A Review of Athlete Leadership and Its Intentional Development Through Sport: Implications for Sport Managers

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A popular legitimation of sport is that it develops important life skills such as leadership (Chalip, 2006; Turnnidge, Côté, & Hancock, 2014). However, research has not entirely supported these assumptions (Bean & Forneris, 2016; Danish, Forneris, Hodge, & Heke, 2004; Gould & Voelker, 2012). While some studies have described athletes’ beliefs that sport helped them develop their leadership abilities (Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2009; Holt, Tink, Mandigo, & Fox, 2008), other researchers have suggested that merely participating in sport does not guarantee the development of leadership (e.g., Extejt & Smith, 2009; Gould & Voelker, 2012; Grandzol, Perlis, & Draina, 2010). For instance, Grandzol et al. (2010) found limited positive effects in relation to leadership development for student-athletes who simply participated in sport. However, it was shown that serving as a team captain “provided a rich opportunity for students to learn and practice leadership skills” (Grandzol et al., 2010, p. 403). Unfortunately, not all athletes are provided the opportunity to fulfill these formal leadership roles (i.e., team captains). Furthermore, some team captains have reported feeling unprepared to fulfill their leadership responsibilities, citing a lack of training and preparation (Voelker, Gould, & Crawford, 2011). Therefore, it has been suggested that sport managers rethink the ways in which athletes experience leadership to foster positive developmental experiences within sport (Dugan, Turman, & Torrez, 2015).

For sport to continue to be touted as an avenue to develop leadership, it is imperative that sport organizations clearly outline ways for those responsible for the management and delivery of sport to intentionally facilitate theoretically-grounded leadership development efforts. Moreover, it is vital to consider how such learning opportunities can be purposefully targeted for all athletes and not solely for those in formal leadership positions (Duguay, Loughead, & Munroe-Chandler, 2016). Thus, the purpose of the current review is to outline athlete leadership research, most of which is derived from the field of sport psychology (Welty Peachey, Damon, Zhou, & Burton, 2015), in an effort to highlight potential implications for how sport managers can better leverage athletes’ experiences using a leadership development approach. Accordingly, this review provides an overview of athlete leadership with the goal of defining and classifying the construct. Three major pillars of athlete leadership research are discussed (i.e., understanding the distribution of athlete leadership within teams, discerning attributes of athlete leaders, and determining athlete leader behaviors), with attention drawn to associations between athlete leadership and a number of individual- and team-level outcomes. Current efforts to develop athlete leadership in sport are reviewed and future directions for athlete leadership research are considered. Finally, implications for how sport managers can better leverage athletes’ experiences using leadership development are discussed. Specific strategies that are examined include deliberately teaching athlete leadership principles, encouraging and facilitating reflection, targeting both leader and leadership development, and cultivating an understanding of the leadership structures within teams. It is hoped that the recommendations presented herein build a foundation for the continued interdisciplinary exploration of athlete leadership and its intentional development through sport.