

Comparing Preferred Coaching Behaviors of Collegiate Athletes to Self-Perceived Coaching
Behaviors of Collegiate Coaches

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1. Leadership Scale for Sport for Athletes (LSS)
2. Revised Leadership Scale for Sport for Coaches (RLSS)

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to compare, contrast, and understand leadership behaviors most exhibited and preferred by collegiate coaches and athletes. Previous studies have found that leadership styles can have a lot to do with the skill level of each athlete, as well as their current psychological state (anxiety levels, confidence, motivation, emotional maturity, competitiveness, optimism, etc.). Team culture was also said to have a noticeable influence on the coach-athlete relationship. Using both the Leadership Scale for Sport for Athletes (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1978) and the Revised Leadership Scale for Sport for Coaches (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980), an analysis of training behavior, positive feedback, social support, autocratic behavior, and democratic behavior was conducted. Results found that training behavior, social support, and positive feedback should be at the forefront of the five leadership styles, while autocratic behavior should be avoided in most instances.

CHAPTER I

Introduction

Overview

Coaching has played an integral part in the development of collegiate athletes for years. As expected, these coaches are credited in large part for the success of both individual athletes and the teams that they lead. While we have seen a plethora of coaching styles and methods contribute to the success of both coaches and athletes, questions can arise about whether or not a clear-cut blueprint for successful coaching is out there. Throughout history, coaches and athletes alike have been known to struggle at one program, then thrive at the next. Newly hired coaches and student-athlete transfers can experience different success, and the different aspects of leadership styles could potentially be influential in that. The “revolving door” of coaches and student-athletes in the college ranks each year is prevalent. Coaches are often fired, forced to resign, or accept other opportunities due to the lack of success and/or team cohesion at a program. Likewise, student-athletes may leave a program for those very same reasons. While this may not inherently be the fault of one singular player or coach, certain personalities can clash without the proper understanding of said leadership styles. With the transfer portal being at one of its heights due to COVID-19 blanket waivers, choosing a program where the coaching style fits the athlete can be essential to future success (Hosick, 2020).

Statement of Problem

This study will look to further understand if collegiate student-athletes’ coaching preferences match the perceived behavior of coaches. The intent is to understand what coaching

styles and methods collegiate athletes seem to prefer. It will also attempt to get a better grasp of the importance of the coach-athlete relationship.

Hypothesis

The five major leadership behaviors (training behavior, autocratic behavior, democratic behavior, social support, and positive feedback) will not correspond between coaches' perceived behaviors and athletes' preferred behaviors.

Operational Definitions

Leadership styles are measured by a variety of different scales in order to touch on as many areas of the coaching dynamic as possible. The specific aspects that are focused on include leadership behaviors and the coach-athlete relationship. Leadership behaviors are separated into training behavior, autocratic behavior, democratic behavior, social support, and positive feedback, as laid out in the Leadership Scale for Sport (LSS) (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1978) and the Revised Leadership Scale for Sport (RLSS) (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980). Training behavior is defined as how a coach's behavior helps improve the athlete's performance. Autocratic behavior focuses on how often coaches makes decisions for their athletes. The coach gives the athletes little involvement in both team and individual decisions. Democratic behavior is geared towards how coaches let their athletes have a hand in making important decisions. Social support is defined as how coaches handle the personal needs of their athletes. Positive feedback concentrates on how coaches positively reinforce their athletes' efforts and performances (Chelladurai & Saleh).

The coach-athlete relationship is split into three major disciplines: commitment, closeness, and complementarity (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004). Commitment refers to how dedicated coaches and athletes are to maintaining their athletic relationship. Closeness refers to

the connectivity between both coaches and athletes. Feelings such as showing care, appreciation, and trust promote the coach-athlete intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships. Complementarity is defined by the coach-athlete cordiality and interactions, especially during training (Jowett & Ntoumanis).

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

Athletes' Perspective

In order to use coaching methods to improve the performances of college athletes, the initial focus should be the athletes themselves. While a student-athlete's skill level can play an integral part in the way they progress throughout their season, mental capacity and fortitude can be just as important. These physical and psychological aspects have the ability to influence an athlete's potential for growth and improvement.

Psychological Influences

Mental factors can affect an athlete's receptiveness to coaching. Varying personalities on college sports teams also have the ability to impact student-athlete development. Anxiety seems to be a common influence on an athlete's preferred coaching methods. Self-confidence, trait anxiety, state cognitive anxiety, and somatic anxiety were significantly related to an athlete's evaluations of coaching behaviors (Kenow & Williams, 1999). Athletes who scored high in trait anxiety evaluated their coaches' behavior more negatively. This was based on communication behaviors and perceived cognitive/attentional effects that athletes observed from their coaches (Dimarco et al., 1998). Cognitive anxiety was also a common theme; athletes negatively reported perceived cognitive/attentional and somatic effects as a result of their coaches' behavior. Athletes who were high in somatic anxiety negatively reported their coach's communication

ability. Athletes who were low in self-confidence negatively reported coach supportiveness and perceived cognitive/somatic effects. This evidence seems to support the idea that athletes who are high in anxiety tend to be more sensitive to certain coaching methods than others. While no one is inherently at fault for this dynamic, it is important to keep it in mind when focusing on student-athlete development. On the other hand, athletes who were highly compatible with their coach were better evaluated. As an athlete's self-confidence increases, so does coach-athlete compatibility. An athlete's goals, personality, and beliefs should be consistent with their coaches in order to provide satisfactory interactions and a positive atmosphere. If this does not happen, certain athlete's needs may not be met (Kenow & Williams, 1999).

As far as preferred coaching styles are concerned, a study on the preferred coaching styles of Generation Z athletes stated that a coaching situation where the athlete could both feel comfortable and motivated to improve was essential. Additionally, they preferred a coach that was calm, supportive, knowledgeable, and democratic (Parker et.al., 2012). Calmness was described as not yelling or showing anger during both stressful and non-stressful situations. These athletes preferred being individually instructed on their mistakes instead. Supportiveness was described as positive feedback. Knowledgeable coaches were described as those with experience and training in their respective sport and/or as a leader of the sport itself. Athletes preferred democratic coaches because it gave them the opportunity to take part in the decision-making process. This level of consideration and collaboration was said to positively influence the coach-athlete relationship (Cramer & Prentice-Dunn, 2007).

Coaches' Perspective

Coaching Expectations

While psychological factors can influence the way a player is coached, they can also shape a coach's expectations of the given player. In a study conducted by Solomon and Kosmitzki (1996), college basketball players were ranked by perceived ability and improvement potential by their coaches. From their findings, it appeared that the athletes who were ranked high in expectancy seemed to get more organizational instruction. Low expectancy athletes seemed to receive more mistake-contingent instruction. High expectancy athletes also received more instructional praise and feedback from coaches than their low expectancy counterparts. For low expectancy athletes, they received more management feedback, which included less specific and less competition-relevant instruction (Solomon, 2002). While this type of instruction was prominent late in the season, high ability athletes were also expected to improve the most in the beginning of the season (Solomon et al., 1998). There was no evidence that suggested that an athlete's ability and potential for improvement were related according to these coaches, and the expectations for their athletes did not seem to change over course of the season. Based on this information, it seems as though athletes of any ability have coaches that expect some sort of improvement from them. However, if low expectancy athletes receive unequal or lackluster feedback from their respective coaches, it raises questions as to how much room they truly have for improvement. It is rational to infer that the varying types of instruction could become valuable to some student-athletes, and detrimental to others. While the athletes who are highly skilled and/or are expected to show major improvements seem to receive the most beneficial coaching, athletes whose coaches expect the least will not garner the same attention. This raises questions as to whether every student-athlete is given an equal opportunity to truly improve

throughout the season. Without proper resources and support systems surrounding lower caliber athletes, it safe to assume that their athletic training may only take them so far. If their confidence and mental preparedness is not enriched by their coaches, there may be little room for improvement.

Coaching Techniques

To dive deeper into what coaching strategies can be most beneficial for improvement, a study was conducted to analyze players' perceptions of optimism and coaching methods used after bad performances. Specific coaching methods included explanatory style self-awareness, origin of less optimistic attitudes, and thought/self-talk redirection. Explanatory style self-awareness consisted of coaches using certain techniques to deal with athletes who were less optimistic. While some athletes failed to understand the coach's explanatory style, others lacked the awareness of their own pessimistic attitudes. Many coaches reported that their athletes were unaware of their negative body language and emotions, which forced coaches to promote positive thinking. Origins of less optimistic attitudes explain how an athlete creates pessimistic attitudes and where these attitudes begin. Coaches also stated that parents and previous coaches played a big role in their athletes' negative attitudes. These mindsets were often so ingrained, that it was difficult for coaches to reverse them. Thought/self-talk redirection includes refocusing athletes' negative comments and attitudes about their performances into positive ones. This could include highlighting the positive aspects of their play and refocusing athletes on future performances instead (Wilson et al., 2015).

Characteristics of a Good Coach

While coaching skills are valuable in developing quality athletes, their personal characteristics can also go a long way. From the coach's perspective, some of the most preferred

personal characteristics they would want from their athletes include being emotionally mature, motivated, competitive, coachable, attentive to instruction, and trusting in their coaches (Giacobbi et al, 2002). Coaches who have positive interpersonal relationships and great communication skills can see both team and individual player success. Stewart and Owens (2011) provided some common characteristics of a good coach. The primary characteristic athletes reported from their favorite coaches was social support. This included things like showing concern for their athletes, facilitating a positive environment, and creating solid relationships. Another common characteristic was the use of training and instruction, (e.g., having coaches that emphasize hard work, skill development, technical work/strategies, and can organize other athletic activities). Lastly, athletes reported that positive feedback, autocratic, and democratic behavior were minor, yet important traits of good coaches (Stewart & Owens, 2011). A combination of both great coaching techniques and personalities can not only help develop successful athletes, but also build a successful program.

Team Culture

Team culture was also considered an important factor in developing student-athletes. Building a positive team culture has the potential to harvest a winning mentality, and these wins and losses can act as a “trial and error” process when coaches make decisions within their program. As losing can prove what culture changes did not work, winning can confirm what culture changes did work (Schroeder, 2010). Being able to restructure the team culture is said to be essential for “turnarounds” in response to unsuccessful seasons. While wins and losses are obviously a huge part of coaching, being able to define and articulate team values to athletes is essential for player development. Teaching tools like demonstrating/practicing with student-athletes and giving them the opportunity to lead can be great ways for them understand and

inherit these values. Hosting lectures, guest speakers, team bonding, team building exercises, and utilizing technology are some other avenues that can help convey these messages (Turman, 2003). In terms of garnering the best and most preferred athletes to their teams, most coaches make recruiting a significant element of their work. This is done in order to ensure that coaches bring in athletes who will not only fit the culture of the program, but also fit the coaching style of the coaches themselves. Looking through recruiting profiles, utilizing scouting techniques, and evaluating prospects during official visits are a few ways that coaches are able to gauge whether an athlete is the right fit. One specific coach stated that a prospect came into their official visit with an arrogant attitude towards the current players, and was immediately removed from the recruiting pool. This is a prime example of how player personalities can play a huge part in a coach's decision-making. Regardless of talent, if the coach-athlete compatibility is less than ideal, there is a chance that both parties will not get the results that they want. Establishing rules, rewards, and punishments are another great way to further communicate important team values so that athletes know what is expected of them. When coaches lay out rewards like playing time, scholarships, and other symbolic reinforcements, it has the ability to motivate athletes to perform well. Additionally, punishments like suspensions, running, study hall, and strike systems are great ways to deter student-athletes from certain behaviors (Turman, 2003).

CHAPTER III

Method

Design

This comparative two-group independent samples study was conducted by having collegiate coaches self-evaluate their coaching behaviors in order to determine their perceived tendency to exhibit said behaviors. Additionally, collegiate athletes were asked to identify the coaching behaviors of their ideal coach. Coaches and athletes each received a separate questionnaire to complete, but ultimately evaluated the same five leadership behaviors.

Participants

The research used convenience sampling to evaluate 32 current NCAA collegiate student-athletes consisting of 7 males 25 females from age 19 to 25 ($M = 20.8$, $SD = 1.28$), and 18 current NCAA Collegiate Coaches 10 Males 8 Females from age 24 to 49 ($M = 30.3$, $SD = 8.18$). Coaches and athletes that participated belong to the following sports: Men's/Women's Track & Field/Cross Country, Women's Volleyball, Women's Tennis, Men's Lacrosse, Men's/Women's Swimming, Men's/Women's Golf, Men's Basketball.

Instrument

For the athletes, the Leadership Scale for Sport for Athletes (LSS) was shared to all willing participants that met the criteria of being a current collegiate student-athlete. For the coaches, the Revised Leadership Scale for Sport (RLSS) was shared to all willing participants that met the criteria of being a current collegiate coach. Both questionnaires were administered via Google Forms, and were shared to any qualifying participants that were interested through email and/or social media platforms (Twitter, Instagram, NCAA cohorts, etc.). Additionally,

both questionnaires were measured by five subscales: training and instruction, democratic behavior, autocratic behavior, social support, and positive feedback.

The LSS is a 60-item questionnaire that was used to determine student-athletes' preferences in coaching behaviors. Questions were scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "5 = 'always' (100% of the time); 4 = 'often' (75% of the time); 3 = 'occasionally' (50% of the time); 2 = 'seldom' (25% of the time); and 1 = 'never' (0% of the time)." Athletes were asked to answer the questions based on what leadership behaviors they would prefer their ideal coach to possess. Their answers did not have to be based on their current or previous coaches, but instead how they would envision their model coach to act.

The RLSS was a 40-item questionnaire that was used to determine coaches' perceived tendency to exhibit certain behaviors. These questions were also scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "5 = 'always' (100% of the time); 4 = 'often' (75% of the time); 3 = 'occasionally' (50% of the time); 2 = 'seldom' (25% of the time); and 1 = 'never' (0% of the time)."

Procedure

Participants were contacted both directly and indirectly via email or through social media in order to take part in the study. The recruiting phase required participants to be current collegiate coaches and student-athletes in order to be eligible. Approximately 24 teams were contacted and asked to participate. Of those 24 different teams, about 15 coaches were directly contacted, while any other eligible coach participants were then forwarded the survey by one of those direct contacts. Out of those 15 coaches, 18 subsequently responded. These contacts were obtained by reaching out to the Athletic Director at Goucher College, a Division III school in Maryland, who then forwarded the questionnaire to all of his head coaches. A total of about 262 athletes received the link to the survey. Out of those 262 athletes, 32 completed the survey.

Athletes from the track & field team at Stevenson University, another Division III school in Maryland, and College of Charleston, a Division I school in South Carolina, were also contacted and asked to share the questionnaire to their teammates and coaches. From there, participants were sent a link to their respective Google Form (LSS for athletes and RLSS for coaches). The instructions for the LSS asked that athletes answer all items, even if they were unsure of a response. They were also instructed not to answer these questions with their present coach or any other coach in mind. Instead, answers were to be based on their own personal preference in coaches and what characteristics their ideal coach would possess. Participants were asked to begin each question with, "I prefer my coach to...". For example, "I prefer my coach to encourage close and informal relationships with the athletes". The instructions for the RLSS asked that coaches answer all items based on their tendency to exhibit specific behaviors. They were told to start each question with, "In coaching, I...". For example, "In coaching, I explain to each athlete the techniques and tactics of the sport". Questions to identify gender, age, and which men's/women's sport that the participant belongs to were also added at the beginning of each survey. At the conclusion of the questionnaire, responses were collected upon submission.

CHAPTER IV

Results

According to the data gathered from the LSS, athletes' most preferred leadership behaviors included training behavior ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 0.43$), social support ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 0.61$), and positive feedback ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 0.70$). The least desired behavior for these athletes was autocratic behavior ($M = 2.45$, $SD = 0.91$). For coaches who completed the RLSS, the behaviors they reportedly exhibited the most included positive feedback ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 0.72$) and training behavior ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 0.69$). Complementary to the athletes' responses, coaches' least exhibited behavior was autocratic behavior ($M = 2.22$, $SD = 1.05$). For both athletes and coaches, democratic behavior was only desired and exhibited "occasionally" in their responses ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 0.74$), ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 0.89$).

Table 1

Coaches' Ideal Leadership Mean Ratings by 32 Athletes and 18 Coaches' Self-Perceptions

Leadership Behavior	Athletes Mean	Athletes SD	Coaches Mean	Coaches SD	t-test	p-value	Athlete Rank	Coach Rank
Training	4.44	.43	4.23	.69	1.33	.19	5	4
Social Support	3.97	.61	3.45	1.22	2.01	.05	3	3
Democratic	3.45	.74	3.44	.89	.04	.97	2	2
Autocratic	2.45	.91	2.22	1.05	.81	.42	1	1
Feedback	4.16	.70	4.34	.72	.86	.39	4	5

Survey scales ranged from 1(Never) to 5(Always). Athletes rated their ideal coach, while coaches rated themselves. The ranks of athletes and coaches mean scale ratings were similar. Training and feedback had the highest or 2nd highest mean scale points, while autocratic behavior had the lowest mean scale points.

Athletes and coaches mean leadership survey ratings only differed significantly ($p=.05$) for Social Support (athletes mean = 3.97; coaches mean = 3.45). The rankings of the five leadership behaviors, however, placed Social Support 3rd for both athletes and coaches.

Figure 1

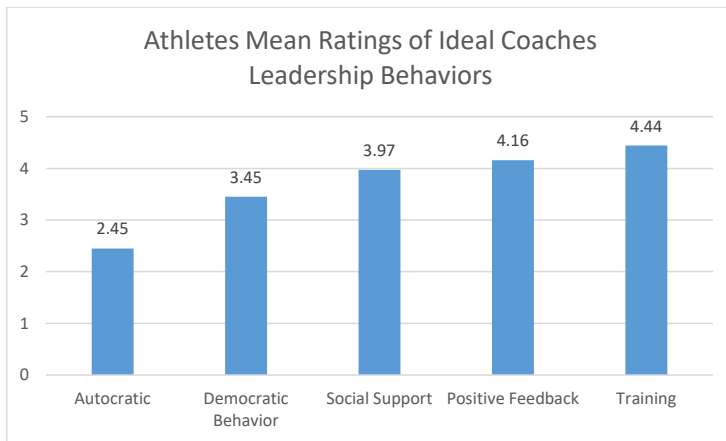
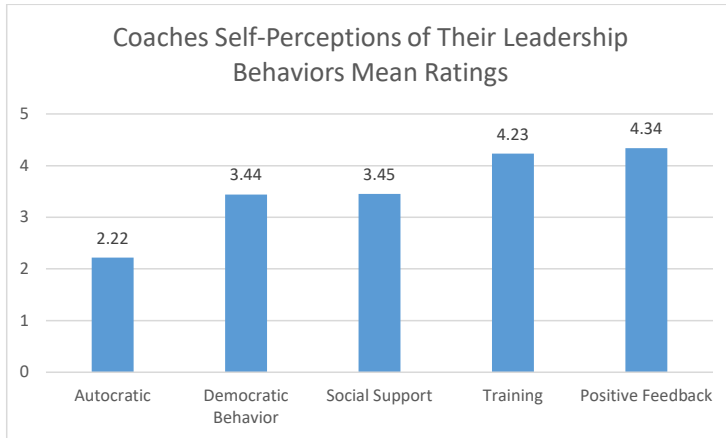


Figure 2



Athletes' perception of the ideal coach and coach's self-perception of themselves were similar on the 5-point survey scale (never-to-always) of leadership behaviors. Autocratic ranked lowest for athletes and coaches, trailing the 2nd lowest behavior by 1 full scale point for athletes and 1.22 scale points for coaches. Training ranked highest for athletes, and positive feedback ranked highest for coaches.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

After gathering data from the results of the study, the initial hypothesis was generally supported. Both coaches and athletes alike reported that one of their most utilized and preferred leadership behaviors was positive feedback. Additionally, the two groups reported that their least utilized and least desired leadership behavior was autocratic behavior.

Implications

Based on these results, it would be highly recommended that collegiate coaches continue to deliver positive feedback to their athletes, as that was one of the most commonly exhibited behaviors between both parties. It is also highly advised that coaches provide more social support and training behavior to their athletes, as those were also highly favored behaviors based on the athletes' responses. These findings were very much in line with the previous research of Stewart & Owens (2011) who stressed the importance of training and instruction. Coaches should also continue to refrain from any autocratic behaviors, as this was the least desirable characteristic reported on both sides. It also seems as though athletes and coaches are on the same accord in terms of the importance of democratic behavior, as both parties mostly reported a healthy balance of occasional democracy within their coach-athlete dynamic. Democratic characteristics were similarly reported as desirable in the previous research of Parker et. al. (2012) & Cramer & Prentice-Dunn (2007) on the importance of collaboration in the decision-making process.

Having a better idea and understanding of both preferred coaching behaviors and perceived coaching behaviors can be beneficial for college athletics in the recruiting process especially. Knowing which particular behaviors certain coaches possess, while ensuring that

athletes are aware of which behaviors they prefer from their coaches, could potentially help programs during the recruiting process. Having the ability to know exactly what type of coaching style a coach has before making a commitment to a particular school could potentially reduce the number of student-athlete transfers from year-to-year. Furthermore, this data could contribute to the retention of both student-athletes and coaches at particular programs. Institutions could more easily pursue a coach whose methods align with the culture of the team.

Threats to Validity

Given the fact that such a small sample size of both collegiate coaches and athletes was gathered, the results may not truly be able to represent the entire population. Also, as coaches completed the survey, there may have been a level of personal bias involved in how they perceive their own coaching behaviors. There were a few minor issues with the items on the LSS as well. The wording of a few questions warranted reverse scoring during data analysis, (i.e. “Not explain (their) action”). Moreover, there could be differences in responses across NCAA Divisions (I-III) that could possibly influence the results. The differences in competition level, incentives, and stakes from division-to-division could potentially affect the way coaches and athletes responded.

Future Research

Future directions this research can take include gathering a larger sample size of both athletes and coaches in order to better represent the entire population. Future research could also look into how these responses differ across all three NCAA divisions. Since each division operates with their own unique policies, rules, and regulations, there is a chance that leadership behaviors could vary. Looking at how these responses differ across various collegiate sports could also be a beneficial and informative direction to take this research. A study that looks at

gender differences between these perceived and preferred leadership behaviors is also a possibility.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it seems as though athletes and coaches need positive feedback within their coach-athlete relationship the most. Additionally, both parties need to continue to find a good balance of democratic behavior in order to stay aligned. Training behavior and social support should be exhibited more on the coaching side of things in order to meet the demands of the athletes, while autocratic behavior should be displayed the least.

As far as future research goes, the influence gender and NCAA divisions can have on these responses could provide a better understanding of the coach-athlete dynamic. This data could also play an integral part in improving student-athlete retention, recruiting, and improving the overall collegiate athletic experience for everyone involved.

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