

Emergent leadership: a comprehensive analysis of stages and relevance in performance sports

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Published online: May 31, 2024

Accepted for publication : May 15, 2024

DOI:10.7752/jpes.2024.05121

Abstract

This article presents a thorough examination of the process of selecting a team captain through emergent leadership, focusing on various aspects and implications. The objective of this study was to clarify the 'Process of selecting the team captain through emergent leadership' by examining each stage of this process. Over a year, we conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with 25 athletes and coaches (12 males and 13 females). The investigation revealed a detailed 'Team captain identification process,' outlined through five primary themes, highlighting the complex interaction between the roles, attributes, selection, tenure, and conclusion of a team leader's term. Notably, the findings underscore the multifaceted nature of leadership in sports teams, underscoring the significance of non-playing responsibilities, personality traits, and athletic performance in the captaincy role. Furthermore, the study emphasises the crucial role of coaches in facilitating the selection and development of team captains, advocating for a comprehensive approach that fosters leadership qualities among all team members. By providing deeper insights into the dynamics of captaincy selection, this research contributes valuable insights to sports management and leadership literature. It underscores the importance of thoughtful consideration and continuous assessment in choosing captains capable of effectively leading, motivating, and unifying their teams, thereby enhancing overall team cohesion and performance. Ultimately, the 'Selection process of the team captain through spontaneous leadership' emerged as a dynamic framework to aid leaders in identifying individuals who embody their team's values and aspirations, fostering sustained success on and off the field.

Keywords: Athlete Leadership, Captain Selection, Decision-Making, Spontaneous Leadership

Introduction

The presence of effective leadership in a community has numerous effects on its overall success (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). It includes the coordination of influence to guide a group or collective toward shared objectives (Jowett, 2017). In sports, leaders are universally recognised by athletes and coaches alike as the critical element in team dynamics, responsible for the team's success (Lafrenière et al., 2008).

Leadership in sports holds profound significance, resonating deeply with athletes and coaches as the cornerstone of team dynamics and the ultimate determinant of a team's success (Rosu et al., 2022). At the core of every victorious team is a strong and adept leader who acts as the guiding force, harmonising the individual efforts of players toward a common goal. This recognition arises from the undeniable impact that effective leadership has on shaping team cohesion, morale, and performance outcomes (Davis & Jowett, 2014).

Athletes at the forefront of action keenly recognise the crucial role leaders play in fostering an environment conducive to collaboration, growth, and success. They understand that capable leaders command respect and inspire trust and camaraderie among teammates. Leaders set the tone for the team through their actions, words, and demeanour, instilling a sense of purpose, determination, and unity that propels them toward victory. Similarly, coaches, drawing on their wealth of experience and strategic insight, recognise the indispensable role of leaders in shaping the team's trajectory (Loughead, 2017). They understand that beyond tactical and physical capabilities, the intangible qualities of leadership—such as motivation, resilience, and adaptability—often prove decisive in critical moments. Coaches depend on leaders to act as their representatives on the field, embodying the team's spirit and executing their vision with precision and conviction (Burkett et al., 2013). Furthermore, leaders serve as conduits for effective communication and conflict resolution in the team, bridging gaps and fostering inclusivity and a sense of belonging among diverse individuals (Stefanica, 2022). They are responsible for uniting teammates during triumphs and setbacks, nurturing a culture of accountability and continuous improvement that transcends individual ambitions. Team captains in sports clubs serve as representatives of both formal and informal leadership (Warner, 2012). These roles differ based on their assigned duties; formal leaders follow predetermined tasks, while informal leaders assume external roles, influencing the

social structure through interpersonal interactions (Luminița & Valentina, 2017). Although the coach holds the official leadership position, team captains perform various tasks, including team adaptation and social support, which significantly impact the team's success (Mercader-Rubio et al., 2023; Valentina & Daniel, 2018).

The fundamental framework for examining team captaincy traces back to Bales' role differentiation model (Santos, 2019), which categorises leadership actions in sports clubs as either "task leadership" or "social leadership." Task leaders are responsible for resolving issues, making decisions, and guiding the team toward objectives, while social leaders focus on fostering trust and providing psychosocial support (Voelker et al., 2011). Smith et al. (2013) underscored the harmonious coexistence of various responsibilities under a single leader. Additionally, Vincer and Loughhead (2010) asserted that establishing a constructive relationship is crucial among athlete leadership behaviours and cohesion in team sports. Scott (2021) introduced the concept of "external leadership functions," encompassing duties such as managing press relations, organising club meetings, and representing sponsors, highlighting the social aspect of leadership. Expanding on these responsibilities, Newman et al. (2019) included "motivational leadership functions" specifically targeting motivation. Voicu (2013) presented a comprehensive model of leader behaviour comprising three dimensions: behaviour required by the context, behaviour that members prefer, and the actual behaviour exhibited by the leader.

Research on leadership in athletics encompasses a range of beneficial behaviours categorised as task-focused, people-focused, innovation-focused, and outward-focused leadership (Leo et al., 2019). Effective team leaders exhibit extroversion, problem-solving skills, motivation, selflessness, trustworthiness, promotion of teamwork, exemplary role modelling, unwavering commitment to the team, competitiveness, resilience, and courage (Borland, 2014). The process of selecting team captains typically involves three methods: coach-appointed, elected by team vote, or determined through mutual agreement between the coach and team (Gould et al., 2013). The pivotal role of the team captain in influencing the team's success underscores the need for a careful and attentive approach from the selection process to task execution (Butalia et al., 2021).

Research objectives of the study:

1. Investigating the process of team captain selection: The primary aim of this study is to elucidate the intricate process of selecting team captains through emergent leadership in sports clubs. This entails examining the various stages involved in selecting team captains, including the criteria utilised for selection, the methods employed, and the underlying dynamics influencing the decision-making process.
2. Exploring team captain roles and responsibilities: Another crucial objective is to explore and delineate the roles and responsibilities of individuals serving as team captains in sports clubs. This involves identifying the diverse tasks and obligations associated with the role of team captain, both on and off the field, and understanding their significance in fostering team cohesion and achieving success.
3. Examining the attributes and character traits of team captains: The aim is to investigate the specific qualities and personal characteristics displayed by individuals fulfilling the role of team captain. This encompasses exploring traits such as leadership abilities, problem-solving skills, dependability, and resilience, among others, and understanding their relevance in effectively leading and inspiring team members.
4. Analysing the process of team captain selection: The research aims to analyse the process and methods employed in selecting or designating individuals as team captains in sports teams. This includes examining factors such as experience, age, career trajectory, sports performance, and team dedication, alongside personality attributes and understanding their influence on the selection process.
5. Evaluating the tenure and conclusion of team leadership: This includes examining the duration of a team leader's position, the factors affecting their tenure, and the circumstances leading to the conclusion of their term, such as voluntary resignation, dismissal, or transfer. The objective of this study is to develop a comprehensive model called the "Team Captaincy Process," which will examine the various elements impacting the process of becoming a team captain from beginning to end.

Materials and Methods

Research subjects

In this study, participant selection followed a purposive sampling technique to ensure the inclusion of highly skilled athletes and coaches pertinent to the research objectives. A total of 25 individuals, comprising 12 women and 13 men, residing in six different cities across Romania, were chosen based on specific criteria. Inclusion criteria stipulated that participants should be aged between 21 and 50, with an average of 10–20 years of sporting experience. Furthermore, participants were required to possess National and International Championships credentials and actively participate in individual and team sports.

Instrument for gathering data

This study used a semi-structured interview style as its primary data collection method. The research methodology encompassed several stages, beginning with an extensive literature review to formulate the semi-structured interview questions. Following this, researchers conducted on-site observations of team captains, players, and coaches over approximately five months, encompassing observations during matches, training sessions, and non-training moments. The third stage involved collecting participant demographic data and administering a comprehensive survey on the team captaincy process. This survey explored various topics,

including the criteria for selecting a captain, the formal and informal responsibilities of team leaders, their personality traits, operational mechanisms, and the conclusion of their tenure. The interview questions were refined through initial interviews with three participants, followed by adjustments based on feedback and insights provided by five specialist academicians specialising in qualitative research.

Data acquisition process

The semi-structured interview form consisted of 24 primary questions designed to elicit comprehensive responses from participants. Data collection took place between May 5th and December 16th, 2022. Before their enrolment in the study, each participant provided informed consent in accordance with the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval for the research was granted by the Ethics Committee of the Doctoral School of Physical Education and Sport Science (ID: 12/4.05.2022), University of Pitești, Romania. Participants were thoroughly briefed on the research objectives, confidentiality measures, and the utilisation of collected data exclusively for research purposes. Interviews were conducted in person or online, with each session lasting an average of 15–20 minutes. Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed into text format for further analysis.

Data interpretation and examination

The data analysis process followed a 6-step thematic analysis methodology. Initially, interview transcripts were meticulously examined, followed by categorising and analysing participants' perspectives on team leaders and captaincy. Coded quotations were verified against the entire dataset, and thematic contents were identified, with relationships between themes carefully examined. A final assessment was conducted to determine relevant data samples for the research report. Thematic evaluation results were then integrated with existing literature using ATLAS.ti, a specialised software platform for qualitative data analysis, facilitating the identification of patterns and trends in the collected data.

Assessment of validity and reliability

Validity and reliability within qualitative research were ensured through targeted strategies. Credibility, applicability, coherence, and verifiability were evaluated to ensure the validity and reliability of the research findings. A rigorous data collection methodology was implemented, supported by expert evaluation and guidance from specialists in team performance and group dynamics. The transferability of findings was ensured through comprehensive descriptions and purposive sampling, supplemented by direct participant quotes. Furthermore, separate experts independently categorised participant opinions using a reliability formula, with observations indicating a mean consistency of 92% across variables related to team captaincy. Thus, this study demonstrated reliability by meeting the criterion of 70% agreement or higher, as typically required in qualitative research.

Results

After conducting qualitative interviews with participants, it became evident that the Process of Team Captain Selection Through Emergent Leadership is influenced by the thorough evaluations and expectations of key individuals regarding the duties and qualities expected from a team captain. Essentially, this process comprises three main stages: 1. the appointment of the group leader, considering both task-related responsibilities and personality attributes that significantly impact the decision; 2. the duration of the team leader's tenure; and 3. the conclusion of the team captain's role. This recurring cycle of the leadership process often commences owing to various circumstances that ultimately lead to the termination of the team captain's tenure.

Section 3.1: Focus Area 1 - TCR

Participants underscore the significance of the team captain's responsibilities in defining their role. When asked about these tasks, a diverse array of job descriptions emerged. However, when prompted to specify the most crucial responsibilities, notable areas such as serving as a member of the coaching staff who supports and assists the head coach in various aspects of team training, strategy development, player management, proficiently relaying information between coaches, players, and other stakeholders, promoting group unity, and efficiently organising logistics were emphasised. An elite coach (Participant 2) describes the captain's duties as involving the transfer of all his/her obligations and authority in his/her absence. Participants emphasise the crucial nature of effective communication when assuming the role of an assistant coach. Player 7 stated, "The team leader is the intermediary between players and the coach. Effective communication is essential for this role to be successful." According to participants, another vital duty of the team leader is coordinating all team-related procedures. The prevailing opinion among most participants is that the leader is responsible for fostering team cohesion. Participant 6 underscored the necessity of continually boosting team morale and maintaining motivation. Coach 11 explored this concept further by stating, "While others may become demotivated, the team captain cannot afford to."

Section 3.2: Focus Area 2 - ACT

Identifying roles inevitably leads to discussions regarding the specific personality attributes expected from a player. Participants agree on the consistent personality traits associated with the role. A general consensus is that leadership abilities are essential for a team captain. Participant 1 asserted that the captain should exhibit exceptionally strong leadership qualities. Participant 9 emphasised that within their squad of twenty players, the

captain assumes a leadership role in front of these individuals. Participants generally agree that leadership is developed through traits such as reliability, setting a positive example, and fairness. Participant 14 emphasised the importance of the captain's trustworthiness, stating that they should be able to share all information with the team captain, expecting that their disclosures will be kept confidential. Participant 12, who also serves as the team captain, stated, "I am constantly under close observation and evaluation by my teammates. I must embody the qualities of a role model both on the field and in my personal life." Additionally, problem-solving skills are essential for the team captain. Coach 8 underscored that the captain needs to excel at resolving conflicts and preventing any disruptions from occurring. However, problem-solving abilities are expected to be closely intertwined with effective communication. This is because it is believed that a leader who cannot navigate obstacles may encounter difficulties in inspiring their team to achieve success.

Section 3.3: Focus Area 3 - TCS

Clarifying the team captain's duties and the necessary character attributes inevitably prompts the crucial question, "Who will assume the role of captain?" Coaches carefully evaluate the players to determine which individual possesses the necessary personality attributes to fulfil the obligations of being the team captain. In addition to desired personality traits, the participants emphasised numerous aspects required in a team captain. These criteria encompass experience, seniority, a distinguished career path, strong team loyalty, prestige, athletic abilities, and their specific position in the game. Participants emphasised the importance of experience (both in performance and leadership positions), seniority, and an impressive career trajectory in shaping the team captain's reputation among players. Player 15 stated that coaches primarily prioritise experience when selecting a team leader. Participant 1 asserted the importance of age, noting that older individuals are typically chosen as captains. Furthermore, a remarkable professional path is pivotal in the captain selection process. Participant 12 explained that those with substantial expertise and a proven history of achievement, both in their performance and conduct, usually assume the responsibility of becoming the team captain. This is because they possess a wealth of experience and accomplishments. If these traits are present in the team captain, other players tend to hold the captain in high regard. Participant 6 asserted that the team captain should possess these attributes because he/she has already proven his/her value. The team members deeply admire these qualities in the captain. Moreover, participants highlighted the expectation of outstanding athletic performance and a profound sense of camaraderie in the team leader. Coach 4 emphasised that they do not choose a player with below-average performance to be their team captain. Player 2 firmly agreed with this opinion, stating, "The captain must be driven to achieve victory." Interestingly, participants emphasised that in certain sports disciplines, particularly volleyball and handball, the player's position significantly influences the selection process for captaincy. Coach 1 explained that in handball, it is customary to avoid choosing the pivot as the leader because of their position behind other players.

Section 3.4: Focus Area - TTC

Being the team captain entails numerous responsibilities for a player. After the appointment, a critical evaluation takes place as stakeholders assess the player's performance as a captain and their athletic abilities. This process generates varying support and opposition from team stakeholders towards the leader. A team leader's tenure varies depending on the influence of fans, critics, the captain's drive, and external factors. These dynamics influence the tenure of the team captain, with internal motivation being deemed the primary factor. Coach 3 underscored the importance of selecting individuals who are genuinely committed to the team for leadership roles. Participant 4, with a long and successful career in national sports, elaborated on the challenges faced when assuming the role of captain in high-pressure matches. He highlighted the external influences that can impact internal motivation while serving as captain. Another crucial element affecting the long-term viability of the captaincy is the captain's proficiency in developing effective communication within and beyond the team's social ecosystem. Coach 5 emphasised the significance of the captain's relationships, including those in their family. According to research subject no. 9, individuals who establish authority and sustain success can maintain captaincy for extended periods, even in prominent sports organisations. Furthermore, participants observe that captains elected democratically tend to have longer tenures owing to high motivation from team members and the captains. Rugby Player 15 emphasised the communal support for the captain's achievements, while Basketball Player 17 asserted that when the team fails, the captain is often unfairly blamed, negatively impacting their tenure. Judoka 12 stated that covert dissent in the team could significantly diminish a captain's term by fostering a pervasive atmosphere of negativity. Trainer 14 supported providing specific training to enhance the captain's growth and long-term success in the position. Coach 2 proposed scenarios in which a team captain, with secret backing, may influence managerial decisions, potentially leading to the removal of a well-known coach and extending their tenure in the position.

Section 3.5: Focus Area – CTCT

Based on the interviews with participants, it is evident that team captains often relinquish their responsibilities owing to unfulfilled expectations. These expectations can stem from both individual reasons, such as the captain's voluntary resignation, transfer to another team, retirement from sports, injuries, illnesses, or personal influences from family or close circles, as well as environmental reasons, which encompass factors like the coach, team management, other players, staff members (such as masseurs or outfitters), fans, and media. Player 9 expressed doubt about the suitability of the chosen player for the role of captain, although first thinking

they were a good fit. Furthermore, all participants unanimously agree that coaches can choose and dismiss the team captain. Coach 1 stated they would replace the squad captain if they failed to meet performance requirements. Player 17 asserted that the coach was responsible for selecting and dismissing team captains. Therefore, an ineffective team captain reflects negatively on the coach because the coach is responsible for the captain's selection and removal. Nonetheless, a captain's decision to leave may also be influenced by personal motivations that extend beyond the choices made by the coaches. Participant 4, who had previously held the position of captain, explained, "Despite advice from my coach and teammates, I decided to resign. I had numerous additional obligations in my life." This suggests that assuming the captain's responsibility presents significant challenges to an athlete, leading them to relinquish the post despite external influences.

Discussion

The discussion and conclusion underscore the significance of selecting the team captain through emergent leadership in the success of sports clubs, which is greatly influenced by the captain's choice. The key findings of this study align with previous research, highlighting recurring patterns.

1. Responsibilities of the Group Leader:

- Research subjects and current literature underscore the role of the team leader as a coaching team member, aiding and supporting the head coach in training, developing strategies, and managing players in the team, with responsibilities extending beyond the field. Non-playing obligations, such as demonstrating leadership off the field and representing the team, are vital for fostering team cohesion and achieving success (Stefanica, 2022). The absence of a leader can result in team failure owing to a lack of a positive team environment. Without a universal consensus on the team leader, players may establish a communication barrier between themselves and the captain. Group leaders are recognised as the team's chiefs and serve as group representatives in social or external events, such as gatherings and endorsements. They act as intermediaries between the club management and the squad (Nikolaev et al., 2022; Marin et al., 2023)

2. Personality Traits:

- Research and previous studies indicate that the selection of a team captain is based on qualities such as extroversion, problem-solving abilities, dependability, a strong sense of team loyalty, competitiveness, and perseverance (Vranić, 2022; Muntean et al., 2023). These characteristics, supported by recent studies and previous investigations, are the preferred attributes for a team captain.

3. Captain Selection:

- The process of selecting a captain considers various aspects, including experience, age, career trajectory, sports performance, team dedication, game position, and personality attributes. Several studies in the literature highlight the importance of the team captain demonstrating sporting performance as a role model (Sarsfield, 2014; Elgar, 2016). While personality plays a crucial role, other factors also influence the decision, emphasising the complexity of the selection process (Patrascan & Stefanica, 2019).

4. Process and Termination of Team Leadership:

- The leadership process encompasses overt and covert resistance, which can impact the captain's tenure. Lack of agreement among players may lead to subtle dissent or apathy, undermining squad dynamics. A captain's success depends on his/her leadership capacity, effectiveness, managerial autonomy, and emotional control. The team's achievements depend on coaches' support, autonomy, and comprehensive leadership development. Nevertheless, those in authority should initiate discussions about replacing the captain if signs of termination arise. This could entail prioritising personal interests and avoiding conflicts with the coach (Whales et al., 2022; Badau et al., 2023). Additionally, McDuff and Garvin (2016) emphasise that coaches employing an autonomy-supportive teaching approach enhance the intrinsic motivation of team captains. Conversely, Jayanth et al. (2018) suggest that coaches should develop leadership skills in all team members to enhance overall leadership capacity rather than focusing solely on grooming specific individuals as leaders.

This study shows that being a team captain entails multiple aspects and is directly linked to team expectations and overall sports success (Rosu et al., 2023). The study highlights the coach's responsibility in selecting the most suitable captain, emphasising the need for further exploration into leadership duties, personality traits, and termination procedures.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study emphasises the multifaceted nature of team captaincy and its direct influence on team success in sports. It underscores the coach's role in choosing the most suitable captain and emphasises the need for additional research into the roles, personality traits, and processes associated with team leadership. Understanding these aspects can enhance team dynamics, improve performance, and foster a positive team environment in sports settings.

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