

ALL ATHLETES CAN LEAD IN THEIR OWN WAY

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YOUNG REVIEWER:



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Did you know that not just coaches can be leaders on sport teams? Athletes are also an important source of leadership within teams. When you think of athletes performing leadership roles, you probably think of captains or assistant captains. While these are important sources of team leadership, athletes do not need to be captains or assistant captains to be leaders. In fact, all athletes can display leadership through their behaviors. Coaches can help athletes to be a part of team leadership. We provide some suggestions on how coaches can facilitate the development of leadership skills in their athletes. If athletes are not comfortable being team leaders, they can provide leadership by mentoring fellow teammates. There are many ways that athletes can provide leadership to their teams!

LEADERS ON A SPORT TEAM

When we think of leadership on sport teams, we often think of the coach as the team leader. There is good reason for this: coaches are responsible for selecting the athletes who will be on the team, planning practices, and choosing which athletes will play and when. It

ATHLETE LEADERSHIP

Influencing teammates toward a common goal.

is important to remember that every coach is different. Some coaches may be strong at teaching the technical aspects of their sports, while others are better at developing their players socially. It is unrealistic to expect coaches to meet all of their athletes' needs. Consequently, there is another source of leadership on sport teams—leadership that comes from the athletes. Our research has found that athletes are an important source of leadership within sports teams. We call this **athlete leadership**, and it happens when several athletes assume leadership roles within their team and influence teammates to achieve a common objective [1]. This definition highlights the fact that multiple athletes on a team can serve in leadership roles. As a result, athlete leadership is shared amongst a group of teammates.

ARE CAPTAINS AND ASSISTANT CAPTAINS THE ONLY LEADERS?

There are many athletes on a team who provide leadership. Teams have formal leaders and informal leaders. Formal leaders are athletes selected by their coach or teammates to be team leaders. These leadership roles commonly have titles, like captain or assistant captain. In addition to these formal leaders, teams also have informal leaders: teammates who gain status as leaders just by interacting positively with their teammates. Unlike formal leaders, informal leaders do not have official titles. Examples of informal leaders are athletes who encourage teammates to stay focused during a game, or athletes who have a lot of experience playing the sport. In our research, we found that teams are full of leaders, with every athlete being viewed as a leader by at least one teammate [2]. In fact, athletes can be viewed as leaders by their teammates even if those athletes do not think of themselves as formal or informal leaders. Based on this, any teammate can be a leader—including you!

HOW TO BE A LEADER

Team leadership is complex. No one athlete, or even a small group of athletes, on a team can meet the needs of every teammate. We believe that leadership is best viewed as a team property, meaning that the leadership behaviors that the team needs are shared by the entire group of teammates. Such shared leadership means that, at certain times or when certain situations present themselves, all athletes will fulfill a leadership role when it is necessary and, in other situations, they will step back to allow other teammates to lead.

Why is leadership shared amongst teammates? There are so many leadership behaviors that athletes use while leading their teams that it would be impossible for any one athlete to effectively display all these behaviors. Researchers asked athletes to rate how important it was for athletes to display 13 leadership behaviors [3]. The rating

used a 5-point scale, with 5 indicating that athletes strongly believed a behavior was important, and 1 indicating that athletes strongly believed that a behavior was not important. The results showed that 10 of the 13 leadership behaviors were rated close to 4 or above (3.91–4.87), indicating that, to be an effective team leader, it is important to display *many* of these leadership behaviors. Figure 1 contains a list of leadership behaviors that can help you show effective leadership on your team. Remember to practice the leadership behaviors that you are comfortable with. The idea is that you and your teammates together will cover all these leadership behaviors.

Figure 1

Ten leadership behaviors that athletes can display to show effective team leadership.



HOW CAN COACHES HELP ATHLETES BECOME LEADERS?

Coaches can help athletes become team leaders in various ways. Many teams have formal athlete leaders, such as captains or assistants, and coaches can help develop leaders by rotating players in these leadership roles. Throughout the season, different players are assigned the role of captain or assistant. This gives every player an opportunity to learn and practice leadership behaviors. Coaches could also assign other specific leadership duties, such as warm-up leader, dressing-room leader, and practice leader. Rotating these duties will also help spread the leadership experience amongst all teammates. Another way that coaches can help athletes to be team leaders is to provide them with leadership materials to read or watch at home. Afterwards, coaches and teammates could discuss what they learned from these materials and implement various leadership activities. These leadership activities could include team-building activities

and/or planning social team events. Overall, coaches can help athletes to be team leaders by providing many opportunities for all players to learn and practice leadership, which will help create a positive team environment.

CAN I LEAD IN OTHER WAYS?

If an athlete does not feel comfortable being a team leader, there are other ways to lead. For example, athletes can lead through **mentoring** [4]. Mentoring is a process by which an individual guides another person to support that person's development. There are many ways to mentor to a teammate. One way is by being a friend. It is important for athletes to have positive relationships with their teammates away from their sport. This can happen in social settings, in which teammates share hobbies or interests. For example, going to a restaurant, watching sporting events, or doing homework together promote **social engagement**. Athletes can also lead by acting as role models. Teammates may observe the characteristics of a role model athlete and try to model their own behaviors after that athlete. If an athlete follows his or her morals and values, teammates will try to be like that athlete on and off the field. Athletes can also lead by creating ways to communicate with teammates away from the sport. The use of social media, texting groups, and online video games are all ways to stay in touch with teammates. This can work for you, too. By being yourself and creating relationships away from your sport, your teammates will look to you as a leader, whether you know it or not.

MENTORING

To support and encourage a teammate in order to maximize their potential.

SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

Participation or involvement in the activities of a group. For example, being actively involved in a sport team.

TAKE-HOME MESSAGE

All athletes can provide leadership to their sport teams. There are many ways that athletes can be leaders, so it is important to select leadership and/or mentoring behaviors that you are comfortable with. Remember, team leadership is a team effort! The key is to have a group of teammates performing leadership behaviors. When athletes help to lead their teams, there are numerous benefits that can positively impact team dynamics [5]. For example, athlete leadership improves team cohesion or team chemistry, which means the amount of unity or closeness that teams feel (Figure 2). Team cohesion or chemistry is important for the performance and satisfaction of sports teams. Using the leadership behaviors we described, all athletes should strive to make their teammates feel valued, get everybody to work together, be focused on team goals and objectives, and develop warm interpersonal relationships.

Figure 2

Teams with numerous athlete leaders have better team chemistry, which means that athletes feel more satisfied with their teams and are more able to perform at their best.



Figure 2

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank Travis Loughead, as a youth sport athlete, for comments and suggestions made to enhance the quality of this manuscript.

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SUBMITTED: 26 March 2021; **ACCEPTED:** 02 May 2022;

PUBLISHED ONLINE: 23 May 2022.

EDITOR: Sam Nicholas Thrower, University of Roehampton London, United Kingdom

SCIENCE MENTOR: Aja Erin McDonagh

CITATION: Loughead TM, Sheppard MB and Hirsch KE (2022) All Athletes Can Lead in Their Own Way. *Front. Young Minds* 10:686407. doi: 10.3389/frym.2022.686407

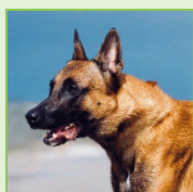
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YOUNG REVIEWER

BLAKE, AGE: 9

I like to play baseball and riding my dirtbike. I also like biking and my favorite baseball team is the San Francisco Giants.



AUTHORS

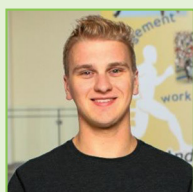
TODD M. LOUGHEAD

Dr. Todd M. Loughead is a professor and co-director of the Sport Psychology and Physical Activity Research Collaborative at the University of Windsor, Canada. His research uses a group dynamics perspective to investigate athlete leadership and coaching, and how these two sources of leadership impact team functioning. He is also interested in cohesion and how this contributes to an enhanced team environment. He consults with coaches, sport teams, and athletes at various competitive levels. *loughead@uwindsor.ca



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Katherine E. Hirsch is a Ph.D., student studying sport and exercise psychology at the University of Windsor, Canada. She is a member of the Sport Psychology and Physical Activity Research Collaborative. Her research is largely focused on the role of athlete leaders in promoting positive group dynamics in team sports. Her research examines leader fairness and outcomes of fair treatment and unfair treatment, including cohesion and athlete satisfaction.

