Student Athletes' Perceptions of Effective Leadership in Sport:

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The reason a qualitative method, specifically interviews, might be used with regards to leadership in sport is because the data collected will be largely based on individuals' perceptions of effective or ineffective communication styles. Interviews are effective for this due to the nature of which a researcher's questions can guide an interviewee(?) to draw on their own personal experience. Their own experience will inform their answers in a longer-form manner than, say, a quantitative approach might.

Furthermore, a qualitative approach, such as an interview, will aid me in collecting the "right" data for my research questions due to the more personal level of data collection. My research questions each seek to understand athletes' perceptions, expectations, or identification of leadership styles within the realm of communication. One on one interviews will allow me to draw on athletes' personal experience to get to the core of such perceptions, expectations, and identification.

I will be using a mix of purposive sampling and convenience sampling for this project. Due to the qualitative nature of my research method, as well as the specific demographic I seek to interview in order to address my research questions, it is important that I use a sample that will give interesting answers, and/or answers that might be typical of the entire population in question (collegiate athletes). The extent to which convenience sampling applies is that I will be interviewing collegiate athletes that are immediately available to me at my current university.

A previous study into how leadership communication affects college athletes used a mix of purposive sampling and snowball sampling (Cranmer, Ash, Fontana, & Mikkilineni, 2020). Their method was to offer "minimal extra credit" for partaking in the study, as well as being

presented with the opportunity to "refer a teammate, a student-athlete on another team at their university, or a student-athlete at another Division-I university".

This study used a quantitative method, with an online questionnaire providing them with the data. In contrast to this, I will be using a qualitative approach, conducting individual interviews with participants. My reasoning for this is, due to my lesser time and resources, I foresee gaining more valuable insight from fewer, yet more tightly focused, student-athletes. Out of 148 individuals opening their questionnaire, only 117 (79.1%) completed it (Cranmer, Ash, Fontana, & Mikkilineni, 2020). With my qualitative method, that figure will be 100%.

The vast majority of studies related to this topic use surveys, likely in order to access a wide range of athletes to gather data. For the sake of time constraints, I will be conducting individual interviews with four student-athletes, in order to gain enough data to make this a worthwhile study within my imposed restrictions.

The goal of this study is to use semi-structured interviews with Division II collegiate student-athletes in order to better understand their perceptions of leadership during their time playing sport. A mix of purposive and convenience sampling was used to find four participants for the interviews. Convenience sampling was used primarily, overall, with only students readily available to me at my university being considered; purposive sampling was then applied within these parameters to cover different demographics, with a 50/50 rate of male/female participants, as well as each participant representing a different sport (rugby, lacrosse, football, and soccer).

An interview guide was developed around answering three research questions, that would hopefully serve to create a clearer picture of their perception of leadership. The research questions are as follows:

RQ1: How do college athletes define and perceive effective leadership within their sport?
RQ2: What communication behaviours and actions do college athletes identify as characteristics of effective leadership?
RQ3: How do college athletes' expectations and perceptions of leadership differ between their coaches and team captains?

Questions aimed to specifically answer one of the three research questions. By using a semi-structured interviewing technique, as opposed to structured, I was able to keep participants on the right track, while also allowing for leeway in their answers. By using a slightly less formal approach, I was able to explicitly gain additional insight from participants that might have only been implicit in a structured interview, as they oftentimes looked to draw on personal experience and stories. This technique allowed me to move questions around in the interview, even adding probing questions or omitting questions entirely.

The nature of the interviews and interview guide were further by Newland et al. (2015), with interviews being "recorded and transcribed verbatim" (p.5), as well as encouraging "candid responses" (p.5) by informing participants that they could withdraw from the study at any time, and that their answers would remain anonymous.

To further develop the interview guide, I partly drew on Bull's (2024) article on sporting leader Andy Farrell: an effective leader, as seen through captaining Great Britain's rugby league team as a player and, presently, leading the Irish national rugby union team as head coach. Informed by this article's analysis of Farrell's leadership prowess, I wondered if such qualities mentioned aligned with how student athletes perceived it. Therefore, I tailored parts of the interview guide and follow-up questions to inquire the extent to which participants value experience, sporting ability, and listening as qualities/actions seen in effective leaders.

Table 1.   Interview Guide
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Goal: Athletes' Personal Definitions and Perceptions of Leadership (RQ1)
When you think of "effective leadership" in sport, what comes to mind?
How would you personally define a *good leader* in a team setting?
Can you describe an example of someone you've played with or for who you thought was an *effective leader*? What made them stand out?
Outside of sport, what characteristics do you associate with good/effective leaders? *(Try getting them to think outside of the box).* Then, do any of those then translate into sport, do you think?
In your experience, what makes leadership in sport different from leadership in other areas of life (e.g., classroom, workplace)?
Do you think leadership is more about *actions*, *communication*, or *personality*? Why?

Goal: Communication Behaviours and Actions of Effective Leaders (RQ2)
Think about the best leader you've had in sport — how did they communicate with teammates? (e.g., verbal, nonverbal, motivational, instructional).
Have the most effective communication behaviours been formal/informal? What about the environment that they take place in? For instance: formal in an office; formal at a relaxed team function; informal in the office/at practice; informal at the pub?
What types of communication (e.g., verbal, nonverbal, motivational, instructional) do you find most effective from someone in a leadership role?
How do good leaders handle conflict or disagreement within the team?
How important is *listening* in leadership? Can you describe a time when a leader listened well (or didn't)?
What kinds of messages or conversations make you feel most motivated, confident, or supported as an athlete?
Do you feel that effective leaders communicate differently depending on the situation (e.g., during a match vs. training vs. off the field)? How so?
How do tone, timing, or body language affect your perception of leadership?

Goal: Comparing Leadership Between Coaches and Captains (RQ3)
How would you describe the role of your coach as a leader?
How would you describe the role of your team captain(s) as leaders?
What are the main differences in how coaches and captains communicate with players?
Who do you feel has the biggest influence on the team's culture — the coach or the captain(s)? Why?
How do your *expectations* of leadership differ between coaches and captains?
Are there times when the leadership of a coach and a captain align — or conflict?
In your opinion, what makes the *relationship* between coaches and captains effective (or not)?
In the heat of the moment, whose leadership/guidance do you prioritise?

Do you think leadership in sport can be learned or developed, or is it more of an innate quality?
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Full transcripts of the interviews were analyzed, thus all data was included. The

pertinence of the content of each interview would be assessed and referenced later, in the data

analysis section of this article.

Once interviews were fully transcribed and documented, the files were uploaded into MAXQDA to analyze the data efficiently.

Upon uploading the documents into MAXQDA, I developed my code book through an inductive method, with the codes being derived from the data. In order to develop and refine my codes, I took inspiration from Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's foundational work on thematic analysis. I immersed myself in each document's data which, according to Braun and Clarke (2022), is crucial for developing a deep understanding. The other steps in this process that I abided by include generating initial themes while getting a feel for the data, before developing and reviewing my themes, and finally refining them.

My goal in phase 5 of this thematic analysis was to ensure my themes were theoretically sound, and easily understood by others (Braun and Clarke, 2022). The data was then read through and coded until reaching data saturation.

Findings

RQ1: How do college athletes define and perceive effective leadership within their sport?

Figure 2. Perceived Effective Leadership Qualities

Code System	Interview 4	Interview 3	Interview 2	Interview 1
˅ ● Themes				
● Respected	2	6	10	
● Experience/Maturity	2	6	4	1
● Natural Leader	1	1	3	
● Sporting Competence		2	3	
● Humility	1	1	1	

According to figure 2, it is clear that having the respect of those you are leading is crucial especially for the males I interviewed; especially for the male subjects in interviews 2 and 3.

Having a high degree of experience and maturity was mentioned across 75% of the 4 interviews, suggesting this also plays an active role in how effective leaders are perceived to be by the participants.

While it was mentioned in interviews 1 nor 4, being competent at the sport you lead in can also have a positive effect on this perception; though it is not required.

From the data, as well as nonverbal cues observed during the face-to-face interviews, one could deduce that sporting ability, the degree of experience, and being a natural leader all contribute to gaining the respect of the squad, whatever kind of leader they are – and being brought up most frequently, respect could appear to be key.

RQ2: What communication behaviours and actions do college athletes identify as characteristics of effective leadership?

Figure 3. Perceived communication behaviours of effective leaders

Code System	Interview 4	Interview 3	Interview 2	Interview 1
Informal Communication	2	1	1	1
Instructional	1	1	2	
Listening	2	3	1	4
Motivational			1	1
Specific Feedback	2			1
Timing, Body Language, Tone	2	4	4	1

Figure 3 provides us with specific methods of communication that were identified to be perceived as effective between leaders (coaches and captains) and fellow squad members. Nonverbal communication can be inferred, from the data, to be recognized as highly important by each of the four participants. Furthermore, listening was coded a total of 10 times across 4 interviews, which was surprising. Both of these provide interesting insights, as leadership is often thought of as guiding, or doing the most talking. Both listening and nonverbal

communication actually explicitly omit verbal communication from these leaders, contrary to what perhaps is popularly believed.
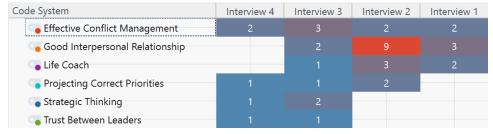
Figure 4 provides some insight into other communication behaviours and actions that the sampled student athletes perceive as effective.

Figure 4. Other effective communication behaviours

Code System	Interview 4	Interview 3	Interview 2	Interview 1
Approachable	1			3
Coaching/Maximising Player Potential	1	1	5	5
Composure	6	3		
Effective Conflict Management	2	3	2	2
Good Interpersonal Relationship		2	9	3
Leading by Example		2	1	
Positive Attitude		2		5
Supportive	1	5		4

RQ3: How do college athletes' expectations and perceptions of leadership differ between their coaches and team captains?

Figure 5: Expectations of Coaches
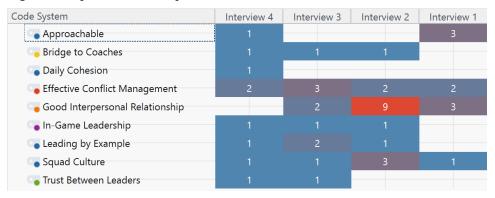
Code System	Interview 4	Interview 3	Interview 2	Interview 1
Effective Conflict Management	2	3	2	2
Good Interpersonal Relationship		2	9	3
Life Coach		1	3	2
Projecting Correct Priorities	1	1	2	
Strategic Thinking	1	2		
Trust Between Leaders	1	1		

The table in figure 5 displays the data collected and coded on what the participants perceived as their expectations of coaches as leaders. What immediately jumps out is the frequency of which effective conflict management, and having good interpersonal relationships with the squad, were mentioned.

Figure 6, below, highlights these participants' expectations of team captains as leaders.

Figure 6: Expectations of Captains

Code System	Interview 4	Interview 3	Interview 2	Interview 1
Approachable	1			3
Bridge to Coaches	1	1	1	
Daily Cohesion	1			
Effective Conflict Management	2	3	2	2
Good Interpersonal Relationship		2	9	3
In-Game Leadership	1	1	1	
Leading by Example	1	2	1	
Squad Culture	1	1	3	1
Trust Between Leaders	1	1		

I believe that what these data suggest is that there is more variation in what is expected of player captains as leaders compared to that of coaches. Though the frequency of what was found in expectations of coaches was around the same as for players, the number of themes coded was divided amongst less categories, potentially suggesting a higher level of expectation on these categories.

What figure 7, below, provides is insight into how some of these themes intersect between expectations of coaches and captains as leaders.

Figure 7: Intersections of Communication Behaviours

Code System	Coaching/Maximising Player Potential	Composure	Effective Conflict Management	Supportive
Approachable	●		●	●
Coaching/Maximising Player Potential		●	●	●
Composure	●		●	
Effective Conflict Management	●	●		
Good Interpersonal Relationship			●	●
Leading by Example				
Positive Attitude	●			●
Supportive	●			

What is interesting is the frequency of which effective conflict management, as a skill, was coded simultaneously with the composure trait. This provides insight that these participants believe that composure is a key skill in diffusing tense situations within a squad. In fact, conflict

management and the ability to improve players' ability intersect with many other expectations from these participants, perhaps suggesting these are perceived as the most important.

This study undoubtedly has its limitations. Primarily, the sample size is far too small to make any wider generalizations, or any past the small sample we have. Furthermore, due to the nature of convenience sampling and purposive sampling, the limitation of not being able to generalize further than the sample becomes a strong one.

References

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