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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Unlocking the power of 'us': Longitudinal evidence that identity leadership predicts team functioning and athlete well-being

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ABSTRACT

The social identity approach has become an important framework for understanding effective leadership. The present study is the first to longitudinally examine the relative impact of coaches' and athlete leaders' identity leadership on athletes' identification with their team, as well as the subsequent relationships with key team and individual outcomes. To investigate these research questions, 18 sport teams (N = 279) completed a questionnaire early and late in their season competition. To analyse these data, we conducted structural equation modelling and controlled both for baseline values and the nested structure of our data. Results revealed that it was mainly the identity leadership of athlete leaders (and not of the coach) early in the season that predicted athletes' team identification later in the season. This increased team identification in turn fed into both team outcomes (i.e., task climate, team resilience, team performance) and individual outcomes (i.e., well-being, burnout, and individual performance). The mediating role of team identification suggests that by building a shared sense of 'we', athlete leaders can improve the team's effectiveness and enhance athletes' well-being. Accordingly, we conclude that empowering athlete leaders and strengthening their identity leadership skills is an important way to unlock sport teams' full potential.

Good teams become great ones when the members trust each other enough to surrender the "me" for the "we".
Coach Phil Jackson (Jackson & Delehanty, *1995, p. 21*)

The importance of a shared sense of 'us'

When Phil Jackson was appointed as head coach of the Chicago Bulls in the NBA in 1989, the team relied fully on its superstar Michael Jordan. In an effort to improve the team's functioning Jackson sought to convince Michael Jordan to share the spotlight with his teammates (e.g., by passing the ball more to other teammates and allowing them to score, instead of taking all the scoring attempts himself). By doing so, it became clear that it was not only Michael Jordan's brilliant individual performance that determined the team's success, but rather, and more importantly, the energy that was unleashed when players put their egos aside and worked towards a common goal. In this way, Jordan's transformation from a gifted solo artist into a selfless team player helped the team to grow and flourish and to win three consecutive NBA championships (Jackson & Delehanty, 1995).

The importance of "we" and "us" is emphasised by a body of research informed by social identity theorising (after Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This research asserts that people's self-concept is defined by their capacity to think, feel, and behave not only as individuals (in terms of their personal identity; e.g., as "me, Michael Jordan"), but also, and often more importantly, as group members (in terms of their shared social identity; e.g., as

"us, the Chicago Bulls"). In other words, social identity reflects the capacity for groups, such as sport teams, to be internalised as part of an athlete's sense of self (i.e., so that the team defines who I am). As a consequence, the way that athletes see the world and behave in it is not simply a reflection of their individuality, but also of the group membership that they share with teammates (S. A. Haslam, Fransen, Boen, & Reicher, 2020).

During the last decade, researchers in the domain of sport have generated a growing evidence base that points to the promising potential of efforts to apply social identity theorizing to sport (Rees et al., 2015; S. A. Haslam, Fransen, & Boen, 2020). In particular, evidence indicates that athletes who identify more strongly with their team display greater commitment and effort (Martin et al., 2017; Slater et al., 2019), develop their personal and social skills more fully (Bruner et al., 2017), and show greater prosocial behaviour toward their teammates (Bruner et al., 2014). Moreover, these athletes show a greater willingness to engage in social labouring such that they go the extra mile for their team (De Cuyper et al., 2016), and hence ultimately perform better (Fransen, Steffens, et al., 2016; Slater et al., 2019). Furthermore, teams with high-identifying athletes have been found to have higher confidence in their abilities as a team (Fransen, Haslam, et al., 2015), to experience greater resilience as a team (Morgan et al., 2015, 2019), and to be characterised by a higher task and social cohesion (Fransen, Decroos, et al., 2016). In addition, recent evidence indicates that social identities can be seen as a "social cure" in sport contexts,

with high-identifying athletes also feeling healthier, experiencing less burnout, and reporting greater well-being (Fransen, Haslam, Steffens, Mallett, et al., 2020; Fransen, McEwan, et al., 2020; Graupensperger et al., 2020).

Leaders as key drivers of a shared team identity

Given the apparent benefits of team identification for team effectiveness and athlete well-being, a key question is how we might cultivate this sense of shared team identity. The answer provided by the social identity approach to leadership (S. A. Haslam, Reicher, et al., 2020) suggests that the ability to foster a shared social identity in the team is an important basis for leaders to motivate and mobilise the energies of their team. According to this approach, effective leaders are those who embody, advance, create, and embed a shared sense of "we" in their teams. More specifically, leaders need to be seen as (1) identity prototypes (i.e., embodying the attributes that define what it means to be a member of a team); (2) identity champions (i.e., promoting the interests and goals of the team); (3) identity entrepreneurs (i.e., creating a sense of a shared social identity, clarifying what their team is about and what it stands for); and (4) identity impresarios (i.e., devising activities, structures, and events that allow team members to live out their shared group membership) (Steffens et al., 2020). These four dimensions of identity leadership are described in more detail in Table 1.

Despite a relatively long history in organisational research (S. A. Haslam, Reicher, et al., 2020), it is only in the last decade that the social identity approach to leadership has been applied to the field of sport and exercise. This sport research has corroborated previous findings in organisational contexts and revealed that coaches and exercise group instructors who demonstrate identity leadership are indeed able to foster a shared social identity in their teams (Krug et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2020; Slater & Barker, 2019; Steffens et al., 2019; Stevens et al., 2018). Moreover, cultivating a shared sense of "we" (i.e., a shared social identity) appears to be a mechanism through which leaders' identity leadership is positively related to multiple performance-related indicators (including team effort, teamwork, team resilience, attendance rates, turnover intentions, and individual and team performance), while also predicting athletes' health and burnout (Fransen, McEwan, et al., 2020; Krug et al., 2021; Steffens et al., 2019; Stevens et al., 2018).

However, coaches are not the only source of leadership in a team. In particular, team members can take on leadership responsibilities and, in doing so, have a positive impact on their team's effectiveness and well-being (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016; Cotterill et al., 2022). As with coaches, a key way in which these athlete leaders are able to be effective is by cultivating a sense of "we" in their team. Speaking to this point, Fransen, Haslam, Steffens, and Boen (2020) examined more than 20 different personality traits and over 25 different leadership behaviours in a sample of 776 athletes, and investigated their association with athlete leaders' leadership quality, as perceived by their teammates. Findings revealed that the four dimensions of identity leadership were among the most prominent attributes of high-quality athlete leaders. Along the same lines, other studies have found that when (and to the extent that) athletes perceive their team captain to demonstrate identity leadership, they also identify more strongly with their team. In turn, these athletes have more confidence in their team's abilities, attend more practice sessions, feel psychologically safer and healthier, experience better teamwork, and ultimately also perform better (Fransen, McEwan, et al., 2020; Fransen, Steffens, et al., 2016; Stevens et al., 2020).

The present study

The upturn in research on identity leadership over the past five years reflects the fact that the social identity approach has become an increasingly important framework for understanding effective leadership in sport and exercise contexts (for reviews, see S. A. Haslam, Fransen, & Boen, 2020; Stevens et al., 2021). However, given the novelty of this line of research, there are still some important gaps in the literature. It is these that the present study aims to address. For example, as Stevens et al. (2021) highlighted in their review of identity leadership, previous longitudinal studies (e.g., Miller et al., 2020; Stevens et al., 2020) relied on individual participants without controlling for the fact that these participants might have been part of the same sport team and thus have been assessing the same leader. To address this gap, the present study uses multilevel analyses to account for the nested structure of athletes within their sport teams. Using this methodology, the study allows us to address three research questions, each of which pertains to a distinct lacuna in the research literature.

Table 1. The definitions of the four identity leadership dimensions, encompassing the associated items of the identity leadership inventory (Steffens et al., 2014).

Identity prototypicality *"Being one of us"*	Representing the unique qualities that define the team and what it means to be a member of this team. Embodying those core attributes of the team that make this team special as well as distinct from other teams. Being an exemplary and model member of the team.
Identity advancement *"Doing it for us"*	Advancing and promoting core interests of the team. Standing up for, and if threatened defending, team interests (and not personal interests or those of other teams). Championing concerns and ambitions that are key to the team as a whole. Contributing to the realization of team goals. Acting to prevent team failures and to overcome obstacles to the achievement of team objectives.
Identity entrepreneurship *"Creating a sense of us"*	Bringing people together by creating a shared sense of 'we' and 'us' within the team. Making different people all feel that they are part of the same team and increasing cohesion and inclusiveness within the team. Clarifying people's understanding of what the team stands for (and what it does not stand for) by defining core values, norms, and ideals.
Identity impresarioship *"Making us matter"*	Developing structures, events, and activities that give weight to the team's existence and allow team members to live out their membership. Promoting structures that facilitate and embed shared understanding, coordination, and success (and not structures that divide or undermine the team).

RQ1: Does early-season identity leadership predict late-season team identification?

First, while the last decade has generated manifold evidence that speaks to the importance of coaches' identity leadership, research on athlete leaders' identity leadership is sparse. Moreover, the few studies that have investigated this have focused mainly on the team captain as the formal athlete leader of the team (e.g., Stevens et al., 2020). However, previous research has also indicated that captains often do not live up to the expectations of players and coaches (Fransen et al., 2019). Instead, informal athlete leaders, who gain their leadership status through natural interactions with their teammates, are often perceived as better leaders of the team (Fransen et al., 2014; Loughead et al., 2006). Along the same lines, recent cross-sectional findings showed that the identity leadership of informal athlete leaders was indeed a stronger predictor of teammates' identification with their team, as well as of subsequent teamwork, team resilience, and team performance than the identity leadership of the team captain (Fransen, McEwan, et al., 2020). Accordingly, as Stevens et al. (2020) suggested, further research is needed to explore the consequences of identity leadership on the part of those athletes who are viewed as leaders by their fellow team members, instead of only assessing the identity leadership of the team captain. In light of this point, in the present study, we use social network analysis to identify athletes who are perceived as the best identity leaders by their teammates (Fransen, Haslam, Steffens, Mallett, et al., 2020).

Relatedly, with the exception of the study by Fransen, McEwan, et al. (2020), very little research has directly compared the identity leadership of coaches and athlete leaders. Fransen et al'.s study indicated that although coaches, team captains, and informal athlete leaders each made a unique contribution to athletes' identification with their team, it was the informal athlete leaders who had the greatest impact on teammates' team identification – with total effects ($\beta = .38$) being much larger than those of the coach ($\beta = .20$) and the team captain ($\beta = .26$).

The present study aims to investigate whether these cross-sectional findings also hold up over time when controlling for baseline values. More specifically, building on earlier longitudinal research on identity leadership of the coach (Miller et al., 2020) and of the team captain (Stevens et al., 2020), the present study aims to assess *longitudinally* the relative contribution of the identity leadership of both the coach and the best athlete leaders on the team (as perceived by the team members, regardless of their formal recognition as a team captain). Here we hypothesise that the perceived identity leadership of both coaches and athlete leaders early in the season will make a unique contribution to teammates' team identification later in the season (H1a). At the same time we also anticipate that athlete leaders' identity leadership will be a stronger predictor of team members' team identification than coaches' identity leadership (H1b).

In examining this hypothesis, we would add that, while earlier studies on identity leadership distinguished between the four dimensions of identity leadership (as presented in Table 1),

none of them provided insight in different dimensions of team identification. Cameron (2004), though, has argued for a multidimensional conceptualisation of social identity, which was later also applied to the sport context by Bruner et al. (2014). This conceptualisation encompasses three dimensions of team identification – specifically, (a) ingroup ties (i.e., perceptions of similarity and bonding with other team members); (b) cognitive centrality (i.e., the perceived importance of being a team member); and (c) ingroup affect (i.e., the positive feelings associated with team membership). Accordingly, our study examined the above hypotheses for each of the four dimensions of identity leadership and for each of the three dimensions of team identification, thereby providing the opportunity to understand how different aspects of identity leadership are associated with the three dimensions of team identification and with team outcomes.

RQ2 and RQ3: Does team identification mediate leaders' impact on team and individual outcomes?

Previous longitudinal studies have examined how team identification mediated the relationship between identity leadership and a single outcome (e.g., attendance rates; Stevens et al., 2020). While attendance rates might be an important outcome in physical activity settings where participation is voluntarily, in competitive sport settings it is not necessarily so relevant as participation in training sessions is usually mandatory (such that rather than being a motivational indicator, absence results from adverse events such as sickness). Moreover, rather than focusing on a single outcome, in the current study we test whether identity leadership early in a sporting season has the potential to open up a pathway to different outcomes later in the season, both at the team level (RQ2) and at the level of the individual athlete (RQ3), with team identification mediating both these pathways.

With respect to the team-oriented pathway (RQ2), we expect that athletes' team identification will explain how identity leadership nurtures a task-involving or mastery motivational climate that revolves around encouraging effort, individual improvement, and cooperation, rather than social comparison and intra-team competition (H2a; Ntoumanis & Vazou, 2005). Given that athletes in such a task-involving climate perceive setbacks as a natural part of their development, this task-involving climate has been found to be a key characteristic of resilient teams (Morgan et al., 2013). Accordingly, we hypothesise that this task-involving climate will in turn be positively related to the team's resilience (H2b). It is important to note here that team resilience in not merely the average of athletes' individual resilience. Rather, team resilience reflects the capacity of group members to draw on both their individual resources and their shared resources to adapt positively to any stressful situation that they encounter collectively (Morgan et al., 2013). Finally, as previous research has shown that both a task-involving climate and team resilience are significant predictors of performance (Balaguer et al., 2002; Fransen, McEwan, et al., 2020; Morgan et al., 2017), we expect a pathway from task climate through team resilience to perceived team performance (H2c).

With respect to the individual-oriented pathway (RQ3), we rely on a broad evidence base to examine the degree to which

social identity processes can serve as a "social cure" in the team. Across several samples, belonging to social groups – at home, at work, or elsewhere – has been shown to be an important source of social support in stressful situations and therefore an important predictor of people's well-being (Avanzi et al., 2015; Junker et al., 2019; S. A. Haslam et al., 2005). More generally, this body of research has demonstrated that social identity processes are key to understanding and effectively managing a broad range of health-related problems (e.g., trauma, addiction, depression, eating disorders; C. Haslam et al., 2018). In sport settings, recent cross-sectional research has also established that athletes' identification with their sport team mediates the relationship between the team's leadership and athletes' health and burnout (Fransen, Haslam, Steffens, Mallett, et al., 2020; Fransen, McEwan, et al., 2020). Accordingly, in the current longitudinal study, we hypothesise that team identification will mediate the relationship between early-season identity leadership and later-season athlete well-being (encompassing athletes' emotional, psychological, and social well-being; H3a), which is then expected to negatively predict burnout (H3b).

Moreover, systematic reviews of burnout in sport have suggested that athletes' experience of burnout is also likely to be linked to impaired performance (Goodger et al., 2007). However, given that, to our knowledge, there is no quantitative evidence yet to support this claim, we will empirically test this relationship in the present study. Here, we hypothesise that athletes' burnout will predict their individual performance (H3c).

The above three hypotheses can be integrated into a single model of the form presented in Figure 1. At a superordinate level, our research therefore also seeks to establish whether this model adequately captures the structure of our data.

Methods

Procedure

This study was part of a larger research project, which used a longitudinal design where participants completed the same battery of study measures at two time points, both early and late in their respective regular season competition (which will be referred to as T1 and T2, respectively). The average time between questionnaire completion ranged from 4 to 22 weeks[1], with an average of 19 weeks. Of particular importance within the larger research project is the fact that the hypotheses tested in this paper were unique in both operationalisation of constructs and study methodology (see also Bruner et al., 2022).

To determine the minimal sample size for a SEM model testing multiple relations, including the mediation between identity leadership and both a team- and an individual-oriented pathway, we used the ratio of sample size/parameters of 5:1, as proposed by Bentler and Chou (1987). Given that our model includes 49 parameters, we aimed to have a sample of at least 245 athletes. To achieve this sample size, we contacted 25 teams to invite them to take part in the study.

After the coach agreed to participate, a research assistant went to a training session of each team, explained the purpose of the study, and asked all players if they were willing to participate in the study. The confidentiality of responses was guaranteed and participants were informed that they had the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time. After giving informed consent, players completed the questionnaire, while a research assistant was present to answer questions. Upon completion, all questionnaires were put in a closed envelope by the researcher. If some players were absent on the day
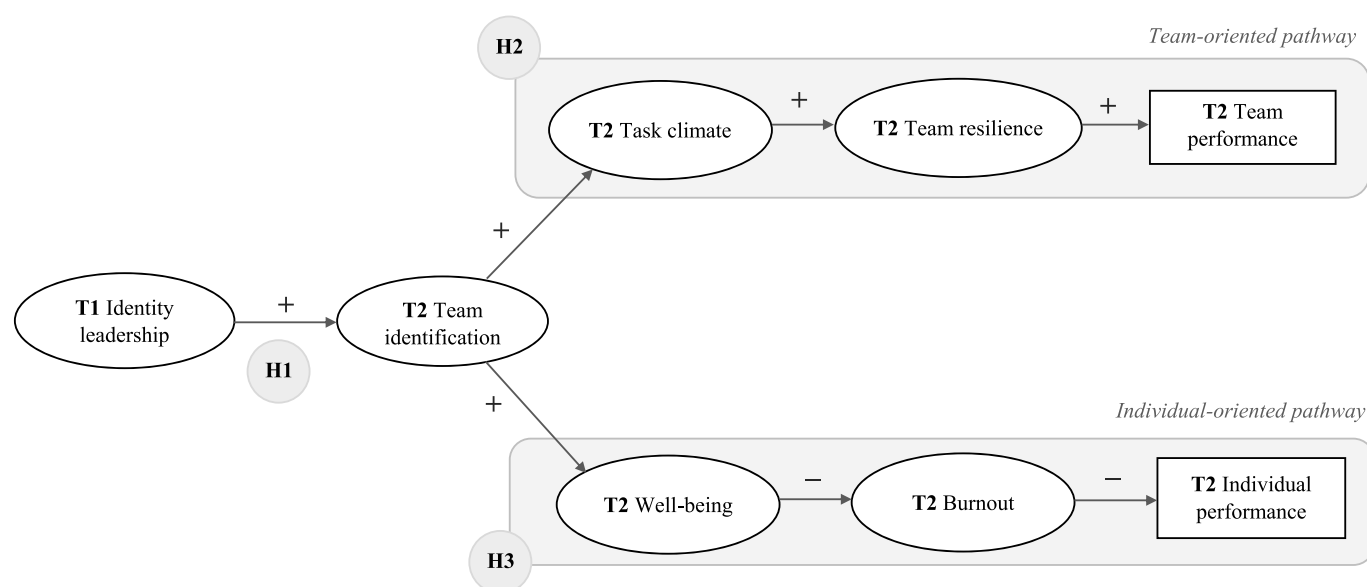
Figure 1. Initial hypothesized model of team identification mediating the relationship between identity leadership at T1 and both a team- and an individual-oriented pathway at T2. the hypothesized direction of the relationships is indicated by + (positive) and − (negative). All the variables included in the model (except for the performance indicators) are latent variables which represent underpinning subscales.

[1]Note that one team had only four weeks between early and late season measures due to a short overall season (i.e., Nordic skiing). The remaining teams all ranged from 16 to 22 weeks between measures.

of data collection, the researcher returned to a subsequent training session to collect the remaining questionnaires.

The APA ethical standards were followed in the conduct of this research and approval was obtained of the ethical committee of the universities in Belgium and Canada (G-201711997 and REB: 101532, respectively). In terms of study incentives, the Canadian athletes received a team meal and could also participate in a draw for a $25 Sport Store gift card (one gift card for each team). To help teams in both countries optimise their team's functioning, all the coaches of the participating teams received a detailed report by email that included the leadership structure for their specific team upon completion of the study.

With respect to the response rate, two teams (i.e., one male soccer and one male ice hockey team) chose not to participate given they did not have time and were already involved in another study at the time. Consequently, the obtained response rate was 92% (23 of 25 teams). In addition, five of the teams completed study measures only late in their season (due to the timing of study). In total, then, 18 sport teams completed measures across both measurement periods (i.e., early and late season questionnaire packages) and were therefore able to contribute data for analysis in this study. After accounting for the response rate of 92% and the drop-off rate of 22%, we obtained a sample size of 279 athletes, which is equal to a ratio of sample size/parameters in our SEM model of 6:1, thereby meeting the power criterion for our analyses. The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in KU Leuven Research Data Repository at https://doi.org/10.48804/F3ID2G (Fransen et al., 2023).

Participants

The sample for this paper included 12 Belgian teams (i.e., two male and two female teams in basketball, volleyball, and soccer) and 6 Canadian teams (i.e., a male and a female team in both basketball and volleyball, a female ice hockey team, and a mixed-gender Nordic skiing team). These 18 teams included 279 highly competitive athletes in total (128 male and 151 female athletes) distributed across four sports: basketball ($n = 83$), volleyball ($n = 80$), soccer ($n = 79$), ice hockey ($n = 25$), and Nordic skiing ($n = 12$). The teams in Belgium competed at national level ($N = 105$) and provincial level ($N = 69$), while the Canadian teams ($N = 105$) were university sport teams. The athletes were between 14 and 34 years old[2] ($M_{age} = 20.79$, $SD = 3.96$), had on average 11.83 years of experience in their sport ($SD = 5.07$), and had played on average for 3.38 years for their current team ($SD = 2.78$).

Measures

Identity leadership

To assess the identity leadership in their team, athletes rated each of their teammates and their coach along the four dimensions of identity leadership: identity prototypicality, advancement, entrepreneurship, and impresariohip. More specifically, after reading the definition of an identity leadership dimension (see Table 1), participants were asked to indicate for each of their teammates and coach (using a prepopulated roster list) to what extent they demonstrated the behaviours captured by a given identity leadership dimension. Answers were recorded on an 11-point scale, anchored at 0 (*not at all*) and 10 (*very much*).

As a measure of the identity leadership of the coach, we averaged participants' perceptions of the coach across the four dimensions of identity leadership. To determine a participant's perceived identity leadership of the athlete leaders on the team, we first had to identify the best identity leaders on the team. To this end, we used social network analysis to create four N x N identity leadership matrices for each team (excluding self-perceptions), one for each identity leadership dimension, with N being the number of players on the team (i.e., the coach was excluded in these networks) (Fransen, Van Puyenbroeck, et al., 2015). The three team members[3] who received the highest average scores from a participant across the four dimensions of identity leadership were labelled as athlete leaders. Our measure of athlete leaders' identity prototypicality was then that participant's average perception of the identity prototypicality of these three athlete leaders. This procedure was repeated for identity advancement, entrepreneurship, and impresariohip.

Team identification

Athletes' social identification with the team was assessed by the 9-item Social Identity Questionnaire for Sport (Bruner & Benson, 2018) along the three dimensions of social identity: (1) ingroup ties (e.g., "I feel strong ties to other members of this team".); (2) ingroup affect (e.g., "I feel good about being a member of this team"); and (3) cognitive centrality (e.g., "The fact that I am a member of this team often enters my mind".). Items were scored on a 7-point scale anchored at 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 7 (*strongly agree*), with higher scores reflecting a greater degree of social identification with one's team. Cronbach's alphas for these subscales were .87 at T1 and .91 at T2 for ingroup ties; .85 at T1 and .86 at T2 for ingroup affect; and .90 at T1 and .92 at T2 for cognitive centrality.

Task climate

Participants' perceptions of their team's task-involving climate were assessed via the Peer Motivational Climate in Youth Sport Questionnaire (Ntoumanis & Vazou, 2005). More specifically, players rated three aspects of their team's task climate, namely (1) teammates' provision of help and encouragement to improve (4 items; e.g., "On this team, most athletes help each other to improve"); (2) teammates' relatedness support (3 items; e.g., "On this team, most athletes make their teammates feel accepted"); and (3) the extent to which teammates

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[2]As we only targeted adult teams, we did not know in advance that players under 16 years old also participated in the study. As a consequence, no parental consent was obtained from the five players under 16. As a side note, the Canadian Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS-2) guideline stipulates that if the participant is able to be comprehend the content of the survey, there is no longer a specific age of consent required.

[3]Previous research has suggested that the relationship between the number of athlete leaders and the positive outcomes for the team is curvilinear, with a limited number of athlete leaders leading to the best outcomes (Leo et al., 2019). A measurement of the leadership quality of all team members would thus be skewed by the presence of players who do not have the competencies or the motivation to lead. Therefore, in line with previous research of Fransen et al. (2017), we focused on the best three leaders to assess a team's athlete leadership quality.

emphasised the importance of exerting effort and trying their hardest (5 items; e.g., "On this team, most athletes encourage their teammates to try their hardest"). Participants rated these items on a 7-point scale anchored at 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 7 (*strongly agree*). The Cronbach's alphas for improvement were .88 at both T1 and T2; for relatedness support .80 at T1 and .83 at T2; and for effort .87 at both T1 and T2.

Team resilience

To assess the team's ability to withstand stressors in the past month, we used the 20-item Characteristics of Resilience in Sports Teams Inventory (Decroos et al., 2017). More specifically, participants were asked to assess both the team's resilient characteristics (12 items; e.g., "Team members fought hard to not let each other down") and the team's vulnerabilities under pressure (8 items; e.g., "The team could not persist through the most difficult moments"). Participants rated these items on a 7-point scale anchored at 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 7 (*strongly agree*). Cronbach's alphas for resilient characteristics were .90 at both T1 and T2 and for vulnerabilities under pressure .86 at T1 and .89 at T2.

Well-being

Participants' well-being was assessed using the Mental Health Continuum (Keyes, 2002). More specifically, we used the 14-item Short Form of the questionnaire (Keyes, 2009), which includes the most prototypical items representing the construct definition for each of the three facets of well-being: (1) emotional well-being (3 items; e.g., "Since the start of the season, how often did you feel happy"); (2) psychological well-being (6 items; e.g., "Since the start of the season, how often did you feel that that your life has a sense of direction or meaning to it"); and (3) social well-being (5 items; e.g., "Since the start of the season, how often did you feel that you had something important to contribute to society"). Participants rated the frequency with which they had experienced each of these symptoms of positive mental health over the course of the past month on a 6-point scale anchored at 1 (*never*) and 6 (*every day*). Cronbach's alphas for emotional well-being were .83 at T1 and .89 at T2; for psychological well-being .86 at T1 and .88 at T2; and for social well-being .83 at T1 and .85 at T2.

Burnout

Participants' experiences of burnout were assessed using the 15-item Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (Raedeke & Smith, 2001). More specifically, three indicators of burnout were assessed, namely a reduced sense of accomplishment (5 items; e.g., "I am not achieving much in my sport"), emotional and physical exhaustion (5 items; e.g., "I feel overly tired from my sport participation"), and devaluation of one's sport participation (5 items; e.g., "The effort I spend in my sport would be better spent doing other things"). Participants rated the items on a 5-point scale anchored at 1 (*almost never*) and 5 (*almost always*), with higher scores indicating higher levels of burnout. In the current study, Cronbach's alphas for reduced sense of accomplishment were .77 at T1 and .82 at T2; for emotional and physical exhaustion .87 at both T1 and T2; and for devaluation .80 at T1 and .85 at T2.

Individual and team performance

To assess performance, we asked participants to rate their own performance and their team's performance in the last month on a Likert scale anchored at 1 (*performed extremely poorly*) and 10 (*performed extremely well*).

Data analysis

We used correlation and regression analyses to compare the predictive power of coaches' and athlete leaders' identity leadership early in the season on team members' team identification later in the season (RQ1). Furthermore, to examine the potential temporal bidirectionality of this relationship, we tested a cross-lagged panel model using Structural Equation Modelling in Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 2017).

To control for the nested structure of our data (i.e., the fact that players were nested within sport teams), we used the Mplus command (type = complex) in all our analyses. More specifically, this procedure adjusts the standard errors to prevent them from being inflated due to clustering (McNeish et al., 2017; Muthén & Muthén, 2017).

To examine whether the data supported the model proposed in Figure 1 (RQ2 and RQ3), we again conducted Structural Equation Modelling using robust maximum likelihood estimation method. This method was chosen because it provides information about the degree of fit of the entire model, especially when examining mediation effects and including latent variables.

In addition, we tested whether the observed relationships remained significant when controlling for the values of the criterion variables at T1. Given that our sample does not have enough power to test a model including all these parameters simultaneously, we tested seven separate regression models, using the variables' composite scores. Each of these models therefore focused on a single relationship in the model, while controlling for the T1 value of the criterion variable.

We used the following fit indices to evaluate the model fit: the normed chi-square statistic (χ^2/df), the Comparative Fit index (*CFI*), the Tucker-Lewis index (*TLI*), the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (*RMSEA*), and the standardised root mean square residual (*SRMR*). While a non-significant chi-square (χ^2) implies a good fit of the data to the hypothesised model, the significance of this statistic increases with sample size. Accordingly, we used the normed chi-square statistic (χ^2/df), where a good fit is reflected by a value below 3 (Kline, 2005). Furthermore, a good fit of the model to the data is characterised by *CFI* and *TLI* values larger than .90, an *RMSEA* equal or smaller than .07, and an *SRMR* close to .08 (Hooper et al., 2008; Hu & Bentler, 1999).

Results

The means and standard deviations for each variable along with bivariate correlations are presented in Table 2.

RQ1: Does early-season identity leadership predict late-season team identification?

Our first aim was to replicate concurrent associations between identity leadership and team identification within a longitudinal

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations.

	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. T1 Identity leadership of athlete leaders	8.10 (1.04)									
2. T1 Identity leadership of the coach	7.50 (1.51)	.45***								
3. T2 Team identification	5.44 (0.97)	.38***	.11							
4. T2 Task climate	4.91 (0.96)	.35***	.05	.54***						
5. T2 Resilient characteristics	4.73 (0.92)	.33***	.02	.53***	.66***					
6. T2 Resilient vulnerabilities	3.40 (1.18)	−.28***	.11	−.31***	−.49***	−.66***				
7. T2 Team performance	6.61 (1.88)	.21**	−.15	.25***	.30***	.60***	−.57***			
8. T2 Well-being	4.37 (0.85)	.19**	.04	.38***	.31***	.22**	−.11	.04		
9. T2 Burnout	2.37 (0.65)	−.24***	−.10	−.38***	−.31***	−.32***	.30***	−.22**	−.37***	
10. T2 Individual performance	6.43 (1.88)	.14°	.03	.15*	.16*	.23**	−.15*	.27***	.11	−.32***

Note. °p = .05; *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Table 3. The results of the bivariate correlations and linear regressions of the four dimensions of identity leadership of the coach and the athlete leaders at T1 on the three dimensions of team members' team identification at T2. A separate regression was conducted for each of the four dimensions of identity leadership.

	T2 Ingroup ties	T2 Ingroup affect	T2 Cognitive centrality	T2 Total team identification
Correlation coefficients				
T1 – Identity prototypicality				
Coach	.06	.17	.04	.12
Athlete leaders	.28***	.20**	.28***	.32***
T1 – Identity advancement				
Coach	−.11	.16	.003	.04
Athlete leaders	.30***	.14*	.27***	.30***
T1 – Identity entrepreneurship				
Coach	−.03	.11	−.02	.03
Athlete leaders	.29***	.19**	.33***	.34***
T1 – Identity Impresarioship				
Coach	.06	.25**	.07	.17
Athlete leaders	.33***	.21**	.26***	.34***
Standardised beta regression coefficients				
T1 – Identity prototypicality				
Coach	−.04	.15	−.03	.04
Athlete leaders	.28*	.05	.20	.23°
T1 – Identity advancement				
Coach	−.20**	.14	−.05	−.03
Athlete leaders	.33***	.07	.20*	.25**
T1 – Identity entrepreneurship				
Coach	−.09**	.06	−.11	−.05
Athlete leaders	.26*	.19°°	.34***	.35***
T1 – Identity Impresarioship				
Coach	−.03	.20*	−.004	.08
Athlete leaders	.24*	.13	.19°	.24**

Note. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001, °p = .06, °°p = .07 The linear regressions are controlled for the fact that athletes are nested within teams (i.e., .in order to prevent inflation of the error terms, the type=complex command was used in MPlus; McNeish et al., 2017; Muthén & Muthén, 2017).

study design. Table 3 presents the bivariate correlations between the identity leadership of (a) the coach and (b) the athlete leaders at T1 and each of the dimensions of team identification at T2. To compare the impact of the coach and the athlete leaders more directly, Table 3 also includes the results of linear regression analyses that were run for each dimension of identity leadership separately, and which controlled for the nested structure of the data.

With respect to the athlete leaders, we found that all correlations between athlete leaders' identity leadership at T1 and the different dimensions of team identification at T2 were positive and significant. Interestingly, these correlations were larger for ingroup ties (rs between .28 and .33; all ps < .001) and cognitive centrality (rs between .26 and .33; all ps < .001), than they were for ingroup affect (rs between .14 and .21; all ps < .05). In the case of coaches, however, we found that the correlations between their identity leadership at T1 and athletes' team identification at T2 were mostly nonsignificant. There was one exception, namely that the coaches' impresarioship at T1 was positively associated with athletes' ingroup affect at T2 (r = .25, p < .01).

Regression analyses confirmed that only athlete leaders' identity leadership (and not the identity leadership of the coach[4]) positively predicted ingroup ties (i.e., perceptions of similarity and bonding with teammates; all βs ≥ .24, reflecting a small to medium effect according to Cohen's (1988)

[4]The negative regression coefficients between coaches' identity advancement and entrepreneurship at T1 and athletes' ingroup ties at T2 might suggest that coaches had a negative impact here. However, an alternative explanation is that these negative values reflect a suppressor effect, given that (1) coaches' identity leadership and athletes' identity leadership at T1 are positively interrelated when controlling for their effect on T2 in-group ties (i.e., r = .32, p < .001 for identity advancement; r = .27, p < .01 for identity entrepreneurship); and (2) the zero-order correlation between coaches' identity leadership and ingroup ties is small and non-significant (i.e., r = −.11, p = .24 for identity advancement; and r = −.03, p = .78 for identity entrepreneurship) which indicates that the suppressor is not a sound predictor itself. We thus suggest that coaches' identity leadership acted as a suppressor here that improved the model's R^2, not by directly predicting ingroup ties, but rather indirectly by removing residual variance of the model without the suppressor (in this case when only including athlete leaders' identity leadership as a predictor) (Courville & Thompson, 2001).

guidelines) and cognitive centrality (i.e., the importance that members attribute to their team membership; all βs $\geq$ .20, also reflecting small to medium effects). More specifically, athlete leaders' identity advancement was most strongly related to teammates' ingroup ties (a medium effect size), while athlete leaders' entrepreneurship was the strongest predictor of teammates' cognitive centrality (a medium effect size). However, with respect to athletes' ingroup affect (i.e., feeling positive about being a member of the team), the only significant predictor was coaches' identity impresarioship (β = .20; p < .05), reflecting a small effect.

In general, we can conclude that H1 was partially confirmed: although coaches and athlete leaders each made a unique contribution to the prediction of team members' team identification (H1a), the contribution of the coach was more limited than expected. However, in line with H1b, the identity leadership of athlete leaders emerged as a strong predictor of team identification – and stronger than that of the coach. The results presented in Table 4 also indicate that, when controlling for early season team identification, the early season identity leadership of athlete leaders remained a significant predictor of teammates' team identification later in the season.

To provide additional insight in the potential bidirectionality of this relationship, we tested a cross-lagged panel model, including both athlete leaders' identity leadership and teammates' team identification across both time points. Results are presented in Figure 2 and indicate that, while the relationship between the identity leadership of athlete leaders and teammates' team identification was bidirectional over time, athlete leaders' identity leadership at T1 was a stronger predictor of teammates' team identification at T2 (β = .17; p = .019) than teammates' team identification was of athlete leaders' identity leadership (β = .12; p = .044).

RQ2 and RQ3: Does team identification mediate leaders' impact on team and individual outcomes?

To test H2 and H3, we examined how well our hypothesised model (as presented in Figure 1) fits the data, while accounting for the nested structure of the data (i.e., the fact that athletes were nested within teams). As the analyses related to RQ1 revealed that coaches' identity leadership at T1 only explained a small proportion of the variance in athletes' identification at T2, we focused in subsequent analysis on the identity leadership of the athlete leaders. Overall, findings here revealed an adequate fit of the hypothesised model to our data (χ^2 = 302.74; df = 165; χ^2/df = 1.83; CFI = .93; TLI = .92; $RMSEA$ = .06; $SRMR$ = .08)[5] The final model is shown in Figure 3 and includes the standardised regression coefficients for each path in bold and the proportions of explained variance in italics. All constructs, except for team performance, were included in the model as latent variables inferred from the underpinning subscales. Although these subscales were included for model fit testing, for the sake of clarity they are not presented in Figure 3. The Appendix, however, presents the full model that was tested, including all subscales[6] In addition, we tested whether each of

Table 4. Standardized beta regression coefficients of the linear regressions testing the separate relationships of the full model while controlling for the dependent variables' T1 value.

Predictors	Standardised β for the relationship to the dependent variable at T2
T1 Identity leadership athlete leaders → T2 Team identification	
T1 Identity leadership	.17*
T1 Team identification	.57***
T2 Team identification → T2 Task cohesion	
T2 Team identification	.29***
T1 Task cohesion	.54***
T2 Task cohesion → T2 Team resilience	
T2 Task cohesion	.46***
T1 Team resilience	.36***
T2 Team resilience → T2 Team performance	
T2 Team resilience	.51***
T1 Team performance	.30*
T2 Team identification → T2 Well-being	
T2 Team identification	.19**
T1 Well-being	.65***
T2 Well-being → T2 Burnout	
T2 Well-being	−.19**
T1 Burnout	.58***
T2 Burnout → T2 Individual performance	
T2 Burnout	−.26**
T1 Individual performance	.33***

Note. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

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[5]Similar to the cross-lagged panel model in Figure 3, we also tested the bidirectionality of the team- and individual pathways at T2. However, as indicated by comparisons of the AIC and BIC, the model fit of the reversed model (i.e., from the performance indicators to team identification) was poorer than the original model fit, thereby attesting to the hypothesised direction of both pathways...

[6]Previous guidelines of Kline (2005) suggest that at least five participants per estimated parameter are required in structural equation modelling to protect against type I and type II errors. According to these guidelines, our sample (N = 279) has enough power to test the model in the Appendix (including 45 parameters). However, given that guidelines vary and some are even stricter (e.g., Schreiber et al., 2006), we also tested the model with only composite scores of all variables (instead of including their subscales as well), which resulted in a model with only 15 parameters. The results revealed that this reduced model had an adequate fit to our data (χ^2 = 43.73; df = 20; χ^2/df = 2.19; CFI = .94; TLI = .91; $RMSEA$ = .08; $SRMR$ = .11), thereby corroborating the validity of our findings...
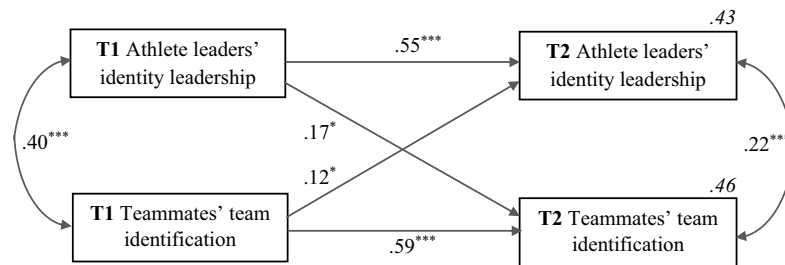
Figure 2. Cross-lagged panel model presenting the relations between athlete leaders' identity leadership and teammates' team identification across the two timepoints. ***p < .001.
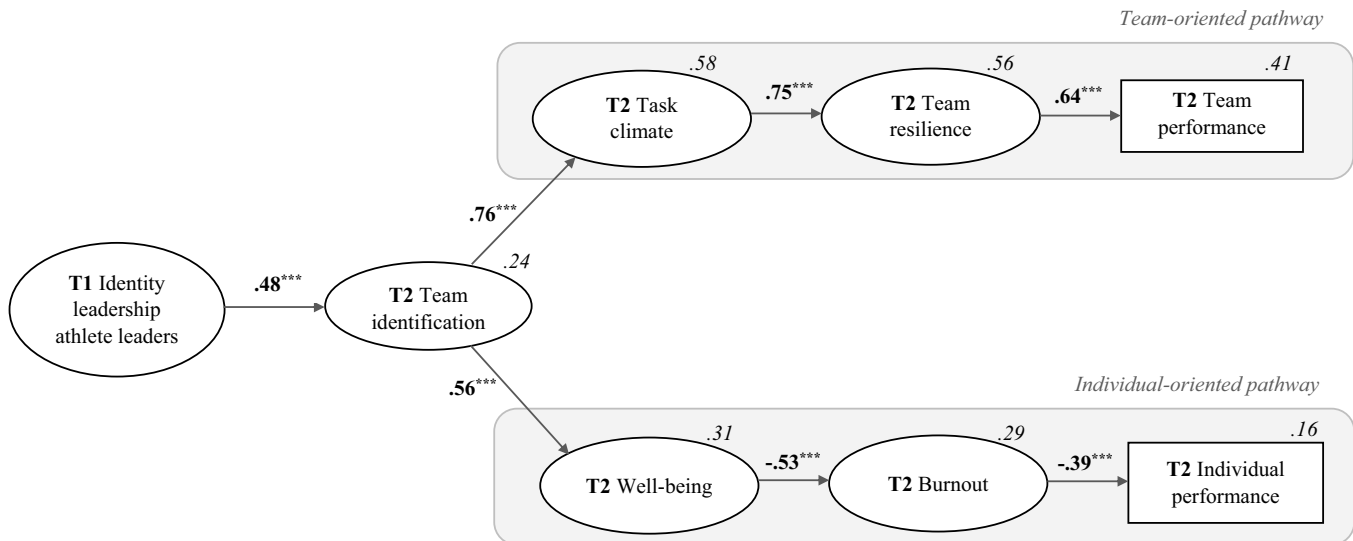

Figure 3. Structural model of team identification at T2 acting as a mediator between the team's identity leadership at T1 and both a team-oriented and an individual-oriented pathway. Standardized regression coefficients for each path are noted in bold; the proportions of explained variance are noted in italics. All the variables included in the model (except for the composite score of team performance) represent latent variables, of which the subscales were included in the analysis. ***p < .001.

these relationships remained significant when controlling for the values at T1 in separate regressions for each dependent variable. The results are presented in Table 4 and revealed that this indeed was the case, thereby further attesting to the robustness of our findings.

In addition to the direct effects presented in Figure 3, Table 5 presents the standardised indirect effects and total effects of this structural equation model, thereby shedding more light on the underlying mediating role of the different variables. Given that all of the indirect effects (IE) are significant, and considering that Mplus did not suggest any additional direct effects to improve the model fit, we can conclude that all of the variables in the model indeed act as mediators between the antecedents and outcomes.

More specifically, in line with H2a, we found that athletes' identification with their team mediated the relationship between athlete leaders' identity leadership at T1 and the team's task climate at T2 (IE = .42; p < .001). Furthermore, in line with H2b, this task-involving climate mediated the relationship between team identification and team resilience (IE = .62; p < .001), suggesting that such a motivational climate is indeed a favourable environment for nurturing team resilience. Moreover, in line with H2c,

team resilience mediated the relationship between a task climate and the perceived team performance (IE = .41; p < .001).

Finally, as predicted in H3a, we found that team identification also mediated the path between athlete leaders' identity leadership and athletes' well-being (IE = .28; p < .001). In line with H3b, athletes' well-being in turn mediated the path between athletes' identification with their team and their experiences of burnout (IE = −.28; p < .001). These findings further corroborate the claim that a shared sense of "we" can function as a social cure in sport settings. Moreover, in line with H3c, we found that burnout acted as a mediator of the association between well-being and individual performance (IE = .25; p < .001).

Discussion

The present research advances our understanding of leadership in sport teams by providing longitudinal evidence that the identity leadership displayed by athlete leaders (more so than the coach) early in the season is associated with teammates' identification with their team later in the season. Moreover, findings indicated that athletes' team identification mediated the relationship between athlete leaders' identity leadership

Table 5. Standardized indirect effects and total effects, along with standard errors (SE) for all paths in the model between predictors (in rows) and outcomes (in columns).

	Team identification	Well-being	Burnout	Individual performance	Task climate	Team resilience	Team performance
		Effect (SE)	Effect (SE)	Effect (SE)	Effect (SE)	Effect (SE)	Effect (SE)
Indirect effects							
T1 Identity leadership of athlete leaders		.27*** (.07)	−.14** (.04)	.06* (.02)	.37*** (.07)	.28*** (.05)	.18*** (.03)
T2 Team identification			−.30*** (.08)	.12** (.04)		.57*** (.05)	.36*** (.05)
T2 Well-being				.21*** (.05)			
T2 Task climate							.48*** (.06)
Total effects							
T1 Identity leadership of athlete leaders	.48*** (.08)	.27*** (.07)	−.14** (.05)	.06* (.03)	.37*** (.06)	.28*** (.05)	.18*** (.04)
T2 Team identification		.56*** (.10)	−.30*** (.08)	.12** (.05)	.76*** (.05)	.57*** (.05)	.36*** (.06)
T2 Well-being			−.53*** (.07)	.21*** (.07)			
T2 Burnout				−.39*** (.09)			
T2 Task climate						.75*** (.06)	.48*** (.07)
T2 Team resilience							.64*** (.05)

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

and both team outcomes (i.e., task climate, team resilience, and team performance) and individual outcomes (i.e., burnout, health, and individual performance).

RQ1: Does early-season identity leadership predict late-season team identification?

Although we expected a unique contribution of both coaches and athlete leaders, both correlational and regression analyses showed that while athlete leaders' identity leadership early in the season positively predicted teammates' team identification later in the season, this was not the case for coaches. These findings were largely confirmed by a more fine-grained analysis, taking into account the multidimensional conceptualisations of both identity leadership (encompassing identity prototypicality, advancement, entrepreneurship, and impresarioship) and team identification (encompassing ingroup ties, ingroup affect, and cognitive centrality). More specifically, while for athlete leaders each of the identity leadership dimensions at T1 was significantly positively correlated with each of the three dimensions of team identification at T2, for coaches only one of these 12 correlations was significant, namely the relationship between coaches' impresarioship at T1 and athletes' ingroup affect at T2.

Regressions that directly compared athlete leaders' and coaches' overall identity leadership confirmed the superior power of the athlete leaders to strengthen teammates' identification with their team. Additional fine-grained multidimensional analyses also revealed important nuances to this. More specifically, the early-season identity leadership of athlete leaders positively predicted teammates' ingroup ties (i.e., perceptions of similarity and bonding with their teammates) and their cognitive centrality (i.e., the importance that they attributed to their team membership) later in the season. However, with respect to athletes' ingroup affect (i.e., feeling positive about being a member of the team), a different picture emerged as coaches' impresarioship was the only decisive predictor of teammates' subsequent ingroup affect. In other words, when

coaches devised activities early in the season that brought the team together and helped them function effectively (i.e., demonstrating identity impresarioship), team members felt more positive about their team membership later in the season (i.e., showing increased ingroup affect).

These findings are largely in line with previous longitudinal work of Miller et al. (2020), which found that coaches' identity leadership in general was unrelated to team identification at a later timepoint. However, our multidimensional analyses indicate that coaches' impresarioship does have predictive value for team members' ingroup affect. It is interesting to note here that while early research on formal leaders' identity leadership focused solely on identity prototypicality (i.e., the more passive dimension of being seen to represent and embody the team's qualities; van Knippenberg, 2011), our findings highlight that instead the more action-oriented dimension of coaches' identity impresarioship (i.e., their initiation of activities that foster team members' identification with the team) was most predictive of team members' ingroup affect.

In general, though, we can conclude that, compared to the coach, athletes who demonstrate identity leadership make a stronger contribution to their teammates' identification with their team. These longitudinal findings accord with earlier cross-sectional and experimental evidence which showed that athlete leaders' identity leadership was positively related to teammates' identification with their team (Fransen, McEwan, et al., 2020; Fransen, Steffens, et al., 2016). While in these previous cross-sectional studies the contribution of athlete leaders was larger as that of the coach (Fransen, McEwan, et al., 2020), this pattern seems to be further amplified when taking a longitudinal perspective.

Our multidimensional analyses made it clear that each of the dimensions of identity leadership makes a significant contribution to the cultivation of a shared sense of "we" in the team. These findings contrast with recent longitudinal evidence that team captains' identity prototypicality, advancement, and entrepreneurship, but not their identity impresarioship, predicted teammates' team identification (Stevens et al., 2020). So while activities that bring a team together and make the

group matter might not be effective when they are organised by team captains (who are often not the real leaders on the team; Fransen et al., 2014), the current findings suggest that this form of identity impresariophip is more effective when initiated by the actual athlete leaders on the team. Furthermore, by differentiating between the three dimensions of team identification, our study generated the novel insight that athlete leaders' identity leadership predicted teammates' ingroup ties and cognitive centrality, but not their ingroup affect.

RQ2: Does team identification mediate leaders' impact on team outcomes?

Data pertaining to RQ1 pointed to the important role that athlete leaders' identity leadership plays in building team identification (relative to that of coaches). In line with this observation, the correlations of athlete leaders' identity leadership with the different team-oriented outcomes were also much larger (with r's between .21 and .45; all p's < .01) than those related to the identity leadership of the coach (where r's were between −.15 and .11; all non-significant). This finding is consistent with previous correlational research which found that athlete leaders' identity leadership was most strongly related to team functioning (i.e., teamwork, team resilience, performance satisfaction), with athlete leaders' contribution being 10 times larger than that of the coach (Fransen, McEwan, et al., 2020). Our longitudinal study thus underlines the point that the role of athlete leaders within a team should not be underestimated and that coaches should empower these leaders if they want to capitalise on the leadership potential in their team. Given the superior influence of athlete leaders over coaches, we therefore focused on these athlete leaders when addressing our next research questions.

In line with H2, we found that athletes' team identification mediated the relationship between athlete leaders' identity leadership early in the season and a range of key team outcomes later in the season. More specifically, we found that athletes who identified strongly with their team reported a higher task-involving team climate (i.e., a climate that revolves around encouraging effort and team development, rather than social comparison; Ntoumanis & Vazou, 2005). Moreover, our findings indicated that a task-involving team climate was positively related to the team's resilience. While the qualitative study of Morgan et al. (2013) identified both team identification and task climate as distinct predictors of team resilience, our study indicates that task climate actually mediates the relationship between team identification and team resilience. In other words, if athletes identify with their team, they prioritise the team's common goals above personal goals and embracing this joint purpose in turn enables teams to build a task climate in which working together for the team's benefit prevails over intrateam competition. Given that a task-involving climate encourages team members to see setbacks as a natural part of the team's development, this environment in turn appears to be an important basis for the development of team resilience. Finally, in line with previous work, our study findings indicated that resilient teams were in turn also

perceived to perform better as a team (Balaguer et al., 2002; Fransen, McEwan, et al., 2020; Morgan et al., 2017).

RQ3: Does team identification mediate leaders' impact on individual outcomes?

Whereas a significant body of research has indicated that social identity processes are key to understanding and effectively managing a broad range of health-related problems (e.g., addiction, depression; C. Haslam et al., 2018), in sport, the role of these social identity processes in relation to athlete well-being has been examined far less. However, recent cross-sectional work has suggested that in sport contexts athletes' identification with their team can also mediate the relationship between the team's leadership and both athlete health and burnout (Fransen, Haslam, Steffens, Mallett, et al., 2020; Fransen, McEwan, et al., 2020). The present study is, to our knowledge, the first to replicate these patterns in a longitudinal research design. In other words, it appears that in sport contexts athlete leaders can initiate social identity processes that serve as a "social cure", whereby, as Frenzel et al. (2020, p. 1) observe, "when I becomes we, illness turns to wellness".

When comparing the impact of coaches' and athlete leaders' identity leadership, previous work found that coaches had three times greater impact on athletes' health and burnout than athlete leaders (Fransen, McEwan, et al., 2020). When looking at the individual correlations, this study does not align with these previous findings. In contrast, the opposite seems to be true, as the identity leadership of athlete leaders was positively related to teammates' well-being (r = .19; p < .01) and negatively to their burnout (r = −.24; p < .01), while the same relationships for coaches' identity leadership were not significant (r's = .04 and −.10, respectively). This finding again points to the importance of athlete leaders – not only for general aspects of team functioning (e.g., motivational climate, team resilience, and team performance) but also for team members' mental health (well-being and burnout).

When considering the link with individual performance, we found that the identity leadership of athlete leaders had a significant total effect on athletes' individual performance. This finding is consistent with previous experimental work by Stevens et al. (2019) which found that the identity leadership of a peer leader (a research confederate) impacted team members' individual performance through increased effort. Our research augments this finding by suggesting that athletes' team identification mediates this relationship. Furthermore, our findings shed light on the subsequent process by revealing that athletes who identify highly with their team also report greater well-being and experience less burnout, and that it is this observed increase in mental health that in turn predicts athletes' performance. While there is ample research in organisational contexts that high levels of burnout lead to impaired functioning on the job (for a meta-analysis, see Taris, 2006), this well-being – performance relationship has, to our knowledge, not previously been investigated in sport. Aside from an earlier systematic review, which suggested that athletes' experiences of burnout could be linked with performance (Goodger et al.,

2007), the present study therefore provides the first quantitative evidence of this relationship in sport contexts.

Practical implications

The current study highlights the fact that the degree to which athlete leaders engage in identity leadership by embodying, promoting, crafting, and embedding a shared sense of "we" in their teams can have positive implications for both team- and individual-oriented outcomes. Interestingly, these relationships were not observed with respect to the coach. In other words, by cultivating a shared sense of "we", athlete leaders appear to be critical to team functioning and their teammates' well-being. In light of this, we would therefore suggest that it is important for those responsible for team development – in particular, coaches and sport psychologists – to empower the leaders within their team and to work with them to build their identity leadership skills.

A first step to harness the leadership potential in the team involves the identification of the best leaders in the team. To gain insight in the leadership structure of the team, coaches might use Shared Leadership Mapping, a methodology that relies on social network analysis (Fransen, Haslam, Steffens, Mallett, et al., 2020). Relying on the perceptions of the team members, Shared Leadership Mapping moves beyond the formalised leadership roles (e.g., the captain) and is able to identify the best leaders in the team.

After formally appointing these leaders, a next step would then be to further develop their identity leadership qualities – for example, in ways outlined by the 5 R Shared Leadership Programme (Fransen, Haslam, Steffens, Mallett, et al., 2020). Recent intervention studies have tested the effectiveness of this approach and indicated that it has beneficial impact on peer leaders' identity leadership skills, as well as on group cohesion, team identification, intrinsic motivation, commitment to team goals, willingness to practice, and well-being (Fransen et al., 2022; Mertens et al., 2020, 2021; Slater & Barker, 2019).

Strengths, limitations, and avenues for future research

The current research has three notable strengths. First, its longitudinal design allows us to establish whether previous findings from cross-sectional studies also hold up over a longer period of time across a sporting season. Attesting further to the robustness of our findings, additional analyses confirmed that the observed relationships remained significant when controlling for the baseline values at T1.

Second, while previous longitudinal research that has explored the relationship between identity leadership and team identification focused on the formal leaders in the team (i.e., the coach (Miller et al., 2020) or the team captain (Stevens et al., 2020)), it is often those athlete leaders without a formal leadership role who are perceived to be the true leaders in the team (Fransen et al., 2014; Fransen, Van Puyenbroeck, et al., 2015). Accordingly, we used social network analysis to identify the key athlete leaders in the team (according to the team members), regardless of whether or not they had a formal leadership status (e.g., as team captain). Moreover, instead of focusing on a single source of identity leadership, the present study was the first to directly compare the identity leadership of the coach with that of key athlete leaders on the team.

Third, we assessed complete teams, instead of individual athletes. Here too the social network methodology that we adopted allowed us to capture the perceptions of all team members to assess the leadership quality of both athlete leaders and coach. This resulted in a more reliable measure of leadership quality than self-perceptions. Important too, in contrast to previous longitudinal studies (Miller et al., 2020; Stevens et al., 2020), our study controlled for the nested structure of athletes within sport teams and thereby provides more accurate estimates of the true relationships.

Fourth, while earlier studies did not consider the multidimensional nature of identity leadership and team identification, the current study provides a more fine-grained analysis of this relationship. The observed differences in our findings emphasise the need for future research to also adopt a multidimensional approach when studying identity leadership and team identification and to differentiate between the dimensions of both constructs.

In addition to the research's strengths, we acknowledge that our study also has two important limitations. First, although our longitudinal design has several advantages compared with cross-sectional designs, rather than having just two measurement points the use of a multi-wave design would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the mediating role of team identification in the relationship between identity leadership and both team- and individual-oriented outcomes. Furthermore, additional analyses indicated that the relationships in the current study might also operate in the opposite direction (e.g., such that team identification early in the season predicted later-season identity leadership). Although our findings revealed that the relationships in the hypothesised direction were stronger than those in the opposite direction, future experimental studies (along the lines of Stevens et al., 2019) are needed to establish causal sequencing in these relationships.

A second limitation pertains to the nature of our sample. While we recruited sport teams in two Western countries, the sample sizes were too small to conduct a reliable comparison between these countries. In the same vein, differentiation between the different sports was not possible. Future research with larger samples is therefore needed to examine the generalisability of our findings across different cultures and sports. Moreover, while we focused on team sports (with the exception of one Nordic skiing team) in the current study, it is certainly possible that the observed relationships would also hold for groups of individual athletes (Cascagnette et al., 2021). It would therefore be interesting for future research to establish whether the performance and well-being of athletes who compete separately but train together is improved when they have athlete leaders who focus on building a joint overarching social identity that unites them.

Conclusion

Whereas most research to date has focused on the impact of coaches as formal leaders of sport teams, the findings of the present study emphasise the important role that athlete leaders

play in shaping teammates' performance and well-being. More specifically, our findings suggest that it is by cultivating a shared sense of "we" among teammates that athlete leaders succeed in mobilising the potential of their team. This strengthened team identity supports not only team functioning (i.e., task climate, team resilience, team performance) but also athlete well-being.

Given that coaches' direct impact on teammates' identification (and the subsequent pathways) was limited, it thus appears that coaches and others responsible for managing and directing teams – including sport psychologists – should focus on empowering the leaders within their team in order to unlock their team's full potential. More specifically, the present research suggests that a critical way to do this is by developing athlete leaders' capacity for identity leadership, so that the importance of "us" is reinforced not just by the coach but also, and more importantly, by the leaders within the team. Indeed, without this distributed identity leadership, it seems unlikely that coaches alone will be able to tap into, or unlock, the full potential of their teams.

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Appendix

Complete structural model of team identification acting as a mediator between the team's identity leadership and both a team-oriented and an individual-oriented pathway, including all the subscales. Standardized regression coefficients for each path are noted in bold; the proportions of explained variance are noted in italics.