

# A Systematic Literature Review: The Influence of Basketball Coaches' Leadership Styles on Team Outcomes

Xinyi Zhang\*

School of Physical Education and Sport Science, Fujian Normal University, Fuzhou 350100, China

\*Corresponding author: 2043266200@qq.com

## Abstract

**Basketball coaches' leadership styles strongly influence team climate, athlete well-being, and competitive performance. This systematic review synthesized evidence from Scopus, Web of Science, and CNKI (2015–2025) following PRISMA and PEO frameworks, with 15 studies included for qualitative analysis. We aimed to clarify the diversity of coaching leadership styles and their differential impacts on team cohesion, recognition, and satisfaction. Results show that leadership styles significantly predict team cohesion, athlete motivation, psychological well-being, and performance. Democratic and transformational leadership effectively enhance team cohesion and athlete development, whereas authoritarian leadership is associated with poor long-term outcomes. Situational factors such as competitive level and sport type moderate leadership effectiveness. Limitations include small or region-specific samples and reliance on self-reported data. Future research should explore cross-cultural and longitudinal mechanisms to improve generalizability. This review provides evidence-based insights for coaching practice and leadership training.**

## Keywords

**Basketball coach; Leadership style; Team cohesion; Athlete well-being; Team performance.**

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Research Background

In competitive sport, coaches serve not only as tactical designers but also as primary leaders whose behaviors and styles directly shape team dynamics, athlete engagement, and competitive results. Exemplary leaders such as Lang Ping in volleyball, Liu Guoliang in table tennis, and John Wooden in basketball have demonstrated how exceptional leadership, combined with strategic expertise, can sustain long-term competitive excellence. For basketball coaches, technical and tactical competence must be paired with effective leadership to optimize team climate, individual performance, and match outcomes.

As one of the most popular and commercially developed sports worldwide, basketball involves hundreds of millions of participants and spectators. The rapid growth of professional leagues such as the NBA has further elevated the practical importance of understanding coaching leadership. Exploring the strengths and limitations of alternative leadership styles can inform leadership training programs for basketball coaches, improve team management and motivational practices, and ultimately enhance competitive performance.

### 1.2. Research Progress

Coaching leadership research has evolved substantially over recent decades. Early coaching behavior theories that emerged in the 1960s shifted scholarly attention from static trait

perspectives to dynamic behavioral approaches, emphasizing that leadership could be learned and developed [1]. Lewin classified leadership behaviors into authoritarian, democratic, and laissez-faire styles, positioning democratic leadership as a balanced intermediate approach. During the 1960s–1970s, contingency theories gained prominence; House refined this perspective into the path–goal theory, which emphasizes leaders’ roles in clarifying goals, providing support, and aligning follower and organizational objectives. Accordingly, four leadership styles were proposed: directive, supportive, participative, and achievement-oriented. Since the 1980s, contemporary leadership theories—including transformational leadership—have focused on leader qualities and leader–follower interactions, reflecting a continued shift from static to dynamic and relational frameworks [2]. In the Chinese context, Ji Liu [3] defined coaching style as the pattern of behaviors through which coaches exert leadership. Given individual differences among coaches and athletes, flexible and tailored leadership is considered essential. Researchers have distinguished between task-oriented and relationship-oriented leadership [3, 4], democratic and authoritarian styles [5], and other typologies. In Western sport settings, servant leadership has been advocated as a suitable model in intercollegiate athletics, emphasizing ethical care, support, and respect for athletes [6]. In contemporary sport psychology, transformational leadership has attracted growing empirical attention due to its focus on inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individualized support.

Within basketball, coaching leadership style refers to consistent patterns of behavior through which coaches influence athletes’ cognitions, emotions, and behaviors during training and competition. Commonly examined styles include authoritarian, democratic, laissez-faire, servant, and transformational leadership. Team-level outcomes include team cohesion, efficacy, climate, athlete satisfaction, and competitive performance.

### 1.3. Innovations of the Review

Although prior research has explored definitions, classifications, and correlates of basketball coaches’ leadership styles, most studies focus on specific styles or outcomes in isolation. Few reviews have systematically integrated evidence regarding how diverse leadership styles affect team-level functioning. This systematic review fills this gap by synthesizing domestic and international literature, comparing effects across leadership types, and identifying moderators of effectiveness. The findings are intended to guide future research and inform evidence-based coaching practice.

### 1.4. Research Questions

What are the key characteristics of the diversity and distribution of basketball coaches’ leadership styles?

How do different leadership styles differ in their impacts on basketball teams in terms of cohesion, recognition, and satisfaction?

## 2. Methods

This review followed PRISMA guidelines and employed the PEO framework:

Population (P): Basketball teams or basketball athletes

Exposure (E): Coaches’ leadership styles

Outcome (O): Team-level indicators including cohesion, satisfaction, and performance

The search strategy used Boolean operators:

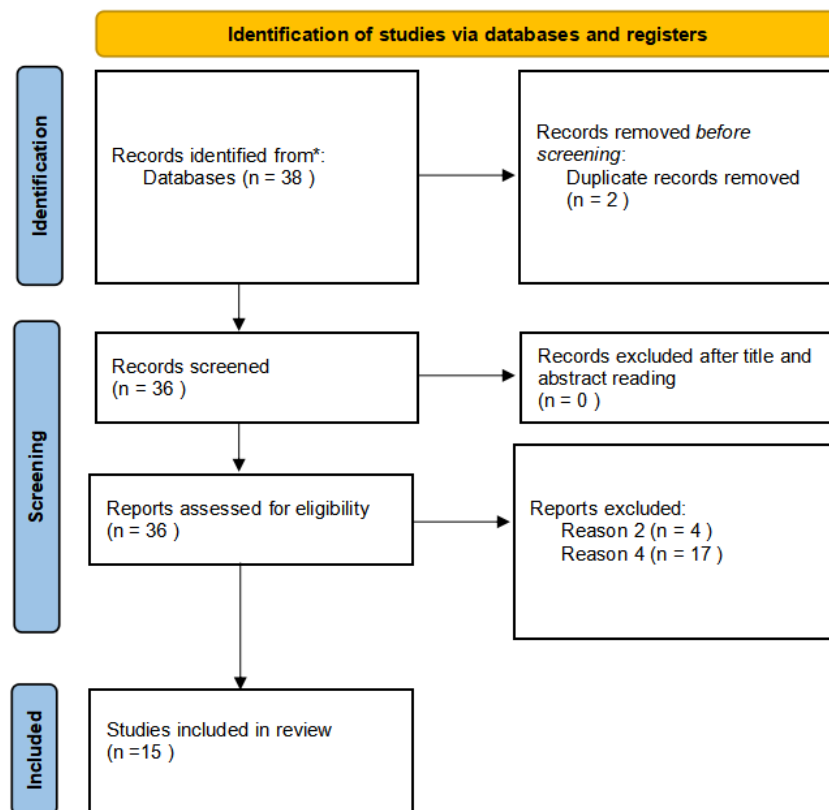
("basketball" OR "basketball coach\*") AND "leadership" AND ("team" OR "group")

Searches were conducted on February 4, 2025, in Scopus, Web of Science, and CNKI. Filters were applied to exclude non-English/non-Chinese documents and conference abstracts.

Screening and eligibility assessment were completed independently by the author. Eligibility criteria are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Eligibility Criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	exclusion
Population	Basketball teams or players	Other sports; non-athletes
Exposure	Leadership measured with validated tools	Only coach background/experience
Outcome	Team cohesion, performance, or related group outcomes	Only individual self-confidence
Study design	Empirical: survey or experiment	Non-empirical; no quantitative data
Publication period	2015–2025	Pre-2015



**Figure 1.** PRISMA Flow Diagram of Study Selection

The initial search retrieved 38 records; 2 duplicates were removed. After title/abstract screening, 21 studies were excluded. Fifteen studies were finally included in the qualitative synthesis. The study selection process is summarized in the PRISMA flowchart (Figure 1).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Diversity and Distribution of Leadership Styles

Basketball coaches use a diverse range of leadership styles. A leadership framework for middle-school basketball coaches identified five core dimensions, with charisma (weight = 0.3707) and foresight (0.2869) as prominent components [7]. A study at the Competitive Sports School of Beijing Sport University revealed that coaches in individual sports tended toward authoritarian styles (11 out of 15 coaches; mean score < 30), whereas those in confrontational

sports favored democratic styles (9 out of 15; mean > 30). Most coaches displayed mixed or intermediate styles [8].

Among 227 female professional basketball players, active athletes preferred training/guidance, democratic, and positive feedback styles more strongly than retired athletes. Players with 1–5 years of professional experience reported stronger preferences for democratic, positive feedback, and social support styles compared with those with 6–10 years or more than 10 years of experience. No significant ethnic differences in leadership preferences were observed [9].

### **3.2. Effects of Leadership Styles on Team Outcomes**

#### **3.2.1. Effects on Team Cohesion**

Leadership styles are strongly associated with team cohesion. In Sichuan high school basketball teams, players perceived higher levels of democratic leadership ( $M = 3.87$ ) than authoritarian leadership ( $M = 2.36$ ). Among male teams, democratic leadership was positively associated with total cohesion, social cohesion, and task cohesion ( $r = 0.338, 0.971, 0.962; p < 0.01$ ), whereas authoritarian leadership was negatively associated. Among female teams, democratic leadership significantly and positively predicted cohesion ( $\beta = 0.331, p < 0.01$ ), while authoritarian leadership showed no significant effect [10].

In Fujian university “Three Major Ball Games” settings, coaches’ servant leadership was significantly positively correlated with team cohesion ( $r = 0.673, p < 0.01$ ). Athlete role engagement partially mediated this association (mediated effect = 67%), and the coach–athlete relationship positively moderated the link between servant leadership and role engagement [11].

#### **3.2.2. Effects on Athlete Psychology and Development**

Coaching leadership shapes athlete psychological states and developmental outcomes. In grassroots basketball, players rated coaching behaviors in the following order: recognition, training/guidance, communication/care, and management ( $M = 4.31–4.40$ ). Team identification partially mediated the relationship between coaching behavior and team efficacy [12].

Among South African elite male wheelchair basketball players, coaches’ training/guidance and positive feedback were moderately and significantly associated with athletes’ subjective vitality and psychological well-being, although core leadership components did not significantly predict well-being. Research among Spanish youth basketball players confirmed that satisfaction of basic psychological needs mediates the relationship between coaches’ transformational leadership and athletes’ social identity.

#### **3.2.3. Effects on Team Performance and Competitive Outcomes**

Different leadership styles show divergent associations with team performance. Studies of middle and high school basketball teams indicated no universally superior style; all styles could support winning records but with varying win rates. For example, teams led by a democratic/laissez-faire coach (MS1) achieved the highest win rate [13]. In a university basketball league, team cohesion positively predicted athlete engagement. Authoritarian leadership negatively moderated this association (effect became non-significant at scores > 5.88), moral leadership positively moderated it (non-significant at scores < 2.75), and benevolent leadership showed no significant moderating effect.

## **4. Discussion**

### **4.1. Situational Adaptability of Leadership Styles**

The effectiveness of leadership styles depends heavily on contextual conditions. At the grassroots and junior high school levels, where athletes possess relatively low skill and

psychological maturity, authoritarian leadership may support structure and clarity. At the university and professional levels, where athletes are more autonomous and skilled, democratic and transformational leadership better foster initiative and potential. Differences between individual sports and confrontational sports further illustrate context sensitivity: individual sports emphasize technical precision (favoring structured, directive approaches), whereas confrontational sports rely on coordination and communication (favoring participative styles).

#### **4.2. Mechanisms Underlying Team Cohesion**

Democratic and servant leadership appear particularly effective in enhancing team cohesion. Democratic leadership encourages participation, strengthens ownership, and improves perceived respect and belonging. Servant leadership prioritizes athlete needs and relational support, which promotes role engagement. The moderated mediation model documented by Wu Wenjie [11] highlights the complex pathways linking leadership to cohesion, involving both mediation through role engagement and moderation by coach-athlete relationship quality.

#### **4.3. Implications for Athlete Psychological Development**

Coaching leadership exerts a lasting impact on athlete mental health and holistic development. Transformational leadership supports the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, thereby strengthening social identity and psychological well-being, as supported by cross-cultural evidence from Spain and South Africa. However, many coaches lack clear awareness of their own leadership styles, which may undermine effectiveness. Leadership training should therefore integrate theoretical knowledge and reflective practice to support athlete development.

#### **4.4. Integrated Effects on Team Performance**

Leadership style is not the sole determinant of team performance; cohesion, individual ability, tactical systems, and match conditions also matter. As Gaines [13] demonstrated, teams can succeed under various leadership styles, although win rates differ. This suggests that leadership must be combined with other structural and process variables to optimize performance. Coaches and practitioners should therefore adopt multi-factorial approaches to improve team functioning.

### **5. Conclusion**

This systematic review synthesizes nearly a decade of peer-reviewed research from Web of Science, Scopus, and CNKI concerning basketball coaches' leadership styles and team outcomes. The evidence indicates that leadership styles significantly influence team cohesion, athlete motivation, psychological well-being, and performance. Democratic and transformational leadership are particularly beneficial for cohesion and athlete development, whereas authoritarian leadership is associated with poorer long-term outcomes. Future research should examine generalizability across cultures and competitive levels and clarify longitudinal mechanisms.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. Some included studies employed relatively small samples and focused on specific populations (e.g., youth, para-athletes) or regions, which may restrict external validity. In addition, reliance on self-reported data may introduce common method bias.

Future studies should adopt larger and more diverse samples, use longitudinal designs, and explore interactions between leadership styles, team culture, and athlete characteristics to provide more robust and generalizable implications.

## References

- [1] Book Reviews--Bass & Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership: T [J]. Quarterly Journal of Speech. 1992, Vol.78(No.3): 392-394.
- [2] Bernard M. Bass 1CA. Theory of transformational leadership redux [J]. The Leadership Quarterly. 1996, Vol.6(No.4): 463-478.
- [3] Ji, L. (2006). Tiyu xinli xue celiang yu pingjia [Sport psychology measurement and evaluation] [in Chinese]. Beijing: Higher Education Press.
- [4] Zhang, Z. (2008). Youxiu yundongyuan xinli xunlian shiyong zhinan [Practical guide to psychological training for elite athletes] [in Chinese]. Beijing: People's Sports Publishing House.
- [5] Zhang, Z. (2012). Butong jiaolian lingdao fengge duiyu nvzi geren xiangmu yundongyuan de yingxiang [The impact of different coaching leadership styles on female individual sport athletes] [in Chinese]. Shangqing [Business Information], (43), 231.
- [6] Burton L, Welty Peachey J. The call for servant leadership in intercollegiate athletics [J]. Quest, 2013, 65(3): 354-371.
- [7] Yang, F. (2023). Zhongxue lanqiu jiaolian yuan lingdaoli zhibiao tixi goujian yu gean yanjiu [Construction and case study of leadership competency indicator system for middle school basketball coaches] [Master's thesis, Hebei Normal University] [in Chinese]. Shijiazhuang: Hebei Normal University.
- [8] Lei, Y. (2017). Beijing tiyu daxue jingji tixiao jiaolian yuan zhijiao fengge dui yundong dui ningjuli de yingxiang yanjiu [A study on the influence of coaching styles on team cohesion at Beijing Sport University's competitive sports school] [Master's thesis, Beijing Sport University] [in Chinese]. Beijing: Beijing Sport University.
- [9] Tremitiere, C. R. (2017). An examination of coaching leadership style preferences of female professional basketball players (Order No. 30263603). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (2779138028). Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/examination-coaching-leadership-style-preferences/docview/2779138028/se-2>
- [10] Yu, J. (2023). Sichuan sheng putong gaozhong lanqiu dui jiaolian yuan lingdao xingwei yu tuandui ningjuli de guanxi [The relationship between coaching leadership behavior and team cohesion in senior high school basketball teams in Sichuan Province] [Master's thesis, Sichuan Normal University] [in Chinese]. Chengdu: Sichuan Normal University.
- [11] Wu, W. (2023). Jiaolian yuan fuwuxing lingdao xingwei dui yundongyuan tuandui ningjuli de yingxiang: you tiaojie de zhongjie xiaoying fenxi [The effect of coaches' servant leadership behavior on athlete team cohesion: A moderated mediation analysis] [Master's thesis, Fujian Normal University] [in Chinese]. Fuzhou: Fujian Normal University.
- [12] Huang, J. (2018). Jiceng lanqiu jiaolian lingdao xingwei, tuandui xiaoneng he tuandui rentong de zhuyao tezheng ji guanxi yanjiu [A study on the main characteristics and relationships of grassroots basketball coaches' leadership behavior, team efficacy, and team identity] [Master's thesis, Fujian Normal University] [in Chinese]. Fuzhou: Fujian Normal University.
- [13] Gaines, J. (2019). Student athletes and coaches leadership style and motivation levels and its impact on team performance (Order No. 27670412). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (2656737683). Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/student-athletes-coaches-leadership-style/docview/2656737683/se-2>