

Leadership development across the lifespan through sport and physical activity

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to analyze if the sport trajectory could be an impact factor in leadership development.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative research method has been adopted by conducting 17 in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The data were analyzed with the program Open Code (4.03).

Findings – The findings of this study revealed that the interviewed managers perceived that their sport trajectory has had an important influence in the development of their leadership. This influence is determined by four factors: (1) sport profile, (2) sport referents, (3) competences, values and abilities and (4) experiences from different sport roles played during their lifespan.

Research limitations/implications – The research is based on interviews with a small sample of managers. In order to develop the research further, a more extensive sample is required.

Originality/value – The paper is unique as it examines the impact of the sport trajectory as an impact factor in leadership development.

Keywords Leadership development, Sport trajectory, Managers, Lifespan, Experience-based leadership development

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Organizations are working hard to find leaders who can adapt to changes and provide the necessary answer by implementing all kind of leadership development programs. Evidence of this are the results of the survey administrated to 2,500 business and Human Resources leaders in 94 countries of which 86% of the respondents rated as urgent the intensification of leader development (O'Leonard and Krider, 2014). During the last years, business leaders have manifested an increasing interest in learning from the sport sector, proof of this are the increasing number of athletes and coaches who participate in leadership programs offering their insights and experience transferable to business (Gordon, 2007; Gould and Voelker, 2010; Frawley *et al.*, 2018; Jones, 2002, 2008). Consequently, the research around the lessons transferable from sport to business has reached more interest (Burnes and O'Donnell, 2011; Frawley *et al.*, 2018; Jalonen *et al.*, 2018; Ryan and Dickson, 2018; Seppänen, 2020; Thornton and Etzebarria, 2021; Trapp, 2013; Vilhelmsdottir *et al.*, 2016; Wallenberg, 2021).

Sport has proved to be a topic of interest in the business organizational field for a long time (Wolfe *et al.*, 2005) and the studies relating leadership and sport have grown remarkably as we have been mentioning, but there has been limited research undertaken on leadership development through the sport trajectory from a lifespan perspective. This research focuses on analyzing leadership from the point of view of human development. That is, what makes a



leader, based on the premise that the leader is not born but develops through skills acquired throughout life (Day, 2000), and how he or she exercises leadership, based on the postulate that leadership requires some kind of interpersonal relationship in order to exist. Therefore, a leader without a social context simply cannot exist (Day and Harrison, 2007).

For that reason, this study adopts the experience-based leadership development framework (McCall, 2004), within the Lifespan developmental psychology (Baltes *et al.*, 1980) to explore how the sport trajectory of a person influence on her/his leadership development.

The concept ‘Sports Trajectory’ in this study is deeply influenced by the frameworks proposed by Puig (1993), Puig *et al.* (1996) regarding sports itinerary, understood as the process that shapes a person’s sports history. It consists of analyzing their sports behavior not focused on a given moment, but in a diachronic perspective. It begins the moment that direct contact is made with the world of organized physical activity, it develops during a more or less extensive period of time dedicated to the practice of one or several sports specialties and ends when the relationship with this field as a participant is abandoned. This research extends the notion of sports itinerary to encompass not only the contextual information and sporting history but also the personal conception and evolution of sport participation in an individual’s life (Desroches *et al.*, 2019; Howie *et al.*, 2016; 2019) based on data collected in previous studies (Riera and Moragas, 2021; Riera *et al.*, 2022) that administered the Sports Trajectory Questionnaire to general population. Recognizing the limited research exposure of the Sports Trajectory Questionnaire (SQT), this study seeks to provide a broader and more comprehensive understanding of “sports trajectory” utilizing these multidimensional aspects to analyze its impact on leadership development.

2. Literature review

The experience-based leadership development framework and the Lifespan developmental psychology have been broadly studied but this study is focused on the integration of these perspectives in the sport field.

2.1 Experience-based leadership development

The experience-based leadership development framework suggests that experiences rather than programs play an important role in leadership development (McCall, 2004). The author highlights seven conclusions that have been investigated over the past few decades about the contribution of experience in leadership development (McCall, 2010).

The first conclusion postulates that leadership is learned from experience. But learning doesn’t happen automatically and experiences don’t automatically improve leader development (DeRue and Wellman, 2009), is a complex process because it needs awareness of learning, predisposition to learn and some other ambiguous aspects as knowing when the learning has occurred (Day, 2010) The second conclusion is based in the fact that some experiences influence more than others, finding that early work experiences, short-term assignments, major line assignments, positive and negative superiors, hardships of various kinds and some miscellaneous events like training programs are the most reported in successful managers over the last decades. Despite these findings, Murphy and Johnson (2011) adds that a framework of leader development that describes what is learned before adulthood, in terms of influences and impact factors, can improve the understanding of leadership and leader development.

The following assumption suggests that these events are influential learning experiences due to the challenge that they imply. Developmental challenges at work seem to be a trigger for developing leadership skills owing to the demand for creativity and problem-solving

ability (Liu *et al.*, 2021). The consequences of these challenges facilitate the development of strategic, cognitive and behavioral leadership skills (Day *et al.*, 2009; DeRue and Wellman, 2009). Leadership identity is an essential requirement for leadership development to occur (Day *et al.*, 2009). The assumption number four postulates that different types of experiences teach different lessons depending on each person's background. In this sense, some authors (Murphy and Johnson, 2011; Liu *et al.*, 2021) propose some leadership developmental models to show how different experiences can influence the individual in each stage of the lifespan.

The fifth conclusion propose that jobs and assignments can be more developmentally enhanced by adding to the challenge coaching and high-quality feedback cycles to the learning process (Bransford and Schwartz, 2009), they require deliberate practice for behavioral reinforcement, which sometimes it's difficult to find in some organizations (Day, 2010). The following assumption is based on the idea that everybody can get the experiences they need despite of the personal and professional circumstances. Many relevant events occur during childhood and adolescence or they are a consequence of personal relationships but there is still a margin of opportunity to obtain the experience they need to succeed. Research has demonstrated that there are personal factors that influence an individual's ability or willingness to learn from experience (Day, 2010), reason why McCall (2010) suggests that the key is matching the developmental needs with the correct experiences.

Finally, the last conclusion suggests that learning is a complex and dynamic process that takes place over time and it has to be embraced to be successful. Individuals have opportunities to work on their leader development at each developmental stage and everyone has the potential to develop leader skills, understanding development leadership as a process that takes place during all lifespan that involves multiple experiences, situations and context (Liu *et al.*, 2021). In summary, an experience-based approach represents a thorough way of developing leaders because it clusters life experience, professional experience and specific skill development, stimulating reflection and openness towards a continuous learning experience (Thomas, 2008).

2.2 Lifespan developmental psychology

The Lifespan developmental Psychology (LP), is an orientation that concerns with the description, explanation, and modification of developmental processes in the human life from conception to death (Baltes *et al.*, 1980). This perspective is based on the assumption that each period of life has its own challenges and developmental successes. It is about comparing the development of an individual with that of others and with the person's own state at different times (Baltes *et al.*, 1999). This approach is governed by 4 assumptions: Development as a long-life process, development as expression of ontogenetic and evolutionary principles, pluralistic conceptions of development and lifespan developmental psychology as integrative framework (Baltes *et al.*, 1980). At the theoretical level, this approach is valid since there are certain aspects of human development that do not make sense if they are not explained through this approach (Baltes *et al.*, 1980). Some of the axis of knowledge through this approach are identification and analysis of the inter-individual differences in intra-individual change and the analysis of interrelationships in behavioral change (Baltes *et al.*, 1980; Day, 2011), themes that are both contemplated in this research.

Although leadership development in the adult stage has been extensively studied over the decades, it has not been until recently that it has been explored on a long-term level as a process that takes place throughout the entire life beginning in childhood to understand the developmental trajectories of individuals through their lifespan (Day *et al.*, 2009; Day, 2011). The authors Avolio and Gibbons (1988) are one of the forerunners in the study of leadership development from a Lifespan perspective but their line of research didn't have much continuity until the last decade.

After exploring the literature related with youth leader development and finding an important research gap on the study of leader development before college, [Murphy and Johnson \(2011\)](#) proposed a model of leadership development across the lifespan. The proposed model is an attempt to schematically capture the dynamic and iterative process associated with the development of leadership. The model starts with early developmental factors that include early influences (genetics, temperament and gender), parenting styles and early learning experiences (education, sports, and other practices that includes leadership roles). As it will be explained later this study is particularly interested in the sports as a learning experience. The second box refers to the dynamic development process based on two concepts: leader identity and self-regulation. The third box includes the outcomes of engagement in future leadership development and leadership effectiveness. It has to be noted that the context (developmental stages, societal expectations, time and history) has an influence in all three sections.

Building on this previous work, [Liu et al. \(2021\)](#) proposed a new model that clarifies the dynamic nature of development and the underlying mediating systems that enhance learning experience leader development ([McCall, 2010](#)) across the lifespan. This model describes a set of developmental experiences and useful skills for leadership at each stage (6) across the entire life. The aspects more relevant from this model to this study are the proposed developmental experiences centered in play (Preschool), cooperative learning experiences (Childhood) and extra-curricular activities (Adolescence) which include sports or physical activity in all cases.

Parallely, as it is detailed in the research carried out by the authors [Riera and Moragas \(2021\)](#), Lifespan Developmental Psychology approach has been adopted by a wide range of researchers to study the role of physical activity and sports in human development at different stages throughout people's lifespans. Investigations showed that even, nowadays the exploration focusing on adulthood and old age has increased, childhood and adolescence are the most studied due to the assumption that earlier age periods are precursors for or contributors to later periods of development ([Malina, 1996](#)). This contribution is explained through different studies that have demonstrated that in these early stages of development is where the most significant changes are occurring at the motor, cognitive and emotional level ([Fischer, 1980](#); [Gardner, 2011](#)).

Despite the importance of keeping in mind all lived experiences taking place at any stage of the life and the learning obtained of them ([McCall, 2010](#)), childhood and adolescence represent a sensitive period where all the lived experiences can influence more significantly the identity construction of an individual ([McAdams and Zapata-Gietl, 2015](#)) and, therefore, these early experiences contribute to create the foundation for future leadership development to build on [Murphy and Johnson \(2011\)](#).

2.3 Leadership development and sport

As it is suggested in the studies mentioned above, participation in some organized activities, like sports during childhood and adolescence ([Murphy and Johnson, 2011](#); [Liu et al., 2021](#)) may influence the development of the leader and predict behaviors in adulthood ([Howie et al., 2016](#)). More precisely, [Murphy and Johnson \(2011\)](#) suggests that even many of the lessons necessary for effective leadership are learned from organized sports the key element is knowing the specific outcomes associated with youth sports that transfer to leadership.

From this question, numerous studies have been carried out to build more knowledge around this matter. [Wright and Côté \(2003\)](#), explored the activities that leader athletes engaged from an early age and found that there are four central components in the leadership development in sports: high skill, strong work ethic, enriched cognitive sport knowledge, and good rapport with people. More specifically, [Larson et al. \(2006\)](#) found that

children who participated in sports programs showed higher rates of initiative, emotional regulation and teamwork experiences compared to other types of organized activities. [Murphy and Johnson \(2011\)](#) highlight some other skills that complemented those mentioned: visioning, intellectualizing, cultivating self-efficacy, focus on winning, being self-interested, being competitive, being task and ego-oriented, and cultivating and enjoying the flow experience.

The research carried out by [Burnes and O'Donnell \(2011\)](#) showed that it exists common areas (characteristics, capabilities, contexts and challenges of leadership) between business leaders and sport leaders. Also, that there are areas where sporting leaders show better results developing their skills and aptitudes as the ability to welcome and bring about change. And, that indeed, business can learn from sport some competencies as interpersonal relationships, communication or the holistic view of ideal performance state. These findings have given rise to a new line of research based on the influence of sport on leadership ([Frawley et al., 2018](#); [Jalonen et al., 2018](#); [Ryan and Dickson, 2018](#); [Seppänen, 2020](#); [Thornton and Etzebarria, 2021](#); [Trapp, 2013](#); [Vilhelmsdottir et al., 2016](#); [Wallenberg, 2021](#))

Some of these studies are focused on the comparison of sport leaders and sport managers, either in terms of leadership styles ([Wallenberg, 2021](#)) or the comparison between team structures and group dynamics ([Vilhelmsdottir et al., 2016](#)). There is also, a growing interest from the gender perspective that focus on the development of women leadership based on their participation in organized sports ([Thornton and Etzebarria, 2021](#); [Trapp, 2013](#)), or that analyses leader women athletes to explore differences and similarities between men leaders and women leaders ([Hood, 2015](#); [Wright and Côté, 2003](#)).

Despite all the literature, significant work is still required to enhance the understanding of leadership development experiences within the sport field. This study aims to contribute to the research of leadership development through sport by exploring how sports participation trajectories from childhood to adulthood shape leadership qualities. Building upon [Riera et al. \(2022\)](#), it is delved into the nuances of this relationship, hypothesizing that distinct sports experiences contribute uniquely to leadership development with a specific focus on experience-based leadership development. This study tries to answer the question of how a person's sporting trajectory can influence the development of leadership competencies. Finally, this research seeks to illuminate the specific aspects of sports participation that are most influential, thereby extending current understanding and informing practical approaches in leadership development.

3. Design

3.1 Method

A qualitative design was carried out with the purpose of examining if sport practice could be an impact factor in leader development. Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews. The introduction of this paper references the previous quantitative studies ([Riera and Moragas, 2021](#); [Riera et al., 2022](#)) that lays the groundwork for the current research. Building upon this quantitative foundation, it is decided to make a transition to a qualitative approach to explore the subtle aspects of leadership development influenced by sports trajectories. The literature review highlighted the complexity of leadership development through sports, suggesting that a qualitative method would be more suited to capture the nuanced experiences and perceptions of individuals. This qualitative approach allows to delve deeply into the personal sports trajectories of the participants, aligning with both theories, Lifespan Developmental Psychology ([Baltes et al., 1980](#); [Baltes et al., 1999](#)) and the Experience-Based Leadership Development framework ([McCall, 2004, 2010](#)) that emphasize the significance of individual experiences in leadership development.

3.2 Context

Considering the findings of previous studies (Riera and Moragas, 2021; Riera *et al.*, 2022), it was created sport profiles in order to select a sample of managers from the more common sport profiles in the managers' sample. To create these sport profiles, it was followed the same procedure as the mentioned studies (Riera and Moragas, 2021; Riera *et al.*, 2022), that includes the selection and codification of three variables based on the influence to the development of an individual during the lifetime. The first variable refers to the regularity of practice in sport and Physical Activity (PA) in each stage (1, Yes, if they have practiced during all stage; 2, No, if they didn't practice sports or PA during all stage). The second variable analyzed relates to the kind of sport or PA that was practiced (1, Individual, if they have practiced individual sports during the stage; 2, Collective, when it was practiced collective sports during all stage; 3, Mixt, when it was practiced both individual and collective sports). Finally, the third variable measures the presence or absence of the component competition in the sport practice (1, Competition, when the sport practiced was competitive during all stage; 2, No competition, if the sport of PA was not competitive during all stage; 3, Combined, when it was practiced both of them).

Each variable was coded taking into account all the development stages of the Sport Trajectory Questionnaire (STQ) to finally create final profiles of each variable based on the mode and the relevance of the first and second stage of the development (Liu *et al.*, 2021) corresponding to childhood and adolescence.

The results from this codification, showed that 2 profiles out of 18 were more present in the sample of 86 managers (Table 1). Taking into account these results, it was conducted a purposive sampling approach to explore deeper insights of how the sport trajectory may affect the development of leadership.

3.3 Participants

A total of 17 managers (5 women and 12 men) aged 31 to 62 (Me 42,4 and s 9) were selected based on their sport profile from a larger sample from a previous study (Riera *et al.*, 2022).

Regularity of practice	Kind of sport	Competitiveness	Number of managers
Constant	Individual	Competitive	3
Constant	Individual	Non-competitive	6
Constant	Individual	Combined	7
<i>Constant</i>	<i>Collective</i>	<i>Competitive</i>	17
Constant	Collective	Non-competitive	0
Constant	Collective	Combined	6
Constant	Mixt	Competitive	7
Constant	Mixt	Non-competitive	3
<i>Constant</i>	<i>Mixt</i>	<i>Combined</i>	24
Non-constant	Individual	Competitive	1
Non-constant	Individual	Non-competitive	6
Non-constant	Individual	Combined	1
Non-constant	Collective	Competitive	1
Non-constant	Collective	Non-competitive	0
Non-constant	Collective	Combined	1
Non-constant	Mixt	Competitive	0
Non-constant	Mixt	Non-competitive	1
Non-constant	Mixt	Combined	2
			86

Source(s): Author's own creation

Table 1.
Managers' sport
profiles

The sample include participants from the two most common profiles in managers, 59% corresponding to a constant, combine and mixt sport profile (practitioners who participated in individual, collective, competitive and non-competitive sports during all their lifespan) and 41% corresponding to a constant, collective, competitive sport profile (practitioners who participated in collective and competitive during all their lifespan). From these profiles, there were selected seventeen top managers (age 31 to 62) from both gender (5 women and 12 men), different professional sector (sport sector and non-sport sector) and different number of employees (from 5 to 250) (Table 2).

Once the sampling was selected, all seventeen managers were contacted by e-mail, which contained a full description of the research, to participate voluntarily in an interview. It was decided to employ the interview as a method of data collection in accordance with the literature reviewed that highlighted the complexity of leadership development through sports, suggesting that a qualitative method would be more suited to capture the nuanced experiences and perceptions of individuals (Burnes and O'Donnell, 2011; Frawley *et al.*, 2018; Jalon *et al.*, 2018; Liu *et al.*, 2021; Murphy and Johnson, 2011; Reitan and Stenberg, 2019; Ryan and Dickson, 2018; Seppänen, 2020; Thornton and Etxebarria, 2021; Trapp, 2013; Vilhelmsdottir *et al.*, 2016; Wallenberg, 2021).

Source(s): Author's own creation

Table 2.
Sample's
characteristics

It was given the choice to participate face-to-face or by video-conference due to the COVID restrictions. All interviews were scheduled in accordance to their availability and needs and had a duration of 35–40 min approximately. It is important to mention that the level of manager position of participants did not allow the interviewer to extend the conversations because of lack of time. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide designed from the approach of direct interview (Kvale, 2008). The questions were divided into three main sections: a set of questions regarding the sport trajectory, a set of questions regarding their professional trajectory and a set of questions regarding the transference from their sport trajectory to their leadership. According to the essential characteristics of the qualitative interviews proposed by Rogers and Boue (2005), the beginning and the end of the interview were not clearly predetermined to adapt each question to the circumstances of each manager to fill the gap between the interviewer and the interviewee (Musselwhite *et al.*, 2006). In order to facilitate data analysis, all interviews were recorded, most part of them by video and there were literally transcribed.

3.5 Data analysis

The process of analyzing qualitative data implies minimizing the complexity of raw data to statements that can be coded and analyzed. This study adopted the procedure of conventional content analysis of Hsieh and Shannon (2005) that consist in a process of six steps. First, it was read all data repeatedly to obtain a sense of the whole content of the interview. Then, data was read word by word to capture key thoughts or concepts. In the third step, each phrase was labeled with a code indicating the meaning of the phrase until data saturation. A total of 19 codes were labeled. After that, the codes were sorted into 5 categories (Sport trajectory, professional trajectory, personal history, sport qualities and sport transfers). Then, based on previous studies (Creswell and Miller, 2000), it was established a verification strategy where two researchers independently coded a sample of transcriptions which served to discuss and determine the findings. Finally, it was produced the report of the findings. All data was analyzed with the program Open Code (4.03).

4. Findings

The findings of this study revealed that the interviewed managers perceived that their sport trajectory has had an important influence in the development of their leadership. This influence is determined by four factors: (1) sport profile, (2) sport referents, (3) competences, values and abilities and (4) experiences from different sport roles played during their lifespan. As participant number 9 conclude:

It's not just a matter of playing sports that contribute to the development of leadership by the mere fact of playing sports, but everything that sports practice entails: success and failure management, coexistence with coaches, teammates, sport clubs, joys, passion, frustration . . . is everything. I don't know, I even would say that sport practice is a good business school because at the end almost everything I've learn in the field I can transfer it to my company.

4.1 Sport profile

The sport profile, understood as the way the sport was practiced during the lifespan (kind of sport, competitiveness and constancy), it has been found to play a significant role in the development of the managers.

Participants found that the kind of sport practiced during their life impacted the way they managed due to the different competences that individual or collective sports contribute to develop. Fifteen out of seventeen managers defined themselves as a collective profile

regardless of whether they play individual or collective sports, due to the justification that individual “sports are trained together with a team”, as participant 14 and 16 mentioned, or even competing, as explained by participant 6:

I would say . . . I have a collective profile, but for a reason. When I practice individual sports, like a race, I like to share it, at the same time as the race, with other people who are also running. I mean, there is a help with the other one that I like.

Even the interviewed managers don't define individual sports as an individual practice because there are more people involved “ . . . I have developed group awareness . . . you train with a lot of people . . . ” (Participant 5), the learning perception transferable to leadership from individuals or collective seems to be different. The practice of individual sports entails more awareness, responsibility and ability to make decisions “if you fail, you are the one that fail, you go all with it and you assume the consequences of the failure in team sports sometimes you don't take the decisions or the right decisions because you are afraid to fail the team” (Participant 8) However, the practice of team sports contributes to develop the ability to delegate and, maybe, to socialize easier. “As a group it's much easier and a lot more fun than doing it yourself. You go much further than if you want to do everything yourself . . . simply because you don't know how to delegate” (Participant 5). In this line, participant 15 highlight:

In collective sports it's clear the development of teamwork . . . but in individual sports, it is more relevant the constancy of the beginning, clear goals . . . You will fail 149 times and at the 150 it will be ok and with work it is the same . . . you have goals or you have a project to run or you have a budget to meet and you have to figure out how to achieve those goals.

These differences between the leadership skills developed through individual or collective sports is far developed by participant 10:

One of the things that tennis gives you, in that sense, is the fact that you have to deal with situations on your own. You are the only one competing and you are the one who has to solve the problems. Tennis teaches you this: a lot of autonomy when it comes to solving problems. You have to go forward by yourself and have the ability to know what decision to make and how to act in any adverse situation. At the level of team sports, football, for example, teaches you about camaraderie, knowing how to understand your teammate, how to add between the two, know the skills that each has and how to enhance them. But, at the end, either what individual or collective sports teaches you can be transferred to a team of people.

Regarding the variable competitiveness, it was found that 16 out of 17 managers define themselves as a competitive person, not only in sports but also in other aspects of their life as work or even with themselves. This competitiveness it seems to be an element transferred directly from the sport practice. It is not only about “that spark that I love” (Participant 6) but also the learned capacity of “knowing when to compete” (Participant 13) and the challenge it represents as it was explained by participant 1 “The competitiveness of setting goals and wanting to achieve them as best you can. That consistency of work to achieve my goals may have it taken out of basketball” and participant 6 “I really like challenges” I have a competitive edge in me that I like, in essence. This is my life”. But, even competitiveness is perceived as a good competence for all of them, participant 5 points out:

The competitiveness it's transferred from the sports field to the business. We would say that it could even go – it's not the same, there are some differences – with the issue of demand in terms of excellence. These are things that can go almost parallel . . . depending on whether you exceed that competitiveness threshold, you can win a medal for being the most competitive guy in the world, but you're not helping the project.

Despite the differences found in the perceived influence of how competitiveness and the kind of sports impact on the development of leadership skills, all managers share a unanimous

vision regarding the perseverance in sports practice even one of them was not actually active. All managers share the opinion that the practice of sports played and plays an important role in their lives although “it’s difficult to reconcile sport with work, family and personal life” (Participant 16) but the most part of them organize their schedules to fit it in. “I try to make it within my priorities . . . if you organize yourself, you will find place for it” (Participant 3). This strong perception of sports need is explained as a consequence of the meaning of what this sport practice represents for them. For some of them, currently, it’s an “escape route to de-stress” to work properly (Participant 12). “I need to have those moments . . . it’s mental . . . some people we need to go up our heart rate so that I can oxygenate my brain and that’s when I think most clearly” (Participant 14). But what’s most interesting it’s the significance that this sport perseverance during their lifespan has brought them, they define sports practice as part of them “Maybe it’s because sports are already part of us . . . For me, it’s basic” (Participant 6). Participant 11 highlighted:

I think it is a very important activity present during all my life. Just like other things I’ve done, I’ve stopped doing them; sport has always been with me, from a very young age, it has always been present. I think it has been an activity that has helped me to develop as a person, it has helped me to socialize, to develop, to learn, to develop an attitude that has helped me in other facets of my life.

4.2 Sport referents

The sport referents (coaches, teammates, parents . . .) were found to be significant to participants’ development because the learning through these relationships contribute to offer a meaningful experience to develop some leadership skills. All managers reported that the initiation of their sport practice started thanks to some member of their family, either because there is a member who is a sports person “Sport has been always important to my family because my father was a swimmer and a football player during the republic, and this was not common” (Participant 11) or because some member of the family thought as a healthy way to develop during childhood and adolescence “I started doing waterpolo thank to my parents, because they thought that I was hyperactive and sport would be a good way to channel my energy” (Participant 7) Not only in terms of personal development but also in terms of social development as participant 14 explained:

It was a way of choosing my environment to grow up with, and this would also condition the companies, my development and a little bit of everything. It was his job to get me into the world of sports so that I could spend my free time playing sports and not doing other things.

Whatever the reason, the implication of most parents in the sport experience of the interviewed managers was very active and it had influence in the attitude with which they participated in the sport “Always try to aspire to the maximum in everything you do, which is what my father taught me: if you do things, do them right. If not, don’t do them” (Participant 15) and the positive way they lived the sport “I enjoyed practicing motorcycle trials with my father and his friends and now I am trying to transfer this passion to my son” (Participant 9) Those experiences were influential to develop a certain attitude to face sport and other aspects of the life as it was reported by participant 6:

I remember, for example, after a very good game, when we were back in the car, my dad would tell me what I failed at, what he hadn’t liked about my attitude, what I could do to improve. Yes, they did congratulate me, but they told me what they need to get my feed on the ground. I didn’t see it when I was a teenager, but I really appreciate it today because it taught me humility.

Also, this example showed how the feed-back perceived after the sport practice contributes to the learning of the experience, even if it’s years after it. In this sense, it is important to analyze the lived experience with the sport coaches reported as referents. “Apart from transmitting

some values about the team that shape me significantly, she helped me to grow. I will always be grateful to her” (Participant 6). In particular, the inter-personal competences that they remember is what most of them reproduce later in their job position. Participant 10 explained:

The most influential coaches are the ones who had the most empathy with the players. Those who most understood the situations in which the players found themselves, those who accompanied them the most. Those who were most able to help you. These are the types of coaches that leave the most mark and the ones that influenced me the most in how I manage certain situations nowadays. Each person has their own personal problems and their own adverse situations. That is why it is very important to know how to act in every moment, to know how to resolve any conflicts that may exist, to know how to accompany them, to make them feel important within an organization. This, is something that I saw in my coach and now I try to apply.

Not all the memories reported about the referents were positive, 9 interviewed managers remembered to have had negative referents at some point of their lifespan. Either it was a positive or a negative referent, all of them were influential for their leadership development. Participant 5 remembered: “It comes to my mind a negative referent from when I was 17 years old that was too demanding with the players. He treated us as an object, if we had an injury, he would exclude us from the team” Most of the respondents who reported negative referents, also reported that the learning of how not to do things have more impact on their leadership development than the positive things. “Those things that have impacted me in a negative way, I keep them in mind to not repeat them, because to do so would be a failure. If I’ve seen something and experienced it in a bad way, I can’t let myself to reproduce it” (Participant 6). This could be understood with the clarification offered by participant 14: “The thought of the way of how you don’t want to do things it is easier to keep it in mind than the one of how you would like to do things, because it’s stronger”

Most of the managers explained their memory about the referents analyzing their leadership skills and their leadership style. “His attitude, his good vibe . . . He led by making us feel part of a group” (Participant 17). It’s something that comes up naturally during most interviews, probably owing to the leadership knowledge that all of them have and the association that they reproduce from one field to the other. Participant 4 expressed:

She was a referent due to the leadership, the intensity, the seriousness, the professionalism, the desire, the way of conveying things and the demand that they conveyed to me. Also, the confidence she gave me. [. . .] She was demanding but then, you saw the reward of a job well done . . . the way she conveyed and communicated, the confidence . . . I remember thinking that I would like to be like her . . .

4.3 Competences

It was found that managers described numerous competences developed through the sport trajectory that they consider important in their job positions nowadays. All the competences have been categorized into three groups depending on the type of relationship that is established: strategic and performance competences, when the relationship is established with the organization; interpersonal competences, when the relationship is with others and emotional and attitudinal competences, when the relationship is established with oneself. [Table 3](#) show the competences reported as influential from the sport trajectory to the leadership.

As it was shown in [Table 3](#), strategic and performance competences are the ones that were less reported by the managers. Goal achievement is the competence more mentioned by managers in this category as a consequence of the direct relation with the purpose of the sport, above all the competitive sport. Participant 9 expressed it this way: “The desire to achieve the goal and not to drag, not to sink if you have a defeat and move on until you reach

Category	Dimension	Participants
Strategic and performance competences	Ability to adapt	7; 14
	Decision Making	2; 9; 10
	Goals achievement	1; 8; 9; 15; 16
	Resolving ability	3
	Strategic vision	1; 12; 17
Interpersonal competences	Time organization	1
	Active listening	2
	Assertiveness	16
	Communication Skills	1; 17
	Conflict resolution	10
	Empathy	3; 8; 9; 11; 13; 17
	Patience	2
	Demand (positive way)	4; 14
	Teamwork	3; 9; 10; 11; 13; 15; 16
	Trust	7
Emotional and attitudinal competences	Commitment	7
	Constancy	5; 8; 9; 11; 14; 15
	Humility	4; 6; 15
	Effort	3; 5; 6; 7; 12
	Emotion's control	3; 8
	Passion	5; 6
	Perseverance	7; 8; 9; 12; 15
	Resilience	11
	Responsibility	1; 4; 10
	Self-demand	4; 14
	Self-esteem	6; 7
	Stress management	16

Source(s): Author's own creation

Table 3.
Influential
competences from
sport to leadership

the goals set. All this is what sport gives you, and it's very similar in the business world." The acquisition of decision making was related to individual sports by various managers. "Tennis teaches you a lot of autonomy when it comes to make decisions" (Participant 10), strategic vision, instead was associated to collective sports as is explained by participant 1:

The strategic and operational vision depends a lot on the experience that everyone has had with team sports. But within the company, when I try to make someone understand, it helps a lot. -Listen, when you were playing handball, you're doing this now, you're throwing ball, pass, ball, pass, ball; And now I need you to think, if an opponent puts you here, what alternatives do you have? How would you approach the game differently? – It helps us a lot to talk internally, to put people in context.

The second category referred to all the competences needed to relate to others, contains two of the most mentioned competences: teamwork and empathy. Findings show that every time a participant talked about teamwork it also talked about another interpersonal competence related with it as for example empathy, communication or listening ability. Participant 13 expressed:

Teamwork is vital, you have to be empathetic, to know how to relate to others and to know how to do teamwork, otherwise it makes no sense . . . you have to be able to unify criteria, be empathetic, listen, work as a team, do things as broadly as possible, and even though the final decision is yours, you have to make it participatory for everyone. The moment you have someone who doesn't feel part of your team or business, you have a problem.

Emotional and attitudinal competences were the most mentioned by the respondents owing to the meaning of sport. Sport is passionate and everything about it involves emotions.

Passion was reported by the respondents as something they learned from the sport practice and they try to pass on to their teams in their workplace. Participant 6 explained:

Sport has taught me to be passionate about work. This is the lost battle of this world. You don't go to work because that's what's it's about, you go to work because you feel it and you love it. You play football or you run because you love it. Well, at work, you have to do the same, because otherwise there are many other jobs, look for another place and be happy.

This passion that encourages the development of a certain attitude towards the different sport situations it is transferred to business. Commitment, perseverance, resilience, constancy, sacrifice, effort . . . all these attitudinal competences are the fruit of the passion and important as leadership skills developed through sport. One aspect that was mentioned numerous times, is the ability to persist even there is a defeat. "Knowing how to lose, you know?" (Participant 7). The results showed that sports imply losing more times than winning for most part of the practitioners, and so this fact develops humility and the ability to persist. Participant 1 expressed:

Practicing sports, you practice losing. But it is a game, because in the end, sport is still a game. And practicing losing . . . Then, in professional life, which is no longer about playing but about being serious, because there are very important commitments, if you have already practiced losing and getting up, you already know how to do it.

4.4 Experiences from the sport roles played during a lifespan

The last factor refers to the learnings obtained thanks to the roles played in sports during the formative stage. Either as a team captain or as a coach or some small job position within the sports club. The results showed that, from all the managers who played team sports as the main sport, none of them reported being captain of their team and just one of the mixt profiles. Those findings could be explained through the arguments given by participant 12:

This concept of leadership that the captain has an important role to play to lead the team as it happens in other countries, it doesn't exist here. In Catalan sport clubs, the captain of a team usually is the member of the team that has been more time on the team, so that doesn't mean he is qualified to lead the team or that he is captain due to his leadership skills, it's just not relevant being captain here.

Despite the position of captain was not relevant for the interviewed due the meaning of this role in Catalan sport, it was found that most of them, remembered to have been played an important leadership role in their team. These leadership within the team is determined by different aspects that can be clustered in two groups: specific knowledge of the sport and human skills. One example of the first group is explained by participant 1: "When you have been playing for ten years, you have developed a maturity in the sport that puts you on a position of leadership in the team, also responsibility, and I think, that I've taken all this to the way I lead in the company". A clear example of the second group is explained by participant 6:

I had a role in the team that I consider important because I fostered the team relationship by creating a good atmosphere or uniting the team with outings . . . something that nowadays I keep trying to apply with my work team.

Comparatively, respondents expressed a similar view about the importance of being a coach during their adolescence and young adulthood and its impact on the development of certain leadership skills. "It's a way of learning by trial and error, when you are 18 you don't communicate as you do when you are 30, you learn, so in my case it really helped me to develop some leadership skills" (Participant 1) This notion of being in a constant learning process accelerates the acquisitions of some leadership skills that probably, they would not have been acquired until they reached the working life. Participant 8 expressed:

“Being a coach at a young age it demands a premature growth of your personality, it demands to be responsible of other persons, to develop communicative abilities . . .” At this sense, participant 11 concludes “If you practice a sport actively and then you become a coach, you are always learning”.

It was found, most of the managers had a busy agenda when they were young combining personal life with sport practice, studies and also coaching. This fact, contributed to development of certain skills linked to organizational management and people management as participant 17 explained “When you are studying and you have to coach or coordinate a summer camp at the same time, you have to be able to organize yourself properly to do everything the best way” (Participant 12) Participant 14 added:

When you are a representative of a group, the empathy, for example, is very present because you have to listen everyone, you have to convey the ideas of everyone and not just yours, and all these competences then has a transfer to exercise leadership in the workplace.

Furthermore, all managers agreed that coaching not only had an influence on the development of leadership skills but also, in the perception of how people looked at them. “. . . they may see you as more responsible and capable of holding positions of responsibility in the future” (Participant 8). Results showed that the perception of the respondents is that general population more easily presuppose leadership skills in young adults when they are coaches or work in the sports club in some coordinating position than when they don’t. In this sense, participant 2 reported:

People perceived that I was a person who had played in a certain category, and in Vallirana, they were not used to it and what they valued was this and the knowledge it gave them. Because apart from being a coordinator, I was the coach of one group, and I was a reference for them as a coach.

In terms of employment, all managers indistinctly from the sector affirmed to take into account the sports career when hiring people. However, only the managers of the sports sector stated that the sports career was a determining factor. Participant 9 explained:

I’m the one who hires most of the people in the group . . . if I end up interviewing these people I ask them, not their whole career, but what sports they play when you interview someone who practices sports that you know well, in my case mountain sports, you always see it with better eyes, because you think that a lot of people who practice these sports, has a set of common features that sometimes are what you are looking for. In the case of climbing, I find it a discipline that teaches you many things that can be applied to other parts of life. For example, to assess the risks. When you are climbing you have to assess each step, whether there is a lot of risk or not, and this in business it’s basic.

This statement, is a clear example of the results found, showing that 8 out of 17 managers declared that outdoors sports (sea or mountain) have more impact in the development of certain leadership abilities as decision making, risk calculation or stress and emotions control. “This is where the difference lies. It is an additional risk that is not present in the other sports, and this decision-making is made about life-threatening. This impacts and influence even more” In this sense, participant 15 highlighted:

On conventional sports everything is very regulated and you know what the playing field is. And instead, all these others (outdoor sports) have many more variants and many more surprises. And that makes the stress level even more beastly. Because on a tennis court, a football field, a basketball court, a hockey rink or a golf course, you won’t be surprised On the other hand, outdoors sports have an added bonus. The humility I told you about the sport gives you, it is even more present when you practice these sports.

To end this part of the results, it was considered relevant the findings around the experiences abroad. The results show that 12 out of 17 managers had an experience traveling worldwide

before becoming the managers that nowadays are. Some of them traveled during their adolescences and young adulthood because of the sport competitions and others lived abroad starting their professional career or expanding their CV.

Finally, to summarize the findings of this study it was found that 15 out of 17 managers found that the sport trajectory lived during a lifespan influenced not only the acquisition of leadership skills and competences but also, their leadership style as expressed participant 5 “In the end, there are many transfers between sports and business”. This influence is more detailed by participant 10:

Sport has given me a lot of things that I am using right now in my day-to-day life. Sport teaches you what life is all about, it teaches you to cry, to laugh, how to treat people, who to help and who not. The microclimate that is created in a football team is very similar to the one that can exist in a company, saving the differences (because it is one thing to play football and another to work). In business, people also work with passion and the coexistences are similar. Sport teaches you that people are sometimes sad, that everyone has their problems, that you don't always win and you often lose. And that you have to try to overcome day by day and try to solve everything that has not just come out. And that's what sport teaches you, of course.

5. Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to explore if the sports trajectory can be an influential factor in the development of leadership and if so, how does influence it. This research has found some key findings related with the lived experience of participating in sports across the lifespan. These findings are now discussed in reference to recent literature on leadership development research, particularly, the experienced-based leadership development (McCall, 2004) within the framework of the Lifespan Developmental Psychology (Baltes *et al.*, 1980; Baltes *et al.*, 1999).

Taking as a frame of reference the principles of McCall (2010), this research could confirm the first one, which postulates that leadership is learned from experience. In this case, the sport practiced across the lifespan offers a unique learning experience for developing leadership. This affirmation is in accordance to the results of some studies (Howie *et al.*, 2016; Liu *et al.*, 2021; Murphhy and Johnson, 2011; Trapp, 2013) in which was concluded that the experiences that one has in athletics can affect one's development into a leader. The second principle of McCall's (2010) development model affirms that some experiences influence more than others. This research has found that managers affirmed to have learned more competences after being coach of some sport team during adolescence and young adulthood than being a captain of a team during childhood, adolescence or young adulthood. This finding is in accordance with the leadership development model of Liu *et al.* (2021) which propose that extra-curricular activities such as sports are an important medium through which adolescents can gain leadership skills. And also, that leading activities as running a club or in this case, leading a term (in terms of coaching) provide opportunities for young adults to exhibit leadership skills. Many cultures emphasize the importance of being a sports captain to develop leadership skills, contrary to this believe, the results found that being a sports captain is not too relevant to develop leadership skills in Catalunya, Spain. This finding could be explained with model of Murphy and Johnson (2011) in which contextual factors impact the extent to which those experiences result in greater growth of the leader development. Contrary to Burnes and O'Donnell (2011) who conclude that the ability to welcome and bring about change are the core competencies developed as a coach, the findings of this research suggested that interpersonal competencies as active listening, empathy or communication skills are the ones more mentioned by the managers. Despite the differences, results show that playing different roles in sports contributes significantly to the development of leadership skills. These activities provide scenarios in which adolescents

and young adults can utilize leadership-related skills in real-world situations and thus develop their leadership potential (Murphy and Johnson, 2011).

Principle number three (McCall, 2010) outlined the importance of the challenge element for learning to occur. The results presented above, showed how managers expressed the importance of the competition as an element in their sport trajectory and later in their work life. The importance of the challenge is that it motivates them to make efforts and persist even if there is a failure again and again. These results are in accordance with some studies (Vielhelmsdottir *et al.*, 2016; Wallenberg, 2021) who demonstrated that transformative leadership generates greater impact from sports leaders than from managers due to some aspects as motivation. Overcoming challenges and converting them into opportunities have a positive impact on the development of behavioral, cognitive and strategic leadership skills as problem solving (Day *et al.*, 2009; DeRue and Wellman, 2009; Thornton and Etxebarria, 2021). These three categories match partially the ones presented in this study, which behavioral leadership skills correspond to emotional and attitudinal competences and also interpersonal competences, and strategic leadership skills correspond to strategic and performance competence. Contrary to the authors, it was not categorized any cognitive leadership skills.

The fourth conclusion (McCall, 2010) highlights the value of living different types of experiences to learn different lessons from each one. In this sense, this study has found that nearly 50% of the managers who answered the STQ questionnaire had a constant mixt combined profile (30%) and a constant collective competitive profile (20%). This finding is relevant for several reasons: On the one hand, because of 18 possible sport profiles, 50% of the managers belong to the same two, and the rest is distributed among the other 16 profiles. On the other hand, is relevant owing to the impact that have the results found regarding the different competencies learned from different sport profiles in terms of individual or collective sports and the presence of the competition element. These findings are in accordance to the results presented by Riera *et al.* (2022) in which the variable kind of sports was analyzed to explore the different outcomes that offers the individual sport practice versus team sport practice in terms of leadership skills development.

The fifth principle (McCall, 2010) highlights the importance of feed-back in the learning process. The results of this study showed that managers stressed the importance of receiving feed-back from their positive referents, either by their coaches, parents or peers. These findings are in accordance to Wright and Côté (2003) who found that receiving feedback, acknowledgment, support, cognitive engagement, mature conversations with adults are important social influences that can play an instrumental role in the formation of some leadership skills. Contrary to Murphy and Johnson (2011) who affirms that incompetent coaches could interfere with the potential leadership development, this research has found that negative referents, among them bad coaches, teach how not to lead so these bad experiences help to develop critical analysis and the conviction and certainty of how not to lead. Principle number 6 of McCall's (2010) model states that even many influential events occur during childhood and adolescence, everybody can get the experiences they need to succeed. The findings presented cannot provide any element that verifies or ratifies this statement in relation to sport as an influential element in the development of leadership. Even so, results confirm that the stages more reported as influential by the managers in terms of sport were childhood, adolescence and young adulthood.

The last principle of McCall's (2010) theory, based in the idea that leadership development is a process that takes place during all lifespan is confirmed in the results of this study in which managers reported that their sport trajectory from childhood to adulthood influenced their leadership development. Contrary with the affirmation that participating in sports could either enhance or hurt leader development (Murphy and Johnson, 2011) this research has found that the sport trajectory influences the development of leadership skills. The diversity

in sports practice, whether it is the type of sport, competitiveness, sports references or the roles represented, favors the development of leadership skills.

Finally, the findings of this research are in accordance to [Burnes and O'Donnell \(2011\)](#) who found that business can learn from sport some competencies as interpersonal relationships and the view of what it takes to achieve an ideal performance state. Even in this study it was not specifically mentioned the expression of the ideal performance state, it was mentioned other abilities as effort, perseverance, constancy that are closely related with the concept. In this sense, the results of [Wright and Côté \(2003\)](#), indicated that leadership development in sport focused on developing four central components: high skill, strong work ethic, enriched cognitive sport knowledge, and good rapport with people which match with the interpersonal relationships presented in the study. As it was said by [Wolfe et al. \(2005\)](#) and explained by one of the managers during the study: "Sport can be viewed as a microcosm of the larger society".

6. Conclusions

During the last decades, sport has been recognized as of paramount importance for the development of individuals across the lifespan ([Murphy and Johnson, 2011](#)). Despite the increased literature focus on the transfer between sport and business ([Burnes and O'Donnell, 2011](#); [Frawley et al., 2018](#); [Jalonen et al., 2018](#); [Ryan and Dickson, 2018](#); [Seppänen, 2020](#); [Thornton and Etxebarria, 2021](#); [Trapp, 2013](#); [Vilhelmsdottir et al., 2016](#); [Wallenberg, 2021](#)) there were not found studies that focus on managers to analyze their sport trajectory.

This paper examined that research gap to explore if the sport trajectory influences the development of leadership skills, and if so, how does it influence by interviewing seventeen managers from different sectors. The results found that there is an influence and it is determined by four factors: (1) sport profile, (2) sport referents, (3) competences, values and abilities and (4) experiences from different sport roles played during their lifespan. The first factor presents data from the participants, outlining the importance of the sport profile (kind of sport, competitiveness and constancy) in the influence on the leadership development. The second factor examines how positive and negative sport referents (coaches, parents, teammates . . .) influence the development of leadership skills. The third factor details all the competences listed by the interviewed as the ones that influenced their leadership from their sport practice during their lifespan. The last factor analyze the influence of the experiences lived playing sport roles during the lifespan.

Overall, the study's findings extend the knowledge around leadership development explaining how the sport practice influence it. This study and its specific findings could have implications for job recruitment in human resources and also in the revaluation of the sport in the society and therefore, schools, not only for its health benefits but also for its influence in the development of interpersonal and behavior competences.

Future research could also address some of the limitations in the study. In particular, research could (1) expand on the diversity of managers that are interviewed, (2) focus more closely on the differences and similarities regarding in the sport trajectory of women and men leaders, (3) analyze other sports profiles that contrast the results obtained, and (4) to explore common patterns in managers who have practiced outdoor sports that involve risk.

First, future studies could include a broader range of managers depending on different sport profiles or different sectors (sport organizations, banking, health, etc.) to expand the data and obtain more conclusive results. Second, this study has not taken into account the similarities and differences between males and women leaders and its results are based on a sample in with predominate male managers. Third, in selecting a subset of managers for interviews, this research focused on those with constant sports participation profiles, particularly those involving collective and competitive activities. This choice was driven by

the hypothesis that constant and competitive sports experiences would have a more pronounced impact on leadership development as it was mentioned in a previous study (Riera and Moragas, 2021). However, the researchers acknowledge that this may have narrowed the sample and maybe influenced the conclusions. Including non-constant and non-competitive profiles could have provided a richer understanding of how different sports experiences contribute to leadership qualities. For future research, interviewing individuals with varied sports trajectories would offer a more comprehensive view of how sports experiences, including those that are non-competitive or discontinuous, influence leadership development. This approach would allow for a deeper understanding of the relationship between sports participation and leadership competencies. Also, if contrary profiles are analyzed, e.g. a non-competitive profile, and results are obtained that state that a non-competitive profile is not conducive to the development of competitiveness, this will support the conclusions of this study. Finally, the results point out that outdoor sports and the risk involved are reported by the interviewed managers as a key element for developing competences as decisions making. More research around this need to be done to compare the outputs of conventional sports, outdoor sports and emerging sports. Future research needs to explore these lines of investigation to continue filling the gaps and extending the knowledge around leadership development.

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