

Leadership Styles of Rugby Coaches in Romania: A Cross-Sectional Descriptive Study

David POPA¹, Dumitru Rareș CIOCOI-POP¹ , Sergiu POP^{1*} ,
Dan Mihai GHERȚOIU¹, Maria Daniela MACRA-OȘORHEAN¹ 

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ABSTRACT. *Introduction:* Leadership style is a central component of coaching practice and may shape the interpersonal climate within team sports. This study investigates leadership styles among rugby coaches across developmental categories in Romanian clubs. *Objectives:* The primary objective was to identify the prevalence of democratic, authoritarian (autocratic), and laissez-faire (neglectful/passive) leadership styles among rugby coaches across age categories (Mini Rugby, U14, U16, U18, U20, Seniors). *Materials and Methods:* The study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional design using a researcher-developed Leadership Style Scale, conceptually informed by the Coaches' Interpersonal Style Questionnaire. The questionnaire included 10 items measuring three leadership styles and was administered online via Google Forms to a sample of 40 male rugby coaches aged 24–50 years. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale (1 = never; 5 = frequently/always). Data were collected anonymously over a one-month period (May–June 2025) and analyzed using descriptive statistics, with results visualized through comparative graphs by age category. *Results:* Democratic leadership recorded the highest mean scores across all age categories, while laissez-faire leadership showed consistently low values. Authoritarian leadership displayed greater variability between categories, with higher mean scores at the senior level. *Conclusions:* The findings indicate a predominant use of democratic leadership practices across developmental levels in Romanian rugby coaching, accompanied by situational use of directive behaviors and limited reliance on

¹ Faculty of Physical Education and Sport, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

* Corresponding author: sergiu.pop@ubbcluj.ro

passive leadership. These descriptive results provide a basis for further research examining how coaching leadership styles relate to athlete experiences and team processes.

Keywords: *coaching leadership styles, rugby, democratic leadership, authoritarian leadership, laissez-faire leadership*

INTRODUCTION

Leadership remains a fundamental aspect of sport coaching, shaping athletes' experiences, motivation, and long-term engagement in physical activity. Coaches are not only instructors of technical skills but also architects of the social and motivational climates in which athletes operate (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). How coaches make decisions, communicate expectations, and involve athletes in problem solving can influence not only performance outcomes but also psychological well-being and team cohesion (Jin, Lee, & Chung 2022; Kim & Cruz, 2016). In many contemporary sport environments, leadership is viewed not solely as a set of behaviors but as a dynamic interaction between coaches' styles and athletes' developmental needs.

Early leadership research in sport adopted a simple triadic framework—autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011; Raidbard, 2019). Despite the emergence of more complex leadership models, this triad remains useful for understanding fundamental differences in how authority and participation are managed during training and competition. Autocratic coaching is typically characterized by unilateral decision-making and directive control, whereas democratic leadership involves shared decision processes and reciprocal dialogue. Laissez-faire leadership, by contrast, reflects minimal intervention and delegation of decisions to athletes (Sevil-Serrano et al., 2021). Democratic decision making and autonomy support, in particular, have been associated with higher athlete satisfaction and positive team climate, whereas highly directive or controlling leadership can undermine athletes' intrinsic motivation and cohesion (Delrue et al., 2019; Sevil-Serrano et al., 2021).

The developmental context of sport introduces additional complexity to leadership dynamics. Youth athletes experience different physical, cognitive, and social demands compared to older or senior athletes, and these developmental distinctions can shape both athlete needs and coach strategies (Reynders et al., 2020; Zhu et al, 2024). Coaches working with younger age groups often prioritize learning, enjoyment, and supportive communication, which align with participative leadership behaviors. In more competitive or senior contexts, increasing performance

pressure and organizational expectations may encourage more directive strategies (Lefebvre, Turnnidge, & Côté, 2021). This developmental perspective underscores a need for deeper understanding of how coach leadership varies across age categories, rather than assuming uniform coaching approaches across the athlete development pathway.

Despite the steady growth of research on coach leadership, designs that systematically compare leadership behaviors across multiple age categories within the same sport remain relatively uncommon. Bibliometric mapping of the field shows that most studies examine associations between coach leadership and athletes' psychological outcomes, often using mixed-sport samples or focusing on a single competitive level (Cruz & Kim, 2023).

Rugby presents an ideal context for such research due to its structured progression from introductory youth levels through to senior competition, entailing evolving performance demands and psychosocial challenges (Witherspoon, 2024). Identifying patterns of leadership behavior across age categories can offer insight into how coaches adjust their approaches to developmental and competitive contexts, and how these adjustments relate to broader goals of athlete engagement and satisfaction (Brown & Arnold, 2019). Recent rugby-focused work highlights the influence of coaching leadership on team functioning and psychosocial outcomes in youth contexts (Hirose et al., 2025), while age-grade comparisons within non-elite rugby have begun to explore how coach behaviors and coach-athlete relationships differ across child, adolescent, and adult teams (Brown & Arnold (2019), Smith et al., 2023). In addition, rugby leadership appears strongly shaped by the socio-cultural and organizational environment in which coaching takes place, suggesting that "effective leadership" may vary across contexts and developmental stages (Groves & Clements, 2024). Together, these findings suggest that within-sport, age-category comparisons are both feasible and theoretically valuable, yet still underrepresented in the broader coach leadership literature.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to examine leadership style tendencies among rugby coaches in Romania and to explore whether these tendencies differ across competitive age categories. The study also focused on comparison between leadership style scores across age categories in order to detect potential differences associated with competitive level, perceived by coaches working with athletes at six developmental levels: Mini Rugby, Under-14 (U14), Under-16 (U16), Under-18 (U18), Under-20 (U20), and Senior teams.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study involved 40 rugby coaches affiliated with rugby clubs in Romania. All participants were male, aged between 24 and 50 years, and were actively engaged in coaching athletes at different stages of development. The sample included coaches working in six competitive categories: Mini Rugby (n = 14), Under 14 (n = 7), Under 16 (n = 5), Under 18 (n = 6), Under 20 (n = 4), and Senior (n = 4). Prior to participation, all coaches were informed about the purpose of the study and the confidential handling of their responses. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

Data collection was conducted over a one-month period, between May and June 2025. The questionnaire was administered online using Google Forms and distributed through electronic communication channels. Participants completed the questionnaire individually and anonymously.

The online format facilitated standardized data collection while minimizing logistical constraints associated with face-to-face administration and encouraging honest self-reporting of coaching practices.

Leadership style tendencies were assessed using a structured 10-item questionnaire designed to measure three leadership styles: autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire. The instrument used was a researcher-developed Leadership Style Scale, conceptually informed by the Coaches' Interpersonal Style Questionnaire (Pulido et al., 2018). The scale was designed to assess coaches' typical leadership behaviours in training and competitive settings.

Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The autocratic leadership dimension was assessed through three items, the democratic leadership dimension through four items, and the laissez-faire leadership dimension through three items. The structure of the instrument is presented in Table 1. For each participant, mean scores were calculated separately for the three leadership dimensions, with higher scores indicating a stronger tendency toward the respective leadership style.

Table 1. Structure of the researcher-developed Leadership Style Scale used

Leadership style	Item numbers	Conceptual description of item content
Democratic leadership	1, 4, 7, 10	Participative decision-making, soliciting athlete feedback, joint goal setting, open discussion of training plans and roles, integration of staff input
Authoritarian (autocratic) leadership	2, 5, 8	Unilateral decision-making, directive communication, public correction of errors, firm instructions under pressure

Leadership style	Item numbers	Conceptual description of item content
Laissez-faire (neglectful/passive) leadership	3, 6, 9	Low involvement in conflict resolution, limited monitoring of attendance and engagement, delegation of responsibilities without systematic follow-up

The collected data were processed using Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistical procedures were employed to summarize leadership style tendencies across the six developmental categories. Specifically, mean values were calculated for each leadership dimension (autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire) within each age category. The results were subsequently presented through graphical representations to facilitate the interpretation of leadership style profiles across developmental levels.

RESULTS

To obtain a structured overview of leadership styles across coaching categories, the present study grouped the 10 items of the Leadership Style Scale into three conceptual dimensions: democratic leadership, authoritarian (autocratic) leadership, and laissez-faire (neglectful/passive) leadership.

This classification reflects the theoretical organization of the instrument and allows a differentiated examination of coaching behaviors across age categories. The graphical representations facilitate a comparative interpretation of leadership style distributions across developmental stages.

Figure 1 presents the mean scores for democratic leadership across coaching categories. High and relatively homogeneous values were observed across all groups, ranging from 3.88 (Mini Rugby) to 4.25 (U16 and U18). The remaining categories displayed similarly elevated values: U14 ($M = 4.07$), U20 ($M = 4.12$), and Seniors ($M = 4.00$).

Figure 2 illustrates the comparative distribution of mean scores for authoritarian leadership across the six age categories. The highest value was recorded at the senior level ($M = 3.83$), followed by U14 ($M = 3.38$) and Mini Rugby ($M = 3.26$). Lower mean values were observed in the intermediate and upper youth categories, with U16 ($M = 2.80$), U18 ($M = 2.67$), and the lowest score at U20 ($M = 2.42$).

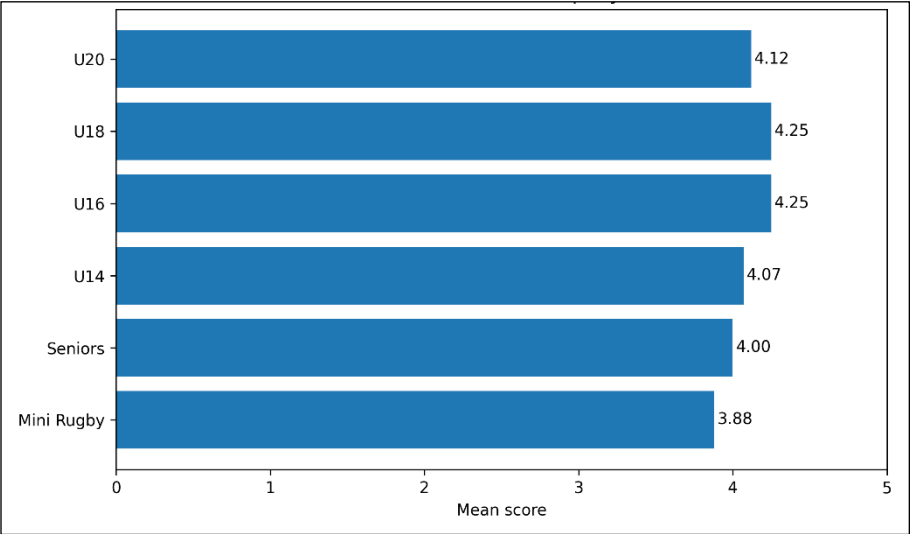


Figure 1. Democratic leadership style among participants

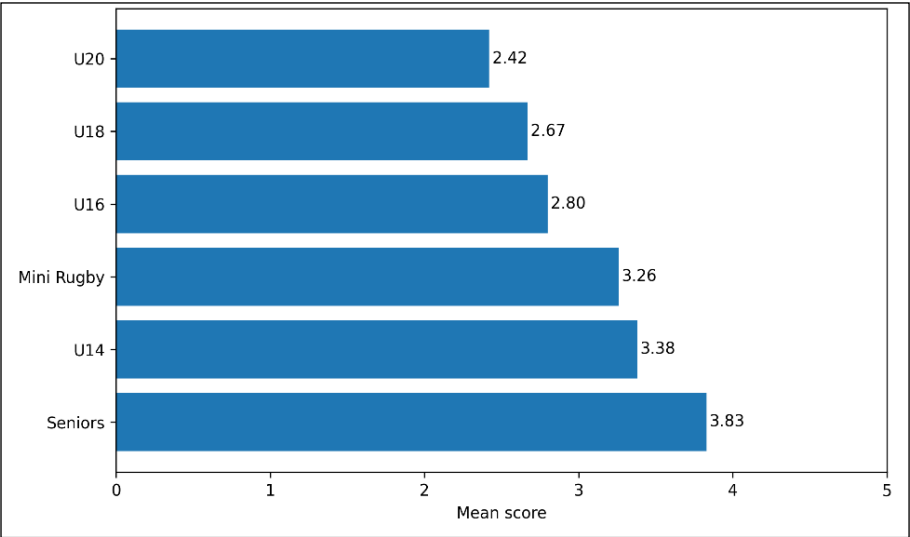


Figure 2. Authoritarian leadership style among coaches

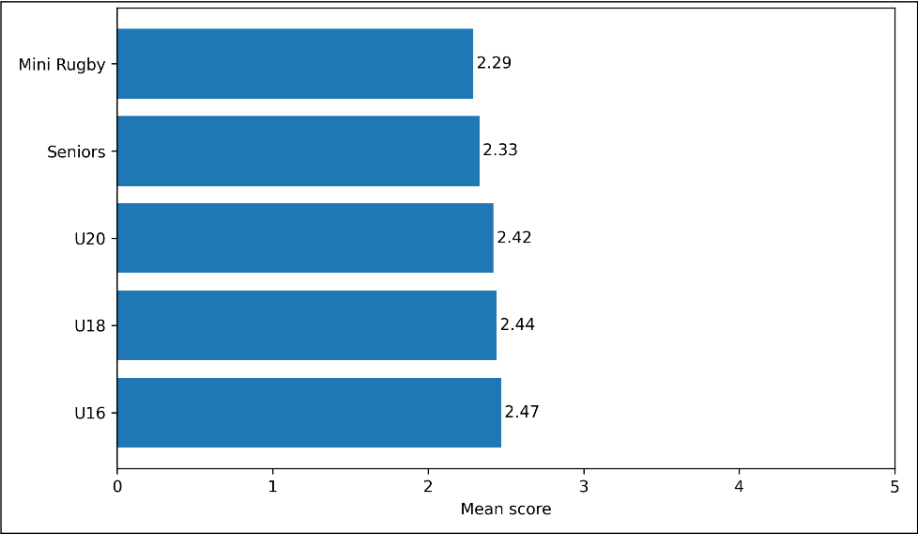


Figure 3. Laissez-faire leadership style by age categories

Figure 3 shows the distribution of laissez-faire leadership scores across age categories. Mean values were uniformly low, ranging between 2.19 (U14) and 2.47 (U16). Comparable values were observed in Mini Rugby (M = 2.29), Seniors (M = 2.33), U18 (M = 2.44), and U20 (M = 2.42).

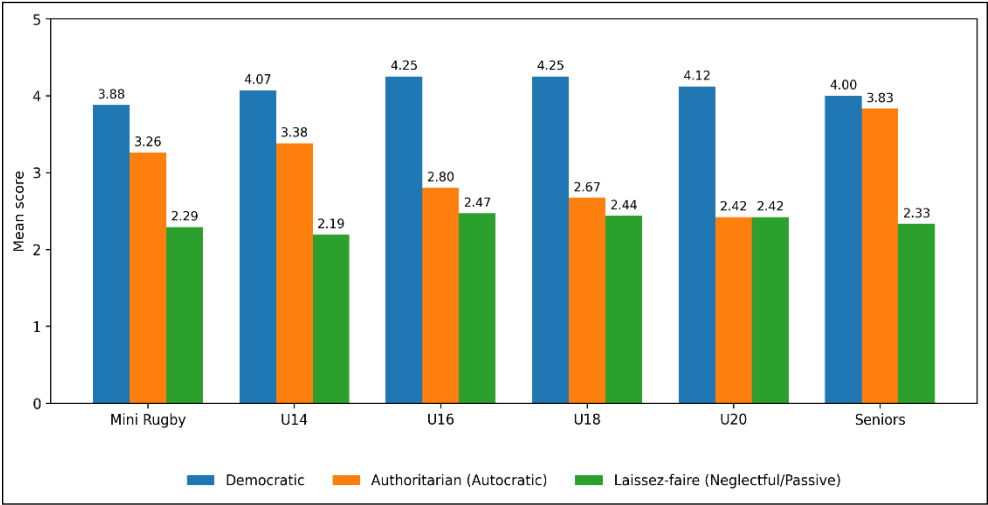


Fig. 4. Comparative leadership style by age category

Figure 4 summarizes the relative distribution of democratic, authoritarian, and laissez-faire leadership styles across age categories, highlighting the predominance of democratic leadership at all levels.

DISCUSSIONS

The present study examined leadership styles among rugby coaches across six age categories using a researcher-developed Leadership Style Scale adapted conceptually from the Coaches' Interpersonal Style Questionnaire (Pulido et al., 2018). The findings indicate a consistent predominance of democratic leadership behaviors across all developmental levels, accompanied by moderate use of authoritarian practices and minimal reliance on laissez-faire approaches.

The dominance of democratic leadership observed in the present sample aligns with contemporary coaching frameworks that emphasize athlete involvement, open communication, and shared goal-setting as central components of effective coaching practice (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). Across all age categories, democratic leadership showed relatively high and homogeneous mean values (Fig. 1), suggesting that participative behaviors are embedded in coaching routines within Romanian rugby clubs. This pattern is consistent with the interpersonal style model proposed by Pulido et al. (2018), which highlights the importance of autonomy-supportive and involvement-oriented coach behaviors for fostering adaptive motivational climates. Although the present study did not assess motivational outcomes directly, the prevalence of democratic leadership provides a contextual basis for future research examining associations between coaching style and athlete motivation or engagement.

Authoritarian (autocratic) leadership displayed greater variability across age categories (Fig. 2), with higher mean values at the senior level and comparatively lower values at U18 and U20. This pattern may reflect contextual demands associated with performance pressure and competitive expectations at senior levels, where directive behaviors and rapid decision-making can be more frequently enacted. Chelladurai's multidimensional model of leadership suggests that coaching effectiveness depends on the congruence between required, preferred, and actual leader behaviors within a given situational context (Chelladurai, 2007). From this perspective, the observed variation in authoritarian leadership across age groups may indicate situational adaptation rather than a fixed leadership orientation.

However, as the present study relied on self-reported coaching behaviors and did not measure athletes' preferences or situational constraints, such interpretations remain descriptive and should be examined empirically in future work.

Laissez-faire leadership exhibited uniformly low mean values across all categories (Fig. 3), indicating that passive or neglectful coaching behaviors were reported infrequently. This finding suggests that coaches generally maintain active involvement in training organization, conflict management, and monitoring of athlete participation. Low prevalence of laissez-faire leadership is consistent with sport leadership research emphasizing the importance of coach engagement and structured guidance for both athlete development and team functioning (Côté & Gilbert, 2009).

The comparative visualization (Fig. 4) highlights a stable configuration of leadership styles across developmental levels, characterized by democratic leadership as the dominant approach, moderate authoritarian practices, and marginal laissez-faire behaviors. This pattern may reflect broader professional norms within organized rugby coaching in Romania, where collaborative communication and structured guidance coexist. At the same time, the variability observed in authoritarian leadership underscores that coaching styles are not uniform across age categories and may shift in response to competitive context, perceived athlete maturity, and performance demands.

Previous research on the coach-athlete relationship emphasizes that leadership behaviors are embedded within relational dynamics and are shaped by contextual constraints and mutual expectations (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). Several methodological considerations should be acknowledged. First, the study relied on a researcher-developed instrument adapted conceptually from Pulido et al. (2018), which limits direct comparability with studies using fully validated scales. Second, the sample consisted exclusively of male coaches, which restricts generalization to mixed-gender coaching populations. Third, the descriptive design and modest sample size preclude inferential conclusions regarding differences between age categories. Despite these limitations, the study provides an empirical snapshot of leadership style distributions across developmental levels in Romanian rugby coaching and offers a foundation for future research incorporating athlete perspectives, longitudinal designs, and validated interpersonal style measures.

CONCLUSIONS

The results show a clear predominance of democratic leadership across all age categories, with moderate use of authoritarian practices and consistently low levels of laissez-faire leadership. This pattern suggests that rugby coaches in the present sample predominantly employ participative coaching behaviors, while directive leadership is used situationally and passive leadership is rare.

These findings provide a descriptive snapshot of leadership style distribution across developmental levels and offer a basis for future studies examining links with athlete outcomes and coach–athlete interactions.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Sergiu Pop and Dan Mihai Gherțoiu contributed to the conceptualization, design of the study and initial drafting of the manuscript. David Popa contributed to the data collection, literature review and writing of the manuscript. Dumitru Rareș Ciocoi-Pop and Maria-Daniela Macra-Oșorhean contributed to the methodological design, data analysis, interpretation of results and also scientific supervision. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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