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## ORIGINAL

### ANALYSIS OF LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOURS IN PROFESSIONAL HANDBALL PLAYERS

### ANÁLISIS DE LAS CONDUCTAS DE LIDERAZGO EN JUGADORES PROFESIONALES DE BALONMANO

Coma-Bau, J.<sup>1</sup>; Baiget, E.<sup>2</sup>; Segura-Bernal, J.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Assistant professor in Physical Activity and Sport Sciences in the University of Vic-Universidad Central de Cataluña (UVic-UCC). Member of the Sport Performance Analysis Research Group (SPARG), UVic-UCC (Spain) [jordi.coma@uvic.cat](mailto:jordi.coma@uvic.cat)

<sup>2</sup> Associate professor in Physical Activity and Sport Sciences in the University of Vic - Universidad Central de Cataluña (UVic-UCC). Member of the Sport Performance Analysis Research Group (SPARG), UVic-UCC (Spain) [ernest.baiget@uvic.cat](mailto:ernest.baiget@uvic.cat)

<sup>3</sup> Associate professor in Physical Activity and Sport Sciences in the Faculty of Psychology, Education and Sport Sciences, Blanquerna (Ramon Llull University) in Barcelona (Spain) [jordisb@blanquerna.url.edu](mailto:jordisb@blanquerna.url.edu)

**Spanish- English translator:** Laura Arranz Bannon, [lauban3@hotmail.com](mailto:lauban3@hotmail.com)

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#### ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to analyse the differences between the self-perceptions of preferred and perceived leadership behaviours in high performance handball players at two different moments of the season and, at the same time, analyse the existing modifications in the two behaviours during a competitive period. The sample was composed of 71 professional players who answered the Leadership Scale for Sport questionnaires (LSS1 and LSS2). The results showed significant differences between the preferred and perceived behaviour in all the studied behaviours in the two different moments of the season except for the democratic one (preseason), as well as significant

differences between the preferred behaviour (pre- post) and the perceived behaviour (pre-post) in all the studied behaviours.

We conclude that the self-perception that the players have of their coach differs between what they prefer and what they perceive depending on the moment of the season.

**KEY WORDS:** leadership, preferred - perceived behaviours, player, coach, congruence.

## RESUMEN

Los objetivos del presente estudio fueron analizar las diferencias entre las autopercepciones de las conductas de liderazgo preferido y percibido en jugadores de balonmano de élite en dos momentos diferenciados de la temporada. Paralelamente analizar las modificaciones existentes en las conductas en el transcurso de un periodo competitivo. La muestra estuvo compuesta por un total de 71 jugadores profesionales a los cuales se les administraron los cuestionarios Leadership Scale for Sport (LSS1 y LSS2). Los resultados mostraron diferencias significativas entre la conducta preferida y percibida en todas las conductas estudiadas a excepción de la democrática en los dos momentos observados de la temporada y por otro lado se observaron diferencias significativas entre la conducta preferida (pre-post) y la percibida (pre-post) en todas las conductas estudiadas.

Concluimos que las autopercepciones de los jugadores sobre su entrenador difieren entre lo que prefieren y lo que perciben a lo largo de la temporada.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** liderazgo, conducta preferida-percibida, jugador, entrenador, congruencia.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

One of the main goals of training in high performance team sports is to optimise the different performance factors (technical, conditional, tactical, strategic and / or methodological) that can improve the performance of the athlete and consequently of the team (Balagué, 2013; Ruiz, 2007; Weineck, 2005). On this basis, we must consider leadership in sports as a facilitator in the management of psychosocial variables that can help improve individual and collective performance (Balagué, 2005; Cruickshank and Collins, 2012; Weinberg and Gould, 2010). The study of leadership in sports has recently evolved, changing from something anecdotal to a relevant aspect in its evolution (Peachey, Zhou, Damon, & Burton, 2015). Smoll and Smith's Mediational model (1978, 1990), Fiedler's Contingency Theory of Leadership (1967), Chelladurai's Multidimensional Model of leadership (1990), Bass' Transformational Leadership theory (1985) or Welty's Multilevel Model of leadership in sport management (2015), are significant examples of the development of this phenomenon.

Different authors highlight the importance of the coach's leadership style as a relevant factor in the improvement of players, team and consequently, performance (Crespo, Balaguer and Atienza, 1994; Riemer and Toon, 2001; Ruiz, 2007; Salminen and Liukkonen, 1996). Specifically, the coach's leadership style and motivational climate have been identified as elements that influence the players' satisfaction and the performance of the team (Alfermann, 2005; Aoyagi & Cox, 2008; Bahrami, 2011). Satisfaction, understood as the difference between what the athlete perceives and what he really wants (Harold, Riemer and Chelladurai 1995), sports performance, and the study of the coach's behaviour, are the backbone of Chelladurai's Multidimensional model of leadership (MML) (Chelladurai, 1978, 1984, 2007). This model presents two different interconnected blocks: on the one hand, the antecedents (situational factors, leadership traits, and player traits) and on the other hand the behaviour of the leader (required behaviour, actual behaviour, preferred behaviour). The model postulates that when the 3 behaviours are congruent, optimal performance and satisfaction can be expected; if the actual and required behaviours are congruent, but the preferred one is not, optimal performance but dissatisfied players can be expected; If the preferred and actual behaviours are congruent, but not the required one, the players could feel satisfied, but the performance would not be optimal; and finally, if there is no congruence between any of the behaviours, players could show disinterest, a situation in which any result is possible (Riemer and Toon, 2001; Riemer and Chelladurai, 1995).

The current idea of leadership as an influential, multidimensional, complex, dynamic and interactive process between the different participants (Peachey et al., 2015), highlights the importance of trying to achieve congruence between what the players perceive and what they expect from the coach, what the coach expects from the players, and the requirements of the situation (Urra, 2015). The study of the coach's behaviour is important for the understanding of the cognitive and behavioural influence on the players and in order to facilitate the achievement of the objectives (Urra, 2018). These lines of research use different versions of the Leadership Scale for Sport (LSS) as an instrument to analyse and characterise the high performance coach's leadership style in individual sports (Ruiz, 2007) and in sports at a formative level (Urra, 2015). On the other hand, the LSS has been related to the motivational climate (Marcos, 2013) and has also been used to analyse the discrepancies between perceived and preferred behaviour in team sports (Harold A. Riemer & Chelladurai, 1995b; Urra, 2018). However, there is little scientific evidence on the implication of the variables analysed using the LSS in high performance team sports. Considering that the use of the LSS in its three versions, LSS1 (preferred version), LSS2 (perceived version) and LSS3 (coach version), allows the analysis of the congruence between the required, perceived and preferred behaviours, the objectives established in this study are:

1. To analyse the differences between the self-perceptions of preferred and perceived leadership behaviours in high-level handball players at two different moments of the season.

2. To analyse the modifications in the self-perceptions of preferred and perceived leadership behaviours in high-level handball players, in the course of a competitive period of 5 months.

## **2. MATERIAL AND METHODS**

### **2.1 Participants**

The participants were 71 male players in the highest Spanish male category of the Association of Spanish Handball Clubs (ASOBAL), 30% of the total number of players in the league. The average age of the players was 27 years  $\pm$  6 (range 19 - 43 years old). Regarding the competitive experience in the category, for 21.9% of the players it was their first year, for 20.5% their second year and for 57.5% it was at least their third year in the category. All the players were given information about the objectives of the research, the confidentiality of the data and the voluntary nature of their participation.

### **2.2 Procedure**

All the coaches in the ASOBAL league were contacted the season before the registration, the project was presented to them and they were invited to participate. Their role was to act as intermediaries with the players, introducing the research so the players could subsequently answer the questionnaires (LSS1 and LSS2). The questionnaires were administered online using the platform Google Drive, they could be answered by using any instrument connected to the internet (mobile, tablet or computer), facilitating this way the answer. The first two questionnaires (LSS1 pre and LSS2 pre) were administered two weeks before the beginning of the league, coinciding with the preseason, and the following two questionnaires (LSS1 post and LSS2 post) after having completed one round of the competition calendar, coinciding with the transition period at Christmas. The first questionnaires were sent from the second half of the preseason on, so that when the players answered they would have already worked with the team for a minimum of three weeks.

The requisite for being part of the sample was that the players had responded to the four questionnaires (LSS1 pre and post and LSS2 pre and post) correctly and within the established period. Leaving any of the four questionnaires unanswered meant that the player was excluded from the sample.

### **2.3 Instruments**

The Spanish translation of the Leadership Scale for Sport by Chelladurai and Saleh (1980) was used. Specifically, the versions LSS1 (preferred leadership; scale of the players' preference with regard to leadership style) and LSS2 (perceived leadership; scale of the players' evaluation of the coach's leadership style), adapted to handball (May, 1997). The two questionnaires are made up of 40 items that must be answered on a 5-option Likert scale [always (5), often (4), occasionally (3), rarely (2) and never (1)]. The scale measures 5 different dimensions or factors of the leader's behaviour: two measure the coach's

decision making style (democratic and autocratic // leadership styles), two measure the coach's motivational tendencies (social support and positive feedback // motivational factors) and one measures the coach's instructional behaviour (training and instruction // task orientation).

The two versions evaluate 5 dimensions that define the coach's behaviour (Chelladurai and Saleh, 1980; Crespo and Balaguer, 1994; Weinberg and Gould, 2010):

1. Training and instruction: This dimension is related to the behaviour aimed at improving the athlete's performance through training and instruction of a technical, tactical and physical nature.
2. Democratic behaviour: Democratic behaviour refers to the coach allowing athletes to be involved in the decision making process.
3. Autocratic behaviour: Behaviour referred to the tendency to make unilateral decisions basically based on personal authority.
4. Social support: This dimension is related to the concern for the welfare of the athletes, seeking harmony and a positive work environment, through the development of good interpersonal relationships among group members.
5. Positive Feedback: Positive Feedback refers to reinforcing athletes and recognising and rewarding good performances.

The LSS is considered a valid instrument with an adequate internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha  $\alpha$ ) in all behaviours in a variety of studies; Training and instruction (0.74 - 0.86) (Crespo, et al., 1994; Dwyer and Fisher, 1988; Coma, Baiget, Segura, 2019; Marcos, 2013); Democratic Behaviour (0.48 - 0.78) (Ruiz-Barquín & de la Vega-Marcos, 2015; Salminen, S.; Liukkonen, 1996; Coma, Baiget, Segura, 2019; Marcos, 2013) ; Autocratic Behaviour (0.04 - 0.68) (Dwyer and Fisher, 1998; Ruiz, 2007; Marcos, 2013); Social Support Behaviour (0.57 - 0.84) (Dwyer and Fisher, 1998; Ruiz, 2007; Coma, Baiget, Segura, 2019; Marcos, 2013); Positive feedback behaviour (0.45 - 0.85) (Crespo, et al., 1994; Salminen and Liukonen, 1994; Coma, Baiget, Segura, 2019; Marcos 2013).

## 2.4 Data analysis

The statistical descriptors of the study are mean and standard deviation ( $M \pm SD$ ). The normality tests used the Shapiro-Wilk method and revealed an abnormal distribution, using non-parametric tests. The Wilcoxon test was used to analyse the differences between pretest – posttest results and between preferred and perceived leadership. The significance level was  $p \leq 0.05$  for different tests. The analyses were carried out using the software SPSS Statistics (v. 23.0).

### 3 RESULTS

**Table 1:** Differences between Preferred and Perceived Leadership behaviours (pre-post).

Behaviours	Preferred Leadership		Perceived leadership		Differences (Sig.)			
	LSS1 pre	LSS1 post	LSS2 pre	LSS2 post	LSS1 pre vs LSS2 pre	LSS1 pre vs LSS2 post	LSS1 pre vs LSS1 post	LSS2 pre vs LSS2 post
Training and instruction	4.08 ± 0.87§ ‡	4.08 ± 0.82	3.91 ± 0.87‡	3.77 ± 0.95	0.000	0.000	0.079	0.000
Democratic	3.14 ± 1.05* ‡	3.19 ± 1.06	3.09 ± 1.07‡	2.93 ± 1.09	0.212	0.000	0.025	0.000
Autocratic	2.65 ± 1.15§ ‡	2.58 ± 0.99	2.98 ± 1.18‡	2.83 ± 1.14	0.000	0.000	0.117	0.041
Social Support	2.98 ± 1.19§* ‡	2.81 ± 1.13	2.87 ± 1.18 ‡	2.66 ± 1.17	0.021	0.003	0.000	0.000
Positive Feedback	3.61 ± 0.97§ ‡	3.58 ± 0.97	3.40 ± 0.93‡	3.27 ± 1.04	0.000	0.000	0.733	0.018

The results are expressed as Mean ± Standard deviation (M ± SD). Sig: significance. \*, significant differences with LSS1 post; §, significant differences with LSS2 pre; ‡, significant differences with LSS2 post.

Significant differences are found between preferred leadership (LSS1) and perceived leadership (LSS2) in the preseason (pretest) in all behaviours except democratic behaviour ( $p > 0.05$ ). In all of them, except in autocratic behaviour ( $2.65 \pm 1.15$  vs  $2.98 \pm 1.18$ ), the results are lower in perceived behaviour (LSS2).

Regarding the results of the players' preferred leadership (LSS1) and perceived leadership (LSS2) in the transition period (posttest), significant differences are found in all behaviours. In the same way as in the pretest, the results of the perceived behaviour (LSS2) are lower than in preferred behaviour (LSS1) except in the autocratic behaviour ( $2.58 \pm 0.99$  vs  $2.83 \pm 1.14$ ).

The training and instruction behaviour is the one that achieves the highest values both in the preferred behaviour pre ( $4.08 \pm 0.87$ ) and post ( $4.08 \pm 0.82$ ), and in the perceived behaviour pre ( $3.91 \pm 0.87$ ) and post ( $3.77 \pm 0.95$ ), followed by preferred positive feedback pre ( $3.61 \pm 0.97$  and  $3.58 \pm 0.97$ ) and perceived positive feedback post ( $3.40 \pm 0.93$  and  $3.27 \pm 1.04$ ), respectively.

Regarding the evolution of self-perception of preferred leadership (LSS1) throughout the 5-month season (LSS1 pre vs LSS1 post), significant differences are found in democratic behaviour ( $p < 0.02$ ), with higher values in post, and in social support ( $p < 0.00$ ), which decreases in post. The behaviour that obtains the highest score in the pre and posttests is training and instruction ( $4.08 \pm 0.87$  and  $4.08 \pm 0.82$ ) followed by positive feedback ( $3.61 \pm 0.97$  and  $3.58 \pm 0.97$ ).

Regarding the evolution of self-perception of perceived leadership (LSS2 pre vs LSS2 post), significant differences are found in all behaviours. The behaviour that obtains the highest score in the pre and posttests is training and instruction ( $3.91 \pm 0.87$  and  $3.77 \pm 0.95$ ) followed by positive feedback ( $3.40 \pm 0.93$  and  $3.27 \pm 1.04$ ).

#### 4 DISCUSSION

This is the first piece of research that analyses the differences between players' self-perceptions of preferred and perceived leadership throughout the season in a high-performance team sport. At the same time, possible modifications in preferred and perceived behaviour between the preseason and the transition period are analysed, finding a significant decrease in almost all the behaviours studied.

Regarding the first objective, analysing the differences between the preferred and perceived behaviour in the preparatory period (LSS1 pre vs LSS2 pre) and in the transition period (LSS1 post vs LSS2 post), the results obtained show (Table 1) significant differences in all behaviours (training and instruction, autocratic, social support, positive feedback) except for democratic behaviour in the preparatory period. Although no research has been found analysing these differences in high-performance sport, these results coincide with studies on football at a formative level (Urrea, 2015, 2018). Multiple factors could explain the differences between the player's preferred and perceived behaviour (Chelladurai, 1990; Hanin.Yuri L, 2007; Horne & Carron, 1985; Newell, 2005; HA Riemer & Toon, 2001). Among them; contextual factors and those related to the features of the player can influence personality, mentality, behaviour, besides affecting the process of training and development of the player's performance: education, socioeconomic status, the coach's level, technical-tactical skills, expectations, self-confidence, motivation, previous experiences, cohesion and satisfaction (Gimeno, Buceta, & Pérez-Llanta, 2001; Lorenzo & Sampaio, 2005; Widmeyer & Williams, 1991). Among the aforementioned factors, we will focus on those more closely related to our study. It is observed that the player's previous experiences (positive or negative) in different teams and with the coaches' different leadership styles can influence the player's beliefs regarding preferences in relation to the current coach's behaviour (Gómez-López, 2020). In this sense, it is worth noting the bidirectional relationship between affectation-influence in the behaviour of the coach and the player (Smoll & Smith, 1989).

Another factor that can help us understand the differences between preferred and perceived behaviour is the agreement between the player and the coach's expectations and interests. Along these lines, it was observed that the greater the similarity between the preferred and perceived behaviour, the greater the psychological compatibility and, on the contrary, the greater the difference, the greater the psychological distance between coach and player, which could result in the player's lower level of satisfaction and poorer performance (Rosado, Palma, & Others, 2007). With reference to our research, the differences observed between the preferred and perceived behaviours of the players, both during the preseason and the transition period, can be interpreted

as indicators of psychological distance. Taking a close look at the research regarding expectations, a study carried out among athletes and amateur volleyball coaches concludes that players feel more satisfied when the perception of their coaches' behaviour is related to their expectations (Kao, Chen, Watson, & Halbrook, 2015).

The player's satisfaction appears as a key factor for the prediction of player and team performance. In addition, players satisfaction is one of the results in some investigations (Chelladurai, 1984; Hanin.Yuri L, 2007; Kim & Cruz, 2016; HA Riemer & Toon, 2001; Urra, 2018; Weiss & Friedrichs, 1986). A study carried out among university students in different sports (Ignacio, Montecalbo, & Cardenas, 2017), reveals a relationship between the coach's behaviour and the athletes' level of satisfaction. Specifically, it concludes that coaches with high marks in training and instruction, recognition, positive feedback and social support, manage to increase the level of satisfaction of their athletes. Likewise, no significant relationship was found between high marks in autocratic leadership and the players' level of satisfaction. Possibly, the coach's management of his/her own behaviour will be decisive in the autonomous development of the players and the team. In fact, autonomy support for the player is a predictor of the three basic psychological needs (competence, autonomy and relatedness), which in turn influence the development and satisfaction of the player (Deci & Ryan, 1980; Morillo Baro, Reigal Garrido, & Hernández-Mendo, 2018).

At the same time, another study carried out among university students in different sports, (Aoyagi, Cox, & McGuire, 2008) shows the importance of developing the athletes' desire to have fun. Having fun, being happy while coping with high demands, will probably lead to a greater satisfaction, effectiveness and individual and collective performance. Being aware of and managing the differences between the players' preferred and perceived leadership behaviour, besides a coherent coach's behaviour and decision making, will improve the team's performance. (Alonso Urra Tobar, 2015; Chelladurai, 2007; García-Mas & Bauzá, 1995; Garcia-Mas & Claudia A. Rivas, 2001; Sanchez, Lorenzo, L. Jiménez, & Lorenzo, 2017; Smoll, Smith, Cruz Feliu, & Garcia Mas, 2009).

Once different relationships between behaviours are established (preferred-perceived) with different variables (situational, features of the player and coach, psychological compatibility, previous experiences, satisfaction and expectations), we cannot ignore the importance of the value "win or lose" in the context of high performance. It seems that when the team wins, it is much easier to generate and perceive an improvement in team cohesion, facilitating in most cases the good evolution of the player and the team (Boone, Beitel, & Kuhlman, 1997; Matheson, Mathes, & Murray, 1997).

Analysing the results, we observe that the training and instruction behaviour obtains the highest values, both in the analysis of the preferred behaviour: pre ( $4.08 \pm 0.87$ ) and post ( $4.08 \pm 0.82$ ); and the perceived behaviour: pre ( $3.91 \pm 0.87$ ) and post ( $3.77 \pm 0.95$ ). These results coincide with those described by other authors (Alonso Urra Tobar, 2015; Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980; Mayo

Santamaría, 1998; Surujlal & Dhurup, 2012; Terry & Howe, 1984). This means that the players identify the training and instruction behaviour as one of the cornerstones of their learning process and performance. Different studies show that coaches have the self-perception of using training and instruction and positive feedback behaviours preferentially over the rest (Coma, 2019; Crespo et al., 1994; Horne & Carron, 1985; R. Ruiz, 2007; Salminen, S.; Liukkonen, 1996). Therefore, players and coaches agree with respect to the relevance and the use of behaviours oriented towards interaction styles (training and instruction, positive feedback and social support) as opposed to decision-making styles (democratic and autocratic). Possibly, the large amount of time devoted to specific tasks during training and matches (sport field work), together with the high demand at these levels of competition, favours the preferential use of training and instruction behaviour over the rest (Mahamud, Tuero, & Márquez, 2005; Marcos, 2013).

With respect to the second objective, which is to analyse the differences (pre-post) between preferred and perceived behaviour, respectively, the results show that regarding preferred behaviour, the values of democratic behaviour increased significantly; pre ( $3.14 \pm 1.05$ ) vs post ( $3.19 \pm 1.06$ ), while social support decreased significantly; pre ( $2.98 \pm 1.19$ ) vs post ( $2.81 \pm 1.13$ ). No research was found analysing the evolution of these variables throughout the season. It is possible that, as the season advances, the players assign a higher value to the coach's democratic behaviour in the management of the team, while also keeping a high demand on the training and instruction behaviour and losing interest in autocratic behaviour.

Regarding the analysis of the differences in perceived pre-post behaviour, the decrease in all behaviours makes it clear that the progress of the season and the demand for a high-performance level of competition (won and lost matches, classification, physical and mental load, daily management of the players, the team and journeys, among others) result in significantly lower values in all the studied behaviours as the competition advances.

In relation to the limitations of this study, it would have been interesting to be able to analyse the results once the season was over. The decision not to distribute the questionnaires during that period was taken, since problems could arise at that point of the season, such as; termination and renewals of the contracts, players call-ups, and physical and mental exhaustion, among others.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Differences between preferred and perceived behaviours (pre-post) are evident in most of the behaviours studied. These differences can be a detriment to the congruence between the three behaviours of the MML model and consequently affect the team's satisfaction. On the other hand, the decrease in preferred and perceived behaviours during the transition period, with the exception of democratic behaviour (preferred behaviour), leads us to think about the highly demanding nature of elite sport and the mental exhaustion it can cause in high-performance players and coaches. Finally, training and instruction behaviour presents the highest values in preferred and perceived behaviours (pre and

post), thus indicating the importance of behaviours aimed at improving the athletes' performance by means of instructions and technical, tactical and physical training.

Regarding the practical contributions of the study, having relevant information about the players in relation to preferred and perceived behaviours by administering the questionnaires strategically and anonymously, could help the coach and coaching staff to make decisions on the use of certain behaviours, methodologies and styles, being able to approach the needs and individual requirements of the players with greater knowledge.

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