

Sport Leadership

Zack J. Damon

Introduction

This edition of Sport Management Digest's Sport Leadership section encompasses a total of five articles. The current edition includes two studies from the *Journal of Sport Management (JSM)*, two from *Sport Management Review (SMR)*, one from *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*. Each of the articles in this section include either a direct focus on leaders and leadership in sport or examine decision-makers leading sport organizations through strategic management decisions.

The current collection of articles spans different approaches to examining leadership as well as positioning certain groups as leaders or through a leadership lens to further understand sport and societal phenomena. For example, Read and Lock (2022) used image repair theory combined with the social identity approach to leadership as a way to explore sport organizations' communication and response to societal crises, namely, the National Football League (NFL) players' U.S. national anthem protests. Swanson et al. (2022) conducted a study, which looked at the role of servant leadership in U.S. professional sport organization employee well-being. Well-being encompassed several aspects measured around employee life satisfaction, physical health, and teamwork. Staying in the U.S., Hayduk (2022) examined Major League Baseball (MLB) team owners and their past business involvement and acumen towards business intelligence (BI) and whether or not high acumen in BI led to improved operating margins for their teams. The remaining two articles took to investigating inclusion policies and perceptions of sport leaders in the Australia and New Zealand contexts (Hammond, 2022; Turconi et al., 2022). Hammond (2022) focused on inclusion policies related to those with a disability on Australian swim teams, with a specific focus on coaches' perceptions of such policies. Turconi and colleagues (2022) turned to diversity and inclusion (D&I) practices among New Zealand Rugby, a National Sport Organization (NSO) through a discourse analysis among key personnel within the NSO. Overall, the current swatch of sport leadership articles focused on three different countries, with three of the articles studying U.S. sport, one studying Australian sport, and the last one studying New Zealand sport.

Despite a narrow geographical focus among the articles, the studies employed a variety of methods to accomplish their work. As mentioned above, Turconi et al. (2022) used a discourse analysis approach to determine the exact differences between what

could be said and what is truly stated (Baachi & Bonham, 2014). Hammond (2022) conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews with eight personnel in the New Zealand Rugby NSO. Hayduk (2022) employed a BI analytical model on his data to ascertain whether and which MLB owners' previous BI experience improved their team's profitability. Swanson et al. (2022) used structural equation modeling (SEM) to determine the relationship between servant leadership and the employee well-being outcomes. Lastly, Read and Lock (2022) approached their study on the NFL's statements towards the anthem protests through a discursive social psychology way to perform discourse analysis. This included a familiar qualitative coding approach to the data, done through iterative and inductive steps.

The following section provides a discussion on the highlights of each reviewed paper with synthesis to each other or the greater sport leadership research stream where appropriate.

Advances in Sport Leadership Research

Read and Lock (2022) merged the recent societal topic of U.S. NFL players protesting the national anthem prior to a game along with the image repair theory and social identity leadership approach to illustrate how the NFL attempted to navigate the precarious social reactions to the protests. Incorporating Benoit's (1997) notion that an organization will be held responsible in the eye of the public for an offensive event or action and thus, leading to an organizational crisis, Read and Lock (2022) took a unique approach to a phenomenon that had been pertinent in recent literature (Singer et al., 2022). While image repair and the general notion of organizational image has been longstanding in sport (Benoit, 1997; 2020; Hambrick, 2018), the social identity leadership aspect has not been a robust focus in sport management and leadership literature (Inoue et al., 2022; Read & Lock, 2022). Social identity leadership is an approach focused on when leaders attempt to connect people with a group through a shared feeling, view, or understanding and aim to influence those through a specific vision linked to either being attractive or not attractive to the group (Haslam et al., 2020; Read & Lock, 2022). This embarks on setting up a "We" and "Us" type of group mentality that the leader can then manipulate, positively or negatively, towards their end goal.

In the case of the NFL anthem protests and image repair theory, Read and Lock determined a nuanced political approach by NFL leader and commissioner, Roger Goodell through recent years. Overall, the authors found the NFL responses to the

anthem protests, social injustice protests, and general social issues in the U.S. to be insufficient. Specifically, the attempts at image repair tended to attempt a balanced political approach yet the rhetoric continuously fell towards the side of promoting a patriotic American vision and veiled support towards protests. Therefore, the “We” and “Us” grouping mentality ended up furthering the divide between those who supported the social protests and those who stood against them, rather than address the actual societal issues authentically (Read & Lock, 2022). Read and Lock (2022) contribute the aspect of poorly executed image repair by the NFL from a practical implication. A key theoretical implication towards the sport leadership research stream is another example of how social identity leadership can help better understand significant societal trends, of which sport organizations and their leaders may play a major role in dictating fans’ and society’s response to the trend. Further, Read and Lock (2022) demonstrated the discourse analysis approach to studying the societal protests and NFL response phenomenon, and therefore, added a layer of understanding how even years after league statements are made, they can continue to have an impact and be studied through new lenses.

Staying in the U.S. context, Hayduk (2022) enacted a unique approach to examine a key group of leaders in the U.S. professional sport context: MLB team owners. Although team owners may not have a direct impact on a game’s outcome such as the manager or even General Manager could through roster moves, the team owners tend to dictate the vision of the franchise and act as the top-management-team (TMT) (Hayduk, 2022). Namely, team owners and their financial resources or willingness to spend those resources dictate whether the team will aim to compete for a World Series in a particular season, compete for a playoff spot, or rebuild the roster with younger players. Each vision comes with various decisions, including those surrounding the player payroll. With the player payroll accounting for a large sum of the team owner’s budget, and MLB still being a business, Hayduk (2022) inquired to determine how a team owner’s aptitude with BI and technology may help their team’s profitability. Through an argument based on an owner who is a BI expert and has successfully navigated implementing technology before, either in sport or in other business ventures, Hayduk was able to uniquely examine the top leader’s influence on their team in MLB. Hayduk (2022) used the organization’s operating margin as the key dependent variable, made up of the premise to increase revenue however possible and to create new cost efficiencies. Either or both of these strategies would enhance the financial margin, and thus, offered an appropriate way to measure the owner’s BI aptitude and impact.

The independent variable offered a unique way to classify a sport leader, in the case of a team owner's background. Hayduk (2022) protocols similar to those used by Canella et al. (2008) and career vignettes for each of the MLB owners. Hayduk (2022) had the vignettes reviewed by an external researcher and once the vignettes were revised appropriately, Hayduk then had a separate panel of four outside researchers and himself rank each owner's experience into the Canella et al. (2008) protocols. Out of the nine protocols, the main one used to classify an owner as having a BI career experience was "IT/high-technology". Owners were only granted this background when at least four out of the five panelists categorized an owner as such. This process resulted in five MLB owners with the BI background designation.

After determining appropriate covariates and constructing the analytical equations to accurately assess all variables, Hayduk (2022) found that an owner's BI background had a positive impact on their team's operating margin, although it was a small impact. There was also a mediating component, which illustrated an owner's BI experience mediated through their organization's cost efficiency management rather than their revenue maximization efforts (Hayduk, 2022). Perhaps the most stark difference and inferred outcome was that of owners with BI experience compared to their counterparts without BI experience holding an edge towards greater cost efficiency for their team. As Hayduk (2022) noted, it can be debated just how influential a team owner is on the daily operations and on-field success of their team in a given game. However, with their financial investment into the team, their involvement and influence is certainly impactful enough to garner further interest. These results not only offer a different way to view the top leader of an MLB team through the lens of their career background, but it also offers an extension of previous work in the TMT area of organizational behavior (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). From a practical standpoint, it reasons that Hayduk's (2022) work illustrated how team owners tend to rely on what made them successful in their previous or other career ventures. As such, current or future team owners may desire to gain some BI expertise in order to lead their franchises through a more cost-efficient approach to gain a competitive advantage.

Swanson et al. (2022) also used a quantitative approach while studying the U.S. professional sport context. Their work differed from Hayduk's in that they examined sport organization employee well-being through a servant leadership lens (Swanson et al., 2022). This approach and type of study draws parallels to those which created much of the foundation for sport leadership research throughout history (Welty Peachey et al., 2015). Swanson and colleagues (2022) added to the foundation by concentrating on the

continuously emerging research on servant leadership in sport, and on the emergent employee well-being research stream (Taylor et al., 2019). Swanson et al. (2022) argued that servant leadership's focus on creating a follower-first leadership environment, with an emphasis on serving those around them (van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015) portrays a natural fit towards enhancing the follower's well-being. In this case, the followers were positioned as employees across the various major professional U.S. sport leagues.

Through an online survey, Swanson et al. (2022) gathered employees' perceptions of their immediate leader or manager and measured that leader's servant leadership type of behaviors on a Likert scale. The components measured to assess employee well-being included life satisfaction, teamwork, and physical health. These were able to capture a holistic approach to one's well-being and also take into account the nature of working in U.S. professional sports, that is in a team environment (Swanson et al., 2022). Swanson et al. (2022) used the quantitative SEM approach to analyze their survey data. Results indicated that servant leadership is indeed an appropriate leadership style for the benefit of employee well-being. Specifically, their results illustrated servant leadership to directly influence one's life satisfaction as well as their teamwork perception. Additionally, teamwork mediated the relationship between servant leadership and both other well-being variables, life satisfaction and physical health.

Swanson et al. (2022) contributed to the nascent sport leadership literature in several ways. First, their work provided further evidence towards the positive outcomes associated with servant leadership and added key outcomes of employee well-being to those positively influenced by servant leadership. Second, as the authors noted, society and sport organizations continue to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic and part of the emerging process includes changes to the workplace. In these changes are a greater understanding of how sport workplaces can impact one's life beyond just a job or career (Taylor et al., 2019). The work by Swanson et al. (2022) further emphasizes the well-being outcomes of sport employees and how important it is for leaders to shepherd these outcomes in a positive manner or else risk losing employees to burnout and turnover. A third contribution offers sport leaders a path forward to acknowledge they must create working environments conducive to positive employee well-being. Swanson et al. (2022) noted as much and their work further supports the notion that current leaders may be well-served to adopt a servant leadership type of approach to creating and maintaining such work environments.

With the above works having a focus on the U.S. sport environment, the final two articles in this edition shift focus to New Zealand and Australia, respectively. Turconi et al. (2022) investigated D&I in New Zealand Rugby. Specifically, the authors looked to understand how executive personnel in the NSO interpret D&I through a discourse analysis. Turconi et al. (2022) noted that despite D&I becoming more prominent in sport organizations (Cunningham, 2019), there is still a need to better understand and explore how personnel in decision-making positions of sport organizations, including NSOs, view D&I. Part of this need includes how those personnel interpret D&I as their interpretation and perception of D&I can potentially influence the NSO's success towards D&I and cohesion towards its achievement goals. Although pertinent in the current research streams, D&I remain difficult to define (Turconi et al., 2022). Diversity tends to be socially relevant (Cunningham, 2019) with an emphasis at times on differences among demographics, or general backgrounds and upbringings. Inclusion is often defined through the comparison of the absence of exclusion (Turconi et al., 2022) and allows for participation in key ongoings by more individuals from a variety of backgrounds. These evolving definitions are part of why it is important to continue to study D&I as personnel and leader perceptions of them can change and thus, lead to policy changes in sport organizations.

Turconi et al. (2022) used the discourse analysis technique for the current study as part of a larger case study approach to New Zealand Rugby. With such a technique and approach, qualitative interviews were used to gather deep answers from the NSO personnel. Turconi and colleagues (2022) used a multi-step thematic analysis approach to better understand and accurately present the data and findings. Through this approach, five discursive practices were found: speech acts, othering, meritocracy, performance, and the role of sport. Turconi et al. (2022) defined each as follows. Speech acts involve the use of talk about D&I without follow through to act on or implement what was spoken. Othering boiled down to personnel's perception of "in groups" and "out groups" with most personnel categorizing typical demographic categories to form each group. Meritocracy was the next practice that was talked about by the NSO personnel. Here, they viewed organizational hierarchy and operation as independent of a person's identity and instead was based on a traditional meritocratic model. Despite this view on meritocracy, personnel believed that the next practice, performance, was enhanced through D&I and offered a way for the organization to continue to stay competitive in the global market. The final practice, the role of sport,

was a traditional sense of sport being a microcosm of society (Donnelly, 1996), particularly New Zealand Rugby given rugby's immense popularity.

Turconi et al. (2022) ultimately contributed a greater understanding of D&I in the New Zealand Rugby NSO and enhanced the discipline's understanding of D&I in this context through a discursive process. The above listed practices hint at competing interpretations by personnel towards D&I as Turconi and colleagues noted. Indeed, participants and the findings illustrate how the five practices "can simultaneously undermine and reinforce D&I initiatives" (Turconi et al., 2022, p. 603). Their work furthers the D&I research through a unique method while also illustrating that industry practice of D&I, even in a longstanding NSO is still not yet working in unison across all five D&I practices. The personnel and leaders of the NSO can stand to gain a greater understanding of the positive reinforcing nature of D&I practices.

The final article in this edition involved Hammond (2022) taking a qualitative approach to better understand how Australian swim coaches experienced including their disabled athletes within their team. With the coaches positioned as leaders in this study, Hammond (2022) dove into exploring a different aspect of D&I from Turconi et al. (2022), with a focus on disability inclusion. Hammond noted that part of the impetus for this study stemmed from the Australian Government's work to develop more inclusive sport for people with disabilities. This offers a unique cultural contribution as specific legislation; the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) prohibits coaches from discriminating against those with disability. Hammond (2022) examined the coaches through a policy lens based on the legislation and the 7 Pillars of Inclusion and Inclusive Swimming Framework, offering a unique way to study the leaders of the swim teams through legislation rather than the leaders who implemented the policy.

Hammond (2022) conducted eight semi-structured qualitative interviews with all participants identifying as a swim coach and who had experience coaching athletes with disability. Six out of the eight coaches were employed at a pay-to-play school or swim club, and the other two were independent contractors who oversaw the training regimen for local swim club swimmers. Overall findings pinpointed that coaches would ignore, adjust, or altogether re-work the policies as they deemed, as to better fit with their organization's culture. Hammond (2022) noted how since around 2000, coaching education in Australia has stopped working in concert with the disability legislation and policies. Rather, "disability coach education in Australian Swimming since the late-2000s has been optional for coaches" (Hammond, 2022, p. 483). As such, Hammond noted that the coaches in his study primarily included those with disabilities only at the

surface-level rather than enacting a fully inclusive approach to those with disability; a trend seen in previous work as well (Spaaij et al., 2020).

While the findings from Hammond (2022) illustrate a disappointing approach by Australian swim team leaders, the research does help further shape sport leadership theory and practice. From a theoretical standpoint, as Hammond (2022) alluded to, the divergence between policy development and coaching disability education illustrates a need for more research into this area. Specifically, why such a divergence happened in the first place and how to explore getting the two in sync again. From a policy research standpoint, Hammond's work illustrates the importance for sport leaders to go beyond lip service when instituting and practicing inclusion policies. In the practical realm there is a need to institute further training and development through a mandatory means if needed so as to not exclude those with disability from sport.

Conclusion

Overall, the current collection of articles illustrates the continued evolution of sport leadership research. Perhaps most noteworthy is that each study involved different types of leaders across sport organizations. This not only shows that we as a discipline continue to move further away from the traditional top-down types of leadership views and studies, but that we are also doing well on the academic side to keep up with the sport sector and how organizations continue to look at leadership differently. Hammond (2022) examined a traditional leadership position in coaches of Australian swim teams; however, the focus went beyond traditional leadership outcomes and instead focused on policy implementation for the inclusion of those with disability. Hayduk (2022) emphasized a way to examine a leader's past experience and expertise as a way to predict how they may help their current team's profitability through his study on MLB team owners and their previous BI experience levels. Turconi et al. (2022) did not name a leadership position specifically, but the personnel whom they included in their study were clear influential personnel in the New Zealand Rugby NSO, illustrating how leaders in sport today are not always defined by a title (Billsberry et al., 2018). Swanson et al. (2022) performed a "traditional" type of sport leadership study, yet they did so with still emerging concepts in servant leadership and sport employee well-being. Collectively, these studies exemplify how sport leadership researchers continue move the discipline forward through innovative approaches. Each study contains valuable insights into an aspect or population of sport leaders and should serve as a foundation for further research endeavors.

Annotated Bibliography

Hammond, A. M. (2022) The relationship between disability and inclusion policy and sports coaches' perceptions of practice, International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics, 14(3), 471-487, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2022.2074515>

A researcher from University of Essex, examined coaches' perception of disability and inclusion policy and the policy implementation on Australian swim teams. Through a qualitative study, he determined that coaches circumvented the policy when possible and only adhered to it on a superficial level. Suggestions for integrating coaching disability education again alongside the policy were proffered.

Hayduk III, T. (2022) Are "tech-savvy" owners better for business? Evidence from Major League Baseball, Journal of Sport Management, 36(5), 559-574. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2021-0252>

The author from New York University examined if MLB team owners' past experience with technology and specifically, BI, netted a positive result on their teams' financial performance. Through a quantitative approach, the author was able to cultivate variables to accurately measure an owner's past BI experience and integrate operating margin variables to assess the BI experience's impact. Results indicated a positive but small difference between those owners with BI experience and those without.

Read, D., & Lock, D. (2022). Image repair using social identity leadership: An exploratory analysis of the National Football League's response to the national anthem protests, Journal of Sport Management 36(5), 587-599. <https://doi.org/10.1123.jsm.2021-0172>

Researchers from Loughborough University and Boumemouth University investigated how the NFL used image repair through a social identity leadership lens to overcome their crisis of how they handled U.S. national anthem protests and other social justice protests. Through a discursive approach, they determined that the NFL's statements were mostly mouth service while the league instead held to its traditional American messaging and stance. Such messaging created further divided groups of fans and people in society as it related to the NFL's messaging.

Swanson, S., Todd, S., Inoue, Y., & Welty Peachey, J. (2022) Leading for multidimensional sport employee well-being: the role of servant leadership and

teamwork. Sport Management Review, 25(5), 748-770.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14413523.2021.2014225>

Researchers from Deakin University, University of South Carolina, Manchester Metropolitan University, and University of Illinois examined how servant leadership can impact sport employee's well-being. Through a survey and quantitative methods, it was determined that servant leadership positively influenced employee well-being and that teamwork helped mediate this relationship. The study further adds to servant leadership's growing role in shaping current and future sport leadership research.

Turconi, L., Shaw, S., & Falcous, M. (2022). Examining discursive practices of diversity and inclusion in New Zealand Rugby, Sport Management Review, 25(4), 589-607.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14413523.2021.2014182>

Researchers from the University of Otago performed a discourse analysis approach to understanding how key personnel in the New Zealand Rugby NSO perceived D&I. Their findings illustrated conflicting themes towards D&I as personnel thought that D&I both hindered and enhanced their organization. Such findings illustrate the need to further educate sport personnel and decision-makers on how D&I can aid their sport organizations. Conflicting discursive practices also helped to illustrate the complexities in navigating evolving D&I, particularly when personnel lack a full understanding of each concept.

References

Benoit, W.L. (1997). Image repair discourse and crisis communication. *Public Relations Review, 23(2)*, 177–186. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111\(97\)90023-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111(97)90023-0)

Benoit, W.L. (2020). Image repair theory. In F. Frandsen & W. Johansen (Eds.), *Crisis communication* (pp. 105–119), Walter de Gruyter.

Canella, A.A., Park, J.H., & Lee, H.U. (2008). Top management team functional background diversity and firm performance: Examining the roles of franchise member collocation and environmental uncertainty. *Academy of Management Journal, 51(4)*, 768–784. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2008.33665310>

Cunningham, G. B. (2019). *Diversity and inclusion in sport organizations. A multilevel perspective* (4th ed.). Routledge.

Hambrick, M.E. (2018). Investigating athletes and their image repair strategies during crises. In A.C. Billins, W.T. Coombs, & K. Brown (Eds.), *Reputational challenges in sport* (pp. 137–152). Routledge.

Hambrick, D.C., & Mason, P.A. (1984). Upper echelons: The organization as a reflection of its top managers. *Academy of Management Review*, 9(2), 193–206.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/258434>

Hammond, A. M. (2022) The relationship between disability and inclusion policy and sports coaches' perceptions of practice. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 14(3), 471-487, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2022.2074515>

Haslam, S.A, Reicher, S, & Platow, M. (2020). The new psychology of leadership: Identity, influence and power. Psychology Press.

Hayduk III, T. (2022) Are “tech-savvy” owners better for business? Evidence from Major League Baseball. *Journal of Sport Management*, 36(5), 559-574.

<https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2021-0252>

Inoue, Y., Lock, D., Gillooly, L., Shipway, R., & Swanson, S. (2022). The organizational identification and well-being framework: Theorizing about how sport organizations contribute to crisis response and recovery. *Sport Management Review*, 25(1), 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14413523.2021.1917246>

Read, D., & Lock, D. (2022). Image repair using social identity leadership: An exploratory analysis of the National Football League's response to the national anthem protests. *Journal of Sport Management* 36(5), 587-599.

<https://doi.org/10.1123.jsm.2021-0172>

Spaaij, R., Knoppers, A., & Jeanes, R. (2020). “We want more diversity but . . .”: Resisting diversity in recreational sports clubs. *Sport Management Review*, 23(3), 363–373. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2019.05.007>

Singer, J. N., Agyemang, K. J., Chen, C., Walker, N. A., & Melton, E. N. (2022). What is Blackness to sport management? Manifestations of anti-Blackness in the field. *Journal of Sport Management*, 1(aop), 1-13.

Swanson, S., Todd, S., Inoue, Y., & Welty Peachey, J. (2022) Leading for multidimensional sport employee well-being: The role of servant leadership and teamwork. *Sport Management Review*, 25(5), 748-770.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14413523.2021.2014225>

Taylor, E. A., Huml, M. R., & Dixon, M. A. (2019). Workaholism in sport: A mediated model of work– family conflict and burnout. *Journal of Sport Management*, 33(4), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2018-0248>

Turconi, L., Shaw, S., & Falcous, M. (2022). Examining discursive practices of diversity and inclusion in New Zealand Rugby. *Sport Management Review*, 25(4), 589-607.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14413523.2021.2014182>

Welty Peachey, J. W., Damon, Z. J., Zhou, Y., & Burton, L. J. (2015). Forty years of leadership research in sport management: A review, synthesis, and conceptual framework. *Journal of Sport Management*, 29(5), 570–587.

<https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2014-0126>.