

Original Article

Coach and athlete leadership behaviors: examining their role in athlete's satisfaction

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Abstract

Coach and athlete leadership behaviors have been frequently investigated attempting to link specific leadership styles with relevant variables including the coach–athlete relationship and athlete's satisfaction. Few studies have examined the contribution of coach and athlete leadership behaviors on the team's function and performance. The aim of this study is twofold: (a) to investigate the behaviors of coach and athlete leaders as well as the relationship between coach and athlete and (b) to examine the association of these variables with athletes' satisfaction. A total of 206 team sport athletes (88 men, 118 women) volunteered to participate in this study. The participants were asked to fill out the Leadership Sport Scale, Sport Leadership Behavior Inventory, Coach–athlete Relationship, and Athlete Satisfaction Scale questionnaires. Statistical analysis identified positive correlations between perceived coach leadership and the communication between coach and athlete, except from the autocratic behavior. The coach–athlete relationship and the dimensions of perceived coach leadership were positively correlated with athlete's satisfaction. The leadership behavior of athlete was positively correlated with the coach–athlete relationship and satisfaction of athlete. Hierarchical regression analyses showed that the training and instructions leadership behaviors and closeness predicted athlete's satisfaction from leadership; the athlete's role, leadership characteristics of athlete, and complementarity predicted athlete's satisfaction from personal performance. The results of this study provide theoretical and practical implications for understanding the leadership behaviors and members' satisfaction inside the team. Moreover, this study derives useful conclusions that contribute to the proper function of the team and unravel the psychological factors that affect coaches and athletes.

Key Words: coach leader, athlete leader, coach–athlete relationship, member's satisfaction, athletes' perceptions

Introduction

Many research studies have focused on the sport leadership, i.e., mainly on the coach leader. The concept of leadership has been examined in studies involving individual and team sports (Terry & Howe, 1984; Witte, 2011; Gioldasis, Kamenov, & Bekris, 2013), both genders (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1978; Sherman, Fuller, & Speed, 2000), amateur and professional level athletes (Beam, Serwatka, & Wilson, 2004; Terry, 1984), and different age groups (Chelladurai & Carron, 1983; Hastie, 1995). Several theoretical models have tried to describe and analyze the coach behaviors that lead to the efficient and successful performance of athletes or/and teams. The multifaceted model of leadership has been widely used to investigate the coach leadership behavior in team sports (Chelladurai, 1980). This model consists of three types of leadership behavior (i.e., required, preferred, and actual), the congruence of which has a positive effect on group performance.

The *required* leadership behaviors are those that respond to the basic formal rules of a club. The *actual* leadership behaviors are those exhibited by the leader without taking account of the rules or preferences of the group. The *preferred* leadership behaviors are those preferred by athletes. This study borrows and uses one of the abovementioned leadership dimensions and investigates the athlete's perceptions with regard to the leadership behavior of their coach. Chelladurai and Saleh (1980) have suggested five dimensions with regard to the evaluation of coaches' leadership behavior, i.e., training and instructions, democratic behavior, autocratic behavior, social support, and positive feedback. According to the multidimensional model of leadership, these coach behaviors predict performance and member's satisfaction. Apart from the coach leader, the athlete leader has an important role within the group. Loughead, Hardy, and Eys (2006) have reported that the leader is an athlete who holds an official or unofficial role in the team and influences the team to reach a mutual goal. Moran and Weiss (2006) highlighted the responsibility that the leaders of each group had, i.e., providing guidance and direction to team members. There are many studies on sports leadership within groups. For example, Price and Weiss (2011) have shown that adolescents, whom teammates considered as leaders, exhibited higher levels of

perceived aggressiveness and internal incentives and were more social than the rest of the members of the team. Later, based on the transformational leadership theory, Price and Weiss (2013) examined the combined effects that these two leaders (coach and athlete) had on the group and its members. When these leadership types were simultaneously examined, it was determined that the coach and team captain improved the entire team's function, and their attitudes were positively related to the cohesion and collective efficacy.

Other studies (Bucci, Bloom, Loughhead, & Carron, 2012; Durpui, Bloom, & Loughhead, 2006) have shown that athlete leaders have a supportive role by facilitating the communication between the coach and teammates. In addition, athlete leaders were involved in leading their teammates to improve the team's performance. In an experimental study, Mertens, Boen, Broek, Vansteenkiste, and Fransen (2018) have indicated that when coaches and captains strengthen their social support and offer positive feedback to the team members during the execution of an exercise, the athletes significantly improve their performance.

Furthermore, the constant day-to-day communication between the coach and his/her athletes is an important contributor to the efficient interaction between team members. It is equally important for achieving team's goals and for the athlete's personal performance and development. The coach-athlete relationship is the state in which coaches and athletes' feelings, thoughts, and behaviors are interlinked in a mutually causal way (Jowett, 2007). Specifically, Olympiou, Jowett, and Duda (2008) have shown that athletes developed feelings such as trust, respect, cooperation, and dedication by interacting with their coaches; as a result, the athletes' skills were strengthened and improved even further. A later study by Jowett, Nicolas, and Yang (2017) has shown that high levels of closeness and commitment from the athletes were predictors of various positive training behaviors such as goal setting, skills development, and fitness improvement. It has been determined that maintaining a harmonious relationship between the coach and athlete offered satisfaction to both (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004) and improved the team's performance as well as coach's training instructions and behavior (Jowett, 2009; Jowett, Shanmugam, & Caccoulis, 2012; Borghi, Borges, Menegassi, & Rinaldi, 2017).

Moreover, satisfaction is a characteristic that has been introduced to the sports field to provide more information about the pleasure that athletes experience when they engage in their sport. Chelladurai and Riemer (1997) have defined athlete's satisfaction as a "positive emotional situation of the athlete which comes from the complex assessment of structures, processes and outcomes of athletic experience" (p. 135). Several studies have dealt with the athlete's satisfaction in relation to the coach's behavior (Chelladurai, 1978, 1984; Schliesman, 1987; Sympa & Bekiari, 2019), team leader characteristics (Eys, Loughhead, & Hardy, 2007), group environment (Weiss & Friedrichs, 1986), and personal context elements (Chelladurai, 1984). Chelladurai (1993) has shown that athletes were satisfied when their coach guided, instructed, and encouraged them with the aim of improving their performance. Recently, Calvo and Topa (2019) have examined the preferences of adolescents and adult soccer players regarding the coach leadership style and motivational climate and their possible relationship with the athlete's satisfaction, sport commitment, and sport objectives. The reported results showed that the athletes preferred the leadership behaviors of training and instructions as well as positive feedback in all categories. Among other variables, the training and instructions leadership behaviors were a significant predictor of athletes' satisfaction.

This study aims to investigate the co-existence of coach and athlete leader within the group and their relationship with the athletes' satisfaction. Although a number of studies have examined the independent role of coach leadership in athlete's satisfaction or the coach-athlete relationship, few studies have assessed the way that both coach and athlete leadership behaviors contribute to the team function and performance. In addition, this study expands previous research findings by examining the athlete's satisfaction in relation to the coach and athlete leader, as well as, the coach-athlete relationship.

The better understanding of coach-athlete relationship and how it is related to athlete's satisfaction in team sports will provide useful information to the coaches and athletes regarding the importance of developing a harmonious and balanced communication within the team. The examination of athlete's leader behavior in the team as an important factor for the group function and each athlete's performance extends the current literature on this topic. In addition, this study seeks to provide useful information to the sport psychology consultants for the preparation of an appropriate intervention program aiming to increase the team members' satisfaction.

Therefore, the aim of this study was twofold: (a) to examine the coach and athlete-leader leadership characteristics and the relationship between the coach and athlete and (b) to investigate the relationship between these variables and athletes' satisfaction. By attempting to expand and confirm previous research findings, we hypothesized that the perceived athlete and coach leadership behaviors will be related to the coach-athlete relationship and the athlete's level of satisfaction.

Material and methods

Participants

A total of 206 athletes participated in this study; their age ranged from 17 to 38 years ($M = 24.18$, $SD = 5.43$); their athletic experience ranged from 1 to 31 years ($M = 12.24$, $SD = 5.88$), and their time inside the group ranged from 1 to 18 years ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 3.14$). The participants were recruited exclusively from team sports. Specifically, 88 men (42.7%) and 118 women (57.3%) participated, who were involved in basketball

(38.8%), volleyball (25.2%), handball (16%), and football teams (19.9%). They competed in the first (49%), second (14.1%), and third national categories (6.8%) as well as other local categories (30.1%). Moreover, 117 athletes declared that they competed as starters players (56.8%) and 89 (43.2%) as substitute players in their team. Finally, 31 athletes declared that they were team leaders in their current team (15%), 59 players had never been leaders in any team (28.6%), and 116 players had been leaders in the past (56.3%). For the team to participate in this study, the main criterion was that at least 75% of its members filled out the research questionnaires (Borgatti, Everett, & Johnson, 2013); at the same time, the athletes should have trained for at least one year with their current team and coach.

Instruments

For this study, apart from the demographic characteristics of the participants, the following assessment questionnaires, which have been adapted and applied to the Greek population, were administered to the participants of the study.

Leadership Scale for Sport (LSS; Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980). LSS evaluates the leadership behavior of coaches. The questionnaire is filled out by the athletes based on how their current coach is perceived (perceived type of leader). LSS consists of 40 items comprising five factors: (i) training and instructions, (ii) democratic behavior, (iii) autocratic behavior, (iv) social support, and (v) positive feedback and rewarding behavior. The response format is a 5-point Likert-type scale. In this study, the Cronbach's α of LSS factors ranged from .60 to .89.

Sport Leadership Behavior Inventory (SLBI; Glenn & Horn, 1993). SLBI evaluates the athletes' leadership characteristics. It consists of 25 items, of which only 19 are evaluated; the remaining 6 are characterized as complementary. Athletes' responses are provided on a 7-point Likert scale. The internal consistency (Cronbach's α) of SLBI was .88.

Coach-athlete Relationship Questionnaire (CART-Q; Jowett, 2009; Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004). CART-Q was utilized to evaluate the athletes' perception regarding the coach-athlete relationship. CART-Q comprises 11 items that measure three relational constructs: (a) athletes' closeness, (b) athletes' commitment, and (c) athletes' complementarity (4 items). The participants' responses for each item are provided on a 7-point Likert-type scale. In this study, the internal consistency (Cronbach's α) of subscales ranged from .81 to .90.

Athlete Satisfaction Scale (ASS; Chelladurai, Imamura, Yamaguchi, Oinuma, & Miyauchi, 1988). ASS includes 18 items of which 10 are evaluated and classified into two factors: (i) satisfaction from the leadership and (ii) satisfaction from personal performance. The answers are given based on a 7-point Likert-type scale. In this study, the internal consistency (Cronbach's α) of subscales ranged from .65 to .91.

Procedure

After receiving the ethical approval from the Department Ethical Review Board (approval code: 1098, Research Ethics-Bioethics Committee, School of Physical Education and Sport Science, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens), the first author initially contacted every sports club coaching staff at the university to insure their consent to participate in the research. After consulting with the coaches, the first author visited the training court prior to training practice. First, the athletes were informed about the purposes of the research and were given necessary clarifications concerning the research variables. Second, players received the necessary instructions and, if there were any questions, the researcher provided the required explanations. The athletes signed a consent form for their voluntary participation in this research. Moreover, they received assurances about the confidentiality of their responses and the fact that their responses were used exclusively for research purposes.

The research was conducted during the second phase of the 2018–2019 season. This time frame was chosen so that young players were completely integrated in the team, and the roles among team members were redistributed and properly allocated. The conditions were neutral; the team did not have any important games that could cause stress and anxiety in the athletes.

Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics [e.g., means (M), standard deviations (SD), and frequencies (F)] were estimated for the entire sample. Pearson correlation coefficients were used to determine the relationship between the examined variables (coach, athlete leadership, coach-athlete relationship, and athlete's satisfaction). A hierarchical multiple regression was applied to examine multivariate associations between the athlete's role (basic or substitute), time-coach (time having the current coach), time-team (time in the current team), coach leadership behavior ("training and instructions", "democratic behavior", "autocratic behavior", "positive feedback", and "social support"), coach-athlete relationship (closeness, complementarity, and commitment), and the athlete leadership characteristics with athlete's satisfaction (satisfaction from leadership and satisfaction from personal performance). The predictor variables were entered as three blocks: (1) athlete's role, time-coach, and time-team; (2) "training and instructions", "democratic behavior", "autocratic behavior", "positive feedback", "social support", and "athlete leadership behavior"; (3) closeness, complementarity, and commitment. The level of statistical significance was $p < .05$. Finally, the reliability of the measurements was estimated based on the Cronbach's α coefficient.

Results

Correlations

The coach leadership dimensions were significantly positively correlated with the coach–athlete relationship dimensions. Closeness, complementarity, and commitment (coach–athlete relationship) were significantly and positively correlated with the satisfaction from leadership and satisfaction from personal performance (athlete’s satisfaction) (Table 1). Moreover, as shown in Table 2, the training and instructions, democratic behavior, positive feedback, and social support leadership behaviors were significantly and positively correlated with athlete’s satisfaction dimensions. While the autocratic behavior was significantly and negatively correlated only with satisfaction from leadership.

Concerning the athlete leadership characteristics variable, it was significantly and positively correlated with the closeness ($r=.23, p<.01$), complementarity ($r=.37, p<.01$), commitment ($r=.27, p<.01$), satisfaction from leadership ($r=.28, p<.01$) and satisfaction from personal performance ($r=.38, p<.01$) subscales.

Table 1. Correlations between LSS, CART-Q, and ASS subscales

	Closeness	Complementarity	Commitment
Leadership Scale for Sport			
Training-instructions	.72***	.56***	.67***
Democratic behavior	.32***	.29***	.34***
Autocratic behavior	-.32***	-.18**	-.29***
Social support	.61***	.50***	.58***
Positive feedback	.51***	.40***	.53***
Athlete Satisfaction Scale			
Satisfaction from leadership	.86***	.67***	.79***
Satisfaction personal performance	.38***	.48***	.43***

** $p<.01$, *** $p<.001$

Table 2. Correlations between the LSS and ASS subscales

	Satisfaction–Leadership	Satisfaction–Personal performance
Training-instructions	.73***	.37***
Democratic behavior	.32***	.15*
Autocratic behavior	-.31***	-.14
Social support	.59***	.30***
Positive feedback	.56***	.24***

* $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$, *** $p<.001$

Regression analysis predicting athlete’s satisfaction

Two hierarchical multiple regression analyses (Tabachnick&Fidell, 2006) were performed to examine the contribution of LSS, SLBI, CART-Q factors to the prediction of athletes’ satisfaction (satisfaction from leadership and satisfaction from personal performance). In the regression analyses, the descriptive variables (i.e., athlete’s role, time-team and time-coach, coach leadership behaviors, athlete leadership characteristics, and coach–athlete relationship subscales) were set as predictor variables; the athlete’s satisfaction subscales were set as the dependent variables in the two regression analyses. Table 3 shows the unstandardized regression coefficients (B) standard error ($SE B$), standardized regression coefficients (β), and the level of significance (p) (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003; Tabachnick&Fidell, 2006).

Regarding the satisfaction from leadership, the R value for regression in the 1st Step was significant, i.e., $F(3, 202) = 4.11, p<.01$; the value of R^2 was .057, and adjusted R^2 was .043. The significant predictors in the 1st Step were the athlete’s role ($\beta=-.19$). The R value for regression in the 2nd Step was significant, i.e., $F(9, 196) = 31.74, p<.001$, and the values of R^2 and adjusted R^2 were .59 and .57, respectively. In addition, there was a significant increase in the prediction value compared to the 1st step ($R^2_{\text{change}} = .54, F_{\text{change}} = 42.99, df 6, 196, p<.001$). The significant predictors in the 2nd Step were training and instructions ($\beta = .53$), autocratic behavior ($\beta = -.17$), and social support ($\beta = .22$).

The 3rd Step was significant, i.e., $F(12, 193) = 56.77, p<.001$, and the values R^2 and adjusted R^2 were .78 and .77, respectively. There was a significant increase in the prediction value compared to that in the 2nd Step ($R^2_{\text{change}} = .19, F_{\text{change}} = 54.24, df 3, 193, p<.001$). The significant predictors in the 3rd Step were the training and instructions ($\beta=.15$) and closeness ($\beta=.57$).

Table 3. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses predicting athlete's satisfaction from leadership and personal performance

Step and variables	<i>Satisfaction from leadership</i>			<i>Satisfaction from personal performance</i>		
	B	SE B	<i>B</i>	B	SE B	β
Step 1	$(R^2 = .057, F = 4.11, df\ 3,202, p < .01)$			$(R^2 = .045, F = 3.21, df\ 3,202, p < .05)$		
Role	-.45	.16	-.19**	-.37	.14	-.18*
Time-team	.01	.03	.04	-.03	.02	-.08
Time-coach	.07	.05	.11	.05	.04	.10
Step 2	$(R^2 = .59, F = 31.74, df\ 9,196, p < .001)$			$(R^2 = .24, F = 7.00, df\ 9,196, p < .001)$		
Role	-.17	.11	-.07	-.25	.13	-.12
Time-team	.03	.02	.07	-.02	.02	-.06
Time-coach	.01	.03	.01	.01	.04	.02
Training-instructions	1.00	.13	.53***	.38	.15	.23*
Democratic behavior	-.08	.10	-.04	-.01	.12	-.01
Autocratic behavior	-.29	.08	-.17***	-.17	1.00	-.11
Social support	.39	.13	.22**	.20	.15	.13
Positive feedback	.04	.10	.02	-.18	.12	-.13
Athlete leader	.00	.00	.03	.02	.01	.30***
Step 3	$(R^2 = .78, F = 56.77, df\ 12,193, p < .001)$			$(R^2 = .33, F = 7.93, df\ 12,193, p < .001)$		
Role	-.07	.09	-.03	-.30	.13	-.14*
Time-team	.01	.01	.03	-.03	.02	-.08
Time-coach	-.00	.02	-.00	-.00	.04	-.01
Training-instructions	.29	.11	.15*	.20	.17	.12
Democratic behavior	-.01	.08	-.01	-.03	.12	-.02
Autocratic behavior	-.07	.06	-.04	-.13	.10	-.09
Social support	.01	1.00	.01	.07	.15	.04
Positive feedback	.12	.08	.08	-.16	.12	-.12
Athlete leader	.00	.00	.02	.02	.01	.22**
Closeness	.45	.07	.57***	-.15	.11	-.21
Complementarity	.06	.06	.06	.30	.08	.35***
Commitment	.06	.06	.08	.15	.09	.22

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Regarding the satisfaction from personal performance, the *R* value for regression in the 1st Step was significant, i.e., $F(3, 202) = 3.21, p < .05$; the values R^2 and adjusted R^2 were .05 and .03, respectively. The significant predictor in the 1st Step was the athlete's role ($\beta = -.18$). The *R* value for regression in the 2nd Step was significant, i.e., $F(9, 196) = 7.00, p < .001$; R^2 was .24, and adjusted R^2 was .21. There was a significant increase in the prediction value compared to the 1st step ($R^2_{\text{change}} = .20, F_{\text{change}} = 8.54, df\ 6, 196, p < .001$). The significant predictors in the 2nd Step were the training and instructions ($\beta = .23$) and the athlete leadership characteristics ($\beta = .30$). Finally, the *R* value for regression in the 3rd Step was significant, i.e., $F(12, 193) = 7.93, p < .001$; the R^2 and adjusted R^2 values were .33 and .29, respectively. There was a significant increase in the prediction value compared to that in the 2nd Step ($R^2_{\text{change}} = .09, F_{\text{change}} = 8.35, df\ 3, 193, p < .001$). The significant predictors in the 3rd Step were the athlete's role ($\beta = -.14$), athlete leadership characteristics ($\beta = .22$), and complementarity ($\beta = .35$).

Discussion

Coach-leader

The purpose of this study was two-fold, i.e., (a) to examine the coach and athlete leadership behaviors and the coach-athlete relationship and (b) to investigate how these variables are associated with athletes' satisfaction.

A positive correlation was revealed between the coach leadership and coach-athlete relationship (closeness, complementarity, and commitment) except for the autocratic behavior, which was negatively correlated. It was clear that a coach who builds a strong relationship with his/her athletes also provides instructions and guidance to the athletes, supports and encourages them with the necessary information and positive feedback about their mistakes during their training or competition. This helps athletes to nourish feelings of respect and trust, and they believe in their coach's cooperation. The high competitive level of athletes who participated in this study (athletes competed at top and professional level) may indicate the need for a close relationship between the coach and athlete owing to the high demands and difficult situations that these athletes frequently face (Jowett et al., 2005). This aspect agrees with the results of Jowett et al. (2017), which supported the notion that high levels of closeness, commitment, and complementarity are significantly related to the positive coach leadership behaviors. In addition, a previous study (Olympiou et al., 2008) showed that the harmonious cooperation

between coach and athlete and the existence of respect and devotion urged coaches to engage in coaching and teaching new skills to their players.

In addition, the obtained results confirmed the important role that the coach-athlete interaction has on the team members' satisfaction. Specifically, the satisfaction from the coach's leadership was positively correlated with closeness, complementarity, and commitment. In addition, hierarchical multiple regression analysis revealed that closeness significantly predicted athlete's satisfaction from leadership. The abovementioned results show that satisfaction is a multifaceted variable, where each of the dimensions is influenced by different characteristics. Thus, the satisfaction derived from the coach seems to be related to closeness, which refers to the relationship developed between the coach and athlete and the emotional support and empathy regarding athlete's needs and concerns he/she provides. In addition, the satisfaction from personal performance was related to the coach-athlete relationship.

The coach-athlete relationship appeared to be an important factor in the team environment because we obtained significant correlations between the two types of leaders (coach and athlete) and athlete's level of satisfaction. It is not clear whether the coach-athlete relationship increases the level of satisfaction or the satisfaction of this relationship leads this interaction. Perhaps, it is a circular connection, which is affected by factors such as personality or various cultural elements. Therefore, longitudinal studies will allow to elucidate potential relationships at multiple levels. Previous studies that dealt with the coach-athlete relationship confirmed the existence of a positive relation with athlete's satisfaction (Jowett & Don Carolis, 2003; Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004). Jowett et al. (2017) highlighted that the coach-athlete relationship is essential for each athlete because the coach is pivotal in the sports experience and impending athlete's success.

The obtained results confirmed the close relationship between the coach leadership behavior and athlete's satisfaction. Specifically, coaches' training and instructions, social support, and positive feedback behaviors provided to the athletes during training and competition appear to positively affect athlete's satisfaction. However, the autocratic leadership behavior seems to exert a detrimental effect and may inhibit athlete's satisfaction from leadership. The abovementioned results were further supported by the hierarchical multiple regression analysis, which revealed that training and instructions leadership behavior significantly predicted athlete's satisfaction from leadership. Therefore, it appears that athlete's satisfaction is a multidimensional characteristic, which requires the coach to have various characteristics. This means that coach as a leader should be able to satisfy athletes' needs because they vary and frequently change depending on different situations and circumstances that athletes deal with. For example, there are differences between starter and substitute players regarding their needs and behaviors they expressed. Eventually, their role inside the team affects the satisfaction level they will reach.

According to previous studies (Chelladurai & Riemer, 1998; Schliesman, 1987), positive feedback, training and instructions, and democratic leadership behaviors were mainly preferred by the athletes regardless of any situation they face during their athletic experience. Chelladurai and Riemer (1998) agree with the abovementioned results and claim that team sports require effective communication and interaction between the players and the need to better organize the training structure and activities by the coach. Terry and Howe (1984), who focused on the coach leadership behavior at the group level, determined that athletes were more satisfied by their coach when he/she exhibited an autocratic rather than democratic behavior. More recently, it has been shown that the coach leadership behavior of training and instructions and positive feedback were most preferred by soccer players (adolescents and adults) in all categories (Calvo & Topa, 2019).

Athlete leader

In addition to the coach behavior, athlete's leadership is essential for the team. This study holistically examined the athlete leader without distinguishing the respective roles of leadership behavior and its functions. The athlete's leadership behavior was positively related to closeness, complementarity, commitment, and athlete's satisfaction. In addition, the hierarchical multiple regression analysis revealed that the athlete's leadership, athlete's role and complementarity with the coach significantly predicted the athlete's satisfaction from personal performance. The athlete leader possesses a specific leadership behavior, and he/she is in close cooperation and interaction with the coach, aiming to increase team performance and providing satisfaction to the team members.

Engleman and Pease (1987) have studied football players and determined that athlete's leadership characteristics (e.g., self-confidence, self-control, and perceived competence) made them more accomplished leaders who properly guided the group and were interested in an efficient interpersonal communication and relationship between the members. Similarly, Moran and Weiss (2006) have indicated that organization and expressiveness are prevalent characteristics for an athlete leader.

Therefore, the co-existence of coach and athlete leaders within the team may be able to easily resolve any issues or conflicts concerning the relationship between coaches and/or athletes. By distributing and clearly sharing leadership roles, coach and athlete can better interact and perform, based on their discrete roles, within the team. It is likely that the athlete leader fulfills a different role within the group by completing the duties of the coach leader in a different way, by providing members' satisfaction and promoting performance improvement.

Conclusions

Coach and athlete leadership behaviors have been frequently examined, attempting to link specific types of leadership with relevant variables, including the coach–athlete relationship and athlete’s satisfaction. This study sought to clarify how athletes perceive coach’s and athlete’s leadership behaviors by associating these behaviors with coach–athlete relationship and athlete’s satisfaction. The results of this study confirmed the close relationship between the perceived coach leadership behaviors and coach–athlete relationship. Athletes perceived that their coach provides instructions and guidance during training, supports them socially, and provides appropriate feedback to improve their performance. This study shows that these perceptions are related to the relationship that athletes develop with their coach; thus, athletes show appropriate devotion and become closer with their coach by respecting his/her decisions and instructions. The presence of the athlete leadership role in the team appears to have a positive relationship with the coach–athlete relationship and athlete’s satisfaction.

The results of this study cannot be generalized to athletes participating in individual sports because conditions and obligations between the coach and athlete are different compared to those in team sports. Coaches did not participate in this study, and participants were limited to athletes. In addition, the results obtained for adult athletes are not applicable to developmental ages (12–17 years old). The results of this study do not provide causal relationships between variables; longitudinal studies that examine the leadership behavior for a period of time (e.g., 6 months) are needed to bring out any cause–effect relationships.

Practical implications

This study inferred useful conclusions that contribute to the proper function of the team and unravel the behavioral factors affecting coaches and athletes. These results provide useful information for the coaches to recognize the importance of the team leader characteristics and athletes’ perceptions of the preferred leadership behavior. It is advantageous for the team if the coach combines and displays leadership behaviors that meet the athletes’ needs based on their competitive level, goals, and role in the team. Because the team is a living organism, the coach should learn how to handle this situation with the appropriate leadership behaviors.

Regarding the psychological factors that influence the team, based on the results of this study, sports psychology consultants will be able to appropriately intervene by dealing with the group holistically or on an athlete-by-athlete basis by combining and developing balanced relationships between the team members. This intervention will help to establish harmonious interactions between the members of the team and provide their coach the advantage to “build” athletes using an appropriate leadership behavior. The aim of any sport team that works effectively should be athletes’ satisfaction as well as the optimum team’s and athlete’s performance.

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