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Exploring the nature of transformational leadership in sports: a phenomenological examination with female athletes

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Transformational leaders lift and inspire followers to achieve performance beyond expectations and realise their full potential. Transformational leadership fosters performance and increases positive outcomes in a variety of domains (e.g. business, military, and education) and may have a salient impact on the quality of athletes' sporting experiences. Bass identified four primary behavioural components of transformational leadership: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration. Yet little is known about what constitutes transformational leadership in a sport setting from a qualitative perspective. This study addressed this issue by interviewing eleven female collegiate athletes about their positive experiences with current or former coaches. Thematic analysis of transcribed interview text revealed four major themes: caring, motivating, teaching life lessons, and trusting. Caring was exemplified by the coach taking the time and energy to establish a personal and individual relationship with athletes. Having high expectations and physically and mentally challenging athletes were salient aspects of motivating. Teaching life lessons was characterised generally by the high quality mentoring that transformative coaches engaged in with athletes. Lastly, trust was perceived when the athletes felt their coaches cared about them, were willing to relinquish some power, and acted in the best interests of the team. Similarities and differences emerged when comparing the themes with Bass', Podsakoff *et al.*'s, and Rafferty and Griffin's components of transformational leadership. Unique elements of sport that may affect the manifestation of transformational leadership in sport include physical coach–athlete interactions, group size, and the motivational reasons for participation.

Keywords: college athletes; females; coaching; caring; leaders

Transformational leaders 'motivate followers to achieve performance beyond expectations by transforming followers' attitudes, beliefs, and values as opposed to simply gaining compliance' (Bass 1985). Because coaches are uniquely positioned to impact the lives of athletes, transformational leadership may be important in enhancing the quality of athletes' sporting experiences (Gould *et al.* 2007). Research across a variety of settings including business (LeBrasseur *et al.* 2002), the military (Bass *et al.* 2003), government (Wofford *et al.* 2001), nursing, (Bowles and Bowles 2000,

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Murphy 2005), and education (Harvey *et al.* 2003) has highlighted the performance benefits for followers experiencing transformational leadership. The impact of transformational approaches to leadership has also been examined in sport. Initial findings suggest that coaches' transformational behaviours are associated with greater intrinsic motivation of athletes (Charbonneau *et al.* 2001), increased athlete effort (Rowold 2006), and social and task cohesion among teams (Callow *et al*. 2009). In addition, the influence of narcissism as a moderating variable between transformational leadership and athlete motivation (Arthur *et al.* 2011) has been examined, as has the mediating influence of intrateam communication on the relationship between transformational leadership and team cohesion (Smith *et al.* 2013). Athlete well-being (Stenling and Tafvelin 2014) and peer leadership (Price and Weiss 2013) have been examined in sport using a transformational leadership framework. Further, Vella *et al*. have established a line of research on transformational leadership that includes examinations of the construct's association with positive developmental experiences of youth athletes (2013a) and coaches training for youth sports (2013b). However, an important limitation of previous research in sport is the utilisation of conceptualisations of transformational leadership borrowed from non-sport domains. We found no studies that have qualitatively explored what transformational leadership consists of from the athlete's perspective in the sport context. Exploring athlete understandings, experiences and the meanings they attribute to transformational leadership is crucial for gaining further knowledge of the essence of transformational leadership within a sport context. Furthermore, gaining a deeper appreciation of the essence of transformational leadership in sport is integral for establishing the validity of the construct and for examining antecedents and outcomes of transformational leadership.

At the core of transformational leadership is the idea that a leader has a transforming, or elevating impact on his/her followers. Burns (1978) coined the term *transforming leadership.* He suggested that this form of leadership occurs as leaders engage their followers in a way that they 'raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality' (Burns 1978, p. 37). Transformative leaders enlist and encourage followers to envision and pursue aspects of their better selves, thus eliciting positive change by appealing to followers' higher order needs of self-actualisation (Burns 1978). Bass (1985) extended these ideas by operationally defining and creating a framework and self-report measure of transformational leadership (Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire, Bass and Avolio 2000). According to Bass (1990), most leaders rely on a transactional relationship with their subordinates, wherein a leader requires an exchange of work for rewards. This transactional relationship, although necessary, requires the presence of other leader characteristics to promote performance from mediocrity to excellence. Research in the sport and military domains establishes this transactional relationship to be an important prerequisite to transformational leader behaviours (Rowold 2006, Hardy *et al.* 2010). Thus, a transformational leader augments the transactional style by motivating followers to accomplish more than is expected by raising awareness of the value of goals, encouraging followers to transcend their own self-interest for the aspirations of the group, and stimulating recognition of higher needs. Bass also suggests that transformational leaders motivate followers to achieve performance beyond expectations by transforming followers' attitudes, beliefs, and values as opposed to simply gaining compliance, a common reward–punishment practice in transactional-based leadership approaches. Finally, transformational leaders elicit positive changes

in their followers, who are then more motivated based on internalised values and beliefs. Therefore, an important tenet of transformational leadership is the underlying notion that transformational leaders positively influence, lift, and transform followers (Burns 1978, Bass and Steidlmeier 1999, Dvir *et al.* 2002).

There are four primary behavioural components associated with transformational leadership including: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration (Bass 1985). The more leaders adopt these components the greater the transformative impact on their followers. *Idealised influence* refers to the admiration, respect, and trust that followers have for their leader. The transformational leader is a role model who has high moral and ethical standards. *Inspirational motivation* occurs when a transformational leader motivates his or her followers by providing them with meaning and challenge in their work. By inspiring teamwork and vision among followers, the transformational leader encourages greater enthusiasm in their efforts. *Intellectual stimulation* is spurred by transformational leaders when they encourage creativity and new ways of thinking about problems, and include followers in decision-making processes. Attending to followers' needs for personal growth is a demonstration of how transformational leaders demonstrate *individualised consideration*. The transformational leader interacts with each individual as a whole person, recognises individual needs, and remembers important information about each person.

Although Bass' (1985) conceptualisation of transformational leadership in a business setting is the most frequently adopted framework, transformational leadership has been conceptualised in other ways. For example, Podsakoff *et al*. (1990) identified six transformational factors that stem from a managerial leadership standpoint – articulating a vision, providing an appropriate role model, fostering acceptance of group goals, high performance expectations, individualised consideration, and intellectual stimulation – and one transactional factor, contingent reward. Yet another conceptualisation was provided by Rafferty and Griffin (2004) while examining the employer–employee relationship. They proposed five sub-dimensions of transformational leadership: vision, inspirational communication, intellectual stimulation, supportive leadership, and personal recognition. These findings indicate a level of variability in how transformational leadership is conceptualised and that components of transformational leadership may vary by context.

While various researchers (e.g. Charbonneau *et al.* 2001, Rowold 2006, Callow *et al*. 2009, Vella *et al.* 2012, Smith *et al*. 2013) have contributed greatly to our understanding of transformational leadership in sport, two issues related to measurement and thus conceptualisation of the construct are worth noting. First, the characterisation of transformational leadership is largely based on business leadership models (Bass 1985). Second, the self-report instruments used to assess transformational leadership in coaches have been culled from measurements also based in business leadership and adapted for sport. For instance, the differentiated transformational leadership inventory (DTLI, Callow *et al.* 2009), as well as the DTLI for youth sport (Vella *et al.* 2012) have been utilised in sport as measures of transformational leadership. However, these scales were constructed using items borrowed from the multidimensional leadership questionnaire (Bass and Avolio 2000) and the transformational leadership inventory (Podsakoff *et al.* 1990), measures created in the business domain. Because the origin of these measures was grounded in business and industry settings, important elements of transformational leadership for sport may have been overlooked. For example, coaches and athletes may interact

differently than in leader–follower relationships in business due to the differences in physical proximity and variations in motivation (Rynes *et al.* 2004).

Despite ongoing progress in research on transformational leadership, a significant gap exists. Researchers have yet to qualitatively explore the key attributes of transformational leadership from the perspective of those who coaches are expected to 'transform' – the athlete. Recognising athletes' perspectives is a major part of deepening our understanding of what constitutes transformational leadership in sport. It is essential that voices of athletes inform the foundation of this conceptualisation because their perception is of preeminent importance. Researchers measure transformation by changes in the athlete that are often not readily observable (e.g. alteration in motivational perspective, altruism). We acknowledge that there are multiple perspectives from which an understanding of transformational leadership can be developed. One benefit of examining this construct from the perspective of athletes (rather than coaches) is that we can limit potential biases or inflated self-perceptions that the coach may hold, reflecting more positive outcomes than are actually perceived by the athlete. Another part of the existing gap is the lack of qualitative research. Qualitative perspectives are often valuable because they provide a depth of understanding from the participants' perspective and have the potential to add to theoretical underpinnings of constructs (Pope *et al.* 2000, Wimpenny and Gass 2000). Therefore, the current study is an important step toward developing a better conceptual understanding of transformational leadership in sport. Given the positive outcomes associated with transformational leadership and the limited research examining how transformational leadership is enacted within sport, the purpose of this study was to provide an initial exploration of the meaning of transformational leadership as perceived by female team sport athletes in the mountain west region of the United States of America.

Method

Paradigm

In the present study, we assumed a relativist ontology in which '… multiple, constructed and mind-dependent realities …' exist (Sparkes and Smith 2009, p. 493). Lincoln *et al*. (2013) suggest that appropriate methods aligning with a relativist ontology may include interviews based on participants' reconstructed experiences of past events and the researchers' subsequent interpretations of participants' experiences. Therefore, our analysis and findings reflect an interpretive understanding of the construct of transformational leadership gained through interactions with participants, which is recognised as the crucial means of knowing (Lincoln *et al*. 2013).

Participants and procedures

Eleven female athletes (ages 18–22) who participated in softball ($n = 4$), volleyball ($n = 1$), and basketball ($n = 6$) were recruited from three colleges – a community college, a NAIA college, and a Division I University – in the Mountain West region of the United States. Selection criteria for participation included being female and currently competing at the college level. Only female athletes were recruited based on research suggesting differences between genders in preferred coaching style, indicating that female athletes prefer more participative styles of coaching (Chelladurai and Arnott 1985). Further, it is important to recognise the gender dynamics that exist

Table 1. Participants' background information.

Athlete pseudonym	Sport	Year in school	Current school division	Highest level of competition	Level(s) of coaches discussed
Stephanie	Softball	Sophomore	NCAA Division I	NCAA Division I	Club
Hailey	Softball	Sophomore	NJCAA	NJCAA	High school, College
Courtney	Softball	Sophomore	NCAA Division I	NCAA Division I	High school
Danielle	Softball	Freshman	NJCAA	NJCAA	High school, College
Michelle	Volleyball	Senior	NAIA	NAIA	College
Cady	Basketball	Sophomore	NJCAA	NCAA Division II	Club, High school, College
Erin	Basketball	Senior	NCAA Division I	NCAA Division I	Club
Jamie	Basketball	Senior	NCAA Division I	NCAA Division I	High school, College
Jill	Basketball	Red-shirt junior	NCAA Division I	International	High school, College, International
Shannon	Basketball	Senior	NAIA	NCAA Division I	Club, High school, College
Jenny	Basketball	Senior	NAIA	NAIA	College

between interviewee and interviewer, suggesting complications in qualitative interviewing between opposite genders (Gurney 1985, Poulton 2012). Following institutional ethics board approval, participant recruitment began and continued until data saturation occurred (Guest *et al.* 2006). Teams were contacted through emails to coaches and interview times were set up via email or text messages with athletes. Interviews were conducted in locations that would ensure the comfort and convenience of the participants. Demographics are provided (Table 1) in order to situate each participant within her context and allow the reader greater understanding of participants' backgrounds.

Interviews and interview guide

Following informed consent procedures, interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. In order to encourage candid responses, participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time and their responses would be anonymous. Audio recordings lasted between 25 and 50 min. In this study a semi-structured interview guide was used to ask athletes about their interactions with influential coaches. Rather than soliciting the perspectives of coaches, the voices of athletes were sought, given that athletes' perceptions of their coaches' behaviours seem to be a key factor in the creation of athletes' reality. The interview guide was based on Bass' framework of transformational leadership. The notion of transformational leadership was not explicitly mentioned to the participants, given the researchers' interest in understanding athletes' conceptualisations of influential leadership without imposing pre-existing definitions or constructs. Questions were

designed to tap into sport transformational leadership generally, allowing participants to describe the phenomenon in their own ways. Effort was made to adopt descriptive words used by Bass in the description of his transformational leadership components (Bass 1985, Bass and Riggio 2006) while at the same time conversing with each athlete using terms and colloquialisms germane to sport. In this manner, questions were designed that enabled inquiry into the presence of specific transformational behaviours of current and former coaches and how the athlete experienced those behaviours. Questions were pilot tested with two former female basketball players from NCAA Division I and III levels of competition. Interview guide questions were reworded and refined to ensure clarity (Table 2). For example, the original question 'how did your coach create meaning for you?' was modified to 'how did the coach communicate that participation in your sport was meaningful?'

Table 2. Interview guide.

Can you tell me about how your coaches influenced your life in a positive way?
Can you tell me about how your interactions with your coaches throughout your career made you a better person?
Sometimes teams perform above and beyond the expectations of others. Can you think of a time when this happened for a team you were on?
And how did the coach facilitate that happening?
Individualised consideration
Did you feel valued by your coach off the field/court? How do you know you were valued as a person?
Did your coach understand that each player needs different coaching?
Did your coaches treat everyone the same regardless of how much you played and contributed in games? How do you know this?
Can you think of a time when a coach spent extra time helping you develop a skill or helped you off the field/court?
Intellectual stimulation
Can you think of an experience where your coaches challenged you or your team to solve a problem?
In what ways have your coaches built trust in you?
How did coaches give criticism or feedback to you or your teammates?
In what ways did your coach communicate to you that what you were doing as an athlete was meaningful or important?
Idealised influence
Did you feel like your coach had good character? How do you know?
Can you tell me about an experience where your coach's actions off the court/field influenced you?
Many people trust their coaches a great deal on the court. How was trust created?
Inspirational motivation
How did your coaches motivate you?
Can you tell me about an experience when your coach motivated/inspired your performance?
In what ways did your coaches provide a goal/vision for your team?
Do you have any other comments to add about how your coaches have impacted you positively?

The semi-structured interviews explored the overarching question, 'Can you tell me about the coaches that have had a positive impact on your life?' The interviewer used probing follow-up questions such as, 'What do you mean by …?' or 'Can you tell me more about that?' to get more detail or clarification from the athletes' statements (Patton 1987). Given our a priori interest in finding out about coaches who positively influenced their athletes, the questions were geared towards eliciting understanding of coaches who facilitated athletes in their endeavours. In this study, a coach was viewed as transformational if the athlete was influenced positively by her coach. However, the parameters of a transformational leader were not explained to participants in order to avoid tainting participants' perspectives by existing frameworks. Because having a positive influence is central to transformational leadership, eliciting details related to the context and circumstances of those various interactions was likely to result in references to the components of transformational leadership. In addition, it was expected that the components of transformational leadership would manifest in ways unique to the sport domain. Based on the nature of interactions in highly interdependent, competitive sport atmospheres, it was also possible that additional themes would emerge.

By design, participants were not given a specific level of competition or coach to focus on. Therefore, athletes talked about coaches at a variety of levels, and many of them talked about more than one coach during the interview. Collectively, athletes referred to both male and female coaches, four travel team coaches, seven high school coaches, two former college coaches, and eight current collegiate coaches.

Data analysis

For this study, inductive and deductive strategies were employed (Strachan *et al.* 2011). As outlined by Thomas (2006), an inductive approach was initially employed to analyse the transcript data. Specifically, inductive analyses proceeded by grouping meaning units into general and higher-order themes. For example, statements made by participants that were similar in nature – 'got to know us outside of volleyball,' 'have a relationship outside of sports,' and 'getting to know us off the field' – were grouped into general themes, such as 'caring about the person,' and then grouped into higher-order themes that shared meaning. In this example, the general theme 'caring about the person' was grouped under the higher-order theme named 'caring'. A meaning unit was defined as 'a segment of text that is comprehensible by itself and contains one idea, episode or piece of information' (Tesch 1990, p. 116). These meaning units were not coded according to a priori themes during the inductive phase of analysis. Rather, as themes developed based on the data, the researchers used deduction to compare themes to emerging components of transformational leadership. Specifically, once higher-order themes had been established, transcripts were again reviewed for specific meaning units that were reflective of the general categories previously established. These meaning units were then placed under higher-order themes (i.e. deductive analysis).

Analysis procedures were adopted based on recommendations from Thomas (2006) and Creswell and Miller (2000). A total of 106 single spaced pages of interview transcripts were coded by the interviewer and two peer researchers in a four step process. First, all three researchers read the interviews multiple times in order to ascertain the individual and collective experience of the participants. Second, each researcher separately extracted meaningful statements that illustrated the impact of a

coach on the athletes' lives, subsequently referred to as meaning units. Third, the primary researcher compiled these statements into a single electronic document, which consisted of 226 meaning units. The pages of text were printed and the meaning units were cut into individual pieces of paper. Lastly, the three researchers met and categorised the meaning units into themes based on their similarity and named the themes. Any disagreements were discussed until consensus was reached.

Trustworthiness

Rather than adopting an a priori *list* of trustworthiness criteria, we employed several trustworthiness procedures that appeared relevant to the current investigation and which are consistent with steps adopted by other contemporary sport and physical activity researchers (e.g. Evans and Crust 2015, Sparkes and Smith 2014, Wilson *et al.* 2015). These included the development of rapport building, use of reflexive journaling, data saturation, critical friends, and member checks. In adopting these traditional trustworthiness measures, we do not assume or imply that such strategies have led us to an accurate truth, but hopefully to a more fair, ethical, and respectful interpretation of participants' viewpoints and recall of their experiences (Sparkes and Smith 2009, 2014, Liechty *et al*. 2014).

In this study, the past experiences of the interviewer (i.e. first author) as a high school athlete and coach emerged as beneficial tools in building rapport and conversing in common sports vernacular that participants were familiar with. For example, in sharing her experiences playing summer softball tournaments with one of the softball players, the interviewer was able to converse with the participant using softball jargon. In doing so, the conversation appeared to flow more easily and smoothly. Numerous other instances (e.g. a participant crying as she relayed an experience in which a coach comforted her following a significant loss) indicated that participants felt comfortable expressing their emotions and describing their experiences to the interviewer. The use of a self-reflexive journal was also employed given that the interviewer's status as a sport insider – one with numerous experiences as an athlete, coach, and researcher – inevitably impacted her interaction with and analysis of participant statements and experiences (Morrow 2005). By recording her experiences, reactions and emerging awareness of any assumptions or biases that came to the fore, the interviewer was better able to 'inspect' the ways in which her experiences and beliefs as an athlete, coach and researcher might influence the interpretation of or relative importance given to particular participant statements and/or experiences (Ortlipp 2008). Furthermore, interviews continued until such time as little novel information appeared to be forthcoming, that is, until data saturation was evident (Morrow 2005).

Since, as mentioned, the interviewer was a former athlete and coach, it seemed worthwhile to employ the use critical friends and member checks. With regard to critical friends, ongoing discussion between the first, fourth, and fifth authors, enabled an honest, open, and rigorous dialogue about the core meaning of themes and the further delineation of characteristics of the major themes. One particular instance is provided as an example. During the categorisation of meaning units, the fourth and fifth authors acted as critical friends by suggesting that perhaps the first author was especially attentive to identifying caring in the experiences of the participants based on her past research focused on caring. The vocalisation of this concern allowed all three authors to recognise and become especially attentive to

any predisposed notions they may have carried with them in interpreting and making sense of participant statements and recollection of their experiences. By considering potential predispositions to extract meaning based on their individual research interests and backgrounds, the authors provided a space for pre-existing viewpoints and beliefs to be explored in relation to the emergence and categorisation of transformational leadership themes.

Finally member checks were performed in two ways. First participants were emailed and asked to read their transcribed interviews to determine if the transcripts were consistent with their words, perspectives and information as conveyed during the interviews. Several participants suggested that the transcripts were congruent with their recollection of the information relayed during the interview process and no suggested changes were offered. Checks were also made after researchers had developed themes by sending the results section to each participant via email and requesting feedback. Although only 4 of the 11 participants provided feedback on emergent themes, the positive nature of their comments (e.g. 'I agreed with the findings', 'what I read looked great') and the fact that no changes were suggested, could be said to provide some indication that our development of themes was a potentially fair and respectful representation of participants' interpretation of their own experiences.

Findings

Four major themes were developed by the researchers from the interview data: *caring, motivating, teaching life lessons,* and *trusting.* Major themes were identified by at least 10 meaning units associated with a topic and by a large majority (80% or more) of the participants emphasising the importance of that topic (Guest *et al.* 2006). Additionally, themes that were considered relevant to the issue at hand or which appeared particularly salient for the participants were included in the results. Using pseudonyms for the participants, these themes are discussed below.

Caring

The most prominent theme that emerged from the interviews was caring. In fact, caring seemed infused in all of the themes. All participants explained that coaches who cared about them on and off the court made a positive impact on their lives. Caring was characterised by the athletes in three ways – investing time and energy into athletes, feeling cared for as an individual, and feeling their coach was loyal and supportive. First, coaches invested time and energy in their athletes. Investment was most often evident by the significant amounts of extra time coaches spent with the athlete, in particular, by helping athletes with skill development outside of regular practice hours, holding team dinners, scheduling outside activities with individual players, and coming to watch participants play even after the athlete had progressed to another team. In many instances coaches invested time and energy beyond their regular responsibilities as coaches. From the participants' perspectives, the extra time was evidence that coaches cared for them.

Frequently, athletes explained that coaches spent extra time with them to help develop skills. For example, Jamie, a basketball player, explained that her high school coach opened the gym for her during the summers to practice and also got up early in the winters to open the gym for her before school started.

> I would show up at six most mornings and he would get up early and make sure I could get over there and [he] would set everything up. So that's a huge deal. Did he stand there and give me a whole lot of knowledge that I didn't know? No. But just waking up every day and being willing to let me in there and take time out of his life was a big deal.

While skill development outside of regular practice time is not unusual, the participants in this study also described instances where coaches went beyond their regular coaching responsibilities. For Jamie, opening the gym early in the mornings was an indication that her coach cared about her.

In some instances, coaches also went beyond regular responsibilities by investing time in their players when the investment was unrelated to their sport. For example, Michelle in referring to her college coaches explained, '[They] took time to come and figure out more about my family and where I'm coming from, and we've had a lot of really good talks when I was struggling with a bunch of things'. Jenny's college basketball coach 'came out and played tennis with [her]' during the off season just for fun. For these players the extra time coaches invested in their players demonstrated caring.

The second way in which participants characterised caring was that they felt they were valued as individuals, and not solely for their athletic abilities. Participants could tell that their coaches cared about them as a person because the coaches wanted to get to know them. Coaches asked about their families, interests, school, and other outside activities. For example, Cady explained that she understood that at a college level 'their [coaches] job is to win, and coaches that really care – they value you – value your opinion and you as a person'.

Getting to know the players' families was another way coaches showed that they cared about their players. Many participants said the coach knew their family members by name and asked about them frequently. Some athletes also knew the family of the coach and seemed to feel that because the coach was willing to share a significant part of his life with his athletes, the value of their relationship increased. For example, Jill said,

> [Coach] has meetings with us all the time … just the other day [we] had a meeting and I think we talked about basketball for like 30 seconds. And then it was just like talking about what's going on in our lives and he's not afraid to tell us what's going on in his life. He's a pretty open book. A lot of coaches are very reserved in telling people, their players, about their lives, which is totally fine if that's how you choose to be. But with him I think it brings a more … almost friendly relationship … With [Coach], I just feel like we have such a good relationship and I know his family. I know his wife and his kids. I know his mother and father-in-law. And our whole team is like that. We're very close with him and his whole family.

Several participants mentioned coach–player meetings as important occasions in which coaches expressed interest in them as individuals and in their lives beyond sport. In addition to Jill's experience above, Shannon's interactions with her coach in individual meetings were evidence of her coach's caring. She said, 'She cares about her players a ton. [She] jokes with us, sits us down, we have meetings. We've probably had three meetings this season where we just sit and talk, and it's not forced. She really cares about you'.

The third way that athletes characterised caring in this study was by the loyalty and support of their coaches. One way these athletes felt valued was when their coaches demonstrated consistent support. For example, Shannon explained that when

she played poorly, her college coach '[took her] aside after the game and said, "That was a crappy game for you, but we're going to move past it. I'm sorry you had a bad game, but I still believe in you and your abilities"'. For Shannon this was evidence that no matter how she performed during a game she had the support of her coach.

Jenny related an experience that demonstrated the loyalty of her coach. When Jenny needed to transfer schools, her current coach was eager to have her on the team. While sharing this experience in the interview Jenny explained, '[Coach said], "We're going to get you here no matter what. I'm going to talk to the athletic director. We're going to scrounge some money". So she made it work'. To make the point that it was a characteristic of the coach and not just a single incident, Jenny shared another time when her coach was loyal to a different player. 'One girl on our team … tried to get her red-shirt [year] back and she didn't and so they brought her on the coaching staff and they still want her. They really care about her'. Jenny explained that her coaches were loyal because they made extra efforts to help a former member of the team without any obligation to do so.

Additionally, verbal expressions of caring were powerful ways the athletes knew the coaches cared for them. For example, Shannon said that her coach 'was probably the only coach that verbally would just say, "I care about you. I love you. You mean a lot to me". And she's a special person for doing that'. While participants indicated that their coaches verbally expressed a sense of caring, these expressions of caring were supported by actions and were, therefore, authentic and meaningful to the athletes. In sum, for the participants in this study, the theme of caring was characterised in three primary ways: coaches' investing time and energy in their athletes, athletes feeling valued by their coaches beyond sport, and coaches demonstrating loyalty and support.

Motivating

A majority of the athletes in this study felt that their coach had a positive impact on them by pushing, or motivating them. Athletes described experiences where their coaches pushed them beyond what they would normally do. In this case, the term 'pushing' refers to a motivational drive that coaches instilled or nourished in their athletes. Several participants used the specific phrase 'pushed me' to describe the motivating feeling their coaches inspired in them.

There were three common ways in which coaches motivated their athletes. First, coaches challenged their athletes physically, either through conditioning or skill development. Jill explained, '[He would] make me work harder than I thought I could work; make me push through being tired and figure out what being really tired is [laughs]. There's always that little bit extra that you can go'. Erin shared a similar experience:

> There were times when I was just like, 'She is ruthless!' which I think is a good thing. There would always be practices where she would just run us really hard. In preparation for tournaments, we'd have conditioning days at [the park] where she would just make us run laps around the park and hills … It was intense!

Both Erin and Jill acknowledged that they exceeded their expectations because the coach pushed them to a higher level of physical conditioning. In both of these instances, the athletes appreciated the difficult conditioning their coaches required of them.

The second way in which athletes described feeling their coach motivated them was by mentally pushing them. Players often felt motivated by their coaches' criticism, encouragement, and challenges. For example, Jenny said, 'I was really undersized, but she was always giving me critical advice … She always knew that's the way she should talk to me to get the most out of me'. Cady shared how her coach also knew how to motivate her to do better – by telling her she could not do something well. She said,

> When [my coach] says, 'You can't shoot the three. Maybe just take a step in', that sets me off and I'll spend 3 hours a day in the gym practicing threes just to prove them wrong. So I feel like sometimes [my coaches] know that and they use that against me because they know that it motivates me and that's something that [my coaches] have learned about me.

Cady was motivated to practice more based on the challenge from her coach. This method of motivation was very individual and relied on the degree to which the coach knew her players. Cady acknowledged that this was something her coaches learned about her as they spent time getting to know her. Several other players recognised that their coaches knew them well enough to adapt their coaching behaviours to elicit specific responses from their players. Knowing individual players well suggests the theme of caring is present here as well.

Finally, athletes in this study felt their coaches motivated them by having high expectations of the athletes. By communicating high expectations to their athletes, coaches motivated their athletes to higher levels of performance. Hailey said, '[Coach] will push you especially if she knows how talented you are,' and of a different coach she said, '[Coach] expected so much from me'.

Some of these influential coaches communicated their high expectations by tapping into and sharing the belief they had of their athletes' potential. Jill shared the following experience:

> For me the most motivating thing was when a coach has told me that I have greater potential than I think. Or that I can do better than I think that I can do … When I went [to compete with my national team] they wanted me to play a guard-forward position. When I went there [coach] was like, 'Jill, you can shoot whenever you want. You have the green light. Shoot the ball whenever you want …' And that really made me think, 'Okay, I don't just have to stick with what I've been doing. It's time to expand my skill set'.

Sometimes these expectations were difficult for the athletes to adjust to. Michelle explained that her coach expected everyone on their volleyball team to communicate well and loudly on the court. This was challenging for Michelle because she was initially very shy and quiet. However, as Michelle worked to meet this expectation she felt personal growth on and off the court.

For the participants in this study, the theme of motivating was characterised by coaches pushing the athletes physically and mentally, and having high expectations of them. The participants recognised that these coaches envisioned a higher level of performance for them and motivated them to achieve more.

Teaching life lessons

Interview comments revealed that coaches impacted the participants in positive ways by teaching life lessons along with their sport. A vast majority of the athletes talked about life lessons. These life lessons ranged from encouraging hard work to being

grateful. Coaches taught these lessons both explicitly and implicitly – by their words and their actions. Stephanie said her coach inspired them by his personal life story. She commented:

> He grew up in a rough background and he lived in a trailer park. His parent's died so he lived with his grandma. And we knew that he came from nothing and now he's a really successful guy and he taught us to never give up because you can do whatever you want.

She also explained that while he was a teacher of softball skills he also taught about how to succeed in life.

> Along with the lessons he taught me on the field, he taught me that you can bring them to your life as well. For example, to respect him … if you show up late, that's rude to him because he is putting in all his time and you're not going to do that to your boss.

Stephanie's coach taught her by his example and by using his life experiences. Jill's coach took the opportunity to teach through her own experiences. When Jill and her teammates skipped class one day, the coach used it as a learning experience. She explained:

> He just said, 'You guys are the leaders of this team … I want you guys to think of what is a deserving punishment for you guys'. We had to sit and think what should we do? So we came up with something … But just little things like that. He wasn't mad. He didn't yell at us. He didn't do anything like that, but he [said], 'You know, girls, I just think you're so much better than this'. And we were like, 'You know what? You're right. We are better than this'. So he just kind of made you think.

The coach seemed to use the players' choices as an instructive opportunity to help them learn about accountability for their actions.

The athletes in this study also saw their coaches living their lives in ways that taught athletes beyond the sports environment. For example, Danielle's coach invested a lot of time taking her players to elementary schools to do assemblies to volunteer with a non-profit organisation. Danielle was impressed with her coach's positive attitude as she interacted with all the young children.

Athletes also learned to have the proper perspective on sports and life. Two different players explained that their coaches put sports into perspective. Erin said that her coach tried to emphasise that their 'whole lives weren't going to be about basketball'. Cady related an experience where her coach let her know that there was more to life than just playing basketball. She said that after a big loss …

> as soon as the game ended, I remember I went to the locker room and I grabbed my shoes, changed my jersey and I went to the other gym, and I just started running, and running, picked up balls and just dribbling and shooting … [With emotion] my coach came in and he grabbed the ball and he was like, '[Cady], stop'. And he just grabbed me and he just hugged me and was like, 'It's okay. It's okay. It doesn't matter. It was just a game. You work your butt off every day. It's going to be alright'. [He made] you feel so much more like basketball – I love basketball, and it's a huge part of my life, but it's not the only thing. He was really good at [explaining that] just because we've lost this game doesn't mean you can't succeed the next game or you can't succeed on your test tomorrow. It doesn't change anything. You can still make a difference in other places. That was really, really helpful to me.

Both Erin and Cady seemed to gain perspective on life through their experiences with their coaches. Their coaches taught them that sports were not the most important part of life.

Erin's coach taught her about being grateful. They were required to bring a 'grateful list' to practice each week. Their coach made it clear that the grateful list was not optional. Erin said, 'You'd show up to practice and if you didn't have it just leave. She was not messing around'. While Erin's coach was teaching a lesson about being thankful, she implicitly taught a lesson about being accountable as well. These impactful coaches taught life lessons such as working hard, never giving up, having perspective, being grateful, and being accountable. It was clear that these coaches made an effort to teach about life in their role as sports coaches.

Trusting

A final theme that emerged in these interviews was trusting. Building trust between coaches and players seemed to be an important issue for the athletes. According to participants, trust existed bi-directionally: the coaches who had a positive impact on their athletes trusted their players and had the trust of their players.

Players trusted their coaches the most when they felt the coach cared about them and wanted to help them. During the interview Cady said about one of her coaches, 'It's easy to trust somebody that isn't out for their own gain or their own benefit'. When asked how she knew the coach wasn't out for her own benefit, she responded:

> It's never about her. It's never about how is it going to help [the coach]. How we talked in practice, and how she would help get my name out to coaches, or colleges … It was like, [Cady], I want to help you. I want to make you better. So she kind of put all the focus on me.

Trusting that the coach was doing the best thing for the team was also an important theme. After sharing an experience where the coach made her sit out of a game, Cady explained how she finally learned to trust her coach.

> I just learned a huge lesson that just because I may not understand what they're doing or what their decision is, I have to trust it. If you already have that relationship that you know that they're doing it for the good of the team or to win or something to help in the long run – even if that might mean a loss – if it's going to have a better influence in the long run, that's huge. She was one of my favourite coaches of all time now. I respect and trust her so much. I know she would do anything to help me be successful and to make this program successful. So sometimes it might take conflict or tough things like that to understand your coach or your players. But just building trust or building a relationship that will be beneficial towards the program.

One method some coaches used to engender trust was to relinquish leadership. Jill explained that her coach let the returning players be in charge during familiar drills in practice, stopping to teach certain parts of the game to team members who were new. Allowing players to take a larger role communicated to the athletes that their coach trusted them. Jamie succinctly stated, 'Sometimes it's not all about the coach having to be a part of it'.

The foundation for trust was the personal relationship between the coach and the athlete. Knowing the coach cared was woven throughout their comments and transcended the meaning units that directly indicated caring. For example, while talking about building trust with her coach, it was apparent that Jenny felt that their relationship extended beyond sports. She said:

> Gosh, I would probably go to my head coach with any problem in my life. I feel like she has lived a good life and has had a lot of experience. It was the same with [my assistant coach]. They are both very approachable, and I think just [with] time comes that trust … if you're having a problem, you could definitely go to them … They really do care about you and so of course, there's that trust that comes with time.

Jenny's comment also illustrates the complex process of building trust. She highlights that caring is a pre-requisite to building trust. As athletes felt cared for they were able to build trust.

In summary, athletes in this study felt that coaches influenced them positively by caring, motivating, teaching life lessons and trusting. The following quote from Cady encapsulates the positive impact of these coaches.

> A coach can have such an effect on [athletes] outside of basketball or outside of sports. They can change the way [athletes] live their lives – their lifestyle, their working out, their eating, or the way you are in your community or the way you are in your work ethic. The more the coach walks the walk or talks the talk, the more you want to be like that and the more they preach about it or talk about it, and they try to incorporate those things, it's going to change your life. I wouldn't be the same without basketball. I wouldn't be the same. The highs and the lows, and the bus trips, the countless pairs of shoes, and everything the coach provides for you, is a life-changing experience, and they can do so much good … so much positive in your life.

Discussion

This study explored the ways in which coaches' transformational leadership influenced athletes in positive ways. In the current study, coaches positively impacted their athletes in four major ways – by *Caring*, by *Motivating*, by *Teaching Life Lessons*, and by *Trusting*. Our purpose was not to redefine transformational leadership, but to explore the degree to which current frameworks of transformational leadership were also applicable to the sport context and explore possible important coach behaviours that have been overlooked. Based on the emergence of and support for these themes, we will examine the similarities and differences between these four themes and existing frameworks of transformational leadership. A plethora of original studies connect Bass' framework of transformational leadership to positive performance outcomes (Lowe *et al.* 1996) and demonstrate the efficacy of his transformational leadership components (Bass 1985, Bass and Riggio 2006). Therefore, Bass' components will be the primary focus, with secondary consideration provided to the contributions of Podsakoff *et al*. (1990) and Rafferty and Griffin (2004).

Comparisons to transformational leadership

Individualised consideration

Behavioural manifestations of individualised consideration were evident in athlete perceptions of being cared for by coaches. Avolio and Bass (1995) explained that individualised consideration is accounting for the needs of followers and recognising individual differences, acknowledging the followers' desires to achieve, and providing ways in which followers feel empowered. Podsakoff *et al*. (1990) also include a similar concept in their framework which they term providing individualised support. At the core of the experiences shared by athletes in this study was the perception that these coaches influenced them in a positive way by caring for them.

This was evident from the relationships coaches built with their athletes and the effort they invested to get to know them as individuals. When coaches asked about family and life outside of their sport it was interpreted as evidence of caring. The athletes noted an authenticity to their coach's interest in their lives. The findings of this study suggest that the basis of individualised consideration or providing individualised support in sport is demonstrating caring behaviours and the development of personal relationships.

Caring was woven into participants' statements throughout the interviews. While caring is similar to individualised consideration, in the current study it was of preeminent importance. This similarity coincides with the work of Avolio and Bass (1995) who suggested that individualised consideration was the linchpin that elevates typical leadership behaviours to transformational behaviours (Avolio and Bass 1995). The notion of caring in transformational leadership also coincides with research on the coach–athlete relationship. Specifically, Poczwardowski *et al*. (2002) qualitatively investigated interactions between coaches and athletes and found that mutual caring was an important recurring pattern. In interviews with Olympic athletes, Jowett and Cockerill (2003) concluded that interactions among coaches and athletes influence both skill development and personal development. In addition, they suggest that the relationships between coaches and athletes are underlined by care, concern, and support. While the idea of building caring relationships is not novel in sport research, it has not been emphasised in conjunction with transformational leadership. As a coach builds a personal relationship with players and knows them individually, he/she builds a foundation upon which the effectiveness of every other leadership and coaching strategy appears to rest. This insight enriches our understanding of the importance of caring behaviours as a significant part of individualised consideration.

Inspirational motivation

Elements of Bass' (1985) inspirational motivation component, Podsakoff *et al*.'s (1990) high performance expectations category, and Rafferty and Griffin's (2004) inspirational communication factor were evident in the theme *Motivating*. Transformational coaches continually challenged their athletes to do more than they thought possible. Enthusiasm was stimulated by the coaches encouraging the athletes to improve their athletic skillset. These ideas are consistent with Bass (1985) and Northouse (2013), who both view having high expectations as central to inspirational motivation. Interestingly, the athletes did not mention the use of inspirational language or speeches. Previous descriptions of inspirational motivation suggested emotion-laden talks and inspirational communication were a significant piece of transformational leaders' behaviours (Rafferty and Griffin 2004). Chelladurai (2007) also identified inspirational communication as a behaviour that is essential to the pursuit of excellence in sport. The lack of motivational speeches as a part of athletes' descriptions of their coaches, suggests a departure from previous conceptualisations of transformational leadership. It may be that the inspiring language so often associated with transformational leaders may have a very transient effect on athletes, not something readily recalled as continually influential in their interactions. On the other hand, we must consider the possibility that the content of the interviews did not reflect the full spectrum of behaviours that encompass inspirational communication. However, for the athletes in this study, the daily imperative for improvement

and hard work was inspirational, suggesting that the presence of clearly communicated high expectations was a factor in motivating athletes.

Distinct from previous conceptualisations of transformational leadership in other domains, athletes in this study focused on the extent to which coaches physically and mentally motivated them. Coaches held the athletes to a high standard of physical conditioning, demonstrating the high expectations they had for their athletes. The relevance of this theme may be unique to settings where fitness and conditioning are central to optimal performance. Sport and the military are two contexts where this seems most applicable. While mentally challenging subordinates may be common in many fields it could be argued that the tenor of that encouragement is more direct, and in a way, more transactional in athletic and military settings. Interestingly, researchers have not identified or explored this aspect of transformational leadership in the military. Thus, the physical and mental demands placed on athletes make this theme distinct from previous conceptualisations of transformational leadership. It is worth noting that most coaches (transformational or not) facilitate challenging physical conditioning drills for their athletes and expect them to work hard. This is not unique to transformational coaches. Nevertheless, it is important to include the idea of being physically challenged because it reflects the notion that coaches held athletes to high standards, an important component of Podsakoff *et al.*'s (1990) model. We also recognise that pushing athletes physically may be considered a transactional behaviour. While important, on its own pushing athletes physically is insufficient to produce the higher levels of performance sought by transformational leaders. Additionally, coaches in this study mentally challenged their athletes by critiquing their performance and challenging them to push their limits. Flett *et al.* (2013) interviewed coaches who were considered effective and ineffective in facilitating positive youth development. Both ineffective and effective coaches challenged the athletes physically and mentally. However, it was clear that effective coaches implemented *tough love*, wherein they criticised performance and pushed athletes physically, having previously established solid, caring relationships. Similar to the effective coaches in Flett *et al.*'s (2013) study, coaches in the current study established relationships with their athletes that allowed them to challenge, motivate, and demand extra effort in a manner that may seem hostile or negative to the outside observer. In previous conceptualisations of transformational leadership, the physical and mental demands placed on athletes had not been addressed. Further examination of this phenomenon is warranted to establish this theme as a distinct characteristic of transformational coaches.

Idealised influence

In this study, *Teaching Life Lessons*, relates to Bass' (1985) idea of idealised influence, Podsakoff *et al.*'s (1990) conceptualisation of providing an appropriate role model, and Rafferty and Griffin's (2004) supportive leadership component, in that each framework refers to a relational element and the vicarious influence of transformational leaders. Leaders act as role models (Bass and Steidlmeier 1999) and their followers admire, respect, and want to emulate them (Bass and Riggio 2006). For the participants, coaches were very influential. This influential nature was due, in large part, to the mentoring provided by the coaches and the life lessons they shared with their athletes (Miller *et al.* 2002, Gould and Carson 2010).

Idealised influence includes providing a clear and inspirational vision for the followers and the organisation (Berson *et al.* 2001). Articulating a vision appears prominently in Podsakoff *et al*.'s (1990) and Rafferty and Griffin's (2004) views of transformational leadership although they both de-emphasise the visionary aspect of the concept. For these female athletes, coaches' visions for their teams were not explicitly important for influential leadership. Perhaps the role of the coach in providing a clear vision for his or her team was not explicitly addressed by the participants because it is inherently expected that the role of the coach is to direct his or her players toward winning.

Another major theme in the current study was *trusting*. As conceptualised by Bass and Riggo (2006), idealised influence includes the notion of trust. Although not included as a component in Podsakoff *et al*.'s (1990) model of transformational leadership, having trust in leaders was a mediator in the relationship between leadership and followers' performing beyond expectations (Podsakoff *et al.* 1990). Trust is also the means by which leaders create acceptance of the vision and goals for the organisation (Bennis and Nanus 1985). The current study provides additional support for the importance of building trust between coaches and athletes.

Participants also emphasised the importance of bidirectional trust. It was important to the athletes that they trusted their coach and that their coach trusted them. Perhaps as the athletes felt trusted by their coaches they experienced a feeling of empowerment. Previous research has indicated that transformational leaders empower their followers and charge them with greater responsibilities (Kark *et al.* 2003). Athletes in this study relished being the recipients of their coach's trust. While it is clear from previous business leadership literature that trust is an essential part of the leader-follower relationship (Podsakoff *et al*. 1990), *bi-directional* trust has not been examined in previous sport leadership research nor emphasised in the transformational leadership literature. Previous leadership research focuses on the importance of followers trusting their leaders (Dirks and Ferrin 2002). The unique element added by this study is that the coaches who had the most influence on their athletes also demonstrated trust in their athletes. Additionally, this study adds to the knowledge base regarding the importance of trust as an integral part of the idealised influence component of transformational leadership. Future research should attempt to examine further the concept of bi-directional trust in sport.

Intellectual stimulation

The concept of intellectual stimulation includes leaders who encourage followers to work through problems in new and creative ways (Bass and Riggio 2006). Bass (1985), Podsakoff *et al*. (1990), and Rafferty and Griffin (2004) all suggest this notion to be a key component of transformational leadership. While intellectual stimulation did not appear consistently in any of the themes in this study, it was tangentially addressed. For example, one athlete in this study alluded to her coach's suggestion that she should reflect on her actions and determine an appropriate punishment for skipping class. Perhaps one way coaches demonstrate intellectual stimulation is through encouraging the development of moral reasoning. Additionally, some athletes in this study talked about their coaches allowing them to work through intra-team conflict on their own. These examples may be an indication of intellectual stimulation behaviours, but this component of transformational leadership was not

specifically emphasised by the athletes. Further research is needed to explore this issue in more detail.

Unique qualities of sport

Transformational leadership was originally conceptualised using a sample of high-ranking executives within a business setting (Bass, 1985). There are important contextual differences between sport and business that may offer insight into the leadership behaviours and themes identified in this study and the distinctions noted with traditional frameworks of transformational leadership. First, the physical proximity in which the coach athlete relationship takes place is often different from a manager–employee relationship. This physical proximity also takes place in a setting where physical skills are being taught and physical contact is common. In order to give appropriate instruction coaches may physically demonstrate a skill, interact with athletes by physically positioning athletes' hands and feet, or give encouragement by a pat on the shoulder.

Second, athletes are likely facing different psychosocial developmental tasks than the average employee in business. For example, depending on the age of the athlete, issues associated with industry (i.e. developing self-confidence through complex skill mastery) and identity (Erikson 1950, 1968) are being negotiated as well as a number of other developmental processes. Conversely, employees in a business setting have different developmental tasks that typically involve concerns about generativity (i.e. being a productive contributor to society and helping to guide the next generation; Erikson 1950, 1968). Coaches who assist athletes in transitioning through these psychosocial stages by providing opportunities to gain competence (e.g. *motivating*) and establish an identity (e.g. *teaching life lessons*) in a supportive environment (e.g. *caring* and *trust*) outside of the sphere of parental influence may be perceived by athletes as particularly positive and impactful. In addition, it is possible that during these developmental phases coaches may be seen as parental figures, mentors, and role models, thus, tapping into a different motivational stimulus causing athletes to seek approval more so than in other relationships. Acting in these roles may also serve as the impetus for greater respect, thus facilitating greater internalisation of life lessons taught by coaches.

Third, interactions between leaders and followers will be different based on group size. In this study, the size of the teams in which the leader–follower interaction occurred may be smaller than in a traditional business setting. Meta-analytic research suggests that as group size increases, leaders are more likely to engage in behaviours that deal with the structure of the group and roles of group members rather than attending to the needs of individuals (Mullen *et al.* 1989). The sizes of the sport teams in the current study were relatively small. Therefore, coaches could have been less concerned with group structure and could focus on relational aspects of their position such as caring and building trust. Additionally, research on coaching efficacy has indicated that coaches who demonstrated high levels of confidence in their abilities as a coach, spent less time in organisational behaviours (Feltz *et al.* 1999), potentially freeing up time to fine-tune their interactions with their athletes to build positive relationships. In this study, athletes related experiences of their most influential coaches who had cultivated constructive relationships. It is possible that these coaches were comfortable enough with typical coaching behaviours

(e.g. organising practices, teaching skills) so they could direct their attention to building these relationships.

Finally, for athletes of varying ages, sport is a voluntary activity engaged in, at least partially, for intrinsic reasons (e.g. the pleasure derived from the activity; Scanlan *et al.* 1993, Amorose and Horn 2000, McCarthy and Jones 2007). Adults ensconced in the world of work and careers may be driven by more extrinsic reasons (e.g. salary, promotions, Rynes *et al.* 2004). Importantly, sport researchers have indicated that often athletes' motivations depend on coaches' behaviours (Amorose and Horn 2000). Thus, the inherent motivational differences between young athletes and adults in work settings combined with the different purposes of the activities may account for differences in how transformational leadership is expressed and experienced. For example, adults may be more preoccupied with supporting themselves and their families by procuring greater financial benefits while adolescents may be driven by a desire to enhance personal performance or please the coach. Differences between sport and business domains are likely to provide insights into the differences between transformational leadership in sport and transformational leadership in business, education, or government settings. Previous research has acknowledged that the effectiveness of certain leadership behaviours may vary depending on the context (Antonakis *et al.* 2003). For example, Chelladurai (2007) suggests that athlete satisfaction and performance are influenced by coaches' ability to adapt coaching behaviours to situations and athlete characteristics. Future research should explore how contextual differences contribute to different expressions and experiences of transformational leadership in sport.

Contributions, limitations and future research

This study makes valuable contributions to the existing body of research on transformational leadership in sport. First, it offers some insight into how current conceptualisations of transformational leadership can be adapted to sport based on the unique aspects of sport participation. For example, a transformational leader in a supervisory role in a business setting may choose to use intellectual stimulation by encouraging followers to creatively and innovatively provide solutions to problems. However, a transformational coach working with adolescent athletes may choose to use intellectual stimulation differently by asking athletes thought provoking questions to help them understand strategies, thereby creating greater 'buy-in' and effort. In this study, transformational leadership seemed to be experienced by athletes differently because of the unique setting of sport competition. Second, adding qualitative research to the existing quantitative body of research on transformational leadership in sport enhances our understanding of the construct. Qualitative research adds depth to our current knowledge and expands conceptual boundaries. Finally, investigating transformational leadership in sport from the athlete perspective offers a new viewpoint for coaches in their understanding of how to interact with athletes. Indeed, several practical applications can be made to coaching practices. For example, coaches may choose to focus on developing caring, personal relationships with each athlete. Also, coaches should gain an awareness of their expectations and how they impact their athletes.

Some limitations to the study should be noted. First, the authors acknowledge the interpretive nature inherent in this research. In an effort to increase the trustworthiness of the findings, various strategies including rapport building, reflexive

journaling, data saturation, use of critical friends, and member checks were used to increase the likelihood that the findings reported in this manuscript reflect a fair and respectful synthesis of athletes' perspectives of transformational leadership. That athletes were in the midst of their collegiate experiences may also have influenced their responses, in so far, as they had not yet had the benefit of time to reflect on the impact of influential coaches in their lives. Answers given to the questions in the interviews may change as athletes mature and their reflections on their personal experiences grow. In the future, it would be beneficial to focus on a sample of retired athletes who have had time to reflect and understand the extent to which coaches made a lasting impact on their lives. In addition, the use of an all-female sample limits the interpretation of results to female populations. Future research should investigate similar questions using a mixed-gender sample of athletes. Similarly, the athletes in this study were recruited from one regional area in the United States of America. As a result, athletes may have shared characteristics that account for some of the similarities and differences in transformational leadership discussed here. Although the interviews continued until data saturation occurred, it is also important to recognise the relatively small sample size as a potential limitation. Also, the method of sampling involved asking coaches for permission to contact their athletes about their positive experiences with coaches. Therefore, the coaches may have selected athletes that had particularly positive experiences with them. However, these athletes were not instructed to talk about their current coaches. They were invited to share experiences about any coach who had influenced them positively. Nevertheless, many of the athletes in this study were leaders of the team and appeared to have strong relationships with their current coaches. This may suggest that players who invest in their athletic careers and are highly skilled may be more open to being influenced by their coaches. Future research should examine possible differences in the influence transformational coaches have on more or less skilled athletes. Another suggestion for future research includes specific investigation into transformational leader behaviours that may influence group dynamics and role acceptance in team settings. Finally, we acknowledge that our interview guide was pointed in its focus and directed participants toward answering questions about their positive coaches.

It was clear from the interviews that coaches can have a transforming effect on athletes. Previously, transformational leadership had not been qualitatively examined within a sport setting with the aim of determining the essence of this style of leadership in sport. This study attempted to clarify how Bass' transformational leadership components can be adapted to the sport domain and create a starting point for future discussions on transformational leadership in coaching. While there was some overlap between the components of transformational leadership in sport and other settings, there were also some divergences from traditional components. For example, intellectual stimulation did not appear to be a prominent theme. Additionally, a major finding of this study was that caring was an essential element of the interactions between coaches and athletes which facilitated the positive impact on athletes. Interpersonal interactions between coaches and players both on and off the field were driven by the strength of the relationship built between coaches and athletes. Based on the findings of this investigation it may be necessary to adapt the components of transformational leadership specifically to the sport domain. One adaptation to the inspirational motivation component might include the emphasis on 'pushing' athletes toward excellence (mentally and physically), but doing so from a position

of caring. Another adaptation might include using athletic competition as a vehicle for teaching life lessons, as a means of demonstrating idealised influence. Given the important role of coaches, transformational leadership in sport warrants continued attention.

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