

Perceived destructive coach leadership behavior in elite team sports

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There is agreement among athletes, coaches, and sport researchers that leadership is one of the most significant factors when performing and operating in elite sport. There is, however, a lack of understanding of how the behaviors of coaches as leaders could be considered as destructive. The aim of this study was to explore elite sport athletes' perceptions and experiences of destructive coach leadership behavior. Informants in this study were a convenience sample of eight (four female and four males) current or former World Class/international elite athletes in handball and soccer, with an average of 12 years of experience at elite level. Using semi-structured interviews and conducting a reflective thematic analysis we identified three main categories of perceived destructive leadership behavior from the coaches described as: Active Destructive Behaviors; Passive Destructive Behaviors, and Incompetent Coach Behaviors. Recognizing these behaviors is the first step in attempting to eradicate them.

KEY WORDS: Leadership, Coach Behavior, Team Sport, Coach, Athletes.

Introduction

There is an agreement among athletes, coaches, and sport researchers that leadership is one of the most significant factors when performing and operating in sport (Cruickshank & Collins, 2016; Lyle, 2002; Schei et al., 2024). Research on leadership in sport has, however, traditionally been aimed at exploring positive aspects of the coach's leadership styles and behavior, which have been identified to contribute to enhanced psychosocial health, motivation, optimal team functioning and subsequent improved performance

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(Chelladurai, 2007; Erikstad, et al., 2021; Schei et al., 2024). Furthermore, ineffective 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 individuals and teams (Bass & Bass, 2008; Craig & Kaiser, 2013; Skogstad et al., 2007). Less research has focused on identifying behaviors that the coaches should not do, or behaviors that may undermine the effect of their otherwise effective or constructive behaviors. Whilst there are studies investigating aspects such as need thwarting behavior (see e.g., Bartholomew et al., 2011) and emotional abuse in sport (Kavanagh et al., 2017; Stirling & Kerr, 2008), there is a deficit of research investigating, from a broader perspective, coaches' destructive or toxic leadership behavior (Feddersen et al., 2019; Turnidge & Côté, 2019; Seifried, 2018). There is, however, a plethora of anecdotal stories, TV series, YouTube videos, and almost daily newspaper reports that 'show' coaches who exhibit behaviors that could reasonably be labeled under the term of destructive or toxic coach leadership behavior. These anecdotal stories from the media indicate that destructive coach leadership behavior is prevalent in sport (Kvamme, 2021; Røkeberg et al., 2021).

Krasikova et al. (2013) stated that destructive leaders tend to control, deceive, dominate, intimidate, manipulate, and threaten their followers, as well as defraud and steal from their organizations. Furthermore, they define destructive leadership as "volitional behavior by a leader that can harm or intends to harm a leader's organization and/or followers by (a) encouraging followers to pursue goals that contravene the legitimate interests of the organization and/or (b) employing a leadership style that involves the use of harmful methods of influence with followers, regardless of justifications for such behavior" (p. 1310). Even though this definition broadened its conceptualization, it is important to note that destructive leadership behavior can include a variety of harmful behavior not related to the leadership task (e.g., taking drugs at work, stealing from the organization). According to Schyns and Schilling (2013), however, the term 'destructive leadership' should be limited to those behaviors that have follower-targeted influence.

Even if several researchers have called for more nuanced research on leadership in sports for decades (Chelladurai, 2007; Kent & Chelladurai, 2001; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011), there is still a deficit exploring destructive sport specific leadership. There may, however, be several plausible reasons for this. For example, the fact that effective coach leadership is seen as an almost exclusively positive entity and regarded as a universal ambition for all coaches (Nash, 2015; Jowett & Poczwadowski, 2007). Therefore, coaching in sport appears to be so indisputably positively oriented that questioning it may be

touchy and perhaps cause considerable disturbance in the sporting federation, organizations, clubs, athletes and in parents. *Destructive* coach leadership represents a contradiction to espoused sports values and therefore may be neglected or suppressed not only by researchers, but also in the sport community. Given the fact that many athletes in sport are relatively young and coached by older coaches, there are power imbalances between the coach and the athletes and thus signals from the athletes about inappropriate, bad and/or destructive coach behavior may be suppressed (Bass & Bass, 2008; Forslin, 2015).

In elite sport it may well be that destructive leadership is more common and more tolerated, both among athletes and other stakeholders. In high pressure and demanding environments (e.g., elite sport), where more is at stake athletically, socially, and economically it may influence coaches to behave in more unethical or incompetent ways if these behaviors are perceived to result in greater performance and success and therefore are more easily accepted among the athletes and broader stakeholders. Furthermore, elite sport athletes who normally are highly motivated, committed and dedicated may contribute to the acceptability of such behaviors as they may more easily suppress and tolerate these destructive coach behaviors as they are more fully committed into the shared goal of success at all costs. This may be partly a consequence of the athletes' enormous investment in the sport, their desire for success, and the fact that their identity is built upon being an athlete, which might make them more vulnerable and thus afraid of reporting coach misbehavior. It may also be that they believe (or have experienced) that if they clearly tell the coach that this behavior damages or hurts them, other team members or the whole team, or if they raise a complaint, it could hamper their sporting career (e.g., rejection, put on transfer list, reduced playing time, access to important support sources).

Taken together, exploring the prevalence of destructive leadership behavior in sport, and understanding its perceived consequences may be as important for understanding effective coaching as understanding and emphasizing the positive aspects of coach leadership. Despite this, the most common line of research in sport in this area has aimed to uncover coach behaviors that are so harmful that they are obviously negative, and in many cases unlawful, such as harassment (e.g., Fasting et al., 2004; 2011), discrimination (Denison et al., 2021; Storr et al., 2021) and sexual abuse (e.g., Brackenridge, 1997; Parent & Bannon, 2012). There is also a line of research investigating emotional abuse (Kavanagh et al., 2017; Stirling & Kerr, 2007, 2008, 2014) which can inflict harm on athletes such as anxiety, depression, or social withdrawal in various sporting contexts (Stirling & Kerr, 2007, 2008, 2014). Whilst this research is highly important and necessary, it does not adequately capture the

'lesser' variety of destructive coach leadership behavior that may occur in the coach athlete relationship. As Kellerman (2004) notes, negative leadership behaviors can be placed on a continuum ranging from ineffective/incompetent to unethical/evil. Although unethical and evil actions are obviously bad and, in many cases, criminal, other forms of destructive coach leadership may not always be perceived as bad or in some situations they may have positive effects related to effort, performance, and success, at least in a short time. For example, studies have shown that coaches have successfully used ruthlessness, bullying, social dominance, and Machiavellianism as a means to gain control and/or change the team's sporting performance (Cruickshank & Collins, 2015; Cruickshank et al., 2014).

Therefore, given (a) the significant role coaches have in elite sport performance (b) the demanding environment and pressure in elite sport context and (c) the lack of descriptive research on destructive leadership and how it manifests in the world of sports, especially in elite sports (Constandt et al., 2020), the purpose of this study was to explore elite sport athletes' perceptions and experiences of destructive coach leadership behavior.

Method

RESEARCH DESIGN AND PHILOSOPHICAL POSITION

The intention of the study was to collect information-rich data about players' perceptions and opinions of perceived destructive coach leadership behavior, therefore a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2014) was deemed as most appropriate. Moreover, emphasizing the subjective meanings and experiences of individuals in their social contexts, the study was philosophically grounded in an interpretivist paradigm (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). This was underpinned by a relativist ontology and constructionist epistemology. A relativist ontology acknowledges that athletes may perceive and interpret reality differently based on their unique experiences, while a constructionist epistemology highlights that knowledge is actively constructed through social interactions and norms, including the co-construction of knowledge through the researcher-athlete interaction (Moon & Blackman, 2014). Of particular importance to the present study, key aspects from a constructionist perspective were 1) emphasis on language to construct meaning, 2) co-construction of meaning, 3) focus on subjectivity rather than objective truths, 4) iterative process, and 5) reflexivity. In summary, this combination allowed us to explore how elite athletes subjectively construct their reality related to destructive coach behaviours, emphasizing the importance of different perspectives and interpretations.

SAMPLE

Participants in this study comprised a convenience sample of eight (four females and four males with an age range from 20 to 37 years) Norwegian current or former World Class athletes

and international elite level athletes in handball and soccer, according to the participant classification framework by McKay et al. (2021). We selected handball and football since they are the two team sports with the largest number of participants in Norway and highly exposed in the media (Kristiansen & Roberts, 2011; NIF 2024). The players had all played in several different leagues in European handball and soccer, with an average of 12 years of playing experience at the elite level. Six of the players had been or were national representatives. Due to the sensitivity of the study no more information about the participants is given. They were recruited based on the following criteria: 1) International level elite sport athletes based on McKay et al. (2021) classification, 2) having had ‘experience of the topic of the research’; and 3) having ‘the capacity and willingness to provide sensitive descriptions of their experiences during the interview’. These criteria delimited the sample to athletes who could remember and verbally articulate their experience of being exposed to what they perceived to be destructive coach leadership behavior.

RECRUITMENT AND DATA COLLECTION

After the study was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (reference number 412235), potential participants for inclusion in the study were sought. The technique of convenience sampling was used to obtain the voluntary participation of athletes, and we approached athletes who we knew had participated in professional soccer and handball under coaches that had been linked to destructive leadership behavior (media information). The potential informants were contacted by phone and informed of the nature of the study, and all stated that they had been coached by destructive coaches, which was one of the criteria for participating in the present study. It was highlighted that their responses would be confidential and pseudonymized and that any information that could identify them or any other person (i.e., their coach) mentioned would be removed or changed in the transcription process. The informants were informed why they had been contacted and that if they wanted to participate, they were free to stop the interview and withdraw from the study at any point without giving any reason and with no penalty. They were also informed that they would subsequently receive an email with a written description of the nature of the study, a consent form and an email address to return their signed consent form to if they agreed to participate. All potential participants that were initially contacted with one exception (no reason was given) agreed to participate in the study. All interviews were performed online using MS Teams or Zoom.

The interview questions were inspired by the work of Einarsen and colleagues (Einarsen, 1999; Einarsen, et al., 2007). It involved open-ended questions, and each interview was structured along the following themes. Their experiences with destructive coach behaviors during their career, and how destructive behavior was manifested in their team. Examples of questions include “have you experienced a coach using their power in a negative way?” and “have there been situations where you have felt discomfort as a result of the coach’s actions towards yourself or others?” All interviews were conducted by the first author and were audio-recorded and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes (mean 72 minutes).

DATA ANALYSIS

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, pseudonymized and analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Reflexive thematic analysis is a

recursive and reflexive method that enables the researchers to organize and describe the data collected in rich detail through familiarization, coding, theme development, revision, naming, and writing (Braun et al., 2016; Nowell, et al., 2017). The reflexive thematic analysis consists of six phases: 1) familiarization, 2) coding, 3) generating initial themes, 4) developing and reviewing themes, 5) refining, defining and naming themes, 6) writing up. The first author transcribed, read, and re-read the data. Initial analytic observations were noted (e.g., interesting quotes and ideas for themes). For stages 2-4, topics, codes and themes were identified through a combined deductive and inductive approach. The first author generated initial codes by analyzing the data in an inductive way and presented them to the last author who acted as a critical friend (Smith & McGannon, 2018). As Braun and colleagues (2016) have pointed out, coding is inherently reflective of the researcher's subjectivity, recognizing that their values, beliefs, and professional experiences shape their understanding of the data and the generation of themes. Thus, the reflexive thematic analysis acknowledges the subjectivity of researchers in their engagement with both the data and the analytic process. In this process, a thematic map was used to organize the codes into themes (see Table I for visual representation). In the following phases, the research team met several times to develop a shared interpretation of the data, recognizing that these findings reflect their perspectives rather than representing the only or definitive solution (Braun et al., 2016). In this process, raw data was tagged with a descriptive label to represent the type of behavior conveyed by the informants into lower order themes or subthemes (i.e. communication that was rude and delivered in a forceful and negative emotional tone, as an example of the lower theme Abusive and Aggressive Behavior). These lower order themes or subthemes were then organized into higher order themes (i.e. Active Destructive Behavior), following phases 3–5 of theme development, refinement, and naming (Byrne, 2021). Lastly, the sixth phase of writing up the analysis was completed by connecting results from the data set to the existing literature (Braun & Clarke, 2019). To ensure the anonymity of the informants, team names, places, and names of individuals were removed or replaced with pseudonyms. As the interviews were conducted in Norwegian, all the quotes presented have been translated as accurately as possible.

METHODOLOGICAL RIGOUR

Efforts were made to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Firstly, all participants were given an opportunity to add or change any answers that were communicated during the interview (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Prior to data analysis we gave the participants the opportunity to look over their interview transcript and they were told that they could revise any of it to make it more accurately reflect their experiences and thoughts. None of the participants made any changes. All approved transcripts were used for data analysis. Further, to ensure the trustworthiness of the data, several checks were incorporated during different phases of the thematic analysis, again following recommendations from Braun et al. (2016) and Nowell et al. (2017). During the analysis process the research group met regularly to discuss and reflect on the sub themes and the higher order themes. The authors have extensive experience in providing sport psychology and qualitative research, especially in handball and football. Furthermore, three of the authors have playing and coaching experience in both sports at a semi-professional level. The research groups' analysis process therefore encouraged reflection on the analysis and interpretations of the findings and further consideration of alternative explanations (Smith & McGannon, 2018), based on our experience both as researchers and practitioners. A critical friend was also engaged in the analysis process to enhance the reflexive self-awareness of the authors (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic under study, ethical considerations were paramount. The study was conducted in line with the last authors university ethical standard, and in line with the APA ethical guidelines (Young, 2017). Before conducting the interview, the interviewer was prepared for and understood that the participants may be vulnerable and that distressing emotions may arise during the interview. To ensure the emotional well-being of the participants, the interviews were approached in a sensitive manner and questions were communicated in a style that was best suited for the participants emotional state in the interview (Mathisen & Høigaard, 2021). During the interview the participants were reminded that they could decline to answer any of the questions and that they could terminate the interview at any point without repercussions. The participants were also provided with the contact details of a named sport psychologist external to the research team if they wanted to seek psychological assistance. However, none of them asked for external assistance, nor asked to stop the interview nor declined to answer any of the questions asked.

Results

The purpose of this study was to explore elite athletes' perceptions and experiences of what they perceived as destructive coach leadership behavior. The analysis identified the following main themes of destructive leadership behavior from the coach 1) Active Destructive Behaviors, 2) Passive Destructive Behaviors, and 3) Incompetent Sport Behaviors (see Table I). Each of these themes, along with their respective sub-themes, are now explored in turn.

TABLE I

The Three Destructive Behaviors Themes And Subsequently The Sub-Themes.

Active Destructive Behaviors
Abusive and Aggressive Behavior
Condescending Behavior
Negative Criticism
Punishment Behavior
Passive Destructive Behaviors
Ignoring and Rejection Behavior
Incompetent Coach Behaviors
Deficient or Lack of Coaching Philosophy
Lack of Sports Competence

ACTIVE DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIORS

The theme was identified as *inadequate or abusive actions demonstrated by a coach in a particular situation* and was represented by the following four behavioral sub-themes: Abusive and Aggressive Behavior, Condescending Behavior, Negative Criticism, and Punishment Behavior.

Abusive and Aggressive Behavior. Behaviors generating this theme were exemplified by athletes identifying that team members experienced verbal communication that was rude and delivered in a forceful and negative emotional tone. The content of the verbal communication varied and included attacking a player's or players' character, competence, and lack of skills, and unspecified threats and profanity. To exemplify such behaviors two players reported:

They point out players and take a conflict with a player who is obviously handling it badly. And continues to press, and continues to be aggressive, and continues to scream. (P3)

I have experienced coaches who take individual players and like to spend ... ten minutes out of a fifteen-minute break, as it were ... and tear someone apart because they don't do this and that. (P6)

I've had coaches who aggressively scream at the top of their lungs. There I think that... if you ask yourself, you might say something like "God, if I had seen that on the street, I would have gone in and said what the hell are you doing?". In training, I have experienced several episodes where things have, in a way, boiled over with a coach I had, and... yes, people have had to step in. (P3)

One of the quotes even indicated that the aggressive verbal behavior escalated to the level that physical force seems to have been used, but none of the informants explicitly stated episodes where abusive and aggressive behavior had become physical. Some of the athletes experienced situations where the coach's aggressive behavior escalated and became so harsh and harassing that other teammates had to interject to verbally calm down the situation or try to mediate between the athlete and the coach. Examples of experiencing such aggressive and abusive coach behaviors were found during both training and competitive matches, for example:

One time, he stood and shouted at us such completely inappropriate things. And personal harassment, it was not to me, but to a fellow player where he screamed "go back to the country you came from". (P8)

I have seen other players who have been given the chance to play in matches, did poorly, were replaced straight away, and yelled at from the bench, saying that "you are too bad, can't use you". After the match the players completely broken down. (P4)

Condescending Behavior. Behaviors creating this theme were situations where players reported communication that was perceived as humiliating

and embarrassing whether delivered with high emotional force, or in a calm and collected manner. The comments from the coach were related to lack of performance, incompetence, failure in a match, and humiliating or belittling body-focused statements. To exemplify such behaviors the participants reported:

He stands and shouts to the management that “I said we should buy a new (goalkeeper)”. In the middle of the match. When someone is at the goal line. (P3)

Other days he could ... terrorize me with everything from ... telling me to count in that language. Which I then lived in (Country). and at that time, I was new to the team and didn't know the language. And then he followed me to training and. asked me to count to ten in that language, and if I couldn't do it, then. I wasn't allowed to go home. And it, like, it developed. So, in a way, I started to become more concerned with what he might ask. So, I kind of sat there and memorized things that he could ask me, because if I only knew the answer to that, then I'd be rid of him. But if I didn't know, it was like he could shout out, like... over the whole field and in front of everyone. Without anyone saying anything, because he had that power. (P5)

Negative Criticism. Behaviors placed into this theme involved feedback from the coach that was perceived as degrading, rude and/or with no constructive elements that may be helpful for improvement or guidance. The players did identify, however, that negative feedback was something they expect and normally something they receive from the coach, and when perceived to be delivered with a positive intention they emphasized that it was necessary for improving their sporting performance. Nevertheless, when the feedback was given with an air of hostility and if they felt mocked, ridiculed, and hung out to dry with no constructive element to the comments, they perceived it to be destructive. To exemplify such behaviors the participants reported:

You come in and do not perform, and you get to hear it. It's like those situations there, which you don't need. Just saying “don't do that”, “don't go straight at him and shoot”, “don't try a forearm shot there”, don't do this, don't do that. Because there is nothing constructive. It's just what you're doing wrong. So, if things had gone bad. Then you just get to hear it. That “damn you are bad” and “sit on the bench, I can't use you”. (P4)

If you shoot and miss (poll out), miss when receiving a ball,... well, things like that... then hearing it from the coach doesn't help anything, because it has nothing to do with it you trying. You cannot be flawless in sports. (P1)

Punishment Behavior. Destructive behaviors identified for this theme included coach behaviors that were perceived as punishment through the communication of humiliating, private, or confidential information in front of the squad or teammates, and as punishment when they intentionally gave players less playing time or excluded them from the squad as a form of retribution. Quotes to exemplify this theme include:

He punished me by not even being allowed to play and a lot of... things like that. ... Punish players who have been bad. In such a way that you can talk to players who play well, but if they perform poorly on the pitch, it's almost as if they hardly look at them. Lash out at players in front of the group. Become aggressive when questioned. That kind of things I think are ... use of power in a very negative way. (P5)

The coach gets to hear who is talking behind his back. This is often just because of different opinions on a topic, and you are punished for that instead. And then you are punished for things that are important to you. They can't take the salary, but they can take the playing time. (P2)

PASSIVE DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIORS

This theme was identified as non-verbal and passive (non) behaviors and contains one subtheme labeled Ignoring and Rejection Behavior. It was *behaviors that the coach failed to perform in a situation where a necessary active response was expected from the coach by the athletes present.*

Ignoring and Rejection. Destructive behavior could be related to when the coach intentionally or unintentionally gave players 'the silent treatment' exemplified as when the athletes experienced completely nonresponsive communication from the coach when a response was appropriate and/or expected, or when a player experienced subtly dismissive body language or sometimes subtle signals which were perceived as social exclusion from the coach. Examples of these behaviors included:

No, I don't talk to the coach, he doesn't say a word to me. It's sort of what you... it's what... then it just seems so hopeless. (P1)

If the coach has decided that you will not play, then he does not see you. (P8)

INCOMPETENT COACH BEHAVIORS

Incompetent Coach Behaviors is related to *players perceptions or experiences that the coach lacks sufficient or necessary sport specific skills to develop players individually or develop the team to be an organized optimal performance unit (e.g., cohesion, role clarity, team structure, game plan, tactical knowledge, shared mental models) and/or not be able to make necessary shifts or adjustments during matches when needed.* Consequently, incompetent coach behavior can either be passive behavior (e.g., omit taking sport specific actions, or ignoring / not focusing factors that was perceived as significant for development and performances), or on active behavior (e.g., doing action that is perceived as wrong or not appropriate in relation to sporting development

and performance). The category contains two behavioral themes: Deficient or Lack of Coaching Philosophy, and Lack of Sport Competence.

Deficient or Lack of Coaching Philosophy. The players reported that when they perceived that coaches lack an overall and well designed plan and structure for practice, as well as deficient tactical competence and action in games, it was perceived as destructive coach behaviour. Quotes to exemplify this theme include:

We didn't have any principles in ... defense, or, how to make a system. It was just like ... just do it. So, I don't think he quite knew himself either. He could also ... sit and say "yes, but it worked when they (the opponent) did it, so then we have to do exactly the same. (P5)

If you don't know your field of expertise (coaching), and don't have the ability to, in a way, make adjustments along the way, read the match. Then there is a lack of professionalism. (P7)

The players reported that when coaches were not able to adapt their coaching practice and behavior to the demands and challenges they face in their sport, they perceived this as incompetent coaching and thus labeled as destructive towards the players' opportunities for further development and success.

Lack of Sport Competence. Interviewed players reported that when they perceived that coaches lack updated knowledge and understanding in various sports-related areas (planning and periodizing of training and workload, technical and tactical aspect in the sport, and training principles related to speed, strength, endurance) and were not able to provide sufficient individualized exercise programs to players when they need it was perceived as destructive coach leadership. The following are three examples:

It's a bit of that "old school" approach that it has worked before, it will continue to work. But like all other sports, it is very much in development. (P1)

It is somehow quite easy for an ex-professional player to become a coach at a high level. But they may not have the knowledge ... which they really should have. To be a good coach at a high level. (P8)

He lacks both structure and tactical qualities. ..it is of course destructive to lack updated sport knowledge when you are a coach for elite players. (P5)

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore team sport players' experiences and perception of destructive coach leadership behavior during their elite careers. During the initial contact with the participants when we informed

them about the study all participants emphasized that the investigation of destructive coach behavior was important and highly appreciated. In the interviews, our focus was to outline how destructive leadership behavior was manifested in the elite team context. Despite this, all participants, unsolicited, emphasized the consequences which they described as mostly negative and furthermore caused heightened stress, loss of self-esteem, insecurity, anger, sadness, anxiety, loss of motivation of playing, and reduced involvement in the team. However, due to the aims of this study we only focus on the informants' experiences and perceptions of different sorts or forms of destructive coach behavior, either targeted to themselves or as witnessed. The three main themes (Active Destructive Behaviors, Passive Destructive Behaviors, and Incompetent Coach Behaviors) and the seven lower order destructive behavior themes show the wide variety of the coach behavior and point to both ineffective and destructive behavior in the elite sport context.

The main theme Active Destructive Behaviours contains what can be defined as the essence of destructive leadership; abusive or tyrannical supervision (Craig & Kaiser, 2013; Einarsen et al., 2007). Furthermore, we identified the following four themes; Abusive and aggressive-, Condescending-, Negative Criticism-, and Punishment behavior which we emphasise should further be investigated both empirically and theoretically to permit deeper exploration of the categories. Nevertheless, concerning active destructive coach behavior, we need to consider the elite sport context. The elite sport context is unique and distinct from many other working environments due to a strong hierarchy, the athletes' high amount of physical training and exposure to an extreme competitive both internal (e.g., fighting for playing time) and external (include e.g., winning matches) environment. The pressure from the club, stakeholders, fan, and media is often massive and they often perform under highly exposure condition (e.g., spectators, media). Moreover, the coaches and players are often characterized with high ambition, intrinsic motivation and dedication for their sport and their team. Finally, the sports investigated (handball and soccer) involve brutal body contact and borderline violence (Coakley, 2003). Blending these elements creates a vulnerability to develop a toxic culture. Feddersen et al. (2019) for example stated that toxic cultural tendencies may be manifested through various harmful behaviors from multiple stakeholders within the sport. Although, all active destructive behavior was experienced in both practice and matches, the behavior was undoubtedly perceived harsher and more emotional excessively in situation when the stake is high. Alongside less desirable personal characteristics (e.g., narcissism, neuroticism, psychopathology or anxious), the behavior may be reinforced by coaches' extreme will to "win" attitude and

obsessive passion in combination with lack of emotion regulating skills. Subsequently it will potentially lead to dysfunctional communication and power abuse from the coach and several researchers (Gearity & Murray, 2011; Scanlan, et al., 1991) have claimed that failing to communicate effectively is one of the main characteristics of poor coaching.

The punishment behavior contained behavior such as humiliation communication, leaking confidential information and negative back talk. Several players had experienced that coaches had reduced playing time in a way that was considered a punishment. However, we don't know if playing time was used as a punishment from the coaches, even if the players perceived it like this. Given that reduced playing time is used as punishment or to increase coaches power it could be claimed that this is a subtle and ugly form of destructive leadership behavior. In sports "fighting for playing time" refers to the fact that athletes compete for the opportunity to compete (Giske et al., 2021; Harenberg et al., 2016). A fair distribution of playing time is an important leadership task (Becker, 2009; Gilbert et al., 2007). Using reduced playing time as punishment represent the opposite of the sport core values, fairness and equal competition, and the consequences of in justice in the playing time allocation may several dysfunctional consequences (e.g. reduced wellbeing, effort, team identity, or, withdraw, revenge, and conflict in the coach-athlete relationship) (Fosse et al., 2019; Giske et al., 2021; Wachsmuth et al., 2017). Considering the importance of perceived justice and playing time, coaches should be especially sensitive and fair when allocating playing time.

Passive or avoidant forms of leadership behavior are seen as an integrated element in destructive leadership. The most used concept in the literature is the laissez-faire leadership (Fosse, et al., 2019). Laissez-faire leadership has traditionally been seen by leaders abdicating responsibility, not using their authority and avoiding making decisions (Bass & Bass, 2008; Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008). However, the players in this study perceive a more person-centered view where ignoring and rejection is prevalent. This view seems to be more in line with Skogstad et al. (2014), definition of laissez-faire leadership: "follower-centered, avoidance-based type of leadership; focusing on subordinates' perceived situational need for leadership and leader non-response to such need (p. 325). Nevertheless, it is documented that repeated lack of leader support may trigger the same negative emotions by inducing anger, humiliation, and a feeling of rejection (Fosse, et al 2019). Finally, even passive behavior may be seen in the light of the context and the situation for example when much is at stake and with high pressure it can result in a coach being overwhelmed, passive and avoidant (Kelloway, et al., 2006).

The theme labeled as Incompetent Coach Behaviors incorporated experience where coaches were perceived to have deficient or lack coaching philosophy and outdated sports competence / expertise. It was an agreement between all players that having these deficits (shortfalls) as a coach, was perceived as destructive in an elite context. The behaviors athletes perceived may not *per se* be perceived as destructive, but the coaches' behavior became barriers for the team performance and their own performance and sporting progress. In line with Kellerman (2004) all negative leadership behaviors can be placed on a continuum from ineffective/incompetent to unethical/evil.

The Incompetent Coach Behaviors theme captures partly some behavior from the concept of "derailed leadership behavior" from McCall & Lombardo (1983), and Einarsen (2007). For example, the coaches fail to use appropriate coaching skills (e.g., tailored feedback and exercise program for the individual and the whole team), fail to build teams, being unable to think strategically and make optimal adjustment or adapt to challenging and changing situations in practice and in competitions. In Darioly and Schmid Mast's, (2011) study they found that perceived lack of competence is related to reduced team outcomes and performance and contrary, expert knowledge among professional basketball coaches was a strong predictor success (Goodall et al., 2011). Furthermore, a significant reason for subordinates to resign from their work is related to the perceived lack of competence in their leaders (Darioly & Schmid Mast, 2011). Perceived incompetence can also negatively impact the power balance between the leader and the subordinate. For example, Darioly and Schmid Mast (2010) found that subordinates perceived the leader's incompetence as a lack of power and compensated for it by taking on a more powerful position themselves (i.e., more dominance behavior, more resistance to the leader's influencing attempts). Translated into a sport context, incompetent coach leadership behavior may be a significant reason for what is referred to as "losing the dressing room" (e.g., when the coach loses the support, respect, and trust from the players).

When investigating elite coaches, it is important to consider exceptionalism in the elite sport context which the coaches are working within. It is common to perceive elite sports as a distinct and unique context compared to other sport contexts. Participants in elite sports, such as athletes and coaches, often exhibit a strong sense of competence and uniqueness, derived from their exceptional skills and achievements. Furthermore, athletes and coaches operate within a high-pressure environment where the personal risks and consequences of failure can manifest in financial, psychological, or health-related impacts. In response, as indicated in this study, coaches may adopt assertive or even aggressive strategies to enhance effectiveness, occasionally crossing

into destructive leadership practices. Conversely, also identified in this study, these pressures can also lead to leaders becoming overwhelmed, passive, or avoidant, which mirrors a laissez-faire leadership style with equally detrimental effects on both safety and performance outcomes. Athletes on the other hand, due to the high stakes involved, may tolerate, accept, or even suppress negative behaviors from their coaches. Thus, the notion of exceptionalism is valuable for understanding elite sporting environments and how it can contribute to normalize or justify destructive leadership practices, not only in elite sports, but also in youth sports due to the impact elite sports have on coaches and athletes' behavior.

Strengths and Limitations

Our findings should be interpreted in the context of the strengths and limitations of the study. The novelty of the study should be emphasized, since it is the first study investigating destructive leadership in an elite interactive team context. The study represents an important and necessary step in our attempt to understand destructive leadership in elite sport. Even though generalization is not the intention of qualitative studies, our inclusion of both handball and soccer players might permit the broader impact of our findings and we also included both male and female athletes. A limitation to consider is the potential influence of the specific sporting and cultural context on our findings. Because our sample comprised Norwegian elite-level football and handball athletes, the norms, values, and expectations within these sports—and in the broader Norwegian cultural context—may have shaped both how participants perceived destructive coaching behaviors and how they discussed them in the interviews. For instance, Norway's cultural emphasis on avoiding aggressive and violent forms of communication may have heightened athletes' sensitivity to such behaviors, thus influencing their perceptions.

Recommendations for Further Research

Further qualitative study should be conducted to elaborate on the construct and content of destructive coach leadership in different sport contexts. The prevalence of destructive leadership in different sport contexts should also be investigated, in addition to age and cultural differences. Studies should investigate the antecedents of the different forms of destructive leadership behavior identified in this paper and exploration of the outcomes

of such behaviors is highly warranted. One important step would therefore be to develop a valid and reliable sport specific destructive coach leadership behavior questionnaire. The categories identified in this paper could be a useful starting point for its development.

Practical Implications

Based on our findings, coaches should be aware how athletes could perceive them as destructive even though most likely, based on the athletes' statements, the coaches did not have the intention to be destructive, nor therefore perceive their behaviors as destructive. Both the elite context and the pressure the coaches are under seems to impact the athletes' perceptions and *identification* of destructive leadership. Still, the athletes' perceptions of destructive behavior impact on the athletes' development process and their coach-athlete relationship, which again might impact both the individual and teams' performance and results. The results from this study could be included in coach education, i.e. developing reflection workshops and evidence for coach behavior guidelines, in order to prevent destructive coach behavior. Based on our results, we would also argue that team development processes should focus on team communication, team trust and psychological safety, in order to help the athletes to prevent and address destructive coach behavior.

Conclusion

The results identified three main themes of destructive coach leadership behavior from the coaches described as: Active Destructive Behaviors, Passive Destructive Behaviors, and Incompetent Coach Behaviors. Due to the perceived negative impact of these behaviours expressed within our study, greater attention is now required to explore further such behaviors from not just the athletes', but also the coaches' perspectives. Even though earlier research has addressed destructive coach leadership behavior, relatively little has been conducted in this century. This might be related to the challenges of conducting studies on negative centered behavior within sport science, where the focus has been more on positive sport performance development. Still, the need to conduct more studies in the field of sports and especially elite sports seems warranted.

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