

Professional Rugby Coaches' Perceptions of the Role of the Team Captain

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The aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences of the coach in relation to the perceived function of captains in professional rugby union. Participants were 8 elite male rugby coaches purposely sampled for this study. Participants were interviewed individually to gain an understanding of their experiences and perceptions of the role of the captain. The data were thematically analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Ten superordinate themes emerged in the study: types of captain, captain development, challenges, captains role, off-field responsibilities, nature of the job, selection, cultural architects, coach–captain relationship, and key attributes. Results suggest that coaches view the captain as an extension of their authority in the team, leadership groups are increasingly important to support captains, and the criteria for the selection of captains are still vague. As a result, future research should explore the development of specific evidence-based approaches to captain selection and development.

Keywords: coach–captain relationship, development, leadership role, selection

In recent years there has been increased interest in sport-leadership research in the role of the athlete leader and, in particular, the position of captain within the team (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016). Despite the resulting advancement of knowledge relating to athlete leadership in sport, there is still limited research exploring captaincy in elite and professional sport domains (Cotterill & Cheetham, 2017). This is especially peculiar in light of the historical importance that has been assigned to team captains and their impact on the teams they are leading (Cotterill, 2016). Although some studies have considered the nature of the captain's position and the role that he or she fulfills, no studies have really considered the interaction between the captain and the coach. This is strange, as in many professional sports the captain is selected by and "managed" by the coach. This suggests that the perceptions of the professional coach will go a long way in determining the nature of the captain's position in the team and the associated expectations placed on him or her as a leader. This could, in turn, affect who is selected as captain and the skills, knowledge, and expertise that are deemed essential for the position. Although perceived to be a core part of the leadership of any sport team, until recently the role of captain has received limited empirical investigation. Although good captaincy can have a marked impact on performance (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016), a deeper insight into the role and the function of the captain has remained elusive, in particular, at the professional level, how key decision makers (such as the coach) view the position, what function it fulfills, and who has the right characteristics to undertake the position.

Captains of sporting teams form part of a group of "athlete leaders" among their peers. An athlete leader has been

operationally defined as one "occupying a formal or informal role in a team who influences a group of team members to achieve a common goal" (Loughead, Hardy, & Eys, 2006, p. 144). Building on this definition, the captain can be characterized as a specific formal role in the team. More recent categorizations of leadership in sport teams has distinguished between four different leadership roles that athletes can occupy in the team: task, social (Slater, 1955), external (Loughead et al., 2006), and motivational (Fransen, Vanbeselare, De Cuyper, Vande Broek, & Boen, 2014). Specifically, the task leader gives teammates tactical advice and adjusts it when necessary, the motivational leader encourages teammates to perform at their best, the social leader develops a positive team atmosphere, and the external leader represents the team to external parties such as club management, media, or sponsors (Fransen et al., 2014). It has long been assumed that the captain is a key source of these different leadership needs within the team (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016). Although many of these athlete leadership roles are emergent in the group, at the professional-sport level, the position of captain is often appointed by the club, and often specifically by the coach (Cotterill, 2013).

One of the first studies that sought to determine the function of the team captain and the link with the coach was undertaken by Mosher (1979), who, when considering the sport of volleyball, outlined three specific responsibilities for the captain: to be a link between the coach and the team, to lead team activities, and to represent the team at events and meetings. This articulation of the captain's role suggests that a core function is to act as a link between two separate entities: the coach and the team. In terms of specific duties, Mosher suggested that captains facilitate coach–team communication, lead by example, help the coach in team planning, and should behave in a professional manner before, during, and after the game. Adopting a slightly different focus, Dupuis, Bloom, and Loughead (2006) focused on the traits that captains appeared to share in a study of six former Canadian male university ice hockey players. The reported traits included being effective communicators, remaining positive, and controlling their

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emotions. In recent years there has been a renewed focus on seeking to understand the position of the sport captain and the specific function the captain fulfills for the team and/or coach. For example, Cotterill and Cheetham (2017) interviewed eight male professional rugby union captains and reported that the core aspects of the captain's position in the team included on-pitch decision-making, acting as a player representative, being a motivator, media liaison, embodying the team culture, mentoring young players, and providing feedback to the coach. Finally, Camiré (2016) explored the benefits and challenges of captaincy in the National Hockey League (NHL), conducting an interview with a current NHL captain and reporting that a core aspect of the role was being the communication bridge between the coach and the players.

Although many authors have assumed the importance of the sport captain, this has not been the case universally. For example, Fransen et al. (2014) reported that much of the athlete leadership identified in their multisport study was not provided by the captain. They conducted a survey of 4,451 team-sport players drawn from nine different sports. The results suggested that almost half of all participants felt that the captain did not fulfill any of the four athlete-leadership roles (task, motivational, social, and external leadership) in the team. However, these outcomes could be interpreted differently, specifically, that these teams did not appoint the most appropriate captain. Also, the nature of the role that the captain fulfills appears to be different in different sports, a fact that could have confounded the results in that study.

Indeed, differences in the function of the captain have been highlighted across different sports, and it has been suggested that there could be differences in the nature of the captain's position at different levels in the same sport, as well (Cotterill & Cheetham, 2017). As a result, it is important that studies explore the nature of the position of the captain within specific sports and at specific levels (e.g., professional) and not seek to combine a more diverse range of contexts in the same study.

Questions have also been raised regarding the process that many coaches adopt in selecting the right player for the position of captain. For example, in some sports the captain has often been selected based on individual performance level or technical ability, rather than his or her leadership ability (Yukelson, Weinberg, Richardson, & Jackson, 1983). The position the player occupies on the pitch or court has also been highlighted as an important determining factor in captain selection (Fransen et al., 2016; Lee, Partridge, & Coburn, 1983; Melnick & Loy, 1996). The general rationale for this approach is that occupying a central position in the team could maximize the individual's ability to communicate the coach's core messages to the team and to "lead by example" (Fransen et al., 2016). However, at the same time, a lack of clarity regarding the function of the captain has also been reported (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016). Although some research has explored the nature of expectations and demands of the captain in youth sport (Blanton, Sturges, & Gould, 2014; Gould & Voelker, 2010), this line of inquiry has not been extended to the professional/elite level. In summary, there is still a lack of understanding about the function and role of captains in sport, in particular, with specific sports and at specific levels, especially the elite level. Finally, the coaches' perceptions have yet to be truly considered.

As a result, the aim of this exploratory study was to explore coaches' perceptions of the role of captain based on their experiences of working with and recruiting captains at the professional level in the sport of rugby union.

Method

Design

Similar to the approach adopted by Cotterill and Cheetham (2017) in professional rugby union, the current study adopted an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, which has broad application in the field of psychology and, increasingly, in sport psychology (Palmer, Larkin, De Visser, & Fadden, 2010). IPA as an approach is best suited to forms of data collection that invite participants to articulate stories, thoughts, and feelings about their experiences of specific phenomena (Smith, 2004). This particular approach is systematic in its procedures, while at the same time not being a prescriptive methodology and allowing for individuality and flexibility (Cope, 2011). The approach offers a detailed analysis of the personal accounts of participants followed by a presentation and discussion of the generic experiential themes, typically paired with the researcher's own interpretation. In the current study, the IPA approach was adopted to understand the particular experiences of the coaches relating to captaincy in the context of professional rugby union.

Ethical approval for the study was gained via the ethics committee at the University of Winchester. All the participants opted to take part in the study by giving their informed consent.

Participants

The current study followed Smith and Osborn's (2015) guidance for IPA studies and the purposeful selection of a homogeneous sample. Participants were selected based on their experience as elite (professional) rugby coaches. Specifically, they were recruited from clubs in the English Premier League (elite national professional league), based in the United Kingdom, through personal contact. There were eight male participants, on average 38 years old (range 32–38 years) and with on average 6 years (range 3–12 years) of experience in coaching at the elite level in professional rugby.

Procedure

The participants were interviewed to gain insight into their lived experiences as coaches, particularly in relation to the role of captain in professional rugby union. Semistructured interviews were used to explore the participants' narratives and experiences. The use of semistructured interviews has been outlined to be a core data-collection tool for IPA studies (Smith & Osborn, 2015). The researchers developed a specific interview schedule for the study, but it was used to guide rather than dictate the flow of the interviews. This approach is consistent with the phenomenological approach, where the participants are considered the "experts" and it is the meanings that they associate with their experiences that are of interest (Smith, 1996). The specific process for developing the interview schedule adhered to a four-step approach developed by Smith and Osborn (2015). This approach suggested that the researchers think about a broad range of issues, put these topics in the most appropriate sequence, think of appropriate questions relating to these areas, and think about possible probes and prompts. Examples of interview questions included as part of the interview schedule include "In your opinion what functions do captains fulfill for rugby teams?" "In your experience how have captains been selected?" and "How important is the relationship between the coach and the captain?" All interviews were recorded

using a digital data recorder and transcribed verbatim to produce an accurate record of the conversations that took place. The interviews lasted 45–85 min.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using IPA. Through this process the researchers engaged in an “interpretative relationship with the transcript” (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 64). All transcripts were read a number of times so the researchers could become familiar with each participant’s account. As this process continued initial notes were made in the left-hand margin annotating anything identified as interesting or significant. As this process continued the right-hand margin was used to document emerging theme titles. These initial notes were then transformed into concise phrases capturing the qualities of the points annotated. The next step involved the researchers’ making connections between the emergent themes and researcher interpretations (Smith & Osborn, 2015). As these connections were made, a clustering of themes emerged. Checks were made with the original transcripts to make sure connections still worked with the primary source materials. This step led to the development of a coherent table of themes. Once the transcripts had been analyzed by this interpretative process, a final table of superordinate themes was constructed. These superordinate themes were then translated into a narrative account.

A nonfoundational approach to judging the quality of qualitative enquiry was adopted in the current study (Smith & Caddick, 2012). The specific criteria for judging the quality of this research included the contribution it makes to the field and its coherence, sincerity, resonance, and credibility (Tracy, 2010). A key aim of this study was to coconstruct knowledge that contributes to the understanding of the coaches’ perspective on the role and function of the captain, to understand the nature of the coach–captain interactions, and to report substantive findings. This substantive report of the findings was also achieved by using detailed quotes from a number of specific participants when creating the Results section of this paper. The coherence of the findings in this study was achieved via discussions with a critical friend (Didymus, 2017), who was used to discuss matters such as sampling and data analyses. In this context a critical friend is used to provide an objective voice in the design and implementation of a study. In terms of the sincerity and truthfulness of the data, it appears that rapport was effectively gained because participants spoke openly and fully about their experiences. Evidence of this included the length of the interviews and the fact that participants mentioned players by name, thus suggesting that they trusted the researchers not to disclose any such confidential information about their role working in an elite and public environment. Regarding resonance, the core aim was to produce findings that are valuable in the context of professional rugby (Tracy, 2010). The credibility of the data was enhanced by spending further time with the participants before commencing the interviews, by sharing each practitioner’s interview transcription with that individual to encourage reflection and dialogue about the data that had been deemed most pertinent, through maintaining a reflexive journal and an audit trail of the research, and by having a critical friend scrutinize and discuss pertinent matters.

Results

The IPA analysis of these data highlighted 10 superordinate themes, as well as 50 subordinate themes. These superordinate themes (see Table 1) include types of captain, development, best

captains, challenges, role, nature of the job, selection, cultural architects, coach–captain relationship, and key attributes.

Types of Captain

The first point raised by the participants in this study related to their lived experiences, highlighting that there are different types of captain. For example, Participant 2 suggested that

There are two types of captains—first, the kind that leads by example, the sort of guy that makes sure everyone wants to

Table 1 Emergent Super- and Subordinate Themes

| Superordinate theme | Subordinate theme |
|----------------------------|---|
| Types of captain | Lead by example Provide clarity |
| Captain development | Ad hoc (through experience) Leadership group |
| Challenges | Transition to captaincy Limited development support |
| Captain’s role | Inspiring Foster enjoyment Driving/motivating Lead by example Off-field responsibilities Voice of the players Input into training Training feedback On-pitch decision making Model for the club (values) Extension of the coach |
| Off-field responsibilities | Pressure adding Varying demands Public relations focus |
| Nature of the job | Evolves over time Separates form and leadership Environment specific Role diversity Nation/club conflict |
| Selection | Group need Options/availability From leadership group Different types Regular on the pitch Player wants the job |
| Cultural architects | Embodiment of culture Bedrock of the club Influential communicators |
| Coach–captain relationship | Trust captain Alignment of values Environment to breed captains Control issues Coach–captain relationship |

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

| Superordinate theme | Subordinate theme |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Key attributes | Knowledge of the game |
| | Good bloke |
| | Respected |
| | Trusted |
| | Interpersonal skills (man management) |
| | Regular in team |
| | Resilient |
| | Good communicator |
| | Calm head |
| | Willing to work hard |
| | Players want to follow the captain |
| | Confident in ability |
| | Maturity (not age) |

follow him on the pitch. The other type of captain really focuses on making sure everything is good off the pitch, that the lads are all OK.

This view of the participants in this study implies that the ability to lead by example and the ability to develop good interpersonal relationships are central aspects of what coaches view the role of the captain to be.

Captain Development

The second major theme to emerge in the current study related to the way that captains develop/are developed in the sport. There was a strong feeling among the participants that in the main this development was still very ad hoc. For example, Coach Participant 3 reflected,

I don't necessarily think there's a formal process to it. I think players can learn from others, so the younger guys can learn from the captains they have, just learning, in terms of their professionalism, the way they conduct themselves and act around the club.

This notion of players learning from the captains they have had has previously been highlighted as the main development option in professional sports including rugby union and professional cricket. However, this perspective is also concerning in that it leaves a lot to chance regarding whether an individual who is promoted to captain has had appropriate (positive or negative) role models from whom to learn the required skills.

What was more encouraging in the current study was the number of participants who highlighted the growing use of leadership groups, in which more players rather than just one team captain share leadership responsibilities. Participants viewed this shared leadership as a way to provide greater leadership to the team and, crucially, to provide a more focused environment in which the leadership skills and knowledge of future leaders can be developed. For example, Coach Participant 2 highlighted,

I think nowadays you try and have a leadership group, which is probably five or six players, and you'd sort of maybe earmark a couple of guys within that. So you would have your captain in that group, then underneath him, players who are learning, learning how to make that transition so that they're not at the

forefront of it. They have got a say in the team decision-making process and you respect what they're saying, and they as a group meet with the coaches every week. Ultimately, the buck stops with the captain, but it's trying to drip-feed a bit of leadership stuff into them and help them make that transition so that one day if they do become a captain they're pretty comfortable how things works and you get the best out of them.

Some of the participating coaches also viewed the leadership group as a way to support the captain and to spread the leadership load:

[The captain] surrounded himself with a decent group. So there's another guy there who's a back rower, who's probably captain material, as well, so he's a good standard, you know, he knows the game. He's then got another in there who he used play with a couple of years ago at scrum-half, so again he's got good standards and is a bit more intuitive, so the captain is probably not tough enough at times so the scrum-half helps him out, and he will sort of try and drive a few standards, and then the other player, he sort of helps him out.

As highlighted in this quote, the presence of specific social support from within the team can help the captain and spread the leadership load.

Challenges

The coaches in this study highlighted a number of key challenges they felt captains faced, the first of which was the transition from being a player to a player-captain. For example, Participant 6 reflected,

It is a big shift going from player to captain—I think the captain has got to be willing and able to pull people out, and have a word; if you're the captain, I think you've got a responsibility to push the club in the right direction, you know both on field and off field, so that you making sure peoples' wives and stuff are feeling comfortable and that you can pull players up who are not meeting the standards.

This challenge of transitioning from a player to the captain was highlighted by a number of the coaches in the current study.

Captain's Role

Based on their lived experiences, the participants identified some key aspects of the role of captain, including fostering enjoyment, acting as the voice of the players, providing feedback on training, and acting as a role model for the club. Fostering enjoyment and helping drive the team's motivation were consistently highlighted by some of the participants. For example, Participant 3 reflected,

I think [the captain] is trying to make [the players] relaxed and enjoy their environment. That hopefully brings the best out of people, and I think, being happy and energetic at work, then you're sort of get the best out of them.

Participant 3 suggested that the captain was seen as "the focal point, you know in terms of he can get them to think the same way and can drive the same standards for the team and their performance." This view also supported the point made by Participant 4, who stated, "I think in this environment the challenge is to be a role model and to exhibit the characteristics that the clubs are trying to develop, in terms of respect, hard work, all that stuff."

Another core aspect of the role of the captain, as perceived by the coaches, was to act as the voice of the players. In the current study this view was reinforced by Participant 2, who stated, “He’s got to be two things—so from a playing point of view he’s got to lead by example, then also he has got to be the voice of the players.” Participant 2 further clarified that the captain in particular needs to be the voice of players when it comes to interacting with the coaching/management staff at the club:

He’s also got to be a guy that feeds back in terms of training, in terms of what he thinks is going well, you know what areas the players want to work on the feedback on your actual sessions, whether or not you’re delivering what you’re trying to deliver. But initially it needs someone that’s got a bit of experience but is confident enough to voice an opinion and make sure you listen to them, really.

It is interesting that this perspective on the captain emphasized a number of functions that supported the coach rather than directly providing leadership and decision making for the team.

Off-Field Responsibilities

The elite coaches who were the participants in the current study further highlighted that captains generally had a range of off-field responsibilities, as well. For example, Participant 1 suggested that these off-field roles can add pressure to the captain:

I think there are off-field pressures too; there are events and functions that the captain has to attend and all that, and I think you have to look at the bloke and so your well-rounded bloke, or woman, but in my world it’s a bloke, and a well-rounded bloke, you’ve got to look at how they can cope with it and would they be able to embrace the challenge.

The fact that captains are expected to also fulfill off-field responsibilities, on top of their job on the field, is also reflected in the four leadership roles that are identified as being essential for the team’s performance, namely, two roles on the field (i.e., task and motivational leader) but also two roles off the field (i.e., social and external leader). Although it is interesting to note that it has been suggested to be more likely that these roles will be dispersed within the team, whereas the coaches in this study have highlighted task and motivational and external leadership as core parts of the captain’s role.

Nature of the Job

A couple of crucial factors were highlighted as part of the “nature of the job” theme. The ability of captains to separate their playing form from their role as captain was seen as an important aspect. For example, Participant 4 suggested,

It’s getting that balance right, and there are times when the captain, is not playing well, but they can’t let that affect the way they are with the group, the decisions they make, and the way they are with the coaches, and I think that’s pretty tough to deal with at times. The better captains can cope with that and don’t let their form affect how they are as a captain.

There was also a view in the current study that the nature of the role also changed and evolved over time. In highlighting this point, Participant 1 stated,

I think captaincy is an evolving thing, so I think what we would have said would be good captaincy when I was playing

would not be potentially seen as good captaincy now, and I also think they are changed by environments because each environment, I suppose, from a club point of view is going to be unique. And while there could be some common traits there’s also going to be some kind of very environmental and situational traits.

Selection

With respect to how the coaches selected the most appropriate captain, coaches admitted that they lacked a clear process in terms of the requirements for the job and, as a result, how they selected their captain. They did, however, have a process for identifying the most appropriate candidate. The ability to lead by example was a common response often underpinning the coaches’ decision. Participant 5 illustrated this view as follows:

Well I suppose all captains are different—you know you’ve got your talkative guys who speak a lot and try and inspire by their words and influence, and then you’ve got those who lead by what they do. I like guys that say something, then they go out there and lead by example with their actions kind of thing.

In addition, Participant 8 highlighted the importance for the captain to be trusted by his teammates:

I’m absolutely looking for the bloke who the boys trust and, you know, that is, I don’t necessarily mean he goes out for coffee with them all the time, or you know he’s one of the lads, it’s just the guy that I know they trust, and it’s got to be the guy who’s going to do the job every week. You know, that’s crucial.

Cultural Architects

The importance of the team’s culture was also highlighted by the coach participants. Indeed, although the captain was seen as a cultural architect embodying the ethos of the team, it was important for the coaching and support staff to support the culture, as well. For example, Participant 3 stated that

We’re a really positive coaching team, and a lot of what we do is worked around, based around work rate, so as long as the boys are working hard, then you know we’re happy. I think, though, it is important to get values sorted during preseason and the players have bought into it. It is also important we buy into the values, as well. I think that has made, for whoever has been captain, that we’ve made their lives a lot easier, and obviously they know that we’re fair about those values.

A particular ideal or challenge outlined by the participants in the current study related to the team environment. There was a feeling that, if designed right, the performance and team environments had the potential to shape and mold captains of the future. This view was illustrated by Participant 1, who suggested,

Hopefully the environment is naturally breeding captains, I suppose, for the want of a better word, and hopefully the experience of being in the Championship, the experience of, you know, providing it is you know being positive, just, you know, just trying to grow as players, you know, potentially as people, as well.

Coach–Captain Relationship

There was also a view that ultimately it was crucial for the coach to trust the captain in terms of what he did and how he went about doing it. This point was highlighted by Participant 2, who reflected,

I think it also depends on the experience of your captain. I'd say the big thing is, if the coach has appointed a captain, they have to learn to have the trust in them to believe in what they're saying and actually listen to what they're saying, and at times I think that can be quite tough for a coach, when a captain turns around and says we want to work on *x* and then the coach will work on *y*; you've got to try and get that balance right!

The quality of the coach–captain relationship was also highlighted as an important factor underpinning leadership effectiveness in the team. For example, Participant 7 suggested that

Yeah, I think obviously they have to be truly aligned. I don't think they have to be best mates, because I think a coach sometimes needs to be challenged, and the captain should be able to feel like he should do that.

The ability of the coach and captain to be able to work together has also been highlighted as important in elite cricket, although this is not necessarily a like-for-like comparison, as the captain in cricket at the elite level is employed at the same level in the organization as the coach.

Key Attributes

The participants in the current study outlined a number of key attributes and characteristics that they felt were important for a successful captain to possess, including man-management skills, mental maturity, a calm head, knowledge of the game, resilience, and the trust of their fellow players. The ability to connect with and understand other players was seen as crucial. Participants referred to this skill as management, as highlighted by Participant 3: "I suppose the other 50% is about getting to know people and just having a good gauge on the group around you and a good understanding of what makes them tick." This perspective was further illustrated by Participant 7, who stated,

I think man management is knowing how to deal with different types of players. Also, being able to inspire, and to motivate, so again [the captain] doesn't have to be doing these "gladiator" type of speeches, but he has to recognize how to connect with different players and with the group as a whole.

Maturity (emotional and psychological) was also highlighted as an important asset of a successful captain, an asset that did not necessarily correspond to chronological age. For example, Participant 2 stated that

Some guys are naturally captains at 21 and will have that natural-born confidence to lead, but then there are other 21-, 22-year-olds who think they've got that and miss the mark by quite a long way, and I think just making people more self-aware, or self-critical maybe, might help.

Having good knowledge of the game and being able to use that knowledge to underpin decision making out on the pitch was highlighted by the participating coaches in the current study as another important factor. This point was noted by Participant 6, who suggested that

You probably look at some people to be captains because they've got the knowledge of the game and they'll say "Well I know when to kick for points, I know when to put balls in the corner." Are they as robust—you know, will they play as many games, will they be in training all the time, you know, are they willing to go the extra mile, go the extra yard type of thing, do they, you know do they looked after themselves off the pitch? But the knowledge can be crucial!

Discussion

The core aim of this study was to explore coaches' perceptions of the role of the captain based on their experiences in professional rugby. A number of perceptions highlighted in the current study support some key aspects of captaincy outlined in other studies. For example, leading by example has been highlighted across a broad range of leadership domains (Bucci, Bloom, Loughead, & Caron, 2012; Holmes, McNeil, & Adorna, 2010), including previously in professional rugby union (Cotterill & Cheetham, 2017), as a core function of formal leadership roles. The challenge of transitioning from a player to the captain has also been highlighted previously by Cotterill and Cheetham (2017) in their study interviewing elite rugby union captains, who reported that elite rugby union captains felt that it was a difficult transition, often with little structured support.

Another core aspect of the role of the captain, as perceived by the coaches, was to act as the voice of the players, a perspective that has been highlighted in a range of other studies (e.g., Camiré, 2016; Cotterill, 2016; Cotterill & Cheetham, 2017; Dupuis et al., 2006). The view that the captain acts as a players' representative has also been highlighted in a number of studies including one by Cotterill (2016), who reported the importance of this role as part of an athlete leadership-development program for elite-level cricketers.

The participants in the current study also noted that different teams and different environments might need different leadership. This notion of different environments' requiring different types of leaders or leadership approaches is not a new concept in sport. Previous research focusing on Chelladurai's (1990) multidimensional model of leadership highlighted the importance of the fit between the leader, the team, and the context. However, Chelladurai's model was originally developed with coaches in mind (Cotterill, 2013). The importance of the fit between the leader and the team/environment could explain why some captains can successfully transition to another team/environment while others cannot. This perspective further highlights the importance of the context when considering the position of the captain across different sports and at different levels.

Participants in the current study highlighted that an important role of the captain is to lead by example. This view of the captain leading by example has previously been highlighted in studies that focused on the perspective of the coach (e.g., Grant & Cotterill, 2016, who focused on national level hockey captains), as well as those that focused on the perspective of the athletes (e.g., Camiré, 2016; Cotterill & Cheetham, 2017). Previous research also corroborates the importance for a captain to be trusted and respected by the other team members (Bucci et al., 2012; Dupuis et al., 2006). For example, studies revealed that social acceptance in the team was the best predictor of the perceived leadership quality of athlete leaders (Fransen, Vanbeselaere, De Cuyper, Vande Broek, & Boen, 2018), and the best leaders tend to appear most central in the team's social-connectedness network (i.e., to have good social relationships with the other team members; Fransen et al., 2015a). Dirks

(2000) even reported that trust in the leader was a direct driver of the team's performance. Given this importance of team acceptance, there have been recent calls advocating that the captain should be selected based on the perception of his or her teammates, rather than simply having the coach decide (Fransen et al., 2015b, 2019).

A number of the personal characteristics highlighted in the current study have been highlighted in other studies that focused on the skill set that a successful captain needs, including man-management skills, motivation, tactical knowledge, and leading by example as the focal point of the team (Callow, Smith, Hardy, Arthur, & Hardy, 2009; Smith, Arthur, Hardy, Callow, & Williams, 2013).

A particular finding in the current study was the importance of social support. Researchers across a range of psychology domains have noted that social support can have potentially both stress-buffering effects (Raedeke & Smith, 2004) and health-enhancing effects (Haslam, Cruwys, Haslam, Dingle, & Chang, 2016). There is evidence that social support also moderates the stress-illness relationship (e.g., Sarason, Sarason, Potter, & Antoni, 1985). The importance of social support for coping with performance stressors has been noted previously (Rees, Hardy, & Freeman, 2007), and the potential stress-buffering effect has been pointed out (Rees & Hardy, 2004). As a result, the leadership groups highlighted by the participants could also serve to help moderate the range of stressors affecting the captain.

An interesting perspective emerging from the current study was the role of the captain in fostering enjoyment in teammates. There is a lot of evidence to suggest that enjoyment and happiness are key factors influenced by the athletes' motivation. The self-determination approach (Deci & Ryan, 1985) postulates that the motivation driven by this inherent interest and enjoyment of the task itself, also termed intrinsic motivation, is the purest form of motivation in the spectrum. In the sport context, it has been shown that players' intrinsic motivation underpins youth athletes' performance progression (Zuber, Zibung, & Conzelmann, 2015). Furthermore, athletes with a strong intrinsic motivation are less likely to drop out of their sport (Jöesaar, Hein, & Hagger, 2011) and ultimately also perform better than their peers who are less motivated (Fransen, Boen, Vansteenkiste, Mertens, & Vande Broek, 2018; Gillet, Vallerand, Amoura, & Baldes, 2010). Finally, when being intrinsically motivated, athletes' well-being is maximized and they are more satisfied with life in general (Martin-Albo, Nunez, Dominguez, Leon, & Tomas, 2012). However, although there is evidence in sporting contexts, most of these studies used youth players as participants—this study is one of the first, to our knowledge, to reflect the importance of fostering enjoyment in professional sport.

One very interesting finding in the current study was the perception of the coaches that the captain was an extension of their authority on the pitch. This perspective is contrary to the perceived function of the captain in rugby union from the perspective of the players (Cotterill & Cheetham, 2017). The coach perspective adopted in the current study was consistent, though, with the coaches' viewpoint, as reported in men's field hockey (Grant & Cotterill, 2016), where the coach very much saw the team as theirs, with the captain acting as a subordinate.

The findings in the current study also contradict the recommendations of Fransen et al. (2014), who suggested that it is more likely that leadership roles (task, motivational, social, external) will be dispersed within the team. The coaches in this study highlighted task and motivational and external leadership as core parts of the captain's role.

The viewpoint of the captain as cultural architect aligns with the developing social-identity approach to leadership (Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2011). This theory asserts that leaders are more effective to the extent that they are seen as “one of us,” embodying the core values (identity prototypicality), as “crafting a sense of us” (identity entrepreneurship), as “doing it for us” (identity advancement), and as “embedding a sense of us” (identity impresarioship). Each of these core assets characteristic of a cultural architect has been demonstrated to be essential for the captain to be perceived as a good leader (Steffen et al., 2014).

Conclusion

In seeking to better understand the perceptions of elite rugby union coaches relating to the purpose of the captain, we found that a number of interesting perspectives emerged. First, based on their past experiences, the coaches in this study viewed the purpose of the captain to be to lead by example, motivate, and act as a player representative. Second, even at this professional level there was a lack of clarity about how to develop captains. Some clubs operated a leadership group structure that worked well in supporting the captain, while some coaches suggested that the main source of leadership development was simply based on a player's previous experience of being captained. Third, social support for the captain was highlighted as a fundamental requirement for success, as was the ability of the captain to foster an environment in which players gained satisfaction from participation, which increased intrinsic motivation. While this outcome has previously been reported in youth sport, this is the first time that we are aware of that it has been reported in professional sport. Fourth, an important point was made regarding the importance of the “fit” between the captain and the environment/team. This perspective suggests that a number of aspects of successful captaincy are context specific. Fifth, coaches in the present study acknowledged a lack of clarity regarding the criteria and process for appointing new captains at their clubs, something that has been reported in a number of other studies at different levels. Finally, the current study supported the social-identity approach to leadership (Haslam et al., 2011), suggesting that the captains were viewed as more effective if they were seen as “one of us.”

Future research needs to explore the nature of captaincy and the position of the captain in different sports and at different levels in the same sport. The current study has also highlighted differences in the perceptions of the coach compared with those of the captains (Cotterill & Cheetham, 2017) in rugby union. As a result, more investigation of the differing perceptions of coaches and captains is required to try to develop a consensus on the role of the captain. From an applied perspective this finding suggests that it is crucial to facilitate dialogue between coaches and captains regarding the nature of the position, the skills and attributes that are required, and the nature of the pivotal coach–captain relationship.

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