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Leadership in a broad sense is defined as a process or interaction between leaders and followers to achieve a common goal (Price & Weiss, 2011). On a sports team, leadership is often thought to be in the hands of the coach; however, more recent research has demonstrated that athletes play an important role in leading the team as well (Price & Weiss, 2011). These individuals are referred to as peer leaders, athlete leaders, or team leaders. Loughead, Hardy, and Eys’s (2006) study differentiated between the team leader, who influences at least 50% of the team members and a peer leader, who influences at least two other team members. Although there is a difference between a team leader and a peer leader, the term athlete leader will be used here to encapsulate both team and peer leaders.

Coaches are often frustrated by the lack of leadership, or poor leadership quality, from the athletes on their teams, but few take action to change this (Gould & Voelker, 2010). Gould et al. (2006) studied high school coaches’ perceptions...
of their student-athletes, and found that, out of 28 problems among high school athletes, poor leadership was the sixth most frequently cited. Furthermore, research has found that coaches and athlete leaders provide different functions on a team (Loughead & Hardy, 2005), making athlete leadership development essential. A multitude of leader development programs are available for coaches, but significantly fewer exist for the athletes. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to outline athlete leadership in sport and describe how coaches and other practitioners can effectively develop athlete leaders in a team or sports program.

**Approaches to Athlete Leadership**

More recently in the leadership and sport leadership literature, the interactional approach to leadership has dominated (Weinberg & Gould, 2015). Interactional approaches to leadership reject the notion that leaders can be predicted exclusively by their personality traits, but propose that great leaders likely share some personality traits. Interactional approaches also suggest that effective leaders can change or modify their style or behaviors to best fit the situation. Interactional approaches to leadership take into consideration personal factors, as well as the interactions between people and the environment, or the specific situations (Weinberg & Gould, 2015). Thus, a brief synopsis of one of the major interactional approaches in the sport literature is provided below to assist coaches and practitioners in developing a better understanding of the various factors and interactions that may impact the development and effectiveness of their athlete leaders.

**Multidimensional Model of Sport Leadership**

There are several sport-specific interactional approaches to leadership, but the multidimensional model of sport leadership (Chelladurai, 1990) is frequently cited in the sport literature. While most sport-specific approaches to leadership were developed to apply to the coach as the leader, the multidimensional model is one that can also be applied to athlete leaders. In this multidimensional model of leadership, an athlete’s performance and satisfaction depend on three types of leader behaviors, determined by the characteristics of the athlete and the specifics of the situation (Chelladurai, 1990; Weinberg & Gould, 2015). The degree of congruence among the three types of leader behaviors is what influences athlete satisfaction and performance (Chelladurai, 1990; Weinberg & Gould, 2015).

There are three categories of antecedents that ultimately direct the leader’s behavior: situational characteristics, leader characteristics, and member characteristics (Chelladurai, 1990; Weinberg & Gould, 2015). Situational characteristics refer to the team goals, type of task (open versus closed), type of sport (individual versus team), and other social or cultural context of the team. Age, experience, leadership style, confidence, and personality make up the leader characteristics. Finally, member characteristics refer to task-related ability and personality. The three types of leader behavior in the multidimensional model of leadership are required behaviors, actual behaviors, and preferred behaviors. Actual behaviors are the behaviors the leader exhibits, the required behaviors are those behaviors dictated by the organizational system or that are largely influenced by the situational characteristics, and the preferred behaviors are those that are members’ preferences, oftentimes influenced by the member’s own individual characteristics (Chelladurai, 1990; Weinberg & Gould, 2015). Therefore, coaches should take into consideration characteristics of the situation, members, and potential leaders when identifying potential athlete leaders.

**Who are Athlete Leaders?**

It is necessary for coaches and practitioners to understand who athlete leaders on a team are in order to optimize their team leadership. Studies have found that athlete leaders typically hold starting positions on the team, are more likely to be third year, or veteran players, and tend to remain stable over the course of a season (Loughead et al., 2006). Research has also found athletes in formal leadership roles, such as team captains, tend to have higher ratings of sport performance as well (Yukelson et al., 1983). However, athletes in formal leadership roles are not the only leaders on a sports team. A recent study by Fransen et al. (2014) found that 44% of the Belgium athletes and coaches studied did not perceive the team captain to be the sole athlete leader. Price and Weiss’s (2011) study found that adolescent female soccer players were more likely to perceive their teammates who were intrinsically motivated, confident in their soccer abilities, liked by others, and preferred challenging tasks as displaying leadership behaviors. Todd and Kent (2004) conducted a study of 179 adolescent athletes in the Southeastern United States using an assessment of athletes’ leader behavior and found that athletes rated the item “works hard in practice and games” as the most important quality of an athlete leader. Finally, a study by Price and Weiss (2011) identified eight characteristics that effective athlete leaders exhibit, reflected by the dimensions of the Peer Sport Leadership Behavior Inventory. These eight characteristics are motivation, compassion, physical/technical skills, maturity, problem solving, commitment/focus, good character, and creativity or intelligence. Effective athlete leaders demonstrate proficiency in all eight of these domains (Price & Weiss, 2011). Thus, coaches and practitioners should consider the above characteristics and traits when they are seeking to identify potential athlete leaders.

**Athlete Leadership Style**

In addition to leadership characteristics, leadership style should also be considered when selecting or identifying athlete leaders. Janssen (2014) has found that athlete leaders tend to display one of two different leadership styles. One type of leader primarily leads by example and conveys commitment, confidence, composure, and character to their teammates (Janssen, 2014). These leaders manifest commitment through
their self-discipline, self-motivation, hard work ethic, passion for team success, and competitive drive. The leader by example conveys confidence in their self-efficacy to lead the team, desire to perform well under pressure, and resilience to mistakes. These leaders demonstrate composure by monitoring their affect, and demonstrate character through their responsibility, reliability, and honesty (Janssen, 2014). In contrast, the other type of leadership style Janssen (2014) identified is the vocal leader. The vocal leader is one who functions as an encourager to build teammates’ confidence, help teammates refocus when mistakes are made, and helps develop and maintain team cohesion. The vocal leader also functions as an enforcer by holding themselves and their teammates accountable for their actions, and handling conflict in a fair, direct, and consistent manner (Janssen, 2014). Some athlete leaders may function only as a vocal leader on the team, others as leaders by example, and some leaders may take on both leader styles and be able to read the situation and apply the necessary type of leader style. Both types of leadership styles are important to have on a given team, so coaches may want to consider identifying a potential leader that exhibits both styles, or selecting multiple leaders.

Functions of Athlete Leaders

Coaches should also devote time to developing their athlete leaders, as research has found that many of the important leader behaviors athlete leaders provide to their team coaches do not (Dupuis et al., 2006; Loughead & Hardy, 2005). Studies have found athlete leaders exhibit behaviors that can be grouped into several categories of functions to their team: task, social, and external. For example, Dupuis et al. (2006) interviewed six male former Canadian university hockey team captains and identified problem solving, or conflict management, and setting a good example as some of the key themes. Loughead and Hardy (2005) also studied male and female Canadian athletes and found that athlete leaders demonstrated social support and democratic decision making. External behaviors, such as representing the team at functions, have also been recognized as behaviors exhibited by athlete leaders (Loughead et al., 2006). More recently, a study by Fransen et al. (2014) expanded the conception of athlete leader functions by revealing players and coaches perceived the role of motivational leader to be distinct from the previously identified task, social, and external roles, thereby adding a fourth category of athlete leader functions. For example, Price and Weiss’s (2011) study examining adolescent female soccer players found that athlete leaders engaged in behaviors aimed at motivating their teammates. Given these important task, social, external, and motivational functions that athlete leaders provide, coaches and practitioners should invest in developing their athlete leaders.

Outcomes of Effective Athlete Leaders

Recent research has found strong athlete leaders to be essential on sports teams for a number of reasons, including improving team performance (Todd & Kent, 2004). Shields et al. (1997) studied the relationship between leader behaviors and team cohesion with high school and community college baseball and softball players in California. They discovered a relationship between high task cohesion and the leader behaviors of training and instruction, social support, democratic behavior, and positive feedback. Additionally, they found the leader behaviors of social support may support social cohesion (Shields et al., 1997). Vincer and Loughead (2010) also looked at the influence of athlete leader behaviors on perceptions of team cohesion among varsity- and club-level athletes in Canada. Vincer and Loughead (2010) found that athlete leaders who engaged in training and instruction behaviors, and who engaged in behaviors to provide social support, had teammates who perceived higher task and social cohesion. A study by Shipperd et al. (2014) found that a lack of strong leadership was a significant weakness affecting team cohesion in a collegiate club rugby team. Furthermore, Price and Weiss (2011) examined adolescent female soccer players and found that

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Developing Athlete Leaders in a Sports Program

Researchers have compared athlete populations with non-athlete populations and found that participation in sports is frequently correlated with higher levels of life skills, including leadership ability (Bailey, 2006). However, more recent studies indicate that simply participating in sports does not ensure the development of these skills (Gould & Voelker, 2010). Athletes in leadership positions, such as team captains, develop leadership skills much more extensively than their teammates; however, athletes in leadership positions would further improve their leadership skills through leadership training (Gould & Voelker, 2010). Therefore, coaches and practitioners should consider the following suggestions to improve their athlete leaders.

Ideally, coaches and athletic departments should integrate an athlete leader development program into their team or athletic program. Such a program should focus on improving athlete leader self-awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, identifying their team’s leadership needs, goal setting to promote leader development, opportunities for athlete leaders to discuss potential problems and practice decision making in challenging situations, and opportunities to be evaluated and receive feedback from teammates and coaches (Gould & Voelker, 2010). Local sport psychology practitioners could be essential in designing and delivering such programs. However, if resources are limited, coaches can still be proactive about providing the right opportunities to develop their athlete leaders and encourage leadership development in all of their athletes. These strategies for coaches are outlined below.

Coaches and practitioners should encourage their athletes to engage in self-reflection to identify their leadership strengths and weaknesses. Leadership development programs often include this as an initial first step, as it promotes self-awareness, which is necessary for growth and improvement (Ravizza & Fifer, 2015). For example, coaches could have athlete leaders create a performance profile to assess themselves on the eight characteristics of effective athlete leaders, identified by Price and Weiss (2011) and described above, or based on the task, social, external, and motivational functions athlete leaders provide to their teams. Coaches should also encourage their athlete leaders to consider the needs of the specific team and brainstorm essential roles and responsibilities that the team needs from their athlete leaders. The multidimensional model of sport leadership described above highlights the importance of leader, member, and situational characteristics in leadership effective-ness. Encouraging athlete leaders to consider the context and needs of the team will allow the athlete leaders to better pinpoint specific behaviors on which they can improve.

Goal setting can also be taught as a strategy for athlete leaders to work on improving their own leadership weaknesses, as research has consistently found goal setting to have a powerful impact on both behavior and performance (Weinberg & Gould, 2015). The literature on goal setting in sport has found that goal setting is most effective when: the athletes have input, both short- and long-term goals are moderately challenging, there are opportunities to receive feedback on goal attainment, goals are specific, and the process for attaining the goal is considered (Weinberg & Gould, 2015). In other words, coaches should ensure their athlete leaders have a say in setting their own goals. However, coaches should also assist the athletes with setting goals that are specific (“give feedback to at least two teammates every practice” instead of simply “communicate more”), include the process or action steps (“arrive 5 minutes early to practice every day” instead of “be a better role model”), and include periodic check-ins.

Furthermore, coaches might consider providing opportunities for their athlete leaders to improve in the characteristics displayed by effective leaders (Price & Weiss, 2011). From a social learning approach to moral and character development, athlete leaders could benefit from observing others (coaches or other athletes) model prosocial behaviors and also from being reinforced when they engage in prosocial behaviors (Weinberg & Gould, 2015). For example, to develop compassion and character, coaches could assign readings on leadership, particularly of individuals who have overcome challenges. Coaches should also reward or reinforce teammates when they demonstrate strong character or prosocial behaviors or are mature enough to hold their teammates accountable and may also consider involving their athlete leaders in community service to strengthen their compassion and character. Additionally, coaches should also emphasize and create a team culture that focuses on cooperation and skill development for their athletes as a way to enhance character and prosocial behaviors (Kavussanu et al., 2006). This can be done by emphasizing the importance of collaboration to achieve goals, by rewarding skill development over competition, and rewarding athletes for engaging in prosocial behaviors, such as helping an opponent up off the ground. For example, a coach could implement an activity in practice in which the only way to be successful is for athletes to work together. Alternatively, a coach could award the game ball to an athlete who engaged in prosocial behavior or who is consistently helping younger team members purely to assist in their development and for the betterment of the team.

To improve decision-making and problem-solving abilities, coaches can share some of the decision making (Gould & Voelker, 2010) and allow athlete leaders to take on progressively more and larger team decisions. For example, a coach may initially allow their athlete leaders to make
small decisions like what uniforms to wear during competition. Then the coach can increase their athletes’ responsibility so the athlete leaders can have a say in decisions related to playing style or other tactical decisions. Coaches should also model their own decision-making process for their athlete leaders, and especially model their process for learning from poor decisions. Research on athlete decision making has found, however, that coaches and practitioners should allow athlete leaders to make mistakes in decision making in order to learn from the mistakes and become better at analyzing situations and assessing options (Kaya, 2014). Therefore, coaches should create a supportive environment where their athlete leaders are empowered to try out ideas without the fear of failure. When athlete leaders do make mistakes, coaches should encourage the athlete leaders to focus on the lesson that can be learned from the mistake.

Given the functions athlete leaders provide to their teams, it is also necessary for athlete leaders to be able to communicate effectively. The ability to persuade is believed to be at the center of the communication and leadership process (Swanson & Kent, 2014). Often, young athletes will listen to or even respect another athlete before a coach (Swanson & Kent, 2014). Therefore, learning the art of persuasion could be a very useful tool for an athlete leader to improve their communication with teammates and also their ability to motivate teammates. Coaches and practitioners can improve their athlete leaders’ persuasiveness and promote effective communication practices by modeling these practices themselves. Furthermore, coaches can encourage their athlete leaders to identify their own models either in the real world or in the media. Coaches may also find it helpful to have their athlete leaders practice communication skills training activities. For example, it may be beneficial for coaches to ask their athlete leaders to brainstorm poor listening habits and effective listening behaviors (Sullivan, 1993). Next, the coach could prompt each athlete leader to evaluate themselves on each of the effective listening behaviors and then assist each athlete leader in developing a plan to improve their weaker areas. For example, if an athlete leader identifies themselves as being weak in trying to understand a teammate’s point of view, they might create a plan that for every time a teammate comes to them with an issue, they first ask their teammate at least three questions to get a better understanding of the situation. Coaches should also provide opportunities for their athlete leaders to practice and improve their communication skills with teammates. For example, during a track and field meet, a veteran on the sprint relay team could pull aside the freshman running the first leg of the race and assure him that he belongs and will succeed, so that the freshman may enter the race with substantially improved motivation and confidence. Finally, coaches and practitioners can also improve their athlete leaders’ persuasiveness by providing the athlete leaders with frequent and descriptive feedback (Gould & Voelker, 2010).

Coaches and practitioners can improve their athlete leaders’ persuasiveness and promote effective communication practices by modeling these practices themselves.

Finally, to promote the continued development of athlete leaders, coaches and practitioners should provide athlete leaders with opportunities to be evaluated and receive feedback from teammates and coaches (Gould & Voelker, 2010). For example, after allowing the athlete leaders to solve a problem or make a decision themselves, the coach might first encourage the athlete leaders to reflect on the decision and evaluate their solution or outcome. Then, the coach might open up the discussion for other athlete leaders to weigh in on their perception of the athlete leaders’ decision or solution. The coaching staff could then provide their thoughts on the matter. Finally, the athlete leaders could discuss what they could do differently the next time and identify actionable steps they can take to improve their leadership ability. Coaches or practitioners should create a safe environment for the athlete leaders to grow and improve. Therefore, for some coaches or athlete leaders, it may be more productive to have these self-reflection and evaluation sessions occur between just the coach and athlete leaders.

**Conclusion**

Given the important task of social, external, and motivational functions that athlete leaders provide, and the lack of leadership often reported by coaches, it is essential for coaches to take steps to develop their athlete leaders. Improving the quality of athlete leaders can improve team performance and climate (Todd & Kent, 2004). Coaches should focus on providing athlete leaders opportunities to practice and develop...
effective leadership behaviors. Namely, allowing athlete leaders to practice prosocial behaviors, decision making and problem solving, effective communication skills, and motivational skills can enhance the leadership ability of their athlete leaders. Coaches can model these behaviors for their athlete leaders and provide athlete leaders with immediate feedback. Furthermore, coaches should create an environment for their athlete leaders to excel and grow by practicing these skills with a lowered risk of failure. By devoting time and energy to improving their athlete leaders, coaches can improve their team’s social cohesion as well as performance.

References


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