

An Exploration of Leadership Characteristics in College Athletes

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Research has been unclear as to what is associated with being a student athlete with leadership qualities. The purpose of this study was to provide more descriptive information regarding the attitudes and behaviors associated with leadership qualities in university athletes. The data suggested that leadership in university athletes is associated with: expecting higher grades, certainty of college major, decreased need for emotional/social counseling, increased social adjustment, and lower expectancy for transferring to another university. These results are discussed in terms of advising issues for student athletes.

A great deal of attention has been given to the parts athletes play in being role models and leaders. Indeed, the media have kept this topic in our national dialogue and cultural awareness (Attner, 1994; CNN, 1994; Telander, 1991). Athletes are often heralded as successful achievers that our children should emulate although they are vilified in the press when they show they are human by making mistakes (Attner, 1994). It is no wonder that athletes seem ambivalent towards our culture which was best exemplified by Charles Barkley's 1994 statement: "I am not a role model!"

This begs the question of whether or not athletes see themselves as leaders and/or role models. In particular, what are the basic leadership dynamics for college and professional athletes? In reviewing relevant research, it seems that the research community has lagged behind the popular sports media in offering hypotheses. Moreover, it is the responsibility of researchers to explore this topic, which has been relatively neglected.

Before examining leadership behaviors in athletes, it may be useful to review current leadership research in general. Most empirical work concerning leadership has been done in organizational and social psychology. In the 1950s and 1960s critical underlying dimensions to the leadership construct were investigated. This trait-factor type approach assumed that leadership effectiveness was associated with certain personality characteristics of the leader. However, the assertion that general leadership dimensions can be isolated has been abandoned due to the complex nature of this construct (Stogdill, 1974). Conversely, other theorists hypothesized that leadership was a function of the environment. This situationist view was based on environmental characteristics and the needs and motivations of the group (Stogdill, 1974).

Another position that has been asserted is an interactional perspective. Fiedler (1971) contended that the only reasonable model of leadership behavior is not based on general dimensions but on situational factors and their interaction with leader characteristics. Other interactional models of leadership have focused on the dyadic relationship between the leader and the follower. However, Fiedler's (1971) theory best exemplifies this person-environment interactional perspective.

Some researchers have tried to translate some of these concepts to the realm of athletics (Chelladurai, 1980; Smoll & Smith, 1989). Smoll and Smith (1989) posited a cognitive-behavioral model of leadership incorporating individual difference variables, situational factors, and cognitive processes that mediate the interactions between athletes and coaches. Chelladurai (1980) proposed a Multidimensional Model of Leadership in which the characteristics of the leader and group members interact with situational factors such as the athletic program philosophy. Thus, the specific characteristics of an effective leader are hypothesized to vary as a function of context. Therefore, the sport leader characteristics that are the most effective for male tennis players may be different than the characteristics of effective leaders on a women's lacrosse team. Glenn and Horn (1993) recommended that diverse samples of athletes should be studied in order to get a clearer picture of effective sport leadership.

In the sports research literature, leadership has been studied primarily in terms of coaching leadership and its effects on player performance (Serpa, Pataco, & Santos, 1991; Summers, 1991; Dwyer & Fischer, 1990). These studies have basically explored leadership from the coaching perspective. In particular, coaching leadership has been explored from the coach's point of view or from how the players' perceive the coach's leadership. In addition, some work has been done in exploring the impact of women's leadership/role modeling in increasing participation by females in athletics (Thorngren & Eisenbarth, 1994). Also, there has been some research regarding the effectiveness of programs using athletes as role models and educators in rape-awareness projects (Caron, 1993), violence against women prevention (Katz, 1995), and drug and alcohol abuse prevention (Palmer, Davis, Sher, & Hicks, 1989).

However, research concerning athletes' leadership behavior from the athletes' perspective seems limited. Some researchers have examined characteristics of team leaders that differentiate them from non-leaders. Kim (1992) explored four types of leadership by team captains and their effect on performance norms in high school and university athletic teams. She found that performance norms were highest when the team captain was rated high on goal achievement and group orientation (Kim, 1992). A study by Pascarella and Smart (1991) described the impact of collegiate athletic participation on a wide array of variables including leadership behavior. They concluded that athletic participation in college had a positive impact on leadership behavior and interpersonal skills (Pascarella & Smart, 1991).

Rierner and Chelladurai (1995) studied the association of preferred and perceived leadership with leadership satisfaction on a college football team. The authors found congruence between preferred and perceived leadership critical to the satisfaction of the players, but the authors only examined how the players perceived and preferred the leadership of the coaches (Rierner & Chelladurai, 1995). Glenn and Horn (1993) examined predictors of leadership behavior in female soccer athletes. The athletes who rated high in competence, femininity, and masculinity rated themselves higher in

leadership ability. Participants who rated high in leadership ability by their peers also exhibited high levels of competitive trait anxiety, masculinity, skill, and perceived competence. Glenn and Horn's (1993) study is noteworthy in the fact that the athletes' leadership ability was measured and not the coaches' leadership as in the majority of the current leadership research in sports.

It may be useful to conceptualize leadership as a construct that varies with group membership. Noncognitive variables such as leadership have been shown to be related to academic performance for what have been called nontraditional groups (Sedlacek, 1996). Nontraditional groups are defined as those receiving prejudice and who may show their abilities in unique ways, which may include university athletes (Sedlacek & Adams-Gaston, 1992).

The research on athletes' leadership dynamics can be characterized as incomplete. For example, the majority of studies look at coaches' leadership, which is a narrow perspective. Relatively few studies take on the task of measuring and describing leadership in the athlete from the athlete's perspective. Clearly, more exploration is needed in this area by obtaining a more thorough description of leadership in athletes and the behaviors and attitudes associated with athletes' leadership. The current research study will provide more information concerning what leadership looks like in college athletes. Furthermore, factors associated with leadership such as attitudes and behaviors of athletes will be assessed so that more accurate theories can be developed regarding leadership behavior in athletes.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 73 freshman athletes at a large mid-Atlantic research university with an NCAA Division I athletic program. Participants were recruited from freshman orientation to college classes that are offered to assist incoming freshmen with adjusting to college life. The study was done in cooperation with the university athletic department.

Instrumentation

The SLBI (Sport Leadership Behavior Inventory), NCQ (Noncognitive Questionnaire), and the New Student Census for the university were administered to the 73 participants. Data were analyzed using Pearson correlations and the Eta statistic.

The SLBI was used as one way to operationalize leadership for the purposes of this study (Glenn & Horn, 1993). This scale was developed from a sample of high school varsity athletes and coaches concerning what characteristics and behaviors determine effective leadership. The SLBI was chosen because it is one of the only instruments available that was developed using primarily feedback from the perspective of team athletes. The SLBI has a fairly high alpha coefficient .85 and an acceptable test-retest reliability of .74 and an internal consistency rating of .91 for self-ratings of leadership behavior.

The SLBI consists of 25 items, 19 of which describe personal characteristics and/or behaviors that are deemed desirable for athletic team leaders and 6 filler items not related to leadership. The respondents were asked to indicate on a 7-point Likert

type scale the extent to which that item is descriptive of the individual being evaluated. The scores for the items were summed together to get a composite leadership score.

The leadership scale from the NCQ was also used to operationalize leadership in this study. The NCQ leadership scale consists of items using a 5-point Likert type scale (where 1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree) and an open-ended item concerning leadership positions held. The NCQ leadership scale has a test-retest reliability of .80 with a sample of university athletes (Sedlacek & Adams-Gaston, 1992).

The University New Student Census (Sedlacek, 1996) was used to evaluate the athletes' perceptions of leadership related activities and attitudes. Topic areas covered by census items included: attitudes towards campus life, willingness to utilize campus services/resources, relationships with others, and career/educational aspirations. The items are either forced-choice questions or 5-point Likert type scale items (where 1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree), and have content validity by being judged to be important by faculty and administrators. Previous forms of this instrument were shown to have test-retest reliability in the .80's.

Procedure

The participants were informed of the nature and purpose of the study and told they could withdraw their participation at any time. They were then asked to respond to the questionnaires and returned them to the experimenter. No participants declined to participate in the current study.

RESULTS

Demographics

The participants ranged in age from 17 to 22. There were 51 males and 22 females in the sample, and the ethnicity composition was 23% African American, 3% Asian/Asian American, 68% White/Caucasian, 2% Hispanic, 3% Biracial. The participants engaged in either revenue (e.g. football) or non-revenue (e.g. tennis) sports. However, no data were collected concerning the specific sports in which each athlete participated.

Validity Evidence of Leadership Indicators

The SLBI was significantly correlated with the census item directly pertaining to leadership. There was a significant relationship between SLBI scores and the statement "I do not have the skills to be a leader on campus" ($r = .26, p < .05$). As SLBI scores increased, athletes were more apt to feel they had leadership skills. The leadership domain of the NCQ was more strongly correlated with the same statement ($r = .36, p < .05$). However, the SLBI was only moderately correlated with the leadership scale of the NCQ ($r = .23, p < .06$).

The SLBI did show a positive correlation with the NCQ leadership domain, but the correlation was nonsignificant which suggests that the NCQ and the SLBI may be measuring somewhat different constructs and may not have psychometric statistics established with a college sample. This makes sense in light of the fact that the SLBI was developed with high school athletes.

Strength of association was calculated for the census items and the NCQ leadership domain using Pearson correlations or the ETA statistic. All of the relationships discussed in the following sections were significant either at the .01 level ($p < .01$) or the .05 level ($p < .05$). A total of 61 correlations were computed among all of the items. Since so many correlations were computed, Type I error is a concern with some of the findings possibly occurring by chance. However, given the number of correlations computed (61), we would expect that approximately 6 correlations would be significant by chance at the .05 level (Sakoda, Cohen, & Beall, 1954). However, we found 16 out of 61 correlations significant at the .05 or .01 level. Furthermore, if we found only significance by chance, the results would have no real organizing patterns or themes. However, our results did yield patterns of findings that are coherent and non-random. In addition, since this is a topic area and population that does not receive a great deal of research attention, we are less concerned with a Type I error and more concerned with a Type II error.

Positive Expectations from College Experience

As leadership scores on the NCQ increased, expectations to obtain good grades and expecting that it will not be difficult to obtain at least a B average increased ($r = -.35$, $p < .01$). In addition, SLBI leadership behavior was positively associated with athletes feeling that instructors will care about students ($r = -.23$, $p < .05$) and that their courses would be stimulating and exciting ($r = -.30$, $p < .01$). As leadership scores decreased on the NCQ, expectations of not receiving a degree increased ($r = .25$, $p < .05$). Furthermore, increased leadership behaviors as measured by the NCQ were associated with a decreased expectation of transferring to another college ($r = .29$, $p < .05$). In addition, increased leadership tendencies in athletes as assessed by the SLBI were associated with the desire to attend college even if better jobs were available ($\text{Eta} = .51$, $p < .01$).

Social/Psychological Resources

As leadership scores in the athletes increased on the NCQ, the expressed need to seek emotional/social counseling decreased ($r = -.24$, $p < .05$). In addition, as NCQ measured leadership increased the expectation that it will be difficult to adjust to the social life of college decreased ($r = .28$, $p < .05$). Leadership was positively associated with awareness of study skills resources available to the athlete ($r = -.29$, $p < .05$). A last finding was that as leadership scores increased on the NCQ expectations of being able to balance the demands of a job and a personal life increased ($r = -.26$, $p < .05$).

Emphasis on Education

Higher SLBI leadership scores were associated with gaining a general education and self-improvement as the main reasons to attend college ($\text{Eta} = .51$, $p < .01$). Conversely, lower leadership scores were associated with getting a better job as the main reason to attend college ($\text{Eta} = .51$, $p < .01$). A related finding is that high SLBI leadership scores were associated with plans to go on to graduate school while lower

scores were associated with being undecided or working full-time after college ($\eta^2 = .50, p < .01$).

DISCUSSION

It seems from the current results that college athletes who exhibit leadership tendencies are optimistic and expect good things from their college experience. These attitudes take the form of: expecting to get good grades, feeling that instructors will care about students, expecting to graduate with a degree, not wanting to transfer to another college, and expecting that classes will be stimulating. These positive expectations can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy of success for an athlete. This could take place in the classroom or on the playing field. Noncognitive variables such as leadership have been shown to be correlated with academic performance and retention (Sedlacek & Adams-Gaston, 1992). The current findings serve as a useful link to previous results pointing to noncognitive factors associated with making good grades. It can be argued that "leader" athletes may feel more in control of satisfying long and short-term goals than athletes who do not possess these skills. Moreover, the athlete may feel more able in influencing people in the environment in such a way that satisfies the athlete's needs.

An interesting finding is that athletes who responded high in leadership did not expect to have a problem with social adjustment to college and were not interested in counseling for emotional or social issues. This would further indicate an attitude of confidence and an internal ability to cope with stressors. This finding may seem to be positive except that an athlete may feel that he or she should be able to handle a situation that is actually overwhelming. From an interactionist perspective, leader athletes who tend to look inward for solutions to problems and are placed in a competitive environment with little support may have difficulty and may be overwhelmed. It is important to consider these individual leadership attitudes/behaviors in college athletes in terms of the competitive context in which they operate.

In addition, leadership in athletes was associated not only with graduating with a degree but higher leadership scores were associated with wanting to obtain a graduate degree. Moreover, leadership in athletes was associated with the desire to stay in school even if better jobs were available. These findings provide evidence for a strong value placed on education and runs counter to the popular media stereotype of the college athlete turning professional to get more money when given the opportunity. Therefore, leadership seems to be associated with an investment in education and the institution the athlete attends.

In conclusion, leadership in college athletes appears to be associated with a strong internal sense of control and an optimism when dealing with problems. Athletes are certainly placed in situations where they can develop their leadership skills, and these situations may draw out leadership behaviors in individuals who may not otherwise exhibit such characteristics. Competing with other intercollegiate schools and with each other intrateam gives the college athlete multiple opportunities to exhibit leadership. Which athletes are the leaders and which are the followers when the coach is absent is an important question that may help athletic directors and coaches gain more insight into team dynamics. Theories in leadership research in college athletics have often addressed coaching leadership and not leadership in the athletes.

Leadership is a highly complex construct that has been shown to change with the individual and situation. Future research can be directed at operationalizing leadership from the athlete's perspective. The current study is an attempt to begin this work in describing what attitudes and behaviors are associated with leadership with this population so that theories may be formulated. A future research project that would contribute to this area would be a qualitative study where college athletes describe what they think leadership is. Clearly, more descriptive research needs to be conducted before leadership in college athletes can be understood.

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