Paralympic Athlete Leaders’ Perceptions of Leadership and Cohesion

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Group dynamics research in disability sport is largely undeveloped. The purpose of this exploratory study was to understand Paralympic athlete leaders’ perceptions of leadership and team cohesion. Ten Paralympic athlete leaders participated in semi-structured interviews. A thematic analysis revealed two higher-order themes, which were labeled Athlete Leader Behaviors and Roles and Building Team Cohesion. Participants reported they were responsible for motivating, supporting, and communicating with their teammates and coaches. Additionally, they felt their role was to assist and encourage teammates to live independently. They also described the importance of organizing social gatherings outside the formal sport setting as a way to influence team cohesion and enhance on-field performance. Results from this study are among the first to investigate group dynamics within disability sport and are of interest to athletes, coaches, health and performance consultants, as well as others involved in the coaching and care of athletes with disabilities.
Leadership has been identified as an important factor in achieving team excellence and success in sport (Weinberg & McDermott, 2002). Research on leadership in sport has a long history of investigating the role and contributions of the coach (Bloom & Salmela, 2000; Chelladurai, 2007; Horn, 2008; Loughead, Hardy, & Eys, 2006; Rathwell, Bloom, & Loughead, 2014). However, a growing body of literature has begun to examine athlete leaders’ behaviors and roles within the team setting (Bucci, Bloom, Loughead, & Caron, 2012; Dupuis, Bloom, & Loughead, 2006; Price & Weiss, 2011; Vincer & Loughead, 2010). For instance, Vincer and Loughead (2010) found that athlete leader behaviors were positively related to team cohesion. Though athlete leaders’ influence on cohesion has begun to receive empirical support in the literature on athletes without disabilities, their role in promoting and sustaining team cohesion has largely been ignored in disability sport.

Research in disability sport has investigated a variety of topics ranging from physiological variables (e.g., Edmonds, Leicht, McKean, & Burkett, 2014), to biomechanical considerations (e.g., Starrs, Chohan, Fewtrell, Richards, & Selfe, 2012), to athletes’ psychosocial outcomes (e.g., Banack, Sabiston, & Bloom, 2011; Martin & Whalen, 2012; Shapiro & Martin, 2014), to the role of the coach (e.g., Canadian Sport for Life, 2012; Coaching Association of Canada, 2005; Cregan, Bloom, & Reid, 2007; Falcão, Bloom, & Loughead, 2015; Tawse, Bloom, Sabiston, & Reid, 2012). Specific to coaching, research has revealed that coaching athletes with and without disabilities is often very similar. However, there are unique aspects to coaching athletes with disabilities such as an awareness of disability, accessibility, and creativity in the pursuit of knowledge (Cregan et al., 2007; Tawse et al., 2012). Although the rehabilitation and educational goals of athletes with a disability are appropriately individualized, they may minimize group experiences and social interactions. In fact, athletes with a disability may have reduced social networks (Lyons, Sullivan, Ritvo, & Coyne, 1995) and place considerable importance on the social opportunities inherent in sport (Hanrahan, 2007; Wu & Williams, 2001), thereby highlighting the importance of developing social cohesion in this cohort. Developing strong peer relationships, a form of social cohesiveness, has been shown to be beneficial for athletes with a disability because it allows them to connect with similar others and reduce feelings of social isolation (Martin, 2013). For instance, Goodwin, Lieberman, Johnston, and Leo (2011) reported that adolescents with a visual disability who participated in a summer sports camp felt a strong sense of belonging to the other group members who likely understood what it meant to be visually impaired.

Athletes with disabilities have fewer opportunities for practice and competition (Nyland, Snouse, Anderson, Kelly, & Sterling, 2000) and/or access to venues (Hanrahan, 2007) than athletes without disabilities, which suggest it is also important to develop task cohesion within this cohort. The majority of disability sports were created to incorporate
athletes with varying levels of physical function. As a result, these teams may have unique
task goal constraints. For example, in International Wheelchair Basketball, each player
is classified into one of eight categories. Higher categories represent players with greater
functional abilities. The coach must ensure that the five players on the court do not exceed
a certain classification total at any point during the game. As such, the five teammates will
include players with greater and lesser physical functioning who will be required to work
together during games in order to function effectively as a team. Thus, athletes with disabili­
ties are dependent upon each other in ways that do not exist for athletes without disabilities,
as they strive for team task goals. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for some athletes with
higher functional ability to transport players of lower functional ability to team practices.
This presents a form of social interaction that is unique to athletes with a disability and is
not seen among athletes without a disability. Taken together, studying cohesion in disability
sport teams and the roles that team leaders play in facilitating this process appears timely.

Carron’s (1982) linear conceptual model for the study of cohesion explains the rela­
tionship between cohesion and leadership. Cohesion is defined as “a dynamic process that is
reflected in the tendency for a group to stick together and remain united in pursuit of its in­
strumental objectives and/or for the satisfaction of member affective needs” (Carron, Braw­
ley, & Widmeyer, 1998, p. 213). Within this definition, Carron and colleagues (1998) noted
that perceptions of cohesion can focus on either task or social aspects. A task focus would
reflect more attention placed on achieving the group’s goals or objectives, whereas a social
focus is aimed at developing and maintaining relationships within the group. As Dion (2000)
noted, the task-social cohesion distinction is viewed as being fundamental since it applies
to most, if not all groups. This conclusion concerning the task and social cohesion distinc­
tion emerged from numerous models and lines of research in both sport (Carron, 1982) and
organizational (Dion & Evans, 1992) psychology. For instance, this line of conceptualizing
cohesion has been used in numerous studies examining all levels of sport including child
(Martin, Carron, Eys, & Loughead, 2012), adolescent (Eys, Loughead, Bray, & Carron,
2009), and adult (Callow, Smith, Hardy, Arthur, & Hardy, 2009) populations.

In Carron’s (1982) model, leadership is one of four antecedents that are hypothesized
to influence cohesion. Athlete leadership is defined as an athlete who occupies a formal or
informal leadership role influencing team members to achieve a common goal (Loughead
et al., 2006). Formal athlete leaders are designated as leaders by their team. Informal athlete
leaders emerge as leaders because of their experience, knowledge, and interactions with
other team members even though they have not been formally designated as a leader by their
team. Research examining athlete leadership and cohesion has shown that both formal and
informal athlete leadership behaviors of training and instruction and social support have
been found to be positively related to both task and social dimensions of cohesion (Vincer & Loughead, 2010). For example, Callow et al. (2009) found formal athlete leaders’ (i.e., team captains) leadership behaviors of fostering acceptance of group goals and promoting teamwork, high performance expectations, and individual consideration were positively related to task cohesion. Further, these authors also found that fostering acceptance of group goals and promoting teamwork was associated with social cohesion. Finally, using a composite measure of transformational athlete leadership behaviors, Price and Weiss (2013) found it related to both task and social cohesion. Overall, several studies have provided support for Carron’s (1982) conceptual model demonstrating a relationship between leadership and perceptions of team cohesion.

In sum, research examining athlete leadership and cohesion has exclusively investigated able-bodied populations, predominantly using quantitative methodologies. Unlike quantitative research methods, qualitative data collection techniques would allow athletes the flexibility to use their own words to describe their experiences in the disability sport setting (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Creswell, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Interviewing is a qualitative research method that has been used to obtain in-depth descriptions of individuals’ experiences or perceptions of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Researchers have noted that qualitative interviews are particularly useful when investigating underexplored topics, as participants are able to explain the how and why of their experiences (Creswell, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Thus, the current study utilized interviews with Paralympic athlete leaders to provide insights on their perceptions of leadership and cohesion. The first purpose of this exploratory study was to examine Paralympic athlete leaders’ perceptions of the roles of athlete leaders. The second purpose was to understand Paralympic athlete leaders’ perceptions of cohesion on their teams.

Method

Participants

Scholars have long debated the appropriate sample size for studies using qualitative interviews (Creswell, 2013; Padgett, 2008; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The current study interviewed 10 Paralympic athlete leaders, which is consistent with previous qualitative work in group dynamics (e.g., Paradis, Carron, & Martin, 2014). Participants in the current study were six male and four female Paralympic athlete leaders who ranged in age from 18 to 44 years and who competed in either interdependent (e.g., Sledge Hockey, Wheelchair Basketball) or independent (e.g., Swimming, Wheelchair Racing) sports. Participants had both congenital and acquired disabilities,
which ranged from upper and lower extremity disabilities and amputations, to paraplegia, quadriplegia, muscular dystrophy, and cerebral palsy. Due to the relatively small number of Paralympic athletes in North America, providing additional comments and details about the participants in this study could potentially risk exposing their identities.

**Procedure**

Coaches and directors of high-performance sport centers in Canada familiar with disability sport helped identify formal and informal athlete leaders (cf. Loughead et al., 2006) for this study. Upon obtaining ethical approval for this study, a list of candidates were contacted via e-mail and sent information on the purpose of the study. Those who expressed interest in participating in this study identified a time and location for a face-to-face interview. At the beginning of each interview, participants were verbally explained his or her rights as a research participant. Each athlete provided verbal and written consent to participate in this study. Interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes in length and occurred at a location selected by the participants in their geographical region.

**Data Collection**

A semi-structured interview guide was created based on Carron’s conceptual model of cohesion (Carron, 1982) and research in adapted physical activity, leadership, and cohesion. The first section of the interview focused on gaining an understanding of the participants’ backgrounds in sport, as well as a description of their disability (e.g., Briefly describe your evolution in sport; Describe the effects of your disability on your daily life). The second section was more specific to our research questions (e.g., Describe some skills and qualities of good athlete leaders; Describe the importance of cohesion for your team). The third and final section of the interview guide provided participants the opportunity to clarify statements made, ask questions, or make additional comments (e.g., Do you have any additional questions or comments you would like to add?).

**Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was selected as the strategy to organize Paralympic athlete leaders’ perceptions of leadership and cohesion. One of the strengths of thematic analysis is its flexibility, as “it is not wedded to a specific theory” (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 124). Consequently, researchers using a thematic analysis have been encouraged to identify their theoretical assumptions and approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). As such, this study was guided by the assumption of social constructivism (Creswell, 2013), whereby the research team assumed that participants’ nature of reality was developed in coordination with
others rather than independently (see Clarke, Braun, & Wooles, 2014). That is, we assumed the meanings attached to Paralympic athlete leaders’ experiences were co-created and influenced by everyday life in North American society. Additionally, the approach used in this study was to focus on the semantic meanings in the data, as opposed to other approaches (e.g., Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis; Smith et al., 2009) that are rooted in the researcher’s interpretation of participants’ experiences. Our approach is appropriate given that members of the research team have not directly participated in disability sport. Therefore, we chose to focus on reporting athletes’ experiences while offering limited interpretation.

The ultimate aim of conducting a thematic analysis is to organize and describe participants’ experiences by inductively analyzing, identifying, and reporting themes in the data (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The current study followed the guidelines set forth by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013). Upon completion of the interviews, each audio recording was transcribed verbatim and stored using the NVivo 10 software package (QSR International Pty Ltd). After the final interview was transcribed, each transcript was read in its entirety several times to gain familiarity with the data. The first interview transcript was selected to begin generating initial codes. A code is a label that summarizes the meaning of a block of text. Braun and Clarke (2013) noted that blocks of text could either be a single sentence or several sentences that encapsulate a participant’s experience or meaning. After generating initial codes for the first interview transcript, this process was repeated for the remaining nine transcripts. Initial codes from all ten interviews were mapped onto a master list. Generating codes was viewed as an iterative process whereby the master list was modified throughout the initial phases of analysis. Some examples of these codes included “athlete leaders’ personal interactions with teammates”, “disabilities on a Paralympic team”, and “athletes’ perceptions of team unity”. Once the list of codes was finalized, similar codes were organized into higher-order themes. The themes were reviewed and analyzed by each member of the research team to ensure they best represented participants’ experiences and perceptions.

**Trustworthiness.** Although there has been much debate on the best ways to establish trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry (see Smith, 2009; Sparkes & Smith, 2009), researchers are encouraged to outline the measures taken to ensure the quality of their findings and to make the conclusions more plausible and credible for readers (Sparkes & Smith, 2014; Trac-ey, 2010). We followed Sparkes and Smith’s (2014) guidelines for reflexivity and researcher triangulation. Reflexivity refers to being self-aware about one’s own perspectives and biases when analyzing, interpreting, or reporting qualitative research findings (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). One method of enhancing reflexivity is through the use of a “critical friend”, whose role is to provide a sounding board and to encourage constant reflection throughout data analysis (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). A co-author who was not present during the interviews...
served as the critical friend. The first author and the critical friend met at each stage of the analysis to ensure the findings were rooted in the participants’ experiences and meanings. In addition to reflexivity, the current study also implemented researcher triangulation to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. Researcher triangulation is used to ensure that participants’ constructed realities are accurately represented and interpreted by the investigators (Sparkes & Smith, 2014), and was accomplished by having the authors of the present study converge on the analysis, results, and conclusions. All four authors independently reviewed and agreed on the data analysis, the results and their interpretations, as well as the conclusions drawn from this study. Having multiple researchers converge on the same findings and interpretations helped to ensure that we, the investigators, offered the most realistic representation of Paralympic athlete leaders’ experiences.

Results

Two higher-order themes emerged from the thematic analysis, and they were labeled as Athlete Leader Behaviors and Roles and Building Team Cohesion. Quotes will be used to illustrate Paralympic athlete leaders’ experiences and perceptions of leadership and cohesion on their disability sport teams. Participants were assigned a pseudonym to identify their quotes and to ensure confidentiality.

Athlete Leader Behaviors and Roles

Paralympic athlete leaders described the ways in which they provided leadership on their teams. Specifically, athlete leaders said their role included motivating, supporting, and communicating with their teammates and coaches. Athlete leaders reported that using a democratic leadership style allowed them to include all athletes in the decision-making process and thus accommodate for the variety of disabilities on their teams. Also, participants discussed that encouraging and supporting teammates’ drive to live independently was an important aspect of being an athlete leader.

All ten of the participants felt that part of their role involved motivating teammates during practices and games: “As an athlete leader, I always try to help and encourage my teammates. If I push them too much they’ll let me know. I know when to lay off the pedal a little bit (Allen).”

I try to motivate my teammates on the court and on the bench during games. When we’re on the bench during games and down by a point or two, I try to keep the players talking on the bench and encourage them on the court (Helen).

Sometimes you have to think outside of the box when your team isn’t in the best
shape. There was a time when my team was going through a rough patch because our point guard wasn’t so motivated. One day when the point guard was in a bad mood, I told him that another player [on the team] said he’s a has-been. The point-guard got so mad... but it also got him fired up! He said, ‘I’ll show you who’s a has-been.’ Before a fight broke out, I told the point guard the truth (Daniel).

Nine athlete leaders also felt that part of their role was to provide support for their teammates. Specifically, they said they supported their teammates by developing close, personal relationships with them:

I have always tried to support to my teammates. When new teammates arrive to the team, I want to talk to them, get to know them, ask them where they come from, and what their story is. If you can relate to them, they’ll feel more comfortable on the team (Helen).

Brian described a fellow athlete leader who was particularly good at supporting teammates:

I’ll tell you about one athlete who I looked up to. He would include people to go for lunch or offer assistance any way he could. He was able to relate to everybody. He could act 10 years old or 40 years old. He would have a lot of one-on-one interactions with teammates. He was always available to chat or help you if you needed assistance. He provided a lot of social support and advice to the athletes (Brian).

Regular communication with teammates and coaches before, during, and after the season was another responsibility described by six of the athlete leaders. Because Paralympic athletes are located across the country, the athlete leaders said they used a combination of e-mail and social networking tools to communicate with teammates when they were not training and competing together:

My teammates communicate well with one another. Facebook and e-mail make it easier to communicate. We set up a Facebook group for players, coaches, and our sport psychologist. We all live far from each other so Facebook is an easy way to keep in contact (Francine).

More specifically, athlete leaders indicated their role was to have an “open line of communication” with their coaches, and to act as an “intermediary” by relaying teammates’ comments and suggestions: “If there are team things that need to be brought forward to the coach, he expects them to come through the captains (Francine).”

I always talk to my teammates to make sure they’re satisfied with the decisions that are made by the coaches. We have meetings to get their opinions to report back to the coaches. Usually we put our teammates’ ideas together and bring them to the coach (Erin).
Though the participants said they enjoyed their position as formal or informal leaders, five of the participants felt that accommodating for the wide range of abilities on Paralympic teams was an important—yet challenging—part of their role:

I try to accommodate for the different disabilities on my team. One time our coach took us on a cave tour but I felt badly for [name of athlete] because she couldn’t see anything! Before we get to a place, we discuss what’s best for the majority and try to make it happen. This is important because a number of people on my team have visual impairments (Gloria).

To help ensure they were effectively accommodating for their teammates’ range of abilities, athlete leaders often included their teammates in the decision-making process, depending on the type of activity or gathering: “As an athlete leader, the majority of the time I’ll include my teammates in my decision-making but sometimes I’ll make decisions on my own. I’d say that 90% of decisions are made with the whole team (Daniel).”

Sometimes we make decisions on our own and sometimes we include the others. It depends on the situation. For example, we ordered golf shirts for our last training camp. We didn’t ask the whole group because we know how we’re supposed to look at events. For other things, like going out to dinner, we would include everyone (Charles).

Five athlete leaders in this study felt that an important aspect of their role was to instill the importance of personal independence with their teammates: “I think participation in wheelchair sports teaches athletes to become more independent. The greatest thing for me is seeing an athlete learn to do things on their own like pushing their chair (Allen).”

Independence is something we try to instill on our team. Some of the [players’] parents are in the same hotel so they can go up to their parents if they need to get a hug or whatever to make them feel at home. However, we try to separate them from that because it can be a really hard habit to break (Charles).

Independence is really important on my team. From a player’s perspective, we try to push everyone out of his or her comfort zone. We make sure everyone cleans up after himself and they go get their own food. That doesn’t mean we refuse to help them [if they need it] but we encourage them to do it on their own (Kyle).

These participants exuded pride when discussing instances when their teammates made improvements with respect to developing personal independence. Athlete leaders believed their role was to teach and support their teammates by giving them strategies aimed at overcoming the daily barriers associated with living with a disability.
Building Team Cohesion

Athlete leaders described some of the ways they attempted to positively influence team cohesion. In particular, they described how they organized and arranged social team gatherings outside the formal setting, and the positive influence these gatherings had on team cohesion. In addition, athlete leaders described how increased familiarity among teammates positively influenced their competitive performances.

Eight of the athlete leaders in this study felt that social team gatherings outside the formal sport setting were an important aspect of building and sustaining group cohesion. Participants said they often coordinated these team gatherings with the assistance of both formal and informal team leaders and coaches.

Sometimes you can have different factions within the team, and you’ll have unity within those factions. When you come back together as a team, then those different factions combine. Sometimes there may be about four or five guys that hang together, and another four or five guys that hang together. These factions may be formed because people have different views on things. I try to make them realize that this divide is not good and we need to bring everybody together (Allen).

These participants described some of the team social gatherings in more detail:

I remember a time when my team really bonded outside of practice. We organized an activity where we went to an amusement park all day. Even now, people will post a photo from that day and will laugh about it. We tease each other about the silly moments. It’s not all about sports (Francine).

Sometimes the other team leaders and I organize team-building activities. Last year we did laser tag. It was really interesting, because you could hear the guys in wheelchairs coming from a mile away. That activity was designed specifically for team-building. Sometimes it may just be watching a hockey game in someone’s room (Charles).

Four of the eight athlete leaders felt these team social gatherings helped to develop a sense of closeness among teammates, which they felt allowed their team to be strongly united on the playing surface. They attributed their team cohesiveness to positive interactions both on and off the playing surface:

I love all of my teammates. On and off the court they’re great. There are no cliques on the team. We all hang out and eat together. Everyone’s so close. Some of the guys I play with are my best friends (Jordan).

My team is pretty united considering the fact that we don’t have much in common in terms of age and status. Some of our athletes are older, some are younger, some are married, and some go home to change dirty diapers (Brian).

The relationships on my team are strong on and off the court. We relate well with one
another. On the court, there’s no, ‘I don’t like you so I won’t pass the ball to you.’ If there’s a problem, we fix it, and we won’t bring our problems on the court or on the track. We try to resolve problems quickly (Erin).

Eight athlete leaders described the ways in which team members’ varying level of abilities influenced the group’s cohesion. For example, Erin and Gloria felt their team’s cohesion was positively influenced by teammates having various types of disabilities. Gloria noted: “My teammates and I have different disabilities and views on certain things because of our different types of disabilities. We definitely approach things with different perspectives, which I think helps our team cohesion.” Furthermore, Erin said:

I think having athletes with different types of disabilities affects our team’s togetherness in a positive way. For example, we had a training camp and I remember going to the pool and two blind guys were playing baseball with one of the amputee’s legs. Balls were flying everywhere. I remember sitting on the side laughing with the others. Allen and Helen noted that athletes’ levels of ability have impacted team cohesion. Specifically, these participants described some of the challenges they encountered when socializing with teammates outside the sporting context:

There are some challenges with having different disabilities on a team, like when an athlete is not verbal and has trouble speaking to you; it can be pretty difficult to try to understand what they’re trying to talking about or what they’re trying to do. Some athletes can sign but it’s an adapted sign language, which makes it more difficult to understand (Allen).

I think disabilities have an effect on how my team socializes. Sometimes it’s easier to hang out with someone with the same level of function that you have. For example, if you want to hop on the bus and go to the mall, some [of my] teammates are unable to do that. There was an athlete who was visually impaired and had a guide, so it was difficult to include him because we didn’t want his guide around. I think that types of disabilities do impact our team socially (Helen).

Although the athlete leaders’ had differing opinions on how disabilities impacted team cohesion, it was evident from their comments that disability sport teams faced unique challenges to build and sustain team cohesion.

All ten of the athlete leaders felt that social team gatherings helped them become more familiar with their teammates, which they felt ultimately affected their competitive performances:

Team unity is important because it allows us to get to know one another’s strengths and weaknesses. For instance, if I’m really close to a player, I’ll know that his right
hand is weak, so I’ll pass to his left hand. If I wasn’t that close to him, I wouldn’t have
known that and it might have affected our performance (Charles).
It tends to be around race time that [name of athlete] is a little bit more sensitive, so
we make sure we are all giving him more support and make sure he feels good about
what he’s doing. If we don’t, we all don’t perform well (Gloria).

Discussion

Given that little is known about group dynamics in disability sport, the results from
this study are among the first to understand Paralympic athlete leaders’ perceptions of
leadership and team cohesion. In general, the results showed that Paralympic athlete leaders
believed they were responsible for motivating and supporting team members, as well as
communicating effectively with both teammates and coaches. Not surprisingly, these roles
and responsibilities are similar to the behaviors and characteristics of able-bodied athlete
leaders (e.g., Crozier, Loughead, & Munroe-Chandler, 2013; Dupuis et al., 2006; Fransen,
In particular, elite athletes and coaches recently revealed the importance of the motivational
role exhibited by athlete leaders (Fransen et al., 2014). A motivational leader was defined as
an individual who encourages his/her teammates to extreme limits in order to perform opti­
mally (Fransen et al., 2014)—a description which aligns closely with the Paralympic athlete
leaders in the current study. Further, being motivated was included as a key characteristic of
being an effective athlete leader in Glenn and Horn’s (1993) Sport Leadership Behavior In­
tventory. Paralympic athlete leaders also suggested that providing support to teammates was
a crucial role. This support is similar to the leadership behavior of social support (i.e., caring
for interpersonal needs of athletes) identified by Chelladurai and Saleh (1980). In their
review of the psychological environment in disability sport, Dieffenbach and Statler (2012)
concluded there were more similarities than differences between athletes with and without
disabilities. Our results appear to be in line with these conclusions and suggest that athlete
leaders with and without disabilities use similar leadership behaviors to support and encour­
age their teammates, which is promising when considering the effectiveness of these types of
leadership behaviors in able-bodied sport (Price & Weiss, 2011; Vincer & Loughead, 2010).

The Paralympic athlete leaders felt it was important to regularly interact with both
their teammates and coaches. Effective communication is a vital component of team success
(Yukelson, 2006), and there is empirical evidence indicating that having effective athlete
leadership within teams serves to enhance communication amongst all team members (e.g.,
Crozier et al., 2013; Dupuis et al., 2006). In addition, the finding that Paralympic athlete
leaders helped to relay teammates’ opinions and comments to the coaching staff supports previous research (e.g., Bucci et al., 2012; Dupuis et al., 2006) showing that able-bodied athlete leaders acted as liaisons between players and coaches. On a related point, athlete leaders in the current study noted that e-mail and social networking sites such as Facebook allowed team members to communicate throughout the year. These results are in agreement with Lampe and Ellison (2010) who found that Facebook was an important communication tool for varsity athletes to coordinate off-season training, keep in touch with teammates, and mentor younger teammates. Paralympic athletes are often geographically isolated from their teammates and thus have fewer opportunities for face-to-face interactions. Additionally, many Paralympic athletes do not receive substantive financial support and/or sponsorships to cover the costs associated with travelling to regional training facilities. This suggests the use of social networking tools may be especially important for Paralympic athletes because it may break down certain logistical and financial barriers related to communicating with teammates. Along the same line, research has demonstrated that online communication was a viable alternative for individuals with disabilities (Braithwaite, Waldron, & Finn, 1999).

The results also indicated the importance of using a democratic or participative leadership style, which allows team members to have input in the decision-making process. According to Carron and Spink’s (1993) team-building model, a participative style of leadership is thought to influence perceptions of team cohesion. Further, Vincer and Loughead (2010) found the democratic (i.e., participative) behavior of athlete leaders was positively related to task cohesion. Likewise, though participants in the current study did not explicitly suggest that the other athlete leader roles and behaviors identified (motivation, support) had a positive impact on their team’s chemistry, previous quantitative research on athletes without disabilities has shown that similar leadership behaviors exhibited by team leaders were positively related to perceptions of cohesion (Price & Weiss, 2011, 2013; Vincer & Loughead, 2010). Thus, it is possible that the leadership behaviors and responsibilities displayed by Paralympic athlete leaders had a positive effect on their team’s level of cohesiveness.

Encouraging personal independence amongst team members was another key role for athlete leaders. In particular, Paralympic athlete leaders commented on the importance of urging team members to extend beyond their perceived limits related to daily living tasks. This aligns with Wu and Williams (2001) who found that sport peers were important socializing agents for helping athletes reintegrate into sport and the community following a spinal cord injury. Similarly, previous research has shown that elite coaches of athletes with disabilities developed them personally and athletically, which included helping them set goals in sport as well as in their personal lives (e.g., Cregan et al., 2007; Falcão et al., 2015; Tawse et al., 2012). Banack and colleagues (2011) studied the relationships between Paralympic
athletes’ perceptions of coach behaviors and found that athletes preferred an autonomy-supportive coaching style. Taken together, it is evident that both athlete leaders and coaches in this population believe they are responsible for developing independence amongst team members. Our results add to this body of literature by providing one of the first empirical accounts that showed how Paralympic athlete leaders’ enhanced the personal independence of their teammates.

The results also revealed the methods used by Paralympic athlete leaders to enhance their team’s task and social cohesion. Specifically, athlete leaders placed significant emphasis on the importance of social team gatherings and their impact on team unity. While it was noted that some activities were organized for team-building purposes (e.g., laser tag), other gatherings were often described as opportunities to socialize and interact with teammates (e.g., watching a hockey game on television). The fact that team gatherings were important to athlete leaders is not surprising as social opportunities have been found to be a key motive for sport participation among athletes with disabilities (Hanrahan, 2007; Wu & Williams, 2001). Further, these social activities served to increase the degree to which players felt a sense of closeness with one another. Thus, it would appear that social cohesion (Carron, Widmeyer, & Brawley, 1985) was the primary outcome of team social gatherings. Further, the results provide theoretical support for the importance of social and task cohesion within disability sport. That is, the results support the theoretical distinction between social and task cohesion as advocated by previous researchers (e.g., Dion, 2000; Eys et al., 2009) and also highlight the presence of both types of cohesion in disability sport. The findings support Dion’s (2000) contention that social and task cohesion is present in all types of groups, which can now include elite-level Paralympic sport teams.

Activities such as team goal-setting or outdoor adventure programs have typically been used to enhance team cohesion (Martin, Carron, & Burke, 2009). However, team social gatherings emerged as a preferred team building activity in the current study. Brawley and Paskevich (1997) defined team-building as “a method of helping the group to: (a) increase effectiveness, (b) satisfy the needs of its members, or (c) improve work conditions (p. 13).” Using this definition, it could be argued that team social gatherings satisfied the interpersonal needs of Paralympic team members and therefore acted as an effective form of team-building for this population. In turn, this socially-oriented method of team-building assisted in the development and sustainment of social cohesion.

Paralympic athlete leaders also felt that team unity was enhanced due to a high degree of familiarity amongst team members. Participants noted that being close with team members on and off the playing surface led to enhanced feelings of cohesion regarding task objectives (e.g., resolving problems quickly allowed team members to remain united on the
PARALYMPIC ATHLETE LEADERS.

Although social cohesion was primarily emphasized by the athlete leaders in the current study, the results also suggest that task cohesion was enhanced due to increased familiarity amongst team members. In addition, athlete leaders believed that the bonding within the team from both a social and task perspective had a positive influence on team performance. For instance, one participant described how being close with a teammate could give him information about whether to pass to the teammate’s strong or weak hand, an advantage that impacted team performance. In a sport-specific meta-analysis, both social (ES = .70) and task cohesion (ES = .61) were important factors that impacted the cohesion-performance relationship (Carron, Colman, Wheeler, & Stevens, 2002). Results from the current study are among the first in the disability sport literature to highlight the usefulness of a team-level construct to increase performance. To date, the majority of research attempting to enhance performance in athletes with a disability has focused on the benefits of psychological skills (Dieffenbach & Statler, 2012; Hanrahan, 2015). It is hoped that the results of the present study will encourage researchers to further examine group-level variables (e.g., cohesion) and how they impact team-level functioning on Paralympic teams.

The results from the current study have some interesting applied implications for athletes, coaches, and health and performance consultants, including the benefit of exposing athletes with disabilities to leadership development and team-building strategies. With respect to leadership development, recent research on athletes without disabilities has shown that leadership training programs are important for enhancing the sporting experience (e.g., Blanton, Sturges, & Gould, 2014; Gould & Voelker, 2010). The current results revealed the importance of educating the disability sport community about motivating behaviors, democratic behaviors, and social support. In terms of developing team cohesion, practitioners could utilize components of Carron and Spink’s (1993) team-building model to enhance the cohesiveness of sport teams in this population. Specifically, practitioners could provide athlete leaders with effective strategies for the three categories of the model (team structure, team environment, team processes) that contribute to team cohesion. This information may provide athlete leaders with novel team-building strategies that could be used to supplement team social gatherings. Similarly, coaches are encouraged to allow adequate time in the schedule for athlete leaders (formal and informal) to organize social gatherings and other team-building activities.

Future research in this domain is recommended and might consider the following suggestions. First, the current study may not have identified all of the roles and behaviors of Paralympic athlete leaders. For example, previous research on athletes without disabilities has identified the additional leadership behaviors of intellectual stimulation, high performance expectations, and contingent reward (Callow et al., 2009). Second, the results do not
provide insight as to which specific leadership behaviors and roles (e.g., motivation, communication) are related to team cohesion. In the future, it would be useful to conduct regression analyses to determine which particular leadership behaviors are positively associated to both task and social cohesion within disability sport teams. Nonetheless, the results of the present study provide athletes, coaches, and performance consultants with salient information concerning Paralympic athlete leaders’ perceptions of leadership and cohesion. It is hoped that the findings will be used to enhance the performance and well-being of athletes involved in disability sport.

References


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