Leadership in Elite Football

A Case Study of Leadership Characteristics in a Men's Football National Team

Sakari Holopainen[1] iD **, Mihaly Szerovay**[1] iD **, Niilo Konttinen**[2] & **Marja Kokkonen**[1] iD

[1] University of Jyväskylä, Finland; [2] Finnish Institute of High Performance Sport KIHU

Author contact <sakari.a.holopainen@jyu.fi>

Abstract

Since little leadership research has been conducted in elite national team environments, this study explored the types of leadership characteristics found in a men's national football team. The research question was: What leadership characteristics describe a men's national football team? Our data comprised 182 pages of transcripts of interviews with five coaches and two players from a men's national team. Reflexive thematic analysis with a deductive approach yielded three themes: 1) coach leadership, 2) athlete leadership, and 3) shared leadership. These key themes suggest that a national team's leadership is built on interactivity. The team's leadership structure was characterized by the coaching staff and players having clear roles while leaving space for informal leaders to emerge as needed. The coaches highlighted the captain's role in bearing the primary responsibility for representing the players' voices in decision-making. Our interview data indicated that the characteristics that distinguish an excellent athlete leader from a good one were an unselfish personality, excellent social skills, and the ability to inspire others.

Keywords: Athlete leadership, Coach leadership, Shared leadership, Leadership structure, Communication skills, Coaching, Informal leader, Formal leader

Introduction

The history of sports is replete with stories of underdogs defying the odds and achieving a level of success that they alone believed in. The sports world is constantly developing, with all elite teams and athletes seeking to maximize their success. In international football, where teams' choices of players are limited by nationality and new superstars cannot be bought with money, it has been suggested that one way to gain a competitive edge is for the team to possess high quality leadership (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016; Wagstaff, 2017). As professional football leadership studies have mainly been conducted in club environments (Hong, 2023; Karayel et al., 2024; Metin & Eratlı Şirin, 2025; Mills & Boardley, 2016; Rausch et al., 2025), we wanted to conduct research on leadership in the national team context. Moreover, recent studies on national teams have focused on players' performance (Chen et al., 2025), teams' tactical decisions (Gabrys et al., 2025; Iván-Baragaño, 2025) and the effects of mega events like FIFA World Cups on global politics (Beissel & Ternes, 2024), leaving a clear research gap for studies on leadership in national teams.

Notably, all the participants in the few existing studies on leadership in national team environments have been coaches (Meckbach et al., 2023; Øystein Hansen et al., 2021; Svensson Primus & Svensson, 2025). However, in their recent meta-analysis on leadership in sport, Clare et al. (2025) found that effective leadership by both coaches and athletes contributes to team- and individual-level performance. For these reasons, we explored perceptions of leadership characteristics of both players and coaches in a men's national team during the UEFA EURO 2020 qualifications and the final tournament. In the leadership process, an individual influences a group of individuals with the aim of achieving a common goal (Northouse, 2013, p. 5). This requires that this individual, a leader, is viewed by the team members as influential (Lanaj & Hollenbeck, 2015). However, Badura et al. (2022) found that to act as a leader in a team does not require a person to be perceived as a leader by every single individual in the team. A leader can also arise in a team in an unconscious way without that individual claiming or internalizing a leadership role (Badura et al., 2022). In sport, team members taking responsibility for leadership can include coaches, formal athlete

leaders appointed by an authority (such as a captain), and informal athlete leaders occupying a leadership role without being formally appointed to it (Fransen et al., 2014; Mertens et al., 2021). To provide a conceptual foundation for our qualitative analysis and avoid working in a theoretical vacuum (Braun & Clarke, 2021), we next introduce a literature review of leadership perspectives examined in elite football. These perspectives—coach leadership, athlete leadership, and shared leadership—function as a theoretical frame for our analysis, while their empirical relevance is explored in the results section.

Coach leadership

Chelladurai and Riemer (1998) define coach leadership as a behavioral process led by the coach to influence athletes' performance and satisfaction. Coach leadership has proven to be a powerful driver of team and player performance (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016; Fransen et al., 2018). With suitable leadership behaviors, high-quality coaches can increase athletes' confidence in the team's capacities (Hampson & Jowett, 2014) and enhance athletes' trust in their coach's (Fransen et al., 2020b; Huang, 2012), teams' and individual athletes' performance (Clare et al., 2025).

Many current coach leadership studies have utilized Smoll and Smith's (1989) Model of Leadership Behaviors in Sport, which is built on the premise that the effectiveness of leadership depends on athletes' perceptions and recall. The model proposes that coach leadership is perceived individually by the players and emphasizes that these perceptions are as important for the outcome of a coach's behavior as the coach's actual behavior (Cotterill & Fransen, 2021). To lead a team successfully, as Jowett (2024) argues, a coach must build quality relationships with the athletes. This cause-and-effect relationship appears to be bi-directional. For example, Gosai et al. (2023) and Liu et al. (2025) found that leadership and coach-athlete relationships are closely associated, and Zhao and Jowett (2023) concluded that high quality coach leadership is a good tool for developing coach-athlete relationships.

In building quality relationships with players, a coach must also consider the team's leadership structure. In the line of command, it is important to establish who has the ultimate authority and ac-

countability (Jowett, 2024). Coaches often believe that they possess the best insight into their team's leadership structure. As a typical established leadership figure and as a team's formal leader, a coach often controls the appointment of other leaders (for athlete leaders, see Fransen et al., 2020c), despite research indicating that the other team members do not always agree with their formal leader's perceptions (Fransen et al., 2020b).

Athlete leadership

Alongside a coach's leadership, athlete leadership has been shown to be a relevant factor in many team outcomes, and therefore very important for both teams and coaches (Fransen et al., 2015). Athlete leadership is strongly associated with better team performance (Crozier et al., 2013; Fransen et al., 2017), team success (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016), and strong team resilience when encountering setbacks (Morgan et al., 2013).

At their best, athlete leaders, whether in a formal or informal leadership role, influence their team's achievement of a common goal (Cotterill et al., 2022; Loughead et al., 2006, p. 144), are vocal, trustworthy, exemplary, and have strong interpersonal skills (Holmes et al., 2010). Formal athlete leaders are athletes who are formally appointed to a leadership role (e.g., team captain), usually by the coaching staff (Newman et al., 2019). The team captain is generally perceived as an important leader (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2020) whose leadership may have a stronger effect than the coach's on a team's performance (Clare et al., 2025).

The captain's role has, however, suffered from a lack of clarity (Cotterill et al., 2022). No consensus exists on the role of a captain (Cotterill et al., 2019) and as every team has their own context-specific leadership needs, it can be difficult to understand the specific expectations inherent in the role (Orhan & Carson, 2025). For these reasons, most captains are unable to live up to the high expectations of coaches and teammates (Fransen et al., 2019) and may experience negative effects of captaincy due to the increased pressure and challenges that accompany the role (Orhan & Carson, 2025).

Informal athlete leaders, in turn, rise to a leadership position by exhibiting effective leadership characteristics (Gökduman et al., 2023; Loughead, 2017) and spending time with their teammates (Fransen

et al., 2014). Teammates may perceive informal leaders as good or better leaders than the team captain (Butalia et al., 2021; Clare et al., 2025; Fransen et al., 2014, 2015) and the relatedness between these and the other athletes seems to be stronger than that achievable by the coach (Fransen et al., 2020a). In fact, informal leaders can sometimes fulfill different leadership roles better and perform tasks more effectively than formal leaders (Fransen et al., 2020c), as they need to be accepted by their teammates to truly be able to impact the team (Gulak Lipka, 2017). Hence, when coaches are looking for athlete leaders in their team to fulfill certain leadership roles, they should also be looking beyond the team captain (Fransen et al., 2014, 2015). An additional benefit of having multiple formal and informal athlete leaders is that athletes occupying a leadership role in the team tend to perceive coaches' leadership behaviors more positively (Fransen et al., 2020b; Holopainen et al., 2023). When considering the specific number of leaders needed for implementing shared leadership, it is important to strike an appropriate balance—that is, to have neither too many nor too few leaders in different leadership roles (Fransen et al., 2020b).

Shared leadership

In shared leadership, where leadership is distributed among two or more individuals, transversal roles and overlapping skills are important (Bonini et al., 2024). In the sporting context, shared leadership has been seen as a form of team leadership where responsibility is distributed between multiple team members, including informal athlete leaders, on the group level (Fransen et al., 2020c; Mächel et al., 2022). Shared leadership has been found very effective in promoting team effectiveness, team members' wellbeing (Fransen et al., 2020c), intrinsic motivation, and teamwork execution (Lee et al., 2024). Moreover, research focused on the precursors of shared leadership has highlighted the central roles of communicatively open team environments (Duguay et al., 2022; Mächel et al., 2022; Takamatsu et al., 2025) and coaches' athlete-centered leadership (Takamatsu et al., 2025) in shared leadership.

Although shared leadership has been shown to be a working leadership model in team sports, the need remains for an appropriate amount of coach leadership in a team with a shared leadership struc-

ture (Fransen et al., 2020b). For example, the responsibility for implementing the desired leadership structure in the team and sharing leadership roles with team members who have the right kind of expertise needs to be taken by someone (Kang & Svensson, 2019). For example, in the game environment, coaches are better able to implement their game-related tactics and strategies if they have good athlete leaders on the pitch (Fransen et al., 2020b). This is especially the case in football as, unlike many other team sports, it is played on a relatively large pitch with a large number of players, and hence the coach cannot markedly impact the flow of the game. This may explain why players' perceived coach leadership is more dependent on the leadership quality of the whole team than solely on the coach's behavior (Fransen et al., 2020b; Fransen et al., 2016).

Coaches able to apply a shared leadership approach with their coaching staff and athletes and help others establish leadership positions (Fransen et al., 2020b) might better avoid conflict between their own and their players' opinions on their coaching behaviors. Individual athletes in a team require not only the coach's guidance but also the support of their peers (Bebetsos et al., 2017). In interviews, athlete leaders have, in fact, mentioned their teammates as the most important source of feedback and support (Machida-Kosuga & Kohno, 2023). Unfortunately, coaches are often reluctant to empower their players for fear this could compromise their own leadership status in the team or induce them to cave in under the pressure of short-term results (Fransen et al., 2020b; Ntoumanis & Mallett, 2014). Another possible reason for not utilizing the concept of shared leadership is lack of knowledge. When the long-term effects are not well known, using controlling behaviors is a good way for coaches to hide their own insecurities as it leaves no room for player autonomy (Ntoumanis & Mallett, 2014). However, when coaches empower players in their team, the players' perception of the coach's leadership evolves in a more positive direction (Fransen et al., 2020b; Holopainen et al., 2023).

Present study

By grounding our study in the leadership literature introduced in the previous sections and reviewing research on coach, athlete and shared leadership, we identified a gap in how these perspectives are

understood in elite national team contexts. This framing ensures conceptual clarity and aligns with Braun and Clarke's (2021) recommendation to avoid working in a theoretical vacuum. Given that previous leadership research in elite football has mainly focused on clubs (Hong, 2023; Karayel et al., 2024; Metin & Eratli Şirin, 2025; Mills & Boardley, 2016; Rausch et al., 2025) and studies on national teams have mainly focused on aspects other than leadership, such as performance (Chen et al., 2025), teams' tactical decisions (Gabrys et al., 2025) and global politics (Beissel & Ternes, 2024), we wanted to enrich the existing football leadership research on coaches, athletes, and shared leadership. This research conducted with a rare dataset from a men's national team environment addressed the question: What leadership characteristics describe a men's national football team? To answer this question comprehensively meant recognizing that the quality of a leader's leadership characteristics is dependent on others' perceptions (Fransen et al., 2020b), and that athletes' and coaches' perceptions of coaching behaviors often conflict (McCleery et al., 2023). Hence, we chose to interview multiple members of a national team, i.e., coaches and players, on how they perceived different leadership roles. To our knowledge no previous leadership research has focused on coaches' and players' perceptions in an elite national team environment.

Methods

Participants

Of the participating national team's 26 male players and 8 coaching staff members, five coaches and two players with different playing positions and amounts of playing time in the UEFA EURO 2020 tournament participated in the study. All were men of the same nationality. Due to the very specific nature of the sample and to protect the participants' identity, it was agreed not to reveal their demographic data in detail.

Data collection

Assisted by the country's football association, a video giving information about the research was sent to the national team during

their training camp. In the video, the first author briefly described the research and invited the team to participate. In total, seven team members volunteered to be interviewed. They were then emailed an individual invitation to the interview along with the same description of the study to enable them to give their informed consent. They were informed that their participation was voluntary, that their data would remain anonymous, and that they had the right to withdraw their participation at any time. They were asked to confirm their consent to participate at the beginning of each interview.

To capture participants' individual perceptions of leadership, we chose to use a semi-structured interview. Drawing on two interview guides from prior studies on athlete leadership (Bucci at al., 2012) and coach leadership (Mills & Boardley, 2016), the first author created two modified interview guides (one for coaches, one for players). The questions were critiqued by the co-authors and two academically educated coaches from different fields. Feedback addressed the clarity and terminology used in the questions and the overall suitability of the interview guides for the target groups. In addition, to test the coaches' interview guide, a pilot interview was conducted with a professional football coach.

Both interview guides followed the same structure. Each comprised four parts: grounding questions intended to initiate discussion and to build rapport between interviewee and interviewer; the leadership of the coaching staff; the peer leaders amongst the players; and lessons learned during the interviewee's career. At interview end, the participants were given an opportunity to add anything to their answers or ask the interviewer for any additional information.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and to arrange the interviews with participants living abroad, all seven interviews were digitally recorded in Microsoft Teams. Initial short observations were noted in writing during the interviews. The interviews were conducted and transcribed verbatim by the first author. Edits were only made to ensure that all participant data remained confidential and to replace any names mentioned in the interview with code names. The interviews lasted 75–201 minutes (mean 123 minutes). The transcripts, in Times New Roman with font size 11 and line-spacing 1.5, totaled 182 pages. To enhance the credibility of the results, we also used member checking (Thomas, 2016), i.e., all the participants had an opportunity to read through their interview transcripts and evaluate their

accuracy before the data analysis commenced. Only one participant corrected a few details (e.g., names and professional jargon).

Data analysis

Interviews were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2022a) reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) principles. In each of the six different analysis phases, deductive (theory-driven) and inductive (data-driven) approaches were combined and abductive reasoning applied (Kovács & Spens, 2005). First, familiarization with the data was gained by listening to the interview tapes, transcribing the interviews, and then carefully reading and re-reading the transcripts. During the reading process, notes were taken on initial observations and insights. To yield a better representation of the participants experiences, after familiarization, the entire dataset was then coded in two rounds without any preconceptions or interpretations. Second, the codes, together with relevant data extracts, were collated and arranged into initial sub-themes. Third, a set of themes was created by grouping similar sub-themes together by repeated crosschecking and comparison. Table 1 (overleaf) presents an example of theme building with sub-theme definitions in the form of the codes extracted from the interview data and prototypical text passages (Braun & Clarke, 2022a). Fourth, the initial themes were then compared against the prior literature on coach leadership, athlete leadership and shared leadership (e.g. Bonini et al., 2024; Cotterill & Fransen, 2016; Fransen et al., 2020b; Fransen et al., 2020c; Mächel et al., 2022; Northouse, 2013, p. 5). These themes were critically reviewed and discussed with the second, third and fourth authors who at this point were acting as "critical friends" (Braun & Clarke, 2022a). Small refinements were then made to the initial themes, one of which was dropped as it was insufficiently related to our specific research question. In the fifth phase of the analysis, following constant revision and critical discussion involving the whole research group on the connections between the themes and the literature, the final themes were chosen and named (Braun & Clarke, 2022a). Finally, the analysis was contextualized in relation to the existing literature (Fletcher, 2017).

To strengthen the reliability of our analysis, we reflected on it with an experienced qualitative researcher and educator in qualitative analysis at the University of Jyväskylä. This researcher came

Table 1. *Example of theme development with sub-themes, codes, and illustrative interview excerpts.*

Theme	Sub-themes	Codes	Extracts from the interviews
Shared Leadership	Encouraging environment	'Team first' -culture Family-like atmosphere Working for the players	"When players are giving speeches, they are comparing this team to another family. That's how meaningful this environment is to these players." (Coach 3)
	Players' proactivity	Taking responsibility Courage	A good coach creates an atmosphere in the group where everyone feels that they are able and dare to influence the team's activities with their own actions and opinions. (Coach 2)
	Trust	Knowing the players Caring about others Commitment	"[for athlete leaders] really the most important thing is to show that they care about others success and their team's success [...]" (Player 1) "We think of those players not only as players, but also as people and are interested in what their lives are all about." (Coach 5)
	Players autonomy	Created sense of autonomy Role clarity Player engagement	"Maybe the effect of this is that they notice that they have been able to influence certain things, so it becomes the players' thing as well, as it should be, this is a common project." (Coach 4)

from outside the research team, thereby bringing an added level of objective critical thinking to our work (Loo & Sairattanain, 2021). We ensured that our use of RTA followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) principles and was not conflated with other thematic approaches or analysis procedures. In line with RTA, our process embraced researchers' interpretative role and reflexivity across the whole research process. This reflects the flexibility of RTA and its capacity for both inductive and deductive reasoning, ensuring conceptual depth and methodological rigor (Braun & Clarke, 2022b). In practice, this meant that early theme development was primarily inductive, grounded in participants' accounts, while later stages incorporated a more deductive orientation by critically comparing and refining themes against existing leadership literature.

Results

The reflexive thematic analysis of the interview transcripts yielded the following three major themes: 1) Coach leadership, 2) Athlete leadership and 3) Shared leadership (Table 2). Below, each theme is presented and illustrated with quotations from the interviews.

Table 2. *Themes, sub-themes and extracts from the interviews.*

Theme	Sub-themes	Extracts from the interviews
Coach Leadership	Sharing responsibilities Commitment to decisions Teamwork Coach & player relationships Communication	"[…] Especially by sharing the responsibility for the players in the everyday tasks and by giving players space to succeed and not interrupting things just for the sake of getting them done in his way." (Player 1)
Athlete Leadership	Taking and sharing responsibilities Coach-athlete relationship Unselfishness Being vocal Ability to inspire Communication Self-initiative	"Captaincy shouldn't become a burden […] everyone can probably execute the tasks alone but surely not as well as with the help of their peers' competence" (Player 1) "A good peer leader can maintain the wanted things, but an excellent peer leader can produce the wanted change." (Coach 5)
Shared Leadership	Encouraging environment Players' proactivity Trust Players' autonomy	"Maybe the effect of this is that they notice that they have been able to influence certain things, so it becomes the players' thing as well, as it should be, this is a common project." (Coach 4)

Coach leadership

The first theme "Coach leadership" comprised five key subthemes: sharing responsibilities, commitment to decisions, teamwork, coach and player relationships, and communication. Leadership was shared across the coaching staff, whose job descriptions and responsibilities were designated by the head coach. However, the coaching staff reported that within these parameters they had freedom to create and take on different responsibilities that they saw as best suited to their personalities and skill set.

> I have been saying from the very start what I want to be responsible for [...] Yeah, the idea is that the roles inside the coaching staff are more taken than given to us. [...] But the roles are probably modified as time goes on. (Coach 4)

A well-functioning leadership structure meant that each coach's decision-making responsibilities were also clear to all the other coaching staff. After discussing different questions together, the responsibility and last word on decisions was always the head coach's. Everybody understood this and trusted the head coach to make the right decision, to which all the coaching staff then committed themselves.

> I take responsibility and bless all the decisions that are made concerning this team. Even if I wouldn't totally agree with something at first, but the rest of the coaching staff think we should try it then I'll bless it anyway and take responsibility for it. (Coach 5)

The ability of coaches to share their own responsibilities with others from time to time was seen as an important part of a well-functioning team. This was done by listening to other's opinions or on some occasions by giving someone else a chance to take the initiative.

> [...] Especially by sharing the responsibility for the players in the everyday tasks and by giving players space to succeed and not interrupting things just for the sake of getting them done in his way. (Player 1)

Good communication skills in relationships with other coaches, and especially with players, were seen as vital for coaches.

> Leadership is mainly about communication. (Coach 5)

> If you can't get interaction with a player, you won't be able to influence him and you won't be able to lead him. (Coach 5)

Players wished that everything included in their coaches' interaction should be informed by the coaches' personalities. Coaches' behavior was seen as very consistent irrespective of the situation.

A culture with steady principles was considered important. For example, both coaches and players reported no significant differences in the coaches' behavior between games and practices. In addition, coaches' honesty in communication improved the coach-athlete relationship, including with players getting less playing time. It made them feel that either way they had an important role in the team.

> A good coach is honest and demanding. He cares about the player in a genuine way as an individual […] he can communicate his requirements and desires in the team environment to the player in a brutally honest and open way, still respecting the player by seeing him as a person first before the player he is. (Player 1)

Athlete leadership

The second theme, "Athlete leadership", comprised seven subthemes: taking and sharing responsibilities, the coach-athlete relationship, unselfishness, being vocal, ability to inspire, communication, and self-initiative. The interviewees described athlete leaders' fundamental abilities as being exemplary and vocal. Athlete leaders also took responsibility for the team's tasks and maintained high standards. When asked what characteristics distinguished a good from an excellent athlete leader, the answer was an unselfish personality, good interaction skills, and an ability to inspire people.

> A good peer leader can maintain the wanted things, but an excellent peer leader can produce the wanted change. (Coach 5)

Athlete leaders had the important role of implementing the coaches' ideas and plans in the team. This meant that the players, especially the athlete leaders, had a big responsibility for maintaining the team's culture and spirit. The biggest responsibility for this was borne by the team captains, who were chosen for that role mainly for their ability to communicate well between the coaching staff and the players as well as being the players' voice in decision making.

Not all players were expected to be leaders, but all were expected to show some level of leadership. They were encouraged to use their leadership skills to attain an informal leadership position or at least to display good level of self-management.

The interviewees considered leadership skills to be really put to the test in situations when things got tough. The leader then had to know how to act and communicate to be able to change course. It was important to know when to take over as leader and when to allow others to make decisions, and also how to manage people in the best interests of the team.

> A good example was that [team name] game when in the qualifiers we lost [result] and I was thinking for a long time what to say when going to the locker room as we'd just lost, and we'd had high hopes that by winning we would have been very close to qualifying. Well, there were players with their heads down but then a couple of players took the lead and opened their mouths and just said that 'this didn't go as planned. We weren't at our best, but we have proved that we can do better, and it is in our hands to show in two days against [team name] that we are going to push through, and we believe in our team'. After I had heard these few speeches, I just said that 'I have nothing to add, you just said what I was thinking'. I told them that I appreciate that this is coming from the players, and I didn't have to bring it up, and so we have accomplished a lot. (Coach 5)

The sharing of leadership between the athletes was also seen as important. This was emphasized when formal leaders gave informal leaders space to flourish. Multiple informal leaders were in fact seen as a necessary resource to support coaches' and team captains' leadership and more effectively influence the players.

> Captaincy shouldn't become a burden [...] everyone can probably execute the tasks alone but surely not as well as with the help of their peers' competence. (Player 1)

Player 2 reflected on what good quality captaincy meant to him and stressed the importance of good communication alongside the benefits of shared leadership, and thus being able to reach every athlete on the team:

> If you have only one captain, then it's just a fact that this one person can't be as good a friend with everyone. But for example, if you have six guys [occupying a strong leadership role] you have much better chances of one of them having a really good relationship with someone. If I have one

> younger guy in that collective and he knows someone better than I do, then it's much easier for me to communicate with that someone through this other leader. So, you must have quite a big group of players who are leaders in some way. In this situation the captain must be ready to personally take a step back sometimes. (Player 2)

One of the most important assets of a team's formal athlete leaders was their knowledge on how to interact with different individuals in the team. Coaches also encouraged players to take the initiative and make them aware of their opinions. Both coaches and players felt it was easier for coaches if players not only told them what was on their minds but also knew how to work in a group so that when a decision was made, even if it was not your own idea, you committed yourself to it as you knew it had been made in the team's best interest.

Shared leadership

The third main theme of "shared leadership" comprised four key sub-themes: an encouraging environment, players' proactivity, trust, and players' autonomy. The team environment was created to encourage athletes to take more responsibility and leave room for informal leaders to develop. The coaches also wanted to enhance psychological well-being in such a way that players could be themselves in the team. Interviewees reported that the coaches cherished the idea of creating a family-like atmosphere:

> When players are giving speeches, they are comparing this team to another family. That's how meaningful this environment is to these players. (Coach 3)

The creation of a family-like atmosphere had also been one of the head coach's ambitions. A further big goal for the coaching staff was developing players' proactivity. With multiple athlete leaders in the team, the coach could trust that they would be amplifying the coaches' messages to the whole team. This was achieved by giving players room for leadership and teaching them how to maintain team standards. This was important as both players and coaches were aware that players may have different perceptions of coaches' behaviors.

> It might be that I think a coach is amazing but someone else thinks he has been absolutely terrible." (Player 2)

It is through trust—one of the core values in a team—paired with encouraging the players to be proactive in interaction that coaches can build a team environment where shared leadership is possible.

> If I had to prioritize then in my opinion it all starts with creating team spirit, trust and a good communication relationship. (Coach 5)

Player autonomy was also an important factor in the coach-athlete relationship. It was one of the prerequisites of coaching in a shared leadership environment and made everyone feel more attached to their common project and that they had a chance to voice their opinion on the decisions made.

> Maybe the effect of this is that they notice that they have been able to influence certain things, so it becomes the players' thing as well, as it should be, this is a common project. (Coach 4)

Discussion

Our aim, through interviews with five coaches and two players, was to shed light on what leadership characteristics describe a men's national football team. The three key themes of coach leadership, athlete leadership and shared leadership, suggest that the national team's leadership is based on interactiveness and that the team's leadership structure is one in which leadership is shared across the coaching staff and players with room for informal leaders to arise as needed. These findings support those of previous studies on the benefits of sharing leadership between coaching staff and players (Bebetsos et al., 2017; Cotterill & Fransen, 2016; Fransen et al., 2014, 2017, 2018, 2020a, 2020b; Haslam et al., 2017; Loughead et al., 2006; Mächel et al., 2022) and indicates their functionality in an elite national football team environment.

In our interviews, the coaches underlined the importance of communication and the need to really know the players as individuals. This was also noted by the players, both of whom reported that on different occasions, they may have different perceptions of coaches' behaviors. That is, even in good coaching relationships occasions will arise where the desired message is not received exactly as intended by the coach. This phenomenon has been reported by Millar et al. (2011) and, specifically in leadership studies, by Kavussanu et al. (2008).

All our interviewees seemed to understand that the perceptions of the individuals they are leading are the best indicator of the effectiveness of leadership. They noted that an essential aspect of communication is the ability to notice that the presence of multiple people in a team means multiple perceptions in interactions within it. To be able to lead a team successfully, it is necessary for the coach to build quality relationships with the athletes (Jowett, 2024). This observation may be the underlying reason for adopting shared leadership, as by focusing more on an athlete's thought-processes a leader can modify his/her leadership behavior in a more suitable direction. As in the case of leadership behaviors (Kavussanu et al., 2008), coaches' and athletes' perceptions of feedback also often differ (Millar et al., 2011), mainly due to low quality communication.

All members of the present coaching staff recognized that they had a clear role in the team in terms of their responsibilities and leadership. They also underlined the importance of openness in the communication culture—supporting previous findings on the importance of communicatively open team environments (Duguay et al., 2022; Mächel et al., 2022; Takamatsu et al., 2025) in shared leadership—pointing out that different topics are discussed, everyone's opinions are considered, and it is clear to everyone that the head coach makes the final decision and carries the main responsibility for it. These results support Meckbach et al. (2023), who found that coaches needed to possess a clear understanding of their respective roles, with the head coach bearing the ultimate responsibility. At moments when the head coach has to make difficult decisions and sometimes overrule another's opinion—sometimes his own—the importance of clear roles and a working team becomes even more crucial (Fransen et al., 2020b). Our findings suggest that the cooperation and impact of coaches' leadership can be further improved if these roles and attributes are also made clear to the athletes.

The coaches emphasized the role of the captain in bearing the biggest responsibility for acting as the voice of the players in decision making. While all players were expected to show some level of leadership, team captains were seen as a needed and well-functioning link between coaches and players. Despite the coaches' wish for everyone in the team to show some leadership abilities, they recognized that not everyone can occupy a leadership position. This assumption was long ago articulated by Gibb (1947, p. 270), who pointed out that "there can be no leader without followers" and subsequently by Platow et al. (2015, p. 20), who state: "the absence of followers indicates the clear absence of leadership."

Our results also suggest that, in the present national team, being exemplary and vocal were seen as especially important leadership characteristics of athlete leaders. They also took responsibility for the team's tasks and helped coaches maintain high standards. The characteristics that make for an excellent athlete leader were reported to be an unselfish personality, good social skills, and an ability to inspire people. Overall, these findings support those of previous studies reporting a good athlete leader as a role model, inspirational and able to promote teamwork (Fransen et al., 2020d).

Limitations, strengths, and future research directions

This study has its limitations. The first is the possibility of social desirability bias. Environmental psychology research has found that social desirability (i.e., a tendency to present oneself in a socially acceptable way in a given situation) can influence people's self-reports (Bergen & Labonté, 2020; Cerri et al., 2019) and hence must be considered even if non-significant (O'Brien et al., 2018). The second is that even if the integrity of the voluntary interviewees' reports is not in doubt, they will usually include some element of subjectivity. Although we had the perspectives of multiple coaches and players to balance this subjectivity, the number of players interviewed was lower than the number of coaches, raising the possibility of the coaches' voices being louder in the data. There is also the possibility of self-selection bias (Stone et al., 2024), i.e., overrepresentation of certain characteristics in the interviewees; for example, the two player participants may have had a particularly close relationship with each other, or with the head coach.

The third is the possible impact of the first author as the interviewer and principal data analyst. He is a professional football coach and coach educator and has over a decade of experience as both a coach and a player in men's teams. However, the relevance of the first author's skills in relation to the topic can be argued to have increased the likelihood of achieving the intended objectives of the interviews and the building of rapport with the interviewees. The second author has been a professional football player in men's teams, and all the present authors work with coaches from various sports. All members of the research group have their own experiences and subjective ideas on coaching. Therefore, while complete neutrality may be impossible, our research group endeavored to attain it. A related limitation concerns our choice of a theoretically flexible method

of reflexive thematic analysis (Terry et al., 2017) that, irrespective of its flexibility, relies strongly on the researchers' interpretations, leaving room for subjectivity and bias (Terry et al., 2017). Its interpretive nature may also impair the replicability of the findings, as different researchers may interpret the same data differently (Smith & Osborn, 2008), yielding ungeneralizable results (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Finally, our focus on male national team players may be seen as a shortcoming as it follows in the tradition of the overrepresentation of male participants in sport studies (Walton et al., 2024). Much work remains to be done to fill the gap in knowledge between males and females in sport leadership research (Clare et al., 2025; Walton et al., 2024)

However, we feel the strengths of the present study outweigh its limitations. First, it is, to the best of our knowledge, the first leadership study conducted in an elite national team environment that includes both coaches' and players' perceptions. Prior research on male national teams has focused, for example, on players' performance (Chen et al., 2025), teams' tactical decisions (Gabrys et al., 2025) and on the effects of mega events such as the FIFA World Cups on world politics (Beissel & Ternes, 2024). In addition, most elite football research has focused on the club environment (Hong, 2023; Karayel et al., 2024; Mills & Boardley, 2016; Rausch et al., 2025) to the neglect of national team football.

Second, from a more methodological viewpoint, we valued the participants highly and invested in trusting relationships with them in many ways. We sent an informational video about the study to the team at their training camp. The first author introduced himself to create an initial relationship with the participants. All the interviews started with a few questions pertaining to the participants' career and life with the objective of avoiding power asymmetry and further building the researcher-participant relationship (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Our group of participants was small but heterogenous (contextual), featuring clearly different roles and responsibilities. The players differed in both their amount of playing time during the past year and their career with the national team during the past decade. All the above offered us a full range of perspectives on our research question. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), investing time in the preparation and analysis of research interviews has its benefits.

Third, to enhance the validity and the ethics of our data collection, we sent the transcripts to the interviewees for checking before starting the coding process (Gray, 2018). Regarding the analysis itself, the main reason for choosing reflexive thematic analysis over more rigorous methods was

to make full use of all the authors' areas of expertise and allow them room for a little creativity in the analysis phase (Whittemore et al., 2001). The strengths of this method, when used correctly, are its flexibility in supporting both inductive and deductive analysis (Terry et al., 2017) and the possibility for deeper engagement with the data and better understanding of participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2022b). Thus we sought to make the most of the research group's expertise in the target research field while at the same time enhancing the transparency of the analysis by emphasizing the researchers' reflexivity and thereby encouraging their awareness of potential biases (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Finally, our data collection was well-timed as it was implemented soon after the EURO 2020 tournament. At that point, the interviewees had had sufficient time to recover from the tournament and reflect on it and the long road to it, while still relatively free from memory bias. Our timing also meant that at study start the coaching staff had been working continuously with the team and each other for several years. The national team calendar year comprises four to five nine-day FIFA international match windows where the teams gather together. Research has shown that it takes at least two months for athletes and coaches to become properly acquainted (Loughead & Carron, 2004), an interval reached before our study began.

The process of choosing team captains merits more research attention. Butalia et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of choosing captains according to individuals' leadership qualities instead of team tenure or technical abilities. Next, armed with greater knowledge on effective leadership characteristics, it would be interesting to study whether the leadership structure of a team evolves inside the team during the time span of a whole season, and if so, for what reasons.

Conclusion

In this study, we identified three key themes: 1) coach leadership, 2) athlete leadership, and 3) shared leadership. The team's leadership structure involved clear roles shared among the coaching staff and players, with space for informal leaders to emerge as needed. The coaches highlighted the captain's primary responsibility for representing the players in decision-making. In this national team, characteristics that distinguished an excellent athlete leader from a good one were reported to include an unselfish personality, excellent social skills, and the ability to inspire others.

We suggest that with this knowledge of what makes an excellent athlete leader, coaches can better develop athlete leadership in their teams and reap the benefits of quality leadership in a highly competitive elite team sport environment.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure of interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

References

Badura, K. L., Galvin, B. M., & Lee, M. Y. (2022). Leadership emergence: An integrative review. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *107*(11), 2069–2100. https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000997

Bebetsos, E., Filippou, F., & Bebetsos, G. (2017). Athletes' criticism of coaching behavior: Differences among gender, and type of sport. *Polish Psychological Bulletin*, *48*(1), 66–71. https://doi.org/10.1515/ppb-2017-0008

Beissel, A. S., & Ternes, N. (2024). The empire strikes back: FIFA 2.0, global peacemaking, and the 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup. *Journal of Global Sport Management*, *9*(3), 408– 441. https://doi.org/10.1080/24704067.2022.2116589

Bergen, N., Labonté, R. (2020). "Everything is perfect, and we have no problems": Detecting and limiting social desirability bias in qualitative research. *Qualitative Health Research*, *30*(5), 783–792. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732319889354

Bonini, A., Panari, C., Caricati, L., & Mariani, M. G. (2024). The relationship between leadership and adaptive performance: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *PLoS ONE 19*(10): e0304720. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0304720

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, *11*(4), 589–597. https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *18*(3), 328–352. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022a). Conceptual and design thinking for thematic analysis. *Qualitative Psychology*, *9*(1), 3–26. https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000196

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022b). Thematic analysis: A practical guide. London, Sage.

Bucci, J., Bloom, G. A., Loughead, T. M., & Caron, J. G. (2012). Ice hockey coaches' perceptions of athlete leadership. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, *24*(3), 243–259. https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2011.636416

Butalia, R., Fransen, K., Coffee, P., Laenens, J., & Boen, F. (2021). Why the chosen ones may not always be the best leaders: Criteria for captain selection as predictors of leadership quality and acceptance. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *11*, 616966. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.616966

Cerri, J., Thøgersen, J., & Testa, F. (2019). Social desirability and sustainable food research: A systematic literature review. *Food Quality and Preference*, *71*, 136–140. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodqual.2018.06.013

Chelladurai, P., & Riemer, H. A. (1998). Measurement of leadership in sport. In J. L. Duda (Ed.), *Advances in sport and exercise psychology measurement* (pp. 227–257). Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technologies.

Chen, S., Zmijewski, P., & Bradley, P. (2025). Establishing reference values for the match running performances of thirteen specific positional roles at UEFA Euro 2024. *Biology of Sport*, *42*(3), 257–268. https://doi.org/10.5114/biolsport.2025.148535

Clare, C., Hardy, J., Roberts, R., Tod, D., & Benson, A. (2025). Do leaders actually influence sports performance? An integrated systematic review and meta-analyses. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, *47*(4), 205–222. https://doi.org/10.1123/jsep.2024-0312

Cotterill, S. T., Cheetham, R., & Fransen, K. (2019). Professional rugby coaches' perceptions of the role of the team captain. *Sport Psychologist, 33*, 276–284. https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.20180094

Cotterill, S. T., & Fransen, K. (2016). Athlete leadership in sport teams: Current understanding and future directions. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, *9*(1), 116–133. https://doi.org/10.1080/1750984X.2015.1124443

Cotterill, S. T., & Fransen, K. (2021). Leadership development in sports teams. In Z. Zenko & L. Jones (Ed.), *Essentials of exercise and sport psychology: An open access textbook* (pp. 588–612). Society for Transparency, Openness, and Replication in Kinesiology. https://doi.org/10.51224/B1025

Cotterill, S. T., Loughead, T. M., & Fransen, K. (2022). Athlete leadership development within teams: Current understanding and future directions. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *13*, 820745. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.820745

Crozier, A. J., Loughead, T. M., & Munroe-Chandler, K. J. (2013). Examining the benefits of athlete leaders in sport. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, *36*(4), 346–364.

Duguay, A. M., Loughead, T. M., Hoffmann, M. D., & Caron, J. G. (2022). Facilitating the development of shared athlete leadership: Insights from

intercollegiate coaches. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, *34*(2), 251–272. https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2020.1773576

Fletcher, A. J. (2017). Applying critical realism in qualitative research: Methodology meets method. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *20*(2), 181–194. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2016.1144401

Fransen, K., Boen, F., Vansteenkiste, M., Mertens, N., & Vande Broek, G. (2018). The power of competence support: The impact of coaches and athlete leaders on intrinsic motivation and performance. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports*, *28*(2), 725–745. https://doi.org/10.1111/ sms.12950

Fransen, K., Decroos, S., Vande Broek, G., & Boen, F. (2016). Leading from the top or leading from within? A comparison between coaches' and athletes' leadership as predictors of team identification, team confidence, and team cohesion. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, *11*(6), 757–771. https://doi.org/10.1177/1747954116676102

Fransen, K., Haslam, S. A., Steffens, N. K., & Boen, F. (2020d). Standing out from the crowd: Identifying the traits and behaviors that characterize high quality athlete leaders. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports*, *30*(4), 766–786. https://doi-org.ezproxy.jyu.fi/10.1111/sms.13620

Fransen, K., Haslam, S. A., Mallett, C. J., Steffens, N. K., Peters, K., & Boen, F. (2017). Is perceived athlete leadership quality related to team effectiveness? A comparison of three professional sports teams. *Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport*, *20*(8), 800–806. https://doi.org/10.1016/ j.jsams.2016.11.024

Fransen, K., Haslam, S. A., Steffens, N. K., Peters, K., Mallett, C. J., Mertens, N., & Boen, F. (2020c). All for us and us for all: Introducing the 5R Shared Leadership Program. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, *51*, 101762. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2020.101762

Fransen, K., McEwan, D., & Sarkar, M. (2020a). The impact of identity leadership on team functioning and well-being in team sport: Is psychological safety the missing link? *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, *51*, 101763. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2020.101763

Fransen, K., Mertens, N., Cotterill, S. T., Vande Broek, G., & Boen, F. (2020b). From autocracy to empowerment: Teams with shared leadership perceive their coaches to be better leaders. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, *32*(1), 5–27. https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2019.1617370

Fransen, K., Vande Broek, G., Cotterill, S. T., & Boen, F. (2019). Unpicking the emperor's new clothes: Perceived strengths and weaknesses of the team captain. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10:2212. https://doi.org/10.3389/ fpsyg.2019.02212

Fransen, K., Van Puyenbroeck, S., Loughead, T. M., Vanbeselaere, N., De Cuyper, B., Vande Broek, G., & Boen, F. (2015). Who takes the lead? Social network analysis as pioneering tool to investigate shared leadership within sports teams. *Social Networks*, *43*, 28–38. https://doi.org/10.1016/ j.socnet.2015.04.003

Fransen, K., Vanbeselaere, N., De Cuyper, B., Vande Broek, G., & Boen, F. (2014). The myth of the team captain as principal leader: Extending the athlete leadership classification within sport teams. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, *32*(14), 1389–1397. https://doi.org/10.1080/02640414.2014.891291

Gabrys, T. T., Chruscinski, R., Garnys, M., Svatora, K., & Suva, M. (2025). The influence of substitution decisions made by national team coaches on final match outcomes at UEFA EURO 2024. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, 7, 1573823. https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2025.1573823

Gibb, C.A. (1947). The principles and traits of leadership. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 42*, 267–284. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0056420

Gosai, J., Jowett, S., & Do Nascimento-Júnior, J. R. A. (2023). When leadership, relationships and psychological safety promote flourishing in sport and life. *Sports Coaching Review*, 12(2), 145–165. https://doi.org/10.1080/21640629.2021.1936960

Gray, D. (2018). Doing Research in the Real World (4th ed.). London, Sage.

Gulak-Lipka, P. (2017). The role of trust for leadership in team sports. *Journal of Corporate Responsibility and Leadership*, 3(3), 16. https://doi.org/10.12775/jcrl.2016.015

Gökduman, Ç., Kartal, M., Temel, C., Toros, T., & Esen, T. (2023). Sustainability of success in sports teams: Who will be the captain? *Sustainability*, 15(5), 4316. https://doi.org/10.3390/su15054316

Hampson, R., & Jowett, S. (2014). Effects of coach leadership and coach-athlete relationship on collective efficacy. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports*, 24(2), 454–460. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1600-0838.2012.01527.x

Haslam, S. A., Steffens, N. K., Peters, K., Boyce, R. A., Mallett, C. J., & Fransen, K. (2017). A social identity approach to leadership development: The 5R program. *Journal of Personnel Psychology*, 16(3), 113–124. https://doi.org/10.1027/1866-5888/ a000176.

Holmes, R. M., McNeil, M., & Adorna, P. (2010). Student athletes' perception of formal and informal team leaders. *Journal of Sport Behavior, 33*(4), 442–465.

Holopainen, S., Szeróvay, M., Konttinen, N., & Kokkonen, M. (2023). Leadership in Finnish elite football: Associations between players' self-assessed leadership roles and player assessed head coach leadership behavior by player gender and age. *Science and Medicine in Football*, 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1080/24733938.2023.2237483

Hong, E. (2023). Qualitative study of a Korean elite university soccer team from a vertical leadership and shared leadership perspective. *Soccer & Society*, 24(2), 208–222. https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2022.2061470

Huang, J. T. (2012). Be proactive as empowered? The role of trust in one's supervisor in psychological empowerment, feedback seeking, and job performance. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 42(1), 103–127. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2012.01019.x

Iván-Baragaño, I., Ardá, A., Losada, J. L., & Maneiro, R. (2025). Analysis of the offensive playing style based on pass event data in the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup: an unsupervised machine learning approach. *International Journal of Performance Analysis in Sport*, 25(5), 946–959. https://doi.org/10.1080/24748668.2025.2468623

Jowett, S. (2024). The coach-athlete relationship within a crossboundary team of experts: A conceptual analysis. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/1750984X.2024.2416968

Karayel, E., Adilogullari, I., & Senel, E. (2024). The role of transformational leadership in the associations between coach-athlete relationship and team resilience: A study on elite football players. *BMC Psychology*, *12*(1), 514. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-024-02043-7

Kang, S., & Svensson, P. G. (2019). Shared leadership in sport for development and peace: A conceptual framework of antecedents and outcomes. *Sport Management Review*, *22*(4), 464–476. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2018.06.010.

Kavussanu, M., Boardley, I. D., Jutkiewicz, N., Vincent, S., & Ring, C. (2008). Coaching efficacy and coaching effectiveness: Examining their predictors and comparing coaches' and athletes' reports. *The Sport Psychologist*, *22*(4), 383–404. https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.22.4.383

Kovács, G., & Spens, K. M. (2005). Abductive reasoning in logistics research. *International Journal of Physical Distribution & Logistics Management*, *35*(2), 132–144. https://doi.org/10.1108/09600030510590318

Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing. Los Angeles, CA, Sage.

Lanaj, K., & Hollenbeck, J. R. (2015). Leadership over-emergence in selfmanaging teams: The role of gender and countervailing biases. *Academy of Management Journal*, *58*, 1476–1494. https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2013.0303

Lee, S., Kwon, S., & Yang, K. (2024). The effects of shared leadership perceived by soccer players on teamwork execution and flow state: Applying the IMO framework. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, *19*(6), 2376–2387. https://doi.org/10.1177/17479541241256851

Liu, R., Wang, S., & Li, J. (2025). How coach leadership behavior influences athletes' performance: The chain-mediated role of the coach-athlete relationship and psychological fatigue. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 15:1500867. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1500867

Loo, D. B., & Sairattanain, J. (2021). Disrupting discourses of deficiency in English for academic purposes: Dialogic reflection with a critical friend. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2021.1947355

Loughead, T. M. (2017). Athlete leadership: A review of the theoretical, measurement, and empirical literature. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *16*, 58–61. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2017.04.014.

Loughead, T. M., & Carron, A. V. (2004). The mediating role of cohesion in the leader behavior satisfaction relationship. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, *5*(3), 355–371. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1469-0292(03)00033-5

Loughead, T. M., Hardy, J., & Eys, M. A. (2006). The nature of athlete leadership. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, *29*(2), 144.

Lower-Hoppe, L. M., Heuett, K. B., Newman, T. J., & Brgoch, S. M. (2020). Communication and team performance: A case study of Division I football captains. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, *13*(1), 77–96. https://doi.org/10.1123/ijsc.2019-0112

Machida-Kosuga, M., & Kohno, N. (2023). Athlete leader development: The perspectives of athlete leaders, teammates, and coaches. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology,* *35*(2), 111–135. https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2021.2024624

Metin, M., & Eratli Şirin, Y. (2025). Effective communication as a mediator between leadership and team unity in football teams. *Mediterranean Journal of Sport Science*, 8(3), 478–489. https://doi-org.ezproxy.jyu.fi/10.38021/asbid.1700012

McCleery, J., Tereschenko, I., Li, L., & Copeland, N. (2023). Gender differences in coaching behaviors supportive of positive youth sports experience. *Women in Sport & Physical Activity Journal*, 31(2), 63–72. https://doi.org/10.1123/wspaj.2022-0024

Meckbach, S., Wagstaff, C.R.D., Kenttä, G., & Thelwell, R. (2023). Building the "team behind the team": A 21-month instrumental case study of the Swedish 2018 FIFA World Cup team. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 35(3), 521–546, https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2022.2046658

Mertens, N., Boen, F., Steffens, N. K., Haslam, S. A., & Fransen, K. (2021). Will the real leaders please stand up? The emergence of shared leadership in semi-professional soccer teams. *Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport*, 24(3), 281–290. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsams.2020.09.007

Millar, S.-K. Oldham, A. R. H., & Donovan, M. (2011). Coaches' self-awareness of timing, nature and intent of verbal instructions to athletes. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 6(4), 503–514. https://doi.org/10.1260/1747-9541.6.4.503

Mills, J. P., & Boardley, I. D. (2016). Expert Premier League soccer managers' use of transformational leadership behaviours and attitude towards sport integrity: An intrinsic case study. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 11(3), 382–394. https://doi.org/10.1177/1747954116645011

Morgan, P. B. C., Fletcher, D., & Sarkar, M. (2013). Defining and characterizing team resilience in elite sport. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 14(4), 549–559. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2013.01.004

Mächel, C., Loughead, T. M., Wergin, V. V., Kossak, T., & Beckmann, J. (2022). A solution focused approach to shared athlete leadership development using mixed methods. *The Sport Psychologist*, 36(2), 101–114. https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.2021-0075

Newman, T.J., Lower, L. M., & Brgoch, S. M. (2019). Developing sport team captains as formal leaders. *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action*, 10(3), 137–150, https://doi.org/10.1080/21520704.2019.1604590

Northouse, P. G. (2013). Leadership: Theory and practice (6th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage.

Ntoumanis, N., & Mallet, C. (2014). Motivation in sport: A self-determination theory perspective. In: A. Papaioannou & D. Hackford (Ed.), *Routledge Companion to Sport and Exercise Psychology: Global perspectives and fundamental concepts* (pp. 67–82). Hove, East Sussex: Taylor & Francis.

O'Brien, L. V., Meis, J., Anderson, R. C., Rizio, S. M., Ambrose, M., Bruce, G., Critchley, C. R., Dudgeon, P., Newton, P., Robins, G., & Kashima, Y. (2018). Low carbon readiness index: A short measure to predict private low carbon behaviour. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 57, 34–44. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2018.06.005

Orhan, S., & Carson, F. (2025). Being a team captain in professional soccer: Perceptions and experiences from the head coach perspective. *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action*, 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/21520704.2025.2455156

Øystein Hansen, P., Chroni, S., Åsrum Skille, E., & Abrahamsen, F. E. (2021). Leading and organising national teams: Functions of institutional leadership. *Sports Coaching Review*, *10*(3), 274–294. https://doi.org/10.1080/21640629.2021.1896213

Platow, M. J., Haslam, S. A., Reicher, S. D., & Steffens, N. K. (2015). There is no leadership if no one follows: Why leadership is necessarily a group process. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, *10*(1), 20–37. https://doi.org/10.53841/bpsicpr.2015.10.1.20

Price, M. S., & Weiss, M. R. (2011). Peer leadership in sport: Relationships among personal characteristics, leader behaviors, and team outcomes. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, *23*(1), 49–64. https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2010.520300

Rausch, C., Fritsch, J., Altmann, S., Steindorf, L., Spielmann, J., & Jekauc, D. (2025). Leading through performance crises: Soccer coaches' insights on their strategies–a qualitative study. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *16*, 1576717. https://doi.org/ 10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1576717

Smith, J. A., & Osborn, M. (2008). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods. (2nd ed.). London, Sage.

Smoll, F. L., & Smith, R. E. (1989). Leadership behaviors in sport: A theoretical model and research paradigm 1. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *19*(18), 1522–1551. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.1989.tb01462.x

Stone, A. A., Schneider, S., Smyth, J. M., Junghaenel, D. U., Couper, M. P., Wen, C., & Goldstein, S. (2024). A population-based investigation of participation rate and self-selection bias in momentary data capture and survey studies. *Current Psychology*, *43*(3), 2074–2090. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-023-04426-2

Svensson Primus, R., & Svensson, D. (2025). Becoming Swedish pragmatics: Comparing the coaching philosophies of Sven-Göran Eriksson and Pia Sundhage. *Sports Coaching Review*, *14*(1), 63–83. https://doi-org.ezproxy.jyu.fi/10.1080/21640629.2023.2248847

Takamatsu, S., Shah, E.J., & Kawata, Y. (2025). Relationships between coach servant leadership, internal team environment, and shared athlete leadership: A social network approach. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 80,* 102866. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2025.102866

Terry, G., Hayfield, N., Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. In C. Willig & W. S. Rogers (Ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology* (pp. 17–36). SAGE Publications Ltd. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526405555.n2

Thomas, D. R. (2016). Feedback from research participants: Are member checks useful in qualitative research? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *14*(1), 23–41. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2016.1219435

Wagstaff, C. R. D. (Ed.). (2017). *The organizational psychology of sport: Key issues and practical applications.* London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.

Walton, C. C., Gwyther, K., Gao, C. X., Purcell, R., & Rice, S. M. (2024). Evidence of gender imbalance across samples in sport and exercise psychology. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 17(2), 1337-1355. https://doi.org/10.1080/ 1750984X.2022.2150981

Whittemore, R., Chase, S. K., & Mandle, C. L. (2001). Validity in qualitative research. *The Qualitative Health Research*, 11(4), 522–537. https://doi.org/10.1177/104973201129119299

Zhao, C., & Jowett, S. (2023). Before supporting athletes, evaluate your coach–athlete relationship: Exploring the link between coach leadership and coach–athlete relationship. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 18(3), 633–641. https://doi.org/10.1177/17479541221148113