



How a team of champions becomes a champion team

Athlete leaders as key figures for optimal team functioning

Dr. Katrien Fransen

Prof. Filip Boen, Prof. Norbert Vanbeselaere, Prof. Bert De Cuyper, and Prof. Gert Vande Broek

December 2014

About Sport Psychology & Coaching

Royal Belgium Volleyball Federation

When the sales figures of a company decrease or the postulated profits are not obtained, often the management is blamed. This also happens, and maybe even more frequently, within sport teams. When a team takes several defeats in a row, the cause is often attributed to the team's leadership. In their quest for a scapegoat, headlines in the news papers often point to the coach and it is the coach who sometimes pays for this lack of performance with his job. During the previous soccer season, it was once again difficult to keep up with the number of coach substitutions. But is the coach really the one to blame?

VRT sport journalist Peter Vandenbempt analyzed the worst competition start in 15 years of the Belgian soccer champion R.S.C. Anderlecht by emphasizing the crucial role of *athlete* leaders to strengthen the team confidence of their teammates: "The main problem is the organization and the confidence in defense. With every counterattack, the players are trembling with fear. There is a harrowing lack of leadership on the field. We have already noted that before. No one takes the team in tow when the team encounters difficulties. The best proof is that not once this season Anderlecht has been able to come back after being behind."

It is well-known that athlete leadership and team confidence strongly impact on the team performance. Although the importance of both factors has been implicitly acknowledged in the sports world, only sparse in-depth and well-grounded scientific information is available. The present article presents an overview of a doctoral thesis (Fransen, 2014), in which a sound empirically-based basis has been developed for both athlete leadership (Part 1) and team confidence (Part 2), and which also analyzed the impact of athlete leaders on the team confidence of their teammates (Part 3). By doing so, we did not constrain our work to the description of this effect, but we also tried to reveal the mechanisms through which athlete leaders influence teammates' team confidence and as such foster an optimal team functioning. Athlete leaders proved to be of crucial importance for an optimal team performance.

Part 1 – Athlete Leadership

Although the majority of the leadership literature focused on the coach only, sport participants also recognize the importance of high-quality athlete leaders within the team and thereby primarily point at the team captain. The captain, as formal leader of the team, is often perceived as the leader of the team, both on and off the field. High expectations are resting on the team captain's shoulders. But are these high expectations appropriate? Is the captain always the best leader?

We examined these assumptions by surveying 4451 players and coaches in different team sports in Flanders: basketball, soccer, hockey, netball, handball, water polo, rugby, and ice hockey (Fransen, Vanbeselaere, De Cuyper, Vande Broek, & Boen, 2014b). We distinguished between four leadership roles that players can occupy:

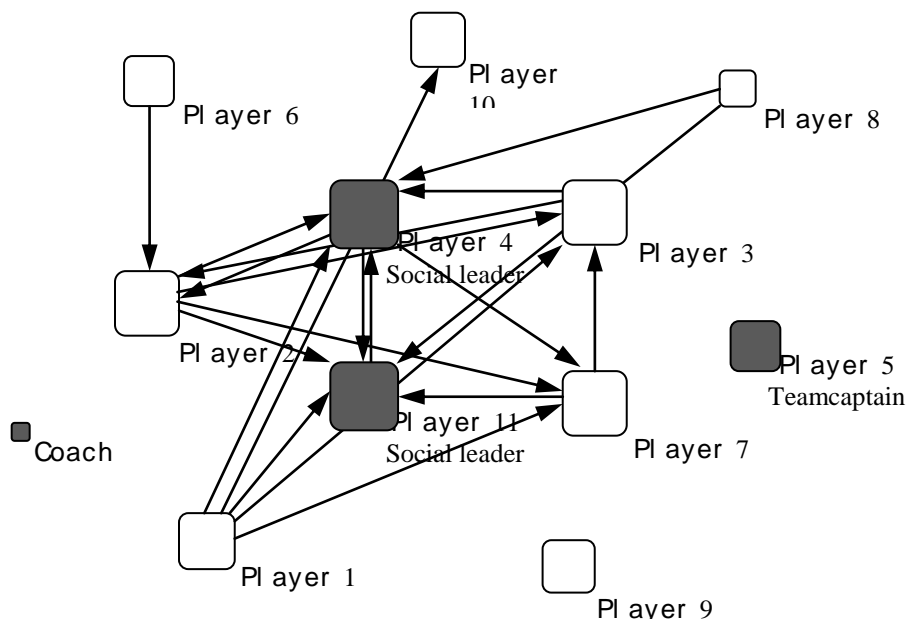
- *the task leader (in charge on the field, adjusts other players and provides tactical instructions)*
- *the motivational leader (motivates the other players on the field to go to any extreme)*

- *the social leader* (cares for a good team atmosphere outside the field)
- and *the external leader* (handles the communication with club management, media, and sponsors)

The functions of the task and the motivational leader can thus be situated on the field, whereas the social and the external leader take the lead off the field. The results demonstrate that only 2% of the participants reported that these four leadership roles were fulfilled by the same player. Leadership is thus often spread throughout the team; different players take the lead on and off the field. In practice, ‘the leader’ rarely exists.

Given the status of the team captain as ‘leader of the team’, players and coaches often intuitively expect that the team captain occupies most of the above-mentioned leadership roles. But how is it in reality? Are captains able to meet these high expectations? Our findings revealed that only 1% of the participants perceived their captain as best leader on each of the four leadership roles. In only 4% of the teams, the captain occupied three of the four leadership roles. Even more remarkable is that in almost half of the teams (44%) the team captain is not perceived as best leader on one of the four leadership roles: neither on the field (task or motivational leader), nor off the field (social or external leader). Other players appeared to be the real leaders within the team, which we will label as the informal leaders. The only attribute in which the team captain does ‘excel’ compared to the other leaders was the number of years that he/she already played for the team.

In another research study (Fransen, Van Puyenbroeck, et al., 2015b), we examined 46 complete teams (575 players), thereby using for the first time a Social Network Analysis as pioneering technique to map the full leadership structure within sport teams. The image below shows this full leadership structure for one of those 46 teams, with a focus on social leadership in particular. Similar networks can be constructed for task, motivational, or external leadership.



An arrow from player A to player B shows that player A gives the highest score to player B for social leadership qualities. The bigger and more central the square of a player, the more this player is perceived as a good social leader by his teammates. In this team players 4 and 11 have the highest scores, which means that they are considered to be the social leaders of the team.

By using this approach, informal athlete leaders can be compared with the team captain as formal athlete leader and with the coach. For example, in the figure presented above, the formal leaders (coach and team captain) are both on the outside of this network, indicating that they do not fulfill social leadership functions. Our findings over the 46 teams demonstrate that the team captain was perceived in half of the teams as best task and external leader. Informal athlete leaders outscore both the team captain and the coach with respect to leadership in general, and motivational and social leadership in particular. The monopoly of the coach thus constitutes a clearly old-fashioned idea that gave way to shared leadership: the coach takes the lead together with the team captain and the informal athlete leaders, in which certainly the role of the latter should not be underestimated.

Furthermore, two other studies investigated the characteristics that turn a leader into a *good* leader. The first study relied on a sample of 4451 players and coaches, active in nine different team sports (Fransen, Vanbeselaere, De Cuyper, Vande Broek, & Boen, 2015). From the 27 characteristics that were examined, 'influence on the team confidence of the other players' emerged as most decisive characteristic for the quality of the task leader, the motivational leader, the social leader, and even the external leader. If these leaders are thought to believe that their team will win the game and are able to transfer this confidence to the other players, they are perceived as *good* leaders. In addition, respondents reported that it was important that the leader was socially well accepted by the teammates. The latter characteristic was found to be the most decisive attribute in the second study, which examined 575 players (Fransen, Van Puyenbroeck, et al., 2015a). More specifically, the extent to which players felt connected with their leader most strongly determined the extent to which they perceived their leader as a *good* leader. These findings held for general leadership, as well as for task, motivational, social, and external leadership. Furthermore, our findings demonstrated that teams having high-quality athlete leadership were characterized by players who identified more strongly with their team and by higher levels of task and social cohesion in the team (Loughead, Fransen, Van Puyenbroeck, Hoffmann, & Boen, 2015).

Part 2 – Team Confidence

After establishing a sound theoretical basis for athlete leadership, in this part, we provide a deeper insight in the construct of team confidence. We thereby distinguish between two types of team confidence: process-oriented team confidence (e.g., the confidence in the capacities of your team to communicate well, encourage each other, exerting maximum effort) and outcome-oriented team confidence (i.e., the confidence that your team will attain its goal, such as winning

the game). We demonstrated that these two types of team confidence are clearly distinct, albeit related (Fransen, Kleinert, Dithurbide, Vanbeselaere, & Boen, 2014).

Team confidence is a dynamic construct that varies in the course of weeks, days, or even within a single game. However, a major limitation of the existing research is its inability to capture this dynamic nature of team confidence. Therefore we developed a new short scale, which can measure team confidence based on observations on the field: the Observational Collective Efficacy Scale for Sports (OCESS; Fransen, Kleinert, et al., 2014). The OCESS might constitute a first step towards more dynamic in-game measures of team confidence during a game.

The fact that team confidence is important for optimal team functioning has not only been demonstrated in research, but can also be observed on the field. The importance of team confidence was for example illustrated in the 2014 final of the Europa League in soccer, in which FC Sevilla triumphed over Benfica Lissabon in the penalty shoot-outs. After the game, Jorge Jesus, the losing coach of Benfica, conveyed to the press: “At the end of the game we were the better team. We created opportunities, but they did not work out. The team that was most confident during the penalties was Sevilla. With regard to the game play, the best team did not win the Europa League” (Sporza, 2014). Apparently, sometimes team confidence even outscores the performance. We further examined the link between team confidence and performance by measuring team confidence not only before or after the game, but for the first time also during the game (Fransen, Decroos, et al., 2015). Our findings revealed that the more confident athletes were concerning the abilities of their team during half-time, the better they perceived the team performance during the second half.

Although the positive impact of team confidence on the functioning of a sport team is widely confirmed, not much is known on the development of this team confidence. We therefore identified the perceived sources of team confidence in volleyball (N = 2356) (Fransen et al., 2012), in soccer (N = 1028) and in basketball (N = 1692) (Fransen, Vanbeselaere, De Cuyper, Vande Broek, & Boen, 2014a). The most decisive sources for high levels of team confidence were ‘positive encouraging communication by the players’ and ‘positive coaching’. In contrast, ‘negative communication’ and ‘negative emotions’ were perceived as strongest predictors of low levels of team confidence. Furthermore, the team confidence expressed by the athlete leaders was perceived as a very important predictor of the team confidence of both players and coaches.

In a third part we will discuss the influence of athlete leaders on team functioning.

References

- Drucker, P. F. (1992). *Managing the non-profit organization: Practices and principles*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Fransen, K. (2014). *Athlete leaders as key figures for optimal team functioning: The mediating role of players' team confidence and their team identification*. Doctoral dissertation, KU Leuven, Leuven.
- Fransen, K., Coffee, P., Vanbeselaere, N., Slater, M., De Cuyper, B., & Boen, F. (2014). The impact of athlete leaders on team members' team outcome confidence: A test of mediation by team identification and collective efficacy. *The Sport Psychologist*, Manuscript in press. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1123/tsp.2013-0141>
- Fransen, K., Decroos, S., Vanbeselaere, N., De Cuyper, B., Vande Broek, G., Vanroy, J., & Boen, F. (2015). Is team confidence the key to success? The reciprocal relation between collective efficacy, team outcome confidence, and perceptions of team performance during soccer games. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, Manuscript in press. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02640414.2014.942689>
- Fransen, K., Haslam, S. A., Steffens, N. K., Vanbeselaere, N., De Cuyper, B., & Boen, F. (2014). Believing in us: Exploring leaders' capacity to enhance team confidence and performance by building a sense of shared social identity. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied*, In press. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/xap0000033>
- Fransen, K., Kleinert, J., Dithurbide, L., Vanbeselaere, N., & Boen, F. (2014). Collective efficacy or team outcome confidence? Development and validation of the Observational Collective Efficacy Scale for Sports (OCESS). *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 45, 121-137. doi: 10.7352/IJSP.2014.45.121
- Fransen, K., Van Puyenbroeck, S., Loughhead, T. M., De Cuyper, B., Vanbeselaere, N., Vande Broek, G., & Boen, F. (2015a). *The art of athlete leadership: Identifying high-quality leadership at the individual and team level through Social Network Analysis*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Fransen, K., Van Puyenbroeck, S., Loughhead, T. M., De Cuyper, B., Vanbeselaere, N., Vande Broek, G., & Boen, F. (2015b). *Who takes the lead? Social Network Analysis as pioneering tool to investigate shared leadership within sports teams*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Fransen, K., Vanbeselaere, N., De Cuyper, B., Vande Broek, G., & Boen, F. (2014a). Perceived sources of team confidence in soccer and basketball. *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise*, In press.
- Fransen, K., Vanbeselaere, N., De Cuyper, B., Vande Broek, G., & Boen, F. (2014b). The myth of the team captain as principal leader: Extending the athlete leadership classification within sport teams. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 32(14), 1389-1397. doi: 10.1080/02640414.2014.891291
- Fransen, K., Vanbeselaere, N., De Cuyper, B., Vande Broek, G., & Boen, F. (2015). *When is a leader considered as a good leader? Perceived impact on teammates' confidence and social acceptance as key ingredients*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Fransen, K., Vanbeselaere, N., Exadaktylos, V., Vande Broek, G., De Cuyper, B., Berckmans, D., . . . Boen, F. (2012). "Yes, we can!": Perceptions of collective efficacy sources in volleyball. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 30(7), 641-649. doi: 10.1080/02640414.2011.653579



- Haslam, S. A., Reicher, S. D., & Platow, M. J. (2011). *The new psychology of leadership: Identity, influence and power*. New York: Psychology Press.
- Loughead, T. M., Fransen, K., Van Puyenbroeck, S., Hoffmann, M. D., & Boen, F. (2015). *An examination of the relationship between athlete leadership and cohesion using social network analysis*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Sporza. (2014). Sevilla wint de Europa League na strafschoppen. Retrieved 15 May, 2014, from <http://www.sporza.be/>
- Steffens, N. K., Haslam, S. A., Reicher, S. D., Platow, M. J., Fransen, K., Yang, J., . . . Boen, F. (2014). Leadership as social identity management: Introducing the Identity Leadership Inventory (ILI) to assess and validate a four-dimensional model. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 25, 1001-1024. doi: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2014.05.002