Society’s interest with leadership has erupted over recent decades. Every institution is fascinated by the power of effective leadership and seeks to better understand and implement leadership processes that drive success. At the philosophical level, leadership theory development continues to evolve, encompassing leader-focused approaches such as the ‘Great Man’ theory, relationship approaches such as transformational leadership, and recent trends of social process leadership including shared and distributed leadership models. Such diverse approaches have been applied to specific practical contexts including educational leadership in schools, yet a globally inclusive, socially just application remains elusive. Leadership research in the area of team sport could potentially offer insight into innovative approaches to successful pedagogical leadership; researchers believe that examination of leadership behaviour in the naturalistic setting of an athletic environment is advantageous to theoretical development. While hierarchical leadership is considered innate within a team sport context as the coach and team captain are positioned as undisputed leaders of a team, recent evidence suggests new approaches to leadership would be beneficial to individual and team development and success. Would a more democratic model of leadership be effective in athletic contexts? Could shared leadership lessons in sport be transferred to other educational contexts?
Leadership

Modern leadership study and development perhaps evolved from Dale Carnegie’s innovative public speaking lectures and writing. In *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936), Carnegie promotes strategies for success in business and personal life. The Dale Carnegie Institute was formed from his resounding success as an educator, and training at the Institute includes building greater self-confidence, strengthening people skills, refining communication skills, developing leadership skills, improving attitude and decreasing stress.

Contemporary leadership studies fill the shelves of bookstores with pop solutions to creating leadership. Guided primarily by White, middle class males, leadership studies deal with individual empowerment and entrepreneurial endeavours. A quick glance in current leadership takes us from Stephen Covey’s *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (Covey, 1989) (influenced greatly by his Mormon background) to the fire-walking, chest-beating accomplishments of the followers of Tony Robbins (Robbins, 2013). Since January 2013, there have been 6,764 new books published to Amazon on the topic of leadership.

Collectively, today’s society believes that acquiring leadership skills is the key to self-improvement as well as employability or entrepreneurship; corporations pursue people with leadership ability and invest large sums of money in leadership and management development; and academic institutions have created leadership studies programs (Bolden, Hawkins, Gosling, & Taylor, 2011; Northhouse, 2007). Bolden and associates claim, “Leadership has become perhaps the most talked about issue in business and organization – heralded as
both the cause of and solution to most of the problems facing contemporary society” (2011, p. 4). While the concept of leadership is widely recognized, utilized and analysed, it also remains debated, contested, and poorly understood.

**The Study of Leadership**

Definitional clarity remains an issue in leadership theory. In their research, many scholars have formed working definitions of leadership, particularly as it is experienced in organizations and societies. Bolden et al. (2011, p. 39) expanded upon Northouse’s (2004) identification of common themes and described leadership as “1) a process 2) of social influence, 3) to guide, structure, and/or facilitate 4) behaviours, activities, and/or relationships 5) towards the achievement of shared aims.” As a definition, these criteria endeavour to encompass a wide range of theoretical positions, including the possibility that leadership is available to multiple individuals as well as the perspective that it may be more widely dispersed and/or socially constructed. Ciulla challenges the efforts made in academia to identify a definition and asserts instead that the “whole point of studying leadership is, ‘What is good leadership?’” (Ciulla, 2002, cited in Bolden et al., 2011, p. 40). Although this question is often examined in leadership research, solutions are difficult to generate and even more challenging to apply universally as ‘good leadership’ is inextricably connected to culture and context (Bolden et al., 2011). Smoll and Smith (1989, p. 1523) suggest the most effective approach to leadership study “may be to delimit the focus of research and theory construction to more specific and well-defined settings in which variables of interest can be more readily specified and
measured.” By limiting the number of contextual factors to a specific setting, researchers may find navigating the complexities of leadership cognitive processes and social interactions more manageable.

**Leadership in Sport**

The athletic environment has been identified as a naturalistic setting for psychological research, particularly for behavioural assessment (e.g. Smoll & Smith, 1989; Zacharatos, Barling, & Kelloway, 2000). Researchers assert that observing, recording and analysing leadership behaviours in a sports setting is advantageous to theoretical development (Smoll & Smith, 1989).

Often, the most prominent leader in team sports is the coach. Coaches play a central role for implementation, management, and success of sports programs. Leadership dimensions include decision making processes, teaching and learning activities used in practice situations, the type and frequency of feedback provided, motivational techniques, and relationship strategies (Horn, 2002). As formal leaders, coaches have powerful influence on the outcomes experienced by athletes.

Until recently much of the sports leadership research has centred on the coach, and very few studies were done to examine leadership among athletes. Given the importance assigned to adult leadership, it would be advantageous to understand the early development of leadership behaviour. Adolescents display leadership characteristics and behaviour in a variety of settings including school, student council, academic clubs, athletic teams, and social settings, yet there is a need to explore dimensions that contribute to youth acquisition of these
According to Todd and Kent (2004), drawing correlations between adolescent leadership tendencies and adult behaviours has been difficult due to a lack of longitudinal research in this area, but some studies have found positive associations between adolescent leadership and self-esteem, locus of control, parental examples in the home, and academic success. In their study of developmental and negative experiences in organized activities, Hansen and Larson (2007) found that adolescents who engaged in lead roles such as a starter on a sports team experienced greater developmental benefits but also more frequent negative experiences during the activity. The authors suggest that a higher level of immersion and investment would facilitate greater responsibility and increased likelihood for learning, whereas stress and an increased pressure to perform could characterize negative experiences. It is hypothesized that these challenges may also be part of the developmental process and an additional stimulus for growth (Hansen & Larson, 2007).

**Formal Leaders (Captains)**

Team captains are formally designated leaders within a sports team, and can be voted into position by teammates or appointed by the coach. It has been noted that the captain can function as a liaison between the coach and the rest of the team (Dupuis et al., 2006), as well as serve many other practical purposes in establishing performance and behaviour standards (LeBoeuf, 1988). Weese and Nicholls indicate that a coach wants a team captain to possess several talents, including: knowledge of the rules, ability to make decisions that will maximize strategic advantage, skill in performance, and an ability to keep his cool in pressure situations. As well, he would like this captain to be
Voelker, Gould, and Crawford (2011) attempted to gain a thorough understanding of sport captaincy by interviewing thirteen university freshmen who were captains during high school. The majority of these former captains (12 out of 13) reported having a positive captaincy experience, a few (3 out of 13) revealed having a stressful and emotional experience, and some (4 out of 13) indicated that their experience as captain, though positive, was insignificant. The descriptive findings of these researchers regarding perceived unimportance of role and lack of coach-facilitated leadership development is very interesting when combined with previous research that has shown that coaches tend to focus on athlete’s skill and sport competence for captain selection (e.g., Glenn & Horn, 1993; Moran & Weiss, 2006). Voelker, Gould, and Crawford question, “youth sports may often be too adult-dominated to allow youth to develop more complex leadership abilities” (2011, p. 62). Additionally, Glenn and Horn (1993) found that, based on self-ratings, peer-ratings, and coach-ratings, athletes and coaches differ in their perceptions of who the team leaders are and what characteristics are most important for team leaders to possess. They suggest that, while coaches conventionally appoint an athlete to serve as captain or have team elections to nominate a team leader, a formal leader does not ensure that the leadership provided by the elected or appointed athlete will be effective or fulfill the team leadership needs.
Informal Leaders (Non-Captains)

Carron and Hausenblas (1998) identify a distinction between formal and informal leadership, based on the roles individuals occupy within a group. Formal leaders are those designated by the organization or group, such as coaches and team captains. Informal leaders are players other than team captains whose roles develop due to interactions with other team members.

Weese and Nicholls (1986) describe an emergent leader as one who assumes the leadership role within a group, and they advise coaches to ensure that the formal leader and the emergent leader are the same person; “the most desirable situation for a team would ensure that the emergent leader is appointed captain or assistant captain” (Weese & Nicholls, 1986, p. 270).

Beyond the formal role of a captain however, some researchers have begun to place emphasis on the role of an informal leader in sport, emerging as a result of group member interactions (Eys, Loughead, & Hardy, 2007; Loughead & Hardy, 2005; Loughead, Hardy, & Eys, 2006). Team members other than the formal leader (coach, team captain) may engage in leadership roles necessary to group function (Loughead & Hardy, 2005). Wheelan and Johnston (1996) examined the emergence of informal leaders in the business and industry setting, finding that the behaviours of informal leaders opposed the behaviours displayed by formal leaders in small task groups. The authors suggest that the function of peer leaders is often to counterbalance the influence of the formal leader.

Loughead and Hardy (2005) examined the leadership behaviours of both coaches and peer leaders in order to develop an understanding of the nature of
peer leadership in sport. They found that leadership behaviours differ between coaches and athletes, and that athletes identify peer leaders as both team captains and fellow teammates. Using a modified version of the Leadership Scale for Sports (LSS) (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980), they found that, in the majority of cases, both captains and non-captains served as peer leaders; on average, athletes viewed one quarter of their teammates as a source of peer leadership. Furthermore, the authors indicate that peer leaders are an important source of leadership because they perform functions within the group that formal leaders fail to fulfil. This is an important realization that would contribute to increased effectiveness of teams through athlete leadership development.

From a practical standpoint, the different functions served by coach and peer leaders provides some preliminary support for the suggestion that coaches should encourage the development of athlete leadership within their respective teams to achieve optimal group effectiveness. As noted by Carron and Hausenblas (1998) formal leaders of organizations (coaches in the present study) have two main responsibilities. The first is to ensure that the team is effective in reaching its goals and objectives. The second is to ensure that team members’ needs are satisfied. Given that coaches may not be able to consistently meet the needs of the athletes, it is important for them to foster an environment where athletes are able to exhibit an additional form of leadership. In doing so, the needs of their athletes are more likely to be satisfied from these two sources of leadership and coaches are more likely to have teams that are more effective. (Loughead & Hardy, 2005, p. 311)

Eys, Loughead, and Hardy (2007) investigated athlete satisfaction in team sports based on three types of leadership functions (task, social, and external). Results from 218 intercollegiate athletes from a variety of interactive team sports suggest that the relative number of perceived leaders, or the amount of athlete leadership, is related to athlete satisfaction within a team. Regardless of whether
there were many or few leaders, greater satisfaction was found in a balanced representation of task, social, and external leadership function. Given the observation of Loughead and Hardy (2005) that various formal and informal leaders meet different group needs, these findings further support the significance of peer leadership in team sport. Furthermore, since studies have shown that athletes rated highest in leadership by their teammates are often not the captain (Gill & Perry, 1979; Tropp & Landers, 1979), team leadership is not the responsibility of the team captain alone, particularly if leadership is viewed as a social process of influence.

The role of the coach as leader of a team may be indisputable in most North American sports and represents a traditional vertical leadership model. However, it is possible to envision shared leadership among team members who engage in a collaborative team process (Houghton, Neck, & Manz, 2003). As is evident by various athletes’ display of task, social and external leadership functions (Eys et al., 2007), key roles can be shared in order to ensure that each is carried out effectively. Further, researchers hypothesize that a shared leadership approach positively influences team commitment, satisfaction, strength, and cohesiveness, as well as behavioural responses such as increased effort and communication (Houghton et al., 2003). An emphasis on balanced leadership suggests that coaches should consider the development of leadership skills among multiple team members in order to better meet the needs of the group for team building and success (Eys et al., 2007).
Creating Leadership Theory through Practice

In a hypercompetitive, consumerist society, North American views of leadership remain hierarchical and grounded in such leadership theories as the ‘Great Man’ view, or trait, behaviour or skills approaches. In innately competitive team sport contexts however, there is evidence to suggest that new approaches to leadership would be beneficial to individual and team development and success. Perhaps innovative forms of leadership practice in sport contexts, such as purposeful leadership development of all team members, could serve to inform leadership theory in general. Concurrently, perhaps there are pedagogical leadership theories yet to be created that would better serve our student athletes, our educational systems, and our society.
References


