

## Article

# Sustainability of Success in Sports Teams: Who Will Be the Captain?

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**Abstract:** This research was carried out in order to reveal the “Team Captaincy Process” by deeply analyzing each phase of the team captain process. For this purpose, semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with 17 (3 female, 14 male) elite athletes and trainers determined using a purposive sampling method during a two-year study. As a result of the qualitative interviews conducted with the participants, there is a “Team Captaincy Process” defined under five themes: “Tasks of the Team Captain”, “Personality Traits of the Team Captain”, “Determination of the Team Captain”, “The Team Captaincy Process”, and “Termination of the Team Captaincy”. For this process, it has been determined that each of its phases is inseparably related to the other. Consequently, it is considered that the “Team Captaincy Process” can be used as a guiding tool by decision-makers for determining the ideal team captain who will meet the expectations of the whole team.

**Keywords:** sports; sustainability; team captain; tasks of captain; selection of captain; team captaincy process model



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## 1. Introduction

Leaders have different effects on the success of the community they are in [1]. Leadership, on the other hand, refers to a process in which an influence is exerted to bring a group or team to a common goal [2]. Leaders, who constitute an important part of team functioning and group dynamism in the field of sports, are recognized as the most important element of team success by both athletes and coaches [3–7]. Team captains in sports clubs are defined as formal and informal leaders [8]. The feature that distinguishes sports leaders as formal or informal is the tasks attributed to them. As formal leaders, team captains are asked to fulfill predefined tasks, while informal leaders are expected to take on external responsibilities such as the social environment, which is formed as a result of human relations and interactions [9,10]. According to this information, while the coach is the formal leader, the team captain has duties such as adapting to the team, providing social support, positively affecting the success of the team, and helping the coach, both as a formal and informal leader [11–14]. The role differentiation paradigm of Bales [15] regarding leadership behaviors in sports clubs is the basis of team captaincy research. The role differentiation paradigm is examined under two headings as “task leadership” and “social leadership”. “Task leaders” solve problems, make decisions, and also make referrals for team goals, while “social leaders” build trust by providing psychosocial support to the team. On the other hand, Rees and Segal pointed out that the tasks of “task leaders” and “social leaders” can be found in the same leader without excluding each other [16]. In addition to these leadership roles, Loughead et al. [8] added a third leadership role, “external leadership functions”, and defined the tasks related to this leadership role as external tasks such as press and media relations, club meetings, and sponsor representation, where

the social environment comes to the fore. Finally, Fransen et al. [11] added “motivational leadership functions”, which are more concerned with motivation. Unlike these definitions, Chelladurai [17] pointed to a multidimensional model of leader behavior that has three different dimensions: “leader behaviour required by the situation”, “leader behaviour preferred by members”, and “real leader behaviour”. In addition to including leadership roles in athlete leadership research [18,19], effective leadership behaviors are classified as “task, relationship, change-oriented and external leadership”. For team captains to be effective and successful leaders, it is pointed out that they should have leadership behaviors and personality traits such as an extroverted character [20,21], being outspoken, problem-solving, an ability to provide team motivation, and an ability to keep team interests above their interests [22]; captains are trusted, respected, encourage teamwork, are suitable role models, have a high sense of belonging to the team [8] and are competitive, unyielding, and courageous [14]. In general, coaches start the team captain determination process, and there are three methods they use for this. First, the team captain is determined by the coach without consulting other players. Second, they are elected by voting. Third, a player with the qualifications adopted by both the coach and the team is selected as the team captain [23,24]. It is necessary to carefully monitor the process from the determination of the team captain, who is considered to have a significant effect on the team’s success, to the end of his/her task [25]. Therefore, in this research, it is aimed to develop the “Team Captaincy Process” model, in which the team captaincy process from the beginning to the end and the factors affecting this process are handled in a versatile way.

## 2. Materials and Methods

In order to analyze the “Team Captaincy Process” in-depth, qualitative research methods were adopted from the study [26]. In this context, the team captaincy process was examined under five different themes. These themes have been named “tasks of the team captain”, “personality traits of the team captain”, “determination of the team captain”, “the team captaincy process”, and “termination of the team captaincy”.

### 2.1. Participants

The purposive sampling method [27] was used to determine the participants in the study. Participants were selected in accordance with this method and consist of a total of seventeen elite athletes and coaches (three women, fourteen men) who are living in six different cities of Turkey, aged between twenty-five and fifty-five, having an average of fifteen to twenty years of sports history, having received degrees in Olympic World and European Championships, and being active in individual and team sports.

### 2.2. Data Collection Tool

A semi-structured interview technique, which is one of the qualitative interview types, was used in this research [28]. In this context, in the first stage, a detailed literature review was conducted for semi-structured interview questions. In the second stage, the researchers observed the team captains, other players, and coaches during matches and training and non-training periods for about five months with the on-site observation technique. The third stage includes the demographic information of the participants and a question pool that can describe the team captaincy process (i.e., how team captains are selected?, what are the official and unofficial tasks of the team captain?, what are the personality traits of the team captain?, how does the team captain process work? and how does the team captainship end?, etc.). In the fourth stage, a preliminary interview was conducted with 3 participants to evaluate the semi-structured interview questions. In accordance with the information obtained from the interview, the necessary corrections were made by submitting the question pool, which was obtained by adding and removing necessary questions, to the opinion of five expert academicians who study qualitative research topics. Then, the semi-structured interview form with sixteen main questions was finalized. In the

fifth stage, the semi-structured interview form was examined by a language expert and made available for application to the participants.

### 2.3. Data Collection Procedure

The research data were collected in 2021. Akdeniz University Ethics Committee (16 April 2021-74987) approval was obtained for the research. During the interviews, the participants were informed about the purpose and content of the research and informed that the interviews would be recorded, that any information that would reveal their names or identities would be hidden, and that the interviews would not be used for any other purpose other than the research findings. All participants were included in the study after signing a voluntary consent form. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with eleven of the participants, while online interviews were conducted with the other six participants. Qualitative interviews with the participants lasted an average of fifty-sixty minutes in Turkish. Audio recordings of qualitative interviews were transferred to the word program for data analysis and made ready for analysis.

### 2.4. Data Analysis

For the data analysis, the 6-step thematic analysis procedure defined by Braun and Clarke [29] was used. According to the procedure, the transcripts of the interviews were read in detail in the first step. In the second step, the opinions of the participants regarding the team captains and the team captaincy were coded from the obtained data sets. In the third step, two academicians with Ph.D. degrees in sports sciences were given a data set that was analyzed and evaluated from the perspective of different experts. In the fourth step, the coded quotations determined by the researchers were compared with the whole data set and checked again. In the fifth step, the contents of the themes were determined and their possible relations with other themes were reviewed. In the sixth step, the emerging themes and the data set were subjected to a final analysis, and relevant data samples were selected to be used in the reporting phase of this research. Finally, the results of the thematic analysis were written in relation to the relevant literature. The NVivo11 program was used in the analysis processes.

### 2.5. Validity and Reliability Strategies

The validity and reliability of qualitative studies depend on the credibility (internal validity), transferability (external validity), consistency (internal reliability), and confirmability (external reliability) criteria of the research [30]. The credibility, transmissibility, consistency, and confirmability of this research have been ensured by the following strategies. In order to ensure the credibility of the research, a depth-oriented data collection strategy and an expert review strategy were adopted. In order to ensure the credibility of the research, a depth-oriented data collection strategy and an expert review strategy were adopted. Apart from the researchers with experience in the expert review strategy, an expert with research experience in team performance and group dynamics provided consultancy during this research. The transferability of the research was ensured by the detailed description strategy and purposive sampling strategy. With the detailed description strategy, the participants' thoughts on team performance and the sustainability of team captaincy were provided by adding direct quotations to the study. For the consistency of the study, an expert and researchers who were not involved in the research categorized the opinions of the participants, while looking at the level of agreement with the formula of [31] "Reliability = consensus/consensus + disagreement". It was observed by the researchers that the consistency was 92% on average at all levels related to the duties, personality traits, determination of the team captain, the team captain's process, and the termination of the team captainship. Considering that reliability will be ensured in cases where this agreement is 70% or more, it can be said that the study has provided reliability.

### 3. Results

As a result of the qualitative interviews with the participants, it was seen that the “Team Captaincy Process” was determined according to the general evaluations and expectations of the decision-makers regarding the tasks and the characteristics of the team captain. The team captaincy process basically consists of three stages: 1. determination of the team captain (tasks of the team captain and personality traits of the team captain are effective), 2. the team captaincy process, and 3. termination of the team captaincy. This process occurs again with the termination of team captaincy for many different reasons.

#### 3.1. Theme 1: Tasks of the Team Captain

The participants state that the tasks of the team captain are very important in determining the team captain. When asked what these tasks are, they give a very wide range of task descriptions. However, when asked what the most important of these tasks are, they pointed to categories such as “Assistant Coach”, “Effective Communication with Coaches/Players and other Stakeholders”, “Establishing Team Spirit”, and “Organizing”. An Elite Coach P2. defines the captain’s tasks as “Where I am not, all my responsibility and all my powers are with the team captain”. Participants emphasize that being an assistant coach is only possible with effective communication. Player P7. states that “The team captain is the bridge between us and the coach. This task is only possible with effective communication”. According to the participants, another important task of the team captain is to organize all the processes related to the team. The majority of the participants think that the captain is responsible for creating team spirit. P6 expressed that “It should definitely provide the morale and motivation of the team. He/she should always keep the team vigorous and encourage it”. Coach P11. explained this situation more precisely “Other players may lose motivation, but the team captain cannot”.

#### 3.2. Theme 2: Personality Traits of the Team Captain

The determination of the tasks raises the question of which personality traits can be fulfilled by the player. Participants define characteristics consistent with each other in terms of personality traits. All participants agree that leadership qualities are indispensable for team captaincy. For example, P1. states that “I think the captain’s leadership qualities should be very high”. P9. indicated that “There are twenty players in our team. The team captain is the leader in front of these players”. The participants state that leadership can be achieved through reliability, role modeling, and fairness. P14. explained this process as “I should be able to explain everything to the team captain. I have to make sure that what I tell will not be shared with others. I must trust the captain”. P12., who is also the team captain, states that “Every moment of me is observed by my teammates. I have to be a role model for them both on and off the field”. Of course, the team captain is required to have problem-solving skills. Coach P8. States that the Captain always solves problems. He/she would not cause any problems”. However, at the same time, problem-solving skills are expected to be performed with effective communication. Because it is thought that a captain who cannot solve problems cannot motivate his team to succeed.

#### 3.3. Theme 3: Determination of the Team Captain

The tasks of the team captain and the personality traits that the team captain should have raised the real question: Who will be the captain? Since the team captain will be one of the team players in any case, the coaches evaluate which player or players have the personality traits to perform these tasks. However, together with the appropriate personality traits, the participants state that experience, being older than others, having a good career, high team belonging, prestige, sportive performance, and game position are the qualities expected to be in the team captain. Participants primarily point out that being experienced (performance and captaincy background), older than others, and having a good career creates a reputation for the team captain by the team players. Player P15. expressed that “When choosing a team captain, coaches look primarily at experience”. Participant

P1. explained that age is important and stated that “In general, older people are chosen as captains”. In addition, having a good career is an important quality that is considered in the selection of a captain. For example, Participant P12. stated that “Generally, players with experience and a good career are in the position of team captain. Why? Because he/she has a lot of experience and a successful career both on and off the field”. If these features exist in the team captain, then they express that other players have a sense of respect towards him. Participant P6. expressed that “I would like my friend who has these characteristics to be the team captain. Because he/she has already proven himself/herself. We all respect these qualities of him”. On the other hand, the participants said that they expect the player with sportive performance and high team belonging to be the captain. Coach P4. pointed out that “I don’t choose a player with low performance as captain in my team.” and Player P2. also expressed that “the captain should be focused on winning”. Interestingly, the participants emphasized that in some sports branches (especially volleyball and handball), the game position played by the player is effective in choosing the captain. Coach P1. explained that “In handball, we do not choose the pivot (center forward) as the captain. Because the pivot is behind the others. Usually the center back player or the quarterback becomes the captain. Because there is a lot of chance to interfere with the game”.

#### 3.4. Theme 4: The Team Captainty Process

Being a team captain comes with many responsibilities for a player. After a player is designated as a captain, it triggers a process in which the way the player performs his captain role and his sportive performance are evaluated by the stakeholders. With this process, while some of the team stakeholders support the team captain, some of them may oppose the captain. How long the team captain can fulfill this task may vary depending on the effects of supporters and opponents, as well as the internal and external motivation of the team captain. All these processes can lead to a longer or shorter tenure of the team captain. It can be said that the main factor determining the tenure of the team captain is the internal motivation of the team captain. In this regard, Coach P3. emphasized the importance of internal motivation in the team captainty process “Actually, the captain is chosen from those who dedicate themselves to the team”. Player P4., who has had a national sports career for many years, explained that “I didn’t particularly want to be captain in matches like the World Championship. Because I had to think about both my own game and the opponents and I couldn’t handle this situation. At the same time, I had to think about both my own game and my opponents, and frankly, I couldn’t handle this situation.” and drew attention to the existence of some external factors that could affect internal motivation during the team captainty process. Pointing out that another factor that can be effective in the continuity of the team captainty process is the effective communication the captain will establish with the social environment inside and outside the team, Coach P5. pointed out that “Even the relationship of the team captain with your family is very important. On the other hand, Elite Player P9. explained that “You will see that people who have established their authority and become successful continue to be team captains for a long time, this is the case even in Galatasaray, Beşiktaş and Fenerbahçe. Some participants also say that the team captain chosen by the democratic method extends the captain’s time, which increases the motivation of the team along with the captain, and that they are captains for a longer period of time”. Football Player P15. explained that “We chose the team captain together. Of course, we all support him to be successful”. However, volleyball Player P17. stated that “Even if the team captain succeeds, when the team fails, the coach blames the team captain first. This situation negatively affects the duration of the team captainty process.” and pointed out the negative impact of the team’s failure on the team captainty process. One of the factors that can affect the team captainty process is the stakeholders who support (openly or covertly) or oppose (openly or covertly). Athlete K12. pointed out that one of the negative effects on the shortening of the team captain’s time was the secret opponents of the team captain: “Negative thoughts and conversations begin in the dressing room, during training sessions, about the team captain. This can spread like

a virus within the team.” as explained in his words. On the other hand, Trainer P14. states that “Seminars must be given in order for the team captain to develop or be successful.” and he drew attention to the fact that various trainings can be effective in extending the life of the team captain. Coach P2. Interestingly stated that “I also know from my very close circle. There are team captains who can replace coaches as a result of good relations with managers. Recently, almost the top foreign handball coach ever in Turkey was fired. This is because of the problems he had with the team captain”. In his words, he pointed out that the team captain could dismiss the coach through his secret supporters and, at the same time, this situation prolongs the life of the captain.

### 3.5. Theme 5: Termination of the Team Captaincy

As a result of the interviews with the participants, considering “individual reasons” (the captain’s resignation for different reasons such as voluntarily, his transfer to another team, the end of his active sports career, injuries or long-term illness, close circle support or opposition such as spouse-family-child, etc.) and “environmental reasons” (coach, management, other players, other members of the team—masseur, outfitter—etc., fans, media), the participants state that the tasks of team captains usually ends with the failure to meet the expectations. For example, Player P9. explained that “I thought that the most suitable player was determined to be the captain, but soon I actually started to think that he was not suitable for such a responsibility”. In addition, all participants agree that the coaches are primarily decisive in the determination and termination of the team captain. Participant Coach P1. mentioned that “If the team captain does not show the performance I expect, I will dismiss him”. Player P17. also pointed out that “It is the coach’s job to decide who will be the team captain. Therefore, the unsuccessful team captain is associated with the coach. He/she brings him/her; he/she dismisses him/her”. On the other hand, there may be personal reasons for the quitting of a team captain beyond the decisions of the coaches. For example, P4., who was previously a team captain, explained this situation as “When I wanted to leave the captaincy, first my coach and then the other players insisted that I do not quit. But I still left the team captaincy. Because I had a lot of other responsibilities in my life.” He also points out that being a captain actually brings many burdens for an athlete.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusions

Team captaincy is a process. This process is associated with sportive success in sports clubs. Who will be the captain (See Figure 1) is an important factor that determines the speed of the process. In this section, the findings are discussed together with other studies.

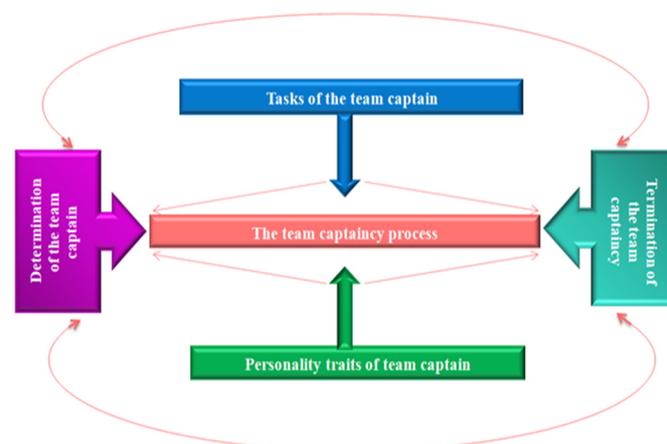


Figure 1. Team Captaincy Process.

#### 4.1. Theme 1: Tasks of the Team Captain

Both the participants' opinions and the literature show that the team captain acts as an "Assistant Coach". This task continues both on and off the field [32]. While off-field tasks are defined as external leadership [8], the tasks of representing the team and facilitating communication with external organizations are also emphasized [9,33]. Because team captains are accepted as the leaders of the team; he/she represents the team in social activities and external events (meetings, receptions, sponsorships) by acting as a bridge between the management and the team [9,22,34]. Performing these tasks in a healthy way can help build team spirit. As Apitzsch [35] points out, the absence of a leader who creates a positive environment in a team can lead to the failure of the team because the team captain is also expected to exhibit motivational leadership roles [11].

#### 4.2. Theme 2: Personality Traits of the Team Captain

Determining the tasks of the team captain triggers the question of who can fulfill these tasks within the team. Current research findings and previous studies show that personality traits that are associated with being extroverted, candid, a problem solver, a role model, reliable, having a high sense of belonging to the team, competitive and not giving up easily are preferred for team captaincy (Bucci et al., 2012; Devine, 2021; Fransen et al., 2019, 2020; Judge et al., 2002; Loughhead et al., 2006) [8,14,20–22,36]. The findings of our study also support these results.

#### 4.3. Theme 3: Determination of the Team Captain

Team captain selection is an important managerial decision [23,37]. Research findings and the literature show that personality traits are of primary importance in the selection of a team captain. However, in addition to personality traits, there are other factors that determine who will be the captain. In the current research, these factors have been determined as "experienced and being older", "having a good career", "high sportive performance", "devotion to the team", and "game position" (e.g., handball) depending on the branches. Especially, "experience" is an important quality that coaches and athletes prefer to have in the team captain. According to the participants, this quality of the team captain ensures team harmony and then increases team success. On the other hand, another quality that can be associated with experience is being older than the other team players. According to the participants, people who are older and with high sportive performance come to the fore during the selection of a captain. In some studies in the literature, it is emphasized that the team captain should set an example with his sportive success [13,37–40]. Although the participants see these qualities as important factors that will affect the selection of a captain, according to the team players, this can be formulated as "to be experienced and being older" + "to have a good career" + "high sportive performance" = "to be accepted as a team captain". In addition, "the position played by the athlete" is also shown as one of the factors affecting the choice of a captain in relation to sportive success. Participants state that, especially in team sports (e.g., handball), midfielders are more suitable for team captaincy. Although it is stated in some studies that team captains are chosen according to the position they play, in order to interact more with the team, and the central position is important in the selection of a captain [24,41], there are also results that suggest the playing position may not be important in all cases [33]. Accordingly, it is clear that the player's position is not one of the primary determinants but is one of the features to be evaluated. In addition, "devotion to the team" has emerged as another factor that is effective in the selection of a team captain. Participants expect the team captain to prioritize team identity, team harmony, and success [22]. The study of Butalia et al. [24] is remarkable because it found that experienced and older players have difficulty in adopting young team captains who do not have these characteristics. Therefore, the primary priority in choosing a team captain is personality traits. However, personality traits alone are not sufficient to determine the captain, and the selection of a team captain is a delicate and cyclical process that requires the consideration of other factors described above.

#### 4.4. Theme 4: The Team Captaincy Process and Theme 5: Termination of the Team Captaincy

Team captaincy is a process that has a beginning and an end. This process may end for a single reason or more than one reason. Because, with the determination of the captain, visible opponents and secret opponents may occur who oppose the captain or his practices. While visible opponents share their opinions about the captain with others, hidden opponents may appear to support the captain's practices and take actions that will affect the process. If there is no general consensus regarding the captain in the team, the players may develop a spiral of silence between themselves and the captain and his practices, prioritizing their personal interests and not conflicting with the coach/management [42]. The way the team captain performs his tasks and his success or failure can determine the direction of the effects of those who support and oppose the team captain. Because of the tenure of the team captain, in addition to the development of the captain's competencies, it is directly related to a higher level of leadership capacity and effectiveness [25,43]. Individual factors such as the team captain playing in different leagues, positions, and roles as much as possible (which may vary according to the branches), having a managerial space where he can make his own decisions, receiving feedback from other players, creating a supportive environment, having the ability to manage emotions, and hard work are the factors that help the team captain to be a leader [44]. In addition, Mageau and Vallerand [45] point out that coaches who adopt a coaching style that supports autonomy increase the intrinsic motivation of team captains. On the other hand, Cotterill and Fransen [46] stated that coaches should try to develop the leadership abilities of all team members in order to maximize the leadership capacity within the team, rather than focusing only on developing certain individuals as leaders. Because there are many informal sports leaders who will take on the leadership role both on and off the field within the team [11,47], sharing the "task, social and external leadership" structures of these leaders can positively affect team harmony, trust, and team success, and the team captain can fulfill his/her tasks longer and more successfully with their support [48,49]. However, despite the sound formation of all processes, the decision-makers should initiate the process regarding who the new captain can be, with the signs that the captaincy may be terminated. The definition of the dimensions of the team captaincy process provides important information for decision-makers because the team captain has a key role and acts as a bridge between the coach and the players with his effective communication skills and determines the team's performance. As a result, team captaincy is a dynamic process. When the sportive success of a sports club is evaluated in its entirety, each step of the team captaincy process is directly related to the expectations of the team players and stakeholders associated with the team. Therefore, this research shows that first of all, the coaches should determine the most suitable player among all the players of the team to be the team captain. Although research on the tasks and personality traits of the team captain is limited, it has been observed that the team captain process and the studies on the termination of captaincy are not handled at the desired level. It can be said that more research on this subject is needed.

Commission Decision: It was unanimously decided to accept the interim report submitted within the scope of the Normal Research Project numbered SBA-2022-5297 and titled "What Are the Characteristics of an Ideal Team Captain?" conducted by Associate Professor CENK TEMEL.

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Project Title: What Are the Characteristics of an Ideal Team Captain?

Project Type: Normal Research Project

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**Author Contributions:** Revealing the research problem, methodology and data analysis, collection of research data, and research findings and discussion: Ç.G., M.K. and C.T.; coordinating the process and responsible author: C.T.; spelling and stylistic arrangement: T.E.; writing, reviewing, and editing, C.T., Ç.G., M.K., T.T. and T.E. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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**Institutional Review Board Statement:** This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by Akdeniz University Institute of Social Sciences Ethics Committee (protocol code:74987-date of approval:16 April 2021).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in this study.

**Data Availability Statement:** Data are not available because of the privacy of participants.

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