

Sport Leadership

Zack J. Damon

Introduction

This edition of Sport Management Digest's Sport Leadership section reviews nine articles published in 2025. Of the nine articles, six were published in the *Journal of Sport Management*, two were published in *Sport Management Review*, and one in *European Sport Management Quarterly*. As in previous editions of this section, the studies reviewed here reflect a range of methodological approaches and organizational contexts through which scholars continue to advance the study of leadership in sport organizations. Of the nine articles included in this review, six rely primarily on qualitative approaches such as interviews, observations, and case-based analyses, two utilize quantitative analyses of large datasets, and one provides a conceptual framework intended to guide future leadership research. The contexts examined across these studies include nonprofit sport governance, sport for development and peace organizations, collegiate athletics, professional sport organizations, and youth sport environments. Collectively, these articles highlight both the breadth of sport leadership scholarship and the increasing sophistication with which scholars conceptualize leadership processes within sport organizations. Rather than focusing exclusively on leadership styles or individual leader characteristics, contemporary sport leadership research increasingly situates leadership within governance systems, organizational cultures, institutional environments, and broader social structures, following similar a similar evolution as our parent leadership discipline has in years past (Day et al., 2014; Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Advances in Sport Leadership Research

Ferkins et al. (2025) examined how collective leadership emerged within nonprofit sport boards and how governance actors shared leadership responsibilities.

Drawing on qualitative interviews with board members and governance stakeholders, the authors investigated how leadership processes unfolded across board structures rather than being concentrated in a single formal leader. Their findings indicated that leadership within nonprofit sport governance frequently emerged through collaborative dialogue, shared expertise, and negotiated influence among board members. Rather than relying solely on hierarchical authority, board members collectively shaped strategic direction through ongoing interaction and deliberation. The study highlighted how governance effectiveness depended heavily on relational processes that enabled board members to contribute meaningfully to leadership activities.

The authors further demonstrated that collective leadership was influenced by the organizational culture and trust relationships that developed among board members. Boards that cultivated open communication and mutual respect created conditions in which leadership responsibilities were shared more effectively. In contrast, boards characterized by power imbalances or limited engagement struggled to distribute leadership responsibilities across members. The study also emphasized the importance of governance structures that supported collaborative decision-making and transparency. By conceptualizing leadership as an emergent and relational process, the article contributed to sport governance research by illustrating how leadership capacity could be strengthened through collective engagement rather than reliance on individual leaders.

Next, Lachance (2025) explored how nonprofit sport organization board members engaged in governance decision-making processes. Using a mixed-method research design that combined board meeting observations, interviews with board members, and document analysis, the study examined the factors that shaped levels of engagement

among board participants. The findings revealed that board chairs and chief executive officers often played particularly influential roles in governance discussions due to their control of agendas and access to information. However, engagement among other board members varied depending on their expertise, familiarity with organizational issues, and perceptions of their governance responsibilities. The study provided detailed insight into how governance participation unfolded within nonprofit sport organizations.

The research further identified several conditions that encouraged more active participation among board members. Alignment between board members' motivations and the organization's mission enhanced engagement, as did a clear understanding of governance responsibilities. Trust and psychological safety within the boardroom environment also played important roles in encouraging members to voice their perspectives. Conversely, uncertainty about roles or lack of relevant expertise sometimes limited participation in decision-making processes. Overall, the study contributed to sport governance scholarship by demonstrating how relational dynamics, structural roles, and individual competencies collectively shaped leadership participation within nonprofit sport boards.

Molloy et al. (2025) investigated the adoption and design of nomination committees within New Zealand national sport organizations. The study sought to understand why sport organizations implemented nomination committees as part of governance reform and how these committees influenced board composition. Using a qualitative multiple-case study approach, the authors analyzed governance reforms across several national sport organizations. Their findings suggested that nomination committees were often introduced in response to increasing expectations for transparency,

accountability, and professional governance practices. External pressures from funding agencies and governing bodies frequently motivated organizations to adopt more formalized director selection processes.

Of note, a main takeaway from this article was how nomination committees reshaped leadership structures within sport organizations by influencing how board members were selected and evaluated. By formalizing recruitment processes, nomination committees helped organizations identify candidates with specific competencies and governance expertise. However, the implementation of these committees sometimes generated tensions between traditional volunteer governance models and emerging professional governance expectations. The authors argued that nomination committees represented a mechanism through which organizations navigated broader institutional pressures for governance reform. The article therefore contributed to sport leadership literature by illustrating how structural governance changes influenced leadership dynamics within nonprofit sport organizations.

Piggott (2025) examined the distribution of decision-making power within sport for development and peace organizations, with particular attention to gender dynamics in leadership roles. Drawing on qualitative interviews with organizational leaders and stakeholders, the study analyzed how gender influenced access to decision-making authority within these initiatives. While women were found to occupy leadership positions within many organizations, the research revealed that the most influential decision-making roles frequently remained dominated by men. The findings suggested that formal representation alone did not necessarily translate into equitable leadership

influence. Instead, deeper organizational norms and historical leadership patterns continued to shape power dynamics.

The article further highlighted how organizational origin stories and institutional histories influenced gendered leadership structures within sport for development organizations. In several cases, founding leaders maintained disproportionate influence over strategic decisions even after governance structures evolved. This dynamic reinforced informal hierarchies that limited the influence of other leaders, particularly women. The study emphasized that leadership equity required more than representation and instead depended on structural and cultural change within organizations. By examining the intersection of gender and leadership power, the article contributed to broader conversations about equity and inclusion within sport leadership contexts.

McSweeney et al. (2025) developed a conceptual framework describing the role of an entrepreneurial mindset among leaders working in sport for development and peace organizations. The authors argued that leaders in these contexts frequently operated in environments characterized by limited resources, evolving social challenges, and diverse stakeholder demands. As a result, leadership required innovative thinking and the ability to identify opportunities for program development and social impact. Drawing on entrepreneurship literature, the authors conceptualized an entrepreneurial mindset as a set of cognitive and behavioral orientations that enabled leaders to navigate uncertainty effectively. The framework emphasized opportunity recognition, risk management, and proactive problem-solving as key leadership competencies.

Additionally, McSweeney and colleagues found how an entrepreneurial mindset influenced organizational sustainability and program effectiveness within sport for

development initiatives. Leaders who demonstrated entrepreneurial thinking were more likely to mobilize resources, build partnerships, and adapt programs to changing social contexts. These capabilities were particularly important in sport for development settings where funding sources were often unstable and social needs continued to evolve. The authors proposed that leadership development programs within sport organizations should incorporate entrepreneurial competencies alongside traditional management skills. By integrating entrepreneurship theory with sport leadership research, the article provided a novel perspective on how leaders could drive innovation within socially oriented sport organizations.

Salaga and Juravich (2025) analyzed racial disparities in leadership opportunities within NCAA Division I men's basketball coaching careers. Using a longitudinal dataset spanning several decades, the authors examined whether minority coaches experienced different labor market outcomes compared with their White counterparts. The findings revealed that minority coaches were more likely to be hired by programs facing particularly challenging competitive circumstances. These positions often involved lower-performing teams and heightened expectations for rapid improvement. As a result, minority coaches frequently began their leadership careers under more difficult conditions than their peers.

Findings also pointed towards minority coaches having experienced shorter tenures in leadership positions compared with White coaches. Despite achieving comparable performance outcomes in many cases, minority coaches were often replaced more quickly or encountered fewer opportunities for advancement within elite programs. These patterns suggested that structural inequalities within sport labor markets continued

to shape leadership opportunities. The authors argued that these disparities reflected broader systemic barriers influencing hiring practices and leadership pipelines within collegiate athletics. By examining leadership outcomes through a labor market perspective, the article provided important insight into diversity and equity issues within sport leadership contexts.

Schyns et al. (2025) investigated the relationship between organizational ethical climate and coaching leadership behaviors in youth sport environments. The study focused on how club-level norms and policies influenced coaching styles and athlete experiences. Using survey data collected from gymnasts and coaches within organized sport settings, the researchers analyzed the relationship between coaching behaviors and perceptions of ethical club climate. The findings indicated that clubs characterized by strong ethical norms were less likely to tolerate controlling or abusive coaching behaviors. Instead, these environments tended to promote leadership practices that prioritized athlete well-being and positive development.

The study also demonstrated that organizational context played a crucial role in shaping individual leadership behavior. Even coaches who displayed controlling tendencies appeared to modify their behavior when operating within clubs that emphasized ethical standards and athlete protection. This finding suggested that leadership outcomes could not be understood solely by examining individual leaders; broader organizational environments also shaped behavior. The authors argued that strengthening ethical governance and accountability structures within sport organizations could reduce harmful coaching behaviors. The article therefore contributed to sport

leadership scholarship by illustrating how ethical organizational climates influenced leadership practices in youth sport contexts.

Whales et al. (2025) examined leadership development within professional sport organizations from a relational and temporal perspective. The authors challenged traditional leadership development models that focused primarily on individual skill acquisition through formal training programs. Instead, their study highlighted how leadership capabilities evolved over time through ongoing interaction among organizational members. Using qualitative interviews with leaders working in professional sport organizations, the researchers explored how leadership learning occurred through daily work experiences and collaborative relationships. The findings demonstrated that leadership development frequently emerged through informal mentoring, peer interactions, and reflective practice.

The authors also emphasized the importance of time and experience in shaping leadership identity. Leaders often described their development as a gradual process influenced by past experiences, organizational transitions, and evolving professional networks, which matches with previous research on followers developing into leaders taking time (Damon et al., 2024). Rather than occurring through isolated training interventions, leadership development unfolded through cumulative learning over the course of a career. The study highlighted how relational interactions within organizations created opportunities for leadership learning and growth. By framing leadership development as an ongoing and socially embedded process, the article contributed to emerging relational perspectives on leadership within sport management research.

In the last article for this edition, Thompson and Parent (2025) examined how organizational culture influenced change processes within nonprofit sport organizations. Using a processual research approach, the authors analyzed how leadership actions shaped cultural transformation during periods of organizational reform. The study drew on qualitative data from multiple sport organizations undergoing governance and structural change initiatives. Their findings demonstrated that organizational culture was not static but instead evolved through ongoing interactions among leaders, staff members, and stakeholders. Leadership communication and decision-making practices played a critical role in shaping how these cultural shifts occurred.

The research further showed that successful organizational change frequently depended on leaders' ability to align new strategic initiatives with existing cultural values. When leaders acknowledged historical traditions while introducing reforms, organizational members were more likely to support change efforts. Conversely, change initiatives that disregarded established cultural norms often encountered resistance from stakeholders. The authors argued that leaders needed to actively manage cultural dynamics when implementing governance or structural reforms. By integrating organizational culture theory with sport management research, the article offered valuable insight into how leadership practices influenced change processes within nonprofit sport organizations.

Overview of Sport Leadership

Across the nine articles reviewed in this edition, several themes emerge that reflect broader developments in sport leadership scholarship. One of the most prominent themes is the growing emphasis on relational and contextually embedded perspectives on

leadership. Rather than focusing exclusively on leadership traits or styles, contemporary research increasingly conceptualizes leadership as a social process emerging through interactions among individuals within organizational systems (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Research examining nonprofit sport governance illustrates this relational perspective particularly clearly. Studies by Ferkins et al. (2025) and Lachance (2025) demonstrate that leadership authority within sport boards often emerges through collaborative interaction among board members rather than through hierarchical authority alone. These findings align with relational leadership perspectives suggesting that leadership is constructed through ongoing interaction among organizational actors.

Institutional forces also play a significant role in shaping leadership structures within sport organizations. Molloy et al. (2025) show that governance reforms such as nomination committees frequently emerge in response to pressures related to accountability, legitimacy, and professionalization. These dynamics align with institutional perspectives within sport management research emphasizing how organizations adapt governance structures in response to external expectations (Parent & Hoye, 2018).

Leadership within sport for development and peace organizations introduces additional complexity. McSweeney et al. (2025) highlight the importance of entrepreneurial leadership capabilities in resource-constrained environments, while Piggott (2025) demonstrates how gendered power structures may continue to influence leadership opportunities within these organizations.

Structural inequality also emerges as a key theme within the literature. Salaga and Juravich (2025) provide evidence that racial disparities continue to influence leadership

pipelines in NCAA coaching careers. These findings align with broader research examining diversity and inclusion within sport organizations (Cunningham, 2019). Organizational culture represents another critical factor shaping leadership processes. Studies by Schyvinck et al. (2025), Whales et al. (2025), and Thompson and Parent (2025) demonstrate how ethical climates, relational learning processes, and cultural norms influence leadership behaviors and development within sport organizations (Day et al., 2014).

Taken together, the articles reviewed in this edition illustrate the increasing complexity of sport leadership research. Scholars are examining leadership across multiple levels of analysis, including individual leader capabilities, relational dynamics among organizational members, governance structures, and institutional environments. This multilevel perspective reflects the continued maturation of sport leadership scholarship and provides a more comprehensive understanding of how leadership operates within sport organizations.

Conclusion

Overall, the research reviewed in this edition demonstrates the continued evolution of sport leadership scholarship. Contemporary studies increasingly situate leadership within relational processes, governance structures, organizational cultures, and institutional systems. As sport organizations confront ongoing challenges related to governance reform, equity, and organizational change, leadership will remain a central area of inquiry within sport management research.

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Annotated Bibliography

Ferkins, Shilbury, & O'Boyle (2025) – Collective leadership in nonprofit sport boards (Sport Management Review)

Ferkins, Shilbury, and O'Boyle (2025) examine collective leadership within nonprofit sport boards. Their research demonstrates that leadership authority frequently emerges through collaborative interaction among board members rather than through hierarchical authority alone. The authors show that relational processes such as trust, open communication, and shared strategic understanding enable collective leadership practices to develop within governance settings.

Lachance (2025) – Nonprofit sport organization board members' engagement in decision making (Journal of Sport Management)

Lachance (2025) investigates board member engagement within nonprofit sport organizations using observations, interviews, and document analysis. The study finds that engagement in governance decision making is shaped by both structural factors such as agenda control and relational factors such as psychological safety among board members.

Molloy, Dickson, & Ferkins (2025) – Director selection and nomination committees (Journal of Sport Management)

Molloy, Dickson, and Ferkins (2025) explore the adoption of nomination committees within New Zealand national sport organizations. Their findings illustrate how governance reforms are often driven by institutional pressures related to accountability, legitimacy, and professionalization.

Piggott (2025) – Gender and decision-making power in sport for development and peace organizations (Journal of Sport Management)

Piggott (2025) examines gender and decision-making power in sport for development and peace organizations. The study highlights how gendered leadership hierarchies may persist even within organizations committed to equity and social justice objectives.

McSweeney, Robar, Doherty, & Svensson (2025) – Entrepreneurial mindset in sport for development and peace (Journal of Sport Management)

McSweeney et al. (2025) introduce a conceptual framework describing an entrepreneurial mindset among leaders in sport for development contexts. The framework emphasizes opportunity recognition, resilience, and proactive leadership behaviors needed to navigate resource-constrained environments.

Salaga & Juravich (2025) – Minority executives and labor market outcomes in NCAA men’s basketball (Journal of Sport Management)

Salaga and Juravich (2025) analyze racial disparities in NCAA Division I men’s basketball coaching careers using longitudinal data. The findings suggest persistent structural inequalities in leadership pipelines within elite sport contexts.

Schyvinck et al. (2025) – Ethical club climate and coaching style (Journal of Sport Management)

Schyvinck et al. (2025) examine the influence of ethical club climate on coaching leadership behavior in youth sport. The research demonstrates that strong ethical environments can mitigate controlling coaching behaviors and support positive athlete experiences.

Whales, Frawley, Cohen, & Nikolova (2025) – Leadership development: relationality and temporality in professional sport (Sport Management Review)

Whales et al. (2025) explore leadership development in professional sport organizations. Their findings highlight how leadership capabilities develop through relational learning and shared organizational experiences.

Thompson & Parent (2025) – Organizational culture and organizational change in nonprofit sport organizations (European Sport Management Quarterly)

Thompson and Parent (2025) examine organizational culture and change in nonprofit sport organizations. The study demonstrates how leadership communication and stakeholder engagement shape cultural transformation during governance reform.