



## Player perceptions of athlete leadership and leadership development in an English Premier League football academy

Isabel Coker<sup>a</sup>, Stewart T Cotterill<sup>b,\*</sup>, Jonathan Griffin<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Winchester, England

<sup>b</sup> AECC University College, England

<sup>c</sup> Fulham Football Club, UK



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### ABSTRACT

The effective leadership of, and within, sports teams has consistently been highlighted to be an important factor impacting upon a range of outcomes including team performance, and team functioning. However, while there has been an increasing focus on athlete leadership and leadership development in recent years there is little research exploring leadership (rather than leader) development in youth sport. As a result, the aim of this study was to explore athlete perceptions of athlete leadership and the development of athlete leadership skills in a professional football youth academy. Participants were 34 professional football club youth academy players, arranged into 9 focus groups (depending upon age). The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, with six first order themes emerging (Leader behaviors, selection criteria, shared leadership, growth and development, changing environmental constraints, and leader development). The results highlight a good level of awareness of leadership amongst the youth footballers, but also major limitations in the degree to which they felt they were developed as leaders.

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#### Athlete leadership

The effective leadership of, and within, sports teams has consistently been highlighted to be an important factor impacting upon a range of outcomes including team performance, and team functioning (Cotterill, 2013). Of particular interest in recent years has been the leadership provision that exists amongst team members, and the degree to which the leadership provided meets the leadership needs of the team. This type of leadership has been described as ‘athlete leadership’, and has been operationally defined as “an athlete, occupying a formal or informal role within a team, who influences a group of team members to achieve a common goal” (Loughead et al., 2006, p. 144). One of the reasons why athlete leadership has promoted specific research interest in recent years is due to the links that have been reported between effective athlete leadership and other factors impacting upon team functioning and performance including: performance, self-efficacy, individual perceptions of identity, and motivation (Crozier et al., 2013; Fransen et al., 2015; Fransen, et al., 2015a; Glenn et al., 2003; Price & Weiss, 2011; Vincer & Loughead, 2010). Athlete leadership has been conceptualized in two different ways in the literature. The first relates

to the formal nature of the leadership role (Loughead et al., 2006), with distinctions drawn between formal leadership roles (e.g., the captain), and informal leadership roles (influential individuals who sit outside of a formal leadership structure). From a leadership development perspective there has been far more reported relating to the development of formal leaders such as captains compared to the development of informal leaders (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016). The second conceptualization of athlete leadership relates to the role athlete leaders fulfil within a team (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016). Four specific roles have recently been reported (Fransen et al., 2014); two of which are classified as ‘on-field’ (task and motivational) and two as ‘off-field’ (social and external leader) leadership roles (Fransen et al., 2014). Interestingly, recent findings suggest that these roles are often distributed between a number of different team members rather than being dominated by one athlete, a phenomenon known as shared leadership (Fransen et al., 2015b). Shared leadership has been described to be “a dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organizational goals” (Avolio et al., 1996, p. 1). With the potential for all athletes to contribute to the leadership needs of the team through shared leadership (Duguay et al., 2019), it makes sense for sports to look to develop the leadership abilities of all athletes to increase the pool of

\* Corresponding author at: School of Psychology, Sport and Physical Activity, AECC University College, Bournemouth BH5 2DF, UK.

E-mail address: [scotterill@aecc.ac.uk](mailto:scotterill@aecc.ac.uk) (S.T. Cotterill).

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potential leaders. Especially as having a group of athletes who can meet the leadership needs of a team has been highlighted as highly desirable (Loughead et al., 2020)

Research into athlete leadership has highlighted a number of characteristics that both female and male leaders such as captains appear to possess including being more dominant, ambitious, competitive, responsible, confident, independent, emotionally intelligent and resilient compared to their teammates (Lopez-Gajardo et al., 2021). These attributes have also been reported to positively influence the athletes' teammate's perceptions of them as a leader, the impact they have on the rest of the team, and their leadership status within that team (Bucci et al., 2012; Glenn & Horn, 1993; Kim, 1992; Loughead et al., 2006; Price & Weiss, 2011). In addition, Fransen and colleagues (2015) reported that perceptions of leadership effectiveness were reportedly not determined by age, experience, or status but by the connection and closeness that the teammates felt to their leader. This finding is supported by previous research that has highlighted that psychosocial attributes such as friendship quality (Moran & Weiss, 2006), peer acceptance (Fransen et al., 2015b; Princes & Weiss, 2011) and good rapport with teammates (Wright & Cote, 2003) are correlated with effective athlete leadership. A range of important behaviors have been reported to be important for athlete leaders to influence teammates and to meet the leadership needs of a team. These include possessing effective communication skills, guiding group tasks and nurturing the accomplishment of individual and team goals (Price & Weiss, 2011; Riggio et al., 2003; Wright & Cote, 2003). On-field motivation has also been highlighted as an important role of athlete leadership, with controlling emotions, remaining positive, and having confidence in the team also being reported as effective motivational behaviors (Dupuis et al., 2006; Holmes et al., 2010). The importance of athlete leaders engaging in these motivational behaviors is further supported by recent findings that have reported a positive relationship with team confidence, identity, and performance (Fransen et al., 2012; Fransen et al., 2015c; Fransen et al., 2015a, 2015b). The effectiveness of athlete leadership in influencing both team and team member outcomes suggests that maximizing athlete leadership within teams should be of particular interest to coaches, teams and national governing bodies, and in particular advocates for the development and implementation of athlete leadership development programs (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016).

Leadership development has in recent years emerged as a scholarly discipline, separate and distinct from the more traditional approaches to studying leadership. Across multiple domains, the required areas of knowledge, skills, and expertise have been identified as crucial building blocks for the development of effective leaders (Day, 2012). Indeed, the ability to develop the leadership capabilities of individuals within a team has been suggested to increase the likelihood that the leadership needs of a team are met (Cotterill, 2016). Within the leadership development domain a specific distinction is drawn between the concepts of leader development (developing an individual as a leader) and leadership development (meeting the leadership needs in a particular context that may or may not be met by a specific leader). Day (2001) suggested that the optimal approach to the development of leadership in a specific context is to link leader development with leadership development such that the development of leadership "transcends but does not replace the development of individual leaders" (p. 605). Building upon this point, the concept of leadership development has been defined as involving expanding the collective capacity of team members to engage effectively in leadership roles and processes (McCauley et al., 1998).

There has been a growing interest in youth athlete leadership development in the sport psychology literature over the last decade. Initially there was a focus on the development of personal leadership skills in youth athletes through sport (e.g., Gould & Voelker, 2012; Gould et al., 2012; Martinek & Hellison, 2009), but more recently there has begun to be an expansion in the studies exploring leadership development within youth sport teams (Blanton et al., 2019; Boisvert et al., 2019)

A number of studies have reported the effectiveness of leadership development programs with youth athletes. One example of this is the

work of Gould and Voelker (2010). They developed a workshop-based development program for high school captains that focused on topics such as the role of a team captain, effective communication, team motivation, team building and cohesion, handling tough team situations, and recommendations from captains and coaches. One particular concern regarding the effective development of youth sport athlete leaders relates to the support and guidance provided to them by their coaches (Collins et al., 2009; Voelker et al., 2011). Part of the problem is that often the coaches are not sufficiently equipped or educated (in relation to leadership development) to develop the leadership skills and abilities of their athletes (Gould et al., 2013). Building on this point, Wallace and Shipherd (2020) suggested that leadership development programs with youth athletes should focus on increasing athlete leader self-awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, and to better understand the team's leadership needs. In addition, opportunities for athlete leaders to discuss potential problems and practice decision-making in challenging situations and to receive feedback from teammates and coaches have also been suggested as important parts of any potential development program (Gould & Voelker, 2010, Martin, 2018). Recent developments have also seen the development of online leadership development programs for US high school captains. For example, Pierce, Blanton and Gould (2018) developed an online course for high school captains that could be accessed online free of charge. However, while there is evidence of effective programs that have sought to further enhance the leadership skills and abilities of formal athlete leaders (e.g., captain) in youth sport there is far less evidence reporting approaches to developing athlete leadership for teams through the development of all team members as opposed to specific individuals. This is important as while with adult populations it can be easier to identify the leaders to develop at a youth sport level it is difficult to identify the leaders of the future, and as a result there is value in seeking to develop the leadership abilities of all athletes in academy squads or programs (Loughead et al., 2020). There is also limited investigation of youth athlete understanding and experience of leadership development pre-intervention. Most studies at this level have adopted a pre-post test design and measured change, not existing knowledge, experiences, and perceptions

There is also very little research that seeks to understand youth athlete understanding of athlete leadership, and crucially their experiences of, and thoughts about how to develop the athlete leaders of the future. In addition, there is limited research exploring the athletes' perceptions of athlete leadership and leader development within professional rather than educational (e.g., high school, university) sports teams environments. This is important as athletes in these environments are already pre-disposed to more formal approaches to educational development (workshops, online training programs). As a result, the aim of this study was to explore athlete perceptions of athlete leadership and the development of athlete leadership skills in a professional football youth academy.

## Method

### Participants

Following ethical approval from the first authors University ethics committee participants were recruited from the male professional academy of an English Premier League football club. A total of 34 participants ( $M_{age} = 12.38$ , age range = 10–18 years of age) were recruited for this study. Five players from each age group in the academy were selected to participate in the study's focus groups through a process of randomized selection. In order to randomize selection the names of all of the players within each age group were entered into a computer program designed to randomly select the requested number of individuals. This approach was adopted in order to reduce sampling bias (Smith & Sparkes, 2013). For all participants under the age of 18 informed consent forms were sent to their parents/guardians in order to gain consent before data collection began. Those who were already 18 were able to

sign for themselves. Some focus groups ended up having less than 5 participants in that particular focus group due to illness and non-attendance on the day of data collection.

#### Data collection

Nine age group specific semi-structured focus groups were conducted to gain an insight into the participant's experiences of athlete leadership as a youth football player, their understanding of leadership, and the attributes a player needs to have to be considered a leader both on and off the pitch. Focus groups were the preferred method of data collection as the associated group interactions can lead to in-depth and debate (Carey, 1994); providing the researcher with an insight into the participant's attitudes, thoughts, opinions, experiences and perceptions (Krueger & Casey, 2014). Furthermore, the use of small focus groups has been suggested as one of the best methods of obtaining data from children (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). This is due to the fact that the type of communication that focus groups elicit is familiar to children as it replicates the communication they have with their peers (Eder & Fingerson, 2002).

When conducting focus groups with children the literature suggests that the size of the focus group should be dictated by the age of the participants (Gibson, 2007). When working with children aged between six and ten the most effective group size has been reported to be between four and six participants, in order to elicit a lively yet manageable discussion (Kennedy et al., 2001). For older children, larger focus groups are possible but with this comes the risk of limiting the participation of each child (Horner, 2000; Roose & John, 2003). Morgan and colleagues (2002) proposed when conducting focus groups with children the ideal group size is four to five participants. Moreover, due to a disparity in ability, understanding, sensitivity and perception across ages ideally there should be no more than a one to two years age difference between participants (Kennedy et al., 2001). In line with these recommendations five participants from the same age group were selected to take part in each of the nine focus groups conducted in the current study.

A flexible focus group schedule was developed using two main principles. First, that questions should move from general to more specific questions; and second, that the question order should be relative to the importance of issues in the research agenda (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

It has been suggested that younger children reach their focus limit between 45 and 60 minutes when participating in a focus group, this increases to approximately 90 minutes for older children (Gibson, 2007). Accordingly, the lead researcher aimed for each focus group to last between 45 to 90 minutes ( $m=58.4$  minutes), dependent on the participating age group. Throughout each focus group the lead researcher acted as the facilitator, guiding the group discussion using predetermined questions in an unbiased manner (Kingry et al., 1990). A key aspect of the facilitator's role was to encourage discussion, ensure that all participants had an equal opportunity to contribute, and allow for differences in opinion to be discussed openly and fairly in order to gain the highest quality data (Gill et al., 2008). Each focus group was audio-recorded with a digital recorder and transcribed verbatim.

#### Data analysis

Data gained from the focus groups were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Clarke et al., 2019). Reflexive thematic analysis can adopt a number of different orientations including inductive, deductive, semantic, latent, realist, and constructionist approaches. The current study adopted an inductive approach as the coding and theme development were directed by the content of the data. (Clarke & Braun, 2017). In taking an inductive approach, rather than being influenced by theoretical interest, the focus is to explore the themes as they are organically identified by the researcher as part of an interactive process involving the data, the positionality of the researcher, and the research

context. This form of data analysis aims to organize and describe the data through identifying patterns, also known as themes, and similarities and/or differences that occur across the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Thematic analysis offered the researchers the opportunity to interpret and describe both the data of each age group specific focus group and the whole data set (Smith & Sparkes, 2013). For the purpose of this study the researchers followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step method to ensure a clear process and structure to the analysis and interpretation of the data was adopted. The first two of which focus on familiarization and coding, with stages three-five focused on theme development, refinement, and naming (Braun et al., 2016).

Adopting this approach, the first stage involved becoming familiar with the data, searching for meanings and patterns as the responses were repeatedly read. Next, the initial codes were produced. Participant responses were coded for key words, phrases, and sentences that indicated recurring patterns in the data. Where responses clearly addressed a number of dimensions these points were coded in a way that acknowledges each individual idea. The codes were then analyzed, organized, and combined into early themes. In this early stage all distinct and valuable ideas were categorized under a theme. The fourth stage involved the reviewing and refinement of themes. Themes were then deleted or collapsed with similar themes where there was not enough data to support them individually, or where the data was too diverse for the theme to be explicit. Themes were only collapsed together when their core meaning was homogenous; determined by the use of common words/phrases, or by examining and interpreting the latent meaning of the responses. The themes were then named and clearly defined. Where multiple themes were collapsed to become 'meta-themes' the given name was either entirely separate, or the most dominant name among the 'sub-themes' chosen.

A non-foundational approach was employed (Smith & Caddick, 2012) to enhancing the quality of the data, judged against the following criteria: the coherence, resonance and credibility of the research and the subsequent contribution it has on the field (Tracy, 2010). The principle aim of this research was to produce knowledge relating to athlete leadership and its development in professional youth football, focus that is novel to the field and valuable both to professional football academies, and to the wider youth sport population (Tracy, 2010). This outcome was achieved through the use of detailed quotes and extracts from the data set. The coherence and credibility of the findings were assessed through discussions between the researchers, with one member of the team acting as a critical friend to deliberate significant stages of the research, such as data collection and analysis. Additionally, the lead researcher spent a significant amount of time at the research setting and also engaged in writing a reflective diary at key points throughout the study, further enhancing the credibility of the findings.

## Results and discussion

Analysis of the data in the current study resulted in the identification of six first order themes (Leader behaviors, selection criteria, shared leadership, growth and development, changing environmental constraints, and leader development) composed of 18 second order themes presented in Table 1. The first order themes have been used to provide a structure to the presentation of the results. Quotes perceived to best represent the data set as a whole have been used to provide greater depth and authenticity to the implications drawn from the data.

#### Leader behaviors

A number of important on-field behaviors and underpinning characteristics were consistently highlighted by participants in the current study. Engaging in motivational behaviors, such as demonstrating positivity and confidence in the team, were recognized by players as young as ten years old as key determinants of effective athlete leadership

**Table 1**  
Themes emerging from thematic analysis of focus group data.

First order themes	Second order themes
Leader behaviors	Motivational behaviors Good communication skills Positivity Funny and humorous
Selection criteria	Age Position Skill
Shared leadership	Multiple leaders Support systems
Growth and development	Getting older Sport knowledge Team development
Changing environmental constraints	Motives to lead Vocal leadership Leadership development
Leader development	Learning from others Experiences Biological basis

within the team. For example, one of the under eleven players reflected that:

Leadership is keeping your team up if they're down, if you're losing, the leader keeps pushing the team forward and keeping your heads up, not all going down. you keep up and you lead your team.

Acting as a motivator has previously been highlighted as a key role of athlete leaders, often being seen as a crucial function of high-quality athlete leaders (Dupuis et al., 2006; Holmes et al., 2010). It is interesting to see an awareness of the importance of the motivator role in players at such a young age. The importance of motivational behaviors has previously been reported in adult sporting populations linked to team confidence, identity and performance (Fransen et al., 2012; Fransen et al., 2015c); but has not previously been reported in such young age groups, a unique finding in this study.

The importance of leaders having good communication skills was also highlighted by participants in a number of the focus groups. Supporting this perspective, one of the under twelve players stated that leaders should be:

Good at communicating because if you're just shouting at people all the time, they won't really take your advice but if you speak in a positive and nice way, then they'll take things on that you said.

This view supports a number of previous studies that have suggested effective communication is a crucial task-related behavior that athlete leaders should be able to demonstrate (Price & Weiss, 2011; Riggio et al., 2003; Wright & Cote, 2003) and as such should be a focus for leadership development programs (Blanton et al., 2019). Participants in the focus groups also highlighted decision-making and a commitment to the team as being actions associated with high-quality on-field athlete leadership. Effective decision-making has been previously highlighted as an important aspect of on-field leadership (Cotterill, 2016). Therefore, offering opportunities for adolescents to develop decision-making skills has been suggested to be an important component of age-related leadership development (Martin, 2018).

In addition to on-pitch athlete leadership behaviors, participants also identified a number of characteristics of athlete leaders that they deemed as necessary for effective off-field leadership. There was a particular consensus across the different focus groups regarding the importance of positivity. For example, one under 11 player explained "Like cheering, people up after the game, so, it's gone now, now they have to be happy, and then just get on with the rest of your day". A similar view was presented by one of the under 13 players who suggested leaders should "...raise spirits like keep everyone happy, try not to let everyone be down". It appears from these examples that junior players perceive positivity to be an important characteristic of effective off-field leadership. Recognizing this fact, American summer camps have adopted a strengths-based approach to youth leadership development in recent years (Martin, 2018).

Another off-field characteristic identified as being important for athlete leadership was the ability to be funny or humorous. This point was illustrated by one of the under 13 players who suggested that: "You don't have to be funny, but it helps off the pitch". This view was also supported by one of the under 18 players who suggested that:

I think being happy and funny off the pitch, are good ingredients to make a successful social group off the pitch for a team. The ability to be funny where possible just helps sometimes to put players at ease and to keep everybody relaxed.

Previous research has highlighted a positive link between developing relationships with other team members and effective athlete leadership. This could explain the importance placed on being funny, as humor may help athletes to build relationships with their team mates outside of the performance context (Wolfers & Schnurr, 2017).

Although positivity and humor were recognized as important off-field leadership qualities, the participants in this study found it significantly harder to identify the characteristics and behaviors that they perceive as necessary for effective off-field leadership compared to on-field leadership. This outcome could be a result of a lack of leadership education for youth athletes outside of their sport and should be considered as an area for future research.

#### Selection criteria

Contrary to the findings of a number of earlier studies (Bucci et al., 2012; Glenn & Horn, 1993; Kim, 1992; Loughhead et al., 2006; Price & Weiss, 2011), participants across all age groups agreed that age, position, and skill level of the leader are not attributes that high-quality athlete leaders must possess. Supporting this point, one of the under 14 players reflected that:

You can be a leader and you are on the pitch like you don't just have to be a center back to be the one that's carrying the team, like you can be a striker and still lead the team forward.

However, there were discrepancies between participants as to whether experience impacts upon the effectiveness of athlete leadership. Some participants felt the extent of leader playing experience was not important, as highlighted by one of the under 13 players who summarized that "I think it [experience] can help but someone with less experience can still be a better or like equal leader if not better". In contrast, some other participants felt that the extent of playing experience was important. This perspective was highlighted by one of the under 14 players who reflected that:

Yeah, I don't think age but experience. As an experienced leader you can probably help the young players more than a younger leader would. So, like he has played football for a long time, so he has experience, so he knows what he's doing.

These inconsistencies amongst these youth players are not surprising as they reflect a general lack of clarity in the literature regarding the skills and experience that are required to be an effective team leader within specific sporting contexts and at different levels (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016). While there was a consensus amongst participants that position and skill level are not crucial to a player's ability to be an effective athlete leader, these attributes appeared to be important in regard to the formal leadership position of captain. For example, one of the under 13 players suggested that:

Captains are more than likely not going to be a left back or something, or like it's going to be someone that like see's everything like a goalkeeper or sat in the middle or something.

This finding offers an interesting insight into the leadership perceptions of youth players in professional football. Suggesting that youth players are aware that the captain is not the only leader within a team. This finding is in line with Carron and Eys (2012) categorization of formal and informal leaders. Captains are considered to be the formal leaders, ensuring both their teammates and the team as a whole achieve their goals; whereas other players with leadership qualities are regarded as informal leaders, helping to develop the culture and mindset of the team (Cotterill, 2013). In the current study participants appeared to differentiate captains from other leaders in the team based on their position and skill level, indicating that in youth sport it is a captain's attributes that sets him/her apart from other leaders as opposed to their role. What is a concern though is that many youth leadership development programs have focused on captains only, such as Blanton and colleagues' (2019) captaincy development program for youth club soccer athletes.

#### Shared leadership

It was interesting to note that while the participants were young, they did have a view on leadership within the team that extended beyond just the captain. For example, one of the under 12 players suggested that:

There could be a captain and then there could also be another leader just because there is one captain it doesn't mean that there's just that one leader, I think there could also be other leaders in the team.

This perspective supports the view that there can be multiple leaders within a team (Fransen et al., 2014), as well as the identified formal leaders (Carron & Eys, 2012). The degree of the sharedness of athlete leadership has also been shown to vary between teams in a youth sport context (Duguay et al., 2019). Indeed, further supporting the work of Fransen and colleagues (2014), participants in the current study suggested that these various roles should not be the responsibility of one single leader, but instead be shared amongst a number of players (Loughead et al., 2020). Participants considered shared leadership particularly important for motivation and decision-making within the team. For example, one of the under 14 players suggested that:

I'd say if that one person wasn't having the best day, he would have no one to lift him up but say there was more than one leader, say that the whole team were leaders we could all help each other instead of one person helping the whole team.

The view of the players in this study was though contrary to some previous athlete leadership research (e.g., Fransen et al., 2015b). The participants in the current study suggested that other players in the team, taking on informal leadership roles, act as a support system that supports the captain in making decision and motivating the team. This outcome supports finding reported by Duguay et al. (2019) that every athlete in the team provides some degree of leadership for the team, not just those occupying formal or informal leadership positions.

Interestingly, the results from the current study also suggests that youth players, some as young as ten years old, have at least a basic understanding of the concept of shared leadership. This discovery, coupled with the preliminary evidence that shared leadership is positively associated with team confidence, identification and overall performance (Fransen et al., 2014), raises the question when is the ideal time in youth athlete's development to introduce the concept of shared leadership? Future research would benefit from further exploring youth athlete's understanding and application of shared leadership within team sports, and the development of leadership awareness within these youth age groups.

#### Growth and development

This process was perceived by participants as a significant factor in the development of athlete leadership and athlete leaders. Despite participants ranging from ten to 18 years of age, they collectively referred to the accumulated experience of playing a key role in growing to become a more effective leader. For example, one of the under 14 players suggested that:

When you were younger, say you were 1 nil down in the match you wouldn't get back into it. It'd be like 6, 7 nil at the end but when you get older you learn not to just give up, and you just carry on you just get over it.

It appears that as a result of experience youth players have a better understanding of their sport which enables them to lead their team more effectively. While previous research has established the importance of understanding other team members to be effective as an athlete leader (Dupuis et al., 2006; Moran & Weiss, 2006), possessing a good understanding of the game seems to have been overlooked by focusing on more transferrable skills.

Participants in the current study further suggested that a player's confidence around teammates significantly contributed to the growth and development process and considered this as an important element in the development of an effective athlete leader. For example, one of the under 13 players reflected that:

When you first join you are quiet and you're not really communicating with anyone. But a few weeks in you start getting more confident to speak to someone and on the pitch, you start like actually like giving advice to people.

This view supports Mead et al.'s (2017) suggestion that captains gained confidence in their ability to lead as they mature as effective leaders. As such, the current and previous findings suggest that experience and confidence to lead are important factors in a youth player's maturation as an effective leader.

#### Changing environmental constraints

Both 'necessity' and 'rising to the occasion' have recently been highlighted as motivations to become a more effective athlete leader (Mead et al., 2017). Supporting this viewpoint, participants in the current study suggested a need to be a better leader as circumstances dictated and the game evolved. In addition to the importance of the game, participants collectively agreed that the size of the pitch was another factor that influenced athlete leadership demands. For example, one of the under 12 players highlighted that:

As the pitch gets bigger (progression through the age groups), if the captain is on one side of the pitch the person on the other side of the pitch might not be able to hear them. So, they might have to get another leader in the team to tell him.

Vocal leadership has previously been reported to play a significant role in the communication and co-ordination of the team (Filho et al., 2014). The data in the current study suggests that as the pitch gets bigger, an increasingly vocal leaders is required within the team for effective leadership. As such leadership development comes in the form of shared leadership, with the team developing their vocal communication as a whole, as opposed to the captain becoming more effective in their vocal leadership.

#### Leadership development

There was a common belief amongst the participants in the current study that effective leadership can be developed through learning from other leaders in the team. Supporting this view, one of the under 14 players suggested that "Surrounding yourself with other leaders you get

to know their personality and what they do to be a leader. You then start to develop these characteristics as well". This perspective was also shared by older players. For example, one of the under 18 players suggested that "I think you learn leadership from coaches, from the older players and captains and just being around football a lot."

Gaining greater personal experience as a captain/leader was also cited as a means of leadership development. This perception that leadership in youth players can be developed and nurtured through learning from others and personal experiences aligns with earlier published findings that personal experience, observation of others, and guidance from mentors are all influential factors in maximizing the development of an athlete leader (Brungardt, 1996; Mead et al., 2017). Additionally, both practice and education have been highlighted as significant contributors to athlete leadership development (Allio, 2005).

Though many participants agreed that leadership skills can be developed through various means, some participants did suggest a biological aspect to leadership. For example, one of the under 14 players reflected that "Some people naturally have more leadership in them but I feel like if you are quite shy you can learn to be a bit more confident in front of your team and speak to them".

In support of this point, previous research has suggested that high-quality athlete leaders often possess inherent personality traits that are stable over time, such as dominance and independence however leadership attributes and behaviors are less stable and can be developed over time (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016).

#### Practical implications

A number of practical implications for leadership development in professional youth football academies and team sport academies in general emerged from the current study. First, it was noted that while the participants in the current study had a reasonable understanding of leadership in line with other youth sport leadership development programs (e.g., Boisvert et al., 2019; Gould & Voelker, 2010), this knowledge did not seem to significantly develop and progress across the age groups as might be anticipated. This outcome suggests that the leadership program in this study was not adapted to meet the needs of each specific age group, and as a result is not developing leadership skills and abilities as players progress through the academy system at the club. As such, differentiated delivery for different age groups should be developed to progress knowledge and understanding as players progress through the academy.

A particularly valuable finding from the current study is that participants suggested that leadership can be learnt, developed and improved (Duguay et al., 2016). As such, coaches have the chance to foster and nurture the athlete leaders of the future if they adopt a considered and planned approach (Mead et al., 2017). Coaches could act upon this information by ensuring that leadership opportunities are provided and promoted for all players within the academy to enhance the development of every player's ability to lead (Loughead et al., 2020), though lack of education for coaches in this regard has previously been highlighted as a barrier (Gould et al., 2013). responsibility could be afforded to players such as taking the warm-up or the half-time talk and rotating these responsibilities each week to give each player on the team the opportunity to gain experience, similar to approaches taken with some adult teams (Cotterill, 2016), and in other adolescent contexts (Martin, 2018).

The acknowledgement of the importance of shared leadership by participants in this study raises further questions regarding the traditional vertical leadership structure widely used in both professional youth and adult football. Research has highlighted that an optimal team environment is positively associated with developing a range of leadership roles, such as the on-field roles of the task and motivational leaders, and the off-field roles of the social and external leaders (Fransen et al., 2014). In line with this perspective, coaches then need to ensure that each of the four leadership roles is satisfactorily fulfilled within the team. It is important for coaches to accept that players perceive leadership to

be most effective when it is shared amongst teammates and as a result should encourage the development of shared leadership for ideal team functioning (Loughead et al., 2020). This point further reinforces the importance of fostering the leadership development of every player, as opposed to just one or two who may have been cherry picked as potential future captains (Cotterill, 2016; Duguay et al. 2019; Loughead, et al., 2020).

The participants in this study proposed that certain changes in the dynamics of the game impacted upon the development and delivery of athlete leadership. The size of the pitch and the importance of the game were specifically identified as influential factors for athlete leadership development. Coaches can respond to this by exposing players to these inevitable changes more frequently at a younger age and incorporate them into the training. Replicating what the player's will experience as they progress through the academy and potentially as professional footballers may be useful as it will prepare them for the changes and allow them to develop their leadership skills (Cotterill & Fransen, 2020).

#### Limitations

While the use of focus groups as a method of data collection has a number of advantages, there are also some inherent limitations. Due to the organized nature of the focus groups it is possible that the conversations stimulated may have been more of a performance by participants producing joint accounts of leadership, as opposed to natural discussions (Smithson, 2000). Additionally, the organization of participants by age group may have also influenced participants to provide more socially desirable responses and/or be more reserved than they would have been in a one-on-one interview situation (Accella, 2011). In view of this limitation, future research should seek to utilize a broad range of data collection methods to develop a comprehensive understanding of leadership and its development in youth sport.

Also, this research was conducted with a single professional English football academy and therefore may only reflect and be representative of the participant's experiences and the culture within this specific academy. Therefore, it might be more difficult to generalize the findings to other professional football academies and youth sport academies in other team sports. To address this limitation the current study should be replicated within youth academies across a range of different team sports.

#### Conclusion

The youth participants in this study demonstrated a clear understanding of shared leadership in practice and offered suggestions regarding its development. The importance of athlete leaders as motivators and communicators on the pitch was highlighted as was the ability to be humorous and good interpersonally off the pitch. While participants supported the importance of having multiple athlete leaders within the team, there was also a suggestion that these informal leaders act as a support system for the formal leader (the captain). It was also interesting to note that participants did not feel that playing position and skill level are importance characteristics of an informal leader on the pitch, but that these were important factors determining the choice of the on-field team captain.

In terms of athlete leadership development, participants recognized that leadership skills can be learnt and developed through personal experiences and learning from others, as opposed to being a fixed trait. But that continued growth and development, was an important part of the developmental process. Future research needs to explore in greater detail the delivery of more systematic approaches to leadership development in professional youth sport academies, and better understand the voice and perspective of those athletes involved in the development programs.

## Declaration of Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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