



## Who takes the lead? Social network analysis as a pioneering tool to investigate shared leadership within sports teams



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### ABSTRACT

Leaders do not operate in social vacuums, but are imbedded in a web of interpersonal relationships with their teammates and coach. The present manuscript is the first to use social network analysis to provide more insight in the leadership structure within sports teams. Two studies were conducted, including respectively 25 teams ( $N=308$ ;  $M_{age}=24.9$  years old) and 21 teams ( $N=267$ ;  $M_{age}=24.3$  years old). The reliability of a fourfold athlete leadership categorization (task, motivational, social, external leader) was established by analyzing leadership networks, which mapped the complete leadership structure within a team. The study findings highlight the existence of shared leadership in sports teams. More specifically, regarding the task and external leadership roles, no significant differences were observed between the leadership quality of coaches and athlete leaders. However, athlete leaders were perceived as better motivational and social leaders than their coaches. Furthermore, both the team captain and informal athlete leaders shared the lead on the different leadership roles. Social network analysis was found to be a pioneering but valuable tool for obtaining a deeper insight in the leadership structure within sports teams.

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### 1. Introduction

High-quality leadership has been considered as a decisive factor in the successes of governments, political movements, educational institutions, business enterprises, and sports teams (Chelladurai, 2012). The majority of the research on team leadership has focused narrowly on the influence and behavior of one single team leader (usually a manager external to the team), thereby largely ignoring the leadership provided by team members. Only since the last decade, the concept of shared leadership was introduced in organizational settings and has been defined as “leadership that emanates from the members of teams and not simply from the appointed team leader” (Pearce and Sims, 2002, p. 172). The idea that “shared

leadership is a more useful predictor of team effectiveness than vertical leadership” (Pearce and Sims, 2002, p. 183) seems to be at the heart of the growing interest in shared forms of organizational leadership (Pearce and Conger, 2003).

The structure of a sports team is similar to the structure of a business team. Both teams are characterized by a hierarchical structure in which there is one person formally appointed as the leader of the team (i.e., respectively the manager or the coach). Furthermore, both types of teams strive for visible performance outcomes, for instance, taking the form of sale increases or a sports victory. Therefore, it should not be surprising that there are also similarities between the leadership styles of business managers and sport coaches (Weinberg and McDermott, 2002). In line with organizational leadership research, the vast majority of the research on leadership in sports settings has concentrated on the role of the coach. In this regard, a wide range of outcomes has been linked to coaches' leadership styles and behaviors, ranging from athletes' motivation to athletes' performance (for reviews see Amorose, 2007; Chelladurai, 2007; Gould and Wright, 2012; Horn, 2008; Langan et al., 2013).

While coaches are vital to their teams, another source of leadership within teams has recently garnered research attention;

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namely athlete leadership. Athlete leaders have been characterized by more central positions on the field compared with their teammates, a longer playing time, a higher task competence, a longer team tenure, and a stronger social connectedness with teammates (Fransen et al., 2015c; Loughhead et al., 2006; Moran and Weiss, 2006; Price and Weiss, 2011; Rees and Segal, 1984; Yukelson et al., 1983). Furthermore, a positive relationship was demonstrated between the presence of athlete leaders and team outcomes, such as athletes' satisfaction, athletes' team confidence, the team's cohesion, and the team's performance (Crozier et al., 2013; Fransen et al., 2012, 2015a,b,d; Price and Weiss, 2011; Vincer and Loughhead, 2010). These findings highlight the crucial role of having high-quality athlete leaders and necessitate further research efforts to obtain a deeper insight in athlete leadership.

Loughhead et al. (2006, p. 144) defined an athlete leader as "an athlete occupying a formal or informal leadership role influencing team members toward a common goal." Contained within this definition are two types of leaders. Athletes who are formally appointed to be a leader, such as the team captain, are termed formal leaders. Informal leaders on the other hand are not formally recognized as a leader but acquire their leadership role through group member interactions. Previous studies on athlete leadership have mainly focused on the team captain as formal leader (e.g., Dupuis et al., 2006; Grandzol et al., 2010; Kent and Todd, 2004; Voelker et al., 2011). Nevertheless, several researchers have argued that, besides the team captain as formal leader of the team, informal leadership should also be taken into consideration (Cope et al., 2011). For example, Loughhead et al. (2006) revealed that, although most athlete leaders occupy a formal leadership position (i.e., captain or assistant captain), also other players within the team are perceived as leaders by their teammates. In a different study, the majority of athletes (65.1%) pointed out that both the team captain and other players occupied a leadership function in their team (Loughhead and Hardy, 2005).

In addition to the formal-informal leadership distinction, Fransen et al. (2014) recently identified the presence of four different athlete leadership roles. This new athlete leadership categorization encompasses two on-field leadership roles (task and motivational leader) and two off-field leadership roles (social and external leader). A detailed description of these four different leadership roles, as outlined in previous research (Fransen et al., 2014), can be found in Table 1. Using this new categorization of athlete leadership roles, Fransen et al. (2014) focused on the players who were perceived as the best leader with respect to these four leadership roles. Interestingly, the results indicated that there was some overlap between the task and motivational leadership role. More specifically, 18.8% of the best task leaders were also perceived as the best motivational leaders in their team. Furthermore, 11.5% of the best motivational leaders were also seen as the best social leaders. However, these overlapping percentages were relatively low, supporting the fact that the four leadership roles are clearly distinct and, more importantly, showing that different players within the team are perceived as best leader on the four leadership roles.

Furthermore, Fransen et al. (2014) examined the formal and informal athlete leaders with respect to the four leadership roles (i.e., task, motivational, social, and external) within nine different team sports in Flanders ( $N=4451$ ). The results demonstrated that only 1% of the participants perceived their team captain (i.e., a formal leader) as the best leader in all four roles. Even more remarkable was that almost half of the participants (44%) did not perceive their captain as the best leader on any of the four roles, neither on the field, nor off the field. On average over the four leadership roles, 29.5% of the participants indicated their captain as the best leader on a specific leadership role, whereas 70.5% of the participants indicated an informal leader. These results show that athlete leadership is shared among different team members, thereby contradicting the

**Table 1**

The definitions of the four leadership roles, as outlined by Fransen et al. (2014).

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 toward 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.

general notion of players and coaches that the team captain is the only leader of the team. As a consequence, there is a clear need for a better understanding how widespread athlete leadership is within teams.

One limitation emerging from Fransen et al. (2014) was that participants were only asked to evaluate the *best* leader on their team. As such, the authors obtained important information concerning the *best* leader on the team, concerning the overlap between the *best* leaders in the different leadership roles, and concerning whether the team captain is perceived as *best* leader. However, information on the leadership provided by other team members, who may not be the best but still influential leaders, is missing. Furthermore, because perceived leadership of the coach was not measured, it was not possible to compare the athlete leaders and the coach in this respect. As such, the leadership structure within the complete team remains concealed. Consequently, it cannot be ruled out that the captain, not often perceived as the best leader in the Fransen et al. (2014) study, was neither perceived as second or third best leader. Likewise, it could be that, although the captain was not perceived as best leader in any of the given roles, he/she might have been perceived as best all-round leader (i.e., scoring second or third best on all four leadership roles).

In order to gain a deeper insight into the leadership structure of sports teams, the present study will measure the leadership quality of the coach and of every player on the team with respect to the four different leadership roles. Moreover, it is important to realize that athlete leaders do not lead in a social vacuum, but instead, are imbedded in a web of interpersonal relationships with their teammates and coach. Nevertheless, previous research has typically focused on individual perceptions when examining athlete leadership, thereby ignoring the surrounding team context. The present study will extend previous research by using social network analysis to obtain a greater insight in the complete leadership structure within sports teams.

### 1.1. Social network analysis

Social network analysis is a set of methodological tools for understanding the relationships and structures within a network. This approach views social relationships in terms of network

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