



# How a team of champions becomes a champion team

Athlete leaders as key figures for optimal team functioning

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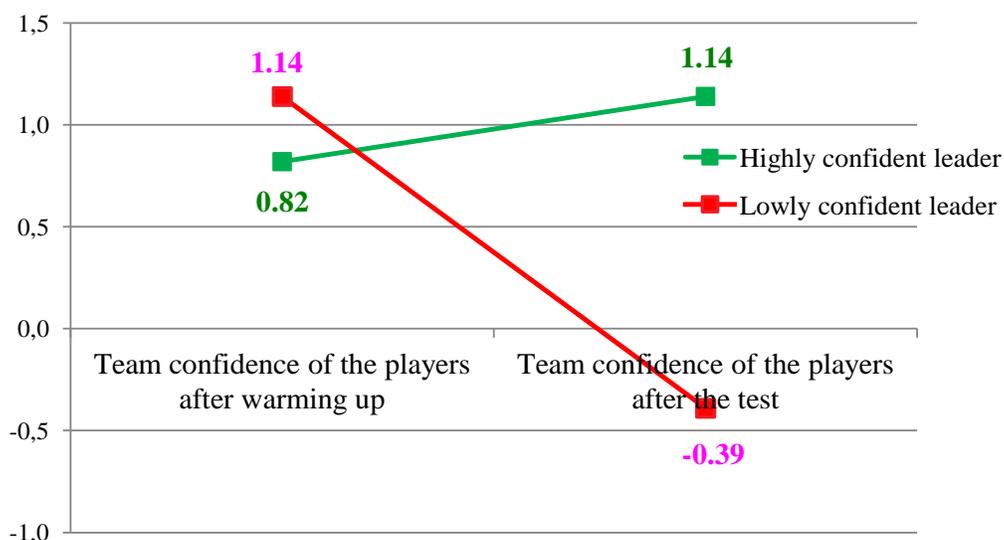
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### Part 3 – The Influence of Athlete Leaders on Team Functioning

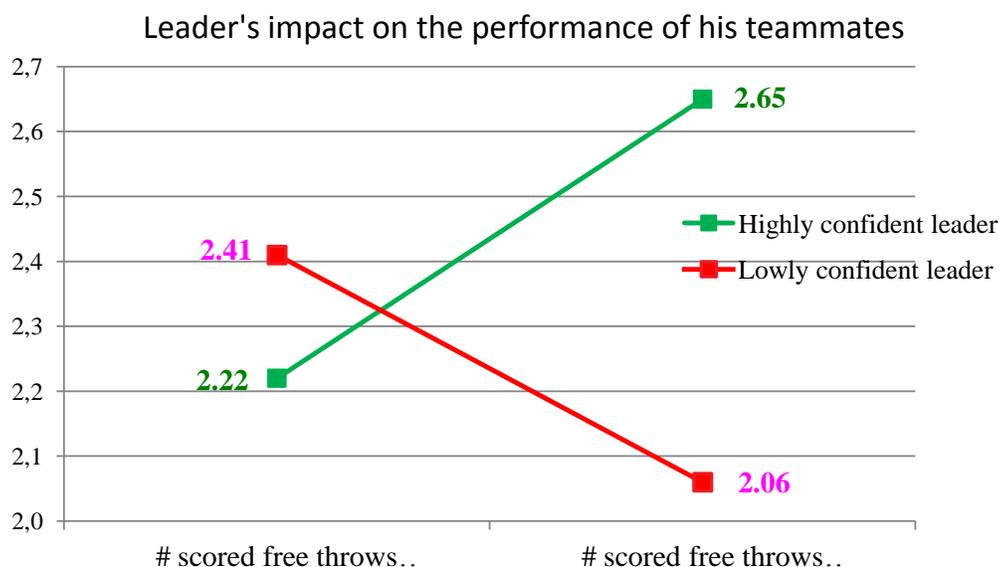
After having obtained a deeper insight in athlete leadership (Part 1) and in team confidence (Part 2), we will investigate in this part whether athlete leaders can influence teammates' team confidence and the underlying mechanisms in two different ways. First, we examined the impact of athlete leaders on the team confidence of their teammates by surveying 2876 players and coaches, active in nine different team sports (Fransen, Coffee, et al., 2014).

Second, we conducted an experimental study with 102 players in a basketball context in which the confidence of the team leader was manipulated (Fransen, Haslam, et al., 2014). The appointed leader of this newly formed basketball team (a research confederate, a fact that the other players did not realize) was asked to express either high team confidence (e.g., by a positive body language and by verbal expression of this confidence) or low team confidence (e.g., by discouraged body language or frustrated reactions when a teammate missed a free throw). The results (presented in the figure below) revealed an effect of team confidence contagion throughout the team such that team members had greater team confidence when the leader expressed high (rather than low) confidence in the team's success.

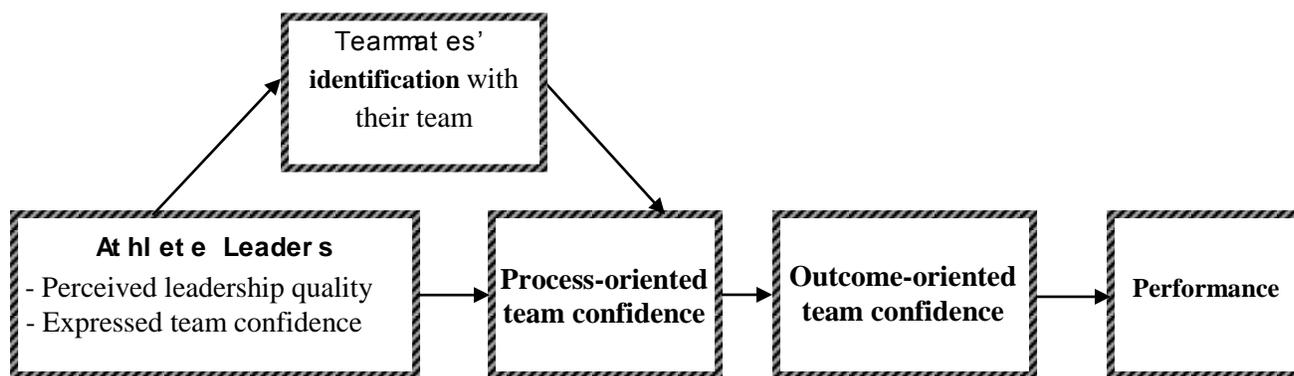
Leader's impact on the team confidence of his teammates



In addition, the findings indicated that when leaders expressed high team confidence, team members' *performance* (number of scored free throws) *increased* during the test. By contrast, when leaders expressed low confidence, team members' *performance decreased* during the test, as presented in the figure below.



Athlete leaders thus seem to have the capacity to influence the team confidence of their teammates (in both positive and negative ways), thereby significantly affecting team members' performance. With regard to the underlying mechanisms that underpin this confidence contagion, both studies provided support for the model presented below.



Our findings thus demonstrated that high-quality athlete leadership is related with a strong process-oriented team confidence of players and coaches (e.g., 'our team is able to perform certain tasks successfully'). This process-oriented team confidence has in turn a positive influence on players' confidence in a successful outcome (e.g., 'our team will win this game'). As such, these findings address the question whether coaches should always convince their players to keep believing in the victory. Although a game is never finished before the final whistle, the persistent belief in a positive outcome is not always realistic and is dependent on external factors (like the opponent, referee decisions, etc.). Instead of focusing on the outcome, it is therefore more important that all players always believe in the capacities of



their team to perform their own process successfully. This confidence in the process is more controllable and leads in turn to a stronger confidence in the outcome.

Furthermore, the above model demonstrates how exactly athlete leaders can influence the team confidence of their teammates. The PhD thesis that is summarized in the present articles provided for the first time evidence that the Social Identity Approach to Leadership (Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2011) can also be applied in a sport context by demonstrating that high-quality athlete leaders are able to cause their teammates to think, feel, and behave in terms of 'we' (as a team), rather than 'I' (as individuals). This leadership theory is nicely illustrated by a quote from Drucker (1992): "The leaders who work most effectively, it seems to me, never say 'I'. And that's not because they have trained themselves not to say 'I'. They don't think 'I'. They think 'team'." As Lewis Ergen noted "the ratio of We's to I's is the best indicator of the development of a team." The present findings suggest that athlete leaders are of crucial importance to foster this sense of 'we'. Moreover, strengthening this 'we' feeling constitutes a means for the athlete leaders through which they foster the team confidence of their teammates.

We also developed a questionnaire to assess this identity based leadership style, both in organizations and in sport teams: the *Identity Leadership Inventory* (ILI; Steffens et al., 2014). This questionnaire distinguishes between four dimensions of effective leadership. First, leaders need to be *prototypes of the team* (e.g., when the team prototype is characterized by a strong perseverance, the leader should embody this fighting spirit). Second, leaders need to be *in-group champions* and stand up for the team's interests at all times. Third, leaders need to be *entrepreneurs of a shared identity*. They should bring the group together by creating a shared sense of 'we' and by clarifying which aspects differentiate the team from other groups. Fourth and finally, leaders need to *embed this identity in reality* by making the team's identity visible for the outside world and by helping the team to achieve progress.

We can conclude that athlete leaders seem to hold the flaming torch of team confidence. The sparks, emanating from the leader's torch, can ignite the other team members, thereby causing the fire to quickly spread throughout the team. This fire can foster the passion in a positive way (when the leader expresses high team confidence) or (and this may be even more pertinent) cause a stifling feeling in a negative way (when the leader expresses low team confidence). It can thus be concluded that athlete leaders who believe in 'our team' and express this confidence are able to create a sense of 'we', which not only fosters teammates' team confidence, but also improves their performance. High-quality athlete leaders thus facilitate optimal team functioning, which goes hand in hand with a better team performance. In this way, a team of champions can become a champion team.



## AUTHOR

Katrien Fransen obtained the degree of Master Kinesiology with expertise in Training and Coaching at the KU Leuven (Leuven, Belgium). Besides her university education, she obtained the highest coaching degree in volleyball and acquired coaching experience as the assistant-coach of the national youth and junior teams and as the head coach of the university volleyball team. Currently, she teaches both theoretical and practical courses volleyball for the Bachelor's students in the Kinesiology Program at the KU Leuven.

Furthermore, Katrien Fransen acquired research expertise in the domain of sport psychology and coaching and successfully completed her doctoral dissertation in the Faculty of Kinesiology (KU Leuven). Her dissertation was titled: "Athlete leaders as key figures for optimal team functioning: The mediating role of players' team confidence and their team identification." As a postdoctoral researcher at the KU Leuven, Katrien's current research mainly focuses on shared leadership in sports teams.



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