

27th ECSS Anniversary Congress, 30.08 – 02.09.2022

Elite team sport athletes' perceptions and experiences of destructive coach leadership behavior

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INTRODUCTION:

Research on coach leadership in sport has traditionally been aimed at positive aspects of coach leadership styles and behavior. Ineffective coach leadership has primarily been linked to the absence of constructive leader behavior, often labeled in the concept of laissez-faire leadership resulting in unsatisfactory performance and losses for both athletes and teams. Less research has focused on identifying behaviors that the coaches shouldn't do; destructive behaviors that may undermine the immediate and long-term effect of their otherwise effective and constructive behaviors. The purpose of this study therefore was to explore elite team sport athletes' perceptions and experiences of destructive coach leadership behavior.

METHODS:

Eight (4 females, 4 males, age range 20 to 37 yrs.) former and current World Class and international elite soccer and handball players participated in individual online semi structured interviews. Question examples from the interview guide included: "Can you describe coach behavior you have experienced as a player that you would label as 'destructive'?", "What effect did that type of behavior have on you?" "On other players? on the team?" The interviews were transcribed verbatim, pseudo-anonymized and analyzed using thematic analysis.

RESULTS:

The athletes' experiences of destructive behavior were categorized in two overarching themes 'active' and 'passive' behaviors that then contained subcategories. Active behaviors were related to the actions a coach performs in a situation, and passive behaviors were ones where the coach omitted or failed to act in a situation where action was expected from or needed by the athletes. The active destructive behaviors consisted of five subcategories: Abusive & Aggressive behavior, Condescending behaviors, Negative Criticism, Autocratic Decisions, and Punishment behavior. Passive destructive behavior consisted of two categories Rejection and Ignoring. In addition, one subcategory was labeled as 'incompetent sport coaching behavior' that contained both active and passive behaviors, but this was not deemed to be intentionally destructive behavior.

CONCLUSION:

This study parallels leadership studies in organizational contexts and confirms anecdotal stories that indicate that destructive coach leadership behavior is prevalent in sport. The sample in this study were elite athletes and it may well be that destructive leadership is more common and tolerated at this level than in sub-elite and recreational sports. However, this study highlights the importance to further investigate the "dark side" of leadership in sport and we recommend more research on destructive coach leadership behavior in other contexts such as individual sports, different sporting levels, and in different age groups.

Topic: Mentoring/Coaching

Presentation form: Poster

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