

Leadership in Sport: from Coach to Manager – An Integrative Perspective

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ABSTRACT. The evolution of leadership roles in sport has generated increasing interest in recent years, especially in the context of professionalization, performance management, and organizational complexity. This theoretical article explores the transition from the traditional role of the coach — as a direct leader of athletic performance to the more complex managerial role, which encompasses strategic planning, communication, decision-making, and team coordination. Starting from a multidisciplinary review of the literature (sports sciences, organizational behavior, and psychology), the paper outlines the conceptual differences and overlaps between coaching and managing in sport environments. An integrative perspective is proposed, emphasizing the fluidity of leadership roles and the importance of adaptive leadership styles. It is argued that modern sport leaders must combine coaching expertise with managerial competence to effectively respond to both athlete's needs and organizational challenges. The article discusses key factors such as emotional intelligence, transformational leadership, team dynamics, and role conflict in dual-role positions. Furthermore, the paper highlights the increasing need for leadership development programs that target both the technical and managerial dimensions of sport professionals. By synthesizing current theoretical frameworks and research findings, the article aims to contribute to a better understanding of the coach-manager continuum and to support the development of holistic leadership approaches in sport organizations. This integrative approach may offer valuable insights for educators, policy-makers, and practitioners involved in sport leadership development.

Keywords: *sports leadership, coach, sports manager, leadership styles, team, performance.*

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, sport has undergone a profound transformation, distinguished not only by the rise in performance levels but also by the accelerated professionalization of institutional structures and the increased complexity of organizational frameworks. This ongoing dynamic has prompted a fundamental reassessment of leadership roles, particularly in terms of reconnecting the traditional relationship between coach and manager (Santos, Batista & Carvalho, 2020). In parallel, bibliometric analyses in the field highlight a significant growth of interest in sports leadership—focusing on dimensions such as team cohesion, motivational climate, and athletes' psychological well-being (Turnnidge & Côté, 2016; Natsuhara et al., 2022).

Traditionally, the coach was perceived as the central leader of the team, responsible for technical-tactical instruction, rigorous supervision of the training process, and direct motivation of athletes (Natsuhara et al., 2022). However, with the expansion of the multidisciplinary team (including psychologists, sports physicians, physiotherapists), the increasing institutional and media pressure, and the need to adopt a strategic vision, the role of the sports leader has evolved into a hybrid one, combining methodological expertise with managerial and social competences (Santos et al., 2020).

The specialized literature confirms the importance of transformational leadership in the sports context. Behaviors such as individualized consideration, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and the development of an ideal role model have been empirically linked to higher levels of intrinsic motivation, athlete satisfaction, group cohesion, and self-efficacy (Turnnidge & Côté, 2016; Erikstad et al., 2021; Natsuhara et al., 2022). For example, the longitudinal experiment conducted by Erikstad and colleagues (2021) found that the perception of transformational leadership among elite youth coaches is positively correlated with task cohesion, a self-development-oriented motivational climate, self-regulated learning, and athlete satisfaction, while simultaneously reducing ego-oriented climates.

Nevertheless, meta-analyses and systematic reviews (Arthur, Bastardoz & Eklund, 2017; Natsuhara et al., 2022) point to the methodological limitations of much of the dominant research—many studies are cross-sectional, rely on single data sources, and lack a clear delineation of constructs, which reduces the strength of causal inference. Consequently, there is a need to clarify concepts and to employ longitudinal and mixed-method approaches capable of capturing the dynamics of leadership over time.

From a managerial perspective, literature on sports managers emphasizes key competences such as strategic leadership, effective delegation, motivation

of support staff, resource integration, and innovative thinking (Santos et al., 2020). This profile blends the coach's technical-methodological skills with the managerial competences specific to the role of sporting director or team manager.

Furthermore, research on emotional intelligence and role conflict in sports leadership shows that hybrid leaders must manage tensions between technical requirements and organizational demands (Laborde et al., 2016; Fransen et al., 2015). A coach's emotional intelligence contributes to reducing conflicts and increasing athlete satisfaction and relational effectiveness.

Building on these interdisciplinary findings, the present article proposes an integrative analysis of the evolution of leadership in sport: from the traditional role of the coach to the expanded function of the manager, exploring the overlaps, differences, and synergies between the technical-methodological and the strategic-organizational dimensions. The analysis incorporates perspectives from sports science, organizational psychology, and transformational and adaptive leadership (including the theoretical models of Chelladurai, Bass & Riggio), offering a robust conceptual framework for understanding the coach–manager continuum.

Conceptual Framework: Leadership in Sport

Leadership is generally understood as the process by which an individual intentionally influences the behavior, attitudes, and performance of others in order to achieve shared objectives (Northouse, 2022). In the sports context, such influence is profoundly shaped by the specific dynamics of the competitive environment—characterized by performance pressure, intense interpersonal relationships, tight timeframes, and collective responsibility (Chelladurai, 2007; Cotterill & Fransen, 2016).

The specialized literature identifies several theoretical models applicable to sports leadership:

Transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006) emphasizes leaders' ability to inspire, motivate, and develop the individual potential of team members through vision, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation. This model is frequently applied in performance sport, showing significant correlations with athlete satisfaction, self-efficacy, and team cohesion (Turnnidge & Côté, 2016; Vella, Oades & Crowe, 2013).

Adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 1994) highlights the need for leaders to manage change, uncertainty, and emerging tensions by creating a space for collective learning and distributing responsibility within the team. In sport, this model is relevant during transition periods (e.g., roster changes, key injuries) or in contexts of organizational instability (Jones, Armour & Potrac, 2004).

The multidimensional model of sports leadership (Chelladurai, 1990) is one of the most widely used theoretical frameworks in coaching research. It posits that leadership effectiveness results from the congruence between the leadership style preferred by athletes, the style required by the context, and the leader's actual behaviors. The model provides an explanatory framework for understanding variations in leadership styles depending on factors such as type of sport, competitive level, or athletes' gender (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980).

In sport, leadership is deeply contextualized, being influenced by:

- the nature of the sport (individual vs. team);
- the performance level (amateur vs. elite);
- the athletes' age and experience;
- the organization's cultural style (authoritarian, participative, results-oriented, or personal-development-oriented) (Fransen et al., 2015; Laborde et al., 2016).

Although the coach and manager may share common objectives, the differences between their roles are substantial.

Table 1. Comparative Framework of Coach and Sports Manager Roles

Dimension	Coach	Manager
Main objective	Sports performance	Strategic coordination
Type of relationship	Direct, with athletes	Indirect, with the organizational structure
Key competences	Technical-methodological, motivational	Strategic, administrative
Leadership style	Task- or relationship-oriented	System- and process-oriented

Nevertheless, in practice, the two roles frequently overlap, leading to situations of dual leadership or even role conflict, particularly in organizations where coaches take on managerial tasks without formal training.

Contemporary Sports Leadership: An Integrative Approach

In the contemporary context of high-performance sport, leadership can no longer be conceived as a unidimensional function focused solely on athlete instruction or competition planning. The multiple pressures of professionalization, organizational management, and interaction with various stakeholders (athletes, technical staff, sponsors, media, federations) have transformed the sports leader into a figure with complex and dynamic roles. This reality has created the need for an integrative perspective on leadership—one that transcends the traditional division between “coach” and “manager” and approaches leadership as a functional continuum (Chelladurai & Riemer, 1998; Cotterill & Fransen, 2016).

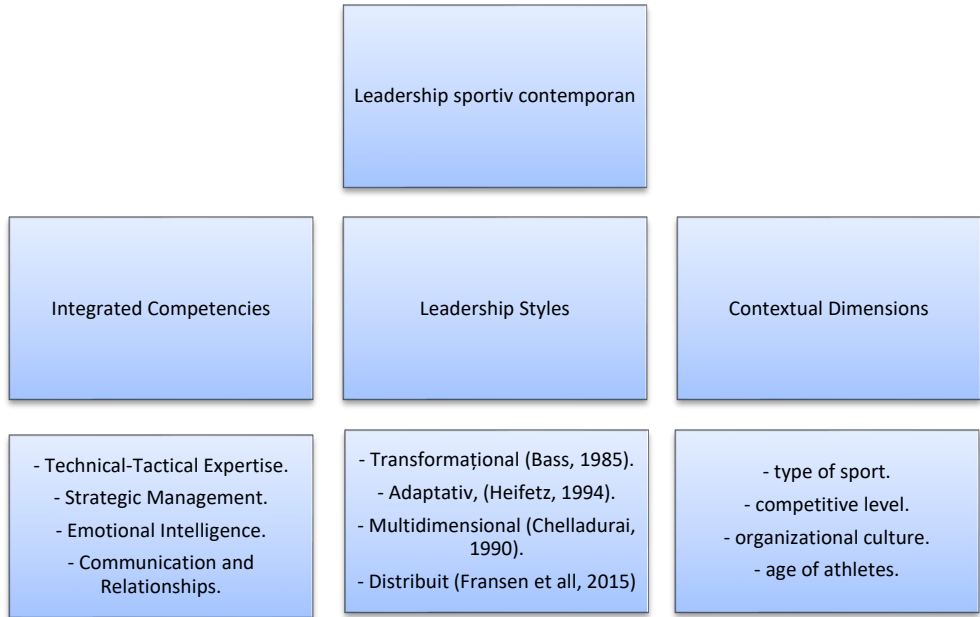


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of integrative sports leadership – dimensions, competences, and influencing contexts.

Traditionally, the coach was responsible for the technical-tactical components of sports preparation, while the manager handled logistics, budgets, and the team's external relations (Lyle, 2002). However, in current practice, these roles tend to overlap and merge, especially in teams where the head coach holds extended responsibility over the entire sports ecosystem (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011).

The integrative approach involves combining pedagogical and motivational expertise with strategic, organizational, and relational competences. A sports leader must be able to:

- plan the competitive season not only from the perspective of performance, but also considering human and material resources;
- manage internal and external conflicts;
- build a team culture based on shared values and objectives;
- interact effectively with both internal and external stakeholders (Wagstaff et al., 2012).

This functional versatility is essential in a sporting landscape where performance is no longer the sole result of technical quality, but also of effective managerial conduct.

Recent studies suggest that transformational (Bass & Riggio, 2006) and adaptive (Heifetz, 1994) leadership styles are the most suitable for the current sports context. Transformational leaders promote clear visions, leverage individual potential, and encourage athletes' intrinsic motivation (Vella et al., 2013). This style is associated with greater team cohesion, personal satisfaction, and improved performance (Turnnidge & Côté, 2016).

Conversely, adaptive leadership is essential during periods of instability—for example, changes in team structure, competitive failures, or external pressures. In such contexts, the leader must be able to redefine roles, reconfigure objectives, and facilitate collective learning while maintaining team trust and morale (Heifetz et al., 2009).

A central pillar of integrative sports leadership is emotional intelligence—the leader's ability to recognize, understand, and manage their own emotions as well as those of others (Laborde et al., 2016). The coach-athlete relationship is often characterized by emotional intensity, and the leader's ability to create a climate of trust, empathy, and mutual respect is essential for optimizing performance (Jowett, 2007).

Developing authentic relationships within the team contributes to reducing competitive anxiety, increasing motivation, and improving satisfaction with the sporting experience (Chan & Mallett, 2011). Leaders with high emotional intelligence are also more effective at managing role conflicts that can arise between technical leadership functions and managerial coordination responsibilities (Fletcher & Scott, 2010).

The integrative perspective also proposes a distribution of leadership, in which the main leader (coach/manager) collaborates with other staff members and even key athletes who take on formal or informal leadership roles (Fransen et al., 2015, Cucui, 2016). This approach fosters autonomy, responsibility, and effective communication within the team, reducing dependence on a single leader.

Studies show that teams with shared leadership tend to have higher levels of cohesion, collective motivation, and sustained long-term performance (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016; Duguay et al., 2016, Cucui et al., 2014). This type of leadership is particularly effective in team sports, where coordination and interdependence are critical.

Integrating the functions of coach and manager cannot be left to chance; it requires intentional training based on multidimensional competences. Sports leader development programs should include:

- the fundamentals of sports science;
- leadership and organizational communication;

- emotional intelligence and the psychology of motivation;
- elements of strategic and operational management (Lara-Bercial & Mallett, 2016).

The lack of such programs contributes to professional stress and managerial inefficiency for many coaches who find themselves in extended leadership positions without formal preparation for such roles (Olusoga et al., 2010).

A comparative synthesis of the most frequently used leadership styles in sport is presented in table 2.

Table 2. Characteristics, advantages, and limitations of main leadership styles in sport

Leadership Style	Key Characteristics	Advantages	Limitations	Authors / Theoretical Framework
Transformational	Inspires vision, personal development, intrinsic motivation	Team cohesion, high engagement	Requires high emotional intelligence	Bass & Riggio (2006)
Adaptive	Flexibility in the face of uncertainty, continuous learning	Rapid response to change, innovation	Can induce uncertainty in the absence of clear structure	Heifetz et al. (2009)
Multidimensional	Alignment between style, athlete preferences, and situational demands	Contextual adaptability	Difficult to apply without constant assessment	Chelladurai (1990)
Authoritarian (traditional)	Strong control, discipline, clear hierarchy	Quick decision-making	Demotivating for autonomous athletes	Classical coaching model
Democratic / participative	Active involvement of athletes in decision-making	Motivation, co-responsibility	May delay action in crisis situations	Lyle (2002); Vella et al. (2013)
Distributed (shared)	Leadership shared among coaches, staff, and key athletes	Cohesion, autonomy, communication	Requires training and mutual trust	Fransen et al. (2015); Cotterill & Fransen

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Contemporary sports leadership requires a reconceptualization of leadership roles in an increasingly complex and professionalized landscape. Traditionally, the coach was regarded as the central figure in team management, with

responsibilities focused on technical-tactical preparation and athlete motivation. However, in recent decades, the realities of high-level competition, media pressures, and organizational demands have significantly expanded the scope of the sports leader's responsibilities. In this context, the rigid distinction between coach and manager is fading, giving rise to a leadership profile that demands integrated skills—drawing from sports expertise as well as management, organizational psychology, and communication.

The integrative model proposed in this article reflects this evolution, emphasizing the need for a holistic approach to leadership in sport. The competencies of the sports leader can no longer be confined to the technical-methodological dimension; they must also encompass the ability to manage complex relationships, make strategic decisions under uncertainty, and respond to the diverse needs of both athletes and the organization. Likewise, the theoretical models discussed—transformational, adaptive, multidimensional, and distributed—provide relevant analytical frameworks for understanding and applying flexible, effective leadership styles.

In terms of future directions, there is a need to strengthen empirical research examining how sports leaders actually manage these multiple roles in practice. Qualitative studies focusing on the experiences of coaches, sports managers, or elite athletes could contribute to the development of operational models applicable in varied contexts—from elite sport to youth and amateur levels. In addition, longitudinal research could explore the impact of leadership training on team effectiveness and athlete satisfaction.

In parallel, the design of professional training and development programs that integrate technical, managerial, and psychosocial dimensions is recommended. Such programs should support the formation of a new type of sports leader—adaptable, empathetic, strategic, and development-oriented—capable of managing the complexity of modern sports systems and responding effectively to the challenges of the future.

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