soon become true friends, and build an impressive sports career together, each in his own sport. The anniversary of the withdrawal served as an opportunity to invite them to a moving reunion, hear all about the memories they have of Lebanon, and the joy they found in sports.



Across the Border

Shaziri (53) grew up in Noga, a moshav in south-central Israel. He served in the Golani Brigade's Orev company, completing his sniper course with honors. This is his account of that fateful day: "We were deployed at Beaufort, and one day we were out clearing a route, and our instruction was a little different: to get off the road, and look for explosive device wires. We entered an old, unmarked minefield after being told that it was all clear. I heard a huge bang. A friend of mine stepped on a landmine first, and we followed explosive device protocol. We rescued him, and on our way back to the road, I stepped on a landmine. A team came to rescue us from the Dlaat post, along with our deputy company commander." The deputy company commander was Better (55), born in Lehavot HaBashan, a kibbutz in northern Israel, who served in Golani's antitank company. He recalls: "As I entered the field with another team and a physician, another landmine went off next to me. It was mainly my eyes that were hit, with some shrapnel and the blast, and at that moment I lost my eyesight completely. I was fully conscious, so I remember the incident well. I continued to manage it until all casualties had been evacuated, including myself." How did you feel on the day of the withdrawal from Lebanon?

Better: "It was very surprising, the IDF completed it overnight. It was a relief of sorts, for someone who knows the place and knows that the soldiers worked very hard there. It looks like it did the trick, because the border's been relatively quiet since then."

Shaziri: "I was flooded with memories that day, and someone also wrote about the incident then, and it was interesting to see how others had experienced it, and how they recount the incident. I don't dwell on it in the day-to-day."

Going with Life's Flow

Sports played a huge part in Shaziri and Better's rehabilitation, and they soon became outstanding athletes in their fields. Shaziri has a history in his, having joined an IDF youth camp (Gadna) for shooters in 9th Grade.



When did you decide to keep on doing sports?

Better: "When we were still onsite, I saw Doron smile and say that we need to move on, and I felt the same way about my own injury. Optimism led to rehabilitation that flowed better with life. When you lose your eyesight, there are very few types of sports

you can engage in, but it was important for me to engage in one where I can handle myself on my own. Very early on, I ended up swimming, and later joined the team. When I came to Beit Halochem Tel Aviv, I knew I'd never leave again."

Shaziri: "My connection to shooting began at an early age, and when I came to Beit Halochem Tel Aviv, I discovered a range there, and started doing what I love most."

What was the most exciting moment in your career?

Better: "The Paralympic Games in Barcelona were my highlight, winning four medals. When you stand there on the podium, with the Israeli flag behind you, it is extremely moving. That was a life-changing event for me."

Shaziri: "I broke two personal records in Atlanta, which is pretty rare, and won two silver medals, mostly thanks to Coach Guy Strick, who's made me ten times better. Winning the gold at the World Championship gave me tremendous professional and personal satisfaction."

What important message would you like to convey?

Better: "Sports play a considerable part in rehabilitation, and we took it to the professional level, but you can also choose sports that are not played in the Paralympic Games. Every young person with a disability should engage in sports."

Shaziri: "First of all, everyone needs optimism – especially people with disabilities. It makes you do things right, and better. People with disabilities will be perceived by the public the same way they present themselves, and it's mostly in your head. You have to live the moment, and do the best you can, even if it doesn't work."

Doron Shaziri:

- 8 Paralympic Game medals:
- 3-position shooting: Three times silver, twice bronze
- Mixed prone: Silver
- Shooting prone: Bronze
- Free shooting prone: Bronze
- 4 World Championship medals:
- Shooting prone: Gold, bronze
- 3-position shooting: Silver twice

Ziv Better:

- 7 Paralympic Game medals:
- 100m backstroke: Silver & bronze
- 400m freestyle: Silver
- 200m backstroke: Bronze
- 400m mixed: Bronze
- 100m freestyle: Bronze
- 50m freestyle: Bronze