

Sport Directors' Perceptions of Successful 'Road Captains' in Men's Professional Cycling

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores professional team sport directors' perceptions of the attributes required for successful Road Captains (RCs) in men's elite road cycling representing a specific organizational context. Six sport directors from one UCI-ranked men's professional cycling team participated in semi-structured interviews. Five of the participants had previously competed as professional cyclists, accumulating 57 years of racing experience across 19 elite cycling teams spanning UCI Continental, ProTeam, and World Tour levels. Transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, adopting a combined inductive–deductive approach within an interpretivist framework. The analysis yielded four primary themes and one overarching meta-theme. *Personal characteristics* included self-confidence, composure, and a strong work ethic. *Race smartness* comprised thorough preparation and tactical knowledge, enabling RCs to make rapid, high-quality decisions under pressure. *Team competence* encompassed effective communication, care and support, and bonding behaviors. *Leadership behavior* involved role-modelling, decisive action, and tailored motivational strategies. The meta-theme, "the hub of the team," described the RC as the communication and operational link between sport directors in the team car and riders in the peloton. Participants emphasized that successful RCs combine tactical intelligence with interpersonal influence and in many ways, act as cultural architects who translate management strategy into coordinated team action and develop and maintain the interaction in the team. Findings are aligned and discussed with transformational and the social identity approach to leadership. The results provide factors to consider when selecting RCs and offer targets for development programs. Integrating principles from athlete- and coach-leadership training could help cultivate the identified competencies, improving intrateam communication, cohesion, and performance in the elite cycling context.

Keywords

Cycling Leadership; Athlete Leadership; Team Dynamics; Team Roles; Sport Psychology



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1 Introduction

Professional road cycling is an endurance team sport in which the competitors must cope with tremendous physical and psychological demands in both training and competition (Phillips & Hopkins, 2020; Sanders et al., 2019; Spindler et al., 2018; Veltkamp, 2016). The races take place in open arenas, for example in city streets and country roads on surfaces varying from smooth asphalt to cobblestones and may incorporate mass-start single-day events, solo races against the clock and stage races. The courses in stage races can also vary from relatively flat roads to extreme climbs and tough mountain passes at altitudes higher than 2500 meters, followed by high-speed descents according to the official websites of the Vuelta a España (<https://www.lavuelta.es/en/>) and Tour de France (<https://www.letour.fr/en/>). The race might also vary in time and length. While a typical professional road race can last between five to six hours, one of the most famous stage races, the Tour de France, consists of 20 stages and a distance of 3000 kilometers (<https://www.letour.fr/en/>). Furthermore, cycling races take place in all forms of weather and, unlike many other sports, races are postponed or cancelled due to adverse weather. The competitive season for professional cyclists is in addition long, compared to many other sports, and they may compete in between 60 to 90 races per year (PCS, 2026; Van Reeth & Larson, 2022). Taken together, one can argue that success in cycling depends on the rider's ability and opportunity to preserve and apportion energy as it is needed during a race, for example having enough energy to be in a breakaway (where one or more riders try to separate themselves from the main pack of riders, the 'peloton') or to surge in the intense sprint finish at the end of the race. Moreover, preserving energy in a race may also make it easier for the cyclist to recover for the next day's race.

Professional road cycling has been identified as "an individual sport practiced in teams" (Rebeggiani, 2016, p.48) where success is dependent on a well-functioning team within which members have different roles and responsibilities. In a professional cycling team, assigned roles are commonly the *climber* (often a lighter weight rider who specializes in hilly or mountainous racing); the *sprinter* (a powerful rider who can perform high-velocity burst finishes); the *time trialist* (a strong endurance rider who excels at maintaining a high speed over a long period of time to win stage sprints or time trials), and the *protected rider* (the rider who is favored by the team to win either the day's stage or the race overall). The *protected rider* may vary from stage to stage and be a climber on a mountain stage, or a sprinter on the flats or one of the *general classifications* (GC) contenders (riders going for the best overall time in the event rather than an individual stage win). Even though road cycling most definitely is an individual sport, behind the individual winner of every stage or overall title, there is a whole team that has worked together to ensure success (Rebeggiani, 2016). Therefore, a cycling team needs supporting riders, termed as '*domestique*' or '*gregarious*' riders that are necessary to ensure success through helping the protected rider to win (Wegelius, 2014). The supporting riders' main functions are to help the protected rider by sheltering them from the wind, physically buffering them from other riders, bringing water and food from the team car, and if necessary, handing over their own bike to the protected rider, if necessary, e.g., in the case of a flat tire. Success in most of the elite team cycling competitions is therefore dependent on a well-functioning team within which members have different riding styles and strategies, to achieve the team's goals. In professional cycling it is common to differentiate between team managers and sport directors. A team manager in professional

cycling is responsible for the overall leadership and direction of the team. They oversee long-term strategy, manage riders and staff, handle budgets and sponsor relations, and ensure compliance with UCI regulations. In sum they must ensure that the team is stable, well-organized, and able to perform at the highest level. On the other hand, sport directors operate within the framework set by the team manager and work more closely with riders and coaches and translate the team's goals into results on the road. Furthermore, the sport director is directly responsible for the team's sporting performance and normally they plan training and race schedules, develop tactics, and make strategic decisions during races (Witts, 2016; van Reeth & Larsson, 2022). Nevertheless, even the best planned strategy may come unstuck due to the unpredictable nature of races, including breakaways, crashes, bad weather, poor communication, and equipment malfunctions. The ability of riders and the team to persevere and adapt under these difficult conditions and uncontrolled occurrences often determines which cyclists and which team wins (Phillips & Hopkins, 2020). Crucial to and a prerequisite for both good individual and team performance is therefore leadership of the team whilst in the heat of competition, and this responsibility falls to the rider known as the *Road Captain* (RC) (O'Grady et al., 2023). RC needs to be able to execute the team strategy and be the sport directors "long-arm" into the team. They often need to adapt the strategy to the situation they face ensuring that each rider in the team goes to the right place at the right time during a race. The RC is unlikely to be the winner and rarely gains the role because of their personal success (e.g., win streak), but rather due to their physical, tactical, and mental qualities. Essential to optimally fulfilling the RCs role are excellent leadership qualities and behaviors. The RC needs to possess the skills to be able to make the right decisions in high pressure situations, and

to have access to different types of leadership bases of power (Forsyth, 2019) so that team members obey their decisions and dedicate their effort and willingness to sacrifice, and "go an extra mile" for the team and the protected rider (De Cuyper et al., 2016; Northouse, 2016).

1.1 Athlete leadership in sport

Appropriate athlete leadership has been highlighted as paramount for optimal team function and team performance. Loughhead et al. (2006, p. 144) defined athlete leadership as "an athlete occupying a formal or informal role within a team who influences a group of team members (i.e., a minimum of two team members) to achieve a common goal". Athletes considered as good leaders influence team identification, team cohesion, athlete satisfaction, team confidence and can put their shared mental model into practice and subsequently increase performance (Fransen et al., 2012; Giske et al., 2022; Vincer & Loughhead, 2010). When investigating athlete leadership, it is common to differentiate between informal and formal roles (Eys et al., 2007; Loughhead et al., 2006; 2014). Informal leaders have a nonformal leadership position and become a team leader as a result of the interactions occurring within the team. The formal leader on the other hand is a prescribed function formally and appointed by the coach or by the team (e.g., captain, RC). The importance of the captain's role has been emphasized in several studies (Brgoch et al., 2020; Cotterill & Cheetham, 2017; Dupuis et al., 2006; Kozub & Pease, 2001). The main function for a team captain is to act as a liaison between the coaching staff and the athletes, act as a leader during team activities and engage in task and social activities on and off the training and competition situation by providing, for example, support and guidance to the teammates. In addition, many captains are also team representatives at meetings and press

conferences (Fransen et al., 2014; Mosher, 1979; Voelker et al., 2011). Although the captain has received most research attention, studies have also explored the impact of informal leadership (Fransen et al., 2014; Loughead & Hardy, 2005). More specifically, researchers (Cotterill & Fransen, 2022; Eys et al., 2007; Fransen et al., 2014) have made a classification of athlete leadership roles based on their leader function. They divided athlete leadership roles into task leaders (e.g., focus on goals, helps in tactical decision-making, gives teammates tactical advice during the game); motivational leaders (e.g., motivator, encourage teammates to go to any extreme, steers all the emotions on the field in the right direction in order to perform optimally as a team); social leaders (e.g., leader off the field, listener, trusted and promotes good relations within the team and cares for a good team atmosphere), and external leaders (e.g., link between the team and the people outside, communicate with media or sponsors). Danielsen et al. (2019) on the other hand, have identified what they labeled as a *cultural architect* as “someone who significantly contributes to cocreating, interpreting, translating, developing, implementing, executing, and enhancing the coach’s visions and strategies through his or her attitude and actions (both verbally and behaviorally) and who thereby contributes to development of optimal team coordination and culture” (p. 314). Whilst a cultural architect is prescribed as an informal role, it may well be that a team captain can also act as a cultural architect within the team.

Research on the team captain’s role and informal athlete leadership has, however, primarily been conducted in interactive team sport (basketball, handball, ice hockey, soccer, volleyball) (Dupuis et al., 2006; Fransen et al., 2014; Grandzol et al., 2010; Voelker et al., 2011). Even if the research provides an excellent overview of the athlete leadership roles (both

formal and informal), it is reasonable to believe that athlete leadership roles need to be context specific, having the sport, level of competition, the competition demands, and the specific team goal apparent when investigating athlete leadership roles. To our knowledge, no research has investigated the RCs role in elite cycling teams despite their clearly identified importance. Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate pro team sport directors’ perceptions of the qualities required to be successful RCs in men’s professional cycling. The reasons for investigating RCs from the sport directors’ perspective is that they designate the role, plan the tactics and strategy for the team, and they need the RC to execute their strategy during races.

2 Material and Methods

2.1 Participants

Six sport directors from a single UCI-ranked men’s cycling team participated in this study. Five of them had previously competed as professional cyclists, accumulating 57 years of racing experience across 19 elite cycling teams spanning UCI Continental, ProTeam, and World Tour levels. The sport directors were invited to participate by the sports psychologist team, and they all accepted the invitation. The APA ethical standards were followed in the conduct of the study.

2.2 Research design and philosophical position

In view of the rather scant knowledge regarding the RCs in elite cycling sport, qualitative methods were deemed to be best suited for this study. Such methods are typically characterized by the adoption of an explorative approach to inquiry and the collection of rich, descriptive data that portrays complex human experiences (Silverman, 2024; Patton, 2002).

The study, emphasizing the subjective meanings and lived experiences of individuals within their social contexts, was philosophically grounded in an interpretivist paradigm (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Drawing on a relativist ontology and a constructionist epistemology, this approach acknowledges the nuanced and multifaceted nature of sport directors' perceptions. A relativist ontology recognizes that individuals may interpret the same phenomenon or experience in diverse ways, reflecting the complexity of their perspectives. Complementing this, a constructionist epistemology asserts that the research findings are co-constructed through the dynamic interaction between the researcher and the informants. This perspective underscores the influence of researchers' values, beliefs, and experiences in shaping both the research process and its outcomes (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020).

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews where the interviewer initially asked participants to elaborate and reflect on the two following main questions: 1) What do you perceive as the main characteristics of a successful RC in a pro cycling team; 2) What do you perceive as the main tasks and functions of a successful RC in a pro cycling team. The interviewer followed up and asked spontaneous questions based on the participants' responses and ensuing discussion. All interviews were conducted by the second author and were audio-recorded and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes (mean 38 minutes).

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, pseudo-anonymized and analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). Thematic analysis was conducted following the six-phase model by Braun & Clarke (2006, 2019): (1) familiarization, (2) coding, (3) generating initial themes, (4) developing and reviewing themes, (5) refining and naming themes, and (6) writing up. In the

familiarization phase, the second author listened to all audio recordings and reviewed the transcripts. The first and second authors then note initial analytic observations such as relevant quotes and potential themes. In the following phases, the research team met several times to develop a shared interpretation of the data, recognizing that these findings reflect their perspectives rather than representing the only or definitive solution (Braun et al., 2016). A combined deductive and inductive approach was used in phases 2–4 to identify topics, codes, and themes. Team Competence and Race Smartness were themes that were constructed primarily inductively, while Personal Characteristics and Leadership Behavior were constructed primarily deductively based on leadership theory and more specifically athlete leadership theory (Loughead et al., 2006; Northouse, 2025). The final themes are presented in this manuscript. As the interviews were conducted in Norwegian, all quotes have been translated with careful attention to accuracy, through a back-translation process by a bilingual researcher not involved in the initial data collection.

2.4 Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, participants were invited to review and revise their interview responses immediately after the interview and the corresponding transcripts to ensure accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). No participants requested changes, and all approved transcripts were included in the analysis.

The sample size of six participants might be considered small; however, it is based on purposeful sampling strategy (Sparkes & Smith, 2014), which allowed us to obtain in-depth insight into a protected context which professional sports teams represent. According to Smith (2018), small purposefully chosen samples can provide unique strength through qualitative research.

3 Results

Figure 1 shows the themes that emerged from the data analysis process. Comments from every participant were present in the main themes, but not in some of the sub-themes. Nevertheless, although certain categories were not as highly represented as others, their inclusion was critical in providing the participants' perceptions of the qualities required to be a successful RC in professional cycling teams. It is important, however, to note that the number of meaning units does not provide an estimate of the importance of each category. The key features of successful RCs in elite teams are also presented within each theme in Figure 1.

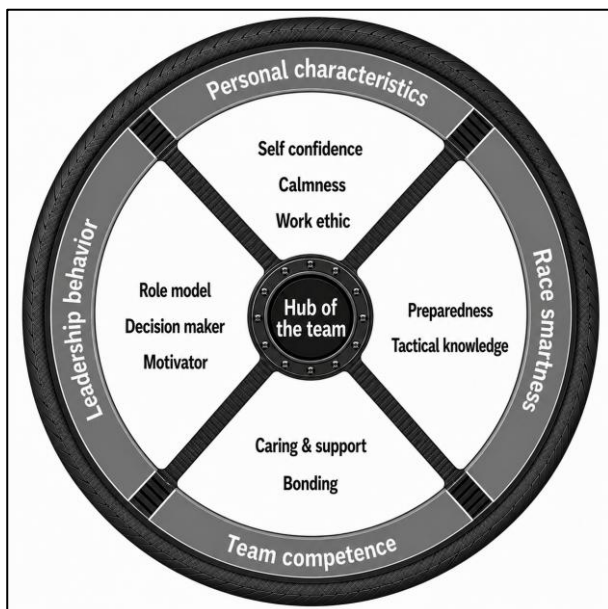


Figure 1. The key features of a successful Road Captain. Note: The image was generated by ChatGPT (DALL·E).

3.1 Personal Characteristics

This theme includes the following three personal characteristic sub-themes: *self-confidence*, *calmness*, and *work ethic*.

3.1.1 Self-Confidence

The directors reported that the RC needs to have a positive attitude about their own cycling abilities and competence, and this forms the foundation for their team influence and for acting in a calm and safe manner. It can

be illustrated by the following quote from SD-5: "The independence, that one is confident in oneself", or as SD-3 stated: "They have a certain confidence and knowledge about what they are doing. That gives a sense of calm and respect from the others". While he elaborates further:

A captain must, above all, be someone who commands respect from others. The team does not only respect what he says, but his personality is also very important to them. They need to look up to him. They need to trust him, which means he must be very good at what he does. (SD-3)

3.1.2 Calmness

The sport directors reported that RC needs to maintain composure, focus, and clear thinking under intense pressure or challenging circumstances in order to make effective decisions. As SD-4 stated, "it is important to maintain an overview and composure. To stay calm". Similarly elaborated on by SD-5, "You must keep your calm, and that's crucial. Even in a stressful situation, it's about taking it step by step: First things first".

3.1.3 Work Ethic

The sport directors reported responsibility, dedication, high work standard, do the job and go the "extra mile" as exemplars of a positive work ethic. For instance, one director described:

When you get to breakfast, you see that it's 3 degrees and raining, and you know that it's 267 kilometers. So, you expect a road captain to lead by example and manage to remove the negativity that naturally arises in that situation, either in the form of verbal motivation or just by being a guy who gets the job done... As a road captain, you have to prepare for the fact that there will be tough days for the team, where he has to take the lead and the center of the team". (SD-2)

3.2 Race Smartness

This theme incorporates tactical intelligence and smartness before and during a race to maximize performance, conserve energy, and achieve their objectives. The category consists of the following two sub-themes: *preparedness* and *tactical knowledge*.

3.2.1 Preparedness

The sport directors reported that preparation involves knowledge about the course profile before a race, as well as being familiar with the team's strategies and being prepared for potential tactics employed by rival teams. As stated by SD-1: "Preparation — I can't emphasize it enough. Preparation also brings calm. If you haven't prepared, you won't have calm in the situation, and then you'll constantly feel uncertain and lack full control. You'll always be one step behind". SD-4 described this in the following:

A road captain must be one step ahead of the rest of the team. An RC should stay ahead by knowing, for example, where the climbs are. They need to understand who we are, what we represent, and how we plan to ride. It's about being prepared, being ready for others' tactics. In other words, thinking ahead: which teams are participating, and how might they plan to ride this race?

3.2.2 Tactical Knowledge

The sport directors reported that an RC was a team member who ensure that the team follow the tactic agreed on, and was able to identify specific moments or situations when the team needs to push the pace, attack, or test the limits of their opponents to create a decisive split or gain an advantage. As SD-2 stated: "First of all, he has exceptional skills to assess different situations and understand how the race is unfolding". SD-6 elaborated more on expectations:

For example, when something unexpected happens during a race—there could suddenly be more crosswind than anticipated, or another team might launch an attack, causing changes in the peloton. He must take responsibility immediately. This is a typical situation where there's no time to communicate with the car, as it could be far behind. A rider has a much better sense of what's happening in the peloton than the sports directors do.

3.3 Team Competence

This theme encompasses RC behaviors that promote an effective collaborative team climate where riders are challenged and cared for and the following two sub-themes were developed; *caring and support*, and *bonding*.

3.3.1 Caring and Support

The sport directors reported that the RC needs to show respect for everyone and to care for and support each rider based on their wants and needs. SD-1 and SD-4 described this in the following:

I really think it's important that the RC has an understanding of and respect for the other team members. It's about respecting your teammates and receiving respect in return. This creates a shared understanding among team members. Even if the RC cannot precisely read how people are feeling, they must try to stay attentive. For example, if someone is struggling, it's important to support and rally the team around that person. Some riders might be feeling down for various reasons, and it doesn't help if we exclude them. It's about being able to support each other. (SD-1)

Riders are different, and the RC needs to recognize that. It's about knowing who to talk to a lot, who not to talk to, and who can be left alone. Who do I need to keep an eye on to ensure they're in the right place in the peloton? It's important for the RC to be respectful to bring everyone along, including those who will handle the first part of the work in a race. (SD-4)

3.3.2 Bonding

The sport directors reported that an RC should behave in a way that builds strong bonds within a team. SD-6 put it simply: “He must ideally be approachable and unifying”, while SD-4 described it in this way:

An RC should help everyone perform and feel like they are part of the project. It’s about noticing everyone. For example, he might ask at breakfast, “How are you doing?” or make a joke to lift others’ spirits. When someone has a role, he asks about that role and says, “That role is incredibly important. It’s crucial, and if you succeed in it, we can succeed together.” In this way, he makes everyone feel valued and motivated to perform.

3.4 Leadership Behavior

Paramount for a RC is the ability to execute leadership behavior in order to influence and guide the team riders on and off races. This theme encompasses the following three sub-themes: *role model*, *decision maker* and *motivator*.

3.4.1 Role Model

The sport directors reported that being a RC is to not only follow and promote the team rules and norms, but to also be the person that directly and indirectly inspires and guides the team and its members to achieve their objectives. SD-2 described this as: “A road captain is expected to lead by example, remove any negativity that may arise in a situation, either by talking and motivating or simply by being someone who gets the job done”. SD-5 stated the following:

No, it’s about being a role model, someone who follows the team’s rules. He should simply not be the last one in training. He doesn’t need to be first necessarily, because there’s always someone ahead of you, but you should be on time. These are simple principles. You throw the trash where it belongs, you stick to the schedule, and you respect your fellow teammates, both in terms of equipment and the way you speak.

3.4.2 Decision Maker

The sport directors reported that crucial for an RC is the ability to make good decisions often under difficult circumstances and to have the strength to cope with and endure the consequences of the decisions made. This was shown by SD-6 as: “You need to have the confidence to make those decisions. Live with the consequences and then figure out if it was right or wrong afterward. But the most important thing is that he takes responsibility.” SD-1 elaborated with the following statement:

Now I expect him to take the lead. It’s like the last man who leaves the ship – he has the responsibility, but he’s also the one who makes the decisions and leads. He shouldn’t wait for communication all the time because often the car (support vehicle) is a bit behind in situations. We need to be alert because we hear what is happening or see it on TV – but the TV broadcast can be delayed, sometimes by up to a minute. This means that a rider in the field has much quicker access to information directly on the bike. The faster he acts, the less damage can occur.

3.4.3 Motivator

The sport directors reported that an RC needs to have motivational skills, and in-depth knowledge about their teammates in order to influence each of them in the best suited way. SD-2 described this in this way: “It’s not when we’re on a wave that we need a pat on the back. It’s in the tough times that we need a damn good captain who can turn it around”. While SD-4 described this in the following quote:

That’s the most important thing about being a captain. It’s about making others better by motivating them and making them feel more valuable. Helping them realize their role is important and generally getting everyone on the team to perform at their best during the race... It’s about approaching each person in

different ways. If you want to motivate someone, you might go up to one person, pat them on the shoulder, and say, “Now you better get it together.” And then they perform exceptionally well. But with another rider, you might put a hand on their back, stand next to them, and say, “You look good; it’s going to be fine today”.

3.5 Hub of the Team

Based on the overall findings, we interpret the role of the RC as the ‘Hub of the team’, and the one who should be the communication link between the sport directors who normally operate in a team car behind the riders in a race, and the riders. As SD-1 and SD-4 stated:

It is also important to have a person who acts as our extended arm, someone who can communicate on behalf of the team and who understands our way of thinking. It’s about speaking the same language and having a shared understanding of both the task and the team’s values. This also involves understanding how one functions as a person and being able to read the situations and the people around them. If necessary, they can also raise the energy and motivation of the group when needed. (SD-1)

And it’s important that he can give messages and bring positivity to the race that we can’t do from the car. If three riders get upset about something, we’re sitting in the car. We have no idea. Or if someone suddenly loses concentration when they go to the start because something exciting happens, he is the one, since he is the extended arm, who says: “Okay, focus now. It’s about keeping your concentration here.” (SD-4)

Furthermore, the RC needs to be good at sharing information and communicating in a way that is easily understood by everyone involved. SD-3 highlighted the importance of communicating during the race: “He should

speak when necessary, and when he does, it must be clear. That is what characterizes the best”. While SD-4 also highlighted communicating between competitions:

Then, of course, there’s feedback after the race. It’s about praising each other, which is incredibly important. If we have someone who wins a race, it’s even more important to praise those who worked earlier in the race or set things up for the victory in the final. It’s crucial that the road captain is good at giving recognition, like a pat on the back, and saying, “It was really great that you led us into that position because it allowed us to get through it, and that’s what gave us an extra man in the next phase.” That way, the person truly feels, “Yes, if I hadn’t done that, we wouldn’t have been able to win”.

4 Discussion

The primary aim of this study was to examine professional team sport directors’ perceptions of the attributes required for successful RCs in professional cycling. Road captains occupy a unique and decisive position within professional cycling, and their performance can significantly influence team outcomes. Accordingly, it is important that riders, coaches, sport directors, and stakeholders can define and describe the qualities, duties, and responsibilities necessary for the complex RC role. Moreover, understanding these attributes is essential not only for selecting the most appropriate RC, but also for informing targeted strategies and deliberate practices to develop and support individuals in this role.

As can be seen in Figure 1, we generated the following main themes: personal characteristics; race smartness; team competence, and leadership behavior, in addition to the theme we labeled as “the hub of the team”. According to the latter, all participants consistently emphasized the

importance of the RC as a hub of the team. A core requirement for the RC is reliable communication with team sport directors located in the team cars or the caravan behind the peloton, together with the capacity to implement those directors' decisions. The RC must also possess the capacity to make high-quality, rapid decisions under pressure and to promptly communicate those decisions to the rest of the team. Team sport directors describe successful RCs in terms comparable to Danielsen et al., (2020)'s concept of the "cultural architect", which is an athlete leader that is the coach's "long-arm" into the team and who has the power and position to influence teammates. The latter is closely related to the theme personal characteristics and particularly self-confidence and calmness. This attribute may be perceived as a core psychological foundation, and it likely also contributes to creating the underpinning basis of respect and calmness, which is necessary to perform the RC role effectively. For example, maintaining composure under pressure to ensure effective decision-making when stakes are high. This underscores the participants' perception that being an RC involves a broad spectrum of leadership behavior, such as decision making, motivation and role modeling. High-quality decisions include objectively good decisions (i.e., increasing the probability of success), and as such, this clarifies the need for being race smart, but equally importantly getting the riders to accept and execute the decision. More specifically, race intelligence should be founded on broad tactical competence in cycling and, critically, on specific, current information about the stages or events in which participants will compete.

Therefore, the RC must systematically analyze upcoming competitions and stages and work proactively. This process requires a dedicated effort to gather and synthesize

information from multiple sources and, in combination with an appraisal of the team's capabilities and limitations, to contribute to the development of a bespoke race plan (i.e., a plan that can use strengths and strategies to overcome challenges). The findings in the present study are consistent with transformational leadership theory and map onto the four I's of that model: idealized influence; inspirational motivation; intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Turnnidge & Côté, 2019). For example, the RC role entails leading by example and central to this is a strong work ethic. This orientation resembles a "domestique mentality" that is, the RC must prioritize the success of their designated leader over their own finishing position and as such, RCs should not be preoccupied with their individual results but should focus on team objectives and on supporting the designated riders. This potential conflict between ego and team goals is highly important for sport directors to address when they recruit and develop RC's. Another challenge for the RC is to handle the leadership role and their own physical limits during a race. It may well be that optimal leader behavior (e.g., to bridge a breakaway) may not be possible due to available energy and forthcoming challenges during a race.

To be a RC a core attribute is to be a role model who possesses a strong work ethic behavior and then sets the standard for effort norms in the team, and it is also a foundation for the power to influence the teammates. In addition, and in line with two transformational leadership behaviors, (i.e., idealized influence and inspirational motivation) the RC should motivate not only by their own example, but also by giving constructive and tailored feedback to the team and the management. This demands sensitivity to the context, to team members and a comprehensive cycling

competence to be able to give individualized feedback that enforces motivation and improves development and performance. This quality is inherent in the theme team competences, which in addition explicitly contains bonding, caring, and support also characteristic in the transformational leadership perceptive. Furthermore, research has identified relationships between transformational leadership behavior and caring, well-being, cohesion, resilience, and performance (Arthur et al., 2017; Erikstad et al., 2022; Kao et al., 2016; Karayel et al., 2024; Mach et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2013).

The role of the RC can also be illuminated using the social identity approach to leadership. This approach holds that leaders are most effective when they are perceived to act in the interests of the group rather than for personal gain. To mobilize follower support and direct collective effort, leaders must not only “be one of us” (identity prototypicality) but also “do it for us” (identity advancement), “craft a sense of us” (identity entrepreneurship), and “embed a sense of us” (identity impresario-ship) (Steffens et al., 2014), all factor inherently as key elements in the participants’ descriptions of what is paramount in order to be a successful RC. Notably, identity advancement acting as an in-group champion, closely parallels the idealized influence component of transformational leadership and both frameworks emphasize that influence grows when leaders are seen to prioritize the group’s interests over their own or those of out-groups (Steffens et al., 2014). Finally, there is substantial evidence that both social identity leadership and transformational leadership are related to several positive individual outcomes (reduced social loafing, social laboring, wellbeing, and performance) and team outcomes (coordination, intrateam communication, and cohesion) (Haslam et al., 2020; Høigaard, 2021; Høigaard et al., 2013; Schei et al., 2023).

4.1 Limitations and Future Research

This study is not without limitations. First, our results are highly context specific and generalizing these findings should be done with caution. Second, the RC is investigated from the perspective of sport directors in one pro cycling men’s teams. Despite the participants’ long experience of different professional cycling teams, their current role as a sport director in one professional team might have impacted on their perception of the RC role due to confirmative and normative pressure in the current team culture. Therefore, future research should explore the RC roles with participants from different nationalities, professional teams and UCI levels. Furthermore, there is also a need for studies from the rider’s perspective, and with women’s teams. Despite these limitations, the novelty of this research should be recognized. These results corroborate earlier studies of athlete leadership and make a substantive contribution to the theoretical refinement and empirical development of athlete leadership research in sport psychology.

5 Practical Applications

From a practical perspective, these findings offer a basis for selecting RCs and, when integrated with principles from transformational and social identity leadership, can guide the design of development programs to enhance RC quality. Because substantial evidence indicates that these leadership styles are trainable, RC development programs may benefit from incorporating elements of established athlete- and coach-leadership training (Cotterill, 2017; Cotterill & Fransen, 2022; Eriksen et al., 2024; Haslam et al., 2017; Haslam et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2019). Furthermore, the use of performance profiling, individual and role behavior analysis, and communication and quality can be useful to develop RCs (for a comprehensive overview see Filho, 2020; Filho et al., 2023; Høigaard et al., 2026).

6 Conclusions

This study establishes the core attributes of effective RCs in professional men's cycling as personal characteristics, race smartness, team competence, and leadership behaviors. The RC is considered as a "hub" in the team and highly significant for team functioning and execution of the race sports directors' strategies during races. These findings align with transformational and identity leadership theories, indicating that an RC who prioritizes group interests, leads by example, and provides individualized support enhances cohesion, motivation, and performance within the team.

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