The myth of the team captain as principal leader: extending the athlete leadership classification within sport teams — **Source link** ⬚

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29   **Abstract**

30   Although coaches and players recognize the importance of leaders within the team, research

31   on athlete leadership is sparse. The present study expands knowledge of athlete leadership by

32   extending the current leadership classification and exploring the importance of the team

33   captain as formal leader of the team. An on-line survey was completed by 4,451 participants

34   (31% females and 69% males) within nine different team sports in Flanders (Belgium).

35   Players ($N = 3,193$) and coaches ($N = 1,258$) participated on all different levels in their sports.

36   Results revealed that the proposed additional role of motivational leader was perceived as

37   clearly distinct from the already established roles (task, social and external leader).

38   Furthermore, almost half of the participants (44%) did not perceive their captain as the

39   principal leader on any of the four roles. These findings underline the fact that the leadership

40   qualities attributed to the captain as the team's formal leader are overrated. It can be

41   concluded that leadership is spread throughout the team; informal leaders rather than the

42   captain take the lead, both on and off the field.

43   The Myth of the Team Captain as Principal Leader: Extending the Athlete Leadership

44   Classification Within Sport Teams

45   Newspaper headlines routinely illustrate the importance of effective leaders; a prime

46   minister leading the country, a business director leading a company or a coach leading a sport

47   team. Based on a generic definition of leadership as 'a process whereby an individual

48   influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal' (Northouse, 2010, p. 3),

49   leadership processes should be similar in different contexts and their success and

50   effectiveness should rely on similar factors (Weinberg & McDermott, 2002). However, in

51   contrast with the abundant literature on leadership in organisational settings, the literature on

52   leadership in sports is sparse (Crust & Lawrence, 2006; Riemer & Chelladurai, 1995).

53   Moreover, most studies have concentrated on the coach of a team (see Chelladurai, 1994;

54   Chelladurai & Riemer, 1998 for reviews) even though leadership needs not to be restricted to

55   the coach; players within the team can also fulfil important leadership functions (Northouse,

56   2010).

57   **Athlete Leadership**

58   Athlete leadership has been defined as "an athlete, occupying a formal or informal role

59   within a team, who influences a group of team members to achieve a common goal"

60   (Loughead, Hardy, & Eys, 2006). Athlete leaders influence team cohesion, athlete satisfaction

61   and team confidence (Fransen et al., 2012; Price & Weiss, 2011, 2013; Vincer & Loughead,

62   2010). Coaches and players on the field confirm the importance of athlete leaders. For

63   instance, Chuck Noll, former head coach of a professional American football team and winner

64   of four Super Bowls, stated; "On every team there is a core group that sets the tone for

65   everyone else. If the tone is positive, you have half the battle won. If it is negative, you are

66   beaten before you even walk out on the field." (Pim, 2010, p. 127). Although these

67   observations stress the crucial role of athlete leaders, a considerable gap exists between the

68   importance assigned to athlete leadership and the efforts made to understand it (Loughead et

69   al., 2006). Therefore, in the present study our goals were to extend our knowledge of athlete

70   leadership by refining the current athlete leadership classification (first aim) and by exploring

71   the importance of the team captain as formal leader of the team (second aim).

72   **Classification of Athlete Leadership**

73   Using role differentiation theory (Bales, 1950) athlete leaders can be classified based

74   on their function. Leaders with an instrumental function are focused on the accomplishments

75   of group tasks, whereas leaders with an expressive function are concerned with interpersonal

76   relationships. These two functions are not mutually exclusive; athlete leaders can

77   simultaneously engage in both task and social behaviours (Rees & Segal, 1984; Todd & Kent,

78   2004; Voelker, Gould, & Crawford, 2011). A third, and more recent identified function of

79   athlete leaders is an external function by which leaders represent the group at meetings and

80   media gatherings (Eys, Loughead, & Hardy, 2007; Loughead et al., 2006).

81   Although this threefold leadership classification (i.e. task leader, social leader and

82   external leader) already specifies various functions of athlete leaders, it may still not be

83   comprehensive enough. More specifically, Loughead and colleagues (2006, p. 148)

84   characterised a social leader by qualities such as 'this leader ensures teammates are involved

85   and included in team events' and 'this leader offers support and is trusted by teammates.'

86   These characteristics relate to the expressive function in the role differentiation theory, but

87   mainly refer to the concern with interpersonal relationships off the field, not on the field. We

88   therefore propose that the current classification lacks a leadership role that embodies the

89   interpersonal interactions that are directly linked to the on-field performance. This proposition

90   is supported by numerous coaches and players who emphasise the importance of motivating

91   and cheering during the game. In accordance with these on-field experiences, several studies

92   indicated that motivating and encouraging behaviours are crucial for effective athlete

93 leadership (Cotterill, 2013; Dupuis, Bloom, & Loughead, 2006; Holmes, McNeil, & Adorna,

94 2010). Apitzsch (2009) even stated that the absence of a socio-emotional leader (i.e. a leader

95 who creates a positive atmosphere on the field) can lead to a collective collapse.

96   Despite these preliminary indications, the on-field motivating function has not yet

97 been empirically established and has, therefore, not yet been incorporated into current athlete

98 leadership classifications. Consequently, the first aim of our study was to explore the validity

99 and relevance of a more comprehensive classification of athlete leadership by including a

100 fourth role, namely the motivational leader on the field. We hypothesise that the four

101 leadership roles (task, motivational, social and external leader) will emerge as clearly distinct

102 roles. In addition, we examine the importance of these four leadership roles for the optimal

103 functioning of a sport team.

104 **Formal Versus Informal Leaders**

105   Another way to classify athlete leaders is based on the formal or informal character of

106 their leadership function. A formal leader is a player who has been prescribed that function

107 formally by the coach or by the team, e.g. the team captain who has been formally appointed

108 to be captain of the team. An informal leader, on the other hand, has no formal leadership

109 position but becomes a team leader as a result of the interactions occurring within the team.

110 Previous studies acknowledge the existence of both formal and informal athlete leaders within

111 sport teams (Holmes et al., 2010; Loughead et al., 2006).

112   So far, most studies focused on the team captain (Dupuis et al., 2006; Grandzol, Perlis,

113 & Draina, 2010; Voelker et al., 2011). The captain is often considered as "the" leader of the

114 team; he/she is expected (a) to act as a liaison between the coaching staff and the players, (b)

115 to act as a leader during all team activities and (c) to represent the team at receptions,

116 meetings and press conferences (Mosher, 1979). Furthermore, the captain engages in both

117 task and social behaviours, such as coaching his/her teammates or providing social support

118   (Voelker et al., 2011). Coaches, players and sports media all seem to assume that the team

119   captain takes the lead both on and off the field. Although the captain has received most

120   research attention, some studies have explored the impact of informal leadership (Loughead et

121   al., 2006). In this regard, Morgan and colleagues (2013) identified shared leadership roles as

122   an important characteristic of highly resilient sport teams (i.e. teams that are able to withstand

123   stressors positively). Their participants recognised the need for a core set of leaders in

124   challenging situations, illustrated by the following quote from a professional football player:

125   "You need a few types of leaders within the team. … My experience of resilient teams is that

126   you have six or more players who could easily have done the captaincy job." (Morgan et al.,

127   2013, p. 552). These studies emphasised that, although athlete leaders often have the formal

128   position of team captain, other players within the team also have an important role as informal

129   leaders.

130   The second aim of the present study was to compare the importance of the captain as

131   formal team leader with the importance of the informal leaders. Therefore, we examined how

132   many leadership roles are perceived as being primarily fulfilled by the team captain. Based on

133   previous research, we expect that the team captain is perceived as the most important leader

134   (i.e. fulfilling most leadership roles) but that other players on the team also act as informal

135   leaders.

136   **Method**

137   **Recruitment**

138   To contact coaches and players within nine different team sports in Flanders

139   (Belgium), we cooperated with the Flemish Trainer School, the organizer of the sport-specific

140   schooling of coaches in Flanders. Their database was used to invite 5,535 certified coaches to

141   complete a web-based questionnaire. To enhance the variability of our sample, we also

142   contacted noncertified coaches and their teams through the different Flemish sport

143   federations. In total, 8,509 players and 7,977 coaches were invited to participate during the

144   last months of the season (i.e. March – May, 2012). APA ethical standards were followed in

145   the conduct of the study and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Coaches

146   and players who did not respond, received a reminder two weeks later. No rewards were given

147   and full confidentiality was guaranteed.

148   **Participants**

149   In total, 4,451 participants (3,193 players and 1,258 coaches) completed our

150   questionnaire, resulting in an estimated total response rate of 27% (i.e. 37.5% for players and

151   15.8% for coaches). This response rate is somewhat lower than the average response rate of

152   web-based questionnaires (Shih & Fan, 2008). However, there are reasons to believe that 27%

153   is the lower limit of the actual response rate. First, the database that we used was not very

154   accurate, in that a considerable number of e-mail addresses were no longer in use or referred

155   to coaches who were not active anymore. Second, the database of the Flemish Trainer School

156   revealed some overlap with the databases of the sport federations. As a result some players or

157   coaches were contacted twice. Third, only participants above 15 years of age were included,

158   because a pilot study ($N = 30$) had revealed that younger players encountered too many

159   difficulties to complete the questionnaire. This restriction further decreased the actual

160   response.

161   More detailed information on the participants can be found in Table 1. The

162   participants played or coached in 2,366 different teams. The sample included players and

163   coaches from nine different team sports in Flanders; basketball ($n = 1,959$; 44%), handball (n

164    $= 116$; 3%), hockey ($n = 127$; 3%), ice hockey ($n = 72$; 2%), korfball ($n = 118$; 3%), rugby (n

165    $= 84$; 2%), soccer ($n = 589$; 13%), volleyball ($n = 1,287$; 29%) and water polo ($n = 99$; 2%).

166   Players and coaches from various competitive levels participated, ranging from elite level (i.e.

167   corresponding to the highest level), over national, provincial and regional level (i.e. three

168   competition levels decreasing in importance), to recreational level (i.e. lowest level of

169   competitive sport; sometimes only competition games without any training sessions) and

170   youth level (i.e. only players below 21 years old).

171   **Measures**

172   **Athlete leadership.** To determine the athlete leaders within a team, we extended the

173   existent classification (Loughead et al., 2006) by including an additional leadership role,

174   namely the role of motivational leader on the field. The definition of the motivational leader

175   was constructed based on motivational leadership behaviours outlined in literature (Dupuis et

176   al., 2006; Holmes et al., 2010; Mosher, 1979) and was subsequently tested by a focus group

177   including three research experts in the area of sports psychology, an applied sport

178   psychologist and an expert coach on elite level. The motivational leader was characterised by

179   the encouragement of teammates to go the extra mile. This leader steers all the emotions on

180   the field in the right direction in order to perform optimally as a team. The descriptions of the

181   four leadership roles were presented to all participants (see Table 2). The role of both task and

182   motivational leader are fulfilled mainly on the field; during practice and during the game.

183   Tactical or motivational behaviours that occur off the field, but with a strong link to the on-

184   field performance (e.g. tactical advice and encouragement before the game or during half-

185   time), are also included in these on-field leadership roles. The roles of social and external

186   leaders are fulfilled off the field.

187   After presenting the description of each leadership role, participants had to indicate

188   which player in their team corresponded best with the description of each of the four

189   leadership roles. Only one player could be ascribed to each of the leadership roles but one and

190   the same player could occupy several leadership roles. Participants could also indicate that a

191   specific leadership role was not present in their team. In addition, they were asked whether

192   these perceived leaders corresponded with the team captain and/or with the players ascribed to

193   other leadership roles. With this type of assessment it can be established whether one or more

194   leadership roles are concentrated in one single player or that different players occupy the

195   different roles.

196   **Optimal team functioning.** As indicators of the team functioning, we assessed

197   players' and coaches' collective efficacy, their identification with the team and the team's

198   place in the ranking. The 20-item Collective Efficacy Questionnaire for Sports (Short,

199   Sullivan, & Feltz, 2005) was used to assess participants' collective efficacy. The internal

200   consistency of this collective efficacy scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .95$) was excellent. Team

201   identification was measured using five items based on previous research (Doosje, Ellemers, &

202   Spears, 1995). The internal consistency of this identification scale proved to be excellent

203   (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$). The place of the team in the ranking was assessed on a 7-point scale

204   including 1 (*first place*), 2 (*place 2 of 3*), 3 (*little above the middle*), 4 (*half way*), 5 (*little

205   below the middle*), 6 (*second or third last place*), 7 (*last place*).

206   **Results**

207   **Occurrence and Overlap of Leadership Roles in a Sport Team**

208   Frequency analyses revealed that most participants perceived that the roles of task

209   leader, motivational leader and social leader were present in their teams; respectively 77.5%,

210   77.4% and 71.3% of the participants identified a task, a motivational and a social leader in

211   their team. Almost half of the participants (47.9%) indicated that no player fulfilled the role of

212   external leader in their team. Frequency analyses with regard to the age of players and

213   coaches revealed only small differences between the different age groups, and no fixed trend

214   could be detected.

215   As noted earlier, a single player can occupy multiple leadership roles within a team.

216   Table 3 gives an overview of the overlap between the different leadership roles. The number

217   of players who occupy a single leadership role is provided in italics on the diagonal. For

218   example, half of the players (49.9%) who performed the role of task leader were not

219   considered the most prominent individual for championing the other leadership roles

220   (motivational, social or external). The percentage of task leaders, who were also perceived as

221   best motivational, best social or best external leaders, was 18.8%, 10.2% and 9.8%,

222   respectively. In 22.5% of the participants' teams no task leader was perceived to be present.

223   Because one player can occupy three or four leadership roles, it is understandable that these

224   percentages do not add up to 100%.

225   Furthermore, our results revealed that in only 2% of the teams, the same player

226   fulfilled all four leadership roles. The overlap between the leadership roles was relatively

227   limited; not more than 19% of the athlete leaders fulfilled two leadership roles in the same

228   team. These findings indicate that the four leadership roles emerged as clearly distinct roles

229   and that leadership is spread throughout the team so that different players within the team

230   occupy the various leadership roles.

231   The number of athlete leaders who are perceived to occupy only one leadership role

232   (see Table 3; in parentheses on the diagonal) was relatively high in each of the nine team

233   sports; the number of unique task leaders varied between 45.9% and 59.6%, for motivational

234   leaders this number varied between 40.9% and 55.9%, for social leaders between 46.3% and

235   55.9% and for external leader between 26.0% and 48.8%. Given the high percentage of

236   unique motivational leaders, this newly proposed leadership role appeared to be clearly

237   distinct from the other leadership roles; the overlap with each of the other leadership roles did

238   not exceed 18.8% on average. Within the nine different sports, the highest overlap was found

239   in ice hockey where 26.4% of the motivational leaders also performed the role of task leader.

240   Linear regression analyses revealed that the overlap between the different leadership roles

241   within a team was not significantly predicted by the examined background characteristics ($\beta >$

242   .05); players and coaches of male and female teams, regardless of the level, perceived a

243   similar overlap between the different leadership roles in their team.

244   **The Most Important Leader**

245   After assigning the leadership roles to players within their team, participants indicated

246   which of these players they perceived as the most important leader. If this leader had multiple

247   leadership roles, participants had to indicate his/her most important role. Table 4 presents

248   which leader participants indicated as most important.

249   The results indicate that most participants perceived the task leader as the most

250   important leader, followed by the motivational leader. The social leader and the external

251   leader were perceived as less important. The nine different team sports all revealed the same

252   order of perceived importance of the different leaders by both players and coaches; the task

253   leader was always perceived as the most important leader (39.7% - 51.1%), followed by the

254   motivational leader (22.6% - 35.8%). The number of coaches and players who perceived the

255   social or the external leader as the most important leader did not exceed 20%, with exception

256   of handball where 25% of the players and coaches listed the social leader as the most

257   important leader. As a result, leadership roles on the field were clearly perceived as more

258   important than leadership roles off the field, regardless of the sport or the level on which

259   participants played or coached.

260   **The Importance of Athlete Leaders for an Optimal Team Functioning**

261   The correlations in Table 5 indicate that the presence of more leadership roles in the

262   team made players and coaches more confident in the abilities of their team (i.e. higher

263   collective efficacy beliefs) and enhanced their connectedness with their team (i.e. higher team

264   identification). In addition, the results suggested that for an optimal team functioning, it is

265   better to have different athlete leaders in the team than one leader who is perceived as best

266   leader on all different areas.

267 **The Team Captain**

268   The results in Table 6 show that only 1% of the participants perceived their captain as

269 the best leader on all four leadership roles. In addition, almost half of the participants (43.6%)

270 reported that the team captain is not the best leader on one of the four domains, neither on the

271 field, nor off the field. On average, over the four leadership roles thereby excluding the cases

272 in which a specific leadership role was not fulfilled, 29.5% of the participants indicated the

273 captain as the best leader on a specific leadership role, whereas 70.5% of the participants

274 indicated an informal leader. These findings were consistent for both coaches and players of

275 the male and female teams, ranging from the recreational to the elite level and within each of

276 the nine sports.

277   If the captain is perceived as being a primary leader, participants indicated most

278 frequently that the captain was a task leader (31.7%) or a motivational leader (24.6%). Only

279 15.5% and 10.1% of the participants indicated that the team captain primarily fulfilled the role

280 of social and external leader. In general, the team captain was more often perceived to

281 perform a primary leadership role on the field than off the field, a finding that held for the

282 nine different sports.

283   **Discussion**

284   The present investigation extends current knowledge on athlete leadership in two

285 respects. First, a more comprehensive classification with four different athlete leadership roles

286 was established and its relevance for optimal team functioning was demonstrated. Second, we

287 compared the perceived importance of the formal leader (i.e. the team captain) with the

288 informal leaders of the team.

289 **Classification of Athlete Leadership**

290   With regard to the classification of athlete leadership, the newly added motivational

291 leadership role appears to be equally prominent as the already established task and social

292   leadership roles. Our results corroborate earlier studies, which also found that the external

293   leadership role is less prominent (Eys et al., 2007; Loughead et al., 2006).

294   Although a player can perform several leadership roles at the same time, maximum

295   18.8% of our athlete leaders combined two specific leadership roles. In other words, the four

296   leadership roles emerged as clearly distinct roles. Leadership appears to be spread throughout

297   the team; different players within the team are perceived as being the primary leader with

298   respect to the four roles.

299   Regarding the importance assigned to these different leadership roles, both task and

300   motivational leader are perceived as more important than the social and external leadership

301   roles. In contrast to previous research that assigned an equal importance to leaders' on- and

302   off-field characteristics (Bucci, Bloom, Loughead, & Caron, 2012), our findings reveal that

303   both players and coaches perceive the on-field leadership roles as more important than the

304   off-field leadership roles, regardless of the sport or level they play or coach. The fact that half

305   of the participants indicated no external leader on their team corresponds with the perception

306   of the external leader as the least important leader on the team. A possible alternative

307   explanation is that this external function is not fulfilled by players but by the coach or club

308   management.

309   The new role of motivational leader is perceived as the second most important

310   leadership role. This confirms our hypothesis that the proposed new leadership classification,

311   including the motivational leader, is more comprehensive than previous classifications. Given

312   the key role of motivating and encouraging behaviours for effective athlete leadership

313   (Apitzsch, 2009; Cotterill, 2013; Dupuis et al., 2006; Holmes et al., 2010), the new leadership

314   classification improves the relevance of this new leadership classification for coaching

315   practice on the field.

316   **The Team Captain**

317   In order to better understand the function of team captain, we analysed which

318   leadership roles the team captain performs. Our findings revealed that in only 1% of the

319   teams, the captain is perceived as being the primary leader in all four roles. Even more

320   remarkable is that almost half of the participants did not perceive their captain as the most

321   important leader, neither on, nor off the field. These results clearly contradict the general

322   conception of players and coaches that the team captain is "the" leader of the team, both on

323   and off the field.

324   Previous research already suggested that not only team captains but also other players

325   can function as athlete leaders (Loughead & Hardy, 2005; Loughead et al., 2006). Our

326   findings add that it is common (i.e. 70.5% of the time) that informal athlete leaders rather than

327   the formal leader, take the principal lead, both on and off the field. This pattern is obtained in

328   all teams, regardless of team gender, sport or level, and thus underlines the general overrating

329   of the leadership qualities of the team captain. Although many studies on athlete leadership

330   only focus on the role of the team captain (Dupuis et al., 2006; Grandzol et al., 2010; Voelker

331   et al., 2011), our findings infer that informal athlete leadership, exhibited by other players

332   besides the team captain, is indeed important and should be acknowledged.

333   These findings are consistent with the new paradigm of shared leadership in the

334   organisational literature (Pearce & Conger, 2003). Although most existing research on

335   organisational team leadership has focused narrowly on the behaviour of an individual leader,

336   the latest research trends acknowledge the importance of leadership provided by team

337   members. Because it is unlikely that a single leader can successfully perform all necessary

338   leadership functions, Carson and colleagues (2007) argued for 'shared leadership' in teams

339   (also called collective or distributed leadership), which they define as "an emergent team

340   property that results from the distribution of leadership influence across multiple team

341   members." Based on our findings, we propose a slightly expanded view of shared leadership,

342 similar to the one of Pearce and Conger (2003, p. 286). They suggested that shared leadership

343 involves informal influence as part of a dynamic, interactive influence process among players

344 in teams, both lateral and vertical, but with the key attribute being more than just downward

345 influence on the players by an appointed or an elected leader (such as the coach or team

346 captain). We extended the model of 'shared leadership' by not only providing evidence that

347 there are different athlete leaders in the team, but also by demonstrating that these leaders

348 occupy different leadership roles.

349   Previous findings within the organisational setting showed that the emergence of

350 informal leaders was positively related with higher individual and team performance (Zhang,

351 Waldman, & Wang, 2012). Furthermore, co-leadership in sports has already been associated

352 with positive outcomes for both team members and leaders (Cotterill, 2013). These findings

353 are in line with our results that shared leadership within the team was positively linked with

354 higher collective efficacy beliefs, stronger team identification and a better place in the

355 ranking.

356 **Strengths, Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research**

357   The strengths of our study include the broad variety of players and coaches in our

358 sample; men and women, of all ages and experience levels, active at all levels of nine

359 different team sports in Flanders. The consistency of our findings, regardless of level, sport or

360 team gender, testifies to the reliability of our findings.

361   In addressing the limitations of the present study, several opportunities for future

362 research emerge. First, in our study we only asked which player and which leadership role

363 constituted the best match. It is possible that the team captain is not perceived as the best

364 leader on and off the field, but instead as second best. Therefore, we cannot conclude that the

365 captain does not perform the given leadership roles at all. Future research could assess the

366 leadership capacities of every player in the team with respect to the different leadership roles.

367   This would provide a deeper insight in the leadership function of the captain compared to the

368   other players. It remains true, however, that other players in the team are perceived as more

369   important leaders than the captain.

370   Second, the team captain was only evaluated with regard to his/her leadership

371   capacities. It is possible then that the team captain has other qualities than those we studied.

372   As such, the captain's function might be focused on other issues than leadership, e.g. on being

373   the confidant of the coach. Future research can clarify the exact function of the team captain

374   by interviewing coaches and players about their definition of the captain's function and about

375   the selection criteria used to assign this function.

376   Third, regarding the design of the present study, individual players and coaches, rather

377   than complete teams, completed the online questionnaire, which resulted in 4,451 participants

378   active in 2,366 different teams. This makes it impossible to conduct analyses at team level.

379   From a research perspective, it is clear that further investigation on team level is warranted to

380   determine to which extent players and coaches of the same team indicate the same player as

381   task, motivational, social and external leader.

382   Fourth, the present study utilised a cross-sectional design, as did most other studies on

383   leadership (Moran & Weiss, 2006; Price & Weiss, 2011). Previous longitudinal research

384   revealed that the percentage of task, social and external leaders within a team remained

385   relatively stable from the beginning to the end of a season (Eys et al., 2007; Loughead et al.,

386   2006). We examined athlete leadership only at the end of the season to give all players

387   adequate time to develop team relationships and to gain insight in the athlete leadership

388   within their team. However, a longitudinal design would allow researchers to verify whether

389   informal leaders are perceived as the most important leaders during the whole season or

390   whether the influence of formal leaders shifts towards informal leaders during the season.

391   Furthermore, such a design would enable researchers to gain an understanding of the stability

392   of informal leadership over the course of a season (e.g. whether the same players are

393   occupying the different leadership roles during the whole season).

394   **Implications for Theoretical Knowledge and Coaching Practice**

395   The findings of the present study contribute both to theoretical knowledge and to

396   coaching practice. First, the results provide clear insight into the nature of athlete leadership

397   within sport teams. Besides investigating formal and informal leadership, and the extent to

398   which leadership is shared within a team, we also examined the different leadership roles that

399   athletes can occupy. Future research can translate these findings to other settings, such as the

400   organisational or educational setting. In this regard, researchers should look more closely into

401   the concept of 'shared leadership' by determining whether the different leaders occupy

402   different leadership roles. Based on our findings, we assume that the already established

403   positive impact of shared leadership on team performance (Carson et al., 2007) would become

404   even stronger when the different leaders in the team take on different leadership roles.

405   Second, coaches can use these findings to elect their team captain in a well-considered

406   way according to the needs of their particular team, thereby focusing on his/her leadership

407   qualities in the different areas. Furthermore, coaches should realize that not only the team

408   captain but also other team members can and should take up leadership roles. Therefore,

409   coaches should allocate time and effort to the identification and development of leadership

410   (Bucci et al., 2012; Price & Weiss, 2011). Identification of the informal leaders within the

411   team can help coaches to guide these leaders and further develop their leadership capabilities.

412   This strengthened athlete leadership has the potential to create a more optimal team

413   functioning, which, in turn, may result in an improved team performance.

414   **References**

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495   Table 1

496   *Sample characteristics*

Function	M_{age} (years)	$M_{experience}$ (years)	Team gender			Level		
3,193 Players (72%)	23.92	14.21	1,876	♂	(59%)	177	E	(6%)
			1,232	♀	(39%)	836	N	(26%)
			85	♂+♀	(3%)[a]	1,733	P	(54%)
						209	RG	(7%)
						122	RC	(4%)
						116	Y	(4%)
1,258 Coaches (28%)	41.94	13.97	880	♂	(70%)	90	E	(7%)
			345	♀	(27%)	268	N	(21%)
			33	♂+♀	(3%)[a]	613	P	(49%)
						102	RG	(8%)
						22	RC	(2%)
						163	Y	(13%)

497   [a]Korfball is a mixed-gender team sport.

498   *Note*: M_{age}, mean age; $M_{experience}$, mean years of experience; ♂, male; ♀, female; E, elite level;

499   N, national level; P, provincial level; RG, regional level; RC, recreational level; Y, youth.

500   Table 2

501   *The definition of the four leadership roles, as presented to the participants.*

Leadership role	Definition
Task leader	A task leader is in charge on the field; this person helps the team to focus on our goals and helps in tactical decision-making. Furthermore the task leader gives his/her teammates tactical advice during the game and adjusts them if necessary.
Motivational leader	The motivational leader is the biggest motivator on the field; this person can encourage his/her teammates to go to any extreme; this leader also puts fresh heart into players who are discouraged. In short, this leader steers all the emotions on the field in the right direction in order to perform optimally as a team.
Social leader	The social leader has a leading role besides the field; this person promotes good relations within the team and cares for a good team atmosphere, e.g. in the dressing room, in the cafeteria or on social team activities. Furthermore, this leader helps to deal with conflicts between teammates besides the field. He/she is a good listener and is trusted by his/her teammates.
External leader	The external leader is the link between our team and the people outside; this leader is the representative of our team towards the club management. If communication is needed with media or sponsors, this person will take the lead. This leader will also communicate the guidelines of the club management to the team regarding club activities for sponsoring.

502

503   Table 3
504   *Overlap between the different leadership roles performed by one player. The number of*
505   *players who occupy only a single leadership role is provided in italics on the diagonal.*

	Task leader	Motivational leader	Social leader	External leader
Task leader	*2,220 (49.9%)*			
Motivational leader	838 (18.8%)	*2,214 (49.7%)*		
Social leader	454 (10.2%)	512 (11.5%)	*2,127 (47.8%)*	
External leader	434 (9.8%)	283 (6.4%)	451 (10.1%)	*1,482 (33.3%)*
No leader present	1,003 (22.5%)	1,008 (22.6%)	1,276 (28.7%)	2,132 (47.9%)

506

507   Table 4
508   *The most important leader*

The most important leader	N	Percentage	Valid Percentage
Task leader	1,668	37.5	42.1
Motivational leader	1,263	28.4	31.9
Social leader	703	15.8	17.8
External leader	325	7.3	8.2
Total	3,959	88.9	100.0
Missing values	492	11.1	

509

510 Table 5

511 Correlations indicating the importance of athlete leaders for an optimal team functioning

	Collective efficacy	Team identification	Place in ranking
Number of occupied leadership roles	.13*	.16*	-.06*
Number of different athlete leaders	.10*	.12*	-.06*

512 *$p < .01$

513   Table 6

514   *Participants' perceptions of the leadership roles performed by the team captain*

Number of leadership roles occupied by the captain	*N*	Percentage
0	1,940	43.6%
1	1,635	36.7%
2	659	14.8%
3	171	3.8%
4	46	1.0%

515