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Leadership Styles in Sport: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Background: Leadership is a central determinant of performance, well-being, and organisational effectiveness in sport. Despite a growing body of empirical work, no comprehensive systematic review has synthesised findings across all sport-related leadership contexts, including coaching, physical education, and sport management.

Objective: This systematic review aimed to identify, describe, and critically analyse the evidence base on leadership styles in sport published between 2010 and 2025.

Methods: A systematic search was conducted in PubMed using a pre-specified Boolean search string in accordance with PRISMA 2020 guidelines [9]. A total of 105 records were retrieved. Following title, abstract, and full-text screening against pre-defined inclusion and exclusion criteria, 43 studies were included in the final synthesis.

Results: Transformational leadership was the dominant paradigm, featuring in approximately 65% of included studies. Authentic and servant leadership emerged as important complementary constructs, particularly in relation to athlete well-being and shared leadership. Evidence on destructive leadership was sparse but highlighted significant negative consequences. Leadership research in sport management and governance contexts remained markedly underrepresented.

Conclusions: The literature on leadership in sport is heavily skewed towards coach-athlete dyads and transformational leadership theory. Significant gaps remain in the study of leadership within sport organisations and federations, non-Western contexts, and emerging constructs such as paradoxical and ambidextrous leadership. Future research should adopt multi-level and longitudinal designs.

Key words: leadership styles, systematic review, sport management, transformation leadership, coaching, servant leadership, sport organisations

1. Introduction

Leadership constitutes one of the most studied constructs in organisational science, yet its application to the sport domain remains characterised by certain disciplinary particularities. In sport, leadership operates simultaneously at multiple levels: within coaching dyads, among athlete groups, across management teams, and at the highest levels of national and international sport governance. The multifaceted nature of sport—simultaneously a competitive, commercial, educational, and social institution—renders leadership an especially consequential variable for understanding outcomes as varied as athletic performance, athlete well-being, organisational innovation, and public trust.

The scientific study of leadership in sport has developed substantially since the publication of Chelladurai's Multidimensional Model of Leadership [4], which provided the first sport-specific theoretical framework and generated several decades of empirical investigation. Subsequent developments introduced transformational leadership theory to the sport context [11] [2], followed by authentic leadership [6] [8], servant leadership [5], and more recently destructive and paradoxical leadership constructs. Each of these traditions has contributed unique insights, yet has also developed in relative isolation, producing a fragmented body of evidence without systematic integration.

Several features of the existing literature warrant attention. First, the preponderance of studies focuses on the coach–athlete relationship, treating the head coach as the sole relevant leader within a sport environment. This risks neglecting leadership at the organisational level—within sport clubs, national federations, and governing bodies—where strategic decisions about resource allocation, athlete welfare, governance reform, and brand management are made. Second, the theoretical landscape is dominated by transformational leadership to a degree that may constrain scholarly creativity and overlook constructs better suited to the heterogeneous realities of sport organisations [12]. Third, geographical concentration in North American and Western European contexts limits the generalisability of findings to other cultural settings.

The present systematic review aimed to provide a comprehensive, methodologically rigorous synthesis of the evidence on leadership styles in sport published between 2010 and 2025. Specifically, the review addressed the following research questions: (1) What leadership styles have been studied in sport-related contexts between 2010 and 2025? (2) What are the primary outcomes associated with different leadership styles? (3) What methodological approaches characterise this body of research? (4) What are the key research gaps and directions for future study?

2. Methods

This systematic review was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines [9]. The research questions were formulated using the PCC framework (Population, Concept, Context), appropriate for reviews with broad scope [1].

2.1 Search Strategy

A systematic electronic search was performed in PubMed in March 2025. The search string was constructed to capture studies addressing leadership styles across all sport-relevant contexts:

("leadership style" OR "transformational leadership" OR "transactional leadership" OR "servant leadership" OR "authentic leadership" OR "destructive leadership") AND ("sport*" OR "athletic*" OR "sport organization*" OR "sport federation*" OR "sport management" OR "sport governance")*

The search was limited to publications in English, covering the period from 1 January 2010 to 31 December 2025. No restrictions were placed on study design or population characteristics. The initial search returned 105 records.

2.2 Eligibility Criteria

Studies were included if they: (a) were published in peer-reviewed journals between 2010 and 2025; (b) were written in English; (c) examined at least one leadership style or leadership behaviour construct; and (d) were conducted in a sport-related context. Studies were excluded if they were conducted exclusively in non-sport settings such as nursing, healthcare, military, or general business management, or were conference abstracts, book chapters, or unpublished theses. Table 1 presents the eligibility criteria in full.

Table 1. Eligibility Criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication type	Peer-reviewed empirical articles, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, scoping reviews	Books, book chapters, theses, conference abstracts, grey literature
Time frame	2010–2025	Published before 2010
Language	English only	Any language other than English
Topic	Leadership styles or leadership behaviours in sport-related contexts	Leadership in non-sport settings without a sport component
Context	Sport organisations, federations, clubs, coaching, physical education, high-performance sport	Healthcare, business, general organisational management without sport
Access	Full text available	Abstract only or pay-walled without institutional access

2.3 Study Selection

All 105 records were imported into a screening matrix. Twenty-seven records were excluded at the title and abstract stage due to their exclusive focus on non-sport settings. The remaining 78 records proceeded to full-text review, resulting in a final sample of 43 included studies. Table 2 presents the PRISMA flow of study selection [9].

Table 2. PRISMA Flow of Study Selection

Phase	Action	Records (n)
Identification	Records retrieved from PubMed using the search string	105
Screening	Records screened by title and abstract	105
	Records excluded (non-sport context: nursing, healthcare, business, military, other)	-27
Eligibility	Full-text articles assessed for eligibility	78
	Full texts excluded (outside scope or mixed non-sport samples)	-35
Included	Studies included in the final synthesis	43

2.4 Data Extraction and Synthesis

Data were extracted using a standardised extraction form encompassing bibliographic information, study design, sample characteristics, leadership style(s) examined, outcome variables, statistical methods, and principal findings. Given the heterogeneity of study designs, a narrative synthesis approach was adopted [10]. Studies were grouped thematically by leadership style and context to facilitate cross-study comparison.

3. Results

3.1 Overview of Included Studies

The 43 included studies were published between 2010 and 2025, with a notable increase in publication volume from 2019 onwards. The majority were quantitative (n = 29, 67%), with a smaller proportion employing qualitative (n = 8, 19%) or mixed-methods designs (n = 6, 14%). Geographically, studies originated predominantly from North America (n = 14), Western Europe (n = 13), East Asia (n = 7), and the Middle East and Africa (n = 5). Transformational leadership was examined in approximately 65% of included studies [12], confirming its status as the dominant paradigm. Table 3 presents key included studies and Table 4 summarises leadership styles and their associated outcomes.

Table 3. Key Included Studies

Author(s), Year [Ref]	Study Focus	Leadership Style	Context	Key Finding
Turnnidge & Côté, 2017 [12]	Status and future directions of TL in sport	Transformational	Sport (general)	TL research dominated by coaching dyads; calls for multi-level approaches
Vella et al., 2025 [14]	Systematic review & meta-analysis: leader influence on performance	Multiple	Competitive sport	Leadership significantly predicts performance; effect sizes moderated by sport type
Lundqvist et al., 2022 [15]	Team performance factors – scoping review	Multiple	High-performance sport	Communication and trust mediate the effects of leadership on team outcomes
Olusoga et al., 2024 [8]	Authentic leadership and athlete mental health	Authentic	Elite sport	AL reduces burnout and improves mental health outcomes
Price & Weiss, 2020 [16]	Transformational leadership, creativity and innovation support	Transformational	Sport organisations	TL fosters creative climate; innovation support mediates performance gains
Moyo et al., 2024 [7]	Leadership styles and employee performance in sport organisations	Transformational, Transactional	National sport organisations	Transformational > transactional for long-term performance; context moderates
Lee & Chelladurai, 2025 [17]	Paradoxical leadership in sport industry leaders	Paradoxical	Sport industry managers	Scale validated; explains variance in innovation beyond TL

Smith et al., 2020 [18]	Culturally responsive TL in college sport	Transformational	Collegiate sport (USA)	Cultural responsiveness enhances effectiveness in diverse sport environments
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Table 4. Leadership Styles and Associated Outcomes in Sport Contexts

Leadership Style	Studies (n)	Primary Outcomes Studied	Main Findings
Transformational	~28 (65%)	Cohesion, motivation, well-being, performance, creativity	Consistently positive effects across contexts; strongest predictor of athlete outcomes
Authentic	~6 (14%)	Burnout, mental health, trust, psychological safety	Positive effects on athlete well-being and safety reporting
Servant	~4 (9%)	Athlete leadership development, shared leadership, service quality	Supports athlete autonomy; underdeveloped in sport management
Transactional	~3 (7%)	Task performance, compliance, satisfaction	Effective for short-term goals; less impactful for athlete development
Destructive / Abusive	~3 (7%)	Burnout, psychological harm, disordered eating, misconduct	Significant negative consequences; underreported due to power dynamics
Paradoxical / Paternalistic	~2 (5%)	Innovation, satisfaction, cultural context	Emerging constructs; promising for non-Western contexts

3.2 Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership (TL) remained the most extensively studied construct. Building on the foundational work of Bass [3] and its sport-specific adaptations by Rowold [11] and Arthur et al. [2], studies consistently documented positive associations between coaches' transformational leadership behaviours and athlete outcomes including team cohesion, intrinsic motivation, psychological well-being, and creative performance.

Athlete age emerged as a significant moderator, with adolescent athletes showing stronger responses to transformational coaching than adult athletes [13]. A meta-analytic review found that positive effects of TL on satisfaction and commitment were slightly stronger for female athletes than for male athletes. At the organisational level, TL was associated with creativity and innovation support within sport organisations [16]. In physical education settings, TL by teachers was associated with increased students' physical activity intentions and motor self-efficacy.

3.3 Authentic Leadership

Authentic leadership (AL) emerged as the second most studied construct, examined in six studies. The theoretical framework—characterised by self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing of information, and an internalised moral perspective—has attracted growing interest in sport given concerns about athlete welfare and psychological safety [6] [8].

A longitudinal study found that AL was a significant negative predictor of athlete burnout over a 12-month follow-up period. In elite sport, AL was positively associated with athlete mental health outcomes, with psychological safety proposed as a mediating mechanism [8]. In the context of concussion management, AL was positively associated with athletes' intentions to report symptoms, suggesting that transparent leaders create environments where athletes feel safe to disclose health concerns.

3.4 Servant Leadership

Servant leadership (SL) was examined in four studies [5]. Research focused primarily on athlete leadership development, shared leadership dynamics within teams, and service quality in sport organisations. A study employing social network analysis found that coaches' servant leadership behaviours were positively associated with the emergence of shared athlete leadership within teams—a finding with implications for athlete development programmes within sport federations seeking to cultivate leadership capacity.

3.5 Destructive and Abusive Leadership

Three studies addressed destructive, abusive, or despotic leadership in sport contexts. Abusive supervision was found to be particularly harmful among athletes from equity-deserving groups, amplifying experiences of marginalisation and increasing dropout intentions. A study examining coaches' leadership styles and disordered eating among athletes identified a statistically significant positive relationship between authoritarian leadership and symptoms of disordered eating, particularly in aesthetic and weight-class sports. These findings underscore the need for sport organisations and federations to implement safeguarding frameworks that include explicit standards for leadership conduct.

3.6 Emerging Leadership Constructs

Paradoxical leadership—characterised by the simultaneous enactment of seemingly contradictory behaviours—was examined in a psychometric study of sport industry leaders [17]. The resulting scale demonstrated acceptable factorial validity and explained variance in innovation outcomes beyond that accounted for by transformational leadership. Paternalistic leadership, more prevalent in East Asian and Middle Eastern cultural contexts, was associated with athlete satisfaction when combined with high levels of team resilience, suggesting that cultural context moderates the relationship between leadership style and athlete outcomes.

3.7 Leadership in Sport Management Contexts

The review identified only five studies that examined leadership in clearly defined sport management contexts [7] [17] [18]. These included studies of employee performance in Ethiopian sport organisations [7], a gender-inclusive sport participation framework in Saudi Arabia, culturally responsive leadership in American collegiate sport [18], servant leadership in fitness centre management, and the validation of a paradoxical leadership scale in sport industry leaders [17]. The paucity of sport management-specific leadership research represents one of the most significant gaps identified by this review.

4. Discussion

This systematic review synthesised 43 studies on leadership styles in sport published between 2010 and 2025. The findings paint a detailed yet uneven picture of the field: theoretically sophisticated and empirically productive in the domain of transformational coaching leadership, but remarkably sparse in the areas of organisational sport management, governance, and non-Western cultural contexts.

4.1 The Dominance of Transformational Leadership

The preponderance of transformational leadership research reflects both the theoretical influence of Bass's framework [3] and its early adaptation to sport coaching contexts by Chelladurai [4] and Rowold [11]. The consistent positive findings associated with TL across diverse sport contexts lend it substantial empirical credibility. However, the very dominance of TL may constitute a limitation: by concentrating so heavily on one theoretical tradition, the field risks theoretical stagnation and the neglect of constructs that may better capture the realities of sport leadership in non-Western contexts or in governance structures [12].

Several included studies identified boundary conditions under which TL is less effective, including settings of high cultural power distance and situations where athletes have high need

for autonomy. This nuance suggests that TL should be understood as context-sensitive rather than universally optimal [13].

4.2 Emerging Constructs and the Expansion of the Theoretical Landscape

The emergence of authentic, servant, paradoxical, and destructive leadership as foci of sport leadership research represents a broadening of the theoretical landscape. Authentic leadership's association with psychological safety and athlete welfare is particularly timely given the international sport community's growing attention to mental health, safeguarding, and duty of care [8]. The evidence reviewed here supports the proposition that how leaders present themselves—with transparency, moral consistency, and relational openness—shapes the psychological climate of sport environments with direct consequences for athlete health [6] [8].

Destructive leadership, despite being the least studied construct in this review, generated findings of considerable practical significance. Sport federations and governing bodies have a responsibility to develop evidence-based frameworks for identifying and sanctioning destructive leadership behaviours.

4.3 The Gap in Sport Management and Governance Research

Perhaps the most consequential finding of this review is the near-absence of empirical research on leadership within sport management and governance contexts. Of 43 included studies, only five examined leaders in organisational roles [7] [17] [18]. None specifically examined leadership within national sport federations or international governing bodies—despite the magnitude of influence that sport federation executives exert over athlete development, competition structures, anti-doping frameworks, and public representations of sport.

This omission is likely attributable to the historical disciplinary orientation of sport science towards coaching, the methodological challenges of gaining access to closed organisational settings, and the absence of validated instruments designed for sport management leadership contexts. The paradoxical leadership scale validated in one included study [17] represents a promising methodological development.

4.4 Methodological Considerations

The methodological profile of included studies—predominantly quantitative, cross-sectional, and reliant on self-report measures—reflects broader limitations in the sport science literature. Cross-sectional designs preclude causal inference and common method variance poses a threat to internal validity. The longitudinal studies identified in this review [8] [14] provided more compelling evidence of the temporal dynamics of leadership effects and should serve as methodological models for future research.

The concentration of research in North American and Western European contexts limits the generalisability of findings. Included studies from East Asian and African contexts [7] offered important evidence that leadership constructs operate differently across cultural settings, underscoring the need for culturally informed theory development and empirical replication in underrepresented regions.

4.5 Practical Implications

The robust evidence base for transformational leadership [3] [12] supports its integration into coach education curricula, with particular attention to the four dimensions of idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration. The emerging evidence for authentic leadership suggests that sport organisations should prioritise development processes that assess self-awareness, transparency, and ethical consistency—not only in coaches but in management teams and governing boards [8]. The evidence on destructive leadership implies that safeguarding policies must explicitly address leadership conduct, with independent reporting mechanisms and clear consequences for abusive behaviours.

At the governance level, the absence of empirical research on federation leadership should be interpreted as a call to action. Sport federations that wish to improve their governance quality and organisational performance would benefit from commissioning research examining how leadership at the executive level shapes organisational culture, strategy, and outcomes [7].

5. Conclusions

This systematic review provides a comprehensive synthesis of the leadership styles literature in sport from 2010 to 2025, drawing on 43 peer-reviewed studies retrieved from PubMed. The evidence confirms that transformational leadership is the dominant and best-supported construct in sport leadership research [3] [12] [14], with consistent positive associations across coaching, physical education, and sport management contexts. Authentic and servant leadership represent important complementary frameworks, particularly for outcomes related to athlete well-being and psychological safety [5] [6] [8]. Destructive leadership, though understudied, demonstrates significant negative consequences that warrant urgent scholarly and policy attention.

The review identified critical research gaps: the underrepresentation of sport management and governance contexts; the overconcentration of studies in Western cultural settings; the methodological limitations of cross-sectional self-report designs; and the limited engagement with emerging constructs such as paradoxical leadership [17]. Addressing these gaps will require longitudinal designs, multi-level analytical frameworks, qualitative and mixed-methods approaches, and the development of validated instruments adapted to sport management contexts.

Future systematic reviews would benefit from the inclusion of multiple databases (e.g., Scopus, Web of Science, SPORTDiscus) and registration of review protocols in PROSPERO to enhance transparency and methodological rigour [9]. The present review, limited to a single database, should be understood as a preliminary mapping exercise that establishes a foundation for subsequent, more comprehensive syntheses.

In conclusion, leadership in sport is a consequential and increasingly complex phenomenon that deserves sustained, theoretically diverse, and methodologically rigorous scholarly attention. As sport organisations navigate growing demands for governance accountability, athlete welfare, and organisational innovation, the quality of leadership at all levels—from the training ground to the boardroom—will increasingly determine their capacity to fulfil their social and competitive mandates.

Disclosure

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