



Original research

Is perceived athlete leadership quality related to team effectiveness? A comparison of three professional sports teams



Katrien Fransen^{a,*}, S. Alexander Haslam^b, Clifford J. Mallett^c, Niklas K. Steffens^b,
Kim Peters^b, Filip Boen^a

^a Department of Kinesiology, KU Leuven, Belgium

^b School of Psychology, The University of Queensland, Australia

^c School of Human Movement and Nutrition Sciences, The University of Queensland, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Researchers have argued that leadership is one of the most important determinants of team effectiveness. The present study examined the extent to which the perceived quality of athlete leadership was related to the effectiveness of elite sports teams.

Design: Three professional football teams ($N = 135$) participated in our study during the preparation phase for the Australian 2016 season.

Methods: Players and coaching staff were asked to assess players' leadership quality in four leadership roles (as task, motivational, social, and external leader) via an online survey. The leadership quality in each of these roles was then calculated in a social network analysis by averaging the indegree centralities of the three best leaders in that particular role. Participants also rated their team's performance and its functioning on multiple indicators.

Results: As hypothesized, the team with the highest-quality athlete leadership on each of the four leadership roles excelled in all indicators of team effectiveness. More specifically, athletes in this team had a stronger shared sense of the team's purpose, they were more highly committed to realizing the team's goals, and they had a greater confidence in their team's abilities than athletes in the other teams. Moreover, this team demonstrated a higher task-involving and a lower ego-involving climate, and excelled on all measures of performance.

Conclusions: High-quality athlete leadership is positively related to team effectiveness. Given the importance of high-quality athlete leadership, the study highlights the need for well-designed empirically-based leadership development programs.

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1. Introduction

It has long been argued that effective *leadership* is central to team functioning and high performance in elite sport.¹ Historically, *vertical* leadership (i.e., where the leader is positioned hierarchically above the team) has been foregrounded in both research and practice. In line with this vertical approach, organizational leadership research has focused on the influence of managers on employees and sports leadership research has examined the impact of coaches on athletes.

In the last decade, however, a radical shift has occurred away from this traditional emphasis on vertical leadership towards the idea that leadership can, and should, be *shared*.^{2,3} This approach

asserts that leadership does not only emanate from the formal leader, but also from team members more generally. In line with this alternative view, shared leadership is argued to be a more powerful predictor of team effectiveness than vertical leadership.⁴ In organizational research, a number of studies have corroborated these claims by demonstrating an overall positive relationship between shared leadership and team performance.^{2,5,6}

One of the first coaches to pioneer this shared leadership approach in sports teams was Ric Charlesworth. This was something he achieved by abolishing the captaincy role in the Australian women's hockey team and creating a leadership group instead.⁷ Amongst other benefits, he observed that this strategy encouraged different people to make complementary contributions to team functioning. As a result, members of the leadership group had responsibilities for portfolios that covered a range of spheres – from on-field tactics and training to off-field concerns, such as building a closely-knit team. More generally, the creation of a

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: Katrien.Fransen@kuleuven.be (K. Fransen).

shared leadership structure was a central aspect of a team culture that promoted sharing of responsibility. Supported by his leadership group, Charlesworth steered his teams to multiple successes, including World Cup titles, Commonwealth Games titles, bronze and gold Olympic medals, and four Champions Trophy gold medals.

In line with such developments, researchers have also become increasingly interested in the contribution of athletes to leadership (for a review on athlete leadership, see Ref. 8). In this regard, several experimental studies have demonstrated that athlete leaders within the team can impact their team members' confidence in the team, their intrinsic motivation, and their objective performance.^{9,10} Furthermore, it has been shown that teams with high-quality athlete leadership are characterized by high levels of team confidence¹¹ and strong task and social cohesion.^{11,12}

Given the beneficial effects of athlete leadership for team effectiveness, it seems crucial to capitalize on the leadership potential of athletes. Traditionally, coaches and players have tended to look to the team captain to provide leadership (at least in the first instance), but a shared leadership perspective suggests that this might not always be the best strategy. Consistent with this point, Fransen et al.,¹³ found that often informal leaders, rather than the team captain, were perceived to be the best athlete leaders of the team. To ensure effective leadership it therefore seems to be crucial to take all team members' views into account when appointing a leader.

Recent research has pointed to the value of using Social Network Analysis (SNA¹⁴). Social network analysis views leadership relationships in terms of (a) nodes (representing the individual athletes within the network) and (b) ties (representing athletes' leadership perceptions; e.g., such that a tie directed from athlete A to athlete B indicates the extent to which athlete A perceives athlete B to be a good leader). An example of such a leadership network is presented in Fig. 1. As a result, SNA can represent the distribution of leadership among group members and can also identify the emergence of multiple leaders.¹⁵ Furthermore, this technique allows researchers to map contours in the leadership *quality* of athletes, thereby moving beyond previous studies which tended to make only binary distinctions between designated leaders and non-leaders. This is important because designated leaders do not necessarily fulfill their leadership function well or better than other team members. More generally too, it is the quality with which a leadership role is enacted that is most critical for a leader's effectiveness. Accordingly, in the present study, the ties between the players in a leadership network represent perceptions of leadership *quality* (from very poor to very good). In other words, the strength of a tie in the network from Athlete A to Athlete B indicates the extent to which Athlete A perceives Athlete B to be a good leader.

When it comes to leadership of professional teams, the expectations of players and coaches are understandably high: they expect the leader to give tactical advice, to motivate other team members, to provide a good atmosphere off the field, and to represent the team to external bodies (e.g., club management, sponsors, and media).¹⁶ Yet because these tasks require quite different qualities, it is unlikely that one player will excel in all these different leadership tasks. Moreover, appointing only one leader to perform them might carry the risk that if that leader is absent (e.g., due to injury or suspension), the team will find itself without leadership in these various domains. Accordingly, sharing leadership responsibilities among team members would seem to be a sounder and more sustainable strategy.⁸

In an attempt to address these issues, Fransen, et al.¹³ distinguished between four leadership roles that players can occupy (i.e., two 'on-field' and two 'off-field' roles): (1) the task leader, who helps the team to focus on the team goals and who gives his/her teammates tactical advice during the game; (2) the motivational leader, who motivates his/her teammates to perform at their best and who channels teammates' emotions effectively; (3) the social

leader, who builds a good team atmosphere and serves as a confidant for his/her teammates; and (4) the external leader, who represents the team when dealing with external parties. More comprehensive definitions of these roles can be found in Appendix A. Fransen et al.¹³ also observed that a shared leadership structure in which different players are appointed to these four different leadership roles leads (a) to higher levels of team confidence, (b) to higher identification with the team, and (c) to higher team ranking, compared to a single team captain model. Furthermore, shared leadership *within* each leadership role (such that each is performed by a number of individuals rather than just one) has been found to be positively related to both task and social cohesion.¹⁷ Accordingly, it has been suggested that SNA can be used to inform the appointment of high-quality athlete leadership teams into each of the distinct leadership roles.⁸

With this in mind, the present study used SNA to identify the leadership structure in three professional sports teams and sought to identify the relationship between the quality of athlete leadership and the team's effectiveness. When examining a team's athlete leadership quality, previous studies have focused on the average leadership quality of all team members.^{12,19} However, not all players have the skills required to lead, and more importantly, as Hardy et al.²⁰ observed, when a team has a large number of leaders this can prove to be problematic (e.g., because it leads to confusion and miscommunication). At a methodological level too, a measure of average leadership quality in a team can be distorted by a varying number of team members who exert little or no leadership. Accordingly, in the present study, we did not examine average team leadership, but rather the leadership quality of the leadership team in each of the four distinct roles identified above. In light of the above reasoning, our main hypothesis was that team functioning and performance – which are the most critical indices of leadership effectiveness²¹ – would be enhanced to the extent that teams had high-quality athlete leadership teams across these four domains of leadership activity.

2. Methods

2.1. Procedure

In the preparation phase of the 2016 season, three top-division Australian football teams, one from the Australian National Rugby League (NRL; playing Rugby League Football) and two from the Australian Football League (AFL; playing Rugby League Football), were contacted to enquire about their willingness to participate in the present research. After providing consent, the players and coaching staff of the three teams were given a questionnaire that was tailored to their team (i.e., listing the names of all the team members whose leadership was to be assessed), and took about 30 minutes to complete. Coaching staff and players who did not respond received a reminder two weeks later and a second reminder after four weeks. Data collection took place over a six-week period between December 2015 and January 2016. As a reward for participating in this study, we provided the coaching staff of the three teams with a feedback report at the end of the study that included the results from the leadership analyses. APA ethical standards were followed in the conduct of the study and full confidentiality was guaranteed. The study was approved by the ethics committee of the academic institution of the first author.

2.2. Participants

Players and coaches from three Australian professional sports teams participated in the study. All were male. One team was from the National Rugby League (playing Rugby League Football: Team

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