

## Article

# Perception of Coach According to the Role of Starter or Substitute in the Final Stage of the Season

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the athletes' perception of their coaches according to the role of starter or substitute in the final phase of the season. The variables analyzed were: leadership style, perceived justice, competence, and support for basic psychological needs. A longitudinal study was developed, evaluating the participants at two different stages: the end of the season and seven weeks before. A total of 112 football and handball players participated in this study, 78 completing the questionnaire at the two waves. The final sample comprised 51 starters (80.39% males) and 27 substitutes (70.37% males) who evaluated their coaches' leadership, competence, and support of the players' psychological needs. The interaction moment of measurement (seven weeks before the end of the season vs. end of the season) \* group (starters vs. substitutes) was statistically significant for the variables authentic leadership, perceived justice, and the basic psychological need of competence. Post hoc analyses revealed a significant decline in the perception of authentic leadership from coaches, perceived justice, and support of the psychological need of competence at the end of the season only in those in a starter position, with no change observed in the substitutes group. The findings show that the perceptions of coaches among starting players deteriorates significantly in the final phase of the season, while those among substitutes remain unaffected.

**Keywords:** authentic leadership; justice; competence; basic psychological needs; team sport



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## 1. Introduction

The role assigned to the athlete and playing time might seem like a simple decision-making problem for the coach, but the possibility of unfair treatment as perceived by the athlete can, at times, initiate internal conflicts which interfere with teaching and competitive success [1]. Likewise, the level of fairness that players perceive in the assignment of their role as starter or substitute, which conditions playing time, are particularly influential in the players' sport experience [2], and, as a consequence, in their satisfaction with the coach [3].

Jordan et al. [4] argue that in a team sport, playing time, responsibility, and the assignment of positions are individual outcomes received by the athletes that may influence their perceptions of fairness. According to González-Ponce et al. [5], during the course of the season, the athlete's perception of his or her coach deteriorates due to the events that occur during the season, especially in the final part. Therefore, knowing the level of possible deterioration according to the role perceived by the athlete could be useful to establish strategies to reduce the negative impact.

The coach–athlete relationship is considered by many authors as the backbone of the training process [6–9]. In the sports field, the relationship between the two is considered fundamental to determine the motivation and well-being of athletes [10]. Different authors grant the coach a fundamental role in the behavior and drive of athletes [11,12], which conditions the relationship between the two. Research in sports contexts makes positive associations between the quality of the relationship and the attention to psychological

needs [11,13]. Thus, the coach's decisions condition the behavior and influence the motivation of the athletes [14,15]. Studies on coaching efficacy and coaching competency have placed significant emphasis on the impact of coaching leadership and coaching behaviors on various athlete outcomes [16–19]. As such, the athlete's perception of their coach's leadership style and the fairness of the decisions they make can be determinant in sports practice.

Thus, the athletes' perception of the coach's leadership style is considered a predictor of the relationship between the two. The interactions between coaches and athletes consist of attempts to influence the behavior of the other [15], with the interest focused on the context of interactions [20]. The relationship of influence and how it is perceived by the athlete has acquired greater importance in different conceptualizations and analyses in this regard [20,21]. A cross-cultural study in five countries examined how the quality of the relationship that athletes had with their coaches and their perceptions of motivation predicted their well-being [13]. The results were similar to those found in other studies that analyzed this relationship and athlete well-being [22].

In recent years, authentic leadership [23] has been defined as a “pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capabilities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers; fostering positive self-development,” and is associated with behaviors that promote and inspire psychological capabilities and a positive ethical climate [23]. This leadership style encompasses the ability to objectively seek and analyze all relevant data to make a decision, which in the sporting environment is related to fairness in the decisions made. Research has shown positive and significant relationships between authentic leadership, perceived justice and competence of the coach [24], and, in turn, with cohesion in sports teams [25]. In a recent study, Bandura and Kavussanu [26] conclude that authentic leadership facilitates the enjoyment and commitment of athletes, which can occur through the autonomy and trust granted by the coach. Therefore, the perceived role of each player as a starter or substitute and its direct relationship to the fair distribution of playing time becomes an significant leadership task [3,27].

Coaches are continuously making sports decisions that influence players [28]. In this sense, the role assigned to the athlete and the playing time the athlete enjoys are related in the sports context to distributive justice. On the other hand, procedural justice is concerned with the fairness of the procedures used to determine these distributions [29]. In sports teams, an athlete may be dissatisfied with his status as a substitute when he perceives the procedures used to determine that role as unfair (e.g., inconsistent, inaccurate) [27]. However, if he or she perceives the procedures used to select the initial team to be fair (e.g., the coach uses objective information), the athlete is more likely to accept the final decision [30]. Perceived justice has been shown to be a predictor of performance related to athlete satisfaction, commitment and effort [28], and also to team cohesion [31], which is associated with a decrease in conflict within team sports.

Athletes constantly analyze the coach's competence with respect to the decisions he/she makes. Myers et al. [18] established that players held the capacity to assess the competence of their coach, defined as the ability to determine its perceived effect on their learning and performance. Myers et al. [32] consider coach competence as a multidimensional measure, identifying the following dimensions: competence to motivate, lead, teach, develop character, and physical conditioning. The perception of the coach's competence by the athletes becomes a weighty variable in the relationship between the two, with repercussions depending on the direction in which it is oriented [32–34].

The ability of the coach to meet the Basic Psychological Needs Theory of the players has been addressed by multiple authors, placing notable emphasis on the effects it generates [11,13]. The need for autonomy refers to a coach's integration of the opinions and decisions of athletes in training and competitions, establishing a strong relationship between the attention to this need and the degree of athlete motivation [9,35–38]. Also

assessed in this study was the need for competence, conceptualized as the desire of people to act effectively in their surrounding environment, producing expected results while preventing those which are unexpected [39]. In the field of sports, the perception of competence is related to the proposal of reasonable expectations of athletes [40], which could have significance with respect to the role of starter or substitute within the team. Finally, the need for social relationships, understood as the connection of significant individuals in the social environment [41–43], is also included in this study. SDT [44] postulates that, to the extent that social factors favor perceptions of autonomy, competence and relatedness, more autonomous or self-determined types of motivation will be developed. This assumption has been widely studied within the sports research field. A player's negative perception of the coach's leadership style and decisions has been found to be associated with lower levels of autonomous motivation and well-being [45].

Thus, the aim of this study was to know how players perceive their coaches as leaders, competent professionals, and supporters of their needs in the final phase of the season, depending on their role as starters or substitutes. Specifically, we hypothesize that there will be a difference in the perception of players regarding their coaches' authentic and justice leadership, competence, and support of their basic psychological needs at the end of the season in comparison with seven weeks before depending on their team role (starter vs. substitute).

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Participants

A total of 112 football and handball players participated in this study, of which 78 answered the questionnaire at the two waves. The final sample comprised 51 starters (80.39% males) and 27 substitutes (70.37% males). The average age for the starters was 16.94 years old ( $DT = 4.81$ ) and 17.89 years old ( $DT = 2.99$ ) for the substitutes. Finally, those players in the starters group had an average of 10.06 years of experience ( $DT = 5.50$ ) in practicing a sport, whereas those in the substitutes group had 9.19 years ( $DT = 3.01$ ) of experience. All participants competed in the regional category.

### 2.2. Procedure

This longitudinal study evaluated the participants at two different stages: at the end of the season and seven weeks before. The participants answered the same questionnaires at both waves. The investigator took the athletes to the facility where they habitually train and explained the guidelines for completing the questionnaires to them. Any related questions were also addressed at this time. The questionnaires were administered to the athletes collectively, with all members of the team present. The researcher remained on-site and available to the participants at all times should any questions arise. The time used by athletes was approximately 25–30 min. Seven weeks elapsed between the first and second administration of the questionnaires, the second take coinciding with the last week of the competition period.

This study respected the norms of the Declaration of Helsinki. Additionally, all participants signed consent forms.

### 2.3. Measurements

All the participants (handball and football players) evaluated their coaches on the following dimensions.

#### 2.3.1. Players' Role in the Team

It was asked to the players the number of matches in which they had acted as starters. This number was divided by the number of total matches and multiplied by 100. This gave us a percentage of each player acting as a starter. Those with percentages above 50% were considered as starters and those below 50% as substitutes. Calculations were made at the end of the season and seven weeks before, evaluating the whole season until both

moments. No changes in the players' role were observed between the seven weeks before and at the end of the season.

### 2.3.2. Authentic Coach Leadership

This variable was evaluated according to the Spanish adaptation validated by [46] of the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ) [23]. This instrument consists of 12 items. The answer format is a Likert scale from 1 (never) to 7 (always). Internal consistency reliability was calculated using Cronbach's alpha. A good level of reliability was found for this scale (first wave:  $\alpha = 0.92$ ; follow-up:  $\alpha = 0.90$ ).

### 2.3.3. Perceived Justice

This variable was evaluated using an adaptation of Colquitt's Organizational Justice scale [47] by [48], of which a modification was made in order to measure Perceived justice within a sports-specific framework. The instrument consists of 12 items, and the response format is a Likert scale from 1 (never) to 7 (always), showing a good reliability in this sample (first wave:  $\alpha = 0.88$ ; follow-up:  $\alpha = 0.88$ ).

### 2.3.4. Coach Competence

This variable was evaluated by means of the Athletes' Perceptions of Coaching Competency Scale II-High School Teams (APCCS II-HST; [33]) validated in Spanish [49]. There are 15 items in this instrument, and it has four subscales: competence to motivate, to make decisions, to teach and instruct skills, and to influence the player. The response format is a Likert scale from 1 (incompetence) to 7 (full competence), with good levels of reliability in this study (first wave:  $\alpha = 0.89$ ; follow-up:  $\alpha = 0.91$ ).

### 2.3.5. Perception of Support for Basic Psychological Needs

This variable was evaluated using the Psychological Needs Support Questionnaire (CANPB) [50], adapted to the sports context. The participants (handball and football players) evaluated to what extent their coaches supported their basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness). This instrument consists of 12 items distributed across three dimensions: autonomy, competence, and need for relatedness. The response format is a Likert scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree). Again, good levels of internal consistency were observed in the three subscales (autonomy: first wave:  $\alpha = 0.78$ , follow-up:  $\alpha = 0.78$ ; competence: first wave:  $\alpha = 0.84$ , follow-up:  $\alpha = 0.75$ ; relatedness: first wave:  $\alpha = 0.84$ , follow-up:  $\alpha = 0.76$ ).

## 3. Results

Descriptive information of the outcomes for each players' role in the team (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Descriptive information of the outcomes seven weeks before the end of the season and at the end for the substitutes and the starters.

	Seven Weeks before the End of the Season								End of the Season							
	Substitutes ( <i>n</i> = 27)				Starters ( <i>n</i> = 51)				Substitutes ( <i>n</i> = 27)				Starters ( <i>n</i> = 51)			
	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Coach's Auth. Leadership	5.07	1.15	2.58	6.83	5.63	0.91	3.33	7.00	5.16	0.98	3.17	7.00	5.33	0.86	3.67	6.83
Coach's Perceived Justice	4.81	0.91	2.92	6.17	5.58	1.01	3.33	7.00	5.02	0.93	3.33	6.42	5.33	0.94	3.67	7.00
Coach's Competence	3.70	0.51	2.80	4.53	4.06	0.54	2.600	5.00	3.68	0.55	2.47	4.60	3.85	0.63	2.67	4.93
BPN Autonomy	3.25	0.93	1.00	4.50	3.38	0.88	1.00	5.00	3.48	0.72	1.00	4.50	3.49	0.81	1.50	5.00
BPN Competence	3.99	0.69	2.75	5.00	4.25	0.75	2.00	5.00	4.12	0.61	3.00	5.00	4.03	0.66	2.25	5.00
BPN Relatedness	4.19	0.68	3.00	5.00	4.23	0.85	2.00	5.00	4.23	0.58	3.00	5.00	4.17	0.72	2.25	5.00

Note: SD = Standard Deviation; Max =Maximum; Min = Minimum; Auth. = Authentic; BNP = Basic Psychological Need.

This study hypothesized that there will be a difference in the perception of players regarding their coaches' authentic and justice leadership, competence, and support of their basic psychological needs at the end of the season in comparison with seven weeks before depending on their team role (starter vs. substitute). Six repeated ANOVAs, one for each outcome (coach's authentic leadership, perceived justice, competence, and support of players' basic psychological needs), with a within-subjects factor (time of measurement: seven weeks before the end vs. end of the season) and a between-subjects factor (players' role: substitutes vs. starters) were run. Specifically, the interaction time of measurement  $\times$  players' role and the post-hoc multiple comparisons tests with the Bonferroni adjustment will indicate if the hypothesis of this study is supported or rejected.

In this sense, the time of measurement  $\times$  group interaction was only statistically significant for the variables of authentic leadership, perceived justice, and the basic psychological need of competence (see Table 1), which means that the hypothesis of this study was partially confirmed.

To interpret these interactions, a series of post-hoc multiple comparisons tests with the Bonferroni adjustment were performed, showing a significant decrease in the levels of authentic leadership ( $p = 0.006$ ), perceived justice ( $p = 0.014$ ), and the basic psychological need of competence ( $p = 0.028$ ) at the end of the season compared to seven weeks earlier in the starters group, while no change was found in the substitutes group.

The measurement time  $\times$  group interaction was not statistically significant for the perception of the coach competence variable, although a clear statistical trend was observed. A posteriori tests with the Bonferroni adjustment also found a significant decrease in the perception of coach competence at the end of the season in the starters group ( $p = 0.001$ ), with no change observed in the substitutes group (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Interaction time of measure (seven weeks before vs. end of the season)  $\times$  group (substitutes vs. starters).

	Interactions			Significant Interactions	
	Time of Measure*Group			Substitutes Group	Starters Group
	F (df)	p	$\eta^2_p$		
Coach's Authentic Leadership	4.74 (1, 76)	0.033	0.059	B = E	B > E
Coach's Perceived Justice	7.34 (1, 76)	0.008	0.088	B = E	B > E
Coach's Competence	3.44 (1, 76)	0.068	0.043	B = E	B > E
BPN Autonomy	0.32 (1, 76)	0.573	0.004		
BPN Competence	4.47 (1, 76)	0.038	0.056	B = E	B > E
BPN Relatedness	0.32 (1, 76)	0.575	0.004		

Note: B = Before (seven weeks) the end of the season; E = End of the season; BNP = Basic.

Additionally, the player status (starters vs. substitutes) and the moment of evaluation's main effects were found to be significant. Starters showed higher levels of perceived justice ( $F(1, 76) = 6.59$ ,  $p = 0.012$ ,  $\eta^2_p = 0.080$ ;  $M_{\text{starters}} = 5.46$ ;  $SE_{\text{starters}} = 0.12$ ;  $M_{\text{substitutes}} = 4.91$ ;  $SE_{\text{substitutes}} = 0.17$ ) and perception of coach's competence ( $F(1, 76) = 4.58$ ,  $p = 0.036$ ,  $\eta^2_p = 0.057$ ;  $M_{\text{starters}} = 3.96$ ;  $SE_{\text{starters}} = 0.07$ ;  $M_{\text{substitutes}} = 3.69$ ;  $SE_{\text{substitutes}} = 0.10$ ) than substitutes. Likewise, the participants scored lower in the perception of coach's support of the psychological need of competence at the end of the season ( $F(1, 76) = 5.06$ ,  $p = 0.027$ ,  $\eta^2_p = 0.062$ ;  $M_{\text{before}} = 3.88$ ;  $SE_{\text{before}} = 0.06$ ;  $M_{\text{end}} = 3.77$ ;  $SE_{\text{end}} = 0.07$ ) in comparison with seven weeks before.



#### 4. Discussion

Different studies have highlighted the influence of the relationship between the coach and athlete on their well-being [13,22], but without differentiating the time of the season in which this relationship was analyzed or the role of the athletes themselves in the team. The aim of this study was to identify players' perceptions of their coaches in the final phase of the season according to the role of starter or substitute. A reduction in the levels of authentic leadership, perceived justice, and the need of competence at the end of the season compared to seven weeks earlier was found in the starters group, while no change in the substitutes group was observed. Some studies have pointed out a deterioration in the athletes' perception of the coach as the season progresses, especially at the end of the season [5]. The wear and tear suffered in the relationships between athletes and coaches over the progressive months may be one of the elements that explains these results. Different studies have confirmed changes in the coach–athlete relationship over time [41], although the role of starter or substitute could also condition them.

Relationships in teams are subject to dynamic processes in constant change as a result of the events experienced [30]. Our results partially coincide with this background, showing how the perception of the coach's leadership style (authentic leadership) suffered a significant decrease among starting players in the final phase of the season, while in the substitute players it was not affected. This observation found among starting players coincides with the results previously found by other studies [5,51]. The results found show that in the last weeks of the season the perception of the coach's leadership style according to the starting players drops significantly. Authentic leadership is closely linked to a relationship based on a positive ethical climate between the coach and the players; it is likely that in the final weeks of the season that climate will deteriorate. Is it possible for athletes to change their perception of coaches' fairness during that time? To inquire about this ethical dimension, the justice perceived by the players in the decisions of their coaches was measured, confirming a deterioration among titular players. Perceived justice has been recognized in numerous investigations as a determinant variable in the athlete's perception of his coach, demonstrating its relationship with satisfaction, commitment, effort, or team cohesion [31]. Even so, there are few studies that survey its evolution over time. The research by De Backer et al. [52], pioneer in the study of perceived justice with a longitudinal design in elite athletes, already shows that it can change considerably throughout the season. Our results confirm this circumstance for starting players in the last weeks of the season. Perceived justice suffered a significant decrease in the starters group, while no change was observed in the substitutes group (who maintained low values of perceived justice regarding their coaches throughout these last weeks of the season). As perceived justice has been shown to mediate athlete satisfaction [2,52], it is reasonable to expect that the decrease in the perception of fairness shown by starting players, together with the previously noted decrease in the perception of the coach's leadership style may affect overall player satisfaction. In this sense, it seems particularly relevant for coaches to pay attention to the fairness they promote among teams in the final part of the season. In summary, the starting players show not only a decrease in the perception of the leadership style of their coaches (authentic leadership), but also an additional diminution in perceived fairness. It is possible that the pressure starting players endure during the last weeks of the season, different from that of the substitutes, could explain these results. In this sense, it seems that starters are more sensitive to the decisions of their coaches than substitute players.

Conversely, our results have identified no variation in the perception of coach competence in either starters or substitutes in the last weeks of the season. Apparently, the deterioration in the perception of the coach in the final part of the season does not occur so much with respect to his competence, but rather with the fairness and leadership style he manifests. In this line, our results are congruent with other studies in which competence and playing time did not explain the satisfaction with the coach as much as justice variables [27]. It is possible that both the deterioration of players' perception of the coach and

the decline in satisfaction in the final part of the season are due more to issues related to perceived fairness or leadership style than to procedural or technical skills. In this sense, our results have not identified any change in the perception of the coach's competence in the last weeks of the season, both in starters and substitutes.

There is sufficient evidence showing how the satisfaction of basic psychological needs (BPN) by coaches leads to a better coach-athlete relationship [14,53,54]. Specifically, some studies have found how athletes' perceptions of what coaches do and how they relate to each other are important for satisfying their psychological needs and optimal functioning [11,12,14]. It is possible that this circumstance should be especially considered by the coach in the last weeks of the season, during which time teams are obliged to achieve good results, and thus suffer an additional pressure, which can deteriorate the coach-athlete relationship. Our results show a significant decrease in the satisfaction of the need for competition among starting players. This is not observed in substitute players nor in the other two BPN (autonomy and relatedness).

The need for competence refers to the sense of confidence and effectiveness in the tasks one performs [30]. This possible modification of the coach could be related to the players' perception of a more controlling coaching style, which has been shown to be a predictor of decreased satisfaction with their coach [55]. Based on other studies, a decrease in the coach's self-control may lead to a lower satisfaction of the athletes' need for competence [56]. In this line, a decrease in the perception of support in the need for competence has implications on the athlete's competitive capacity, as it predicts the athlete's confidence in relation to sports performance [57].

A combined analysis of the results in the variables studied, regarding the perception of the coach according to the role of starters and substitutes at the end of the season, clearly reveals that it is the starters who show a deterioration in the perception of the coach; both in his leadership style (authentic leadership), perceived justice, or satisfaction of the BPN (in terms of competition). It is possible that the episodes experienced in teams during these weeks generate this perception of the coach among titular players, who, as previously identified, bear greater pressure to achieve the team's goals, thus conditioning their perception differently than that of the substitutes. Similarly, despite the fact that no change in the perception of the coach in the variables studied can be seen in the substitute players, the analysis of their descriptive values shows low levels in the last weeks of the season. It is possible that these players have already reached the final part of the season with a rather deteriorated perception of the coach, which would justify the results found.

#### *Study Limitations and Future Directions*

One of the limitations of the study is that the participants belonged to different handball and football teams, with contrasting levels and categories. It would be advisable to replicate the current study with participants from different competition levels and categories.

Similarly, it would be desirable to incorporate other study variables that provide more information about the athletes' perception about their coaches and their levels of satisfaction with them. Likewise, the design dealt exclusively with the final part of the season; extending the time of analysis would be recommended to achieve a deeper understanding of the object of study. Future research should address these problems.

#### **5. Conclusions**

The results of this study allow us to reach some conclusions and reveal some practical implications. The starting players report a significant decrease in the perception of the coach's leadership style (authentic leadership), perceived fairness, and satisfaction of the need for competence (BPN). On the other hand, substitute players do not show significant changes in any of the variables analyzed. The results achieved may have implications for the implementation by coaches of strategies to reduce the impact of events that occur in

the last weeks of a sports season (e.g., individual or group meetings depending on the role of the athlete, consider a strategy for assigning the role).

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