Leading by Example: Coaches' Perspectives of the Nonverbal Leaders on Sport Teams

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Abstract

Within the last century, scholars in sociology and psychology have begun to research roles in society. In recent decades, industrial/organizational psychology research sparked an interest in informal roles, and now sport psychology is beginning to adopt that investigation of informal roles as they appear on sport teams. Current research is sparse, but some early work has determined several informal roles, and one of these has been individually investigated. The purpose of this study was to contribute to the expansion of knowledge concerning individual informal roles by investigating collegiate coaches' perspectives of a second role: the nonverbal leader. Analysis revealed ideas that coaches shared about the characteristics, emergence, consequences, and management of nonverbal leaders on sport teams.

Keywords: informal roles, sport, nonverbal leaders, peer leaders

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Team Roles

Researchers and practitioners alike have taken notable interest in the psychological factors which contribute to team success, and even more interest in the psychology of the individuals that make up teams. The effort to understand maximal team functioning on a collective and individual level has led researchers to investigate the importance of individual roles. For decades, sociologists have defined roles as behaviors adopted to fulfill expectations based on status, with status referring to the individual's position in a social system (Merton, 1957). In sport, some behavioral responsibilities are explicitly mandated by the rules of the sport, such as the functions of a pitcher in baseball or a quarterback in football. Some are assigned by the coach, such as a team captain's or manager's responsibilities (Cope, Eys, Beauchamp, Schinke, & Bosselut, 2011). Lastly, some emerge in a less obvious manner, developing organically through an individual's personality, personal expectations, and experience, as well as outside expectations (Cope et al., 2011; Manning, Parker, & Pogson, 2006). Cope et al. (2011) noted the following:

> Who communicates role information, how that information is conveyed, and what the information pertains to will dictate the *type* of role that is prescribed, or emerges, and can be generally categorized based on its degree of *formalization* (Hare, 1994). With respect to this categorization, Mabry and Barnes (1980) suggested that a role can be formal or informal (p. 20).

Until recently, sport research has focused primarily on the aforementioned formal roles. However, significant anecdotal evidence points to the presence and importance of informal roles as they influence the effectiveness of a team, and informal role research in

the past decade has continued to demonstrate the need to further expand current

understanding of these roles (Cope et al., 2011; Cope, Eys, Schinke, & Bosselut, 2010;

Eys, Beauchamp, & Bray, 2006).

There is a substantial body of literature related to team roles under the disciplines

of industrial/organizational psychology, and a quickly growing collection of research

related to formal roles within sport psychology. Early team role research by Bales (1958)

established two types of team roles: task performance roles and socio-emotional support

roles. Later, Belbin (1984) published a report based on decades of observation,

experimentation, and analysis related to team roles in business. The key aspect of his

experiments was that he made sure the roles were not based on status: every subject in his

simulation-based experiments held the official position of a business manager. However,

several different roles, whether more useful in task performance or socio-emotional

support, developed independently of any formal assignment and correlated strongly to

specific personality traits. Due to the similarity of structure within both sport teams and

business teams (i.e., an authority figure such as a coach or manager directing

subordinates such as athletes or employees), much of the early role research in sport has

taken direction from existing organizational literature (e.g. Benson, Surya, & Eys, 2014;

Cope et al., 2011; Eys, Carron, Beauchamp, & Bray, 2005; Peterson, 2017).

Like many areas of research in the early stage, current work surrounding team

roles in sport is relatively scattered and disconnected, and most of it has focused on

formal roles. However, as informal roles have begun to receive more attention in the

literature, the findings provide promising incentive for further research. Fransen,

Vanbeselaere, De Cuyper, Vande Broek, and Boen (2014) investigated the way teams

perceived athlete leadership and who occupied leadership roles, basing their

measurement on four functions of leadership: task leadership, motivational leadership,

social leadership, and external leadership (i.e., representation of the team during official

interactions with non-team members). One significant finding of this study was that only

two percent of participants labeled a single player as occupying all four functions, and

only one percent of participants identified their team captain as that player, with 43% of

participants saying that the team captain was not the main leader in any of the four

functions. Additionally, only 20% of athlete leaders were associated with more than one

of the four leadership functions, meaning different members tended to perform different

leadership functions (Fransen et al., 2014). Even more surprisingly, Crozier, Loughead,

and Munroe-Chandler (2013) found that, based on participants surveyed, the ideal

percentage of athletes that should be assigned a formal leadership role on any team is

about 19%, whereas the ideal percentage of informal leaders per team is 66%, meaning

the participants valued widespread informal leadership. A wide array of benefits were

found related to strong and widespread athlete leadership, and though both studies

focused on informal leaders, Crozier et al. (2013) also emphasized that role clarity across

the entire team was a benefit of strong athlete leadership, meaning that other informal

roles are ideal to supplement and complete formal and informal leadership as it functions

to enhance team performance.

Informal Roles

Given the presence and importance of informal roles on sport teams, current and

future research in this area holds great potential for furthering theoretical and practical

understanding of team performance as well as other related variables of team functioning.

Some groundwork and early research on informal roles have already been done. As mentioned earlier, the way a role is communicated defines whether it is formal or informal, and as informal roles are not officially prescribed, they are more likely to arise out of social interactions with teammates than with an authority figure, though an authority figure could still be an influence. Cope et al. (2011) took the first step toward specific informal role research in sport, and, much like Belbin (1984), identified specific roles of varying purpose that tend to take shape on sport teams. The first phase of their study identified twelve roles, which are listed fully in Appendix A (Cope et al., 2011, p. 24), but these do not necessarily comprise an exclusive list. They do, however, provide a good starting point for future investigation of specific informal roles. The Cope et al. study demonstrated that each informal role can be either positive or negative in nature. In the second phase of the study, 101 athletes verified and confirmed the results of the analysis, and in addition, assessed the influence each role had on team function. The results showed that cancer, distracter, and malingerer were seen as negative roles, and comedian, spark plug, enforcer, mentor, informal leader–nonverbal, informal leader–verbal, team player, star player, and social convener were all perceived as positive roles. Further investigation of each of these roles is still needed to develop current literature surrounding their presence and the effect they have on team functioning.

In addition to the inherent positive and negative nature of individual roles, informal role research is beginning to show the relationships between cognitive elements of role involvement, e.g., role acceptance, and performance factors (Beauchamp & Bray, 2001; Beauchamp, Bray, Eys, & Carron, 2005; Eys & Carron, 2001). For a review of existing research related to informal and formal role involvement in sport, see Eys et al.

(2006). In the first and only study so far to intentionally acknowledge the existence of both formal and informal role involvement, Peterson (2017) found that conflicting expectations among team members about an individual's role (role conflict) predicted a decrease in task cohesion.

As of yet, only one informal role has been studied for better understanding of its presence on sport teams and of how individuals perceive it. While writing for Cope and colleagues' (2011) informal role study was ongoing, Cope et al. (2010) interviewed several coaches in order to analyze their perspectives on the negative role cancer. Their findings consisted of several sub-themes under four general categories: characteristics, emergence, consequences, and management. To summarize briefly, coaches perceived the characteristics of a cancer role athlete to be manipulative, negative, narcissistic, blame shifting, and distracting. The sources of cancer's emergence were identified as immaturity, self-doubt, self-centeredness, inappropriate inclusion tactics, leeway from the coaches, and external pressure. Perceived consequences—in this case both negative and positive—included distractions, negativity, clique formation, cohesion, performance, and attrition. Finally, the participants advocated management of cancer athletes through direct communication, indirect communication, assignment of supervision, discipline, pre-screening, and simple tolerance. These findings contributed to theoretical understanding of role communication and practical understanding of one informal role's impact on team functioning and performance and management by coaches.

Nonverbal Leaders

Currently, the characteristics of nonverbal leaders are largely undiscussed in the literature, with most athlete leadership studies making no distinction between verbal or

nonverbal leaders (Fransen, Vanbeselaere, De Cuyper, Vande Broek, & Boen, 2014;

Loughead, Hardy, & Eys, 2006; Price & Weiss, 2011; Vincer & Loughead, 2010). Thus,

known characteristics of the nonverbal leader are limited to the concise definition given

by Cope et al. (2011): "An athlete who leads the team by example, hard work, and

dedication" (p. 24). Likewise, given the lack of research related to this particular informal

role, there are no current proposed causes or effects of a nonverbal leader's emergence.

However, studies on team leaders (who are perceived as a leader by at least 50% of a

group) and peer leaders (who are perceived as a leader by at least two individuals) shed

some light on the general effects of athlete leaders on their teams (Loughead et al., 2006).

Notably, Vincer and Loughead (2010) found that peer leadership relates positively to

cohesion, and a strong relationship exists between team cohesion and performance

(Carron, Colman, Wheeler, & Stevens, 2002). Price and Weiss (2011) similarly found

that peer leaders play a significant role in task cohesion, social cohesion, collective

efficiency, and team confidence. Finally, there appears to be a gap in the literature that

leads to a few questions surrounding nonverbal leaders: 1) What are the characteristics of

nonverbal leaders? 2) What causes nonverbal leaders to emerge on sport teams? 3) What

kind of consequences do nonverbal leaders have on their teams? 4) How do coaches

manage the nonverbal leaders on their teams? Determining various coaches' perspectives

on the answers to these questions could serve to further knowledge and understanding in

the field of sport psychology as it relates specifically to informal roles, athlete leadership,

and, of course, nonverbal leaders.

Method

Participants

A total of five coaches participated in this study, three female and two male, with all five currently coaching at the collegiate level in the state of Virginia. Within the pool of participants, three were head coaches, one was a strength and conditioning coach, and one was an assistant coach. Two of them coached men's teams, two coached women's teams, and one coached both the men's and women's teams. The coaches represented four different sports: tennis, basketball, swimming, and soccer, allowing me to understand perspectives from both individual sports and team sports. According to Seidman (1991), there are two criteria for determining an adequate number of subjects in a qualitative study: sufficiency and saturation. Though saturation was not possible given the time limitation of this study, the five participants' widely varying perspectives were ideal to create sufficiency.

Materials

The only instruments involved in this study were a semi-structured interview guide and myself as the researcher. In order to produce an interview guide, I contacted one of the authors of the Cope et al. (2011) study to request the guide used in that study, and subsequently received a reply containing the document along with permission to utilize it. I adjusted the questions to apply to the informal nonverbal leader role rather than the cancer role and cut some questions in order to satisfy time restraints due to the smaller scope of this study. Questions were open-ended and non-leading in order to avoid researcher bias and to elicit full answers, as suggested by Seidman (1991), but the interview was not limited to these questions alone.

Because this is a qualitative study, the brunt of the responsibility for valid and useful data collection fell on me as the researcher. Here, I intend to expose my performance in that capacity and defend my reliability as a conductor of relevant information. As a current athlete, I was able to establish an immediate connection with the coaches I interviewed and was very comfortable discussing sports and teams. By nature, I am very quiet, but I am also good listener, and that quality was heightened in this study by my genuine interest in the topic and what these coaches had to say. Throughout the whole process, my analytical mind helped me manage all the information that I gathered and adapt my thinking as the concept of nonverbal leaders became increasingly defined.

My decisions during the interviews were always guided by an internal set of principles. I used active listening, asking a variety of questions to follow up, clarify, and explore ideas at appropriate times. Seidman (1991), who recommended those principles, also warned against depending too heavily on an interview guide during in-depth research interviews due to the tendency of the researcher to collect a series of answers. To minimize the risk of becoming stuck with one-dimensional responses to the pre-set interview questions, I sometimes requested that participants tell me stories illustrating where their answers were coming from. I also took notes on word choices and unscripted questions that elicited fuller responses from the participants and added them as notes to my interview guide after each interview.

Procedure

Before contacting any potential participants, I submitted an application to the Liberty University IRB for approval on June 1, 2018. I received their feedback and made

the necessary changes. On June 26, 2018, I gained full approval for the study and use of

my recruitment, consent, and interview documents.

After receiving IRB approval, I recruited coaches to participate in the study via

email. I intentionally recruited coaches across a wide spectrum of relevant demographics,

contacting 17 in total, but could only continue the study with the five who responded.

They worked with me to arrange a date and time for an in-person interview at a location

of their choice. Each coach was fully informed of the study's purpose, the procedures

involved, and the risks and benefits associated with participation before agreeing to take

part in the study.

I collected the interviews over the course of four months. Each interview lasted

approximately 30-45 minutes. After all five were completed, I personally transcribed

each one from a video recording, checked them for accuracy, and sent a copy of each

transcription to the respective interviewee so that each participant could check for

possible misrepresentation. None was found. In total, I collected 50 pages of raw

interview data.

Results

Analysis

My data analysis technically began during my efforts to design the study and

continued throughout data collection, as is common during qualitative research. Bogdan

and Biklen (1998) set out several principles to facilitate ongoing analysis during these

early phases of the research, a few of which I used heavily: 1) develop analytic questions,

2) write notes about ideas generated during data collection, 3) mention ideas and themes

to the participants, and 4) compare data being collected to existing ideas using metaphors

and analogies. With numerous notes and a mental collection of emerging themes in addition to the raw transcribed data, I was well equipped to embark on post-data collection analysis. One weakness of this process was that since I was the sole researcher, I could not compare my analysis to anyone else's, as Tesch (1990) recommended. However, intuition, guidance from my thesis committee, and extensive reading on qualitative methodology ensured that I followed a logical and sound analysis process. Much of the analysis detailed in the next few paragraphs follows guidelines recommended by Bogdan and Biklen (1998).

After finishing the transcriptions, I took a three-week break in order to give my mind a rest from the material. Once I resumed work, I made sure to save clean copies of each transcription. These were left untouched while I worked on separate copies. In order to condense my material, I cut out all text that was completely unrelated to my research topic, such as answers to personal background questions early in the interview, tangents that the subjects went on outside the scope of a given question, and poorly worded questions on my end that led to irrelevant answers. This left me with 32 useful pages of data.

The focus of this study and the structure of the interview guide made initial coding fairly straightforward. I created a color code for each of the four categories: characteristics, emergence, consequences, and management. For each category, I read through all five transcriptions in a row, looking only for sentences and paragraphs that fell under that particular category, and highlighted them with the representative color. Some pieces of the data represented more than one category, and I made note of this. Once I had completed this process for all four categories, I pasted each highlighted

section onto a separate document, grouping all same-colored sections under their

corresponding category heading. I then had a clear view of all data related to

characteristics, all data related to emergence, and so on.

Within these groups, I labeled each piece of text with a word I felt captured the

essence of what was communicated, making notes in a separate Word document to keep

track of my thought process throughout. Once I felt that each unit of text had been

labeled appropriately, I created a chart for each of the four main categories. Within that

chart I listed each new subcategory that had been created and a quote from each coach

that had spoken to that subcategory. Since frequency of mention does not necessarily

indicate the level of importance (Cope et al., 2010), I used the strongest quote when

coaches touched on a subcategory multiple times, as was often the case. Using this visual

format, I was able to cut out subcategories with weaker support, and the contents of the

remaining subcategories are detailed in the following section, with the implications saved

for discussion. In total, post-data collection analysis took three months.

Throughout the interviews with the five participants, certain trends became

evident in the coaches' perceptions of nonverbal leaders despite their wide range of

experiences. Asking each coach specifically for their perspectives on 1) characteristics, 2)

emergence , 3) consequences, and 4) management of nonverbal leaders, I was able to

gather full answers from all five coaches on each topic. The shared themes that emerged

within each category appear below, with each coach referenced by a pseudonym to

protect their confidentiality.

Characteristics of the Nonverbal Leader

Questions about the characteristics of nonverbal leaders elicited the most diverse set of answers, but also the most shared themes of any category. Six subcategories received widespread support: coaches tended to see nonverbal leaders as 1) hardworking, 2) humble, 3) timid, 4) desiring to lead, 5) service-oriented, and 6) reserved. All supporting quotes appear in Table 1.

Hardworking. The coaches often began their descriptions of nonverbal leaders by commending their hardworking nature. It was one of the first descriptors that came to mind for one coach, referred to as Jarrod: "Character, work ethic, attitude, being a great teammate, those are all characteristics I see." Another coach, Dana, saw this attribute as the essence of nonverbal leadership, describing how one team member became a leader by example through this very characteristic: "She truly led by example because she came to the courts every single day, early, before everybody, working hard on getting better." Markell expressed a similar perception: "They put in the work every day." Two coaches, Terry and Allison, even spoke about the athletes doing more than what was required:

"They just want extra work…they just want to spend extra time, whether it's with me or [another coach], or in the film room" (Terry).

"Those kids are usually most likely to come in and get extra help, those kids are more likely to be in the gym when nobody else is" (Allison).

Humble. Coaches widely recognized humility in nonverbal leaders on their teams, despite their position of leadership: "I think a characteristic is humility, I think that's part of it" (Jarrod). A few seemed to feel this was owed to an aspect of personality. For Dana, it was an aversion to attention: "They don't want a lot of attention drawn to

themselves, either, I don't think." Markell attributed it to reservation: "[They're] more reserved, humble, laid back, like, everything will be okay type of thing." Finally, Terry indicated a sort of self-sufficiency, noting that attention was not needed: "I think a nonverbal leader would be somebody who leads through their actions…without needing to call attention to it" (Terry). Allison also mentioned the humility of the nonverbal leaders she had seen and went so far as to commend them for it: "[They] don't do it for the recognition, which is why they might be the best type of leader."

Timid. Though coaches saw humility as a generally positive characteristic, they also identified timidity as a negative source of the athlete's tendency to be less vocal. Jarrod described it as an outright fear: "Fear, whatever that looks like: of speaking out, of leadership…of authority, but not a fear of my authority, but of their own authority." Markell, on the other hand, attributed it to natural inhibition: "If we were ever in a team situation…it wouldn't be in their natural ability to speak up, unless someone really prodded them." Dana compared a nonverbal leader to the more verbal athletes who often became team captains, pointing out a hesitation to hold people accountable: "The captain has to be willing to be vocal to a degree, to speak up…So instead of just leading by example, making your teammates accountable." Regardless of this characteristic, Allison assured me that this did not take away from their strength as an athlete: "The quiet ones are sometimes a little bit more timid. Doesn't mean that they're weak, doesn't mean they're not tough, just timid."

Desires to lead. Despite nonverbal leaders feeling timid, the coaches believed those athletes still exhibited a desire to lead. "They may not be able to explain [a skill] because they don't feel comfortable being a verbal leader, but they can show you,

proudly," Allison said. According to Terry, the desire to lead is simply the manifestation

of a desire to see the team succeed:

> They don't know [exactly where the team needs to go or how to get there]. But
>
> what they do know is if you play hard, if you're dedicated to your craft, there's a
>
> greater chance of success, and especially if you get others around you to do it as
>
> well.

While Jarrod took a more negative approach to the nonverbal leaders' hesitation to speak

up, he also indicated that they want their example to influence their teammates: "What

they're saying is, 'Look at me. This is how you do it. You're not doing it right, I'm not

going to say anything…and I'm hoping you'll notice I'm doing it right.'" Finally, Dana

told a story about how an athlete's desire to lead and recognition of his influence caused

him to change his behavior:

> I talked to him…I was like, "You know you can really lead this team in different
>
> ways, because you're such an excellent student. But you still need to be on time to
>
> study hall to…set an example for your teammates." And he's never been late
>
> again.

Service-oriented. All five coaches recognized humility in their nonverbal leaders,

and some went a step further by describing them as servants. "They serve, they're

servers," Jarrod said. Allison noted that beyond not doing the work for attention,

nonverbal leaders are not even doing the work for themselves: "It's not for them, and it's

not really for the coach I don't think, it's just for the whole group. It's more of an

altruistic servant leadership, in a sense." Dana expressed a similar view: "They're very

Table 1
Characteristics of Nonverbal Leaders

	Terry	Allison	Jarrod	Dana	Markell
Hardworking	"They just want extra work…they just want to spend extra time, whether it's with me or [another coach], or in the film room."	"Those kids are usually most likely to come in and get extra help, those kids are more likely to be in the gym when nobody else is."	"Character, work ethic, attitude, being a great teammate, those are all characteristics I see."	"She truly led by example because she came to the courts every single day, early, before everybody, working hard on getting better."	"They put in the work every day."
Humble	"I think a nonverbal leader would be somebody who leads through their actions… without needing to call attention to it."	"[They] don't do it for the recognition, which is why they might be the best type of leader."	"I think a characteristic is humility, I think that's part of it."	"They don't want a lot of attention drawn to themselves, either, I don't think."	"[They're] more reserved, humble, laid back, like, everything will be okay type of thing."
Timid	"They don't know [exactly where the team needs to go or how to get there]. But what they do know is if you play hard, if you're dedicated to your craft, there's a greater chance of success, and especially if you get others around you to do it as well."	"The quiet ones are sometimes a little bit more timid. Doesn't mean that they're weak, doesn't mean they're not tough, just timid."	"Fear, whatever that looks like: of speaking out, of leadership…of authority, but not a fear of my authority, but of their own authority."	"The captain has to be willing to be vocal to a degree, to speak up…So instead of just leading by example, making your teammates accountable."	"If we were ever in a team situation…it wouldn't be in their natural ability to speak up, unless someone really prodded them."

Table 1 (continued)

	Terry	Allison	Jarrod	Dana	Markell
Desires to Lead		"They may not be able to explain [a skill] because they don't feel comfortable being a verbal leader, but they can show you, proudly."	"What they're saying is, 'Look at me. This is how you do it. You're not doing it right, I'm not going to say anything…and I'm hoping you'll notice I'm doing it right.'"	"I talked to him…I said, 'You know you can really lead this team in different ways, because you're such an excellent student. But you still need to be on time to study hall to…set an example for your teammates.' And he's never been late again."	
Service-Oriented		"It's not for them, and it's not really for the coach I don't think, it's just for the whole group. It's more of an altruistic servant leadership, in a sense."	"They serve, they're servers."	"They're very helpful people. I already said they put the team above themselves, but they're really…good-hearted people. They want to help."	
Reserved		"I feel like I might talk to the talkers more, engage with them more than I would the quiet ones (nonverbal leaders)."	"They're doing what we need them to do, but they're just staying in their lane."	"Typically, when they come on [to the team] they're more reserved and observing first, enjoying the sport."	"The athletes that I've worked with that lead by example are more shy, reserved; they feel more comfortable in a close setting."

helpful people. I already said they put the team above themselves, but they're

really…goodhearted people. They want to help."

Reserved. Finally, the coaches tended to describe nonverbal leaders as reserved.

Allison equated this reservation with a quiet nature while noting her conduct toward

them: "I feel like I might talk to the talkers more, engage with them more than I would

the quiet ones (nonverbal leaders)." Jarrod painted a slightly different picture: "They're

doing what we need them to do, but they're just staying in their lane." In any case, the

coaches consistently described nonverbal leaders as fairly low-maintenance athletes who

tend to keep to themselves. "Typically, when they come on [to the team] they're more

reserved and observing first, enjoying the sport," Dana said. Markell also used the same

word: "The athletes that I've worked with that lead by example are more shy, *reserved*

[emphasis added]; they feel more comfortable in a close setting."

Emergence of the Nonverbal Leader

Coaches seemed to agree less frequently on what factors caused nonverbal leaders

to emerge on their teams, but four themes still emerged from their interviews: 1) work

ethic, 2) intentionality of the coach, 3) intentionality of the athlete, and 4) positive

affirmation. All supporting quotes appear in Table 2.

Work ethic. Not only did coaches view nonverbal leaders as hardworking, but

they also perceived a link between the athlete initially displaying strong work ethic and

eventually becoming a leader on the team. Terry described it most plainly, explaining

how an athlete at any level of skill could become a leader in this way: "A walk on who

isn't very talented and has worked their butt off year after year until they're a

senior...they can become somebody that people follow." Allison saw work ethic as a sort

of foundation of a nonverbal leader's emergence: "I think work ethic is the basis of it, but then a lot of things stem from work ethic." Markell, when she had described nonverbal leaders as hardworking, explained that it was because of this that "they were one of the top people (sic) that people would look up to."

Intentionality of the coach. Some coaches also saw themselves as a key factor in the nonverbal leader's emergence on the team. "Spending that one-on-one time with them, that's the only way you can cultivate that kind of leadership," Terry said. Dana further emphasized the importance of the coach's role in fostering nonverbal leadership: "Sometimes they don't realize it, and most of the time they don't realize it at first, so you have to bring it to their attention about their strength." Allison actually related a common practice she had implemented on her team to recognize the nonverbal leaders and encourage them in their role:

> I've tried to foster that role. It's about shedding light to the role, giving them a voice, giving them a purpose. So, we put what we call those intangible statistics…we track those, and we put them in a locker room so that those kids are being recognized.

Intentionality of the athlete. All five coaches believed nonverbal leaders were intentional about earning their role on the team. "I think them being in a team situation where it all clicks and they're around different personalities…there's a lot to be learned there…you learn how to be the person that you want to be," Markell said, referring to the quieter athletes who desire to lead. Jarrod implied that it even takes intentional discomfort: "You can see how uncomfortable it is for them, but you can also see that their desire to put the team above themselves is what pushes them out of that comfort

zone." Terry noted this as well: "There is a transition when you're pushing yourself to do something that's uncomfortable, something that's not habitual to you."

Allison described what she believed the athletes were trying to develop when they ventured outside of their comfort zones: "Somewhere along the way they picked up the trait of, 'I'm going to be the hardest worker…whether or not I'm the best athlete.'" Dana told a story about a team member who was not the best athlete on the team but who grew into a nonverbal leader, and noted that this came through a similar intentionality: "She was just more focused at practice, and leading more by example, meaning concentrating on making herself the best player she could be, and not getting discouraged like she used to."

Positive affirmation. Lastly, coaches recognized the influence that other team members had on the behaviors nonverbal leaders adopted as they began to grow into their role: "Sometimes it's that they're seeing positive reinforcement from their peers, from their teammates" (Dana). Terry noted the influence of younger athletes: "The underclassmen, the followers, whoever they are, look up to them and say, 'I need to be following them.'" Markell focused more on the guidance of older athletes: "I have seen the upperclassmen encouraging them in that role." Allison explained why this factor was important: "When they see the positive affirmation from it…they feel like it's actually something that's working, and they continue to do it." Both junior teammates and senior teammates seem to give the nonverbal leaders, who desire to make the team better, more motivation to continue leading by example.

Table 2
Emergence of Nonverbal Leaders

	Terry	Allison	Jarrod	Dana	Markell
Work Ethic	"A walk on who isn't very talented and has worked their butt off year after year until they're a senior...they can become somebody that people follow."	"I think work ethic is the basis of it, but then a lot of things stem from work ethic."			"They were one of the top people (sic) that people would look up to."
Intentionality of the Coach	"Spending that one-on-one time with them, that's the only way you can cultivate that kind of leadership."	"I've tried to foster that role. It's about shedding light to the role, giving them a voice, giving them a purpose. So, we put what we call those intangible statistics…we track those, and we put them in a locker room so that those kids are being recognized."		"Sometimes they don't realize it, and most of the time they don't realize it at first, so you have to bring it to their attention about their strength."	
Intentionality of the Athlete	"There is a transition when you're pushing yourself to do something that's uncomfortable, something that's not habitual to you."	"Somewhere along the way they picked up the trait of, 'I'm going to be the hardest worker…whether or not I'm the best athlete.'"	"You can see how uncomfortable it is for them, but you can also see that their desire to put the team above themselves is what pushes them out of that comfort zone."	"She was just more focused at practice, and leading more by example, meaning concentrating on making herself the best player she could be, and not getting discouraged like she used to."	"I think them being in a team situation where it all clicks and they're around different personalities… there's a lot to be learned there…you learn how to be the person that you want to be."

Table 2 (continued)					
	Terry	**Allison**	**Jarrod**	**Dana**	**Markell**
Positive Affirmation	"The underclassmen, the followers, whoever they are, look up to them and say, 'I need to be following them.'"	"When they see the positive affirmation from it…they feel like it's actually something that's working, and they continue to do it."		"Sometimes it's that they're seeing positive reinforcement from their peers, from their teammates."	"I have seen the upperclassmen encouraging them in that role."

Consequences of the Nonverbal Leader

When I asked the coaches to assess the consequences of nonverbal leaders on their teams, most of their initial answers were focused on the positive effects. However, the four themes that emerged consistently across each interview were evenly spread between positive and negative: 1) positive energy, 2) team behavior (positive), 3) team behavior (negative), and 4) lack of accountability. All supporting quotes appear in Table 3.

Positive energy. Often the first answer from coaches, positive energy appears to be an easily recognized consequence of nonverbal leadership on teams. "I would say the effect that they have, well obviously it's positive," Terry noted. Likewise, other coaches thought that nonverbal leadership "is positive energy, a spark of life to the team" (Allison), and that "nonverbal leaders are positive" (Jarrod). Dana gave an example of a nonverbal leader "just showing enthusiasm to be on the court every day" and said that it "infected the group." Similarly, Markell saw a one-on-one positive effect: "Instead of

yelling at the whole team, it's like the girl right next to you: 'Keep going, keep going.'
It's those little things that make the big picture what it is."

Team behavior (positive). While positive energy seems to apply more to an
overall atmosphere on the team, some coaches described a separate effect nonverbal
leaders had on other team members' actual behavior. Allison saw the influenced team
members giving increased effort: "[Nonverbal leaders] are not saying, 'Let's go, let's go,
let's go,' but they're working really hard and that's, in turn, making the other ones try to
catch up to that player." Dana described the effect on team members' attitudes as well:
"[Nonverbal leaders] are working hard on the court next to you, they're going to inspire
that teammate who might be a little bit flaky, or irate, to say, 'That's how I want to
look.'" Again, Terry's mention of team members recognizing an example to be followed
evidences this theme as well: "The followers, whoever they are, look up to them and say,
'I need to be following them.'"

Team behavior (negative). Though coaches provided positive examples first,
when I asked them if they had ever seen negative effects, team behavior was often the
first issue that came up. "Instead of…saying, 'Alright, I chose to be here, I'm just going
to give it all I've got,' I think she was just a negative energy. Less common, but I have
had a few that have been negative influences even in the leadership role," Allison
recalled about one particularly damaging nonverbal leader. Dana recognized that though
team members were often inspired by the nonverbal leaders' body language, if their body
language became negative, it could be a danger to the team, which she tried to minimize.
She said, "I've had to work with [one athlete] on bringing negative behavior on the court,
'cause he beats himself up, and his body language changes when he'll make one

mistake." Terry summed up the issue with one statement: "You have all these qualities

that everybody loves, so if you have a bad practice we all have a bad practice, because

everybody follows you."

Lack of accountability. The last subtle consequence that appeared in multiple

coaches' answers was a lack of accountability on the team. Jarrod actually struggled with

having too many nonverbal leaders and not enough verbal leaders, and so the lack of

accountability was extremely noticeable to him. He explained,

> I've got six or seven outstanding nonverbal leaders, but my challenge is, I've got
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> to transform some of those into verbal leaders. […] What I saw a lot with my
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> team, was too many guys that were just happy to stay in their lane. […] They
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> don't want to look across and say hey, get back in line here—which is what we
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> needed.

Terry, while keener toward the positive effects of nonverbal leaders, conceded that this

was a major weakness: "You have to sometimes say something to somebody. If the

nonverbal leader…does [a drill] the right way, the person who did it the wrong way is

like, 'Oh, well I'm just tired.' And they just accept that." Dana hinted at the lack of

accountability when comparing nonverbal leaders to more vocal teammates: "The captain

has to be willing to be vocal to a degree, to speak up to somebody when they're messing

up…so instead of just leading by example, making your teammates accountable." Thus,

the coaches seemed to agree that accountability on the team stems from verbal leadership

rather than nonverbal leadership.

Table 3
Consequences of Nonverbal Leaders

	Terry	Allison	Jarrod	Dana	Markell
Positive Energy	"I would say the effect that they have, well obviously it's positive."	"I think it's a positive energy, I think it's a spark of life to the team."	"I think nonverbal leaders are positive."	"Her nonverbal, just showing enthusiasm to be on the court every day infected the group."	"Instead of yelling at the whole team, it's like the girl right next to you: 'Keep going, keep going.' It's those little things that make the big picture what it is."
Team Behavior (Positive)	"The followers, whoever they are, look up to them and say, 'I need to be following them.'"	"They're not saying, 'Let's go, let's go, let's go,' but they're working really hard and that's, in turn, making the other ones try to catch up to that player."		"They're working hard on the court next to you, they're going to inspire that teammate who might be a little bit flaky, or irate, to say, 'That's how I want to look.'"	
Team Behavior (Negative)	"You have all these qualities that everybody loves, so if you have a bad practice we all have a bad practice, because everybody follows you."	"Instead of…saying, 'Alright, I chose to be here, I'm just going to give it all I've got,' I think she was just a negative energy. Less common, but I have had a few that have been negative influences even in the leadership role."		"I've had to work with him on bringing negative behavior on the court, 'cause he beats himself up, and his body language changes when he'll make one mistake."	

Table 3 (continued)

	Terry	Allison	Jarrod	Dana	Markell
Lack of Account-ability	"You have to sometimes say something to somebody. If the nonverbal leader…does [a drill] the right way, the person who did it the wrong way is like, 'Oh, well I'm just tired.' And they just accept that."		"What I saw a lot with my team, was too many guys that were just happy to stay in their lane. […] They don't want to look across and say hey, get back in line here—which is what we needed."	"The captain has to be willing to be vocal to a degree, to speak up to somebody when they're messing up…so instead of just leading by example, making your teammates accountable."	

Management of the Nonverbal Leader

When discussing management tactics, three themes pertaining to nonverbal leaders in particular became evident via the coaches' responses: 1) one-on-one communication, 2) encouragement, and 3) soft communication. All three appear to be methods the coaches used to be intentional about fostering these athletes' leadership and positive habits. All supporting quotes appear in Table 4.

One-on-one communication. Most of the coaches expressed the importance of one-on-one communication with nonverbal leaders. Markell said it put the athletes more at ease and allowed them to open up more than they would in a group: "They're more comfortable in a one-on-one setting." Terry talked about the role of this form of communication in fostering their leadership qualities: "The one-on-one time is important because you can talk with them about things that may not necessarily be innate to them." Allison also used one-on-one communication to encourage them to keep leading by

example: "We have one-on-one meetings every two weeks…and I'll address [nonverbal leadership] individually with them and how I'm proud of them for doing those types of things." Finally, Dana recognized one-on-one communication as an opportunity to hear what was going through the nonverbal leaders' minds, since they were less keen on expressing themselves in a group setting: "What I would do, I would say more one-on-one…having an open conversation and asking them their input…They'll respond to that."

Encouragement. Three of the five coaches spoke about encouraging nonverbal leaders specifically, recognizing it again as an aid to their emergence as leaders on the team. It is clear from these coaches that they value the behaviors and traits of the nonverbal leaders for their teams: "If…they tell me what they're doing, I reinforce that. [I say,] 'That's really helpful, you're helping him become a better player, and thanks for doing it,'" Dana explained. Terry talked about using encouragement before the players even recognized their own strengths: "You can tell them about the greatness and the qualities within them that they have that they don't quite recognize yet and make them aware of these things." Jarrod had a similar tactic, emphasizing how he pushed the athletes to try to do more direct leading: "You do find yourself having more of a conversation of, 'You've got to step up and own who you are…and be that leader you are.'"

Soft communication. Finally, coaches tended to see nonverbal leaders in particular as needing a gentler form of correction than other athletes did. "It's better if I talk to him, pull him aside, and correct the technique, instead of correcting him in front of the other guys," Dana said. Allison connected the need for softer communication to the nonverbal leaders' tendencies to be timid: "Sometimes I tiptoe around [them]…'cause

Table 4
Management of Nonverbal Leaders

	Terry	Allison	Jarrod	Dana	Markell
One-on-One Communication	"The one-on-one time is important because you can talk with them about things that may not necessarily be innate to them."	"We have one-on-one meetings every two weeks…and I'll address [nonverbal leadership] individually with them and how I'm proud of them for doing those types of things."		"What I would do, I would say more one-on-one… having an open conversation and asking them their input…They'll respond to that."	"They're more comfortable in a one-on-one setting."
Encouragement	"You can tell them about the greatness and the qualities within them that they have that they don't quite recognize yet and make them aware of these things."		"You do find yourself having more of a conversation of, 'You've got to step up and own who you are…and be that leader you are.'"	"If…they tell me what they're doing, I reinforce that: 'That's really helpful, you're helping him become a better player, and thanks for doing it."	
Soft Communication	"A nonverbal leader could be an unbelievable leader, but if you discipline him in front of the team, he may shut down…he always wants to do the right thing, so if you tell him he's doing the wrong thing…he may be really embarrassed."	"Sometimes I tiptoe around [them]…'cause most of the time those ones that are timid don't receive aggressive constructive criticism like the other ones do."		"It's better if I talk to him, pull him aside, and correct the technique, instead of correcting him in front of the other guys."	

most of the time those ones that are timid don't receive aggressive constructive criticism

like the other ones do." Terry expressed a similar idea, and gave an alternate explanation

for his management tactic: "A nonverbal leader could be an unbelievable leader, but if

you discipline him in front of the team, he may shut down…he always wants to do the

right thing, so if you tell him he's doing the wrong thing…he may be really

embarrassed." This insightful management tactic matches well with the established

character traits of nonverbal leaders.

Discussion

The general purpose of this study was to explore coaches' perspectives of

nonverbal leaders on sport teams, specifically nonverbal leaders' characteristics,

emergence, consequences, and management. By interviewing five collegiate coaches with

various sport and team backgrounds and analyzing the transcripts according to currently

accepted qualitative methods, I found several different themes within each category to

support both the coaches' recognition of nonverbal leaders and their agreement on

consistent characteristics, factors of emergence, consequences, and management of those

nonverbal leaders. Beyond providing further evidence for the existence of informal roles

(Cope et al., 2011; Cope et al., 2010), the results of this study do not have many

theoretical implications. However, in the realm of sport in particular, practical knowledge

is just as important, if not more important, than theoretical knowledge, and in that regard

this study offers valuable descriptive evidence as groundwork for continued future study.

In addition to adding to the groundwork started by Cope et al. (2010), the results

of this study have strong implications for the effectiveness of informal athlete leadership

in particular. While informal verbal leaders may be the more obvious form of informal

athlete leadership, nonverbal leadership appears to play an important part as well. The positive consequences of nonverbal leaders may contribute to the positive relationship between peer leadership and task cohesion, social cohesion, and team cohesion, efficiency, and confidence found by Vincer and Loughead (2010) and Price and Weiss (2011), but that cannot be directly inferred from this study. Most of the practical implications of this study come from descriptive insights, given the sparseness of existing literature on the subject. The identified characteristics and emergence of nonverbal leaders give coaches signs to look for in athletes on their teams in order to quickly recognize and strengthen their presence as leaders. When a coach recognizes an athlete is hardworking, humble, timid, desiring to lead, service-oriented, and reserved, or a smaller combination of those six, he or she can begin to be intentional about developing leadership qualities in the athlete and encouraging the athlete's strengths, which, according to this study, tends to contribute to a nonverbal leader's emergence. Coaches would need to be aware of both positive and negative consequences of nonverbal leaders, and work to encourage positive energy and behavior while minimizing negative behavior, and perhaps ensuring that the lack of accountability is offset by more vocal leaders. Lastly, coaches can be mindful that nonverbal leaders seem to be most receptive to one-on-one communication, encouragement, and soft communication, both before and after they become leaders on the team.

Limitations

The current study did have its limitations. Due to time constraints, I could only interview five participants, and while their varied experiences helped to boost the study's validity, in the end the perspectives were limited to those of collegiate coaches in the

state of Virginia. In addition, as a student new to qualitative research conducting this

study alone, though with the guidance of a faculty committee, my decision-making skills

and analysis were inexperienced and so may not have been as strong as a seasoned

qualitative researcher's. Despite this, the study provides some sound evidence for

ongoing existence, effects, and handling of nonverbal leaders on sport teams, and great

potential exists for further studies on the remaining informal roles as well as methods and

practices for maximizing team functioning in light of these roles.

Directions for Future Research

The existing literature leaves a large gap for future research to fill. Further

qualitative studies similar to the current one and to Cope et. al (2010) are needed to

confirm the existence of and expand current understanding of the remaining ten roles

found by Cope et. al (2011). In addition, the current list of roles is not necessarily

comprehensive, and future studies might find completely new and separate roles that

arise on sport teams. Future empirical research aimed at determining the relationships

between factors of informal role involvement and factors of performance and satisfaction

is also needed, similar to research that has been done already with a focus on formal

roles. Finally, once a solid groundwork of understanding is established, future research

might begin to experiment with and observe different methodologies by which

practitioners can manage and maximize informal role development on sport teams.

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Appendix A
Informal Roles on Sport Teams

Informal Role	Definition
Comedian	An athlete who entertains others through the use of comical situations, humorous dialogue, and practical jokes. This individual can also be referred to as a jokester, clown, or prankster.
Spark plug	An athlete who ignites, inspires, or animates a group toward a common goal. May be referred to as the task booster.
Cancer	An athlete who expresses negative emotions that spread destructively throughout a team.
Distracter	An athlete who draws away or diverts the attention of other teammates, decreasing their focus.
Enforcer	An athlete who is physically intimidating or willingly belligerent and who is counted on to retaliate when rough tactics are used by the opposing team.
Mentor	An athlete who acts as a trusted counselor or teacher for another athlete on the team. This athlete has usually been with the team for a few years and has experience and wisdom to teach the less experienced athlete(s).
Informal leader— non verbal	An athlete who leads the team by example, hard work, and dedication.
Informal leader— verbal	An athlete who leads the team both on and off the playing surface through verbal commands. This individual is not selected by the team as a leader but assumes the role through social interactions.
Team player	An athlete who gives exceptional effort and can be seen as a workhorse that is willing to sacrifice and put the team before his/her own well-being.
Star player	An athlete who is distinguished or celebrated because of their personality, performance, and/or showmanship.
Malingerer	An athlete who prolongs psychological or physical symptoms of injury for some type of external gain.
Social Convener	An athlete who is involved in the planning and organization of social gatherings for a team to increase group harmony and integration.

Note. Adapted from Cope, C., Eys, M., Beauchamp, M., Schinke, R., & Bosselut, G., 2011, p. 24.