Is A "C" Really Necessary?

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Leadership in sport is viewed as important by coaches, athletes, fans, and the media alike (Loughead, 2017). Typically, the coach has been seen as the primary source of leadership on sports teams. However, another source of leadership within teams has emerged, emanating from the athletes, known as athlete leadership (Loughead, 2017). From this definition, athlete leadership can come from two sources. On the one hand, formal athlete leaders are those who occupy a leadership role based on their role within the team in the form of captain or assistant captain. On the other hand, informal athlete leaders emerge as a leader within their teams through their interactions and communications with teammates (Loughead, 2017). Taken together, athlete leadership is a dynamic process where leadership responsibilities within the team can be assumed by multiple athletes (Crozier, Loughead, & Munroe-Chandler, 2017).

When leadership is viewed in this manner, all team members have the opportunity to provide leadership to their team. Therefore, athlete leadership can be viewed as a form of shared leadership among team members. In other words, the reliance on officially designated leaders is losing its place within sport teams. What this ultimately means is that it is unrealistic for a captain to be able to fulfill all of the leadership responsibilities for his/her team. A good example of a team embracing the concept of sharing leadership responsibilities amongst athletes are the 2019 National Basketball Association Champions Toronto Raptors. In discussing the team's leadership, head coach Nick Nurse characterized point guard Kyle Lowry's leadership style as something that can't be measured on a stats sheet: "His natural instincts are to be a leader out there, and he shows it. He does it with his [basketball] IQ and his great knowledge of the game. He shows it with tremendous toughness as well. That's his other natural characteristic. He's

blocking out guys twice his size. He's taking charges every game. He's just going to fight to win." (Schuhmann, 2019). As for, small forward, Kawhi Leonard, his leadership style is characterized by his consistently calm behavior regardless of the situation (Madu, 2019). Following the Toronto Raptors' win in Game 3 of the NBA Finals, teammate Pascal Siakam encapsulated Leonard's leadership style: "He's always been that guy who you can look at when something goes bad. He just has that calm demeanor. It gives you that peace, knowing that everything is going to be OK." (Madu, 2019). Additionally, shooting guard Danny Green, when asked what he brings to the table from a leadership perspective, mentioned: "Just staying really locked in, being disciplined, being professional. Fighting out certain game situations and sticking together, not complaining to referees, not criticizing each other. Positive criticism, constructive criticism is okay, but we're fighting these battles together and not to worry about things we can't control" (Grange, 2018). When asked about what a veteran player like Danny Green adds to the Raptors, Nick Nurse stated: "He's like the ultimate teammate, right? He does everything with a little bit of positivity and a little bit of a smile on his face 'come-on-let's-go type of attitude.' Those guys go a long way. They're fun to be around." (Grange, 2018). Based on the example above, we can see how each one of these players brought something different to the leadership of the team. These features of the Toronto Raptors' leadership are echoed by Fransen, Vanbeselaere, De Cupyer, Vande Broek, and Boen (2014) who found that the team captain was not able to fulfill all of the leadership within their respective teams. Instead, it was accomplished by several team leaders.

If several athletes are serving in a leadership role within their team, the question then becomes: "How many athletes should fulfill a leadership role?" The answer to this question is a lot! Crozier, Loughead, & Munroe-Chandler (2013) showed that approximately 85% of a team's

roster should be comprised of athlete leaders, with 19% occupying a formal leadership role and the remaining 66% occupying an informal leadership role (Crozier et al., 2013). This demonstrates that the leadership within teams is very much shared across most team members. To further support the idea that leadership ought to be shared by various team members, research has found that the team captain (formal leader) was selected only 1% of the time by fellow athletes as the best leader on the team (Fransen et al., 2014). Instead, the majority of participants selected a combination of both formal and informal leaders as best suited to fulfill the leadership needs of the team.

This trend towards shared athlete leadership has recently garnered mainstream media attention, with outlets such The Washington Post and Associated Press putting into question the utility of a designated team captain in the modern-day National Hockey League (NHL). In early 2019, six NHL teams found themselves without a formally designated captain, that player who wears the 'C' on their jersey: the Detroit Red Wings, Ottawa Senators, Toronto Maple Leafs, Vegas Golden Knights, New York Rangers, and Vancouver Canucks. For instance, after the retirement of Vancouver Canucks' captain of eight years, Henrik Sedin, the team's general manager Jim Benning chose not to name a new captain, fearing his team wasn't ready for someone to fill Sedin's role. Instead, Benning opted to name four players as alternate captains to allow players to share in the leadership responsibilities of the team (Khurshudyan, 2018).

Perhaps the most interesting case of an NHL team choosing not to name a captain is the Vegas Golden Knights, who elected to leave the captaincy vacant for their inaugural season and not putting that pressure on one player. Instead, the team's management adopted the philosophy of having 23 captains (i.e., the team's entire roster). This strategy proved fruitful because the Golden Knights reached the Stanley Cup Final in their first season. Speaking to the Associated

Press about the benefits of having every player share leadership responsibilities, Golden Knights' goaltender Marc-André Fleury stated: "Everyone chipped in. I think we had a good group of veterans who played a lot of games. I think all together we kind of took charge of helping try to lead the team" (Whyno, 2018). Following the success of their inaugural season, the Golden Knights decided to keep the captaincy vacant for their second season and continue their philosophy of "23 captains." Forward Reilly Smith shed light on this decision in an interview with Isabelle Khurshudyan (2018) of the Washington Post: "Last year we needed 23 different leaders to be able to come together and build as a team. I think we kind of just roll that over into this year and try to work in a similar attitude and a similar mind-set where it takes all of us." With research showing the benefits of shared leadership, it will be interesting to see whether more teams elect to get away from captains and move towards allowing all team members to take part in the leadership process.

Take Home Points:

1) Not one athlete can fulfill all leadership responsibilities.

2) Shared leadership allows all players to develop their leadership abilities.

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