

# International Journal of Business in Sports, Tourism & Hospitality Management

*Vol.01 No.02 December* **2020**



# Coaching Behaviours through the Lens of the Coxswain



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## Abstract

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The coxswain is a unique role in rowing, often called the “coach in the boat.” This begs the question of defining the differences in behaviour and preferences between rowers and coxswain. This manuscript identifies the difference in desired and actual leadership behaviour of the team’s coach between the coxswain and the rowers. A survey-based analysis is performed to quantify the differences in coaching behaviours of rowing coaches. The results indicate that there exist significant differences between the preferences and observations of the coxswain and rowers for their coaches. The study therefore proposes a different program for coaching coxswain than for rowers.

**Keywords:** *leadership; gender; athletes; college athletics; coxswain*

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## 1. Introduction

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In this manuscript, the authors present a unique sport with unique roles, rowing. Like most sports, rowing has a coach and participants or rowers. However, there are three roles in rowing: the coach, the coxswain, and the rowers. The rowers are considered the “players” in this sport. The coach oversees the team. The coxswain performs a role that is traditionally conducted by the coach in other sports. The three roles are explained further in the paragraphs below.

The rowers are in the boat numbered from bow to stern, with the stern referred to as the “stroke.” The stroke seat is responsible for keeping pace for the boat. While the other rowers have specific numbers, their duties are varied and are typically associated with the side of the boat and the arm with which they row. They are also placed in the boat based on their technical skill or physical strength. While these are the technical roles, many feel that rowers are machine-like and simply row. In a 2016 USA Today article, Meghan Musnicki, of the US women’s eight and two-time defending Olympic champions, described the rowers’ role as “just hauling it and in a lot of pain” (Ritter, 2016).

The coach conducts practices and prepares training plans. However, the coach is prohibited from talking to the team (aka coaching) once the rowers are in the boat during a race. Thus, all coaching, from the coach, must be done in practice sessions and not during the event.

Unlike other sports, rowing has the unique role of the coxswain, which is defined as “any competitor in a crew who is not a rower and who,

apart from operating a bona fide steering mechanism, does not participate in the physical propulsion of the boat” (*The rules of rowing: 2020 edition*, 2020, p. 11). In rowing, the coxswain keeps the boat going straight and the oars swinging in sync. The coxswain communicates with officials, steers the boat, and coaches the team while the team is in the boat. The coxswain encourages the crew, judges the pain on their faces, and pushes them forward. They also let the crew know who is ahead and who is behind and by how much. If done right, the cox's commands help the rowers push past the pain barrier and keep pulling the oars when every muscle fibre tells them to stop (Sequin, 2018).

While the rowers are the muscle, the coxswain is the brain of the operation, or sometimes called the coach in the boat. Their job is to persuade the rowers to go on, even after they are very tired. One thought is that the coxswain needs to be part psychologist and part coach. The coxswain’s role is to steer the boat, to provide motivation to the crew, and to let the rowers know where they are in the race. Finally, the coxswain is the one who makes tactical and strategic decisions during the race, hence, the name of “coach in the boat.” The cox is also usually the smallest person in the boat since their job is not to physically propel the boat (Ritter, 2016).

Given that the rowers and the coxswain have such different roles and both interact with the coach, this manuscript examines the differences between preferred and actual coaching behaviour between the two positions with respect to the coach. The manuscript highlights sports leader-

ship theory (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980; Riemer, 2007) and examines the behaviours of the coach that are both preferred and identified by coxswains and rowers.

## 2. Review of Literature

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### 2.1 Background

In this section, coaching rowing and women's rowing are highlighted in the literature. This is followed by an explanation of measurement of leadership in sports and an introduction of the Leadership Scale for Sports (LSS).

### 2.2 Coaching Rowing

There is an increasing volume of research on coaching in rowing (Cote & Sedgwick, 2003; Kiosoglous, 2013). Much of this research focuses on the physiological aspects of training high-level athletes. There are a few studies that focus on the behaviour of the coach, although primarily these are reserved for coaches who are working with elite and pre-elite athletes (Olympic and national team members and hopefuls). Purdy et al. use their personal account as a coxswain (2008) and as a participating observer (2011) to recount the leadership behaviour exhibited by two different coaches and the way in which those behaviours were received by their respective teams. This manuscript addresses the gap by examining non-elite athletes. Purdy (2008, p. 320) reviews sport coaching literature finding that "most studies which have been undertaken exploring this dynamic [coach-athlete relationship] have been from the coach's perspective." They elaborate on personal experiences with a new coach, the team, and uses those experiences to explore "the transformative nature of power within the coach-

athlete relationship", in particular the component in which the coach only holds power over the athletes if the athletes allow the coach to hold power over them.

The setting for the Purdy et al. study (2008) was a national team training camp where the participants had already been identified as the top rowers in the country. Their observational data was eventually ordered into six categories: "hierarchies, conflict between athletes, athlete-athlete communication, athlete-coach communication, coaching preferences, and expectations in high performance sport" (2008, p. 336).

Similar to the Purdy study, Rossi et al. used the personal experiences of Rabjohns as a coxswain, coach, and administrator within the Australian national team to provide "a focus on a learning culture within sport; the culture of high-performance rowing (2016, p. 56)".

### 2.3 Women's Rowing

The first intercollegiate contest in all of sports was a regatta held on Lake Winnepesaukee in New Hampshire between Yale and Harvard. (Dealy, 1990) Although women rowed as early as 1877 at Wellesley College, their involvement was intended to be recreational. It was nearly one hundred years later with the formation of the National Women's Rowing Association in 1962 that women were allowed to compete in the sport of rowing (Rosner, 2001).

Although the NCAA was formed in 1906, the organization did not become the primary sponsor of intercollegiate women's sports until 1981, replacing the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women. At that time there were 43 women's rowing teams competing at the varsity

level. While the NCAA sponsored women's rowing, the organization did not recognize women's rowing as a championship sport. The next step in changing that status was enacted in 1994 when women's rowing was identified as an emerging sport (Rosner, 2001).

According to the College Sports of America website, there are currently 150 NCAA women's rowing programs (87 Division I, 16 Division II, 47 Division III) ("Rowing," 2020).

#### *2.4 Leadership in Sport*

Leadership in sport is often measured using the Leadership Scale for Sport (LSS). This scale measures five leader behaviours: training and instruction, democratic behaviour, autocratic behaviour, social support, and positive feedback. Much research has been done on leadership in sport using the LSS since its initial development in 1980 (Chelladurai & Saleh). Many of the studies have focused on athletes and their relationships with their coaches, while finding correlations for specific behaviour. One study (Jacob, 2006) found a positive correlation with winning percentage and social support given by the coach. Other studies found a somewhat surprising result that athletes preferred the positive feedback and training and instruction behaviour more than the social support and democratic behaviour (S. P. Cumming, Smith, & Smoll, 2006; Surujlal & Dhurup, 2012). One more study (Sherman, Fuller, & Speed) found that positive feedback, democratic behaviour, and the training and instruction behaviours were preferred by all athletes while autocratic and social support behaviour were not preferred.

Researchers have attempted to look at indi-

vidual groups to see if there were difference in coaching preferences. A 2012 study of NCAA Division I athletes (2012) found there were no differing preferences between gender, among race or playing time. Some studies have investigated differences in youth sports (Sullivan, Paquette, Holt, & Bloom, 2012), while other works investigated the differences between youth perceptions and the perceptions of their parents (Martin, Jackson, Richardson, & Weiller, 1999). There have been studies which only interviewed coaches on what they perceived to be their actual behaviour (Sullivan & Kent, (2003). Other researchers have conducted a longitudinal study that revealed some changes in coaching behaviour over a ten-week period. They observed that training and instruction and positive feedback were perceived to increase, while democratic behaviour was perceived to decrease (Fletcher & Roberts, 2013). In some studies it was found that there was no difference in age or gender, but individual athletes preferred democratic behaviour over team athletes (1984) while other studies found a difference by gender (Sherman et al., 2000).

While rowing has been the subject of some research, much is qualitative (Cheek, 2008; Cote & Sedgwick, 2003). One of the few quantitative studies examined successful versus unsuccessful DI programs (Giddings, (2009). Another study of successful vs. unsuccessful programs focused on youth sports (Sean P. Cumming, Smoll, Smith, & Grossbard, 2007). It is the goal of this research to identify the coaching leadership behaviour of NCAA Division II women's rowing coaches. The perspective of the athletes is essential to de-

termine the leader behaviour that is exhibited by their coach as well as what type of behaviour is preferred by the athletes. As the roles between the coxswain and the coach are significantly different, questions arise as to how this difference is manifested in their behaviour. Given this distinct difference in the roles in rowing, several research questions arise:

- RQ 1: Is there a difference in the preferred coach's behaviour between rowers and the coxswain and on what dimensions of the LSS?
- RQ 2: Is there a difference in the observed coach's behaviour between rowers and the coxswain and on what dimensions of the LSS?

### **3.Methods**

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The research design for this study models Giddings (2009) and is entirely quantitative. The surveys were administered online as this method is very efficient when collecting data over a large geographic area. Also, the subjects of the research are comfortable using online survey methods.

One of the researchers was in a unique position on the coaching staff of an NCAA Division II women's rowing program. At a meeting at the 2014 NCAA National Championship Regatta the coaches in attendance from six Division II member institutions were informed of the upcoming study and asked to encourage their athletes to participate in this study. Research of online surveys administered shows that they have several advantages including easy access to participants, speed of data collection, and low cost. Unfortunately, there is also a low response rate associated with online surveys although it is unclear how results may be affected (Aerny-Perreten, Dominguez-

Berjon, Esteban-Vasallo, & Garcia-Riolobos, 2015). Another study found that a variety of factors influence response rates including interests of participants, and survey structure (Saleh & Bista, 2017). Confidentiality and reminders also appeared to influence the response rate. The researcher's connection to the pool of possible respondents potentially aided in the participation rate.

Head coaches from all NCAA Division II women's rowing programs were notified of the research study via email. They were then asked to forward a second email containing survey instructions to their athletes. If a coach chose not to participate, they would simply not forward the email. Athletes choosing to participate in the study would follow a link provided in the email. This was thought to allow individuals to make decisions about their inclusion in the research and allow them to do so on their own schedule with the motive of increasing participation rate. A follow-up email was sent to coaches approximately two weeks later. Recipients of this email included coaches whose teams were not represented in the data at the time. Coincidentally, the program in which this researcher was on staff was included in both emails. The researcher did not intentionally influence the participation or results of the study.

Athletes were asked to complete two versions of the Leadership Scale for Sport (LSS). In the first version, referred to as LSS – Preference, athletes responded to questions based on their preferences for leadership behaviour of a coach. The second version, LSS – Actual, asked the athletes to answer the same questions as they relate to the

current head coach's leadership behaviour.

There are two distinct differences between the research that Giddings (2009) produced and this research study. Giddings focused on NCAA Division I women's rowing programs where this research focuses on NCAA Division II women's rowing programs. Giddings also evaluated successful programs vs. other programs which was not considered in this study.

### 3.1 Survey Instrument

The Leadership Scale for Sport (LSS) was the primary tool used to measure the leadership behaviour of NCAA Division II women's rowing coaches. Since 1980, the LSS has been one of the primary measurement tools of sport-specific leadership behaviour. Since then there have been countless studies to test its validity and reliability. No tool is perfect for every situation and the LSS is no different. In general, qualities of the LSS suggest moderate to high internal consistency, reliable estimates for the training and instruction, democratic behaviour, social support, and positive feedback subscales. Lower reliability estimates have been obtained for the autocratic behaviour subscales, although this finding has been inconsistent across studies. Higher reliability has been obtained for the perception version when compared to the preference version across multiple studies, although acceptable reliability has been found for both versions (Fletcher & Roberts, 2013, p. 90).

The LSS is the tool which Chelladurai and Saleh (1980) developed in order to assess lead-

ership behaviour and evaluate the relationships they hypothesized in the Multidimensional Model of Leadership (MML). The LSS is comprised of three versions of the same forty questions. One version measures the self-reported behaviour of the coach; one version measures the actual behaviour of the coach, as reported by the athletes; and one version measures the preferred behaviour of a coach, as reported by the athletes. This study eliminated the coach's self-report due to low response rate. Respondents addressed each statement by completing a Likert scale to be used for measurement, ranging from always to never: (1) Always, (2) Often (about 75% of the time), (3) Occasionally (50% of the time), (4) Seldom (about 25% of the time), and (5) Never.

## 4. Results and Discussion

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The data analysis of the survey data addressed the research questions RQ 1&2 derived at the end of the Background section. There were six coxswains in the study. The responses of all the coxswains were averaged to compare to the rowers. A one-sample t-test comparing the rowers scores to the overall coxswain score was used. The significance value below .05 shows that there is a significant difference between the responses of the coxswain and that of the rowers. The findings are as follows:

### 4.1 LSS Preferred

The results of the one sample t-tests for the LSS Preferred survey are the preferred leadership style as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1***One sample t-tests for LSS Preferred Survey*

	Coxswain	All others		
	Mean	Mean	T-value	Significance
Training and Instruction	2.60	2.17	-2.83	0.01
Democratic Behaviour	2.53	2.76	1.86	n.s.
Autocratic Behaviour	2.80	3.47	5.37	0.00
Social Support	2.50	3.18	6.96	0.00
Positive Feedback	2.60	2.25	-2.38	0.02

#### 4.2 Training and Instruction

The mean response of the coxswain was 2.60 compared to 2.17 for the rowers. This difference was significant, which shows that statistically the coxswains are different from the rowers. Regarding training and instruction from the coach, coxswains desired more of this behaviour than the rowers.

#### 4.3 Democratic Behaviour

The mean response of the coxswain was 2.53 compared to 2.76 for the team. This difference was not significant, which shows that statistically the views of the coxswain are not different from the rest of the team.

#### 4.4 Autocratic Behaviour

The mean response of the coxswain was 2.80 compared to 3.47 for the team. This difference was significant, which shows that statistically the views of the coxswains are different from the rest of the team. Regarding autocratic behaviour from

the coach, the coxswain desires this approach less than the rest of the rowers.

#### 4.5 Social Support

The mean response of the coxswain was 2.50 compared to 3.18 for the team. This difference was significant, which shows that statistically the coxswain is different from the rest of the team. Coxswain desire less social support from their coach than the rest of the team.

#### 4.6 Positive Feedback

The mean response of the coxswain was 2.60 compared to 2.25 for the team. This difference was significant, which shows that statistically the views of the coxswain are different from the rest of the team. Regarding positive feedback, coxswain appear to desire this coaching behaviour more than the rest of the team. LSS Actual:

The results of the one sample t-tests for the LSS Preferred survey are as shown in the below table 2.



**Table 2**

*One sample t-tests for LSS Actual Survey*

	Coxswain	All others		
	Mean	Mean	T-value	Significance
Training and Instruction	3.14	2.35	-4.74	0.00
Democratic Behaviour	3.28	3.10	-1.36	n.s.
Autocratic Behaviour	2.40	3.29	6.92	0.00
Social Support	2.63	3.39	7.94	0.00
Positive Feedback	3.37	2.45	-5.78	0.00

*4.7 Training and Instruction*

The mean response of the coxswain was 3.14 compared to 2.35 for the team. This difference was significant, which shows that statistically, the views of the coxswain are different from the rest of the team. Coxswain reported their coach does more training and instruction than reported by the rowers.

*4.8 Democratic Behaviour*

The mean response of the coxswain was 3.28 compared to 3.10 for the team. This difference was not significant, which shows that statistically, the views of the coxswain are not different from the rest of the team.

*4.9 Autocratic Behaviour*

The mean response of the coxswain was 2.40 compared to 3.29 for the team. This difference was significant, which shows that statistically we can conclude that the views of the coxswain are different from the rest of the team. Rowers reported at a higher rate than the coxswain that their coach exhibits autocratic behaviour.

*4.10 Social Support*

The mean response of the coxswain was 2.63

compared to 3.39 for the team. This difference was significant, which shows that statistically, the views of the coxswain are different from the rest of the team. Regarding social support, rowers reported at a higher rate than the coxswains that their coach exhibited social support behaviour.

*4.11 Positive Feedback*

The mean response of the coxswain was 3.37 compared to 2.45 for the team. This difference was significant, which shows that statistically the views of the coxswain are different from the rest of the team. Coxswain reported at a higher level of positive feedback from their coach than did the rest of the team.

**5. Discussion**

The element that stands out during the analysis is clearly that the coxswain is different than the rowers. There are times in analyzing the material that the coxswain appears to be more like a coach and at times where they appear to be like the rowers. It does make one question the analyses of rowers over time. Since there is such a difference between rowers and the coxswain, should

coxswain be removed when analyzing rowing as a sport?

### *5.1 Preferred coaching behaviour*

The principles of scientific management (aka Taylorism), involve standardization and time study (Locke, 1982). The nature of the rower's task is an extreme level of standardization and routine performance. It is no wonder that rowers prefer the Taylor form of management, since the most effective rowing stroke is one that exhibits the most efficient use of the physiology of the rower. Of the five behaviours, training and instruction and positive feedback appear to be how the coach behaves. These are the things they say and do. Democratic / autocratic behaviour tends to be the methods to which they coach, while social support is the environment created off the field/court. Coxswain appear to want more 'coaching' than the rowers. They prefer higher levels of training and instruction and desire the positive feedback more. Simply put coxswain want coaching more than rowers. Some say there is not much that needs to be coached for rowers. Once the actual rowing technique is performed, it is simply a matter of repeating the same action. In addition, if a rower makes a mistake, it is likely to go unnoticed. If a coxswain makes a mistake, it is extremely noticeable and likely even affects the race. Once a race starts, the coach is not able to communicate with the boat, so it is the sole responsibility of the coxswain to coach the team to victory. Another possibility is the perpetuation of rowers as coaches in Division II women's rowing. In a review of head coaches at the sixteen institutions, most were rowers when

they competed. Thus, former rowers are clearly meeting the needs of current rowers, where coxswain seek more training and instruction.

Regarding autocratic behaviour, rowers seem to want decisions to be made for them, while the coxswain wants a voice in the matter. The coach in the boat sees things differently. Referring to the coxswain as the coach in the boat invokes a certain amount of rowing intelligence and decision-making abilities to that role. It would be reasonable for a coxswain to want to be able to speak into their role as the coach in the boat and have the freedom to make decisions that would ultimately get the most out of their rowers.

With respect to social support, coxswain desire less social support than the rest of the rowers. Coxswain function more as a superior than a peer to the rowers. In order to be effective, coxswains must develop a personal relationship with the rowers in order to know how to get the most out of them while also keeping a certain social distance from them so that their authority in the boat is not compromised by those relationships (Rinne, Steel, & Fairweather, 2011).

### *5.2 Observed behaviour*

The data in Table 2 support that coxswain are different on the metric of social support. Rowers feel the coach does a lot for social support, where the coxswain do not feel that way. Is this as simple as we are not using activities specifically designed for the coxswain? Perhaps the team-building exercises that are currently being used are physical in nature which helps the rowers to connect with each other but may ostracize some of the coxswains.

The 'coach in the boat' (coxswain) has a different view of the autocratic style. The coach likely involves the coxswain in "coaching" activities; thus, the coxswain feels that the coach is not autocratic. The rowers may not be aware of this involvement and rate the coach as being more autocratic. The very nature of the sport is that there are not many reasons to have democratic behaviour for the rowers.

Training and instruction and positive feedback may be a significant finding of the study. Coxswain identify that the coach 'demonstrates' this behaviour, while the rowers tend to feel that they do not. This may be due to several reasons. The first is that the coxswain, because they are the coach in the boat, can identify when the coach is providing positive feedback and performing training and instruction. The other consideration is the concept known as mental fatigue, which can be brought on by the physical fatigue endured during training and racing. When the rowers exhibit mental fatigue, the coxswain is still mentally sound and able to observe the coaching being conducted. The other possibility is that since the coach is not allowed to communicate with the boat during the race, no positive feedback or coaching and instruction is taking place.

### *5.3 Implications for coaching*

Across the entire spectrum of athletics, the coxswain is not like other athletes. Their primary responsibility is to coach the team during the event itself. They require a bond with the coach like no other position in sport. There must be a large degree of confidence in the coxswain by the coach. Large programs can have coaches that are able to directly coach the coxswain. Either the

head coach was a coxswain, or they have the resources to have an assistant that was a coxswain. Smaller programs are unlikely to have a coach with coxswain experience.

There are parallels with positional coaches in other sports. There is often a pitching coach for baseball or a goalie coach for soccer or hockey. However, those positions are still asked to perform certain tasks like everyone else. A pitcher still needs to field a ball while a goalie may still need to use their feet to pass a ball or their arms and pads to deflect a puck. However, the coxswain skills are unique, they are not asked to perform the same tasks or apply the skills of the rowers.

The researchers would suggest a totally different approach for coaching coxswain than with the rowers:

- Treat the coxswain like a graduate assistant coach. Coach leadership skills as much as possible.

It is likely that the coxswain may want to become a coach in the future and having additional leadership responsibilities would be helpful preparation.

- Social support should be different. Rowers should have their own system, and perhaps the coxswain on the team can conduct different team building activities. The researchers suggest an Escape Room activity for the Coxswain.

The coxswain is in a somewhat difficult position. They are neither coach nor rower. They are not really a part of the team but more like an assistant coach. It is not appropriate for the coxswain to befriend the team and still be able to

maintain a distance for the authority needed to be the “coach in the boat.”

## **6.Future Research**

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The original intent of the study was to compare the differences among the coach, the rowers, and the coxswain. In future research, the researchers would seek a larger population in order to get a sample size to further examine the finer differences among the three groups. Originally, the researchers expected to see no significant differences between the coach and the coxswain but did expect to see differences with the rowers.

In addition, the researchers would propose including all of college rowing, among all NCAA divisions and for both men and women. Some larger programs can incorporate coaches on to their staff that exclusively coach the coxswain, like specialized coaching roles in baseball and football.

Finally, the authors may be able to apply the findings of this study to business, The roles of a manager and a supervisor may be parallel to those of a coach and coxswain. The manager has ultimate responsibility while the supervisor is responsible for the day to day operations of the business – which can be considered a parallel to the boat race.

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