# EXPLORING CANADIAN ELITE FEMALE YOUTH HOCKEY TEAMS' SHARED LEADERSHIP THROUGH COACH AND ATHLETE LEADERS' EEXPERIENCES

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## Abstract

Effective coach and athlete leadership is fundamental to optimal sport performance (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016). Guided by emerging frameworks (e.g., Fransen et al., 2014, 2017), this study explored shared coach and athlete leadership within Canadian elite youth female hockey teams. Fifteen coach and athlete-leader dyads (i.e., N=30) were purposefully sampled from youth female high-performance leagues (i.e., U18 AAA) for representation across Canada. Participants engaged (individually) in semi-structured interviews focused on their sport experiences, leadership approaches (e.g., implicit/explicit), and team outcomes (e.g., performance, positive youth development). Results emerged through four interconnected themes: (a) establishing a shared structure: collective collaboration (b) building a shared philosophy: 'we before me', (c) developing a shared foundation: caring and supporting, and (d) attaining shared goals: (re-) defining success. Findings advance understanding of shared coach and athlete leadership, offer practical implications to enhance leadership development, and provide insights for fostering healthy shared leadership models.

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## Introduction

Leadership has been described as a behavioural process influencing individuals and/or groups to cooperate toward the achievement of a set goal or goals (Barrow, 1977; Gray, 2004). Over the past quarter-century the majority of research on leadership in sport has focused on the roles and impact of the coach on a team (Cotterill, 2013). The coach is a major influence in the expression and development of leadership in a sport setting. Coaches are often integral in selection of a team's formal athlete leader(s) as well as shaping the philosophy of leadership in a team's culture. Early research on coach leadership focused on coaches' distinct impact on the team without considering the interplay between coach and athlete. Few studies have simultaneously examined different forms of leadership (e.g., coach and athlete leadership) (Price & Weiss, 2013) despite sports often being a collective of management, staff, coaches, and athletes. Examining leadership only through the coach's perspective is like looking at a single piece of a jigsaw puzzle. To have a more fulsome understanding of sport leadership we also need an understanding of how athletes fit into this picture. Although much popular and academic literature has focused on the captain as leader (e.g., Walker, 2017), and the captain is likely a cornerstone piece which helps to frame and organize the other pieces of the puzzle - this singular piece does not render a complete picture. As Loughead and Hardy (2005) demonstrated, coaches and athletes fulfil different roles within the team. As such, in this study, I considered how the coach and captain frame the pieces of the puzzle, while also considering how the other team members and athlete leaders fit into the puzzle. The purpose of this study was to explore shared coach and athlete leadership within elite youth female hockey teams. As such, the review of literature that follows presents an evolution and understanding of sport leadership focused on: (a) leadership in coaching; (b) athlete leadership; (c) characteristics of good leaders in sport; (d)

individuals (and leaders) within groups, (e) group leadership structures associated with optimal team outcomes; and (f) identified gaps in understanding sport leadership.

## Review of Literature

### Leadership in Coaching

Over the past several decades there has been an evolution of coaching styles from the authoritarian and autocratic (i.e., coach-controlling many aspects of an athlete's life and sport environment), to a more diplomatic style of coaching in which the coach and athlete collaborate on the technical, tactical, and cultural aspects of the team environment (Hodge et al., 2014; Howitt & Henry, 2012). This shift is reflected in leadership research, with a shift away from transactional leadership models towards more transformational leadership models (Bass, 1985; Bass & Riggio, 2006; Price & Weiss, 2013; Rowold, 2006). Transactional leadership refers to a practice where leaders focus on contingent rewards and management-by-exception (Loughead, 2017; Price & Weiss, 2013). Leadership using contingent rewards involves cueing others for satisfactorily carrying out a task. Active management-by-exception refers to the leader's vigilance in ensuring an outcome is achieved and passive management-by-exception refers to a leader drawing upon an intervention only after an error has occurred. Transactional leadership contrasts with transformational leadership, where leaders stimulate and inspire followers to achieve extraordinary outcomes and exceed expectations, resulting in greater follower satisfaction and commitment to the organization (Bass, 1985; Smith et al., 2017). Research has shown that leaders can have the most impact on followers when they are inspiring, value-based, and intellectually stimulating (Fransen, Haslam, et al., 2020). In their study of 'Serial Winning Coaches' involving coaches who had repeated success at the highest level of Olympic and professional sport, Lara-Bercial and Mallett (2016) discovered that over time these coaches

learned to become more benevolent and flexible in their coaching practice, in contrast to being business-like and inflexible, as they had been earlier in their coaching tenure.

As coaching styles have shifted from autocratic to democratic, research on leadership styles also appears to be shifting from a focus on individual leaders (i.e., coach leaders or team captains), to a focus on the collective (i.e., the manner in which coaches, athlete leaders, and peers/teammates interact collectively). Essentially, coaching styles have been shifting from a vertical hierarchical approach to leadership, to one which is horizontal and collaborative (Mertens, et al., 2020); it appears a new type of followership is emerging, which is in contrast to the traditional leader-follower relationship from club to coach, coach to captain, and captain to peers. An example of this approach was outlined by James Kerr (2013) in describing the New Zealand All Blacks' rugby team's approach; leaders created an environment for the right behaviours to occur, and through shared responsibility, leaders did not create more followers, but rather, created more leaders. In a case study of the All Blacks' team culture, Hodge et al. (2014) described a 'Dual Management Model', where the philosophy was one of sharing ownership and 'dually-managing' the team collaboratively with coaches and players alike. As head coach, Graham Henry stated:

> Part of that alignment is the coach fielding the responsibility to transfer the ownership [to the players]. And that's about player development, players getting better, leaders getting better…Part of that is alignment, but part of it is the personal development of those people. (Hodge et al., 2014, p. 69)

Why then, is this shift from hierarchical and unidirectional leadership to collaborative and bidirectional or multidirectional leadership occurring? As transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1985; Bass & Riggio, 2006) suggests, and as supported by studies of top performing

athletes and teams (i.e., Serial Winning Coaches; Lara-Bercial & Mallett, 2016; New Zealand All Blacks; Hodge et al., 2014), this shift is likely driven at least in part by the value of facilitating a functional leader-follower relationships (Chan & Mallett, 2011; Lara-Bercial & Mallett, 2016). Teams with strong athlete leaders have been shown to positively influence team cohesion, athlete satisfaction, team identification, team confidence and the motivational climate within the team (e.g., Crozier et al., 2013; Fransen, Coffe et al., 2014; Fransen, Haslam, et al., 2015; Fransen, Vanbeselaere et al., 2012; Glenn et al., 2003; Price & Weiss, 2011, 2013; Vincer & Loughead, 2010; Watson et al., 2001). Conversely, poor athlete leadership climates or lack of leadership role fulfilment has been associated with detrimental consequences for team confidence and the performance of the team (Fransen, Haslam, et al., 2015; Fransen, Steffens, et al., 2015).

**Athlete Leadership**

Given that both coaches and athlete leaders are important facets of sports teams, it is important to understand both their distinct and combined influence on team and individual outcomes (Price & Weiss, 2013). Currently, a widely accepted and utilized definition of *athlete leadership* in a sport context is, "an athlete, occupying a formal or informal role within a team, who influences a group of team members to achieve a common goal" (Loughead et al., 2006, p. 144). The understanding of athlete-leader roles has shifted over time from Bales and Slater's (1955) description of *instrumental function* leaders and *expressive function* leaders, which saw the task focus roles of instrumental leaders as mutually exclusive from the interpersonal relationship focus of expressive leaders. A critical review of role differentiation theory in the 1970s acknowledged the distinction between instrumental and expressive leadership functions but argued that these functions were not incompatible and often integrated (Lewis, 1972). Rees

and Segal (1984) reinforced these critiques revealing that sports teams show a high degree of leadership role integration. Leaders on sports teams may specialize in task or social roles, while other team members may be more multifunctional – combining both instrumental and expressive roles. Loughead et al. (2006) extended the athlete leadership categorization to include a third role of 'external leader'. This leader is someone who represents the team's interests with media, sponsors, and the club. Building on the previous classifications, Fransen, Vanbeselaere, et al. (2014) envisioned a four-fold classification combining the previous three roles (task leaders, social leaders, and external leaders) with a fourth leadership role: motivational leader. The four roles were separated into on-field leadership roles and off-field leadership roles. On-field leadership roles included task leadership (i.e., providing tactical instruction and focus) and motivational leadership (i.e., providing a positive example based in effort and steering the team's emotions to perform optimally). Off-field roles included social leadership (i.e., a caretaker of team atmosphere outside the field of play) and external leadership (i.e., handling communication with club, media, and sponsors).

In their examination of the relationship between playing positions and leadership in sport, Fransen, Haslam, et al. (2016)found that players with high interactional centrality (i.e., players whose position promotes opportunities for interaction with other team members) were perceived to be better leaders than those with low interactional centrality (i.e., players whose position limits their opportunities to interact with other team members). However, researchers found this was attenuated in sports where interactionally central playing positions conferred limited interactional advantages. For example, sports played on a large field with relatively fixed playing positions (e.g., soccer) saw leaders in central playing positions whereas sports played on a smaller field where players switch positions dynamically (e.g., basketball, ice hockey) had weaker

relationships to central playing positions (Fransen, Haslam, et al., 2016). It could be surmissed that these findings muddy the clear delineation between the on-field and off-field leadership roles, specifically in relation to motivational leaders (typically on-field) and social leaders (typically off-field). In some sports (i.e., intermittent high intensity sports such as hockey, basketball, baseball, and football), motivational leadership may extend to the bench, between innings or during positional changes. In these contexts, there are shift changes, regular substitutions of players, and consistent breaks and interruptions in the flow and timing of the game, allowing for regular interaction between coaches and players and among players - *off-field*. Similarly, social leadership may extend onto the field of play whereby the positive atmosphere created by social leaders off-field leads to deeper connection and trust between players on-field. In intermittent, high intensity sports, the bench provides players an opportunity to strengthen social ties while the game is going on. As such, on-field and off-field delineation of leadership roles presented by Fransen, Vanbeselaere and colleagues (2014) appear largely influenced by traditional flow-based European sports (e.g., soccer, field hockey, rugby, volleyball, handball) where coach and players have little in-game interaction until half time, and players communicate minimally with each other, except by using tactical cues.

Another body of research investigating athlete leadership focused on team captains, and particularly the practice of naming a captain – a practice which appears to be entrenched in sport culture. In professional sport, as in the example of the National Hockey League, team captains are paid more and are more productive than the average player (Camiré, 2016). Camiré also points out that professional sport team captains face a great deal of stress due to the primacy of winning, length of the season, and expectations to interact with the media on a daily basis, suggesting that organizations should marshall resources to better support captains. In their study

of ice hockey coaches' perceptions of athlete leadership, Bucci et al. (2012) found that coaches felt it was important to share similar values with their team captain, meet regularily, and foster a caring and trusting relationship. Further, Fransen et al. (2019) found in their study of captains and coaches across multiple sports, that team captains were mainly selected because of attributes that are not directly linked to leadership. such as experience, sport-specific competence, or nepotism. Collectively, these findings may reveal a disconnect between the values of the coach and abilities of the captain, whereby there is more of a unidirectional fit of the coach's values overlaying on that of those of the team captain, rather than perhaps a more optimal bidirectional discussion of values and abilities prior to selection to the role. Further research would be valuable in understanding optimal dynamics and compatibility between coach and captain, with regards to task, motivational, and social orientation and/or between coach, captain, and informal leaders.

Now, with a fuller understanding of leadership in coaching, and athlete leadership roles (i.e., some of the pieces of the puzzle and the picture they form), the question becomes: how does one go about building great leadership within a team? To answer this question, there appear to be three key areas within the literature to explore: (a) understanding the characteristics of good leaders, (b) understanding individuals (and leaders) within group contexts, and (c) understanding group leadership structures associated with optimal team outcomes.

**Characteristics of Good Leaders in Sport**

Cotterill and Fransen (2016) suggested leaders could be distinguished from their followers through distinct leadership traits (i.e., personality traits that are considered to be stable over time), leadership attributes (i.e., characteristics that may change over time), and leadership behaviours (everyday acts of leadership). Past research has found that traits such as dominance,

ambition, competitiveness, and responsibility have been identified in leaders (Klonsky, 1991). Moran and Weiss (2006) extended the list of characteristic leadership traits to include 'instrumentality' traits (i.e., independent, competitive, make decisions easily, self-confident, stands up under pressure) and 'expressiveness' traits (i.e., emotional, devotion to others, gentle, helpful to others, understanding, awareness of feelings of others, and warm relations with others). Assessment tools like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers, 1962; Myers et al., 1998), the Big 5 Taxonomy (Goldberg, 1993), and Leader Trait Questionnaire (Northouse, 2018) embrace the idea that leadership is rooted in one's personality – built upon the concept that certain individuals possess special innate enduring characteristics that make them great leaders (Fransen et al., 2020).

Athlete attributes that are often considered when selecting leaders include age, team tenure, skill level, starting status, level of and sport-specific experience, player's popularity, and playing position (Bucci et al., 2012; Glenn & Horn, 1993; Kim, 1992; Klonsky, 1991; Lee et al., 1983; Loughead et al., 2006; Price & Weiss, 2011; Rees & Segal, 1984; Tropp & Landers, 1979; Yukelson et al., 1983). While attributes are related to the nature of a leader at a given point in time, and may change over time, they are generally more superficial qualities of the leader. Leadership behaviours have also been examined in the literature, and could be divided into: (a) 'task-related behaviours' such as effective communication skills, guiding group tasks, and fostering goal attainment (Price & Weiss, 2011; Riggio et al., 2003; Wright & Coté , 2003), (b) 'motivational on-field behaviours' such as role modelling, demonstrating a good work ethic, and setting a positive example for teammates (Bucci et al., 2012; Dupuis et al., 2006; Holmes et al., 2010) and, (c) 'social off-field behaviours' such as being vocal and trustworthy, possessing good interpersonal skills, showing care and concern for others, and facilitating relationships with

teammates and coaches (Dupuis et al., 2006; Holmes et al., 2010; Price & Weiss, 2011). Collectively, this work suggests that selecting good sport leaders is complex. Understanding the relationship between leaders' more static and innate traits and superficial attributes should be considered alongside their more dynamic behaviours. Further, in considering what makes 'good' sport leaders, it is critical to understand the relationship of individual leaders within the groups they are leading.

**Individuals (and Leaders) within Groups**

As leadership cannot be separated from followership, consideration should also be given to the dynamics of the team and its intertwined relationship with its leader(s). A good starting point for understanding the relationship between a leader and a follower is Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social Identity Theory was developed in the 1970s with an aim to understand the psychology of intergroup relations (Rees et al., 2015). The social identity approach offers insight into the ways individual psychology both structures and is structured by the dynamics of group life. A foundational idea of the theory is that groups are not just external features of the world that provide a setting for individual behaviour, but that they shape and form a person's sense of self. In the context of a sport team, this translates to suggest teams have the ability to shape one's sense of self as an athlete on the field of play and as a person (man, woman, or other) off the field (Rees et al., 2015). To further extend this perspective, Social Identity Theory suggests groups (i.e., teams) have the ability for athletes to see themselves as an individuals ("I" or "me") within the context of the team, but also to see themselves as a part of the team ("we" or "us"), prioritizing the goals and aims of the group and/or aligning their indvidual goals with that of the group. Groups also have the potential to strengthen task and group cohesion by emphasizing the "us" versus "them" mentality, uniting the group in a

common cause against the aims of another group. Recent findings in sport settings demonstrated that effective athlete leaders strengthen their teammates' identification with their team (Steffens, et al., 2014). As Drucker (1992) explains, "the leaders who work most effectively, it seems to me, never say 'I'. And that's not because they have trained themselves not to say 'I'. They don't think 'I'. They think 'team'" (p. 14). While Drucker may be overstaing the intrinsic ability to be a selfless leader, social identity approach helps to explain why leaders see themselves as part of the collective.

**Group Leadership Structures Associated with Optimal Team Outcomes**

What then, is the ideal structure of a team to foster optimal team outcomes? Past research points to the value of a structure with leaders in all of the four roles: task, motivational, social, and external (Fransen, Vanbeselaere, et al., 2014). Not only is it important to have a leader in each of these roles; research has shown that the more leaders there are, the greater the team effectiveness (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016; Eys et al, 2007; Fransen, Vanbeselaere, et al., 2014). Leo et al. (2019) discovered that when looking at role fulfilment on soccer teams, having three or more task leaders led to greater capacity of leadership. Specifically, teams that had leadership roles spread through the team effectively allowed more leaders to connect with more teammates, sharing the burden of leadership, and creating greater continuity of leadership (e.g., if one leader was not in the line up because of injury or illness). Two or more social leaders was associated with greater team cohesion and less team conflict; this was suggested to be in part because team members had more leaders to trust and could choose the leader in which to place thier trust. Similarily, two or more external leaders was associated with increased team cohesion and intention to continue (i.e., return to the club the following year). Essentially, this study showed that when there were more leaders on a team, there was increased role clarity, strong task

cohesion, collective efficacy, intention to continue, as well as better perceived performance. In addition there was less role conflict, task conflict, and relationship conflict. Interestingly, the work of Leo et al. (2019) did not directly align with previous research by Eys et al. (2007), which found that teams that perceived an equal or similar number of task, social, and external leaders (whether high or low) were more satisfied with the team's performance and cohesion. Regardless, several studies suggest that a shared leadership structure (i.e., with multiple types of leaders in diverse roles) is most desirable and effective (Fransen et al., 2017; Fransen, Vanbeselaere, et al., 2014; Fransen et al., 2014; Fransen, 2014).

With evidence pointing towards the importance of a shared leadership model, what then is the ideal leadership structure between coach and leaders, and between leaders and the rest of the team? Hodge and colleagues' (2014) study of the New Zealand All Blacks suggests that the reason for the team's continuous success was a result of team cohesion. This was facilitated by clear communication and agreement on key issues among the coaches, among the players, and between the coaches and players. What Hodge and colleagues' (2014) Dual Management Model highlights is the importance of collaboration between the head coach and coaching staff, coaching staff and formal team leaders, and the formal team leaders sharing responsibilities for the operation of the team with informal leaders and team members collectively.

Another body of related research has examined shared leadership structures in high performance sport settings, drawing upon Social Network Analysis (SNA; Wasserman & Faust, 1994). SNA involves a set of methodological tools, used to understand the relationships and structures within a network (i.e., individuals within a group) (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). SNA is an established technique for studying leadership in organizational settings because: (a) it can be used to model patterns of relationships among interconnected individuals; (b) it can be used to

represent how leadership is distributed among group members; and (c) it can identify the emergence of multiple leaders (Emery et al, 2013). SNA is well suited to investigate sport teams, because they are composed of well-defined groups of individuals (i.e., 'full networks'), they have clear and measurable performance outcomes, and the relationships between players has a direct impact on those outcomes (Lusher et al., 2010). SNA views leadership relationships in terms of: (a) nodes (representing the individual team members), and (b) ties (representing the links between athletes and their perceptions of each athlete's leadership), allowing researchers to map not only the distribution of leadership among a group and the emergence of leadership amongst members, but also to measure the leadership quality of athletes, moving beyond the binary distinctions between leader and non-leader (Fransen, et al., 2017; Fransen, Van Puyenbroeck et al., 2015). As such, SNA can illustrate a web of interconnections throughout a team and assess the impact of an individual leader on their teammates, moving beyond examination of the traditional vertical structure between coach and captain, and moving beyond examaination of the four leadership roles (i.e., task, motivational, social, and external) (Fransen, Vanbeselaere, et al., 2014), to assess the influence of all types of formal and informal leaders within the overall leadership structure of the group.

SNA (Wasserman & Faust, 1994) may be particularly valuable in understanding shared leadership given recent findings showing that in most sports teams, informal leaders are perceived as better leaders than the formal team captain (Fransen, Decroos et al., 2016; Fransen, Vanbeselaere, et al., 2014). Findings of these studies marks a distinct shift away from the traditional focus on the primary role of the captain as team leader. In a study by Fransen, Vanbeselaere et al. (2014) analyzing 4,451 players and coaches across nine different sports, only 1% of teams viewed the captain as the best leader across the four leadership roles. One

interpretation of this finding is that the captain may not possess all the traits, attributes, and behaviours to support complete leadership role fulfilment, while also suggesting that teammates may have misperceptions about the role of team captain, or that they may place blame on the leader for lack of team success. Regardless, it is clear that recent research indicates coaches and teams should consider the principles of a shared leadership structure, where different players are appointed to the four different leadership roles (task, motivational, social, and external), to reach optimal outcomes. Fransen et al. (2014) found that teams with a shared leadership structure had higher team confidence, higher team identification; and higher team rankings, when compared to a single team captain model. Further, teams with high quality athlete leadership were characterized by high levels of team confidence, strong task and social cohesion, a clear sense of purpose, were more committed to team goals, had less ego-involving climates, and excelled on player-reported, coach reported, and objective performance measures (Fransen, Haslam, et al., 2017; Loughead et al., 2016; Price & Weiss, 2011). Given these findings it is not surprising that there has been an accompanying shift in practice, from a vertical heirarchical leadership style to an environment where coaches and athletes share the duties of leadership. Nonetheless, given the infancy of both research and practice involving a shared leadership approach, research must continue to better understand the complexities of diverse shared leadership models.

**Gaps in Current Shared Leadership Research**

With increased research focused on leadership in sport, there has been also been increased understanding of the nuances and complexities of sport leadership. Generally, there has been a shift from a model with a singular leader (i.e., coach or team captain) to a model where where coaches and athletes manage team leadership activities collaboratively, with athletes occupying both formal and informal roles to influence teammates and the operation of the team.

Moving forward, some areas for future research and investiation include: (a) furthering understanding of sport specific models of shared leadership (i.e., differences in leadership between continuous flow-based sports like soccer, rugby, and field hockey, and intermittent, high intensity sports like ice hockey, basketball, and football); (b) exploring coach, team captain, and athlete leader compatability in shared leadership models; and (c) developing evidence based programs to help coaches develop better leaders and leadership for their teams.

***Sport-Specific Shared Leadership***

As noted previously, much of the study on athlete leadership has been focused on flow-based continuous action sports like soccer, rugby, and field hockey. While studies have examined sports such as basketball, volleyball, cricket, handball, and ice hockey – intermittent, high intensity sports which are interupted by breaks in play and changes in possession – there is great opportunity to understand the dynamics of how the four roles of athlete leadership (task, motivational, social, and external) (Fransen, Vanbeselaere, et al., 2014) function and differ in specific sport contexts. In their study of central playing positions and leadership in sport Fransen et al. (2016) hypothesized that: (a) the link between interactional centrality (i.e., the degree to which a player's position provides opportinities for interaction with team members) and leadership would be stronger with sports players in a large area, with more players, and with players playing realtively fixed positions; (b) team captains would be more likely to occupy interactionally central field positions. These hypotheses were supported in most sports studied (e.g., soccer, field hockey, rugby) with the exception of basketball and hockey. When evaluating these results, it is clear that the context of the sport and positions played within it, the space in which it is played, and the temporal restrictions of the game, all factor into the interactional centrality, and by extension, the leadership model within specific sports. In contrast to field

sports like soccer and field hockey, or a court sport like volleyball where play runs through a central position (i.e., a mid fielder, central defender, or setter), basketball and ice hockey have different positionality, with much more flow and dynamic interchange of positions. These differences between sports highlight opportunities to understand potentially unique differences between formal and informal leadership role fulfilment and development. Furthermore, there is great opportunity to understand the sport of ice hockey specifically, in greater detail. Despite being Canada's national winter sport (National Sports of Canada Act, 1994), few studies have examined athlete leadership in ice hockey. Additionally, most of the studies that have been conducted have focused either specifically on coach or team captain leadership, and none have addressed female ice hockey, a limitation noted in several studies (Bucci et al., 2012; Camiré, 2016; Dupuis et al., 2006).

### *Coach, Captain, and Athlete Leader Compatibility*

In addition to limited understanding shared leaderhsip in specific sport contexts, there are also gaps in understanding the compatibility of coaches, captains, and athlete leaders within shared leadership models. As noted in the review above, coaches and athletes each bring to the team unique leadership traits, attributes, and behaviours, highlighting the need for a good 'fit' between the coaches' leadership styles as well as those of the team captain and other athlete leaders. Furthermore, there is a need for greater understanding, specifically, of the four athlete leader roles (i.e., task, motivational, social, and external) (Fransen, Vanbeselaere, et al., 2014) and where the team and athletes' strengths may lie. Athletes would benefit from a deeper understanding of their role(s) to help bolster individual and team leadership strengths while also being able to direct attention to building leadership skills in areas less developed. Similarly, coaches would benefit from an understanding of which leadership roles are filled on the team

between formal and informal leaders and how to add or enhance leadership in those roles in which the team is deficient. Greater role fulfillment within the athlete leader roles has been associated with positive outcomes for team members and leaders (Cotterill, 2013), higher collective efficacy beliefs, positive team identification, and better ranking (Fransen, Vanbeselaere, et al., 2014). Further, despite a movement away from a vertical heriarchical leadership framework in team sports, formal leadership roles such as team captains nevertheless play an important role in team leadership. While we have a growing understanding of coach and athlete leadership roles, there is still much to learn in the interplay between coach and captain, formal and informal leadership roles, and how leadership permeates through the team, within a shared leadership model.

### *Evidenced-Based Leadership Programs*

Finally, given the importance of further examining shared leadership models (i.e., in sport-specific contexts, and in terms of compatability of different leadership roles), it follows that future work should also focus on developing evidence-based leadership programs for both coaches and athletes (Fransen et al., 2019). While much research has examined leaders' characteristics and attributes, much less work has focused on how leaders grow and develop their leadership skills over time. Increased understanding of teams' experiences within shared leadership models, can in turn lead to evidence-based shared leadership training programs, optimizing coach and athlete leadership development. As such programs are developed, they must also be evaluated for their effectiveness and modified accordingly, to further improve leadership development.

## Rationale and Purpose

Given limitations in knowledge around leadership in sport outlined above, the purpose of this study was to explore shared coach and athlete leadership within Canadian elite youth female hockey teams. This research aimed to address specific gaps in knowledge by (a) advancing understanding of shared leadership in a specific sport (i.e., hockey), (b) furthering understanding of coach, team captain, and athlete leadership compatability within a shared leadership model, and (c) offering insights for the development of evidence-based programs to enhance leadership within shared leadership models.

## Methods

### Research Design

In conducting this research, I utilized a critical realist perspective. Specifically, I assumed a constructivist ontology (i.e., there is no single truth and reality is created by individuals in groups) and an interpretive epistemology (i.e., reality needs to be interpreted) (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Given the purpose of this study was to explore shared coach and athlete leadership within elite youth female hockey teams, a phenomenological approach was utilized. As described by Creswell et al. (2007), phenomenology seeks to understand the lived experiences of persons by collecting data and describing the essence of the experience. Phenomenology offered an opportunity to understand what participants have in common as they experience the phenomenon and to distill these experiences to what is universal. I acknowledge that as a hockey coach with 26 years of coaching experience, I am situated within the world I was aiming to understand further, with particular focus on the relationship between coaching leadership practices and athlete-leaders' experiences. A phenomenological approach acknowledges that a researcher is both in and part of the world, braided and intertwined, and that our social and cultural location,

sex, and age influence how and what we see and how we associate meaning to these experiences (Allen-Collinson, 2016).

**Research Context**

Perceptions of leadership were understood within the context of elite youth female ice hockey teams in Canada; elite youth female ice hockey was deemed an appropriate research context for several reasons. Specifically, ice hockey is the national winter sport of Canada (National Sports of Canada Act, 1994) with more than 621,000 registered participants (Gough, 2020). While girls and women have played ice hockey since the late nineteenth century (International Ice Hockey Federation, 2020), female participation has increased significantly in Canada and worldwide since the sport's introduction at the Nagano Olympics in 1998. As of 2018, there were more than 205,000 registered female hockey players globally and in 2019, 39 countries applied to enter national teams in the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) Women's World Championship program (International Ice Hockey Federation, 2020). Almost half of all female players registered internationally are in Canada (i.e., 101,000); more specifically 81,680 play at the child and youth (3-18 level) and 12,456 of those are within the under 18/under 19 (U18/U19) age group (Hockey Canada, 2020).

While extensive studies have examined leadership within male team sport contexts at both youth and elite levels (Bucci et al., 2012; Camiré, 2016; Dupuis et al., 2006; Preston et al., 2019; Preston et al., 2020)), little to no research has focused on leadership in female ice hockey. When considering the elite youth context, there are over 100 club teams in Canada competing in the U19 and U18 age groupings. More specifically, the elite level is represented by sanctioned (i.e., by Provincial Sport Organizations) U18 and U19 teams that compete for the ESSO Cup, Canada's U18 club team national championship; competition for Hockey Canada's U18 National

Championship, an annual championship between branches/provinces where the best players from club programs are selected to represent their province. This level represents the most competitive hockey preceding university/college level hockey, professional hockey, and national team selection. These youth athletes are at a key period of maturation and transition as they enter emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Coaches at the U18 level are also of interest, as they are often at the highest level of coaching, without being professional coaches (i.e., not earning their living from coaching); they are engaged in extensive training that includes leadership training (i.e., must have their High Performance 1 coaching level through Hockey Canada and the National Coach Certification Program) and typically have had previous high-level coaching experience and/or high-level playing experience.

**Participants**

In line with the context described above, 15 coach-athlete pairs/dyads (i.e., 30 individuals) involved in Canadian elite female ice hockey across the country were recruited for participation in this study. For the purpose of this study, elite level included U18 and U19 AAA level teams from leagues in British Columbia (BC Hockey Female U18 AAA), Alberta (Alberta Female Hockey League), Saskatchewan (Saskatchewan Female U18 AAA Hockey League), Manitoba (Manitoba Female Hockey League), and Atlantic Canada (Maritime Major U18 Female Hockey League). In Ontario, the elite level also included the U22 Provincial Women's Hockey League (OWHL), the top junior women's hockey league in Canada, and the U18 AA teams, given the Ontario Women's Hockey Association (OWHA) and the Ontario Provincial Sport Organization (PSO) do not identify teams at the AAA level. In Quebec, recruitment was targeted to teams in the Ligue de Hockey D'Excellence du Québec (LHEQ) Midget Féminin

AAA. In addition, Sport School teams which compete in both local and national leagues (Canadian Sport School Hockey League) were included in the recruitment process.

Following approval of the study protocol by the university's research ethics board, recruitment involved first attaining the contact information (i.e., email addresses) for head coaches and team managers of the approximately 100 teams across Canada that met the study criteria. The majority of teams made contact information publicly available; in cases where this was not readily available, relevant Provincial Sport Organizations were contacted and requested to share the study information with coaches that met the criteria. Information about the study (i.e., overview of aims, what was required of participants, procedures for confidentiality, and informed consent forms) was provided to 88 prospective coaches; 23 coaches indicated interest in participating. The 23 interested coaches were asked to identify three or four athlete leaders from their team (i.e., a captain, alternate/assistant captain, or member of their team leadership group, depending on how they defined their team-specific leadership roles) and these athletes were then approached regarding their willingness to be involved in the study. The final sample was comprised of 15 coach-athlete dyads (i.e., 30 individuals from 15 teams); these final 15 were selected drawing upon purposeful sampling (i.e., recruited for maximum diversity across regions), with only complete coach-athlete dyads (i.e., where both coach and athlete consent to involvement) included in the study. With consideration to the critical realist perspective utilized in this study, and based on the population of coaches and athlete leaders at this level of female ice hockey in Canada, 15 coach-athlete pairs/dyads was considered a sufficient number of participants to achieve meaningful knowledge production and data saturation (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

**Data Collection**

Data collection occurred during the winter and spring of 2022. All participants (i.e., coaches and athlete-leaders) engaged in a single semi-structured interview, which allowed for flexibility from both the interviewer and interviewee perspectives. Semi-structured interviews allow for the interviewer to nimbly explore themes and perspectives of the interviewee, while also allowing the interviewee to openly discuss their experiences with few restrictions, and elaborate on any perspectives they consider important and meaningful (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In keeping with a phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews recognize that the researcher inevitably affects what is being learned. A 'responsive interviewing' model recognizes that both the interviewer and interviewee are human beings with feelings, interests, and experiences - not automatons - and that they form a relationship during the interview which mutually influences the interview and informs a deep understanding of what is being studied (Rubin & Rubin, 2004).

Interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendices A and B) which was developed following an extensive review of the literature on leadership in sport (e.g., Bucci et al., 2012; Camiré, 2016; Cotterill & Fransen, 2016; Duguay et al., 2016; Duguay et al., 2020; Dupuis et al., 2006; Eys et al., 2007; Fransen, Steffens et al., 2016; Fransen et al., 2019; Fransen, Decroos, et al., 2016; Fransen, Haslam, et al., 2016; Fransen, et al., 2017; Fransen et al., 2020; Fransen, et al., 2015; Fransen et al., 2014; Leo et al., 2019; Loughead, 2017; Loughead, et al., 2016; Loughead et al., 2006; Mertens et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2019; Santos et al., 2019; Todd & Kent, 2004). The guide was informed by identified gaps in understanding, coupled with the primary researcher's additional insights and inquiries following 26 years of experience coaching elite female hockey in Canada. In addition, the primary researcher conducted two pilot

interviews with university-level coaches to help improve the flow of questions and refine questions and prompts within the interview guide. The guide focused on participants' background and experience in the sport of ice hockey, their perspectives and perceptions of leadership generally (i.e., coach leadership, athlete leadership) and within their team (i.e., leadership roles, their personal leadership style), the structure of the team's leadership (i.e., single captain model, shared leadership model), and finally, given the focus on female hockey, their reflections on sex and gender and leadership.

Coach/athlete-leader pairs were interviewed separately to inquire about their unique perspectives and perceptions regarding leadership. Where possible, coaches were interviewed first to gain knowledge about their team environment and what systems of leadership may have been in place on the team. In most cases, athlete interviews followed coach interviews, and focused on understanding alignment between the coach's philosophy and their practice of teaching leadership, in addition to the athlete-leader's adherence to, and leadership behaviours within the system of leadership. Interviews took place in mid-February to June (i.e., late/post-season), which allowed time for the coach and athlete leader relationships to develop through the season, as well as to allow the team leadership environment and team dynamic to develop, so that both coach and athlete-leader were able to reflect on their experiences. Interviews were conducted at a time that was convenient for participants. Interviews were conducted virtually by Zoom conference. Virtual interviews provided an affordable opportunity to connect with people face to face across vast geographic areas, in a comfortable environment (i.e., their home), which led to greater connection between the researcher and interview participants, as well as providing an opportunity, through the transcription process, for the researcher to engage with the data and relive moments of interaction and remember the personality and emotions of the participants

(Iacono et al., 2016). Interviews ranged between 32-76 minutes in length and were audio recorded for review and transcription after the interview.

**Data Analysis**

Data was analysed drawing upon thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2016; Braun et al., 2016) to gain insight into coach and athlete leaders' overall experiences. Thematic analysis is a flexible, creative, and reflexive research tool, which allows for a rich, detailed, and complex account of interview data. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guide to thematic analysis, during the interviews I took notes based on participants' responses, to assist in reviewing the transcripts and to help in the initial generation of codes and potential themes for analysis. Following each interview, I utilized software to generate initial transcription of the data. I then reviewed each trancript by reading the text while simultaneously listening to the audio of the interview, correcting inaccuracies generated by the software during the initial transcription. This process gave me a deep understanding of each interview, the interviewee, and the initial data. Next, I generated initial codes of meaning, searched for themes by collating codes, and generated a set of initial themes (i.e., data with shared meaning, underpinned or united by a core concept; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2019), which I then discussed with critical friends. Following discussions with critical friends, I reviewed the transcripts, my notes, initial codes generated from the data, as well as the initial themes, with particular consideration to the central research questions related to team leadership composition (e.g., single captain, shared leadership, leader roles), and leadership roles, compatibility, and approaches within the leadership model. This process led to redefining and renaming some themes and subthemes, and finally, generation of a report. It is important to note that this type of analysis is not a linear process but rather a

recursive process, moving back and forth between the phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

**Methodological Rigour**

Part of the process of engaging in responsive interviewing as part of a phenomenological study is to continuously examine one's own understanding of, and reaction to, the data collected (Rubin & Rubin, 2004). Several methods were employed to ensure methodological rigour. First, as lead researcher, I engaged in reflexive journaling to position my experiences, biases, and ongoing views throughout the data collection and analysis phases. This was important as my engagement in the interview process, assumptions and positionings, as well as my decisions within the thematic analysis were all an integral part of qualitative research and inseparable in the process of inquiry (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Rubin & Rubin, 2004). Second, via a collaborative approach, I shared interview data and transcripts back to the interview participants, ensuring credibility of the information as well as involvement of participant's views into the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000;Tracy, 2010). Finally, rich rigour was achieved by engaging in peer debriefing via critical friends (i.e., my supervisor and a subject matter expert). Engaging in regular discussions throughout the research process with researchers and subject matter experts with greater experience ensured a critical lens was applied to challenge my views, assumptions, and interpretations, while also providing support to push me to the next step methodologically (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

## Results

Participants' key demographic information is presented in Table 1, with each of the 15 coach-athlete dyads represented by a team number, and participants being represented with alphanumeric codes to protect their anonymity. In sum, coaches had a mean of 20.8 years of

coaching experience (range of 5-38 years); 4 were female, and 11 were male. Athletes had a mean of 11.7 years of playing experience (range 8-14 years). All participants (i.e., coaches and athletes) described their teams' as having a shared leadership model, with specific structures as follows: (a) leadership group with captains and assistants (6 teams), (b) 1 captain and 3 assistants (6 teams), (c) 1 captain and 2 assistants (1 team), (d) 4 assistant captains (1 team), and (e) leader group with no letters (1 team). Within these structures, the athlete participants in the study were made up of assistant captains (n=9), leadership group members (n=4), and captains (n=2).

**Table 1**

*Participants' Demographic Characteristics and Team Leadership Structures*

| Team | Coach | Years Coaching Experience | Sex | Athlete | Years Playing Experience | Leader Role | Team Leadership Structure |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | C1 | 30 | Male | A1 | 12 | Assistant Captain | Captain plus 3 Assistants |
| 2 | C2 | 38 | Male | A2 | 12 | Assistant Captain | Leadership Group with Captains and Assistants |
| 3 | C3 | 30 | Male | A3 | 10 | Assistant Captain | Captain plus 3 Assistants |
| 4 | C4 | 35 | Male | A4 | 13 | Leadership Group | Leader Group with no letters |
| 5 | C5 | 5 | Female | A5 | 14 | Assistant Captain | Leadership Group with Captains and Assistants |
| 6 | C6 | 17 | Male | A6 | 10 | Assistant Captain | 4 Assistant Captains |
| 7 | C7 | 12 | Female | A7 | 12 | Captain | Captain plus 3 Assistants |
| 8 | C8 | 17 | Male | A8 | 14 | Leadership Group | Leadership Group with Captains and Assistants |
| 9 | C9 | 35 | Male | A9 | 13 | Assistant Captain | Captain plus 3 Assistants |
| 10 | C10 | 5 | Female | A10 | 8 | Assistant Captain | Leadership Group with Captains and Assistants |
| 11 | C11 | 8 | Male | A11 | 12 | Assistant Captain | Captain plus 3 Assistants |
| 12 | C12 | 35 | Male | A12 | 10 | Leadership Group | Leadership Group with Captains and Assistants |
| 13 | C13 | 22 | Male | A13 | 11 | Captain | Captain plus 3 Assistants |
| 14 | C14 | 8 | Male | A14 | 12 | Assistant Captain | Captain plus 2 Assistants |
| 15 | C15 | 15 | Female | A15 | 13 | Leadership Group | Leadership Group with Captains and Assistants |

Four interrelated themes emerged through the data analysis process, reflecting coach and athlete experiences with shared leadership in elite female youth hockey as follows: (a) establishing a shared structure: collective collaboration (b) building a shared philosophy: 'we before me', (c) developing a shared foundation: caring and supporting, and (d) attaining shared

goals: (re-) defining success. Table 2 illustrates these four overarching themes as well as the subthemes in each category.

**Table 2**

*Coach and Athlete Experiences with Shared Leadership in Elite Female Youth Hockey*

| Theme | Subthemes |
|---|---|
| Establishing a shared structure: collective collaboration | Vision and philosophy of collaboration |
| | Collective decision making |
| | Team of leaders in different roles |
| Building a shared philosophy: 'we before me' | Helping teammates |
| | Being a family |
| | Keeping the energy positive |
| Developing a shared foundation: caring and supporting | Creating culture early |
| | People-first relationships |
| Attaining shared goals: (Re-)defining success | Staying a family |
| | Team improvement and excellence |
| | Individual improvement and excellence |
| | Developing good people (personal life skills and attributes) |

## Establishing a Shared Structure: Collective Collaboration

Participants described various processes which helped to establish a shared leadership structure within their teams, reflected in four subthemes: (a) vision and philosophy of collaboration, (b) collective decision making, (c) valuing every voice, and (d) team of leaders in different roles.

### *Vision and Philosophy of Collaboration*

Participants discussed the importance of establishing a vision and a philosophy of collaboration between the coach and formal athlete leaders (i.e., captains and assistant captains) and the rest of the team. For example, coach C2 explained how they set up the vision of their team:

> So as coaches and leader, when I look at that …you have to be able to articulate a vision. …And then help the players achieve that vision and create an environment for them to be able to do that. And that vision has to be done collaboratively with the players.

Similarly, coach C8 spoke to their philosophy of how to set up the daily training environment for their team:

> My philosophy is a player choice - player voice philosophy. I like to provide guidelines and based on, you know, what skill sets our team and our players have as individuals, I like to present some options for my team as to how they want to play, and give them, you know - the staff two cents on how we think we could play effectively. But ultimately, I give the players a choice on how they want to grow as a group. On the ice how they want to grow as a group - off the ice, sort of, provide guidance, but don't give them a be-all-end-all you know dictatorship type of approach.

***Collective Decision Making***

Teams' visions and philosophies of collaboration informed how coaches and athletes interacted in the daily training environment on and off the ice, particularly in terms of collective decision making. Coach C1 spoke to a bidirectional flow of leadership between coach and athlete leaders:

> Yeah, so I call it a progressive dictatorship. And what I mean by that is like, I have a backbone. I'll make decisions. But I think it's really important […] especially with female athletes, with millennial athletes […] it's becoming increasingly important to have, you know, the leadership group that sets the tone and that works with me. [...] For example, I'll go to my leadership group and say, "What time is curfew?" My leadership group has always set curfew half an hour, at least half an hour, before what I would set. [...] It has to become a habit of working with your leaders. […] Our players know that it's coming from them.

The idea of leadership involving bidirectional interactions between coaches and athletes, in turn fostering collective decision making, was furthered by coach C12 who described their monthly debriefing sessions with the athletes:

> With the girls like we asked the questions, "What can I do better? What can the coaching staff do better?" and we do that every month. We have a sit down with…either individually or defense pairings or the lines, and we talked and we asked, like, "What do you think's going well? What are you proud of? What do you think we can do better? How can I help you more? What can you do better?" And that dialogue tends to build trust, I think. But that also nurtures the leader.

***Valuing Every Voice***

While coaches spoke about setting up a collaborative vision and philosophy, and engaging in collective (bidirectional) decision making, coaches and athletes also described their perspectives on how shared leadership involved the entire team (i.e., including players not in the formal leadership group), and the need to value every player's voice. For example, athlete A6 described:

> I honestly think that leadership is also a group effort. Like, you can't just have it from one person. You have to accept everyone that's not in your leadership group too - does bring leadership to the team. Let everyone speak and kind of just be there for everyone, and make sure you're uplifting everyone to get to their best.

Athlete A6 went on to describe the somewhat unique leadership structure on her team, which supported this perspective. Rather than having a team captain, their team had four assistant captains:

> We all just work better together [rather] than having one [captain], because we all have little parts of what a captain would have, and it just works way better than one. And then also it's just… it's also easier in girls' hockey because sometimes, again, people get jealous, or they don't use it properly and use it as, "Oh listen to me"…Do you know what I mean? Kinda? I think it just works better with our group this year and the kids that we have on our team - that we have four A's [Assistant Captains].

The concept of valuing every voice focused on every team member's ability to lead, regardless of whether they had been identified as a formal leader (i.e., captain, assistant captain, member of a formal leadership group), or were an informal leader (i.e., a member of the team). As athlete A7 described in her team setting:

> Our coach is really big on accountability so, like almost every single year at the start of the year that's the number one thing we talked about - that you might not have a letter but it doesn't mean you can't speak up in the dressing room - you can hold each other accountable. So as a team, I know we've kind of went through some challenges with holding each other accountable, sometimes, and maybe feeling like some people can't speak up because they don't have a letter. But we've had team meetings as a whole and it's gotten way better, and girls are speaking up when they feel like the team needs, like that motivation, motivational push.

Coach C5 furthers the idea that anyone can lead when speaking to the mechanism of leadership within the structure of the game on the ice compared to the leadership off the ice:

> I tell my girls just cause you don't have a letter doesn't mean you know, you can't say anything…doesn't mean you can't be a leader. Letters really are just for [talking to] the Refs honestly, in my opinion. So, so I do like to tell the girls, "Don't be afraid to talk in

> the room", you know, "Not the same four girls have to talk every time". And I've seen, you know, some of the quieter, shier girls have started to pipe up a little bit with certain things that they want to say, and whether it's good or bad that's great right, because I want them to communicate those things.

### *Team of Leaders in Different Roles*

Finally, participants suggested these (above) approaches collectively contributed to the building of a team of leaders – players fulfilling different leadership roles within the team. As athlete A9 highlighted,

> Everybody plays a role. Everybody has a leadership role on our team, and you can't be a winning team, with just four leaders. It just doesn't work that way. You need the loud leaders, the quiet ones, the ones that want to lead by example. Um…the whole the whole bunch of us make up a team of leaders.

Athlete A14 echoed this sentiment describing how different individuals' leadership roles emerged in different contexts – in practices, games, and team meetings:

> It's not just the people with the letters that need to be leaders. Everyone can be a leader in their own way. (…) It's understanding what's happening and being able to show it and acknowledge where the coach is coming from.[…] Like I've mentioned a lot already, I think each player is a leader in her their own way, because nobody is the same. Everyone sees things differently, and each person can add their own point to everything because somebody else may not know that and they'll be like, "Oh wow. I didn't know that. Thanks for sharing!" And now that person has taught somebody else and now they've become a leader, even in the smallest way.

Further, Coach C12 recognized the influence of shared achievement goals in developing individual leaders:

> Everybody wants to achieve something and everybody has a role to play in terms of achieving it. And you can't do it alone. Like there's no possible way, you can meet your individual goals, in a team sport, if you don't have everybody invested in the team goals. […] I'm trying to develop 17 leaders, 18 leaders. Like, I don't I don't differentiate between that. There's different levels of players and some people aren't leaders, but they need to understand leadership and they can have, even if the role is small, it's still significant, right.[…] But we provide an opportunity for everybody to grow and develop leadership skills and for the most part, the demographic of people that play hockey and athletes, most of them have tendencies to exhibit the ability to lead.

**Building a Shared Philosophy: "We Before Me"**

As highlighted in the first theme, participants espoused a preference for a shared leadership structure with meaningful collaboration, bidirectional communication and decision making, and multiple diverse leader roles within the team. Central to their shared leadership structure was building the team through an emphasis on the "we" (team) before the "me" (individual player). As Coach C2 explained, "the phrase that I always use is - when you're a player, it's all about you, and when you're a leader it's all about others". Similarly, Coach C14 explained, "Leadership is (...) doing things for the sake of the whole group, rather than just the sake of one person." Embedded within this theme, were three sub-themes: (a) helping teammates, (b) being a family, and (c) keeping the energy positive.

***Helping Teammates***

Central to the ‘we versus me’ shared leadership approach, was the notion of helping teammates: “kind of hearing everyone out and trying to help out the team” (A7). Coach C5 described the value of a quality teammate as someone who “know[s] how to put aside [their] differences to help a teammate. […] naturally, being able to be and have that team-first mentality, and to buy into every single thing.” Similarly, Coach C3 outlined what he believed to be key attributes of leaders:

> You’re always thinking about what's best for the team. How can you help the team? And you just want to be a positive role model for all the girls and make sure that they know that they can talk to you about stuff.

Athlete A12 highlighted similar attributes when reflecting on her gratitude towards her team, and eagerness to ‘give back’ to her team:

> It's something that I’m very proud about because I get to help my teammates as much as I can. I feel like more a part of the team, and I’m able to like contribute as much as I can. And I want to give back to my coach so much, and like my teammates, because they definitely deserve it. And [Coach] has taught me so much. I feel like with all the knowledge that I have, I want to be able to share that with my teammates and help them.

Athlete A14 further reinforced the value she placed on giving back through knowledge sharing:

> A group or a person or just any individual who wants to get the best out of people and teach people what they've learned. And just making sure that everyone around them is the best… getting the best of their ability out of them.

Finally, Coach C3 provided an example of how ‘we before me’ played out within the routine practices and ways of interacting as a team: “I will say to them, a lot of times, when we score a

goal, it's not because of that line, it's because of the line before them and what they did. And so, we talk about stuff like that." (C3)

***Being a Family***

Building upon their deeply rooted value of helping their teammates, was a sense of family or community within the teams. Athletes A3 described:

> I've always really considered being on a hockey team as a family and so and that's what I was always taught throughout the years, ever since playing, as I was young. And currently, it's always… Leadership is making sure that everybody feels included in the space and nobody should be excluded from team gatherings or bonding or just being as a group. And there shouldn't be anybody who feels like they're different than everybody else, because every player… everybody plays an equal role on the team. (A3)

Similarly, Athlete A14 described the importance of: "… making sure, like, everyone's included. It's no selfishness going on. It's almost like a group - you're almost one whole, all together, with no weak links." Further Coach C7 described the central role of trust in fostering family:

> The idea of the leader is to make sure that everyone gets there, kind of idea. So, you're not, you're not the one in charge of them. They're […] in your charge. […] You're not there to boss people around. You're there because those people put you there and they trust you. And your job is to help them move on as a group and as individuals.

Further, Athlete A12 described how their team was made up of a diverse group of individuals, coming together as a family:

> So, I think that it was really interesting for all of us to be from all over - but we've come together from all these different places and we've been able to, like, create such a

> great family environment. I think it really helps us on the ice to work better together and use all of our strengths. (A12)

While participants expressed that effective leaders put the collective ahead of their own personal interests, they also agreed that when a 'we versus me' family approach was not taken, the inverse was true. As Athlete A10 recounted:

> I've played on many teams, where many people felt very excluded and there were a few little groups. And I just know how much how hard that feels for people to be excluded. So, I like to take that responsibility of just making sure our team feels like one big team, not a bunch of little teams within. (A10)

Similarly, Athlete A12 explained:

> I feel like we play so much better if everyone gets along and everyone feels welcomed on the team. I know in past years we've had some drama on teams and it never works out well. Girls weren't passing to each other over things, and it was really like messing up our team and the flow. So, I think us being able to get over that and being able to have a good time with each other, like in the dressing room and outside of hockey activities, just having a really strong family relationship with everyone, really helps us. (A12)

***Keeping the Energy Positive***

Given the possibility of team dynamics being off-balance, exclusion, or 'drama', participants also spoke of the importance of keeping the team's energy positive. As Athlete A2 describes:

> I would say, for me, it's just, like leadership would be just putting the team before yourself and making sure that, you know, I think it's really about the energy that you have. A negative energy is just going to suck all the energy out of the room and a positive

> energy will do, quite the opposite, and will just boost everyone up. So, I would say just leadership is like someone who like puts the team before themselves, has a great energy and just a positive outlook on kind of, any situation. (A2)

Further, athlete A14 described the importance of achieving balanced energy on the team, by considering all individuals: "So, we really like to focus on the personalities of everyone. And our coach likes to say, 'no energy vampires' - so our room is always a positive atmosphere." (A14)

**Developing a Shared Foundation: Caring and Supporting**

The first two themes highlight the shared leadership structure within these 15 elite female youth hockey teams and how coaches and athletes collaborated to establish and build this structure. The third theme reflects the foundation of this structure: a caring and supportive environment. Two sub-themes emerged: (a) creating culture early, and (b) people-first relationships.

***Creating Culture Early***

Coaches and athletes suggested that the development of a caring and supportive environment was rooted in creating a culture in alignment with a shared leadership approach. Coach C15 emphasized the need to actively foster culture: "I think leadership is a lot like culture, where it's kind of that living, breathing thing that that you know we have to water it to see it grow." For Coach C2, creating the "right" culture at the start of the season involved asking questions and revisiting his philosophy:

> We always start with culture. We always start with, "Why are we all here?" I really believe that the game is for the players. […] They need to understand why they're here and then from that, based on that, then we develop our, okay well, "What do we need to do to achieve your why?" […] To me culture is all about driving behaviors […] If you

> get the culture [right] at the beginning…. A lot of those other things that drive success and competition levels, naturally evolve out of that. If you get it wrong, it's really hard to come back from that. So, my philosophy is really creating an environment where everybody believes they belong, where we understand why we're there. They believe that their contribution matters and we focus on what we can control. We stay in the moment […] and the results are what the results are. But we try to focus on the process.

Coach C6 also spoke about the importance of starting the season out with a positive culture, by asking questions and developing a cohesive understanding between the coach and team captains:

> A lot of it for me is team culture and leadership. So how do we form that the right team culture? What does our team culture of this year's organization going to look like versus last year's? Do I have the right leaders in place? You know, I think they're the ones that drive that culture. I mean, I'm *the* Leader. It all comes based off of me, but I like my assistant captains, Captain, to be an extension of who I am. But if they're not on the same page, it doesn't really matter, what I want. Our culture is not gonna be very strong.

Coach C12 outlined how he created culture by focusing on three 'main things':

> I think the main thing is… The athletes come first. […] So, skill development, I would say is number one, and then, of course, you know, you want to have a safe, fun environment for them. I think that is what really promotes, you know, growth, is you know, if they feel safe [and] that they're having fun. And I think those are the those would be the three main things. (C12)

Once again, athletes had reflections on teams where the 'right' culture was not created early in the season. As Athlete A15 expressed:

> I know, especially in past years, and a bit this year, that players have taken - if they've been named a captain - they've kind of taken that as, they're better than everyone else. So, I think that's kind of something that should have been addressed at the beginning of the year - that just because they're Captain on the team, doesn't mean they hold more value than any other players. Because I know that this year, that kind of brought a lot of tension within the dressing room - that some captains think they're better than other people. Then some players find that really frustrating, and that just builds an internal sense of anger or resentment towards each other in the room.

### *People-First Relationships*

While the creation of the right culture early spoke to the caring and supportive context developed for the team as a whole, participants also spoke of the value of one-on-one relationships with individuals. Coach C1 was very articulate and specific in describing his means of connecting with individuals on the team:

> I tell them we're going to build the bridge, touch the heart, send the message. Building the bridge is getting rapport that first month…getting to know them. Touching the heart is making the individual athlete know that you care about them specifically, and about their goals. (C1)

Coach C9 further reinforced this approach, explaining that he:

> Want[ed] to be athlete focused. So, you know, really wanting to know what that athlete needs, and providing them the best experience possible. […] But I also want to develop a strong relationship with them built on trust and that they realized that I only want the best for them. (C9)

## Attaining Shared Goals: (Re-) Defining Success

Finally, central to the shared leadership approach, was participants' shared goals or outcomes. While participants acknowledged their desire to win, none of them were exclusively focused on winning. Participants did not define success by their teams' winning records or championships, but rather, by other measures of team and individual excellence, improvement, and development. Specific sub-themes that emerged included: (a) staying a family, (b) team improvement and excellence, (c) individual improvement and excellence, and (d) developing 'good people' (personal life skills and attributes).

### *Staying a Family*

As evidenced in previous themes, building a family-like connection and camaraderie amongst teammates was critically important to participants. Participants re-visited this notion when discussing their shared goals and measurement of success as a team. As Athlete A11 explained, "to really bond together and get a good group going - I think just bonding is another one of our goals." Athlete A9 expanded on her team's definition of success stating:

> Success for us, I think, is getting to the end of the season as a team - as a family. Winning or not winning, you know, obviously winning some titles and championships would be huge and, obviously, at the end of the day, that's going to be our main goal, but I think if we can get through some really tough games and end of the year tournaments, and come out happy with each other, and happy with how we played, win or loss, … I think that will be success for us. (A9)

### *Team Improvement and Excellence*

Participants' definitions of success also included improving and attaining excellence as a team. Athletes outlined their desire to feel satisfied with their effort, to fulfill their potential, and to attain their highest possible performance levels. As A11 outlined, "Our team goals…I think

we're just trying to make it as far as possible. […] and I think it's getting better because most of us are going to be here for another few years." Similarly, Coach C9 stated, "I would say that if we reached our full potential, […] then we've had a successful season." Other athletes spoke about wanting to leave the team in a better place for the next group of players:

> I think for me it's building the [Team] program. […] I think that that's what I want to accomplish by the end of the year. I think, leaving [a] legacy is huge for our team - something that [coach] brought in, and it's something that's really resonated with me is like, how can I make [team] name scary to other teams? […] I think that's something that I want to leave behind for the organization because I think it's so huge have an organization that people want to be a part of and creating a community that people want to actually be like, "Yeah! I played for [Team]!" […] I want to make it a better organization. (A9)

Often, a strong alignment could be seen between coaches and athletes when describing what their team's success 'looked like', as evidenced in athlete A2 and coach C2' comments:

> So, success for him (Coach) would just be kind of the same for us. Like just knowing that we did absolutely everything that we could and we finished the season with a smile on our faces - you know loving the team, loving the game, and just wanting to be back on the ice as soon as possible. (A2)

> The biggest barometer of how I define success is when we get to the end of the year… Are the players really disappointed that the season is ending? Are they disappointed that this is our last game together as a team?... That feeling of accomplishment and that feeling of, "What a great year it was!" is not always determined by whether or not we've

> won provincials. So, what I always say to the girls is, "We are outcome aware but we are process driven." (C2)

***Individual Improvement and Excellence***

In addition to improving and attaining excellence as a team, participants expressed a similar desire for/as individual athletes. Coaches focused on developing individual players' technical and tactical skills in order to maximize the potential of the team (previous theme) or to develop personal assets (next/final theme). For example, coaches C3 and C5 spoke about the value of personal improvement leading to the team's greater on-ice success:

> So, my coaching philosophy from the athletic side of it, is focus on the individual. Grow the individual. Empower the individual. Give them the opportunities to be successful. And when you do that, it becomes a lot easier to develop the team concept from there. (C3)

> I don't define success by wins and losses, I really don't. […] Like we have goals that we set out to be at the beginning of the year and the very last goal that I put is to win a championship. Because I don't put that much merit into it, I think the goals that come before that is what's going to get us there. But the biggest thing for me, that I communicate to my team, is for me success looks like each and every single player being the best version of themselves on and off the ice. (C5)

Similarly, athletes expressed their individual goals to improve - to in turn contribute to the team's collective improvement and excellence. As athlete A3 expressed,

> The team goal is obviously to win playoffs but, in general, our team goal is to all be able to play our best for playoffs and (…) being able to see improvement throughout the year.

> For me personally, my goal is to be able to be better than or, to be able to play at my best. (A3)

Athlete A10 expressed similar thought processes:

> There's always the goal of we want to win the big tournament and we want to win Provincials. But I think the biggest goal is just I want to see everybody improve. I want to be able to look back at the beginning of the year and say, "Oh, we may have struggled with our passing", let's say, but come the end of the year, "We are fantastic at that!" And just being able to see that continuous growth is really just a win. […] But I like to always take something away from my experience, whether it's a new skill I learned on the ice, off the ice, just being able to look back and be like, "Wow! At the beginning of the season I couldn't do that, but now it's just a part of what I do!" (A10)

Another measure of individuals athletes' improvement and excellence was their advancement to the next level of their playing career. Athletes wanted to move up the ladder to the next league, whether the college/university level, the national team, and potentially, professional hockey. Athlete A12 spoke not just about her own desire to advance to the next level but also for her teammates to achieve success at the next level (further reinforcing the concept of 'we before me'):

> Definitely winning provincials and getting to provincials, because that's something that a lot of us want to do, and some of us it's our last year in U18, so I think it would be great to win a provincial championship for those girls. I think, also I want to see a lot of my teammates graduate to the [higher level] and be able to move on to like a higher level of hockey and start getting looks from NCAA and CIS [Usports] scouts. A lot of girls on my team really deserve those spots, so I think that would be really exciting for me to see that.

Coaches were keenly aware of their athletes' want to move onto the next level, and congruently defined success in this manner:

> I mean the team, first and foremost…I want each individual and the team collectively to reach their goals, right. So, most players at this level, one of their big goals is to play at the next level. So, certainly, year after year, trying to attain that - you know, everyone being able to play the university level, whether that be at Usports or whether that be NCAA, that's a great, you know - success to me. C13

Finally, some coaches felt compelled to explain their focus on personal/individual improvement, as it was often perceived to be in contradiction with a team focus on winning:

> The team goals (…) could be winning, for sure. But we tend to set some goals outside of that because we're very cognizant of like, only one team is going to win. So, if we only set goals of winning and we don't win, and that kind of sets us up to say, "Well, what was the point of the season" right? And so yeah, the goals that we set as a team and individuals (…) - it's if everyone wants to still play at the end of the year. That's a big one for me. (C13)

***Developing 'Good People' (Personal Life Skills and Attributes)***

Finally, participants expressed a strong desire to develop 'good people', by fostering athletes' personal life skills and attributes, imparted through the lessons and learnings of competitive hockey. As coach C9 expressed, "Success would mean that you know these people turn out to be great people and do great things." Similarly, coaches C13 and C15 explained their philosophies:

> It's a combination of helping young people enjoy a sport they love, while hopefully helping them gain some valuable life skills along the way, that can help them throughout the rest (their) life, not just in sport and not just certainly in minor hockey. (C13)
>
> To create and develop an environment that allows players to learn the game and grow as individuals, grow as students, grow as athletes, and develop some individual skills within a team environment that allow them to find success later in life, whatever that next step looks like for them. (C15)

Furthermore, athlete A10 summarized her coach's approach:

> She (Coach C10) is really focused on successes - just getting us to be better players and better people at the end of the day. If we don't end up winning the biggest tournament or we lose an important game …I think, for her, she'll still feel successful if she knows she's made an impact in our lives - a positive impact in who we are, as people and as players. (A10)

Participants valued and strove to achieve wide ranging life skills (e.g., punctuality, communication skills) and attributes (e.g., character, integrity). For example, Coach C14 highlighted how athletes learned to "do the stuff that's hard and other people don't want to do; having tough conversations." Athlete A7 further described a good leader as "someone that includes everyone, works hard - like in the gym, off ice (…) like, in school, just being a good person overall." Further, coach C13 expressed,

> I still think that things like being on time, being honest, being a person of good character and integrity, admitting when you're wrong...You know, doing the little things, called upon to be a good person are important. And I think through sport and especially a team sport, that can be very challenging because sometimes doing those things aren't in the

> best interest of the individual, but they might be in the best interest of the team. So, I think those are lessons that are going to serve people as they progress through life and be part of teams at work or family teams and, obviously, certainly, teams if they decide to get married or be part of their own family. (C13)

## Discussion

The purpose of this research was to explore shared coach and athlete leadership within Canadian elite youth female hockey teams. Fifteen head coaches of elite youth girls' ice hockey in Canada, and members of their leadership groups (i.e., captains (n = 2), assistant captains (n = 9), members of leadership groups (n = 4)) participated in the study. All 15 teams had shared leadership structures comprised of either (a) a leadership group with captains and assistants (n = 6), (b) a captain with 2-3 assistants (n = 7), or (c) alternative shared leadership structures (i.e., a leader group with no captains (n = 1), a leader group comprised of 4 assistant captains (n = 1)).

Findings emerged aligning with four key themes. In the first theme, *establishing a shared leadership structure: collective collaboration*, participants described how their individual leadership characteristics and attributes helped establish a structure of collaboration between coach and athlete leaders. Specifically, participants outlined the value of a team vision and philosophy of collaboration, allowing formal athlete leaders to influence informal leaders and the rest of the team toward shared goals. In turn, this led to bidirectional flow of informaiton between coach and athlete leader which created team environments that valued all team members' voices. This enabled formal and informal athlete leaders to take on different leadership roles needed for the team to function effectively.

Within the second theme, *building a shared philosophy: we before me*, participants highlighted their preference for a shared leadership sturcture that valued success of the collective

over that of the individual. The team-first mentality was fostered by building strong relationships between team members through a willingness to help teammates, creating a sense of family or community, and keeping the team atmosphere positive. A focus on the collective helped mitigate conflict within the team, fostering a belief that all team members were valued, which enabled the team to move toward goal achievment and satisfaction.

In the third theme, *developing a shared foundation: caring and supporting*, participants decribed the caring and supportive foundation for the shared leadership structure. Coaches and athletes described the creation of team culture early in the season as vital for driving the right behaviors of athletes and creating cohesion between coach and athlete leaders. Furthermore, particpants spoke to the value of people-first relationships which focused on nurturing the needs of the individual within the team setting. This foundation of care and support was central to participants having positive experiences, and in turn creating a stronger team environment, because the needs of all team members were being supported.

Within the final theme, *attaining shared goals: (re)defining success*, particpants described their shared team goals, acknowledging that they had a strong desire to win, but that this was not their exclusive focus in striving for success. Participants were mindful that only one team is going to win a championship at the end of a season and that this goal alone should not be the singular outcome defining their success. They (re)defined success as the ability to stay a family throughout the season, while achieving improvement and excellence on both a team and individual levels, and developing personal life skills and attributes. Participants described success as fulfilling their potential, leaving the team in a better place at season's end, achieving their highest level of performance, improving individual skills, and advancing to the next level of play. Additionally, there was a strong desire among particpants for team members to develop as

good people by imparting life lessons through the challenges of a team environment and competitive hockey.

In the sections that follow, findings are discussed in relation to the study's aims, and in the context of addressing gaps in previous knowledge. Specifically, the discussion is divided into three main sections focused on: (a) advancing understanding of shared leadership in a specific sport context (i.e., Canadian elite female hockey), (b) furthering understanding of coach, team captain, and athlete leadership compatability within a shared leadership model, and (c) offering practical implications to enhance leadership within shared leadership models. A final section focuses on the study's strengths and limitations, and study contributions.

**Canadian Elite Youth Women's Hockey: A Collective Leadership Model**

Overall, study findings support that Canadian elite youth female hockey, like many team sports, is evolving toward a shared leadership model where coaches and athlete leaders collaborate in all matters of team leadership (Duguay et al., 2020 ; Fransen et al., 2018; Fransen et al., 2020). Regardless of structure (i.e., captain and assistant captains, 4 assistant captains, no captain and leadership group) a collective appraoch was felt to 'work better' and facilitate better team functioning and reduce 'drama' within the team environment. Specifically, findings of the first theme (i.e., *establishing a shared leadership structure: collective collaboration*) extend research by Hodge and colleagues (2014), who described the motivational climate of the world champion New Zealand All Blacks rugby team as a "dual-management model" where coaches and athletes collaborated on all aspects of the team, from tactics on the field of play to team environment off the field. In the current study, Hodge and colleagues' work was expanded to offer details of how coach and athlete leaders collaborated - through bi-directional communication, collective decision making, and valuing every team member's voice.

Additionally, coaches valued input from athlete leaders and the team as a whole, and athlete leaders felt supported when coaches listened to and implemented feedback from the leadership group or team in general. Participants described that a shared approach to leadership was vital for success, and collectively expressed a preference for a collective leadership model, however, further research is needed to determine whether this finding may be unique to ice hockey, female ice hockey, and/or a youth/under 18 age group. Additional investigation is warranted to determine whether the perceived effectiveness of a collective leadership model is optimal for other sports (e.g., with more or less interaction), different age groups (e.g., with varied psychosocial and cognitive maturity), and/or different gendered (e.g., boys, mens, other) sports.

**Compatibility: A Team of Leaders in Different Roles**

Findings of this study emphasized the critical role of collaboration among all teammates in a shared leadership model. Past research has differentiated leadership roles as on-field (i.e., task, motivational) and off-field (i.e., social, external), with mixed findings regarding the importance and/or value of these different roles. While Bucci et al. (2012) found on-field and off-field leadership qualities were viewed as equally important by athlete and coach participants, Fransen, Vanbeselaere et al. (2014) found on-field leadership roles were perceived as more important, placing greater emphasis on task and motivational roles. Findings in the current study, demonstrating a collective leadership model, align and expand upon those in Bucci et al.'s study, as participants perceived on-field leadership roles (or on-ice roles in ice hockey) and off-field (or off-ice) roles as collectively valuable. One explanation for this more egalitarian view of leadership roles could be the nature of the sport of ice hockey – which was the sport context for both the current study and Bucci and colleagues' study, whereas Fransen, Vanbeselaere et al.'s (2014) study was conducted among other mixed sports (i.e., basketball, field hockey, ice hockey,

softball, rugby, soccer, volleyball, waterpolo). The sport of ice hockey involves many sport specific elements including smaller playing areas and interchageable player positions, that in turn limit interactional central player positions. In contrast, Fransen, Haslam, et al. (2016) found in their study in other sport contexts that on-field (i.e., task and motivational) leaders were more likely to occupy interactionally central playing positions. In sum, the unique (i.e., egalitarian) interpretation of leadership roles in this study could be due to functional differences within the game of ice hockey compared to the other sports, or it could point more specifically to unique elements of Canadian elite female ice hockey (e.g., high value placed on off-ice leadership). In line with suggestions for further investigation outlined above, it would be valuable to explore and better comprehend athletes' interpretation of leadership roles within collective leadership models, in diverse sport contexts (i.e., age, level, sport, gender).

An extension of these findings regarding on- and off-ice leadership roles is that participants in this study viewed all teammates, regardless of playing position or formal/informal leadership roles, as having the potential to be a leader by fulfilling diverse roles within the shared leadership model, and in turn contributing to the team's success. This is in line with past research indicating that teams that share responsibilities across the four athlete leader roles (i.e., task, motivational, social, and external) have several more postive team outcomes including greater team identity, higher levels of confidence, and stronger task and social cohesion compared to a single captain model (Fransen, Vanbeselaere, et al., 2014; Fransen, Haslam, et al., 2017; Loughead, et al., 2016; Price & Weiss, 2013).

Further, these findings suggest that shifts in teams' leadership structures may be accompanied with evolving interpretations of leadership. Loughead and colleagues (2006) defined an athlete leader as an individual who influences the team toward the achievement of a

common goal, and that those leaders can be both formal (i.e., a captain, assistant captain, or member of the team's leadership group) and informal (i.e., an individual that takes on leadership without a role specified by the coach). Findings of this study are in line with this definition; however, ongoing research on shared leadership structures should simultaneously allow space for revisiting of the definition of leadership. In particular, leadership roles may be less binary (i.e., formal/informal; on-field/off-field), but more fluid or continuous in categorization, and/or be team-specific. Addtionally, there may be a need to better understand the role of followership in shared and collective leadership models. Recent research in transformational leadership in sport contexts highlights the value of leaders stimulating and inspiring followers, to achieve extraordinary outcomes and exceed expectations, through value-based intellectually stimulating environments; this model has been shown to result in greater follower satisfaction and commitment to the organization (Bass, 1985; Fransen, Haslam, et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2017). However, findings of the current study seem to align more closely with the context described by Kerr (2013) of the New Zealand All Blacks' rugby team, whereby team leaders' focus was increasingly on creating more leaders, rather than creating followers.

In sum, this study's findings extend previous research (e.g., Duguay et al., 2020; Fransen et al.'s, 2014; 2018; 2020), which found that leadership no longer lies with one individual (i.e., the captain), but rather is spread across several leaders on the team which fulfill multiple leadership roles within the team structure; and that leaders within the team mutually impact each others' leadership characteristics and abilities. Findings raise several questions for further investigation, most notably: (a) Is there a delineation between on-field (task, motivational) and off-field (social, external) roles within the shared leadership model? (b) Does the structure of the sport (e.g., ice hockey with more shared central interdependent interplay) influence the

importance of different leadership roles? (c) Are the four-fold leadership roles applicable across specific sport contexts and levels (e.g., youth versus professional, male/female), (d) Might there be additional unnamed leadership roles within the shared leadership model, outside the existing four identified? (e) Does followership fit within shared leadership models?

## Practical Implications: Enhancing Leadership within a Shared Leadership Model

In addition to advancing understanding of shared leadership models in a sport specific context, findings of this study also offer preliminary practical implications for coaches and sport stakeholders aiming to enhance leadership and postive team outcomes, drawing upon a shared leadership model. Implications could be considered in four key areas: (a) developing a caring collaborative culture, (b) becoming and staying a family, (c) putting 'good' people first, and (d) helping foster individual and team success. These implications are discussed in the context of fostering youth athletes' development through implicit and/or explicit approaches.

### *Developing Culture: Care and Collaboration*

Foremost, participants highlighted the development of a caring and supportive culture, centered around athlete empowerment and a collaborative team environment, which in turn positively influenced coaches' and athletes' views of success. Participants emphasized the longevity of this culture – created and initiated early in the season, and 'worked at' throughout the season (e.g., keeping energy positive). This reinforces the work of Lara-Barcial and Mallett (2016) on serial winning coaches at the professional and Olympic levels, which found successful coaches had a well-developed personal philosophy, a clear and compelling vision of success, managed people succesfully, and the created optimal environments for development.

### *Becoming and Staying a Family*

Foundational to this caring collaborative culture were the positive relationships between the coach, athlete leaders, and team members, as well as between formal and informal leaders within the team environment. The subtheme of being a family emerged within more than one theme – first in relation to building a team philosophy (i.e., *we before me*) and also in relation to the fourth theme (*i*.e., *attaining shared goals: (re-)defining success*), whereby participants expressed a desire to not just form a family-like environment, but also to stay a family throughout the challenges of a season. As noted above in their study of serial winning coaches, Lara-Bercial & Mallett (2016) use the term, "driven benevolence" to describe coaches' determined pursuit of excellence alongside a genuine care for others in an environment optimized for development.

***Putting 'Good' People First***

Also central to the to the team's structure, philosophy, foundation, and shared goals, was the focus on developing 'good people', rather than simply performing athletes. The coaches of elite youth sport athletes in this study viewed the individuals under their tutalege as people first and athletes second. Coaches and athletes consistently expressed a desire to develop 'good people' by fostering individuals' personal life skills and attributes. Similarily, the rugby All Blacks placed emphasis on values such as "better people make better All Blacks", creating a culture of player responsibility and leadership, and strong team cohesion, alongside an expectation of competitive excellence (Hodge et al., 2014).

***Helping Foster Individual and Team Success***

Finally, participants outlined their supportive approach, whereby they helped each other out (i.e., *we before me*), and strove towards improving and achieving excellence personally and with/for the team (i.e., *team/individual improvement and excellence*). Participants viewed

personal improvement and excellence as complementary aims, which helped them to win games, compete for league titles, and win championships. Success was not viewed merely as winning, but rather with the acquisition of other assets like the development of sport-specific skills, advancement to the next level of play, a feeling of team camaradery, and personal development or learning of life-lessons. The desire to leave the team in a better place after they completed their time (i.e., on this team/at this level of play), to create a positive culture and opportunities for their teammates and peers, and to contribute to the legacy of the team and players within the team, were expressed and sought after outcomes among participants.

Findings from this study highlight the importance of developing leadership skills in the coach, formal athlete leaders, as well as imparting these leadership skills across the entire team. There is not only a need for leadership skills within the team's leadership group but a need to develop a succession plan as athletes graduate out of the U18 age group. In this regard it is advantageous to create a team full of leaders to create greater capacity for leadership within the group to allow for backfilling of vaccated leadership positions due to graduation. Furthermore, as mentioned previously creating a team with more leaders in more leadership roles is beneficial to team identity, team confidence, and team cohesion (Fransen, Vanbeselaere, et al., 2014; Fransen, Haslam, et al., 2017; Loughead, et al., 2016; Price & Weiss, 2013).

### *Implicit and Explicit Approaches*

Bean and colleagues (2018) outlined an implicit/explicit continuum which suggests approaches to life skills development and transfer in youth sport can be distributed across six levels from most implicit to most explicit, as follows: (a) structuring the sport context, (b) facilitating a positive climate, (c) discussing life skills, (d) practicing life skills, (e) discussing

transfer, and (f) practicing transfer. Participants in this study discussed fostering and learning leadership skills through both explicit and implicit approaches.

Participants from the current study expressed many ways in which they were proactive (i.e., explicit) in their leadership and life skills development. For example, as evidenced in the first and third themes (i.e., *establishing shared structure; developing a shared foundation*) participants detailed how coaches, in collaboration with team members, explicitly created and implemented team culture, by bringing the team together early, setting expectations around performance, values, behaviours, and leadership, outlining team bonding/team building exercises, and planning team/leadership meetings. This explicit approach is in line with similar works which emphasize the importances of coaches understaning of their personal coaching philosophy, setting a vision for the team to buy into, building a culture in collaboartion with athletes, empowering athletes to lead within the established culture, developing good people in an environment where all can thrive, and imparting life skills that will serve team members during their competive career and beyond ( Donoso-Morales et al., 2017; Hodge et al., 2014; Lara-Bercial & Mallett, 2016; Vallée & Bloom, 2016).

Nonetheless, many coaches and athletes spoke about learning leadership implicitly through their experiences in competitive hockey. They spoke of lessons learned from specific challenges they faced or through watching another coach or athlete leader's actions, and the implications attached to that outcome, whether positive or negative. Additionally, when considering many of the approaches taken by coaches, athletes, and the team within a shared leadership model (e.g., *valuing every voice, helping teammates, people-first relationships*), it could be argued that the distinction between explicitness and implicitness was somewhat blurred. While the intention underlying an action could be considered explicit, an approach was

sometimes so inherent to participants and their immersion within competitive elite sport, they often described their approaches as more implicit in nature. This finding is in line with others recent work which challenges existing binary frameworks detailing implicit and explicit approaches (Bean et al., 2018; Turnnidge et al., 2014), highlighting a need for continued understanding and interpretation of optimal approaches to life skill development through sport. Nonetheless, when revisiting Bean and colleagues' (2018) continuum, which postulates that life skills development and transfer through sport are optimized the more explicit coaches become in their approach, it could be argued there is still room for greater explicitness in both of these areas; specifically coaches could more actively discuss and practice the transfer of life skills, to further enhance positive outcomes among their athletes and athlete leaders.

**Strengths and Limitations**

A key strength of this study was the design, guided by a phenomenological approach (Creswell et al., 2007) using semi-structured interviews to capture the lived experiences of participants and their unique beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives. As the lead researcher, I engaged in reflexivity throughout the research utlitizing journaling, critical friends, and providing participants the opportunity to review the transcripts, ensuring credibility of participant's views into the study. These approaches offered the opportunity to develop great richness in understanding the leadership perspectives of elite female youth hockey players and coaches. My position must be acknowledged as an ice hockey coach with 26 years of coaching experience in female ice hockey. I am in and from the context being examined. This was beneficial because it granted me access to recruiting a robust pool of coaches and athlete leaders and resulted in a high infiltration rate into the participant population. My positionality and familiarity with the sport context enabled me to build rapport quickly, speak the same language

as participants, and have greater understanding of their perspectives on leadership. In qualitative research, the researcher inevitably becomes the data-gathering instrument and as a human, as opposed to an automaton, they also affect what is learned (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Nonetheless, drawing upon this research approach offered a limited perspective of understanding of the broader concept under investigation. In order to compliment the knowledge gained in the current study, additional study design and methods of investigation (e.g., observation, survey, athlete journals) would be valuable.

## Conclusion

In line with this study's purpose, findings advance understanding of shared coach and athlete leadership within Canadian elite youth female hockey teams. Specifically, this study aimed to advance understanding of shared leadership in a specific sport context: Canadian elite female hockey. While there has been extensive research to examine the role of the captain as leader, shared leadership within team sport settings, and leadership in ice hockey specifically (Bucci et al., 2012; Camiré, 2016; Fransen et al., 2014; Fransen et al, 2018; Lara-Bercial & Mallett, 2016), the vast majority of that research has focused on male athlete perspectives. While female ice hockey athletes have been involved in previous studies, they have always been a significantly smaller subset of a larger multisport sample. In general, female athletes are underrepresented in sport literature. In ice hockey, more than 80% of studies focus exclusively on male athletes (Robertson et al., 2019). The results of this study extend understanding of leadership in a sport, shared leadership, and specifically advance understanding of female athlete leadership perspectives in the sport of ice hockey.

This study also aimed specifically to further understanding of coach, team captain, and athlete leadership compatability within a shared leadership model. Shared leadership models are

increasingly prevalent in team sport contexts today when compared to a single captain model (Duguay et al, 2020; Fransen et al, 2018). While findings of the current study are context specific (i.e., to Canadian elite female hockey), they align with much work conducted in other sport contexts to date. For example, several studies of leadership within male hockey have highlighted the importance of developing leadership characteristics, fostering positive coach-athlete leader relationships, sharing responsibilities between coach and athlete leaders and leadership groups, and positive communication between coach and athlete leaders (Bucci et al., 2012; Camiré, 2016; Dupuis et al., 2006); however, disparities between previous studies in male hockey contexts also stand out, including the primacy of winning felt by a National Hockey League captain (Camiré, 2016) and the perceived heirarchical status of male university captains which enabled them greater access to the coach. Further, several findings appear unique to the shared leadership context of this study. Participants redefined success as winning in addition to the acquisition of other assets such as improvement, advancement to the next level, and learning life lessons. Additionally, participants spoke specifically to a lack of hierarcy in their team environment, placing more emphasis on creating a team of leaders in different roles and collective decision making. These disparate concepts may be unique to female ice hockey as opposed to male counterparts, and/or differences between athletes playing at the under 18 age group as opposed to older male athletes at the university or professional levels. Regardless, these findings warrant further inquiry to gain a more fulsome understanding of shared leadership in diverse contexts, to inform the generalizability of this study's findings.

A final aim of this research was to offer practical implications to enhance leadership development within shared leadership models. Findings offer some preliminary insights for coaches and teams aiming for foster healthy shared leadership models in line with the four key

themes emerging from the data: (a) establishing a shared leadership structure of collective collaboration, (b) building a shared philosophy of we before me, (c) developing a shared foundation of caring and supporting, and (d) attaining shared goals by (re-)defining succes. Within these themes, key practical implications include consideration to collective collaboration, becoming and staying a family, fostering 'good' people (before athletes), and helping each other to foster individual and team success. Research should continue to explore what approaches may be optimal within a shared leadership structure (along an implicit/explicit continuum), and in turn, the effectiveness of these approaches in fostering leadership, optimal person/athlete development, and ultimate team success.

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## Appendix A: Coach Interview Guide

[A consent form will be signed and returned to the research assistant over e-mail prior to participant's being scheduled for an interview]

**A. Introduction:**

- Researcher to thank participants for coming.
- Researcher to introduce themselves.
- Researcher to share general purpose of interview: "The purpose of today's discussion is to *exploring elite female youth hockey teams' shared leadership through coach and athlete leaders' experiences.* In particular, I am interested in gaining insight into coach and athlete leaders' overall experiences with consideration to leadership approaches (implicit/explicit), and team outcomes (e.g., performance, positive youth development).

**B. Review of Focus Group Procedure** (Researcher to explain)**:**

- This interview should take between 1 and 1.5 hours to complete.
- There are no wrong or right answers, think of this as a regular conversation.

*Review of Ethics*

Our conversation today will be **audio-recorded.** An audio-file will be saved by the zoom application. This is necessary for research purposes, as I will create a transcript of our discussion and later review participant responses. Only I will hear the audio, and your name and affiliated sport organization will be removed from the transcript before sharing with other members of the research team, meaning all quotes will become anonymous.
Before we begin, do you have any questions?

*Preamble:*

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study and sharing your perspectives on leadership. I'd like to start by getting to know more about you, your journey in sport as an athlete and coach, and your experiences with leadership and your perspectives on how you integrate leadership into your coaching practice. Do you have any questions before we begin?

**INTRODUCTION TO COACH**

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself:
    a. Family – childhood family composition and current family dynamic
    b. Sport background and experience as an athlete and coach
    c. How long have you been coaching?
        - Probe: what positions/roles; what sports; what levels

2. Can you tell me about your coaching philosophy?
    a. Tell me about the experiences that shaped you as a coach.
    b. Tell me about your current coaching context…what kind of team do you have? What are some of the strengths of your team? What are some challenges you are going to, or have faced this season?
    c. What does success look like for you as a coach?

3. Can you tell me about your coaching plan for a typical season?
    a. What are the key factors that you consider in your planning process?
    b. When you think about the outcomes you would like to see at the end of the season, what comes to mind? What are your goals, your team's goals, athlete's goals?
    c. When you think about athlete development (technical, tactical, mental, and social/emotional), what are the priorities you set as a coach?

**PERCEPTIONS OF LEADERSHIP**

4. As I mentioned, I am interested in exploring coach and athlete perspectives on leadership. Can you tell me about how you perceive leadership?
    a. As a general concept (to be clear on whose leadership they are referring to)
    b. As a coach? Among athletes?
    c. Do you perceive leadership as a strength or weakness? Why?
    d. Where does leadership fit into your coaching plan?
    e. Do you feel your perception or understanding of leadership has evolved or changed over time (if so, how)?

**LEADERSHIP WITHIN THE TEAM**

5. How does your leadership impact your team?
    a. How do you view your role as a leader with the team?
    b. Can you tell me about how you develop yourself as a leader?
    c. In a typical week, how often do you address leadership in your plan? Is it something you are deliberate about in your planning? Can you tell me about how you develop or nurture leadership within your athletes?

6. Can you tell me about athletes' leadership within your team?
    d. How do you feel that you as the coach influence your athletes' leadership?
    e. Can you tell me about the qualities that you feel make a good athlete leader?
    f. How are athlete leaders identified and selected within your team?
    g. What leadership roles do you have for your athletes within your team? Are there specific tasks, duties, or expectations you have for your athlete leaders?
    h. At what point in your season do you select/appoint athlete leaders?
    i. What is the leadership structure for your team?
        - Probe: single captain model, shared leadership model, formal and informal leader roles

7. Athletes can fulfill many different leadership roles on a team including both 'formal' and 'informal' roles in both 'on-field' and 'off-field' contexts. Thinking about your team, what different types of leadership roles do feel your athlete leaders fulfill?
    j. Experts looking at sport team leadership have identified different types of leadership roles, and I'm going to discuss each of these specifically with you to get your thoughts in relation to your team. First, formal leadership roles would be

those leaders identified by you and your team like the captain and alternate/assistant captains. Can you talk about the qualities and characteristics of the 'formal' leaders on your team?

k. It's been suggested that informal leaders are those who are not formally identified as team leader like captains or alternate/assistant captains – but could be seen as leaders, nonetheless. Does your team have informal leaders on your team? If so, what qualities and characteristics do these informal leaders have? How would you view their contribution to the team's leadership?
l. Task leaders have been described as those leaders who lead through on-field play and may influence tactics and specific aspects of team play, and keep the group focused on team goals (Fransen et al., 2020). Do you have individuals on your team that you would consider task leaders? If so,
    i. How many?
    ii. Who?
    iii. What position(s)?
        - Probe
            a. What makes them the same/different from other leaders we discussed?
            b. Do you view them as formal or informal?
m. Motivational leaders have been described as the "biggest motivator on the field; this person encourages teammates to go to any extreme; this leader also puts fresh heart into athletes who are discouraged. In short, this leader steers all the emotions on the field in the right direction in order to maximize team performance" (Fransen et al., 2020). Do you have individuals on your team that you would consider motivational leaders?
    i. How many?
    ii. Who?
    iii. What position(s)?
        - Probe
            a. What makes them the same/different from other leaders we discussed?
            b. Do you view them as formal or informal?
n. Social leaders have, "a leading role off the field; this person promotes good relations within the team and cares about having a good team atmosphere, for example, in the dressing room, on the bus, or during social activity. Furthermore, this leader helps with conflicts between teammates off the field. This leader is a good listener and is trusted by teammates" (Fransen et al., 2020). Do you have social leaders on your team?
    i. How many?
    ii. Who?
    iii. What position(s)?
        - Probe
            a. What makes them the same/different from other leaders we discussed?
            b. Do you view them as formal or informal?

o. External leaders are, "the link between the team and the people outside the team; this leader is the representative of the team when dealing with the club management. If communication is needed with media or sponsors, this person will take the lead." They are also intermediaries between the club/coach and the team members. Do you have external leaders on your team?
    i. How many?
    ii. Who?
    iii. What position(s)?
        - Probe
            a. What makes them the same/different from other leaders we discussed?
            b. Do you view them as formal or informal?

p. We've discussed different leadership roles and several types of leadership… Do you feel there are other roles or types of leaders on your team – or other teams that you've seen – that we might have overlooked that you would like to discuss?

**SEX, GENDER AND LEADERSHIP**

8. Do you think leadership 'looks different' for males and females? Explain why or why not.
    q. Do you think there are differences between male and female coach leaders? If so, describe. Can you provide any specific examples?
    r. Do think there are difference in male athlete leaders and female athlete leaders? If so, describe. Can you provide any specific examples?
    s. You are a male/female coach of a female team. Can you describe how you think your experiences may be similar or different to other male/female coach leaders' experiences (possibly probe coaching male and female teams)
    t. As a coach (male/female) on a female team how do you feel your sex influences your relationship or interactions with your athlete leaders?

**CONCLUSION**

9. Demographic information.
    u. If not fully explained in question #1…years coached, years coaching female hockey players, age groups coached, hometown, where they live now and where they grew up. Age. Self identify as male/female? Different sports coached. Levels of athletes coached. Coaching education/certification.

10. Is there anything else you would like to add about leadership, its role within your team, or value to you as a coach? Are there any closing thoughts you would like to add?

11. Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me about your experiences as a coach and sharing your thoughts on leadership and its influence in your team structure. I will follow up in a couple of weeks with a transcript of our discussion today. I would encourage you to review it to make

sure it accurately represents the nature of our conversation. Please feel free to contact me if you have any further thoughts you would like to share or should you have any questions. Once again, thank you very much!

## Appendix B: Athlete Leader Interview Guide

[A consent form will be signed and returned to the research assistant over e-mail prior to participant's being scheduled for an interview]

**A. Introduction:**

- Researcher to thank participants for coming.
- Researcher to introduce themselves.
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*Review of Ethics*
Our conversation today will be **audio-recorded.** An audio-file will be saved by the zoom application. This is necessary for research purposes, as I will create a transcript of our discussion and later review participant responses. Only I will hear the audio, and your name and affiliated sport organization will be removed from the transcript before sharing with other members of the research team, meaning all quotes will become anonymous.
Before we begin, do you have any questions?

*Preamble*. Describe study etc.
Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study and sharing your perspectives on leadership. I'd like to start by getting to know more about you, your journey in sport as an athlete and hockey player, and your experiences with leadership and your perspectives on how the sport of hockey and your coach may have influenced your leadership. Do you have any questions before we begin?

**INTRODUCTION TO ATHLETE**

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself:
    a. Family
    b. Sport background and experience as an athlete. What other sports do you (have you) play?
    c. How long have you been playing hockey?
    d. How long have you played on this team you currently on? How long have you been coached by your current coach?

**PERCEPTIONS OF LEADERSHIP**

2. As I mentioned, I am interested in exploring coach and athlete perspectives on leadership. Can you tell me about how you perceive leadership?

   a. Probe:
      i. As a general concept (to be clear on whose leadership they are referring to)
      ii. In a/your coach
      iii. For an athlete

3. How has your perception or understanding of leadership evolved or changed over time (or has it evolved and changed)?

**LEADERSHIP WITHIN THE TEAM**

4. Can you tell me about how you see the role of the coach on your team?
   a. Tell me about some experiences that shaped you as a player as it relates to coaching (good and bad).
   b. Tell me about your current team and coach…what kind of team do you have? What are some of the strengths of your team? What are some challenges you are going to, or have faced this season?

5. Can you tell me about your priorities for the season?
   a. When you think about the outcomes you would like to see at the end of the season, what comes to mind? What are your team goals? What are your goals as an athlete? What are your goals as a leader?
   b. When you think about athlete development (technical, tactical, mental, and social/emotional), what are the priorities you set for yourself? What does your coach value in these same areas?
   c. Does your coach address leadership in their coaching plan?
   d. What does success look like for you as an athlete? What do you think success looks like for your coach? (Team, athlete, leader)

6. Can you tell me about the leadership structure within your team?
   a. Do you have captains and assistant/alternate captains? If so, how many?
   b. How does your role as an identified athlete leader influence leadership?
   c. Can you tell me about the qualities that make a good athlete leader? A good coach leader?
   d. How are athlete leaders identified and selected within your team?
   e. What leadership roles do you have within your team? Are there specific tasks, duties, or expectations you have for your athlete leaders?
   f. At what point in your season does your coach/team select/appoint athlete leaders?

7. How does leadership impact your team?
   a. How do you view your role as a leader with the team? Why do you think you were identified as a leader for your team? Can you tell me about it makes you feel to be a leader for your team?
   b. Can you tell me about how you develop yourself as a leader?

c. In a typical week, how often does your coach address leadership in their coaching plan? Is it something they are deliberate about in their scheduling/ planning? How do they develop leadership within your team?

8. Leaders can fulfill many different roles on a team. There are both 'formal' and 'informal' roles as well as 'on-field' and 'off-field' leaders within a team's leadership structure.
    a. Thinking about your team and its leadership context, what roles do athlete leaders fulfill? What role(s) do you fulfill as a leader?
    b. Formal roles would be those leaders identified by your coach and/or your team like the captain and alternate/assistant captains. Previously, I asked you about the qualities of a good athlete leader. Can you talk about the qualities and characteristics of the 'formal' leaders on your team?
    c. Informal leaders are those who don't occupy an identified or specific leadership role like a captain or alternate/assistant captains. Does your team have informal leaders? If so, what qualities and characteristics do these informal leaders have? How would you view their contribution to the team's leadership?
    d. Task leaders are those leaders who lead through on-field play and may influence tactics and specific aspects of team play, and keep the group focused on team goals (Fransen et al., 2020). Do you have task leaders on your team?
        i. How many?
        ii. Who – are you a task leader?
        iii. What position(s)?
    e. Motivational leaders are the "biggest motivator on the field; this person encourages teammates to go to any extreme; this leader also puts fresh heart into athletes who are discouraged. In short, this leader steers all the emotions on the field in the right direction in order to maximize team performance" (Fransen et al., 2020). Do you have motivational leaders on your team?
        i. How many?
        ii. Who - – are you a motivational leader?
        iii. What position(s)?
    f. Social leaders have, "a leading role off the field; this person promotes good relations within the team and cares about having a good team atmosphere, for example, in the dressing room, on the bus, or during social activity. Furthermore, this leader helps with conflicts between teammates off the field. This leader is a good listener and is trusted by teammates" (Fransen et al., 2020). Do you have social leaders on your team?
        i. How many?
        ii. Who – are you a social leader?
        iii. What position(s)?
    g. External leaders are, "the link between the team and the people outside the team; this leader is the representative of the team when dealing with the club management. If communication is needed with media or sponsors, this person will take the lead." They are also intermediaries between the club/coach and the team members. Do you have external leaders on your team?
        i. How many?

ii. Who – are you an external leader?
iii. What position(s)?

h. Are there other roles not mentioned previously that you would like to discuss?

**SEX, GENDER, AND LEADERSHIP**

9. Do you think there are differences between male and female leaders? Do think there are difference in male athlete leaders and female athlete leaders? Between male and female coaches?
    a. If so, can you tell me about some of the differences you have experienced as an athlete?
    b. Does your sex influence your relationship or interactions with your coach?

**CONCLUSION**

10. Demographic information.
    a. If not fully explained in question #1…years coached, years coaching female hockey players, age groups coached, hometown, where they live now and where they grew up. Age. Self identify as male/female? What else???

11. Is there anything else you would like to add about leadership, its role within your team, or value to you as a coach? Are there any closing thoughts you would like to add?

12. Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me about your experiences as a coach and sharing your thoughts on leadership and its influence in your team structure. I will follow up in a couple of weeks with a transcript of our discussion today. I would encourage you to review it to make sure it accurately represents the nature of our conversation. Please feel free to contact me if you have any further thoughts you would like to share or should you have any questions. Once again, thank you very much!