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Stewart T. Cotterill, Katrien Fransen

**Institutions:** University of Winchester, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

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Athlete Leadership in Sport Teams: Current Understanding and Future Directions

Stewart T. Cotterill<sup>1</sup> & Katrien Fransen<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Sport and Exercise, University of Winchester, UK

Stewart.Cotterill@winchester.ac.uk

<sup>2</sup> Department of Kinesiology, KU Leuven, Belgium

Katrien.Fransen@faber.kuleuven.be

19 **Abstract**

20 Leadership is a fundamental aspect of sports performance, particularly within team  
21 sport environments. Over the past 25 years there has been significant research exploring the  
22 role of the coach/manager in this regard. However, this only represents one aspect of  
23 leadership within the sporting domain. Equally important, although far less examined is the  
24 concept of athlete leadership.

25 The role of athlete leaders, both formal (e.g., the captain) and informal (such as  
26 motivators and cultural architects) can have a significant impact upon a range of team related  
27 factors including satisfaction, cohesion and team dynamics. However, the mechanisms  
28 through which this impact occurs are less well understood. Also, while the development of  
29 leadership skills has been proposed as an important aspect of coach development programmes  
30 there is very little consensus regarding the approaches that should be adopted in developing  
31 athlete leaders and their associated leadership skills.

32 This paper will review the existing literature relating to athlete leadership seeking to  
33 provide clarity regarding current understanding. Building upon this base the paper will then  
34 highlight future areas for research and theoretical development.

35 *Keywords:* athlete leadership, captaincy, leadership, team psychology

36 Athlete Leadership in Sport Teams: Current Understanding and Future Directions  
37 Leadership is a fundamental aspect of sports performance, particularly within team  
38 sport environments. Leadership, by its very nature is applicable across a wide range of  
39 domains and contexts. This has, in turn, led to a broad spectrum of leadership definitions. For  
40 example, Barrow (1977, p. 232) defined leadership as “the behavioural process of influencing  
41 individuals and groups toward set goals”, whereas Gray (2004, p. 76) adopted a slightly  
42 different approach suggesting that leadership is “knowing what should be done, and  
43 influencing others to cooperate in doing it.” Athlete leadership has been defined more  
44 specifically as “an athlete, occupying a formal or informal role within a team, who influences  
45 a group of team members to achieve a common goal” (Loughead, Hardy, & Eys, 2006,  
46 p.144).

47 In relation to sports leadership, the majority of research over the past 25 years has  
48 focused on the roles and impact of both the coach and manager on the team (Cotterill, 2012).  
49 The role of athlete leaders, whilst no less important, has received far less attention (Fransen,  
50 Vanbeselaere, De Cuyper, Vande Broek, & Boen, 2014). Unfortunately, given the influence  
51 athlete leaders can exert upon the team and its processes this suggests a gap in current  
52 understanding.

53 Indeed, athlete leaders have been shown to positively influence team cohesion, athlete  
54 satisfaction, team identification, team confidence and the motivational climate within the team  
55 (e.g., Crozier, Loughead, & Munroe-Chandler, 2013; Fransen, Coffee, et al., 2014; Fransen,  
56 Haslam, et al., 2015; Fransen, Vanbeselaere, De Cuyper, Vande Broek, & Boen, 2015a;  
57 Fransen et al., 2012; Glenn, Horn, Campbell, & Burton, 2003; Price & Weiss, 2011, 2013;  
58 Vincer & Loughead, 2010; Watson, Chemers, & Preiser, 2001). In contrast, when athlete  
59 leaders do not fulfil their leadership role positively, their behaviour might have detrimental

60 consequences for the team confidence and performance of the team (Apitzsch, 2009; Fransen,  
61 Haslam, et al., 2015; Fransen, Steffens, et al., 2015).

62 This paper will review the existing literature relating to athlete leadership and seek to  
63 highlight future areas for research and theoretical development. In particular the paper will  
64 explore the different leadership roles that athletes can fulfill and the difference between  
65 formal and informal leaders. Furthermore, the present paper provides a deeper insight in the  
66 leadership structures in team sports, the assessment of athlete leadership and the leadership  
67 development of athlete leaders. Finally, based on the review of the current literature, we will  
68 outline the gaps in current knowledge and provide future directions for research.

### 69 **Role-Specific Athlete Leadership Categorization**

70 There are a number of ways in which athlete leadership can be categorized, one of  
71 which is to distinguish between the different roles that athlete leaders can occupy. The  
72 original evidence of role differentiation dates back to the mid 1950's (Bales & Slater, 1955;  
73 Slater, 1955). Two types of athlete leaders have been distinguished in work groups according  
74 to their function: (1) leaders with an *instrumental* function are focused on the  
75 accomplishments of the group tasks, while (2) leaders with an *expressive* function are  
76 concerned with interpersonal relationships. Bales and Slater (1955) argued for mutual  
77 exclusivity by demonstrating that team members fulfilling the role of instrumental leaders  
78 (i.e., scoring the highest on contributing ideas) were different from the team members  
79 fulfilling the role of expressive leader (i.e., being liked by teammates).

80 In the 1970s, a critical review on the role differentiation theory forced researchers to  
81 adopt a different research view (Lewis, 1972). This critique did not question the validity of  
82 the distinction between instrumental and expressive leadership functions. Rather, the  
83 argument was that these functions are not incompatible and oftentimes integrated.  
84 Consequently, a single person could fulfil both instrumental and expressive leadership

85 functions. Rees and Segal (1984) confirmed these critiques in sport teams and revealed a  
86 relatively high degree of leadership role integration, with athlete leaders fulfilling both  
87 instrumental and expressive leadership roles. Besides these ‘multifunctional’ leaders, some of  
88 the athlete leaders also tended to be specialized in either task or social roles.

89         Although the role differentiation theory has existed for a long time, only a few  
90 researchers have integrated the different roles into their athlete leadership research. Loughead  
91 et al. (2006) extended the athlete leadership categorization by the inclusion of a third external  
92 leadership role. This external leader represents the team’s interests in communication with the  
93 external team environment (e.g., club management, media and sponsors). Fransen,  
94 Vanbeselaere et al. (2014) further built on this classification and developed a four-fold athlete  
95 leadership categorization, including two leadership roles on the field, namely the task leader  
96 (who provides tactical instructions to his/her teammates) and the motivational leader (who is  
97 the greatest motivator on the field); and two leadership roles off the field, namely the social  
98 leader (who cares for a good team atmosphere outside the field) and the external leader (who  
99 handles the communication with club management, media and sponsors). The detailed  
100 definitions of these four leadership roles are presented in Table 1. The study conducted by  
101 Fransen, Vanbeselaere et al. (2014) emphasized the relevance of this leadership classification  
102 by demonstrating that an effective fulfilment of the four leadership roles resulted in higher  
103 team confidence, stronger team identification and a better team ranking. Furthermore, the  
104 validity of the fourfold leadership categorization was further established when taking into  
105 account not only the best athlete leader, but the complete leadership structure in the team  
106 (Fransen, Van Puyenbroeck, et al., 2015b).

107         In contrast to previous findings (e.g., Rees & Segal, 1984), Fransen, Vanbeselaere et  
108 al. (2014) pointed to a high degree of leadership role differentiation when examining 4,451  
109 players and coaches in nine different team sports: in only 2% of the teams, the same athlete

110 fulfilled the four leadership functions. In other words, in most teams, different athletes within  
111 the team occupied the various leadership roles. That role differentiation is a positive factor for  
112 the team's functioning became apparent in the study findings, which demonstrated that the  
113 number of different leaders in the team was positively correlated with team confidence, team  
114 identification and a higher place on the team ranking. In other words, teams in which the four  
115 leadership roles were occupied by different athletes in the team were characterized by a more  
116 optimal team functioning. Moreover, the positive effects of this role differentiation also apply  
117 within a specific leadership roles. In this regard, it was found for each of the four different  
118 leadership roles that the more leaders are identified within a specific leadership role, the  
119 higher the team's task and social cohesion (Fransen, 2014). These preliminary findings seem  
120 to suggest: the more leaders within a team, the better. However, it should be noted that in a  
121 particular leadership role, maximum three athletes were perceived as leaders.

122         Indeed, if we were all determined to play the first violin, we should never have an  
123 ensemble. In other words, there is no effective leadership without followers. While for some  
124 leadership roles a limited number of leaders may be more beneficial (e.g., when different task  
125 leaders communicate different tactical instructions, confusion may arise), for other leadership  
126 roles 'the more, the better' may apply (e.g., a lot of motivational leaders could be very helpful  
127 in tough situations). While there is some research exploring the ideal number of leader for  
128 each leadership role (e.g. Eys, Loughhead, & Hardy, 2007) it is an area that would benefit from  
129 further investigation in the future.

### 130 **Formal versus Informal Leadership**

131         A second approach adopted in the literature to categorize athlete leadership is to  
132 explore the formal versus informal nature of the role (Carron & Eys, 2012). Whereas formal  
133 leadership roles are those that are prescribed or awarded (e.g., captains and vice-captains);  
134 informal roles are those that emerge within the team as a result of interactions between

135 teammates and the demands of the task (Cotterill, 2012). These informal leaders often act as  
136 the ‘cultural architects’ for the team. In general terms cultural architects are leaders who  
137 possess the ability to change the mindset of others (Railo, 1986). Informal leaders have been  
138 highlighted to both help and hinder the work of the formal leaders (Cotterill & Cheetham,  
139 2015). One example of this relates to decision-making, the informal leaders can either support  
140 or undermine (disagree with) the decisions that are taken by the formal leader. The actions of  
141 these informal leaders can in turn impact upon the perceptions of the rest of the team and can  
142 further strengthen a shared vision or in turn spread discord in the team.

143         Previous literature mainly focused on the formal leaders of the team, thereby  
144 highlighting two main responsibilities (Cotterill, 2012): (1) to ensure that the needs and  
145 aspirations of team members are fulfilled; and (2) to ensure that the demands of the  
146 organization or club are satisfied and that the team is effective in terms of their goals and  
147 objectives. The specific role of the captain can however vary significantly from sport to sport,  
148 and across levels of performance (Cotterill, 2015). In some teams for example, in which team  
149 tactics are determined by the coach or manager, the captain might be only a formal leader on  
150 the pitch but a role model off the field. In other teams (e.g., the sport of cricket), the captains  
151 have greater responsibilities and make the majority of decisions on the pitch (Cotterill, 2015).

152         Loughead et al. (2006) demonstrated that the majority of task, social and external  
153 leaders occupied a formal leadership function. Although captains are perceived as being an  
154 important source of leadership within the team (Kozub & Pease, 2001; Loughead & Hardy,  
155 2005), in many cases this is not necessarily true. There has been an increased focus in recent  
156 years on the importance of informal leaders, who can have significant authority and power  
157 within a group.

158         In a qualitative study, for example, the majority of athletes pointed out that not only  
159 the team captains, but also other teammates provided peer leadership to their teams



160 (Loughead & Hardy, 2005). Fransen, Vanbeselaere, et al. (2014) further emphasized the  
161 importance of these informal leaders by conducting a study with 4451 participants across nine  
162 different team sports, in which they demonstrated that only 1% of the participants indicated  
163 that their team captain was the best leader on all four leadership roles (i.e., task, motivational,  
164 social and external role). In 44% of the teams, the team captain was not perceived as best  
165 leader on any of the four leadership roles, neither on the field, nor off the field. In most teams  
166 the informal leaders, rather than the captain, were thus perceived as best leaders, both on and  
167 off the field.

168 More recently, a study using a network approach to leadership tempered these findings  
169 by demonstrating that leadership is shared within sport teams. More specifically, it was shown  
170 that only in half of the teams the team captain was perceived as best leader in general. In the  
171 other half of the teams, the informal leaders, rather than the team captain, were perceived as  
172 the real leaders (Fransen, Van Puyenbroeck, et al., 2015b). With regard to the specific  
173 leadership roles, the study findings demonstrated that in the majority of the teams, the  
174 captains were perceived as best task and external leader. However, on the motivational and  
175 the social leadership role mainly informal leaders were perceived as the best leaders.

176 We can conclude that leadership is shared within the team: the coach, the team captain  
177 and the informal athlete leaders are together taking the lead on the different leadership roles.  
178 These findings thus propose a radical shift from the traditional vertical view on leadership (in  
179 which the coach is viewed as the primary leader in the team) to the idea of shared leadership  
180 (in which the coach, together with the team captain and the informal leaders take the lead). In  
181 this article, we will outline how future research can further build on this idea of shared  
182 leadership by also taking informal leadership into account, rather than only focusing on the  
183 team captain. Before doing so, we will first look at the attributes and behaviours of athlete  
184 leaders: what is it that differentiates a true leader from the other players in the team?

**185 Leadership Attributes and Behaviours**

186           When looking at the factors that differentiate the leaders from their followers, we can  
187 distinguish between leadership traits (i.e. personality traits that are considered to be stable  
188 over time), leadership attributes (i.e. characteristics that may change over time) and leadership  
189 behaviours. With regard to leadership traits, athlete leaders have been characterized by higher  
190 levels of dominance, ambition, competitiveness and responsibility (Klonsky, 1991). In  
191 addition, Glenn and Horn (1993) revealed that competitive trait anxiety and masculinity were  
192 also characteristic traits for athlete leaders. Finally, Moran and Weiss (2006) further extended  
193 the list of characteristic leadership traits with instrumentality traits (i.e., independent,  
194 energetic, competitive, make decisions easily, never gives up, feel superior, self-confident and  
195 stands up well under pressure) and expressiveness traits (i.e., emotional, able to devote self  
196 completely to others, gentle, helpful to others, kind, understanding of others, aware of feelings  
197 of others and warm in relations with others).

198           In their search for characteristic leadership attributes, most research focused on age  
199 (Bucci, Bloom, Loughead, & Caron, 2012) and team tenure (Loughead et al., 2006; Rees &  
200 Segal, 1984; Tropp & Landers, 1979; Yukelson, Weinberg, Richardson, & Jackson, 1983).  
201 The research findings consistently revealed that older players who have been playing in the  
202 team for a longer period have a greater chance to be perceived as an athlete leader. Also, the  
203 level of experience and the player's popularity in the team have been cited as influencing the  
204 leadership status of a player and his/her impact on the team (Kim, 1992; Weese & Nicholls,  
205 1986). Moreover, leaders are often selected based upon their skill level, starting status or  
206 sport-specific experience (Gill & Perry, 1979; Glenn & Horn, 1993; Loughead et al., 2006;  
207 Moran & Weiss, 2006; Price & Weiss, 2011; Yukelson et al., 1983). Furthermore, leaders are  
208 often characterized by a more central playing position than their teammates (Glenn & Horn,  
209 1993; Klonsky, 1991; Lee, Patridge, & Coburn, 1983). This last point is well illustrated in a

210 study conducted by Melnick and Loy (1996) exploring the recruitment of captains in New  
211 Zealand rugby union teams. The results highlighted that the majority of team captains played  
212 in central positions (e.g., number eight and half-back).

213         One could wonder however if selecting the captain based on performance levels or  
214 playing position is the good choice. Fransen, Van Puyenbroeck, et al. (2015a) examined the  
215 quality of the provided athlete leadership, and more specifically to the extent to which  
216 teammates perceive their leader as a high-quality leader on the different leadership roles (i.e.,  
217 task, motivational, social and external leader). Their findings demonstrated that neither  
218 playing time, nor age, team tenure or sport experience were the most important determinants  
219 of a player's leadership quality. Instead, it was the extent to which teammates felt closely  
220 connected to their leader that was most decisive in determining a players' leadership quality,  
221 not only with regard to leadership in general, but also for task, motivational, social and  
222 external leadership quality. It should be noted that this study was cross-sectional in nature, as  
223 a result of which the direction of this relation could also flow in the opposite way (i.e.  
224 leadership quality influencing athletes' perceptions of closeness to that leader). However, also  
225 Moran and Weiss (2006) pointed at the importance of friendship quality as predictor of athlete  
226 leadership skills, when interviewing soccer players and their coaches. More specifically, their  
227 findings revealed that, although coaches almost exclusively determined athlete leadership  
228 skills based upon playing ability, the players in the study highlighted the importance of a  
229 range of psychosocial variables including friendship quality, expressiveness, instrumentality  
230 and peer acceptance. Also other studies confirmed that a player's leadership status can be  
231 linked with teammates' ratings of interpersonal attraction and peer acceptance (Fransen,  
232 Vanbeselaere, De Cuyper, Vande Broek, & Boen, 2015b; Price & Weiss, 2011; Rees & Segal,  
233 1984; Tropp & Landers, 1979). Wright and Cote (2003) corroborated these findings by

234 highlighting four important central characteristics in athlete leaders: high skill level, a strong  
235 work ethic, an advanced tactical knowledge and a good rapport with teammates.

236 Besides particular traits and attributes, leaders are also characterized by particular  
237 behaviours, which can range from task-related on-field behaviours over motivational on-field  
238 behaviours to social off-field behaviours. With respect to the task-related behaviours,  
239 effective communication skills, guiding group tasks and fostering goal attainment were  
240 established as key elements for leader effectiveness (Price & Weiss, 2011; Riggio, Riggio,  
241 Salinas, & Cole, 2003; Wright & Cote, 2003).

242 However, high-quality leaders go further than only preaching what to do and which  
243 tactical guidelines to follow; they walk the talk. By behaving like a role model and  
244 demonstrating a good work ethic, they set an example for their teammates (Bucci et al., 2012;  
245 Dupuis et al., 2006; Holmes et al., 2010). Moreover controlling their emotions and remaining  
246 positive during the game were established as key motivational leadership behaviours (Dupuis  
247 et al., 2006). A concrete example of this motivational behaviour is the expression of team  
248 confidence; an athlete leader who was confident in the team's abilities and its chances on  
249 success significantly impacted teammates' team confidence, their identification with the team  
250 and even their performance (Fransen, Haslam, et al., 2015; Fransen, Steffens, et al., 2015;  
251 Fransen, Vanbeselaere, et al., 2015a, 2015b; Fransen et al., 2012).

252 As previously discussed, the role of the leader is not restricted to his/her task on the  
253 field. Instead, research revealed also important social off-field behaviours that characterize a  
254 leader. Examples are being vocal and trustworthy, possessing good interpersonal skills,  
255 showing care and concern for others and facilitating relationships with teammates and  
256 discussions with the coaching staff (Dupuis, Bloom, & Loughead, 2006; Holmes, McNeil, &  
257 Adorna, 2010; Price & Weiss, 2011).

258 All these research findings provide useful information for leader selection (i.e., which  
259 traits are characteristic for high-quality leaders) and leader development (i.e., which attributes  
260 and behaviours can be taught). In addition, one of the latest trends in leadership research  
261 emphasizes the importance of leader's capacity to build a shared identity within the team  
262 (Rees, Haslam, Coffee, & Lavalley, 2015). The idea that social identity lays the platform for  
263 effective leadership is at the core of the Social Identity Approach to Leadership (Haslam,  
264 Reicher, & Platow, 2011). The Social Identity Approach asserts that the psychology and  
265 behaviour of team members is not only shaped by their capacity to think, feel and behave as  
266 individuals (in terms of their personal identity as 'I' and 'me'), but also, and often more  
267 importantly, as group members (in terms of their shared social identity as 'we' and 'us'). The  
268 recent application of this approach to leadership argues that leaders' effectiveness depends on  
269 the extent that leaders are able to create and manage a shared identity within a group. In other  
270 words, effective leaders are able to create a shared sense of 'we' and 'us' within the team. A  
271 quote from Drucker (1992, p. 14), a well-known researcher on leadership, nicely illustrates  
272 this leadership approach: "The leaders who work most effectively, it seems to me, never say  
273 'I'. And that's not because they have trained themselves not to say 'I'. They don't think 'I'.  
274 They think 'team'."

275 Although the social identity approach to leadership originated in organizational  
276 settings, recent findings in sport settings also demonstrated that effective athlete leaders  
277 strengthen their teammates' identification with their team (Steffens et al., 2014). Moreover,  
278 both cross-sectional and experimental findings demonstrated that by creating a shared sense  
279 of 'us' within the team, athlete leaders strengthened their impact on teammates' team  
280 confidence and performance (Fransen, Coffee et al., 2014; Fransen, Haslam et al., 2015;  
281 Fransen, Steffens et al., 2015). The work of Steffens et al. (2014), in which an inventory has  
282 been created to assess this identity leadership, sheds more light on which leadership

283 behaviours are crucial to create a sense of ‘us’ within the team. We will provide more  
284 information on this questionnaire in the next section.

### 285 **Benefits of effective Athlete Leadership in Sports Teams**

286       Recent research exploring athlete leadership in sport has further highlighted the  
287 benefits of athlete leadership in teams by examining its relationship with a range of important  
288 team-related factors including: satisfaction and team dynamics (Aoyagi, Cox, & McGuire,  
289 2008; Eys et al., 2007); its influence on task and social cohesion (Loughead, Fransen, Van  
290 Puyenbroeck, Hoffmann, & Boen, 2015); performance (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011); external  
291 perceptions of effective leadership (Schneider, Ehrhart, & Ehrhart, 2002; Todd & Kent,  
292 2004); and links to the effectiveness of approaches to leadership within the team including  
293 transformational and transactional leadership (Price & Weiss, 2011; Rowold, 2006; Vidic &  
294 Burton, 2011; Zacharatos, Barling, & Kelloway, 2000).

295       We can conclude that effective athlete leadership is important as contemporary  
296 sources suggest that it has a positive effect on a range of factors including team confidence  
297 (Fransen, Coffee, et al., 2014; Fransen, Haslam, et al., 2015; Fransen, Steffens, et al., 2015),  
298 team resilience (Morgan, Fletcher, & Sarkar, 2013, 2015) and team functioning (Edmonds,  
299 Tenenbaum, Kamata, & Johnson, 2009). Furthermore, athlete leaders have been shown to  
300 ensure high standards and a strong work ethic, to help the team to handle adversity, to help to  
301 develop better team chemistry, to help the coach to better understand the team, to help to  
302 minimise and manage conflict, to help in recruiting players to the team and to offer the best  
303 insurance against indiscretion by teammates (Dupuis et al., 2006; Janssen, 2003).

### 304 **Assessing Athlete Leadership**

305       The typical characteristics and behaviours of athlete leaders have served as a means to  
306 construct scales and questionnaires to map athlete leadership quality. The first scale  
307 developed to assess athletes’ leadership behaviours was the Player Leadership Scale (PLS;

308 Kozub, 1993). The PLS distinguished between instrumental or task leadership behaviours  
309 (e.g., helps to set goals for the team) and expressive or social leadership behaviours (e.g.,  
310 helps to settle conflicts among team members). More recent research with interscholastic  
311 student athletes demonstrated that male student athletes generally perceived task leadership  
312 behaviours as significantly more important for athlete leaders than did female student athletes,  
313 who showed no favouritism between task and social leadership behaviours (Todd & Kent,  
314 2004). For example, the leadership attribute 'being warm and friendly towards teammates'  
315 was rated as far more important by females than by males.

316 An often used measure to assess athlete leadership behaviour is the Leadership Scale  
317 for Sports (LSS; Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980), originally developed for coaches. The LSS  
318 includes five behaviours for effective leadership: (1) training and instruction; (2) democratic  
319 behaviour; (3) autocratic behaviour; (4) social support; and (5) positive feedback.

320 Loughhead and Hardy (2005) used the LSS to compare the leadership behaviours of  
321 coaches and athlete leaders. Their findings revealed that coaches were perceived as exhibiting  
322 training and instruction and autocratic behaviours to a greater extent than athlete leaders,  
323 while athlete leaders exhibited more social support, positive feedback, and democratic  
324 behaviours than their coaches. However, Paradis and Loughhead (2010) added that athlete  
325 leaders were perceived as most effective when providing training and instruction.  
326 Furthermore, formal athlete leaders were characterized by providing positive feedback, while  
327 informal leaders were characterized by democratic behaviour.

328 Another measure that has been used to assess athlete leadership behaviour is the  
329 Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ; Bass & Avolio, 1995). The MLQ assesses a  
330 broad range of leadership styles from passive leadership, to transactional leadership (i.e.,  
331 leaders who give contingent rewards to followers), to transformational leadership (i.e., leaders  
332 who transform their followers into becoming leaders themselves). Paradis and Loughhead

333 (2010) revealed that individualized consideration (e.g., ‘the leader differentiates among us’)  
334 and inspirational motivation (e.g., ‘the leader expresses confidence’), which are two  
335 dimensions of transformational leadership, were most decisive in determining the  
336 effectiveness of athlete leaders. Price and Weiss (2013) asked adolescent female soccer  
337 players to fill out the MLQ twice, once for their coach, and once for the teammate whom they  
338 perceived as the athlete leader. The results revealed that transformational leadership  
339 behaviours of both coaches and athlete leaders were positively related to perceived  
340 competence, intrinsic motivation, enjoyment, team cohesion and confidence. When both  
341 coach leadership and athlete leadership were examined together, it was demonstrated that  
342 athlete leadership behaviours were overshadowed by coach leadership behaviours when it  
343 comes to individual outcomes (i.e., perceived competence and enjoyment). However, with  
344 regard to team outcomes (i.e., task and social cohesion, collective efficacy), the  
345 transformational leadership behaviours of both coach and athlete leaders were important  
346 contributors.

347         As noted before, creating a sense of ‘us’ within the team is perceived as an essential  
348 leadership behaviour that facilitates effective leadership. Recently, a new measure has been  
349 developed to assess this leadership behaviour aimed to foster a shared identity within the  
350 team: the Identity Leadership Inventory (ILI; Steffens et al., 2014). The ILI distinguished  
351 between four dimensions of effective identity based leadership. First, leaders need to be *in-*  
352 *group prototypes* (i.e., represent the unique qualities that define the group and what it means  
353 to be a member of the group). Second, they need to be *in-group champions* (i.e., advance and  
354 promote the core interests of the group). Third, leaders need to be *entrepreneurs of identity*  
355 (i.e., bring people together by creating a shared sense of ‘we’ and ‘us’ within the group).  
356 Fourth and finally, leaders need to be *embedders of identity* (i.e., develop structures that  
357 facilitate and embed shared understanding, coordination and success). Moreover, the study of



358 Steffens et al. (2014) included 421 athletes of four different team sports who filled out the ILI  
359 in order to assess the identity based leadership of their team captain. Results revealed that the  
360 dimensions of identity prototypicality and identity entrepreneurship were most positively  
361 related to the perceived leadership quality of the team captain. The other dimensions of the  
362 captain's identity leadership behaviour were positively related to team confidence and task  
363 cohesion.

364         It should be noted though that most previous measures were originally developed for  
365 coaches or for organizational leaders and have afterwards been applied to measure athlete  
366 leadership behaviours. Two measures exist however that were originally developed for athlete  
367 leaders: a self-report measure and a teammate-rated measure. The self-report measure is  
368 named the Peer Sport Leadership Behaviour Inventory (PSLBI; Glenn, 2003), specifically  
369 aimed to assess athlete leadership behaviours. Price and Weiss (2011) updated the PSLBI  
370 based on a pilot study, which resulted in a 49-item scale, representing eight different  
371 leadership dimensions: motivation, character, creativity and intelligence, focus and  
372 commitment, problem-solving, compassion, responsibility and maturity and  
373 physical/technical skill. The study findings revealed that athletes who rated themselves higher  
374 on their athlete leadership behaviour also reported greater task and social cohesion and  
375 collective efficacy.

376         The teammate-rated measure is the Sport Leadership Behaviour Inventory (SLBI;  
377 Glenn & Horn, 1993), a 25-item measure, aimed to obtain teammates' ratings of athlete  
378 leadership behaviour for each member of the team except themselves. Glenn and Horn (1993)  
379 also validated a shortened 11-item version including the following leadership attributes:  
380 determined, positive, motivated, consistent, organized, responsible, skilled, confident, honest,  
381 leader and respected. Price and Weiss (2011) used the 11-item SLBI in their research and  
382 discovered a two-factor structure: (1) instrumental athlete leadership (i.e., confident,

383 consistent, skilled, determined, leader and respected); and (2) pro-social athlete leadership  
384 (i.e., honest, positive, organized and responsible). These findings demonstrated that athlete  
385 leaders who were perceived to engage more in instrumental leadership behaviours viewed  
386 themselves as more skilled, were more intrinsically motivated and felt accepted by their  
387 teammates. On the other hand, athlete leaders who demonstrated more pro-social leadership  
388 behaviours reported higher levels of perceived behavioural conduct (i.e., acting the way they  
389 know they are supposed to and avoiding things that get them in trouble).

390         The different questionnaires can be useful tools in identifying the leadership quality of  
391 athletes within the team. It should be noted though that the length of these questionnaires is  
392 often considerable and does solely allow self-report responses. However, team leadership is a  
393 socially constructed phenomenon and therefore highly dependent on the surrounding context.  
394 To identify the leadership structure in sport teams, it is therefore important to move beyond  
395 leaders' self-perceptions and take into account the leadership perceptions of all players in the  
396 team.

### 397 **Identifying the Leadership Structure in Sport Teams**

398         Many athlete leadership studies to date have focused on the team captain as the formal  
399 athlete leader of the team (e.g., Dupuis et al., 2006; Grandzol, Perlis, & Draina, 2010; Kent &  
400 Todd, 2004; Voelker, Gould, & Crawford, 2011). However, more recent studies have focused  
401 on the best athlete leaders, regardless of his/her formal leadership status (e.g., Fransen,  
402 Vanbeselaere, et al., 2014; Price & Weiss, 2013). It should be noted though that all these  
403 studies used a single leader as object of their investigation, thereby ignoring the remaining  
404 leadership structure in the team (e.g., the second or third best leader). Loughead et al. (2006)  
405 initially attempted to map the leadership structure in the whole team by asking participants to  
406 list the names of the team members who most strongly contributed to the team's task, social  
407 and external factors. Subsequently, 'team leaders' were classified as such if at least half of the

408 team members endorsed them as task, social or external leader. In addition, the authors  
409 classified athletes as ‘peer leaders’ if at least two team members endorsed these athletes as  
410 task, social or external leader.

411         Nevertheless, several limitations remain inherent to most athlete leadership research to  
412 date. First, the majority of research has been unable to capture the full leadership structure in  
413 the team, thereby encompassing not only the best leader on the different leadership roles, but  
414 also the leadership status of all other team members. A second shortcoming in the current  
415 literature is that most athlete leadership research has categorically distinguished between  
416 leaders and non-leaders. Because designating someone as a leader does not necessarily imply  
417 that the appointed leader also fulfils his/her leadership function well, information on the  
418 leadership quality remains concealed. For example, an athlete might designate a teammate as  
419 leader because of the dominance and authority this teammate conveys, which does not  
420 necessarily go hand in hand with high-quality athlete leadership. The lack of leadership  
421 *quality* perceptions in previous research is unfortunate given that in particular the quality with  
422 which a leadership role is fulfilled is decisive for the leader’s effectiveness.

423         Recent studies by Fransen, Van Puyenbroeck, et al. (2015a; 2015b) addressed these  
424 two limitations by using Social Network Analysis (SNA) to construct leadership networks  
425 that capture the complete leadership structure in sport teams for each of the four leadership  
426 roles. SNA pictures groups in terms of networks, consisting of nodes (representing the  
427 individual actors) and ties (representing the relationships between the actors) (Wasserman &  
428 Faust, 1994). Over the past decade, SNA yielded explanations for social phenomena in a wide  
429 variety of areas, ranging from sociology and politics, over the use of social media and  
430 information sharing, to organizational research (Borgatti, Mehra, Brass, & Labianca, 2009).  
431 Only very recently, SNA has been used in organizational research to explain leadership  
432 phenomena.

433           Also in sport teams SNA constitutes the perfect method to investigate leadership  
434 networks because a sport team is a well-defined group of interdependent individuals, or in  
435 social network terms ‘a full network’ (Lusher, Robins, & Kremer, 2010). Despite these  
436 recommendations only a few studies have used this technique to provide more insight in the  
437 leadership structure of sport teams. For example, Lusher et al. (2010) constructed an influence  
438 network of an Australian football team by asking each of the players which teammate they  
439 considered as influential. The results revealed that most players rated the most skilled players  
440 in their team as influential. Unfortunately, the present networks were binary networks  
441 (relations represented by 0 ‘*not influential*’ or 1 ‘*influential*’), thereby concealing information  
442 on the strength of these influence perceptions.

443           To address these limitations, researchers recently created valued leadership quality  
444 networks, in which the strength of the ties represents the perceived athlete leadership quality,  
445 ranging from 0 (*very poor leader*) to 4 (*very good leader*) (Fransen, Van Puyenbroeck, et al.,  
446 2015a; Fransen, Van Puyenbroeck, et al., 2015b; Loughead et al., 2015). Instead of focusing  
447 on the presence of athlete leaders, the present studies thus focused on the quality of athlete  
448 leaders. Furthermore, these studies did not only identify the network structure with regard to  
449 general leadership, but also with regard to task and motivational leadership on the field and  
450 social and external leadership off the field. Their results established the validity of the  
451 fourfold athlete leadership categorization and confirmed that leadership is spread throughout  
452 the team: different athletes occupy the four leadership roles (Fransen, Van Puyenbroeck, et  
453 al., 2015b).

454           SNA is in this regard a novel but promising tool to capture the full leadership structure  
455 in sport teams both on and off the field. As Fransen, Van Puyenbroeck, et al. (2015b)  
456 outlined, the analysis of the role-specific leadership networks for a specific team provides a  
457 sound diagnostic tool to identify the best athlete leaders on the different leadership roles. In

458 addition, SNA analyses provide insight in the existence of leadership cliques. For example, by  
459 using this technique, one can distinguish between the situation in which two athletes are  
460 perceived as high-quality task leaders by all other team members and the situation in which  
461 half of the team members perceives one athlete as the best task leader and the other half  
462 perceives another athlete as best task leader. Insight in the specific leadership structure thus  
463 clearly affects coaching practice, because especially in the latter situation, it might be  
464 important for the team effectiveness to formally appoint both leaders as task leaders.

465         Such a social network approach provides full insight in the leadership structure in a  
466 team, and provides more clarity on the importance of the formal versus informal leaders  
467 (Fransen, Van Puyenbroeck, et al., 2015b). Furthermore, the social network approach is  
468 ideally-suited to enhance on our knowledge on the specific leadership attributes (Fransen, Van  
469 Puyenbroeck, et al., 2015a). Finally, the approach allows for further examination of the  
470 antecedents and consequences of high-quality athlete leadership (e.g., Loughhead et al., 2015).

#### 471 **Leadership Development in Athlete Leaders**

472         The area of athlete leadership development in sport has until recently received very  
473 little attention within the literature. Indeed, there is a significant body of research that has  
474 explored the development of personal leadership skills through sport (Gould, Voelker, &  
475 Blanton, 2012; Martinek & Hellison, 2009), but much less that has explored the development  
476 of leadership knowledge, skills and behaviours in athletes (Voight, 2012). Blanton, Sturges  
477 and Gould (2014) developed a youth leadership club in which US high school athletes shared  
478 leadership principles. Gould and Voelker (2010) developed a captaincy development  
479 programme for high school captains adopting a workshop-based approach. This captaincy  
480 leadership development programme included a clinic (development group) and separate self-  
481 study team captain's guide. A core reflection on this programme by Gould and Voelker  
482 (2010) highlighted the importance in also developing a coach supervision programme

483 alongside the captain development programme. There are also a small number of examples in  
484 the literature of structured approaches to develop leadership skills in adult performance-  
485 focused athletes. Voight (2012), for example, implemented a 15-stage leadership development  
486 programme with two regional US volleyball teams. While the programme proved to be  
487 effective at this level, Voight recommended that future research should explore the delivery of  
488 similar intervention programmes at different levels (e.g., youth, recreational and professional  
489 levels). Finally, Cotterill (2015) developed a leadership development programme for elite  
490 (international) UK professional cricketers. The programme sought to develop athlete  
491 leadership at three specific levels: (1) captaincy development, (2) leadership skill  
492 development, and (3) personal growth and leadership development. These three levels had  
493 been earmarked as crucial in helping to develop leaders at an international level of  
494 performance. Reflections on the programme by the participants suggest that a formal  
495 development programme can be both beneficial and impactful in enhancing the leadership  
496 capabilities of elite players.

497         However, while the importance of both formal and informal leadership roles is  
498 acknowledged, there is very little evidence of structured development programmes being  
499 designed or applied in the literature. Indeed, in reviewing current practice at the collegiate  
500 level Voight (2012) summarised that much of the leadership training that team captains  
501 received consisted of either receiving a list of books or articles about leadership or a list of  
502 responsibilities that they must do without guidance or instruction. Therefore more research is  
503 required exploring both the development and application of applied leadership development  
504 programmes.

505         Although a useful starting point, these studies have almost exclusively focused on  
506 significantly different leadership development environments and have adopted very different  
507 approaches to leadership development. As a result, far more research exploring applied

508 intervention programmes is required. Indeed, it could be argued that a good starting point  
509 would be the development of a conceptual framework to underpin leadership development  
510 projects.

### 511 **Gaps in Current Knowledge and Future Directions for Research**

512         While there is an increasingly evidence base to underpin current understanding of  
513 athlete leadership and leadership development there still exists a number of gaps. First, future  
514 research on athlete leadership should further build on the idea of shared leadership by taking  
515 into account the informal athlete leaders, rather than only focusing on the team captain. When  
516 establishing leadership teams, the responsibilities are shared and the athletes' accountability is  
517 fostered. When a particular leader is not able to fulfil his leadership role well, other leaders  
518 can stand up, take the lead (Fransen & Vanbeselaere et al., 2014). Furthermore, leadership is  
519 not only important on the field. Also off the field, leaders can have a decisive impact on the  
520 team functioning (Cotterill, 2013). Ensuring that all four leadership roles are fulfilled (i.e. task  
521 and motivational leader on the field and social and external leader off the field) can help  
522 coaches in creating an optimal team environment (Fransen & Vanbeselaere et al., 2014).  
523 Furthermore, research investigating the role of the captain in this structure of shared  
524 leadership is sparse (Cotterill & Cheetham, 2015). There is little consideration of the specific  
525 role(s) of the captain, the skills, knowledge, behaviours and expertise required (Cotterill,  
526 2013). Also, there has been little focused research exploring the challenges that athlete leaders  
527 face and the necessary on going developmental needs (Voight, 2012).

528         It is also important to emphasize that athlete leaders do not lead in a social vacuum,  
529 but instead are imbedded in a web of interpersonal relationships with their teammates and  
530 coach. Leadership is thus a socially constructed phenomenon, which is highly dependent on  
531 the surrounding context. As Ladkin (2010, p. 21) stated: "Trying to understand leadership  
532 without looking at the context is like trying to comprehend 'love' abstracted from the people

533 who feel and enact it. You may be able to capture a trace of it, but it is virtually impossible to  
534 really appreciate its full impact and significance as a detached observer.”

535         Nevertheless, previous research has typically focused on individual self-perceptions  
536 when examining athlete leadership, thereby ignoring the surrounding team context. One of the  
537 few exceptions is the study by Price and Weiss (2011), in which participants were asked to  
538 assess the leadership behaviours of each of their teammates. Future research looking to further  
539 develop understanding in this area might look to build on the studies of Fransen, Van  
540 Puyenbroeck, et al. (2015a; 2015b), who adopted for the first time social network analysis to  
541 capture the full leadership structure in sport teams on the different leadership roles. Adopting  
542 this approach offer the researcher the opportunity to explore which leaders are perceived by  
543 their teammates as providing high-quality leadership.

544         Although most research to date has focused mainly on leadership analysis before or  
545 after the game, a more elaborate knowledge on how leaders impact their teammates during the  
546 game could mean a large knowledge gain in the field. Social network analysis is in this regard  
547 the perfect method to provide a deeper insight, not only in the leadership structure of the  
548 team, but also in the way that communication flows within the team. Specific SNA measures  
549 such as outdegree centrality, betweenness centrality and closeness centrality may reveal  
550 whether tactical/encouraging communication emanates from the leader and thereafter spreads  
551 throughout the team or whether leaders are important catalysers in strengthening and  
552 circulating these communication paths. For more information on these specific network  
553 measures, we refer to the work of Borgatti, Everett, and Johnson (2013). Similarly, future  
554 research could also map the way in which positive and negative emotions such as excitement,  
555 anger and anxiety flow throughout the team.

556         Also with respect to the attributes and characteristic behaviours of high-quality athlete  
557 leaders, SNA can be a useful tool to provide a deeper insight. More specifically, the



558 leadership quality of athletes in the team, as perceived by their teammates instead of through  
559 self-report (i.e. the indegree centrality in social network terms), can be linked with particular  
560 traits, attributes or behaviours. As a result, we can obtain a more profound insight in which  
561 factors really matter in selecting or developing athlete leaders.

562         Such research on the leadership attributes could provide more insight in the nature-  
563 nurture discussion with regard to athlete leadership, thereby trying to respond the everlasting  
564 question: are leaders born, or can they be made? In this regard, studies should include both  
565 pure personality traits (e.g., extraversion, optimism, dominance) and leadership behaviours in  
566 the same study to allow for a proper comparison between the relative importance of trait  
567 characteristics and leadership behaviours in determining the perceived leadership quality of an  
568 athlete. Such studies would also provide interesting insights with respect to talent  
569 identification (e.g., which characteristics are necessary to become a leader) and with respect  
570 to leadership development (e.g., which behaviours should be taught to athletes to become  
571 better leaders).

572         Finally, more research is required that explores the development of leadership skills in  
573 real world contexts, in particular evaluating the effectiveness of developmental intervention  
574 programmes. Programmes based in real sporting contexts, developed on a strong empirical  
575 foundation are important. The challenge is getting sports clubs and teams to ‘buy-in’ to the  
576 programme.

## 577 **Conclusion**

578         Athlete leadership is a crucial part of sport team functioning. As such a greater  
579 understanding of the concept has the potential to underpin significant gain in team  
580 functioning. It is important to recognise that leadership is shared within the team. Viewing the  
581 athlete leaders in isolation when looking at real performance domains is a mistake. A holistic  
582 understanding of leadership in the team environment that accounts for the manager, coaches,

583 formal and informal athlete leaders is important. Exploring team leadership at this level with  
584 provide a more realistic picture of the leadership needs, frameworks and roles at play.

585         An important gap in current understanding relates to the development of effective  
586 leaders across each of the roles in question, but in particular relating to athlete leadership  
587 roles. There are currently few studies that either propose, or deliver and evaluate  
588 intervention/development programmes. Further practice in developing the athlete leaders of  
589 the future needs to be built upon a strong empirical foundation. This however needs to be  
590 underpinned by the sharing of intervention case studies and other well-designed development  
591 plans. However, the challenge as in other domains of sport psychology is gaining access to the  
592 'real' sporting domains to develop and deliver new approaches to leadership development.  
593 Particularly as to date there appears to be a lack of real structure and clarity to the  
594 development of athlete leaders in sport, or even at a basic level what the leadership roles are  
595 and what the knowledge, skills, and experience that are needs to be an effective athlete leader.  
596 Finally, there is also a need to explore whether the same in-team leadership needs are  
597 replicated across sport or whether the specific needs, and therefore required roles, vary  
598 according to the sport in question.

599

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