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SITUATIONAL COACHING STYLES
The Impact of Success and Athlete Maturity Level on Coaches’ Leadership Styles Over Time

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This investigation examines athletes’ preferences and perceptions and coaches’ perceptions of leadership styles used throughout an athletic season. The review of literature identified an existing limitation to current examinations of coaching styles. Past researchers failed to include time as a potential variable affecting athletes’ preferences and perceptions of their coaches’ use of five leadership styles: autocratic, democratic, social support, positive feedback, and training and instruction. The participants for this study included 155 varsity wrestlers and 17 coaches. Athletes and coaches completed instruments three times during the season, and repeated measures procedures computed for the two primary research questions indicated significant differences for each. When examining the impact of athlete experience level, results indicated only athletes’ perceptions of their coaches’ social support styles are affected by the athletes’ experience level across time. Also, athletes’ perceptions of their coaches’ autocratic leadership styles for successful and unsuccessful teams were significantly different at the end of the season.

The study of leadership has advanced significantly since the introduction of the trait approach at the turn of the century. Leadership approaches currently focus on the situational characteristics that affect the way leaders interact with their subordinates (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1978; Hemphill & Coons, 1957; Hersey & Blanchard, 1969; House, 1971), and they identify the responsibility leaders have for influencing and guiding the development of their subordinates (Cruz, Henningsen, & Smith, 1999; Hirokawa & Keyton, 1995; Kolb, 1996; Larson & LaFasto, 1989; Pavitt, Whitchurch, McClurg, & Petersen, 1995; Sweeney & Allen, 1988; Thamhain & Wilemon, 1988). One aspect associated with the lead-
ership process is the impact time has on the relationship that develops between leaders and their subordinates. However, aside from the situational approach (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969), a limited number of research studies have examined the relationship between leaders and their subordinates over time. It is reasonable to assume that as leaders interact with their subordinates over time, they adapt and change their leadership styles.

Leaders in many organizations are assigned to existing groups (e.g., committees, legislatures, boards of directors) or emerge over an extended period of time, limiting the potential for an effective examination across time. However, there are a number of contexts that do allow for the examination of the leadership process because of their significant reliance on time. The field of athletics is one such area. As a team progresses through the course of an athletic season, a coach’s role and his or her interaction with athletes will transform and modify. In high school sports, for example, a developmental relationship between coaches and athletes occurs each year. The season, for most schools, begins 2 to 3 weeks before the first competitive event. Because of the requirement for a concentrated group effort, most athletes are exposed to 2 weeks of grueling workouts and a series of lengthy team meetings. As the first competitive event approaches, the structure becomes more formal and is then fine-tuned as the season progresses. For a few select athletes, the postseason allows for an extension of the regular season. Along with this weekly schedule, there are other influences and/or confounding variables (e.g., individual athlete’s win and loss records; whether the team wins or loses in dual and/or tournament competition; the difficulty of team practices; the level of competition faced during the previous week; success against difficult competition; losses against weak competition; years of experience with the team; the number of years spent coaching; and satisfaction with teammates, sport, and coach) that may ultimately determine the leadership styles used by coaches.

Previous research on coaches’ leadership styles failed to collect data using the Leadership Scale for Sports (LSS) at various points in the athletic season, limiting the research to one-time examinations of athletes’ preferences and perceptions. This study attempts
to better understand the fluid nature of the coaching process through the examination of athletes’ preferences and perceptions and the impact athletes’ years of experience and skill level have on those preferences and perceptions throughout the course of an athletic season.

MULTIDIMENSIONAL LEADERSHIP THEORY

Research (Danielson, Zelhart, & Drake, 1975; Percival, 1972; Smith, Smoll, Hunt, Curtis, & Coppel, 1979) has demonstrated the importance of viewing leadership from a variety of perspectives. To reflect these perspectives, the multidimensional leadership model for sports was developed to identify the leadership styles preferred by athletes, the leadership styles required by athletes, and the actual leadership styles used by coaches. Chelladurai and Saleh (1978) developed a five-dimensional description of the leadership styles (autocratic, democratic, positive feedback, social support, and training and instruction) believed to exist in athletics. As a result, Chelladurai and Saleh (1980) developed the LSS to measure the leadership styles used by coaches when directing their athletes. They used three surveys that measured athletes’ preferences and perceptions of their coaches and leadership styles that coaches believed they used during interaction with their athletes, as a more accurate reflection of the coaching process.

During the past two decades, researchers have used the LSS to examine leadership in sports to identify athlete preferences and perceptions based on gender differences (Chelladurai & Arnott, 1985; Chelladurai & Saleh, 1978; Serpa, Pataco, & Santos, 1991; Terry, 1984), sport type (Chelladurai, 1984; Dwyer & Fisher, 1988, 1990; Horne & Carron, 1985; Terry & Howe, 1984), and culture (Chelladurai, Imamura, Yamaguchi, Oinuma, & Miyachi, 1988; Chelladurai, Malloy, Imamura, & Yamaguchi, 1987). In addition, team success and the level of competition have been two additional variables examined in the athletic context using the LSS. Carron and Chelladurai (1981) found the nature of the task also influences the levels of cohesion felt by team members. They reported that
task dependency and task variability were significantly and positively correlated with athletes’ preferences for training and instruction and democratic behavior and negatively correlated with preferences for autocratic behavior.

When examining intercollegiate and intramural athletes, Erle (1981) found college athletes preferred greater training and instruction, greater social support, and less positive feedback and democratic behavior from their coaches than the intramural athletes. Similar findings were derived by Terry and Howe (1984) and Terry (1984) who found that athletes preferred coaches who displayed training and rewarding behaviors most often. The democratic and social support styles were moderately preferred, whereas the autocratic style was seldom desired.

Weiss and Friedrichs (1986) suggested that specific coaching styles are associated with more satisfied athletes. They found that rewarding behaviors displayed by coaches were the best predictor of team satisfaction, and the use of social support style was closely linked to a team’s win-loss percentage. One startling conclusion from their findings suggested that only 7.2% of athletes’ satisfaction was explained by their perceptions of coaches’ leadership. Serpa et al. (1991) argued that the democratic style is the least desired and least used by coaches of elite athletes. In their analysis of perceptions, they found that different styles were used by successful and nonsuccessful teams. Gordon (1988) studied differences based on the levels of success achieved by a team by studying university soccer players. Successful teams perceived more training and instruction, social support, and positive feedback styles from their coaches than athletes from less successful teams.

A number of researchers have addressed the impact success has on athletes’ perceptions of and preferences for their coaches’ leadership styles (Carron & Chelladurai, 1981; Erle, 1981; Gordon, 1988; Schleisman, 1987; Serpa et al., 1991; Terry, 1984; Terry & Howe, 1984; Weiss & Friedrichs, 1986); however, these studies have been limited by not examining the use of various leadership styles over the course of the athletic season. Success of the team is an important factor to consider when examining the impact leader-
ship styles have on athletes’ perceptions and preferences over time. It is reasonable to assume that athletes from a highly successful team may view their coaches differently when compared with athletes from unsuccessful teams at different points in the season. Based on the above rationale, the following research question was set forth: Do athletes’ perceptions of and preferences for their coaches’ leadership styles change as the season progresses based on team success?

**SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP THEORY**

According to Hersey and Blanchard (1969), for leaders to be effective, they must adapt the leadership style used with their subordinates. Also, leadership is more dependent on the situation and various chance factors than leaders’ personal attributes. Various factors can be indicative of environmental characteristics other than just the situation confronting leaders. Hersey and Blanchard (1977) developed an extensive list of elements that could affect one’s leadership style. They suggested “leader, followers, supervisor, key associates, organization, job demands, decision time” (pp. 188-189) as potential indicators.

Hersey and Blanchard (1977) defined readiness as “the extent to which a follower has the ability and willingness to accomplish a specific task” (p. 189). As indicated above, subordinates have varying levels of ability and willingness, requiring leaders to understand what drives subordinates toward goal achievement. Subordinates’ abilities consist of expertise, skill levels, and procedural knowledge, and their willingness refers to the motivation levels, self-confidence, and commitment levels subordinates have toward completion of group goals. To encompass these two characteristics, Hersey and Blanchard (1969) used the term maturity to describe the situational characteristic judged by the leader. Hersey, Blanchard, and Natemeyer (1979) argued that a direct relationship exists between the selected leadership style and the maturity level of followers. They stated,
Maturity is a task-specific concept and depends on what the leader is attempting to accomplish. The maturity of the follower not only dictates which style of leadership will have the highest probability of success, but it also determines the power base that the leader should use to induce compliance or influence behavior. (p. 420)

Hersey (1984) argued that regardless of the situation, leaders are likely to exhibit both relationship and task dimensions while influencing and directing subordinates.

Hersey and Blanchard (1977) believed the appropriate selection of leadership styles is dependent on the group “level of readiness.” In Hersey and Blanchard’s model, they viewed the level of readiness as one of the major indicators leaders can use to determine the point at which their leadership style should change. Through self-analysis, leaders should be able to predict the correct leadership style to use in various situations. Hersey and Blanchard (1969) first attempted to apply their model to the business setting, using managers and workers to determine the points at which leadership styles changed. Results indicated that when a leader is working with highly trained personnel, the most effective style was “delegating.” However, they also determined that during the early stages of any organizational project, a high level of structure imposed and task-oriented style used by the leader ensure the “requirements and limitations of the project are established” (p. 30).

Chelladurai and Carron (1983) acknowledged the implications of the situational leadership theory to the sport setting. “It can be assumed,” they state, “that athletic maturity increases as the athlete progresses through the competitive levels of elementary, high school, university, and professional sport” (p. 372). Case (1987) examined 40 coaches from a variety of levels (e.g., Amateur Athletic Union, junior high, high school, and college) and did not find support for the propositions set forth in the situational approach. Chelladurai and Arnott (1985) and Chelladurai, Haggerty, and Baxter (1989), however, concluded that situational elements were the major factors attributed to coaching style rather than the traits or personality of the coach.
Chelladurai and Carron (1983) administered the preference version of the LSS to high school midget, junior high, high school, and college basketball players to examine the maturity levels of the participants. The trend analysis demonstrated that the preference for training and instruction progressively decreased from high school midget players through junior to senior levels and increased for college players. Second, the preference for social support progressively increased from the high school midget level to the university level. Their findings were consistent with Chelladurai and Saleh’s (1978) study of university athletes, which suggested more experienced athletes preferred training and guidance from their coaches. Athletes became socialized into preferring less responsibility. As the athletes advanced, they tended to prefer coaches who demonstrated more autocratic styles of behavior when directing the team.

Although the situational model has been successfully applied in organizational settings, a direct application to athletics and coaching has been unsuccessful. One potential reason for this may be that researchers have been operationalizing athlete maturity levels in terms of junior high school, high school, college, and professional athletes. Athletes participating in high school sports often consist of athletes with a number of years of experience with that particular team or sport. Examination of maturity from a perspective of differing sports settings including Amateur Athletic Union, junior high, senior high school, college, and professional levels (Case, 1987; Chelladurai & Arnott, 1985; Chelladurai & Carron, 1983; Chelladurai et al., 1989; Vos Strache, 1979) is one of the major reasons for the inability to apply the situational leadership theory to a sports context. When examining the context of high school athletics, coaches have the potential of developing relationships with athletes from a variety of experience levels. It is reasonable to assume coaches of a high school team would interact differently with athletes who possess varying skill levels or years of experience with the team. Based on the above rationale, the following research question was set forth: Does the number of years of experience with a team affect athletes’ preferences for and perceptions of their coaches’ leadership styles at the beginning, middle, and end of the season?
PARTICIPANTS

The participants of this study consisted of varsity athletes and coaches from 17 high school wrestling teams. Data were collected across three different time periods (beginning, middle, and end of the season), and a total of 534 athlete and 51 coach surveys were returned throughout the data collection process. Of these, 425 athlete surveys were deemed usable (109 surveys were unusable due to either invalid responses or surveys being returned incomplete) and were obtained from a mixture of 1st year \( (n = 88) \), 2nd year \( (n = 107) \), 3rd year \( (n = 95) \), 4th year \( (n = 109) \), 5th year \( (n = 16) \), and 6th year \( (n = 10) \) athletes. Athletes' preferences and perceptions of their coaches' leadership styles were later categorized as either 1, 2, 3, or 4 years of experience (5 and 6 years of experience were categorized as 4) for data analysis purposes. Successful and unsuccessful teams were distinguished by calculating dual meet winning percentage at the end of the season. After winning percentage was calculated, teams in the top half (in terms of percentiles) were classified as successful \( (n = 8) \), and the teams in the bottom half were classified as unsuccessful \( (n = 9) \).

DEPENDENT VARIABLE

This study used the LSS to assess leadership behavior by coaches. This inventory assesses five dimensions of coaching behavior (training and instruction, social support, positive feedback, autocratic style, and democratic style) with the use of preference and perception versions. From the items developed by Zhang, Jensen, and Mann (1997), 8 items were selected for each of the five leadership behaviors. The top 8 items with the highest factor-loading scores were used to create three different 40-item measures. The three versions of the LSS (athlete perception, athlete preference, and coach self-evaluation) have the same five leadership dimensions, and each version includes the same 40 items. Each item is either preceded with “I prefer my coach to,” “My coach,” or “I.” A
A Likert-type scale is used, allowing athletes to select always (100%), often (75%), occasionally (50%), seldom (25%), and never (0%). Once completed, athletes’ and coaches’ scores were tabulated and percentages computed for each coaching behavior.

To alleviate limitations associated with previous research using the LSS and to measure coaches’ leadership styles, data collection took place at the beginning, middle, and end of the season. Surveys were first administered directly after the team’s 1st week of competition, then 4 weeks later, and then during the final week of competition.

**DESIGN AND ANALYSIS**

Research questions were analyzed using a repeated measures factorial design to measure the potential change in athletes’ (with differing years of experience) perceptions and preferences of their coaches’ leadership styles at the beginning, middle, and end of the athletic season. Levels of experience with the team (1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th year of experience) and team success (successful, unsuccessful) were between participants, and time in the season (beginning, middle, and end) was within participants. Team success and athletes’ preferences and perceptions and coaches’ perceptions were included in the analysis as a multivariate and analyzed using a MANOVA. When significant differences were detected across the beginning, middle, and end of the season, the appropriate post hoc analysis was performed.

**RESULTS**

**ATHLETE PREFERENCES**

As shown in Table 1, athletes’ preferences for their coaches’ use of autocratic, democratic, positive feedback, and social support leadership styles were not significantly affected by success and athlete experience levels at the beginning, middle, and end of the season. Results also indicated that athletes’ preferences for their
coaches’ use of training and instruction were not significantly affected by athlete experience levels at the beginning, middle, or end of the season; however, a significant main effect did emerge for team success and the time in the season. Follow-up procedures indicated that athletes on successful teams preferred their coach to use roughly the same amount of training and instruction at the beginning ($M = 81.87$, $SD = 6.65$), middle ($M = 78.24$, $SD = 11.01$), and end ($M = 79.33$, $SD = 8.85$) of the season. However, athletes on unsuccessful teams indicated a significant change in preferences for their coaches’ use of training and instruction, demonstrating a desire for a stronger focus at the beginning ($M = 85.79$, $SD = 7.62$) of the season with a decline over the remainder of the athletic season (middle, $M = 80.07$, $SD = 10.31$; end, $M = 75.27$, $SD = 11.63$).

ATHLETES’ PERCEPTIONS

Athletes’ perceptions of their coaches’ use of democratic, positive feedback or training and instruction leadership styles were not significantly affected by success and athlete experience levels at the beginning, middle, and end of the season (see Table 2). A significant main effect did exist when measuring the effects of success on the autocratic leadership style for which follow-up procedures were computed—Time 1 to Time 2, $F(59) = 3.58$, $p > .05$; Time 1 to Time 3, $F(51) = 4.35$, $p < .05$; and Time 2 to Time 3, $F(51) = .14$, $p > .05$—suggesting that athletes’ perceptions of their coaches’ use of an autocratic leadership style were affected by team success. Ath-

TABLE 1: Athletes’ Preferences Based on Team Success and Athletes’ Levels of Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership Style</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Success and Time $F$</th>
<th>$n^2$</th>
<th>Experience and Time $F$</th>
<th>$n^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autocratic</td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td>1.913</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>0.306</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>5.59</td>
<td>0.863</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>0.723</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive feedback</td>
<td>5.57</td>
<td>0.447</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>0.825</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support</td>
<td>5.77</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>0.577</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training and instruction</td>
<td>5.84</td>
<td>4.28*</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>0.753</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p = .05.
letes on successful teams perceived their coaches’ use of an autocratic style to remain the same (beginning, $M = 46.04$, $SD = 9.75$; middle, $M = 48.92$, $SD = 12.04$; end, $M = 51.63$, $SD = 12.08$), whereas athletes from unsuccessful teams perceived a significant increase in their coaches’ use of an autocratic style from the beginning ($M = 48.37$, $SD = 9.31$) to the end ($M = 58.26$, $SD = 12.48$) of the athletic season.

The examination of athletes’ perceptions of their coaches’ social support leadership style provided a number of interesting findings. This was the only measure to indicate a significant main effect for athlete experience levels at the beginning, middle, and end of the season (see Table 2). To measure difference for experience and time, follow-up procedures were computed across experience levels for each time period: Time 1, $F(49) = 1.70$, $p > .05$; Time 2, $F(49) = 2.71$, $p > .05$; and Time 3, $F(49) = 1.32$, $p > .05$. When no significant differences were found, additional follow-up procedures were computed to compare experience levels against each other for each time period: Experience 1, $F(24) = 2.86$, $p > .05$; Experience 2, $F(24) = 2.06$, $p > .05$; Experience 3, $F(24) = 1.35$, $p > .05$; and Experience 4, $F(26) = 1.92$, $p > .05$. Each of the simple follow-up procedures for the within and repeated effects failed to detect where the significant difference lay. However, observations of mean scores for the different cells suggested that athletes in their 1st year of experience perceived less social support from their coach at the beginning ($M = 60.54$, $SD = 16.37$) when compared to the middle ($M = 69.01$, $SD = 10.62$) or end ($M = 67.27$, $SD = 8.78$).

![Table 2](https://sgr.sagepub.com)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership Style</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>$n^2$</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>$n^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autocratic</td>
<td>5.98, 89.71</td>
<td>1.46*</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>0.621</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>5.99, 89.96</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>0.796</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive feedback</td>
<td>5.84, 87.66</td>
<td>0.117</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support</td>
<td>5.86, 87.91</td>
<td>0.067</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>2.74*</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training and instruction</td>
<td>5.94, 89.04</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p = .05.*
of the season. Athletes in their 2nd year perceived more social support from their coach at the beginning ($M = 62.48, SD = 9.11$) of the season when compared to the middle ($M = 56.49$), which saw a drop in perceived use of social support. Athletes in their 2nd year perceived amounts of social support at the end ($M = 63.54, SD = 10.98$) that were similar to the amounts perceived at the beginning of the season by athletes in their 1st year. Athletes in their 3rd year perceived more social support at the beginning ($M = 64.42, SD = 11.13$) and middle ($M = 65.16, SD = 10.46$) of the season; however, their perceptions declined at the end ($M = 60.82, SD = 10.50$). Finally, 4th-year athletes perceived more social support at the beginning ($M = 69.84, SD = 6.73$) when compared to the middle ($M = 65.36, SD = 11.48$) and end ($M = 66.92, SD = 8.20$). A significant main effect did not exist for team success and the time in the season.

**COACHES’ PERCEPTIONS**

Coaches’ use of autocratic, democratic, social support, and training and instruction leadership styles did not have a significant main effect for successful and unsuccessful teams, indicating that coaches’ use of these leadership styles was not significantly different at the beginning, middle, and end of the athletic season (see Table 3).

A significant main effect did not exist for team success and the time in the season.

Coaches’ perceptions of their use of a positive feedback leadership style match those of their athletes’ preferences and perceptions when measuring team success. A significant main effect emerged for successful and unsuccessful teams for which follow-up proce-
dures were computed: Time 1 to Time 2, $F(16) = 5.02, p < .05$; Time 1 to Time 3, $F(14) = 8.90, p < .05$; and Time 2 to Time 3, $F(14) = .73, p > .05$. Coaches’ perceptions of their use of positive feedback was the only strategy to change across time. Positive feedback declined significantly over the course of the season (beginning, $M = 91.21, SD = 3.82$; middle, $M = 87.11, SD = 8.83$; and end, $M = 85.16, SD = 8.11$). These findings are consistent when compared with athletes’ preferences and perceptions providing for a change in the same direction across time.

**DISCUSSION**

Leadership in the context of athletics is a truly fluid process that demonstrates a change in leadership preferences and perceptions over the course of a season. By examining coaches’ leadership styles over the course of time, this study has provided a clearer idea of coaches’ use of leadership styles. Results from this analysis indicate significant mean differences for athletes’ perceptions of their coaches’ social support styles when comparing athletes who are either in their 1st, 2nd, 3rd, or 4th year of experience as a varsity athlete. Specifically, athletes in their 1st year indicated their coaches’ using less social support at the beginning of the season, which then increased when measured during the middle of the season and then slightly decreased at the end. Athletes in their 2nd year indicated similar amounts of social support as did those in their 1st year; however, the middle of the season saw a decrease rather than an increase. The use of the social support style then increased at the end of the season for those in their 2nd year. Athletes in their 3rd year perceived a gradual increase in social support from Time 1 to Time 2, with a decline at the end of the season. Those athletes in their 4th year indicated the highest use of the social support style at the start of the season, which then declined over the next two time periods. Significant differences did not exist for athletes’ preferences for and perceptions of their coaches’ use of autocratic, democratic, positive feedback, and training and instruction based on athlete experience levels.
The results from this study provide a clearer picture of the coach-athlete relationship as it pertains to the use of styles that foster and develop support for athletes. It is reasonable to assume that athletes in their 1st year of experience would perceive the least amount of social support because this style focuses on the relationship that exists between athletes and their coaches. Having only participated as a varsity athlete for less than 3 weeks limits the amount of interpersonal interaction that can occur between coaches and their athletes. As the season progresses and the coaches and athletes have further contact, the amount of social support would increase to a level obtained by athletes in their 4th year. Athletes in their 2nd year as varsity athletes perceived a sudden drop in the amount of social support during the middle of the season. These perceptions could indicate that coaches begin to provide more social support to the 1st-year athletes with the understanding that those in their 2nd year may need less as the season progresses. Athletes in their 4th year perceived the highest amount of social support at the beginning of the season, which may be representative of the strong relationship that has developed between coaches and athletes over the previous 3 years. Coaches and athletes know each other well, suggesting the presence of stronger interpersonal relationships. This makes it easier for coaches to implement more social support at the beginning to encourage 4th-year athletes to become team leaders and role models for other athletes. The amount of perceived social support then drops as the season progresses. The first research question was proposed based on the situational leadership model developed by Hersey and Blanchard (1969). The situational leadership model suggests superiors will use different techniques when interacting with subordinates based on their perceived maturity levels (Hersey, 1984; Hersey & Blanchard, 1969, 1977; Hersey et al., 1979). Although coaches were perceived to use different amounts of social support with athletes from various experience levels, the situational leadership approach suggests superiors would focus less on the relationship between those subordinates with the highest amount of maturity and more on those with medium amounts of maturity. Coaches, however, were perceived to use more social support with those with
the highest amount of maturity and the least with athletes in their 2nd and 3rd years. The situational approach does apply to 1st-year athletes’ perceptions, in that coaches used significantly less social support (low relationship) when compared to 4th-year athletes. Inconsistencies with the situational leadership approach also exist when applied to the findings of athletes’ preferences for and perceptions of their coaches’ use of autocratic and democratic leadership styles. If the situational model did apply to the athletic context, one would conclude that significant differences would have also existed for the autocratic style (high and low task, telling behaviors) and democratic style (high and low relationship and participating and delegating behaviors).

Results from this analysis indicate significant mean differences for athletes’ perceptions of their coaches’ autocratic style when comparing athletes from successful and unsuccessful teams. Although athletes from both team types indicated increases in the use of an autocratic style over the course of the season, those athletes on unsuccessful teams perceived a significant increase over time. Results also demonstrated significant mean differences for athletes’ preferences for training and instruction when comparing athletes from the two team types. Athletes on successful teams indicated a slight decrease in training and instruction from the beginning to the middle of the season, which then gradually increased toward the end. Athletes on unsuccessful teams, however, indicated high preferences for training and instruction, which then dropped significantly during the middle and end of the season.

Athletes’ perceptions of and preferences for democratic, social support, and positive feedback were not significantly affected by team success. Also, coaches on successful teams perceived themselves using the five leadership styles similarly to coaches of unsuccessful teams. Findings from these results indicate a number of conclusions. First, being from a successful or unsuccessful team does not dramatically affect athletes’ preferences and perceptions. Only preferences for training and instruction and perceptions of autocratic styles demonstrated significant differences. Second, athletes perceived coaches from unsuccessful teams using significantly more of an autocratic style than those on successful teams.
These findings suggest a shift toward more controlling behaviors by the coach over time.

There are a number of limitations to consider for this study. First, athletes’ scores on the LSS were aggregated by experience level (1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th year as a varsity athlete for each team) to eliminate the potential for nested data. As a result, even if there were up to six athletes in their 1st year on one team, those scores then resulted in only one set of data during analysis. Second, of the 534 returned surveys across the three time periods, only 425 were usable, which could be a result of self-selection by the athletes. Athletes with neutral preferences or perceptions of their coaches may have been less likely to complete the entire survey each time when compared to those athletes with strong positive or negative feelings toward their coach. In addition, the number of usable instruments declined when collected at the beginning ($n = 144$), middle ($n = 131$), and end ($n = 124$) of the season, which may have been a result of participant fatigue as a consequence of having to complete the same instrument three separate times. Third, to ensure athlete anonymity, it was impossible to match athlete responses across all time periods. If team composition changed from one time period to the next, this may have caused the significant change in athlete preferences or perceptions. However, athlete scores on the LSS were aggregated according to experience level to limit the effect a change in team composition would have had. Finally, because of the high number of statistical tests performed in this study, one must be aware of the increased chance for a Type 1 error to occur.

Despite the above limitations, this study should provide researchers and coaches with a more accurate picture of the leadership process as it pertains to the athletic context. Researchers and coaches would benefit from the application of findings concerning the impact team success has on athletes’ perceptions of an autocratic style and coaches’ perceptions of training and instruction. An avenue for future research may be to examine the impact sport type (e.g., football, baseball, basketball, gymnastics, and track and field) has on athletes’ preferences and perceptions over time. Because of the dynamics involved in defining team success, this
study used only one sport type; however, measuring other sport types would help to ensure that a change in time is not specific to the sport of wrestling alone.

Turning points in the season and the coach-athlete relationship may also be a valuable avenue of research based on the findings of this study. The goal of this research was to use the LSS to indicate a change in athletes’ preferences and perceptions over the course of the season. Further research would benefit from a more thorough examination of the interpersonal relationship that develops between the coach and athlete by examining specific turning points as the season progresses. Valuable insight would be obtained by selecting one team and conducting in-depth interviews throughout the season to better understand the situational factors that affect changes in coaching behaviors.

REFERENCES


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