

Title: An examination of shared athlete leadership in professional Australian soccer teams.

There are several studies (e.g., Chelladurai, 2012) that have focused on the coach as a leader and considered a decisive factor in the success of sport teams. Nevertheless, another important source of leadership within sports teams is often missing in leadership discourse is the role of athlete leaders (Fransen, Vanbeselaere, De Cuyper, Vande Broek, & Boen, 2014). The focus of this research has been on the role of followers (i.e., athlete leaders) within the team leadership (Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2011) in soccer teams. However, we know little about professional coaches' and players' perceptions of athlete leadership within professional Australian soccer teams, and how those perceptions might influence coaches' and players' behaviours in potentially influencing the development of leadership within the teams. Furthermore, the importance of examining athlete leadership is central to improving the coach-athlete-performance relationship.

The aim of this study was to examine (i) how professional soccer male coaches and players perceive the leadership within their teams (coach-centred vs player-centred); and (ii) how they contribute to team leadership tasks. Professional soccer male coaches (n=6) and players (n=10) participated in semi-structured interviews. Data were analysed thematically (Patton, 2002) within the theoretical lens of Social Identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). A social identity approach asserts that followers (i.e., players) are critical to effective leadership, which puts the followers at the centre of leadership (Haslam et al., 2011).

Results indicated that:

- (a) Players perceived that coaches and players shared training responsibilities and communication in general (e.g., feedback, performance standards, motivating players, and helping coach to solve team internal problems);
- (b) Players perceived coaches did not invite players' contributions to team playing strategies and tactics nor setting of team values;
- (c) Coaches perceived that they often share information and responsibilities with players to provide guidance and direction; however,
- (d) Coaches are reluctant to share team playing strategies and tactics, the creation of club values, and selection of the team captain.

Although, coaches and players perceived the benefits (e.g., providing more opportunities and ideas, avoiding micromanagement, fostering coaches' and players' satisfaction and confidence) of players' contribution within the team leadership, they raised their concerns about challenges (e.g., adoptability to different cultures, lack of coaches' and players' knowledge and practice of shared leadership) ahead of implementing a shared leadership approach in which players contribute within the team leadership.

The literature supports the implementation of a shared leadership approach in sport (Fransen et al., 2017); however, the adoption of this leadership structure requires an understanding of what it is and how it is enacted. In this study, the coaches and players were lacking a depth knowledge of shared leadership and its benefits, relying on cultural practices associated with a vertical leadership approach. Challenging leadership orthodoxy is necessary to adopt evidence-based approaches to leadership in sport.

References:

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Presenter Bio:

Pouria Nabi is doing his PhD, collaboration project with UQ and Football Federation Australia, in leadership in professional Australian soccer teams. Pouria graduated in Master of Philosophy (applied psychology in sports coaching) in 2016 (UQ). He was interested in specific areas, included: a) players' motivation within the framework of self-determination theory (SDT), and b) Autonomy-supportive learning environment in soccer. Pouria is a member of the research sub-committee of the Football Coaches Australia (FCA) and a professional soccer coach in Australia.