

An investigation into transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles and how they influence team culture in high-performance sports teams in Ireland.

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College: National College of Ireland

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Abstract

Leadership plays an important role in shaping team culture and driving performance within high-performance sports teams in Ireland. High-performance teams rely on leaders who can create a positive, innovative, and cohesive culture. This entails leaders helping guide their team and athletes through their clear and strategic decision-making as well as setting an example for their athletes to follow, building trust and respect. Within Irish sport where factors such as tradition and community alignment are considered very important. Leaders must align these values with the demands and expectations that arise from high-performance sports environments. Leadership can form different areas within high-performance sports teams including managers, coaches, athletes or the wider backroom staff that assist the manager, they are all responsible in fostering a robust, positive culture within their environment which encourages strength during challenging times, teamwork and ongoing development in order to achieve success. This helps people within the environment work towards a shared objective, achieve success and ultimately perform at the highest level they are capable of.

This study will explore transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles and their influence on team culture within high-performance teams, focusing on factors such as collaboration, innovation, and adaptability. While existing research highlights the importance of leadership in creating a positive team culture as well as building trust, resilience, and alignment within teams in order to achieve success and performance within high-performance environments, gaps still remain in understanding how specific leadership styles influence cultural outcomes in high-performance sports environment, especially within the context of Ireland. This study will examine how transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles can influence team culture within high-performance sports teams in Ireland. This study will take the experiences of managers, players and support staff from sports such as Intercounty Gaelic Football and Hurling, Professional Rugby and Soccer into consideration with the aim of discovering key insights, recommendations and behaviours that foster a robust and positive team culture and performance. This research will employ a qualitative methodology, including semi-structured interviews which aims to identify leadership approaches that promote positive cultural outcomes and long-term success in high-pressure environments.

The study's findings highlighted the major impact leadership style has on creating a high-performing environments. The research outlines the need of adopting adaptable, context-sensitive leadership approaches. Despite being restricted by a small sample size and time constraints, the results provide useful insights that may help support practical leadership strategies and enhance leadership development frameworks within Irish high-performance sport.

Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Master of Business Administration is entirely my own work and has not been

submitted for assessment for any academic purpose other than in partial fulfilment for that stated above.

Signed *Glenn O'Reilly* Date 12/08/2025

(Glenn O'Reilly)

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Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Desmond Gibney, for his invaluable guidance and support throughout the dissertation. My sincere thanks also extends to my father, Clive, for his continuous support and advice throughout this year and throughout this journey, I would also like to thank my two sisters for their encouragement throughout my studies.

I am particularly grateful to my partner, Katie, who has constantly supported and motivated me and has always shown patience and understanding throughout the duration of this course.

Finally, I would also like to thank my classmates for helping make the past two years an enjoyable experience, and to my friends who have always motivated me to continuously develop, this helped me overcome some of the challenges that arose during my time on the course.

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Abbreviations

GAA	Gaelic Athletic Association
F.A.I	Football Association of Ireland
IRFU	Irish Rugby Football Union
P	Participant
Doc	Document

List of Appendices

Consent Form for participation in research (Document 1)

I of my own accord agree to participate in this research.

I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to respond to any question without any penalties.

The purpose and nature of this research has been explained to me and the opportunity to ask questions has been given.

I understand that my participation in this research requires to undertake an interview of 45 min to an hour.

I consent to the recording of the interview.

I understand that all the information provided to this research will remain confidential.

I understand that my identity will remain anonymous, changing my name and concealing any identifiable information provided during the interview process that might reveal my identity.

I understand that some extracts from my interview may be cited in the findings of the research carried out.

I understand that any information provided to the researcher that could incur in the harm of myself, or others must be reported to the pertinent authorities by the researcher.

I understand that a copy of the interview recording, transcript and consent form will be kept in a password protected folder to which only the researcher has access.

I understand that a copy of the interview recording, transcript and consent form will be stored until the result of the research have been published.

I understand that all the information provided will be available for me to access it.

I understand that I can contact any of the parties involved in conducting this research for further clarification if needed.

Contact details:

(Researcher) Email: xxxxxx@student.ncirl.ie

(Supervisor) Email: xxxxxx@ncirl.ie

Signature of research participant

Participant Information Sheet (Document 2)

I would like to invite you to take part in my research study. Before you decide if you want to participate, I will provide you with some information regarding myself, this research and what your involvement would entail.

Participation Form -

Who I am and what this study is about?

My name is Glenn O'Reilly, and I am carrying out this dissertation for the fulfilment of a MA in Business Administration with the National College of Ireland. The research aims to analyse the concept of "An investigation into Transformational, Transactional, and Laissez-Faire leadership styles and how they influence team culture in High-Performance Sports Teams in Ireland.

What will taking part Involve?

Participating in this research is strictly voluntary. Your participation will include an interview of 45 minutes to an hour that will take place through Microsoft Team. You may decline to answer any question you don't wish to reply to. Additionally, If, at any point, you don't desire to continue with the research, you are welcome to withdraw. With your permission, the audio of the interview will be recorded to facilitate its transcription and a copy of this will be available to you.

Will taking part be confidential?

The information provided for this research will be confidential, and no personal or identifiable information will be recorded in the dissertation. The transcription of the interviews will be stored in my personal computer, unidentifiable and password protected. If during the interview process information is disclosed that is likely to cause serious harm to others, it will have to be disclosed to the pertinent authority.

Why have you been asked to take part?

The relation between leadership and High-Performance teams within Ireland has been critically underexplored, with no research carried out in Ireland to date, leaving a gap in the literature available.

This lack of research added to provides the perfect scenario for our study. Through this research we would like to investigate the reason why and how leadership style influence team culture within high-performance sports teams in Ireland

Right to withdraw?

You can decide to withdraw from the study at any point prior to the transcripts being anonymised without any consequence. You can contact the researcher to request this.

Who should you contact for further information?

If you would like to receive any additional information or ask any other question related to this research, you can contact me on the following phone number or through email at xxxxxx@student.ncirl.ie

Looking forward to speaking with you, Thank you very much for your time.

Interview Questions (Document 3)

1. How would you describe your leadership style, and how has it evolved over time?
Do you consciously use any leadership frameworks (e.g., transformational, transactional, laissez-faire)? Which align most with how you lead or respond to leadership?
2. How do these leadership styles influence the overall culture within your team?
3. Can you describe a time when one of these leadership styles (or a shift in style) directly influenced trust, collaboration, or innovation in the team?
4. Are there moments where a more directive (transactional) or hands-off (laissez-faire) style is necessary? How do you judge when to take that approach?
5. In your view, which leadership style fosters the most positive and sustainable team culture in high-performance sport?
6. Can you share a moment when your leadership style or a leader you worked with was challenged or had to adapt in a high-pressure context?
7. In what ways do you think leadership style can influence athlete or team performance, positively or negatively?
8. How has leadership - your own or someone else's, either enhanced or hindered team cohesion and collaboration?
9. How does leadership affect innovation and new thinking in your team environment?
10. What helps promote open communication and trust within your team?
11. How do you see leadership helping athlete or team resilience during high-pressure or difficult periods?
12. Have you ever experienced or observed a poor team culture? How was it addressed?
13. How is leadership shared or distributed within your team (e.g., captains, senior players, staff)? How does this impact the team?
14. Have you experienced any challenges with shared leadership (e.g., role confusion, friction)? How were these managed?
15. How do you support or identify emerging leaders within your team or environment?
16. How do leadership behaviours help build and sustain a strong team culture over time?
17. How do you balance different leadership approaches to maintain culture, especially during high-pressure or transitional periods?

18. In what ways does leadership affect accountability, discipline, and shared values in your team?
19. How does Irish sporting culture (e.g., amateur ethos, community roots, provincial identity) shape how leadership is practiced or perceived in your team?
20. Are there specific challenges in applying leadership styles like transformational or laissez-faire in the Irish high-performance context?
21. Do you see differences in how leadership works across Irish sports like GAA, rugby, and soccer? What might explain these differences?
22. How has your understanding of effective leadership changed throughout your career?
23. What key experiences or influences have shaped your leadership style or understanding of leadership?
24. What practical leadership behaviours or strategies do you believe are most important for building high-performing teams and strong culture?
25. What supports (e.g., mentoring, education, training) have helped you grow as a leader or better understand leadership?
26. What advice would you give to new or emerging leaders in Irish high-performance sport?
27. In your view, what defines effective leadership in Irish high-performance sport today?
28. What is the most effective way to lead a high-performance sports team in Ireland?
29. Is there anything else you'd like to add about your leadership experience or how leadership influences team culture and performance?

Thesis Declaration Page

Submission of Research and Dissertation

National College of Ireland Research Students Declaration Form (*Thesis/Author Declaration Form*)

Name: Glenn O'Reilly

Student Number: x23189819

Degree for which thesis is submitted: Master of Business Administration

Title of Thesis: An investigation into transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles and how they influence team culture in high-performance sports teams in Ireland.

Thesis supervisor: Desmond Gibney

Date: 14th August 2025

Material submitted for award

- A. I declare that this work submitted has been composed by myself.
- B. I declare that all verbatim extracts contained in the thesis have been distinguished by quotation marks and the sources of information specifically acknowledged.
- C. I agree to my thesis being deposited in the NCI Library online open access repository NORMA.
- D. *Either* *I declare that no material contained in the thesis has been used in any other submission for an academic award.
Or *I declare that the following material contained in the thesis formed part of a submission for the award of

Glenn O'Reilly

(State the award and the awarding body and list the material below)

Thesis Submission Form

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Student name: Glenn O'Reilly Student number: x23189819

School: National College of Ireland Course: Master of Business Administration (MBA)

Degree to be awarded: Master of Business Administration (MBA)

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An Investigation into Transformational, Transactional and Laissez-Faire Leadership Styles and How

They Influence team culture in High-Performance Sports Teams in Ireland

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Signature of Candidate: *Glenn O'Reilly*

For completion by the School:

The aforementioned thesis was received by _____

Date: _____

This signed form must be appended to all copies of your thesis submitted to your school.

Project Submission Sheet

National College of Ireland

Project Submission Sheet

Glenn O'Reilly

Student Name:
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Student ID:
Master of Business Administration MBA

Programme: **Year:**
H9DISSER_A Dissertation

Module:
Desmond Gibney

Lecturer:
15/08/2025

Submission Due Date:

Project Title:
An investigation into Transformational, Transactional, and Laissez-Faire leadership styles and how they influence team culture in high-performance Sports Teams in Ireland.

17,613

Word Count:

I hereby certify that the information contained in this (my submission) is information pertaining to research I conducted for this project. All information other than my own contribution will be fully referenced and listed in the relevant bibliography section at the rear of the project.

ALL internet material must be referenced in the references section. Students are encouraged to use the Harvard Referencing Standard supplied by the Library. To use other author's written or electronic work is illegal (plagiarism) and may result in disciplinary action. Students may be required to undergo a viva (oral examination) if there is suspicion about the validity of their submitted work.

Glenn O'Reilly

Signature:

15/08/2025

Date:

PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING INSTRUCTIONS:

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2. Projects should be submitted to your Programme Coordinator.
3. **You must ensure that you retain a HARD COPY of ALL projects**, both for your own reference and in case a project is lost or mislaid. It is not sufficient to keep a copy on computer. Please do not bind projects or place in covers unless specifically requested.
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5. All projects must be submitted and passed in order to successfully complete the year. **Any project/assignment not submitted will be marked as a fail.**

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AI Acknowledgement Supplement

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An investigation into Transformational, Transactional, and Laissez-Faire leadership styles and how they influence team culture in High-Performance Sports Teams in Ireland.

Your Name/Student Number	Course	Date
Glenn O'Reilly / X23189819	MBA/2	13/08/2025

This section is a supplement to the main assignment, to be used if AI was used in any capacity in the creation of your assignment; if you have queries about how to do this, please contact your lecturer. For an example of how to fill these sections out, please click [here](#).

AI Acknowledgment

This section acknowledges the AI tools that were utilized in the process of completing this assignment.

Tool Name	Brief Description	Link to tool
Microsoft Co-Pilot	Helped support with Transcription and themes of Semi-Structure Interviews via Microsoft Teams	

Description of AI Usage

This section provides a more detailed description of how the AI tools were used in the assignment. It includes information about the prompts given to the AI tool, the responses received, and how these responses were utilized or modified in the assignment. **One table should be used for each tool used.**

Microsoft Co-Pilot
Microsoft Co-Pilot
No prompt – Recorded Interview

Evidence of AI Usage

This section includes evidence of significant prompts and responses used or generated through the AI tool. It should provide a clear understanding of the extent to which the AI tool was used in the assignment. Evidence may be attached via screenshots or text.

Additional Evidence:

[Place evidence here]

Additional Evidence:

[Place evidence here]

1.0 Chapter One - Introduction

In today's world of high-performance sports, achieving success takes a lot more than just skill or strategy. Some of the world's most successful teams are consistently focused on methods and areas that can help them continuously improve. These teams wisely invest in leadership, improving team culture as well as interpersonal relationships to help build and maintain a competitive edge. At the heart of these endowers is the crucial role of leadership, which significantly impacts the psychological climate, collaborative processes, and ultimate performance of elite teams (Northouse, 2019; Schein, 2010).

Leadership is more than just a title or occupying a position; it encompasses the behaviours of the team that help influence the values, habits and actions of a team. It plays a vital role in how teams handle challenges, adapt to change and remain united in high pressure situations. Within high-performance sports teams in Ireland and especially within the context of Gaelic football and hurling, elite level rugby and soccer, leadership becomes even more challenging. These environments blend amateur settings with professional demands, involve many different stakeholders and operate under various governance structures (Bairner, 2001).

Leadership styles and their effectiveness have triggered growing interest, primarily due to their significant impact on culture, motivation, and performance. Leadership styles are typically defined into three different models which include transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and laissez-faire leadership, each leadership model exhibits unique behavioural traits and implications for group dynamics (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Transformational leaders focus on inspiring as well as supporting their team members, through motivation, innovative ideas and personal guidance (Burns, 1978). Transactional leaders on the other hand focus on clear objectives, monitoring, and reward systems to ensure structure and maintain accountability within the team (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Whereas laissez-faire leaders adopt a hands-off approach and provides its team members with autonomy to make their own decisions and take responsibility by delegating tasks and key decisions to its members, though outcomes may vary depending on team maturity and discipline (Robbins et al., 2007).

These leadership styles have a clear impact on a team's culture, they have the ability to effect trust, innovation, engagement, motivation and psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999). The capacity of a leader to adapt these models depending on the specific situation, team maturity,

and performance demands is growingly seen as crucial for building high-functioning teams in elite sport (Goleman, 2017; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011).

Although there is a wealth of international research on sports leadership, a notable gap persists in understanding how these leadership styles are implemented and operate within Irish high-performance sports teams. Teams, including inter-county Gaelic and hurling squads, provincial rugby sides, and league of Ireland clubs, encounter distinct cultural and organisational challenges, they must delicately balance traditional values with the demands of high-performance sports environments. A thorough understanding of how leadership shapes team culture within these unique environments not only enhances theoretical knowledge but also offers significant practical benefits implications for coaches, management, and sport administrators.

International studies have thoroughly researched leadership in high-performance sports but there is a significant gap in research which directly concentrates on the Irish sporting context. In Ireland identity, tradition, and community play an integral role in forming the athlete's experience. Studies that have been carried out by Fransen et al. (2020) and Wagstaff (2018) have emphasised the importance of relationships and psychology in leadership, thereby transcending old-style command and control approaches.

This research originates from my own extensive personal involvement as an athlete in a high-performance sport team in Ireland, particularly within an Inter-County Gaelic football environment. Beyond my role as an athlete within this environment I have also been actively engaged in leadership roles across a wide range of sport disciplines both as a manager and part of a back room environment supporting both managers and players. These experiences have highlighted the multifaceted challenges that leaders face with aiming to balance performance demands, team cohesion, athlete wellbeing as well as cultural fit. My experiences have also highlighted many inconsistencies in leadership styles within sports organisations showing the need for deeper awareness of how leadership styles can have an effect on team culture and overall team performance. This research hopes to close that gap and offer key insights into the key dynamic that occurs between leadership styles and their impact on team culture.

The researcher also had a keen interest in understanding on a more detailed level in how emotional intelligence, peer influence, and adaptable leadership approaches can help foster

resilience and help build sustained success. This research will also aim to address gaps in existing literature by examining the lived experiences of leaders, athletes and support staff who have or are currently operating within Ireland's high-performance sporting environment.

The study aims to examine and further investigate transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles and how they influence team culture in high-performance sports teams in Ireland. This research will particularly focus on how these leadership styles can impact key components of team functioning within elite sports which include collaboration, motivation, adaptability, and innovation. Specifically, the research aims to address the following questions:

1. How are transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles demonstrated and experienced within Irish high-performance sports teams?
2. What impact do transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles have on team culture, including trust, psychological safety, and group dynamics?
3. How does a leader's behaviour influence performance, resilience, and sustained success in a high-performance Irish sport environment?
4. How does shared leadership and peer influence affect team cohesion, leadership effectiveness, and performance in high-performance Irish sports teams?

The study adopts a qualitative research approach, firmly rooted in organisational behaviour theory and sociological perspectives. To explore the questions further out semi-structured interviews were carried out with a diverse range of participants including managers, players and support staff within high-performance sports teams in Ireland. With the aim of gaining a better insight into these participants lived experiences and their insights into the impact that leadership can have within high-performance sport.

Furthermore, the ensuing literature review will thoroughly examine relevant theories and research on organisational behaviour, leadership styles, high-performance team functioning, and the socio-cultural context specific to Irish sport. The aim is to discover actionable insights. I hope to develop leadership strategies that cater for the demands of high-performance sport in Ireland. Ultimately my aim is to contribute significantly to both

academic research as well as real world leadership practice in the world of high-performance sport.

The framework of this thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive review of the existing literature on transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles, with a particular emphasis on how they influence team culture within high-performance sport teams in Ireland while also identifying research gaps, especially within the Irish context. Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology, detailing the qualitative approach that was utilised, the use of semi-structured interviews, as well as the rationale for these choices, and the procedures for data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 will delve into the findings of the study, structured around key themes and backed by direct quotations from participants. Chapter 5 explores these findings while referring to the research question, existing literature, and relevant leadership theories. Lastly, Chapter 6 concludes the thesis by summarising the key insights, outlining theoretical and practical implications, and proposing directions for future research.

2.0 Chapter Two - Literature Review

2.1. Organisational Behaviour: Foundations and Context

Organisational behaviour is a broad study of human behaviour within organisational settings, it aims to understand, predict, and influence actions at the individual, group, and organisational levels (Robbins & Judge, 2019). It combines different theories and research from numerous fields such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics, and political science in order to provide a better understanding of how people operate within organisations. Organisational behaviour main objective is to improve both organisational effectiveness and employee wellbeing by using proven, researched based methods. Key elements of Organisational behaviour include leadership, motivation, communication, power and politics, decision-making, team dynamics, conflict resolution, organisational culture, and change management (McShane & Von Glinow, 2017). These areas are closely aligned and together shape how organisations function, influencing important factors like performance, innovation, and employee satisfaction.

Organisational behaviour was first developed in the early 20th century with Frederick Taylor's Scientific Management, which prioritised improving efficiency and productivity through task optimisation, measurement, and control (Taylor, 1911). This approach viewed

workers more like parts of a machine. Later, the Human Relations Movement, inspired by Elton Mayo's Hawthorne Studies (Mayo, 1933), highlighted that psychological and social factors such as recognition, having a sense of belonging, and open communication has a strong influence on both employee behaviour and performance.

As the field of Organisational behaviour evolved, it integrated more complex views and ideas, such as Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs which highlights the different levels of human motivation, Herzberg's (1959) two-factor theory which outlines the factors that result in job satisfaction and dissatisfaction and McGregor's (1960) Theory X and Theory Y which focuses on different management approaches based on assumptions about employee motivation. More recent insights include emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) which explores how understanding and managing emotion can help improve work relationships, psychological contracts (Rousseau, 1995) look at the unwritten expectations between employers and employees, while organisational justice (Greenberg, 1987) focuses on fairness in how people are treated in work. Today organisational behaviour includes systems thinking and complexity theory, which view organisations as flexible, adaptive systems who are capable of responding to internal and external forces (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

While organisational behaviour originally focused on business and industrial environments, its use has broadened to different settings such as public services, education, healthcare and increasingly, sport. In these environments, organisational behaviour principles support team coordination, leadership development, and organisational improvement (Wagstaff & Leach, 2015).

In education, organisational behaviour has been utilised to better understand and improve factors such as staff morale, curriculum innovation, and administrative leadership. In sports, it promotes teamwork across a wide range of athletes and teams, improving cohesion and staff retention. These examples show how adaptable and valuable organisational behaviour can be across different organisational environments.

Within elite sports teams, especially those working within high-pressure settings have become an increasing focus for organisational behaviour research and practice. Organisational behaviour principals help us understand how leadership, communication, motivation, and team culture impact key factors such as cohesion, resilience, and long-term success. As with other organisations, high-performing sports teams face challenges with

factors such as hierarchy, role clarity, managing emotions, providing and taking on feedback, and measuring performance. The intense nature of competition, public scrutiny, and small margin for error highlight the need for effective organisational behaviour.

Wagstaff and Leach (2015) emphasise that organisational behaviour frameworks are vital in high-performance sport, where factors such as athlete wellbeing, leadership style, and team dynamics impact both immediate results and long-term development. Therefore, organisational behaviour provides an important foundation both theoretical and practical for understanding leadership within elite Irish sports teams, which face distinct cultural, institutional, and performance-related challenges.

2.2 Evolution of Leadership Theories and Styles

Leadership, a key element within organisational behaviour has developed dramatically within the last century. Early theories focused heavily on traits, suggesting that good leaders are born with specific characteristics such as intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and charisma. Although research could not show that a single set of traits resulted in effective leadership, attention then shifted to behavioural theories with key studies coming from Ohio State University and the University of Michigan which explored the actions and behaviours of leaders, focusing on two main types of task-oriented and relationship-oriented behaviours (Fleishman, 1953; Likert, 1961). These theories suggested that leadership could be learned not just inherited, but they were soon criticised for not considering the context in which leadership occurs.

As a result, contingency and situational leadership theories emerged, which argue that a leader's effectiveness is situational dependent, this is highlighted in Fiedler's Contingency Model (1967) which mentioned that a leader's success was aligned between their leadership style either task or relationship-oriented fits the situation. Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership Theory (1969) added that leaders should adapt their style based on teams' maturity, commitment and skill level.

Another important breakthrough came when Burns' (1978) introduced the idea of transactional and transformational leadership. Bass (1985) built on this further with the Full Range Leadership Model which along with Avolio and Bass (1991), identified three key leadership styles: transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire. Each of these styles have

a different approach of leading and influencing teams and this model is now one the most widely used framework in both organisational and sports leadership studies.

2.2.1 Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership is characterised by the ability of a leader to inspire, motivate, and intellectually stimulate team members while fostering a supportive and value-driven culture (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Transformational leadership includes four main elements which are idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration. This leadership style helps leaders to build trust, encourage innovation and align individual goals with the team goals. This approach to leadership is particularly effective in high-pressure, dynamic environments where adaptability and cohesion are paramount (Fransen et al., 2017).

Transformational leaders create an environment that encourages psychological safety, an important element in high-performance environments where risk-taking, creativity, and emotional resilience are critical (Dvir et al., 2002). Kark, Shamir, and Chen (2003) also noted transformational leaders help foster an environment which promotes collaboration, trust, and innovation key elements that are required in elite sports. Within the Irish sporting environment, where inter-county Gaelic football, hurling, professional rugby and soccer require strong mental toughness and a long-term focus, this leadership style proves particularly effective (Fransen et al., 2020).

Research has shown that transformational leadership works well within Irish sport. This transformational leadership approach helped improved resilience and unity within teams helping them to overcome challenges and perform in high pressurised moments throughout a campaign. Furthermore, Afsar and Umrani (2020) highlighted that transformational leadership improves engagement and fosters a psychological safety, resulting in improved performance.

However, the success of transformational leadership relies on team members having shared values and aligned goals. Without team cohesion and mutual understanding, its impact may be limited (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Leaders must have awareness of the team dynamics and adapt their style to create a collaborative and growth- focused environment.

2.2.2 Transactional Leadership

Transactional leadership is based on clear structures, rewards, and consequences to achieve specific goals (Bass, 1985). Transactional Leadership is based on three key elements which include contingent reward, Leaders rewarding individuals or team members for meeting set goals or performance indicators, active management by exception where a leader will monitor and correct as they see necessary, and finally passive management by exception, where leaders will only intervene when issues arise. This leadership style encourages consistency, and strong discipline (Avolio & Bass, 2004).

In the context of high-performance sports teams in Ireland, the transactional approach to leadership can be often utilised to ensure that key performance indicators are met. Where tactical adherence, role clarity, and performance consistency are critical, transactional leadership becomes an essential tool for team management. In Irish sports, particularly in rugby, soccer and inter-county Gaelic football and hurling, where team performance is closely monitored, transactional strategies are commonly used to maintain discipline and focus (O'Boyle, Takos & Hassan, 2021).

Although, an over-reliance on this leadership style can result in rigidity and a lack of innovation, which may impact the long-term adaptability and success of the team (Eisenbeiss et al., 2008). The success of transactional leadership relies on the team's ability to align with its structure and standards. Without it, transactional leadership may result in disengaged team members and hamper collaboration. Furthermore, transactional leadership may erode team cohesion if athletes perceive their contributions as valued only in terms of performance outcomes rather than personal development or team relationships (Eisenbeiss et al., 2008).

Therefore, transactional leadership is most effective when complemented with elements of transformational leadership. Combining elements of transformational leadership, teams can achieve a balance between discipline and long-term engagement, creating both accountability and a deeper connection to team objectives and values.

2.2.3 Laissez-Faire Leadership

Laissez-Faire leadership, often seen as a hands-off approach or non-leadership style, is characterised by the leader's avoidance of decision-making and minimal involvement in team processes (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Laissez-Faire style to leadership usually is linked to poor team performance, however this approach can have a positive impact and empower self-motivated teams, mature, autonomous teams where members possess a high degree of self-regulation, trust, and competence (Skogstad et al., 2007).

Within high-performance teams and especially within sport where clarity of roles and responsibilities, coordination and alignment are crucial for achieving success, in high-performance sports teams, where clarity and alignment are essential for achieving collective success, laissez-faire leadership may have mixed outcomes. For teams with high levels of self-motivation and experience, a laissez-faire leadership approach can build autonomy, responsibility, and innovation as athletes assume responsibility for their decisions and actions. Whereas teams that are less experienced or teams that are in a phase of transition this approach may not be effective and may result in ambiguity, role confusion as well as damaging team culture (Fransen et al., 2020). A laissez-faire approach to leadership has significant risks involved as coordination and clarity in roles and responsibilities are required for teams to be successful. In the absence of clear guidance, the lack of structure can lead to confusion and undermine the collective focus required for success in high-pressure environments.

Within the Irish sports context, particularly within intercounty Gaelic football and hurling, rugby and football, laissez-faire leadership can present significant challenges. This approach can be helpful during off field preparation phases or when empowering experienced players to take more responsibility. But in a highly pressured environment, such as high-performance sports a laissez-faire approach to leadership has significant risks involved. These risks include, coordination and clarity in roles and responsibilities which are required for teams to be successful. In the absence of clear guidance, the lack of structure can lead to confusion and undermine performance and cohesion which is required for success in high-pressure environments. Therefore, laissez-faire leadership is most effective when used selectively and in combination with more structured approaches.

To conclude, the Full Range Leadership Model provides a helpful framework for understanding how different leadership styles affect team dynamics and culture. Research shows that transformational leadership promotes innovation, satisfaction, and performance (Eisenbeiss et al., 2008), while transactional leadership maintains stability as well as accountability. Although Laissez-faire leadership is regularly criticised, it can have its place within specific settings.

This evolution from trait-based models to the Full Range Leadership Model offers a strong platform for studying leadership in high-performance sports teams in Ireland and how they can have an impact on team culture. Future research should look at how leaders adapt these styles to fit the cultural and organisational landscape of Irish sport.

2.4 The Irish Sporting Context

Ireland has a rich sporting history and culture which manages to blend strong local traditions with global influences, this plays a key part in shaping national identity and community life. Some of Ireland's most popular and culturally important sports include Gaelic games and hurling, rugby union, and soccer. These sports are more than just hobbies or recreational pastimes; they also function as vehicles for identity expression, social integration, and performance excellence (Bairner, 2001). In this highly competitive setting strong leadership is key for building team culture, sustaining motivation and performing in highly pressurised settings.

2.4.1 Gaelic Games

Gaelic football and hurling, which is governed by the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), possess an amateur status and structure but perform at a level of intensity and commitment which matches the level seen within professional sport. Elite inter-county players commit numerous hours and days within their week to take part in high-intensity training, performance analysis as well as managing their recovery, while simultaneously managing academic or full-time work commitments (Cronin, 1998).

The GAA is unique in that it is driven by community volunteers, and local community pride which makes it different from other sports within a professional environment. County teams are heavily connected to their communities within the county and events such as the All-Ireland Championships attract major crowds even with its amateur status. Gaa teams have

seen the adoption of professional performance standards and indicators, which include strength and conditioning programmes, data-driven analysis, and formal leadership roles within backroom teams.

2.4.2 Rugby Union

Rugby in Ireland, which is overseen by the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU) became fully professional in 1995 following the sports global transition towards a professional setting.

Within Ireland's professional rugby landscape, it consists of 4 provincial teams, Leinster, Munster, Ulster, and Connacht as well as the Irish national team which sees the best players from these provincial teams represent their club at an international stage. Both the provincial and national teams have been successful at European and international level regularly competing in the Six Nations Championship, Rugby World Cup, and European club competitions.

The move to professionalism has resulted in significant investment both monetary and time in player development, performance science, and leadership structures. Leadership in rugby often extends beyond the traditional head coach model, encompassing performance directors, data analysts, and leadership groups within squads (Groves & Clements, 2024). The IRFU's centralised system helped in aligning leadership strategies across national and provincial levels helping improve player development and sustained success.

2.4.3 Soccer

Soccer, which is led by Football Association of Ireland (FAI), has a huge level of participation from both youths and adults as well as male and female. Soccer has a huge media presence which generally promotes club and international football such as the Premier League, Champions League and European Championships. Within Ireland the main soccer league is formally named the League of Ireland which is slowly transitioning away from its semi-professional status towards a fully professional setting. Ireland's most elite players will build their career within the United Kingdom or in some instances across Europe. This diaspora model has historically limited domestic player development, though recent policy reforms aim to strengthen coaching quality, player retention, and performance infrastructure within Ireland.

Ireland's soccer national team is vital to the sport's success. However, The Football Association of Ireland has faced several years of poor leadership, and which has resulted in persistent challenges which include, public controversy which has needed government intervention as well as severe underinvestment in grassroots football and future pathways all which has damaged Ireland's soccer progress over the last number of years. Although in recent times there has been an increased effort in developing coaches and investing and installing better pathways show the growing awareness of the need for stronger leadership and cultural alignment in Irish football (Sugden & Bairner, 1993).

Overall, leadership involved in Gaelic games, rugby and soccer are evolving in order to meet growing performance demands and popularity. Whether in the amateur status of GAA, the professional environment of rugby, or the evolving structure of Irish soccer, strong and adaptable leadership is required in order to achieve success within Ireland's sporting landscape.

2.5 Leadership in High-Performance Sports Teams in Ireland

The significance of effective leadership in high-performance Irish sports teams is increasingly being recognised as a key factor for both individual and team success. As athletes deal with growing pressure to perform, media attention and the emotional demand that comes with elite level sport, effective leadership becomes central to maintaining focus, resilience, and alignment with strategic goals (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011).

Irish sporting culture values community, teamwork, and volunteerism, which creates unique leadership challenges. Leaders must find a balance between pushing for performance and respecting values like loyalty, humility, and mutual respect.

This is very evident in the GAA, where players often possess deep rooted cultural ties and are motivated by pride and love of the sport instead of financial reward which is seen within fully professional environments. As a result, leadership strategies must be contextually sensitive and reflect the ethos of the sport and its participants. Consequently, leadership styles must be contextually aware and reflect the ethos of the sport and its members.

In the settings of rugby and soccer, where the structures are more professional and performance is closely monitored, leadership typically adopts a hierarchical approach which aligns closely to key performance indicators. Nonetheless, the best leaders in these contexts

still demonstrate emotional intelligence, adaptability, and the ability to build trust and unity within diverse squads (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016).

There is no one size fits all approach to leadership. Research emphasises the importance of adopting a flexible, situational approach to leadership in sport. Transformational leadership in particular has been demonstrated to improve cohesion, intrinsic motivation, and psychological safety, all which are vital elements in high-performance teams and highly competitive sporting environments such as inter-county Gaelic football and hurling, professional rugby and soccer (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Fransen et al., 2017; Afsar & Umrani, 2020).

However, transactional leadership plays a pivotal role in upholding standards, reinforcing tactical discipline, and ensuring role clarity, vital elements which are needed for success in structured sports such as Gaelic football and hurling, rugby and soccer. On the other hand, experienced teams that possess strong leadership qualities can succeed under the approach of laissez-faire leadership as it can empower athlete autonomy, foster innovation, and promote a shared sense of responsibility (Skogstad et al., 2007; Fransen et al., 2020).

Overall, leaders in Irish high-performance sport need to possess strong emotional intelligence, cultural awareness and the ability to engage effectively with a wide range of stakeholders which includes players, coaches, governing bodies, media, and the wider public. A leader's success will depend not only on the leadership approach but also on the team's maturity, cultural alignment, and the competitive environment in which they perform in.

2.6 High-Performance in Sports Teams

High-performance sport involves elite levels of competition where success isn't just measured by winning medals or titles, or rankings, it's about the relentless pursuit of excellence in all areas of preparation, execution, and adaptation (Woods et al., 2020). Within these high-performance settings, optimal performance is achieved through evidence-based coaching, structured talent development and support teams and a comprehensive approach to physical, technical, tactical, and psychological skills.

High-performance teams in sport are defined as cohesive, purpose-driven units composed of individuals with complementary skills, shared leadership, mutual accountability, and a

collective commitment to excellence (Carron & Eys, 2012). Teams working within high pressure environments face very small margins for error and are expected to consistently meet the high level of expectation which is set from both internal and external forces. Within such environments leadership it requires leaders to ensure they foster an environment that creates the right psychological and cultural environment which is required for long term success.

Fletcher and Arnold (2011), describe effective leadership in high-performance sport settings as inherently multidimensional, involving the coordination of strategic direction, emotional intelligence, interpersonal influence, and organisational alignment. Leaders must have the ability to manage tactical elements of performance as well as the human element within this environment. Leaders must consider the athlete's wellbeing, while also maintaining team unity, and long-term growth.

2.6.1 Culture as a Foundation of High-Performance

Team culture is now widely seen as a key factor in achieving success in elite sport. Schein's (2004) model of organisational culture, which includes three interconnected levels which include -

1. Artefacts - The visible parts of culture which include behaviours, symbols, and rituals
2. Espoused Values - The stated beliefs and goals and standards that the team adheres to
3. Underlying Assumptions - The often-unconscious beliefs that truly drive behaviour

Schein's model of organisational culture helps provide a valuable insight and understanding of how shared meanings can influence behaviour in high-performance settings. In sports teams, these cultural elements manifest through routines (e.g., pre-match rituals), communication styles, leadership norms, and collective identity (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012).

A robust and adaptable organisational culture is vital for enhancing team cohesion, reinforcing shared values as guiding behaviour during challenging times. Within elite teams, culture becomes both a buffer and an enabler, supporting psychological resilience and enabling rapid regrouping in high-stress scenarios (Wagstaff et al., 2015). Leaders are crucial in shaping and evolving this culture by setting the example, setting clear expectations, and guiding the team through transitional phases.

2.6.2 Psychological Constructs and the Performance Environment

Psychological safety is also a key foundation for high-performance teams to succeed. According to Edmondson (1999), psychological safety is the collective belief among team members that they can voice opinions, raise concerns, or acknowledge mistakes without fear of punishment or humiliation. In the world of elite level sport, where high pressure scenarios can stifle clear and open communication, creating psychological safety is vital for enabling feedback loops, innovation, and continuous learning. Teams that foster this kind of environment are more likely to engage in constructive conflict, share ideas, and develop solutions collaboratively (Edmondson 1999).

Resilience and mental toughness are important psychological traits that are linked to high-performance. Resilience refers to the capacity to maintain or regain psychological well-being in the face of stressors or adversity (Gucciardi et al., 2009). In contrast, mental toughness, according to Jones et al. (2007), is having the ability to control your environment, consistently stay committed, see challenges as growth opportunities, and believe in your own abilities. Leaders can help build these traits by providing clear constructive feedback, performance framing, using motivational language, as well as the creation of developmentally challenging yet supportive environments.

In the world of high-performance sports, the concept of psychological safety is frequently considered alongside concepts such as resilience and mental toughness. Resilience refers to the capacity to recover from setbacks, adapt to adversity, and maintain focus under pressure (Gucciardi et al., 2009). Mental toughness involves four core dimensions: control, commitment, challenge, and confidence (Jones et al., 2007). Both resilience and mental toughness are closely tied to leadership styles that prioritise support, challenge, and autonomy.

Effective leadership plays a vital role in fostering psychological traits like resilience and mental toughness as well as shaping the overall performance environment. People in leadership roles such as coaches and team leaders set the tone by demonstrating expected behaviours, deliver constructive feedback, cultivate trust, and set clear standards to show what is important and required within such environments. Furthermore, leadership ensures alignment among many stakeholders including athletes, support staff, and administrators and ensures that they are working towards the same shared objectives.

In Ireland, high-performance sports environments represent a mix between tradition and modernity. Gaelic games, which still operate under an amateur status, are progressively evolving by setting professional standards in key areas such as preparation, analysis, and support services. Irish rugby's international success is backboned by world class high-performance systems, including centralised player management, the integration of sports as well as leadership development programs. Consequently, soccer in Ireland encounters distinct challenges such as limited infrastructure, governance problems as well as a lack of investment in grassroots football and player pathway structures which hinder their ability to compete at the highest level.

As a result, high-performance sport in Ireland offers a unique environment for studying leadership. Leaders must navigate a mix of elements such as limited resources, strong community links, and consistently growing professionalism present both challenges and opportunities. It's crucial for leaders to understand how different leadership styles work within the culture, psychology, and team dynamics of Irish sport. This is essential for deepening both theoretical understanding and practical approaches in high-performance sport leadership.

2.6.3 The Role of Leadership in High-Performance Environments

Leadership within high-performance sport is not fixed, it is a dynamic evolving process that demands quick situational responses, adaptability and cultural awareness. Leaders must facilitate team functioning while also acting as cultural architects and strategic visionaries (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011). They help athletes navigate the pressure and challenges of elite sport by balancing the need for structure with the desire for independence, challenge with support, and help deliver short-term results as well long-term development. Additionally, leaders also play an important role as they serve as essential links between various organisational levels effectively bridging the gap between governing bodies, performance departments, athletes, and wider communities.

In interdisciplinary teams where coaches, strength and conditioning staff, physiologists, psychologists, analysts, and medical personnel work collaboratively, leadership becomes a shared function rather than a top-down directive (Fransen et al., 2017). This shared leadership approach is becoming more widely accepted and has been acknowledged for its ability to

boost collective responsibility and decision-making agility particularly in high-performance environments.

2.6.4 Challenges and Opportunities in High-Performance Teams

High-performance sports teams in Ireland encounter substantial challenges, including intense competition at provincial, national and international level, relentless media scrutiny, and the necessity to balance amateur and professional expectations. To thrive within this setting, leaders must have the ability to overcome these challenges by fostering a culture of collaboration, resilience, and adaptability.

Transformational leadership is especially effective in meeting these challenges, fostering long-term team development, psychological resilience, and adaptability (Fransen et al., 2020; Bass & Riggio, 2006). This leadership is paramount in organisations like the GAA, where athletes must juggle their sporting careers alongside their professional careers. Leaders who can intrinsically motivate their athletes, build emotional connections and foster a shared sense of purpose is vital for sustaining motivation and commitment over time.

Whereas, transactional leadership is crucial for delivering short term results and achieving key performance indicators, particularly in structured sports like rugby, where accuracy and discipline are vital. However, an over-reliance on this approach can limit innovation, which is an essential driver of success in evolving, high-performance environments.

Laissez-faire leadership, while empowering athletes and self-motivated teams, must be applied with caution, as it may affect cohesion as there is no clear strategic framework in place. In high-performance sports teams, where alignment, clear strategic direction, and cohesion are essential, the hands-off nature of laissez-faire leadership can undermine team unity and create ambiguity around roles and expectations (Skogstad et al., 2007). This leadership style can be problematic for teams who are in the early stages of their development, as it may delay the formation of a shared team culture and vision. Nevertheless, for well experienced and self-disciplined teams, laissez-faire leadership can promote initiative, strategic experimentation, and peer accountability, thereby empowering athletes to take ownership and contribute to the team's overall success.

High-performance teams in Ireland face numerous challenges, relentless performance pressure, the necessity for mental toughness, and striking the fine balance between managing both external expectations and internal dynamics.

Ultimately, the most effective leaders in Irish high-performance sport are those who demonstrate leadership agility. To effectively meet these challenges leaders must adopt an approach that integrates transformational, transactional and laissez-faire styles. By combining these styles, coaches and team leaders can create a balanced strategy that addresses both immediate goals and long-term development. This blend allows for necessary structure and discipline when needed, while also creating an environment of trust, creativity and autonomy, all key elements for ensuring long-term success.

2.7 Complexity and Contextualisation of Leadership in High-Performance Irish Sport

Leadership in high-performance sports teams in Ireland occurs in a distinctive social and organisational landscape. Ireland's sporting environment consists of a mix of traditional amateurism and growing professionalism which is clearly noticeable in the different structures of the Gaelic Athletic Association, professional rugby, and soccer (Bairner, 2001; Cronin, 1999). This dual nature presents both challenges and opportunities for sport leaders, needing them to adopt flexible and contextually sensitive, aware leadership strategies that reflect the meeting the changing needs of their athletes and institutions.

Leadership in this environment cannot be conceptualised as a fixed set of behaviours; rather, it is better understood as an emergent, dynamic, and context-dependent process (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Leaders are required to navigate an environment of competing demands: fostering elite performance while simultaneously upholding community values, managing high-performance expectations while protecting athlete well-being, and fostering innovation while preserving sporting traditions. These competing imperatives call for high levels of emotional intelligence, cultural competence, and adaptability.

In high-performing Irish sports teams, leaders must understand and manage relationships within their environment. Irish sports are deeply connected to local communities, where athletes come from similar cultural, social, and geographical backgrounds. In sports like Gaelic football, hurling, and even professional rugby, strong community ties create a sense of loyalty and commitment, which strongly influences team cohesion and performance outcomes (Bairner, 2001). Leaders in these environments must be acutely aware of these

cultural aspects. They must foster a sense of belonging and shared purpose that supports the team's goals and the expectations of the wider community (Afsar & Umraní, 2020).

In Irish sports leadership expectations vary significantly across different sports and levels for instance, the Gaelic Athletic Association operates within an amateur environment, where athletes balance elite levels of training and competition with their professional careers and personal lives, Whereas athletes who are representing, Leinster, Munster, Connacht and Ulster in professional rugby work within highly structured, performance driven environments which have a strong focus on commercial success and international performance results. These contrasting contexts present leaders with unique challenges within these environments and highlight the need for leaders to tailor their leadership approach depending on their team's developmental stage, performance level, and cultural context (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011).

Navigating the complexity of leadership in high-performance Irish sport requires leaders to be strategic as well as flexible using a mix of different styles. Transformational leadership which is focused on building a shared vision, emotional connection, and motivation for long-term development (Bass & Riggio, 2006), proves to be effective. This approach has been linked with high levels of trust, psychological safety, and team resilience (Fransen et al., 2020). These qualities are crucial in amateur environments such as the GAA, where players heavily depend on internal motivation and a strong team culture to stay committed over time.

On the other hand, transactional leadership may be more effective in a more structured and professionalised environment where short-term results, discipline, and accountability are critical especially in sports such as elite rugby or soccer. Transactional leaders set clear expectations, provide rewards, and consistently reinforce team standards, thereby fostering a performance-focused culture underpinned by measurable objectives (Bass, 1985; Avolio & Bass, 2004). Nevertheless, an overreliance on this leadership style can stifle creativity, reduce motivation, and weaken a sense of autonomy, particularly in settings where cultural alignment and personal commitment are key.

Laissez-faire leadership, typically characterised by its hands-off approach, laissez-faire approach is often perceived as less effective in most high-performance sports settings due to its association with ambiguity and lack of direction (Judge & Piccolo, 2004).

However, research has indicated that there can be specific advantages of laissez-faire leadership particularly within highly experienced teams, where athletes are self-regulating and demonstrate high levels of intrinsic motivation, maturity, and peer leadership (Wagstaff et al., 2018). In these situations, stepping back strategically can encourage innovation, responsibility, and independence provided it is supported by solid structures and mutual trust.

In the Irish sporting context, leaders cannot rely on one fixed leadership style. Instead, they need to tailor their approach depending on the situation and environment and constantly assess factors such as team culture, performance demands and the specific needs of an individual athlete. This flexible and evolving style adheres to Fletcher and Arnold's (2011) view that successful leaders in high-performance sport are those take a flexible, responsive approach focusing on fostering relationships and monitoring performance. They tailor their leadership style depending on the needs of the team, the situation, and individual athletes.

This study builds on the foundational work of Bass and Riggio (2006), Fransen et al. (2020), and Wagstaff and Leach (2015), applying their leadership insights to the unique social and cultural context of Irish sport. Through the integrations of sport psychology, leadership theory, and organisational behaviour, the study aims to provide practical and context-sensitive strategies for developing leadership within high-performance Irish sports teams. It emphasises the need for more context specific leadership research (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007), particularly in settings influenced by strong community ties, growing professionalism, and complex cultural identities.

In summary, leadership in high-performance Irish sport is best understood as a dynamic and contextually embedded practice. It requires leaders to combine strategic vision with emotional insight, balancing modern performance systems with deep-rooted cultural values. This integrative, adaptive approach is essential for fostering high-performing teams that are not only technically proficient but also culturally cohesive, resilient, and capable of sustained success.

2.8 Research Question

An investigation into transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles and how they influence team culture in high-performance sports teams in Ireland.

The core objective of this research is to explore how leaders within high-performance Irish sporting environments influence team dynamics, athlete development, and performance outcomes through their leadership approach. The following aims underpin this study:

Aims of the Research:

- To identify the leadership styles most commonly used within Irish high-performance sports teams.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of transformational, transactional, and distributed leadership models in elite team settings.
- To understand how cultural values and the Irish sporting identity shape leadership practices.
- To explore the impact of leadership on psychological safety, resilience, and team cohesion.
- To investigate the role of peer-led and shared leadership structures in fostering high-performing teams.

3.0 Chapter Three – Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The methodology chapter will look at the research design as well as the methods that were used within this study, which examines the impact on various leadership styles in particular transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire and the impact it has on team culture within high-performance sports teams in Ireland. It also explores how leadership styles, team dynamics, and cultural contexts interact to shape the success of elite athletes and organisations.

Based on the theoretical frameworks of Bass and Riggio (2006), Fransen et al. (2020), and Wagstaff and Leach (2015), a qualitative research approach was chosen to explore the lived experiences of coaches, players, and performance staff in greater detail. A semi-structured interview approach was used to ensure flexibility and maintain consistency across interviews.

This chapter will entail the research design and approach, purpose and objectives, participant recruitment and profiles data collection procedure, data analysis and ethical considerations. Furthermore, it discusses limitations, and the validity of the study.

3.2 Research Design and Approach

For this research a qualitative approach was selected to deeply understand leadership behaviours and team culture within high-performance sports. By using semi-structured interviews (as seen in doc 3), we have gained key insights from people who have experience or are still actively participating in high-performance sport in Ireland. The semi-structured interviews provide both the interviewer and participants to engage in an open conversation while adhering to a structured set of questions which align with the study's research aims.

A qualitative approach also provided a platform which allowed us to capture the lived experiences, meanings, and perceptions related to leadership in high-performance sport. Qualitative research also made it possible to further examine the relational and cultural aspects of leadership, factors which are crucial in the Irish context where tradition, identity, and community often influence elite performance.

3.3 Purpose and Objectives of the Research

3.3.1 Purpose

The main objective of this research is to explore the impact of leadership on the performance of elite sports teams in Ireland. Leadership plays a crucial role in achieving both individual and team success yet there is a gap in research examining the various leadership styles that within the Irish sporting context.

The research focuses on three main leadership styles which include transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles. These styles are highlighted due to their importance within leadership literature, and they also play a pivotal role in Bass and Avolio's Full Range Leadership Model (1994), which is widely recognised and is used in both organisational and sport psychology environments. All styles have their own unique prospective creating a comprehensive for understanding leadership dynamics in high-performance sports teams.

- Transformational leadership is characterised by the ability of a leader to inspire, motivate, and intellectually stimulate team members while fostering a supportive and value-driven culture (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

- Transactional leadership is based on clear structures, rewards, and consequences to achieve specific goals (Bass, 1985).
- Laissez-Faire leadership often seen as a hands-off approach or non-leadership style, is characterised by the leader's avoidance of decision-making and minimal involvement in team processes (Judge & Piccolo, 2004).

Investigating leadership styles in high-performing Irish sports teams provides a clear insight into how leadership influences team culture.

In this study culture is defined as the shared assumptions, values, and beliefs that govern how people behave in organisations (Schein, 2010). In the world of high-performance sport, team culture can have an impact on communication, trust, decision-making, motivation, and psychological safety. Previous studies have shown that a strong and positive culture is a key determinant of team success (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012). Thus, it is crucial to explore how leadership can foster or harm team culture in order to ensure optimal performance is achieved in high-performance sport settings.

High-performance sport is set in a high-pressurised environment where physical, emotional, and psychological demands are high and the difference between being successful or a failure can depend on the finest of margins. These settings are characterised by pressure, scrutiny, and the need for consistent excellence (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). Leadership in these settings can have a profound influence on resilience, cohesion, and long-term outcomes.

3.3.2 Main Objective

The main objective of this research is to explore the impact of leadership within Irish high-performance sport environments, with an emphasis on how different leadership styles influence team cohesion, psychological safety, resilience, and overall performance. This study also explores the unique cultural aspects that exist within Irish sport, such as the amateur-professional dynamics, strong community ties as well as traditions.

3.3.4 Specific Aims

1. To examine how transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles are demonstrated and experienced in Irish high-performance sport.

2. To evaluate the effectiveness of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles and how they influence team performance and psychological safety.
3. To explore the impact leadership styles, have on team culture, focusing on trust, cohesion, psychological safety, and communication.
4. To investigate how shared leadership and peer influence shape team dynamics and leadership effectiveness.
5. To identify leadership development strategies tailored to specific contexts of Irish Sport (e.g., GAA, rugby, soccer).
6. To determine which leadership behaviours, strengthen or weaken team performance and resilience in high-performance sport settings.

3.4 Participant Recruitment and Profiles

3.4.1 Recruitment and Ethical Procedures

Participants for this study were carefully chosen based on their active or historic involvement in leadership, coaching, or support roles within high-performance Irish sports teams, specifically in Gaelic football and hurling, elite level rugby, and soccer. Each participant has a minimum of ten years of experience in a leadership or support role in high-performance sport (see table 1 - profile of the participants).

A purposive sampling approach was used to ensure that participants from a range of sports and leadership levels were included. This helped us gather a wide range of insights into leadership practices and their impact on culture within high-performance Irish sports teams.

Before recruitment, each participant was sent a participant information sheet detailing the main aims, objectives and purpose of the study as well highlighting the voluntary nature of participating and how their data would be used and kept securely. Each participant also received a Consent Form (as seen in Doc 1) which was sent along with the participant information sheet, (as seen in Doc 2) this consent form was signed by each participant prior to the interview beginning. These steps ensured we were adhering to ethical guidelines and provided participants their rights to informed consent and confidentiality.

Contact was made with our participants through various channels including email, socials, leveraging professional networks as well as through personal relationships with former teammates or friends who have or are actively involved in high-performance sports teams.

The first step was introducing the participants to the study followed by a request for them to participate. As soon as the participant declared their interest in participating, both the consent form and participant information sheet were shared (Doc 1 & 2) and an interview was arranged at a time that suited them.

3.4.2 Participant Profiles

Participant	Age	Years of Experience	Role	Sport	Setting
1	25-30	10+	Captain	Gaelic Football & Hurling	Senior Intercounty & Senior Club
2	30-40	15+	Manger/Support Staff	Gaelic Football	Senior Intercounty
3	50-60	20+	Manager/Head Coach	Rugby	Professional Rugby
4	30-40	10+	Coach	Soccer	Professional Soccer
5	30-40	10+	Captain	Hurling	Senior Intercounty & Senior Club

Figure 1.0

3.5 Data Collection Procedure

Each interview took place online utilising Microsoft Teams; this platform was selected to help overcome geographical barriers as well as provide more flexibility and convenience for the participants involved. The duration of each interview varied between 45 minutes and one hour, depending on the level of depth of responses and availability of the participant.

A comprehensive Interview structure was built with up to 30 open-ended questions (Doc 3) to help guide the interviews. These questions were categorised into key themes which were identified in the Literature Review. They are as follows:

- Leadership Style and Team Culture
- Leadership and Team Dynamics
- Shared Leadership and Peer Influence
- Leadership and Culture Sustainability
- Team values and Culture
- Leadership within the Irish Sporting context
- Leadership Development and Practical Recommendations
- Final Reflections

Each interview adhered to a clear structure, starting with initial introduction and general background questions before transitioning to more reflective questions which discussed the lived experience of each participant.

The semi-structured interview format provided the opportunity to explore unanticipated but relevant topics that arose throughout the interview. With prior consent, we interviewed each participant as well as taking highly detailed notes. Transcriptions were created through my own reviewing and replaying of the interviews alongside the support of Microsoft Co-Pilot which helped form a thematic analysis. To protect participants' privacy, all identifiable data was anonymised during transcription.

3.6 Data Analysis Approach

This study used a thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to thoroughly explore the interview data. This approach is particularly effective to help identify, analyse, and report occurring themes within qualitative data.

The analysis process involved several key steps:

1. Familiarisation with the data - This was achieved through repeated reading of transcripts to gain a deeper understanding on key themes
2. Initial coding - Identifying key elements of the data and utilising them using both inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-driven) methods
3. Theme development – Grouping repetitive wording and key points into broader themes linked to leadership styles and team culture
4. Reviewing and refining themes - Observing the themes for consistency and clarity

5. Defining and naming themes – Writing clear descriptions and explanations for each theme

3.7 Other Methods Considered

Initially I considered using Quantitative methods with the use of surveys. This option was considered as a way of assessing leadership styles as well as team performance. Although after further deliberation I had felt this method was not best suited for this research as it would not fully capture the complex, and context specific nature of leadership in Irish sport. Additionally, the small sample size and the study's emphasis on meaning and interpretation made a qualitative design more suitable.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Considering the sensitive nature of discussing leadership behaviours, team culture, and relationships in high-performance sports environments, I ensured that ethical considerations were prioritised throughout the research. Ethics can be described as ‘the moral principles that provide the rules that tell you how to act in any given situation’ (Rossman and Rallis, 2012).

3.8.1 Informed Consent and Participant Rights

Participants were selected based on their experience in being involved in high-performance sports teams in Ireland in roles that vary between managers, leaders and support staff. Ahead of participants taking part in the study, each person was sent a Participant Information Sheet (Doc 2) which highlighted -

- The aims and objectives of the study
- That participation for this research was voluntary
- Detailed how confidentiality and anonymity would be kept secure
- How the data gained from the interviews would be stored and used

Participants were also sent a consent form (Doc 1). By agreeing to the consent form participants agreed to partake in a recorded interview while having the freedom to pull out without any consequence at any point in the process.

3.8.2 Anonymity and Confidentiality

Ensuring that we prioritised anonymity and confidentiality was crucial in order for our participants to provide their honest views, opinions and lived experiences. Anonymity can help to protect privacy so that respondents can reveal information that cannot be identified to them.

The names of the participants and any reference to sports teams, organisations and athletes were removed from the research findings and materials. The Interview questions were carefully designed to discover the participants lived experiences relevant to the study while adhering to all necessary ethical guidelines. This research also complied with the Data Protection Act (1998) for the collection and storage of data. All interview data which was gathered from the interviews was securely stored on a password-protected computer with no identifying information helping secure the participants anonymity.

3.8.3 Interview Preparation and Participant Comfort

Before each interview, I met and discussed the interview process with each participant and explained in detail the format and structure of the interview as well as highlighting key themes that I wanted to discuss throughout the Interview. I also shared a copy of the questions (Doc 3) to the participants helping them plan and prepare ahead of time of the interview and ensuring they were more comfortable as the interview started.

3.9 Limitations

This study had several limitations which should be highlighted. This was a small-scale, qualitative study which included a limited number of managers/coaches, players, and support staff from high-performance sports teams in Ireland. As a result, the data which has been gathered cannot be applied to all sporting codes in Ireland, although they do provide detailed insights to support future studies.

Only qualitative semi-structured interviews were utilised, as a result we could not measure the leadership styles and team culture in a qualitative way. On review utilising a combined approach of qualitative and quantitative might have provided better further insights that could help support further research. Although the exploratory nature of this study and the emphasis on lived experiences, a qualitative research approach was the most appropriate choice.

Furthermore, the time constraints of a master's dissertation as well as combining it with a full-time professional career limited the number of sports that could be covered and the number of participants that could be involved.

3.10 Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the research design, the research purpose, main objectives of the research and specific aims, participant recruitment and profiles, data collection and procedure, Data analysis approach, other methods considered, ethical considerations and the limitations of this study which addressed leadership within high-performance sports teams in Ireland. This chapter outlined the reasoning and the approach used in carrying out semi-structured interviews as well as the process applied to ensure confidentiality and anonymity of the participants involved.

The limitations of the research were also outlined as well as the justification to the Qualitative approach and use of semi structured interviews to help discover leadership styles in high-performance sports teams in Ireland and how they impact team culture.

The next chapter will highlight the results from the interviews, offering a detailed examination of leadership styles, team culture, team dynamics, sporting context and shared leadership within Ireland's high-performance sports environments.

4.0 Chapter Four - Results & Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from semi-structured interviews conducted with five participants currently involved in high-performance sports teams in Ireland. The primary aim of these semi structured interviews was to explore the participants lived experiences and perceptions of leadership and its influence on team culture within high-performance sport settings.

The qualitative data was analysed, transcribed and coded following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines to identify frequent themes. These themes are highlighted with the support of direct participant quotes to explain in detail how different leadership styles, particularly transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire, help build and influence team culture in high-performance sport teams.

The findings provide important insights into the intricate dynamics of leadership in Irish high-performance sports and tackles the main research question: How do transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles influence team culture in high-performance sports teams in Ireland?

It is important to highlight that as with all qualitative research, some grammatical errors may occur.

4.2 Effective Leadership

The data highlights a significant shift in leadership strategies within high-performance sports, mirroring broader changes in leadership theory and practice. Historically, leadership in sport often relied on authoritarian, transactional models characterised by control, compliance, and directive communication (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985). Several participants highlighted a clear transition towards transformational leadership styles that emphasise, aligning with Bass and Avolio's (1993) conceptualisation of transformational leadership which aims to motivate and inspire members to surpass expectations. This was noted throughout the interviews with one participant describing this shift.

“My style would be relationship building and trust, and you have conversations with guys over a long period of time, and they trust you, you trust them and they’re willing to go that extra mile because of that.” (P2)

This change reflects the contemporary view that effective leadership in high-performance environments demands more than authority; it involves fostering an environment where athletes feel psychologically safe and empowered (Edmondson, 1999). For instance, one participant emphasised how transitioning from a transactional to a more transformational approach resulted in increased ownership and greater success:

“At the beginning, we were very, very much it’s our way and that’s the way we want to go. We then pivoted to giving those leaders more ownership, making the environment more fun and relaxed and we had a successful year.” (P2)

The idea that leadership is a skill that can be developed rather than an inherent characteristic was highlighted, this perspective adheres to the transformational leadership view that leaders

develop through experience, reflection, and continuous learning (Day, 2000). A clear example of this is the participant who highlighted the importance of continuous development.

“I do think if you explain and teach them about leadership, it is a skill that can be learned.” (P3)

“My evolution into high performing environments didn’t happen automatically. I went on courses, studied leadership, attended conferences - I developed the skills intentionally.” (P3)

Another participant discussed the significance of adaptive leadership styles, they highlighted that the ability to effectively transition between transformational, transactional or laissez faire styles depending on the specific situation helps boost team morale and performance (Yukl, 2013):

“The best leaders I’ve worked under have been flexible in their leadership approaches. They have mixed transformational, transactional and laissez-faire styles depending on the situation.” (P4)

Another important component of effective leadership within this framework involves building training environments that mirror high-pressure settings. Effective leaders support their teams by creating similar high-pressure situations on a daily basis in training where players will train at high intensity and stress as well as high fatigue levels to help them perform at their best when required. This approach helps build resilience and encourages automatic decision-making (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). This strategy reflects modern leadership approaches that focus on improving psychological skills as well as physical performance:

“Putting them under pressure in training sessions so that their learning becomes automatic and then giving them tools and strategies to deal with those moments of pressure.” (P3)

The ability to be authentic and show vulnerability were highlighted as important leader traits. These traits are vital for building psychological safety and trust within teams (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Effective Leaders who can acknowledge their errors and show resilience inspire confidence and encourage growth among athletes:

“Being authentic and admitting mistakes, helps players grow confidence.” (P3)

To conclude, the insights from participants highlight that effective leadership in Irish high-performance sport is rooted in transformational principles. These principles include building trust, empowering athletes, commitment to continuous learning, and being adaptable. The findings adhere to the view that transformational leadership significantly enhances team culture by promoting fostering a sense of ownership, ensuring psychological safety, and encouraging high-performance.

4.3 Leadership Style and Its Evolution

According to leadership contingency theories (Fiedler, 1967), participants emphasised the importance of adopting flexible leadership styles that combine transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire principles depending on the specific situation. This flexibility reflects contemporary leadership frameworks that highlight the importance of situational responsiveness (Goleman, 2000).

This was echoed by one participant who stated:

“I’m reasonably flexible, I’ll try and flip between each style depending on the context.” (P2)

Other participants highlighted the clear shift and progression from a primarily transactional leadership transactional approach which was built on authority, clear structure and rewards and punishments to a more transformational and laissez-faire approach which focuses on motivating, inspiring and building trust with athletes (Burns, 1978; Lewin, Lippitt & White, 1939). As one participant reflected:

“Twenty years ago, the go-to approach was shouting and screaming. Now its relationship building and trust.” (P2)

Encouraging athletes to take more ownership and make decisions helps provide a sense of accountability which has been associated with enhanced team culture and performance. The laissez-faire style, while often criticised in management literature (Skogstad et al., 2007), was viewed to be beneficial when blended with transformational leadership elements to promote autonomy:

“The best ones I’ve always found is giving a hands-off approach, trying to empower the players to make their own decisions for themselves.” (P1)

Similarly, support staff within high-performance sports highlighted the importance of engaging the wider support staff in the decision-making process. This strategy promotes a more unified and trusted support environment and reflects distributed leadership models (Bolden, 2011):

“Our manager moved from a more direct approach to involving the medical and fitness staff heavily in planning, it brought the backroom team closer together.” (P4)

Leaders who have the ability to showcase authenticity and vulnerability within their environment can help create an environment of psychological safety, allowing for open communication and building which trust necessary for high-performance (Edmondson, 1999). This strategy allows athletes to be themselves and bring their best to training on a daily basis:

“If you show that side of yourself rather than being the dictator all the time, they respond well to that.” (P2)

To conclude, these findings align to the research question by showcasing that the most effective leaders in Irish high-performance sport seamlessly blend transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire styles. This approach helps leaders create a culture that promotes psychological safety, trust innovation, and accountability to achieve sustained success within high-performance sport environments.

4.4 Empowerment, Decision-Making, and Team Culture

Participants emphasised the importance of empowerment and highlighted it as a crucial element in building a long-lasting positive culture within a high-performance sports team. This aligns with Spreitzer’s (1995) psychological empowerment framework, which highlights autonomy, competence, meaningfulness, and impact as key dimensions.

Participants also highlighted the crucial role that trust, and fun can play in building a culture that blends accountability with enjoyment, in alignment with team cohesion theories (Carron, 1982):

“Trust, fun, accountability, those three are hugely important. Fun is hugely important, it doesn’t mean you’re not serious about winning.” (P2)

Leaders outlined the importance of empowering athletes to make decisions especially under pressure this cultivates confidence and shared responsibility, adhering to principles from Self-Determination Theory which underscores the importance autonomy support in improving motivation and well-being.

“The best leadership style I’ve found is a hands-off approach, empowering players to make their own split-second decisions on the pitch.” (P1)

One participant also discussed the significance of empowerment beyond the players, outlining that shared leadership plays a vital role in encouraging collective ownership and culture (Pearce & Conger, 2003):

“When staff are trusted to take ownership in their areas, you get more buy-in and better solutions.” (P4)

Maintaining a positive organisational culture was described as a continuous process that demands clear values, the consistent reinforcement of these values, and promptly dealing with behaviours that do not align with the values, as discussed in Schein’s (2010) model of organisational culture:

“Call out behaviours that don’t match the culture. Keep the values simple and integrated into everything you do.” (P2)

These findings clearly demonstrate that transformational and laissez-faire leadership styles, distinguished by their emphasis on empowerment, trust, and authenticity, cultivates a robust team culture that promotes both individual and collective growth in Irish high-performance sports.

4.5 Building and Sustaining Positive Team Culture

Participants repeatedly stressed that leadership in high-performance sport should focus on building a sustainable positive team culture over the long term instead of over emphasising short term results. This is consistent with Schein’s (2010) view that enduring culture is built on consistent behaviours and shared values reinforced over time. Effective Leaders “lead by example,” by demonstrating behaviours such as punctuality, preparation, and clear

communication consistently which are vital in establishing team norms and building accountability within the team.

Participants referred to the way they lead by example within a high-performance sport team.

“Often some of the best leaders just lead by example, being first on the bus, always doing the simple things right, very quickly you’ll find that other people will follow.”
(P5)

“Leading by example and showing what I’m doing daily and yearly helps the group understand what behaviours we expect, like being on time, being prepared, and communicating clearly.” (P1)

The cultivation of culture was described as extending beyond the pitch, with participants highlighting the importance of off-field behaviours such as engaging in additional training and strength conditioning as instrumental in embedding positive habits that sustain culture long-term.

“It’s not just about what happens on the pitch; it’s about what you do away from it too, extra shooting, running, gym work, and showing the team how that builds culture.” (P1)

Accountability was recognised as influencing factor to building a sustainable culture, applied through formal methods such as setting clear expectations as well as informal methods applied through shared ownership as well as creative reinforcement strategies such as “roll the dice” forfeits (Edmondson, 1999):

“From the staff side, being accountable to the same standards as the players, turning up on time, being prepared, makes it easier to ask that of them. It has to be shared, not just demanded.” (P4)

“We have ‘roll the dice’ forfeits that make keeping the standards fun but intentional, consciously reinforcing accountability both on and off the pitch.” (P1)

One participant described his own insights to building a sustainable culture and discussed the “Culture Pyramid”, starting with the foundation of team identity and core behaviours, working up towards higher purpose and player ownership, referring to Schein’s (2010) cultural layers and Pearce & Conger’s (2003) distributed leadership model:

“Culture is the base, then identity, behaviours and standards, higher purpose, and player ownership, always in that order. You focus your attention based on where the team is in that pyramid.” (P2)

Building resilience was viewed as a key behaviour for leaders to achieve a positive and sustainable team culture in high-performance sports teams. This was achieved through intentionally exposing athletes to a high-pressure training environment which involves rigorous training under high stress, fatigue and pressure as well as providing constant feedback to athletes to support their development and performance in high-pressure environments. This helped support the internalisation of behaviours and decision-making skills.

“We train under pressure to perform under pressure. Feedback and recalling learning points regularly helps players internalise behaviours and decision-making.” (P3)

Participants emphasised the importance of leaders combining structure while having flexibility, incorporating local identity and history into team psychology to build resilience, unity, and loyalty during difficult situations, seamlessly combining cultural values with performance demands (House et al., 2004):

“We’re weaving local history and values into our team psychology, resilience, unity, defiance, loyalty, so players have something meaningful to anchor to in tough moments.” (P3)

Cultural realignment was viewed as an important ongoing leadership task. Sometimes this leads to leaders having to make difficult decisions on the suitability of players and staff members (Schein, 2010):

“Coming into new teams often means cultural refix, dealing with attitudes and behaviours, and making tough decisions on players and staff fit to build the culture.”
(P3)

In conclusion, building and sustaining positive team culture in high-performance Irish sport teams demands calculated, exemplary leadership. Leaders must showcase, establish a clear set of behaviours and set clear expectations as well as create an identity and purpose that aligns with team aims and objectives. These factors help foster trust, build resilience and accountability helping implement a sustainable positive culture.

4.6 Challenges and Contextual Influences

Participants discussed how the unique Irish sporting context plays a major role in influencing leadership styles and challenges. The amateur status of the GAA, along with high-performance expectations, forms a unique environment where athletes juggle sporting aspirations with full time professional careers, this dynamic restricts their available contact hours compared to professional sports like rugby or soccer (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011).

Participant 1 described the importance of community and legacy in this context:

“It’s important that we value the teams that have gone before us and the community that we’re in. The club’s been on a long journey. Relaying that to the team shows how lucky we are to be in this position chasing our goal.” (P1)

One participant highlighted the difficulty of balancing the rigorous demands of high-performance with player wellbeing within professional setting, emphasising the necessity for leaders to create room for development while upholding established standards:

“In professional setups, there’s pressure not just on performance but on managing players’ mental and physical loads daily. The challenge is creating space for players to develop while maintaining high standards every session.” (P4)

However, participant 5 also raised concerns of the growing challenge of public scrutiny within the GAA. Greater media coverage and social media exposure mean intercounty players are highly visible both within and beyond their communities.

“There’s eyes on you everywhere you go, switching off in high-performance sport isn’t discussed enough, players are finding it more and more difficult to switch off.”
(P5)

The participant outlined that this constant visibility, combined with the condensed playing calendar and club commitments, leaves little opportunity for genuine rest and recovery, potentially leading to mental burnout. The inability to fully disconnect may even prompt earlier retirements as players seek relief from continuous public attention.

One participant provided insights into how they utilise psychological models and contextual values to improve performance and build resilience:

“We weave local history and values into the team psychology so when tough times come, we have resilience, unity, defiance, and loyalty to lean on.” (P3)

In conclusion, effective leadership in Irish high-performance sports influences team culture by juggling unique cultural and contextual challenges by learning on strong community ties, managing the demands of dual careers, and building a shared purpose to build trust and resilience.

4.7 Emerging Leaders

All participants recognised the critical role of emerging leaders in sustaining long-term success and positive team culture. They stressed the need for curiosity and learning from different high-performance environments. This strategy drives innovation, promotes adaptability, and introduces different perspectives by incorporating ideas from various sporting environments.

One Participant noted:

“Definitely be curious. What other sports are doing interesting things? How can I find out more about that?” (P2)

Participants also emphasised the importance of emerging leaders connecting with senior leaders and building relationships while actively seeking ownership opportunities to take ownership. This is vital for leadership development regardless of age or experience, encouraging an inclusive leadership culture that prioritises contributions over experience (Bolden, 2011). We see this frequently within high-performance sports teams where leaders vary in age, experience and background.

“Make sure you’re always picking their brain, asking questions, coming to them with ideas, and looking for ownership of things, everyone should be able to lead and bring that to the surface.” (P2)

Participants supported this inclusive approach by advocating for leadership development across the team instead of prioritising certain individuals, and by emphasising reflective learning and experiential growth:

“I work on the principle that everyone has a leadership ceiling that can be improved. Everyone has the potential to grow. There must be 10 academy players in the first block, and I’d like to think if you ask them, they’d say they’ve grown as leaders in that period and thought about things they never had before.” (P3)

Another participant echoed their own insight into prioritising certain individuals:

“I’m always looking for more leaders, especially from that younger cohort... you can sense when a person has turned a corner and they’re ready to step up. Maybe I’ll ask them to say a word after training or before a match or bring them for a coffee with more experienced players to get their insights.” (P4)

Some participants referenced structured mentorship and real-game exposure as key areas for helping emerging leaders building confidence and improving their decision-making skills:

“It’s not just about talent on the pitch; emerging leaders need support off it too. Regular check-ins, guidance on decision-making, and exposure to leadership responsibilities help them build confidence and readiness.” (P4)

In conclusion, all participants emphasised that identifying and developing emerging leaders is vital in high-performance sports teams. Participants are aligned in their beliefs that being curious, building relationships and promoting development helps foster a positive culture with high-performance sports environments.

4.8 Leadership Behaviours to Build Sustainable Culture

Several participants highlighted the need for key behaviours and shared purpose to help build a sustainable team culture in high-performance sports teams; these behaviours vary from technical, tactical, and physical skills combined with intentional leadership development (Fransen et al., 2015).

“You’ve got to be strong technically, tactically, and physically. But once you identify those players, it’s about developing their leadership alongside those skills.” (P3)

The cyclical and often short-term nature of sports teams require the constant reinforcement of shared goals and values to sustain a positive and robust culture (Schein, 2010). Emerging leaders are advised to cultivate curiosity, foster relationships, and actively seek developmental opportunities and mentorship, regardless of age or experience.

Effective leadership development depends on supportive feedback and experiential learning to encourage behaviours that build resilience, accountability, and achieve high-performance. This strategy equips teams to overcome and adapt to the challenges and changes that regularly arise in high-performance environments.

4.9 Conclusion

This chapter presented and analysed the key themes emerging from qualitative semi structured interviews with high-performance sports leaders in Ireland, it referred to the research question how different leadership styles such as transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire affect team culture in Irish elite sports. The findings and themes that emerged emphasise the critical role of authentic and adaptive leadership, emotional intelligence, shared leadership structures, the cultivation of positive team culture, rooted in accountability, resilience, and local identity. Furthermore, participants highlighted the specific challenges that arise within the high-performance Irish sport settings such as the GAA’s amateur status and deep-rooted community connection which influences leadership strategies. These

findings showcase that leading high-performance sports teams is complex and requires careful skill, laying the foundation for the following discussion and conclusion chapter.

5.0 Chapter Five – Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter examines and discusses the key findings from this study on leadership in high-performance sports teams, linking them to existing literature and focusing on the main research question: How do transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles influence team culture in high-performance sports teams in Ireland?

The discussion is organised from the key themes highlighted in the results chapter:

1. Adaptive leadership and emotional intelligence
2. Shared leadership and team culture
3. Contextual challenges in Irish high-performance sport
4. Development of emerging leaders
5. Leadership behaviours and cultural sustainability
6. Implications for practice

Each theme is explored alongside participant insight and reference to existing literature, showcasing how the findings support, contest, or enhance the current understanding of leadership in sport. The chapter also examines the complex relationship between leadership and the cultural and contextual, highlighting how these dynamics influence team culture. It offers valuable insights into the complexities of leadership in high-performance sports teams.

5.2 Adaptive Leadership and Emotional Intelligence

The study discovered that adaptability and emotional intelligence was needed for effective leadership with high-performance sports teams transitioning between directive, coaching, and relational approaches based on the situation and the needs of the athlete. This adheres to Northouse's (2018) perspective of leadership as a dynamic process that must adapt to situational demands, and supports Goleman's (1998) view that emotional intelligence is crucial for effective leadership.

Participants regularly connected adaptability with the ability to cultivate trust and sustain high-performance, especially in high pressure environments. Participants also stressed the importance of leaders having emotional intelligence, self-awareness and empathy can create an environment of psychological safety and resilience within their teams. This aligns with Meyer and Fletcher (2007) view who argue that emotional intelligence significantly improves leader-follower relationships and team cohesion.

From a leadership-style viewpoint these findings closely align with the principles of transformational leadership, which focuses on empathy, individualised consideration, and inspirational motivation (Bass, 1990). Although, aspects of transactional leadership were also apparent when leaders transitioned to a more directive approach to enforce standards or manage performance. This indicates that leadership in high-performance rarely adheres strictly to one specific style but instead integrates transformational and transactional components to address both relationship building and performance goals.

5.3 Shared Leadership and Team Culture

Another key finding that emerged was the significance of Shared leadership, with responsibilities and decision making delegated across players and staff. Participants outlined that empowering emerging leaders, fostering peer accountability, and upholding shared values help improve team cohesion and maintain high-performance. This draws on the findings of Fransen et al. (2017) and Pearce and Conger (2003), which connects shared leadership to enhanced collective efficacy and group identity. Additionally, it aligns with transformational leadership principles, especially in nurturing the development of others and building a shared vision.

However, the study also found that in the absence of clearly defined roles and continuous reinforcement of standards, shared leadership could rapidly devolve into laissez-faire leadership, where lack of direction risks weakening accountability. This emphasises the crucial need to maintain a balance: empowering leaders at all levels while maintaining consistent cultural anchors such as team rituals, shared goals, and visible role modelling (Schein, 2010).

Ultimately, the findings highlight that leadership's influence on team culture goes further than the designated leader, however it requires deliberate planning and continuous effort to ensure empowerment enhances, rather than impacts, performance culture.

5.4 Contextual Challenges in Irish High-Performance Sport

The unique context of Irish high-performance sports teams in Ireland, especially within the GAA, brings distinctive leadership challenges. Several participants discussed the challenge of operating in an amateur sport with professional performance expectations, meeting community expectations all while balancing a full-time career and other life distractions that occur.

Within this context it demands leaders to be contextually adaptive, combining transformational behaviours which include inspiring commitment and creating a shared identity alongside transactional elements such as setting clear expectations and behaviour as well as maintaining discipline. This blend is crucial for achieving performance standards especially when fighting against time and resource constraints.

The findings also highlighted the importance of striking a balance between respecting tradition and promoting innovation, building a dynamic interplay between continuity and change also noted by. This tension supports Day et al.'s (2014) view that leadership in sport must be context sensitive where cultural identity is both a resource and a constraint.

In an environment with high expectations and limited contacts, laissez-faire leadership is usually not sustainable. It is crucial for leaders to consistently influence the culture through daily actions and utilise community connections to strengthen shared purpose and resilience.

5.5 Development of Emerging Leaders

The study also highlighted the importance of leaders identifying and nurturing emerging leaders within their environment to help sustain team culture and achieve long term success. Participants emphasised that emerging leaders must show specific behaviours in order to help them grow as a leader. This included showing curiosity and a desire for self-improvement, learning from different sporting environments as well as proactively building relationships with other leaders. This perspective is in line with leadership development literature which stresses the importance of experiential learning, mentoring, and fostering a growth mindset as being key elements to leader emergence (Garvin, 2000).

These findings also demonstrate the importance in identifying leadership potential in all players instead of a select few embodies inclusive leadership frameworks that promote

collective responsibility (Bolden, 2011). Such inclusivity promotes collective responsibility and a stronger cultural foundation.

The findings also emphasise the need to foster an environment where less experienced athletes can develop their leadership capabilities through constructive feedback and role modelling, and shared responsibility helps ensure a sustainable leadership pipeline over time.

Referring to the research question, these practices embody transformational leadership emphasising empowerment and personalised development, additionally transactional elements are sometimes utilised to establish expectations and maintain standards.

5.6 Leadership Behaviours and Cultural Sustainability

Participants highlighted that sustaining a positive team culture depends on leaders consistently showcasing behaviours that drive high-performance and a shared purpose. While technical and tactical skills were viewed as important behaviours in high-performance sports teams, effective relational skills, accountability, punctuality and resilience were deemed as important.

Current literature strongly aligns integrative leadership models that combine both task-oriented and people-oriented behaviours (Yukl, 2013). The study discussed cultural sustainability which involves keeping core values and identity through everyday interactions and adapting to changing team dynamics is heavily suggested, this perspective aligns with recent calls in sport psychology for leadership that balances stability with flexibility, promoting both continuity and innovation within teams (Cruickshank & Collins, 2016).

In addressing the research question, these behaviours demonstrate a transformational influence, through the integration of shared purpose and values, at the same time they incorporate transactional elements where the consistent reinforcement of expectations remains essential. Conversely, laissez-faire leadership is usually perceived as counterproductive, except when intentionally applied to foster autonomy among already empowered individuals.

5.7 Implications for Practice

The findings indicate many implications for leadership practice in Irish high-performance sport. To begin, leaders in high-performance sport prioritise adaptive leadership

development, emotional intelligence training, and implementing shared leadership structures to help leaders to respond effectively to the diverse demands of athletes and contexts.

Additionally, implementing structured shared leadership frameworks, which are underpinned by clear communication and defined responsibilities, can strengthen team cohesion and effectively spread cultural ownership.

Installing programs to identify, develop and guide emerging leaders can help promote long-term cultural sustainability and success, ensuring that leadership demands go beyond a small group of experienced individuals.

Additionally, understanding the unique sporting context within Ireland's high-performance sports and in particular the GAA, leadership models must respect tradition and encourage innovation. Practical strategies such as clear communication, leadership rotation, and intentional culture-building strategies can promote team cohesion and build resilience.

5.8 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how the study's findings both align to the research question: How do transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles influence team culture in high-performance sports teams in Ireland? While enhancing existing leadership literature high-performance sport.

The results show that effective leaders in this environment combine transformational qualities which include empowerment, relationship-building, and shared vision along with specific transactional elements to ensure accountability and performance standards. Whereas Laissez-faire methods were applied at times only to foster autonomy among competent individuals.

Key factors influencing team culture included adaptive leadership, emotional intelligence, shared leadership structures, and deliberate actions that uphold core values and collective identity. Leaders must overcome unique contextual challenges by combining traditional values with adaptable approaches.

By nurturing emerging leaders and instilling core behaviours within the team, a positive and resilient culture can be cultivated that supports long term success. These insights provide a comprehensive and actionable framework for leadership development in Irish high-

performance sport and provide a foundation for future research into the interplay between leadership styles and cultural dynamics.

6.0 Chapter Six – Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This study examines the role and implementation of various leadership styles in high-performance sports teams in Ireland, with specific focus on transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles. The findings, which were comprehensive analysed in chapter four and five and linked to relevant academic literature and theoretical frameworks.

This chapter will conclude findings, by reviewing the findings, drawing well supported conclusions and providing recommendations based on the data gathered from semi-structured interviews and broader research. The interviews were carried out with managers, coaches, players and support staff all who had a minimum of ten years' experience working in high-performance sports environments.

6.2 Overview of Findings

The Semi structured Interviews which were conducted with managers, coaches, players and support staff yielded the following results.

- Effective leadership in high-performance sports teams requires a dynamic and context-sensitive approach instead of a strict adherence to any one leadership style.
- Transformational leadership was widely implemented to build team cohesion, motivation, and long-term development. Transactional leadership has a bigger focus on ensuring discipline, structure, and accountability, particularly in high pressure environments. Where laissez-faire hands-off approach has benefits within mature, experienced and highly motivated athletes and environments.
- Shared leadership helps foster accountability, resilience, and improve team cohesion by delegating responsibility across different roles. This methodology is strongly supported by collective efficacy and transformation leadership (Bass, 1990).
- Cultural sustainability relies on the continual reinforcement of shared values and required behaviours, this process is further strengthened by consistent leadership

modelling and adaptability to adapt to evolving team needs (Schein, 2010; Cruickshank & Collins, 2016).

- Contextual challenges in Irish sport - Leaders in Irish high-performance sports teams face similar challenges across a broad range of sport, it requires leaders to balance elite performance expectations with community ties, limited resources, and strong cultural traditions. There is a clear requirement for leadership development frameworks that reflect the unique socio-cultural context of Irish sport.

In light of these findings, we have formulated the following recommendations and conclusions.

6.3 Recommendations and Conclusions

The research indicates that effective leadership in high-performance sports teams requires both flexibility and adaptability. Managers, coaches and team leaders are encouraged to utilise a wide range of leadership styles including transformational, transactional and laissez-faire leadership styles depending on the specific needs of the situation, athlete and wider team. Essential skills including intelligence, clear and effective communication, and cultural awareness are vital for sustaining high-performance and fostering a positive team culture.

The study highlighted that transformational leadership helps foster trust, motivation, and innovation within teams. Although participants emphasised the importance of incorporating transactional elements, particularly in highly competitive setting where structure, expectations, and accountability are vital, while laissez-faire leadership is frequently linked with disengagement due to its hands off approach. However, research indicates that when this style is used strategically it can empower experienced athletes to lead by example, exercise autonomy, and cultivate a culture of shared ownership. This approach works best when there is already strong trust and clear structures in place.

The absence of leadership development frameworks specifically designed to the Irish sporting context is a significant issue that hinders the effective preparation of team leaders. This shortfall hampers leaders' ability to navigate the unique balance between amateur traditions and high-performance expectations. Without these frameworks, leaders may find it difficult to fully support athletes and sustain a high-performance environment.

Coaches and leaders in high-performance Irish sports teams must enhance their awareness and prioritise training in the practical integration of transformational, transactional, and laissez faire approaches. High-performance leadership, according to the literature, goes beyond technical and tactical guidance. It encompasses fostering trust, empowering athletes, and instilling fundamental core cultural values into everyday routines.

Participants generally agreed the need to establish structured leadership development pathways that identifies and supports emerging leaders at various levels. By implementing a standardised approach, similar to formal leadership progression models that exist in other sports, can ensure a consistent approach, that remains flexible enough to accommodate Irelands amateur-professional balance.

Building leadership capacity through intentional culture-building activities and providing athletes chances to lead and take on further responsibility can significantly enhance team cohesion and build resilience. This strategy supports high-performance teams to maintain long term success while upholding the traditions and values central to Irish sport.

6.4 Conclusion

This research undertook an in-depth exploration into leadership practices and perceptions within high-performance sports teams in Ireland with a particular emphasis on the interaction among transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles. By examining the lived experiences and insights of managers, coaches, players, support staff and team leaders, key themes were identified and analysed alongside existing theoretical models and modern leadership research.

Utilising semi semi-structured allowed for an in-depth qualitative exploration of the lived experiences and insights, revealing the complex nature of leadership in high-performance sports teams. These findings establish a foundation for a wider understanding of integrative, responsive leadership that values both strong relationships and effective performance systems.

Although the scope of this research is constrained by the limited sample size. The findings highlight the urgent need for a broader, potentially nationwide study on leadership development within high-performance sports teams in Ireland covering a wide range of sports.

Such an investigation could provide critical insights and help shape practical frameworks and policy for leadership training, mentorship, and succession planning in Irish sport. Ultimately, this study supports the ongoing discussion on effective leadership within high-performance teams highlighting the critical role of a flexible, relational, and context-aware leadership approach in achieving and maintaining high-performance.

7.0 Chapter Seven - Bibliography

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