"You really could be something quite special": A qualitative exploration of athletes’ experiences of being inspired in sport

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“You really could be something quite special”: A qualitative exploration of athletes’ experiences of being inspired in sport.

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Abstract

Objectives: The purpose of this research was to provide an explicit examination of inspiration in sport. In Study 1, we explored (a) what inspires athletes in sport, and (b) the consequences of being inspired. The aims of Study 2 were to explore (a) the contexts in which leaders inspired athletes, (b) leader behaviours and actions that inspire athletes, and (c) the consequences of being inspired by leaders.

Design: Two qualitative descriptive studies were conducted in order to explore athletes’ experiences of being inspired.

Method: In Study 1, 95 athletes wrote about an experience of being inspired in sport. Study 2 utilised semi-structured interviews to explore 17 athletes’ experiences of being inspired by leadership. Data were analysed via inductive thematic analysis.

Results: In Study 1, athletes’ responses revealed three sources of inspiration: personal performance, accomplishments, and thoughts; role models; and leadership. Findings from Study 2 indicated that athletes were inspired by a range of leadership behaviours (e.g., demonstrations of belief) in a variety of, mainly negative, situations (e.g., following poor performance). Broadly, findings from both studies revealed inspiration to impact on athletes’ awareness of their capabilities, confidence, motivation, and behaviour.

Conclusions: Overall, the findings indicate that an experience of inspiration can be evoked by a range of sources (most prominently leadership) and can have a powerful effect on athletes and their performance. Further research is required to understand how and why leaders can exert an inspirational impact on athletes.

Key Words: Inspiration, awareness, leadership, qualitative description, evocation, role models.
Introduction

Inspiration is used in everyday conversations and by the media to explain extraordinary achievements and innovative ideas. Within sport, inspiration is often cited as the driving force behind outstanding, and often surprising, athletic feats (Arthur, Hardy, & Woodman, 2012). Recent research outside of the sport psychology literature (see Thrash, Moldovan, Oleynick, & Maruskin, 2014 for details) has demonstrated that inspiration can have a profound impact on important self-growth related outcomes and alter the way individuals perceive their capabilities. Despite these widespread benefits of being inspired, to date, we know little surrounding the ways in which athletes are inspired.

Until recently, inspiration as a psychological construct had been largely ignored within the scientific literature owing to the lack of a consistent definition that clearly distinguished it from other psychological constructs (Oleynick, Thrash, LeFew, Moldovan, & Kieffaber, 2014). Consequently, Thrash and colleagues (e.g., Thrash & Elliot, 2003; Thrash & Elliot, 2004; Thrash, Elliot, Maruskin, & Cassidy, 2010; Thrash, Maruskin, Cassidy, Fryer, & Ryan, 2010) conducted a series of studies aiming to define and operationalise a domain-general conceptualization of inspiration in order to promote the study of inspiration. Overall, this research has outlined the core characteristics (Thrash & Elliot, 2003), the processes that constitute an episode of inspiration (Thrash & Elliot, 2004), and the purpose of inspiration (Thrash, Maruskin, et al., 2010).

Initially, Thrash and Elliot (2003) reviewed the diverse literatures on inspiration (e.g., religious, creative, and interpersonal) and proposed a *tripartite conceptualization*, consisting of: (a) *evocation*, suggesting that the occurrence of inspiration is evoked spontaneously by something or someone outside of the self; (b) *transcendence*, when an individual gains awareness of greater possibilities for themselves or others; and (c) *approach motivation*, which involves the energisation or direction of behaviour to realise or achieve these
possibilities. Thrash and Elliot (2004) built upon this work by proposing that an episode of inspiration may comprise two component processes. These are, being inspired by—involving evocation and transcendence—which refers to being awoken to the perceived intrinsic value of an external stimulus, and being inspired to—involving approach motivation—which refers to the motivation to actualize or extend the inspiring qualities exemplified in the evocative object. Thrash, Maruskin, et al. (2010) extended Thrash and Elliot’s (2003) conceptualization by examining the transmission model, which contends that inspiration mediates the transmission of the values exemplified by an evocative stimulus into some form of tangible action. That is, intrinsically valued qualities of a stimulus evoke inspiration, which, subsequently, compels an individual to pursue a newfound goal.

Research has also begun to examine the correlates and consequences of inspiration. Within social psychology, researchers have shown inspiration to be positively associated with a range of positive outcomes including self-determination and work-mastery motivation (Thrash & Elliot, 2003), well-being (Thrash, Elliot, et al., 2010), goal progress (Milyavskaya, Ianakieva, Foxen-Craft, Colantuoni, & Koestner, 2012), and productivity (Thrash & Elliot, 2004). Given such benefits in contexts where individuals’ perceive there to be high intrinsic value (e.g., potential for self-growth), it is surprising that limited research attention has been paid to inspiration in sport, where individuals often compete for intrinsic reasons (Ryan & Deci, 2007). Indeed, only two studies have examined inspiration in sport. Gonzalez, Metzler, and Newton (2011) used edited video clips to examine the influence of a coach’s team talk on athletes’ levels of inspiration. Athletes who watched the inspirational video clip reported higher feelings of inspiration, dominance, and motivation. In addition, Gucciardi, Jackson, Hanton, and Reid (2015) found that tennis players who experienced inspiration more frequently were more likely to exhibit mentally tough behaviours. Taken together these findings indicate that inspiration may be evoked in sport and be associated with advantageous
psychological concepts such as mental toughness. Thus, further exploration of inspiration in sport may provide a fruitful avenue of research that could guide applied practitioners and sport psychologists.

To this end, the overall aim of this research was to explore athletes’ experiences of being inspired. Given the limited research in this area, two qualitative studies were conducted to understand how inspiration is evoked in athletes. Study 1 sought to identify sources of inspiration for athletes. Building on these findings, Study 2 was conducted to further examine how leaders inspire athletes. Leadership was chosen as the context of interest as it was identified as the major source of inspiration in Study 1 and because research has shown leaders to have a major impact on factors relating to the performance and development of athletes (Appleton, Ntoumanis, Quested, Viladrich, & Duda, 2016).

**Methodology**

As the aim of the two studies was to produce a descriptive summary of athletes’ experiences of being inspired in sport (e.g., the sources and consequence of being inspired), the research took a qualitative description approach. A qualitative description approach looks to understand “the who, what, and where of events or experiences” (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 338). This approach has been successfully utilized in previous sport psychology research when exploring novel research areas (e.g., coaching transitions; Knight, Rodgers, Reade, Mrak, & Hall, 2015). Thus, given that little sport psychology research has examined inspiration, this approach was deemed appropriate to fulfil the aims of this research. Qualitative descriptive research is not limited to a specific philosophical or methodological framework other than drawing from the general principles of naturalistic enquiry (Sandelowski, 2000). However, the design and analysis of the research were consistent with the perspective of critical realism that underpinned these studies. Critical realism proposes that through research it is possible to identify patterns that underpin social phenomena, that
these patterns are relatively stable but that the phenomenon in question cannot be fully understood only approximated. Also, it is acknowledged that the findings are a consequence of interaction between the knowledge and experiences of the participants and the researchers.

**Study 1**

The purpose was to explore athletes’ experiences of being inspired. Specifically, the aims of this study were to: (a) understand what inspiration means to athletes; and (b) understand what inspires athletes and identify potential consequences of being inspired.

**Method**

**Participants.** The sample consisted of 95 athletes (67 males and 28 female) aged between 18 and 37 years (M = 20.3 years, SD = 2.75). The participants had between 1 and 30 years of experience (M = 10.9 years, SD = 4.6) of competing (between amateur and international standard) in a range of team and individual sports, including Football, Golf, Athletics, Swimming, Gymnastics, Equestrian, Rugby, and Netball. Drawing on experiences from such a broad range of participants was deemed appropriate given the lack of previous research in this area.

**Procedure.** Prior to conducting the study, institutional ethical approval was obtained. Participants were invited to take part via email or face-to-face meetings, both of which included information regarding the aims of the study, details regarding confidentiality, and the requirements of the study. To be part of the study participants needed to be able to describe (in writing) an instance in which they were inspired in sport.

Following the receipt of informed consent, participants were asked to write about a situation in which they were inspired in sport\(^1\). As this was the first study to explicitly explore the concept of inspiration in a sporting context, written accounts were selected as the data collection method because they provide rich qualitative data (Sparkes & Smith, 2013), and
they have been used successfully in previous inspiration (e.g., Thrash & Elliot, 2004) and

sport psychology research (e.g., Sitch & Day, 2015). The participants’ written account was
guided by two main questions. The first question asked participants to describe what being
inspired in sport meant to them. The purpose of this question was to encourage participants to
consider what inspiration feels like in order to facilitate easier recall of a moment in which
they were inspired. The second question asked participants to describe a time when they had
been inspired in sport, which allowed us to examine sources and consequences of inspiration.

Data Analysis. The written accounts, which ranged between 0.5 and 1.5 A4 pages
long (M = 0.98 pages), were analysed using inductive thematic analysis, following the
procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Initially, the written accounts were read
and re-read by the lead researcher to ensure familiarity with the data and initial analytic
statements of the data were noted. These initial statements were then used to facilitate initial
inductive coding and aid theme and category refinement in the latter stages of the analysis.
Initial coding involved attaching words or labels to the relevant research questions. Following
this, the codes were then refined and sorted into broader themes. Throughout analysis the
emerging themes were constantly compared against one another to ensure clarity and
distinctiveness of themes. As analysis progressed questions were posed to ensure the
emerging themes appropriately addressed the research questions. Such questions included, for
example, what inspiration meant to the participants, the sources of inspiration, and the
consequences of being inspired.

Methodological Rigor. Given the variety of methodologies and subsequent purposes
of qualitative research, it is difficult to assess all qualitative research against the same strict
criteria. Rather qualitative research should be judged against criteria that align with the
specific methodology employed in each study (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). A number of steps

1 A definition of inspiration was not provided for participants because previous research (Hart, 1998) has
were integrated into this study to enhance the methodological rigor and ensure it fulfilled the
criteria of a qualitative descriptive study. Initially, the writing task was piloted in order to
ensure that the questions asked were appropriate for the study and would provide rich data
(Tracy, 2010). The research team reviewed the pilot work to ensure the data obtained would
meet the intended aims of the research and produce results that described the phenomenon in
question. The first author also wrote a range of memos throughout data collection and
analysis in order to keep a clear and detailed account of the decisions made throughout the
data analysis (Cresswell & Miller, 2000). Further, the first author engaged with critical
friends who encouraged reflection upon and questioned the emerging interpretations of the
data. Of particular importance to these processes was that the analysis was arranged in a
manner appropriate for the data (i.e., a descriptive summary of participants’ experiences).

Results

In the following section, participants’ perceptions of the meaning of inspiration are
outlined. Next, the moments of inspiration are described in relation to what and how
participants were inspired. Finally, the consequences of being inspired are discussed.

The meaning of inspiration. In general, participants perceived inspiration to be a
highly emotive “overwhelming” state, which they were not regularly used to experiencing.
Inspiration also appears to impact on passion, with one participant explaining, “inspiration is
getting a fire in your gut, heart and head to compete to the best of your ability.” Participants
proposed that inspiration leads to an increase in desire to push oneself to reach their “highest
potential,” as highlighted by one participant who wrote, “[Inspiration means] having a drive
to push all boundaries you thought there were, mentally and physically.” Participants often
felt that the experience of inspiration made them aware of new opportunities, “learn
something”, and created interest in something new (e.g., a new performance goal or target).

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demonstrated that, while inspiration holds many shades of meaning, lay conceptualizations of the construct are
clear and consistent (Thrash & Elliot, 2003).
One participant wrote that inspiration meant, “to be shown a new light and see something that is unexpected but engaging and exciting that makes me want to be involved.” Participants’ experiences of inspiration were also associated with a noticeable change of mental state, attitude, or behaviour. This was highlighted by one participant who referred to inspiration as, “something that changes your mentality, a situation, or group.” The feeling of inspiration was proposed to be something that takes hold and triggers action instantaneously, as one participant wrote, “[inspiration is] seeing something that you see to be extraordinary, sparking you into life.”

The source of inspiration. Participants described being inspired by a range of sources, which have been categorized into three main sources: (1) Personal performance, thoughts, and accomplishments; (2) interacting with and watching role models; and (3) demonstrations of leadership.

Personal performance, thoughts, and accomplishments. Participants reported being inspired by their own unexpected performances (e.g., performances they did not think they were capable of), their previous experiences, and their ability to deal with testing competitive circumstances. For instance, one participant recounted being inspired by successfully executing a new skill that he had not used in a competitive game before:

I was playing in the annual cricket match between my side and a touring side. [The touring side] turned up and was two players short, and I was chosen to join their squad. Heading on up to bowl aged 16 to the most senior and skilled batsman from my team felt daunting, so I decided to bowl leg-spin for the first time. I had never been confident enough to compete with it before. To my surprise I took 3 wickets and haven’t looked back since.

Participants were also inspired by their thoughts regarding their upcoming performances. For example, one participant described being inspired by, “the thought that I could win . . .
thought that I could cause an upset, and the feeling of awesomeness [I would experience] when I destroy the stereotype over sprinters.” In contrast, another participant described how letting go of negative thoughts and remembering the effort expended previously inspired him:

I got the ‘fuck it’ factor. I said to myself “I have worked too hard to just give up. Next time I get the opportunity I will get in the battle and show people I belong.” I was aggressive and nothing was going to stop me. When I did bowl things worked for me and it went very well.

**Interacting with and watching role models.** Inspiration was drawn from elite-level athletes’ ability, demonstration of skill, and exceptional performances in highly pressurized situations. For example, one participant wrote about being inspired by the performance of a role model in a pressurized situation:

It was David Beckham versus Greece in 2001, the world cup qualifier. The importance of the goal he scored inspired me . . . how did he do that with the weight of a nation on his shoulders? [When he scored] I was happy and excited.

Role models’ experiences of adversity were another catalyst for participants’ experiences of inspiration. Participants wrote about being inspired by the way in which their role models dealt with adversity and difficult circumstances and were still able to perform. For instance, one participant was inspired when watching the Paralympics:

It amazed me to see that individuals who have been dealt a tough hand in life manage to overcome their disability and perform at the highest level. Especially ex-soldiers . . . how they overcome the trauma of being at war and being injured, are able to put that to one side and have the drive and determination to succeed in sport.

Participants were also inspired by their perceptions of role models’ confidence in themselves, as one participant said, “It was Phelps’ belief in himself; that he could achieve his goal of 8 gold’s. There were some close calls where he nearly missed out, like the 100
metre fly, but he still pushed himself to the very end.” Perceptions of group dynamics were also inspiring. For example, one participant reported being inspired by a team’s cohesion, “The moment they won and the whole team celebrated together inspired me to improve my game, make the team and have that experience myself.”

Interacting with role models also provided inspiration. For example, when describing her experience of seeing a role model present at a coaching conference, one participant wrote, “One of the course leaders was [a world-class athlete] and she did a talk about her training and lifestyle, and ran a training session during the course. Hearing her talk and watching her train was inspirational.” Praise from role models also inspired athletes. For example, a discussion with a former international athlete inspired one participant:

I was told by the ex-pro that I could, if I put the effort in, achieve my goals as a player. I was just a club cricketer that loved the game; being a pro had never really been an option. They told me I had what it took so I believed him.

Demonstrations of leadership. Leadership seemed to be the major source of inspiration in sport based upon the participants’ responses. Participants reported being inspired by both formal (individuals in a pre-determined leadership position such as coaches and captains) and informal leaders’ (individuals within a group who have no formal leadership role) communication and behaviour. Participants recalled a variety of moments when they were inspired by a leader’s speech. For example, one participant said he was inspired when, “the manager and captain gave an emotional speech. They told us that we needed to sort ourselves out, and gave us confidence by saying ‘we are a lot better than how we are playing’.”

Individual talks with leaders also evoked inspiration. For example, one participant recalled being spoken to by a national coach, “[The] England coach was watching me fight. He pulled me to one side [during the fight] and said that he believed I was better than I knew,
and if I really went for it I would surprise myself.” Other participants were inspired by leaders providing them with specific information on how to improve. One participant commented that, “[the captain] gave me a few pointers on how to improve in the game . . . applying the new marking and feeling relaxed about it [the mistake] helped us to win.”

Displays of leadership away from the competitive environment were also inspiring. For example, one participant described the following situation that he found inspiring:

I told my coach what I was feeling [that I didn’t want to carry on playing or training]. He pulled me aside during training and pointed out my friends, all working hard, he told me that these boys are my brothers, my family, and you can’t quit on family. [The coach] told me that I had “special talent” and that I shouldn’t quit because I was tired and in pain, instead I should keep going and get reward from it. That [what the coach said] blew my mind and I carried on.

Providing opportunities, challenging individuals, and having high standards were also cited as ways in which leaders could inspire athletes. One participant described how a coach had inspired her by providing her with an opportunity to switch to a preferred position stating, “[The coach] gave me the opportunity, showed her confidence in me and gave me the challenge. [The coach] said that if I practiced and showed competency I could play that position in the next game.”

Finally, leaders inspired athletes by being role models and demonstrating high levels of competency. As one participant recalled, he was inspired by the captain’s effort and persistence during competition because, “our captain never gave up when chasing the opposition. [The captain] was very positive throughout and fully gave 110%.” Another participant wrote, “We were representing East at nationals and lost against Wales. I was feeling very defeated and [my teammate] motivated me to improve my performance . . . She made every tackle, every run, and I wanted to be like that.”
Consequences of being inspired. A range of positive outcomes were associated with being inspired. These outcomes related to athletes’ thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.

Increased positive thoughts. Participants reported inspiration to have an effect on a range of cognitions. Participants reported experiencing increased confidence in their capabilities (e.g., achieving performance goals), ability to deal with challenging situations (e.g., perform well against higher-skilled opponents), and setbacks (e.g., returning to the same level following injury). For example, one participant recalled the consequences of an inspirational team-talk from his coach writing, “My confidence to perform well at the competition was much greater. I felt more capable and had much greater belief in myself to achieve what I had targeted.” Participants also reported feeling more motivated in relation to competing, achieving new goals, and improving their own skill-levels. One participant explained, “I felt like I wanted to push training further, and I was determined to improve and reach my goals . . . it [being inspired] made me feel more motivated to achieve.” In addition, participants reported having more rational thoughts when evaluating their own performances. For example, one participant felt frustrated following a mistake which resulted in a goal and recalled how being inspired, “changed my thoughts about letting the team down . . . I felt more relaxed, but focused to win.”

Athletes in team sports also recalled how inspiration resulted in improved team functioning including improved perceptions of team cohesion and a heightened sense of belonging within a team. For instance, one participant reported identifying more with his team following a speech by a senior player stating, “I have never felt more part of a team before.” Episodes of inspiration also facilitated increased levels of trust within a team with one participant writing, “[the coach] then listed every player’s qualities which allowed me and my teammates to trust each other.”
Increased positive (and decreased negative) feelings. Participants explained that inspiration had a positive impact on their emotional state. For instance, one participant recalled being, “relieved, excited, and happy” after being inspired. Participants also described increased pride, enjoyment, and enthusiasm for their sport following an episode of inspiration. This was alluded to by one participant who described the impact of watching a role model perform, writing, “It [seeing the role model perform] showed me that any situation can be enjoyable... it has had a long-term impact as I have always had this enthusiasm since then in any games I have played.” Participants indicated that being inspired gave them a more positive outlook on their own performances and could lead to a positive reappraisal of the situation. For example, one participant described the influence of inspiration on their feelings following a loss in an important cup-final, “We thought we could win; we had very little doubt. We played well and fought for each other for the full 90 minutes, but we lost. However, although we lost we were still proud of our performance.”

As well as the typical positive feelings facilitated by an experience of inspiration, participants also suggested that inspiration could lead to what are usually considered negative feelings (e.g., increased levels of aggression). However, in these instances, participants perceived these consequences as positive. For instance, one participant wrote, “[Inspiration] gave me enhanced anger to drive and focus me.”

Behaviour and performance. In the main, participants experienced a range of positive outcomes on their physical behaviour (e.g., increased effort, enhanced skill-level) as a by-product of experiencing inspiration. Participants described feeling more energised and aroused when inspired. For instance, one participant described their team’s response to a team-talk from their coach stating, “All of us became more highly aroused and positive before we went out for the second half.” Being inspired led to participants expending greater effort in training and competition (e.g., to reach a new goal), as one participant wrote:
It [being inspired by role models’ performance] made me want to work hard to the extent that I could play and perform at a similar level. As a result, I have worked very hard, and put in 100% at every training session in order to enhance my skills. Ultimately, participants attributed improved performance to the experience of inspiration. For example, one participant described how his coach’s inspirational half-time team-talk proved the catalyst for improved performance, “the performance after the half-time talk was much better and we won 2-1.” The effects of inspiration on performance were not just limited to the specific context (e.g., current game) in which an individual or team were inspired with one participant commenting that their manager’s intervention, “inspired us and our performances for the rest of the season.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore athletes’ experiences of being inspired in sport. Firstly, we aimed to explore and understand what inspiration means to athletes. Consistent with many of the propositions outlined in previous literature (cf. Thrash, Moldovan, Oleynick, et al., 2014), participants perceived inspiration to be a highly emotive and exciting state which has the power to alter perceptions of their or their team’s capabilities (in terms of potential or a specific situation) and direct their focus and effort towards a target. Secondly, we aimed to explore the sources of inspiration, with athletes identifying three major sources of inspiration. Athletes were inspired by their own unexpected successful performances and the thought of potential success. These findings provide support for Thrash and Elliot’s (2003) contention that individuals are inspired when they gain awareness of new or better possibilities. To explain, when an athlete produces a performance that exceeds their perception of their capabilities they may be inspired as it presents an image of what they may be capable of in the future. Participants were also inspired by the perceived positive characteristics, dedication, and performances of other athletes competing at a higher level.
This provides support for previous research which has demonstrated that exposure to high-performing role models (e.g., Michael Jordan) can have a positive impact on an individual’s perceptions of their own potential (Thrash, Elliot, et al., 2010). The findings also support the suggestion that leaders can have an inspiring influence on followers (e.g., Searle & Hanrahan, 2011). Indeed, the findings of the current study show leadership to be the major source of inspiration for athletes in a sporting context. Specifically, participants reported being inspired by verbal (e.g., team-talks) and nonverbal (e.g., setting a positive example) communication and behaviour. These findings further our understanding of inspiration in the leadership context by indicating that, in addition to providing a compelling vision of the future (e.g., Searle & Hanrahan, 2011), other behaviours may also be inspiring (e.g., setting an example and expecting high standards of discipline).

As well as identifying potential sources of inspiration, the present study also examined the consequences of being inspired. Previous research has found inspiration to correlate with self-determined motivation and approach motivation (Thrash & Elliot, 2003, 2004), efficiency and productivity (Thrash, Maruskin, et al., 2010), goal progress (Milyavskaya et al., 2012), energy (Hart, 1998), mental toughness (Gucciardi et al., 2015), and positive affect (Thrash, Elliot, et al., 2010). The present study supports these findings but also extends our understanding of the potential consequences of inspiration in the sporting context. Indeed, as well as experiencing a range of positive cognitive, affective, and behavioural outcomes, participants reported that inspiration may enhance group functioning, specifically team-bond and identification. These findings provide some support for the findings of previous research which suggests that leadership can improve cohesion (Smith, Arthur, Hardy, Callow, & Williams, 2013) and impact upon a team’s social identity (Slater, Barker, Coffee, & Jones, 2014). Given that inspiration may lead to these important outcomes, future research should take a more detailed look at how these are facilitated by inspiration.
The findings of the present study support the idea that leaders may have the greatest potential to provide inspiration. Given that athletes are exposed to numerous leaders (e.g., coaches, captains, performance directors, and senior players), enhancing the inspirational potential of leaders may hold numerous benefits for individuals and groups. However, little is known regarding the ways in which leaders inspire followers (Frese, Beimel, & Schoenborn, 2003). The findings of this study further knowledge of this area, but the design of this study did not allow for in-depth exploration of how leaders inspired athletes. Further research to explore what leaders do to inspire athletes was therefore deemed necessary.

Study 2

Building upon Study 1, Study 2 examined athletes’ experiences of inspirational leadership. Specifically, we aimed to understand, (a) how leaders inspire followers (i.e., what is it leaders say and do to inspire athletes), (b) in what situations athletes were inspired, and (c) the consequences of inspiration.

Method

Participants. Participants were 17 athletes (13 male, 4 female), aged between 18 and 38 years (M = 27.12, SD = 7.07) with between 5 and 30 years’ sport experience (M = 14.53, SD = 8.47). These participants had not taken part in study 1. Participants had competed at semi-professional, professional, national or international standard in a range of sports including hockey, athletics, soccer, sailing, triathlon, and basketball. To be eligible for the study, participants had to: (a) have experienced leadership that had inspired them, and (b) be willing to openly share thoughts, opinions, and experiences in an interview. These sampling criteria were used to ensure that participants would be information-rich cases who would be able to provide detailed information pertaining to the research aims.

Procedure. Prior to commencement of the main study, a pilot interview was conducted with one participant in order to evaluate and refine the content and clarity of the
initially developed interview guide. Following analysis of, and reflection upon the pilot interview (e.g., using reflective notes), revisions were made to the interview guide. For example, to allow a more free-flowing interview, the amount of direct questions was reduced. Instead, in the initial part of the interview, participants were asked to recall situations in which the leader inspired them, and these examples were recorded and then used as a stimulus to structure the rest of the interview.

Following the pilot interview, potential participants were contacted via a telephone conversation or email to explain the study and enquire into their interest in taking part in the study. If participants were interested in taking part, an individual interview was arranged. Interviews were conducted as conversations using open-ended questions. Before the interview started, participants were provided with information regarding the purpose of the study, the ways in which confidentiality would be ensured, and their right to withdraw at any time. Participants were given an opportunity to confirm their understanding of the study and complete a consent form, before voluntarily proceeding with the interview.

The interview began with introductory questions (e.g., tell us about your major achievements and highlights of your career in your sport), which aimed to gain an understanding of the participant’s background and aid the development of rapport between the interviewer and participant. Participants were then asked to talk generally about inspirational leaders they had experienced in their career. Next, participants were asked to identify moments in which leaders had inspired them; explaining what happened leading up to these moments, what happened in the moments themselves, and the impacts of these inspirational moments. All interviews were conducted face-to-face, and lasted between 45 and 120 minutes (M = 82.47, SD = 24.91). Interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed verbatim.
Data Analysis. As with Study 1, inductive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six phase procedure, was used to analyse the interview data. Initially, the transcripts were read and re-read to ensure familiarity with the data and identify initial codes. The codes were then refined and sorted into broad themes relating to the inspirational moment, the consequences of being inspired, and factors that influence athletes’ perceptions of their leader. Following this, key themes were identified that best represented the essence of each candidate theme.

Methodological rigor. To aid critical reflection, emerging findings were regularly presented to the research team. The research team acted as “critical friends” throughout the research process in order to provide a theoretical sounding board to encourage reflection surrounding the interpretation of data (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). Further, authenticity was enhanced through the use of a reflexive journal. The use of a reflexive research journal has been proposed as an efficacious tool through which to acknowledge the way in which the researcher’s involvement can shape the research process, as well as help the researcher focus on the developing method and content of the study (Culver, Gilbert, & Sparkes, 2012). In this instance, the notes referred to the researcher’s subjective feelings, reflections on the interview process, and emerging themes following each interview. Reflections were used to increase the researcher’s awareness of his own subjectivities during the research process, to assess the interviews and data analysis, and aided the on-going refinement of the interview guide.

Results

In the following sections the categories that depict the participants’ experiences of inspirational leadership are presented. First, details surrounding inspirational moments experienced by the participants are reported. Second, consequences of inspirational leadership are presented, and finally, factors that influence athletes’ perceptions of their leader are outlined.
The inspirational moment. In total, participants discussed 61 moments in which they were inspired by their respective leaders. These moments happened in a range of situations and inspiration was evoked by different leadership behaviours and actions. Thus, this section is divided into two parts outlining (a) the context prior to inspiration, and (b) the leader actions which inspired the participants.

Context prior to being inspired. Participants were inspired following a range of scenarios in which they experienced a range of, mainly negative, cognitions and emotions. For example, prior to being inspired participants reported experiencing situations that could have had potentially negative consequences (e.g., following injury or training in adverse weather). This was illustrated by one participant who recalled how an argument with their coach had preceded inspirational leadership, “something went on that prompted a response . . . we were both really annoyed that it wasn’t going well, and we’d had quite a big clash. I was nearly in tears at the time as I was so angry.” Performance outcomes (positive and negative) were another catalyst for inspirational leader behaviour. For example, inspirational moments were preceded by negative performance either during competition or training, as highlighted by one athlete who stated, “Before that [the inspirational leader behaviour] we were 3-1 down, and everyone was getting deflated.”

Participants reported experiencing a range of negative cognitions prior to being inspired by their coach. For example, they reported feelings of uncertainty relating to their own potential, how to progress, and their ability to cope with the demands of a situation. One participant described how she was feeling prior to completing a gruelling training session:

I was like ‘I’m not going to be able to do it’. It was like fifty-eight miles and fifty-eight hills, massive horrible hills . . . I was really, really nervous, thinking “there’s no way I can do this. I’m going to fail.”
Participants also reported lacking confidence and motivation, as one said, “People just seemed not to be motivated . . . in our minds we were thinking ‘they’re much older than us, they’re just going to smash us.’” Prior to the inspirational moments discussed, participants also noted feeling a range of (mainly negative) emotions (e.g., frustration, worry). For instance, following poor performance one athlete described feeling, “a bit stressed and angry and a bit depressed.”

**Leader actions leading to inspiration.** The leaders discussed in this study demonstrated a range of behaviours and actions that were proposed to evoke inspiration. Indeed, leaders evoked inspiration in participants through verbal and nonverbal communication, which included praising and supporting athletes, and displaying positive emotional reactions to the participants’ performances.

Leaders inspired participants by providing an example for them to follow in terms of behaviour and characteristics, and performance during competition and training. For instance, participants discussed moments where they were inspired by seeing their leader train, compete, and display exceptional effort. Indeed, one participant perceived seeing his coach perform to be an inspirational moment during his career saying, “Seeing [the coach] compete was inspirational . . . he was amazing at [his sport]; he could beat everyone with his left-hand even though he doesn’t play left-handed.”

Participants also reported that leaders cultivated opportunities to be inspired. For instance, participants described instances where they were inspired when their leader provided opportunities for athletes to train with or meet higher-level athletes. One athlete recalled when another coach with Olympic experience was brought in to training:

[The coach] had a lot of contacts and was able to bring people at different levels in to show us what we had to do to get to that next level . . . we had an ex-Olympian come
in. He was a great coach and very specific because he’s got a lot of experience, he’s been in the position we’re in. So, it was really interesting to see his ideas.

All the participants reported being inspired by their leaders communicating a clear strategy to help them move forwards when they were unsure how to proceed. For example, one athlete described how her coach inspired her by providing technical instruction when she did not know how to compete against difficult opponents:

[The coach] talked to us about positioning . . . he focused on specific positional skills—what the defence needed to do and what the forwards needed to do. Instead of the defence just trying to go straight to the forwards, maybe passing it around and that triggered what we had done in training previously and what had happened in previous matches as well.

Participants were also inspired by leader’s direct expressions of belief such as the participants’ potential for future successes and growth, their ability to cope with the demands of a situation, and expressing higher expectations for athletes. For example, one participant recalled his coach’s reaction to a personal best performance, “Wow! If you’ve improved that much then you really could be something quite special quite soon, and we must come up with some ideas of how we can improve you.” Another athlete described how her coach expressed belief in her ability to perform better following a frustrating performance, “I know you’re frustrated but I know you can do better.”

Participants also discussed being inspired by behaviours that they perceived to demonstrated belief. This was evidenced by one participant’s perception of their coach turning up to train them individually despite adverse weather conditions, “The belief [inspired me], that he [the coach] had belief in me. That he was willing to come down in the snow to train just me, I must have had potential.” Similarly, leaders attending competitions to support participants was perceived as demonstrations of belief. As one participant described:
So he’s [the coach] driven all that way just to come and see me and help me. He actually wants to be here; it’s not like he’s been told to be here . . . I could tell that he believed in me, I knew he wanted to work with me and get the best out of me.

Participants also found emotional support to be inspiring. Leaders demonstrated their understanding of participants’ feelings in difficult circumstances by discussing the participants’ concerns and providing support during these moments. For instance, following a difficult build up to the competition and poor performance, which led to feelings of frustration, one participant recalled her coach saying:

“We both know that the training prior to it wasn’t ideal, wasn’t what you wanted . . . it’s not the end of the world.” He [the coach] did sympathize with me at that point and said “I know you're frustrated; I know you're going to do better.”

**Consequences of inspiration.** Being inspired by a leader led to a range of positive cognitive, affective, and behavioural responses.

**Cognitive outcomes.** Inspirational moments had an impact on participants’ thoughts and beliefs. For instance, participants reported inspiration to influence their motivation (e.g., to train, to return from injury), as one participant said, the inspirational leadership made them, “want to do more to succeed.” Inspiration was also seen to increase participants’ confidence in a range of areas. Participants described how their leaders’ behaviour (e.g., demonstrating belief in the athlete) led to increased confidence in their ability to accomplish further success. This was highlighted by one participant who stated, “It was a really positive moment [coach’s reaction to performance], I actually realised then that I could achieve . . . it was massive.”

Participants reported increased awareness and understanding of their potential as a result of the inspirational moments. For example, one participant described how his leader’s reaction to their performance led him to reassess his athletic potential saying, “suddenly it [the coach’s reaction] made me think, well maybe I can improve a lot and . . . it just made me
suddenly think that there would be more in there somewhere.” Participants also reported increased awareness relating to the way to progress in their sport or the context in which they were inspired, as one participant said, “in that moment [following the coach’s reaction] I realised that I was okay at the physical side, but the technical side needed work.”

The inspirational moments also produced a range of other cognitive responses, such as increased focus, the ability to let go of negative thoughts regarding previous performances, and a positive approach to competition and training. Additionally, there were examples of the participants’ feelings towards their leader being strengthened after the inspirational moment. For instance, when recalling the impact of the inspirational moment, one participant stated, “It just strengthened the bond and the trust.”

**Affective outcomes.** While many participants reported feelings of negativity prior to being inspired, a range of positive affective responses were reported as a result of the inspirational moment. Participants reported feeling excited regarding their potential and the opportunities that may come their way, and happier (in sport and general life) with one participant describing the positive impact of inspiration stating, “I hadn’t had a great race when I went and spoke to [the coach] and it [coach’s reaction] put a smile on my face.” Participants also experienced a range of performance-related positive affective responses (e.g., decreased frustration, increased pride). One participant recalled their feelings following an inspirational interaction with his coach describing, “I performed with a lot more passion and enjoyment after that.” Further, participants reported feelings of relaxation following inspirational interactions with the leader, with one participant commenting, “[the coach] did help me to switch off and just stop thinking about it for the day and relax.”

**Behavioural and performance outcomes.** The participants also perceived that inspirational moments facilitated change in their training behaviours (e.g., dedicated more time, increased effort). One participant described how they challenged themselves more in
training, saying the moment, “made me put what I’d been doing before that time as kind of a marker and then try and do different things in terms of distance and pace to try and improve.” Inspirational moments were also reported to have an impact on performance, with one participant explaining how her leader’s reaction following poor performance facilitated improved performance saying, “the next two days’ racing my performance really improved and went really well for me.” As well as improved performance outcomes, participants reported inspiration to influence other performance-related factors (e.g., increased effort). For instance, one participant discussed the impact of a half-time team talk from her coach, “it made me more persistent, so if I lost the ball I wouldn’t just stand there, I’d chase back.”

Factors that influence athletes’ perceptions of their leader. When discussing their experiences of being inspired participants also mentioned some factors that influenced their perceptions of their leaders. These factors related to leaders’ characteristics and general behaviour, and participants’ feelings towards the leader.

Leader characteristics and general behaviour. Participants identified a range of behaviours and characteristics that may have influenced their perceptions of the leader. For example, when referring to how the leader promoted autonomy within the side, one participant recalled how the coach would, “ask us what we wanted to do before the weekend and then he’d plan sessions around what we wanted to do.” There were also several examples of the leader having high expectations, with one participant commenting on the culture of excellence facilitated by their leader saying, “because of the standards he’d set in training . . . we basically had an international environment in a club set-up.” The participants also highlighted various characteristics common to leaders they identified as inspirational, including aspects relating to the authority, aura, passion, and enthusiasm. For instance, participants perceived their leader to be genuine, one participant commented, “I think it’s just how he [the leader] was totally genuine . . . he wasn’t trying to get something from you . . .
They were genuinely trying to make you better or genuinely leading the way to make, ultimately, the team better."

**Feelings towards the leader.** A number of factors were identified concerning the feelings participants held toward their leader. One aspect highlighted by participants was the respect they had for their leader, with reasons for such respect including the leader’s reputation and conduct. For example, one participant highlighted how the whole team, “had full respect for [the leader] because they knew what a competitor he was.” Trust in competence and on a personal level was seen to play an important role in the interactions between participants and leaders. Indeed, one participant referred to the trust she had in her coach’s training structure:

Sometimes I’ll be like “oh, I can’t do that” . . . I panic that I’m going to push myself too hard, but I go and do it and I’m alright. So, I do trust the way that he sets out the timetable as well.

**Discussion**

The purpose of Study 2 was to understand how leaders inspire athletes in sport. Firstly, Study 2 explored the leadership behaviours that inspire athletes in sport. There appears to be some overlap between our findings and previous leadership research and theory. For instance, a key behaviour within transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1985) is inspirational motivation, where leaders inspire followers by articulating a compelling vision of the future. In support of this, participants in this study described being inspired when leaders outlined their future potential. However, in addition to this, the findings indicated that leaders inspired athletes by demonstrating other behaviours including showing athletes the way forward in difficult circumstances, providing a positive example to follow, providing support, cultivating opportunities to be inspired, and through emotional reactions to athletes’ accomplishments.
Secondly, this study aimed to understand the context in which inspiration occurs. This builds on previous research (e.g., Searle & Hanrahan, 2011) by identifying the situations in which leaders inspire followers. Searle and Hanrahan posited that leaders could pick the “opportune” moment to inspire followers, without providing details of the contexts in which leaders had inspired followers. Within the present study inspirational leader behaviour was preceded by both negative and positive situations accompanied by a range of, mainly negative, cognitions and emotions. These findings are consistent with previous research that has found inspiration to occur on the same day as positive experiences and following moments of difficulty, frustration, and struggle (Hart, 1998; Thrash & Elliot, 2003). Thirdly, this study examined consequences of inspiring leadership. Consistent with the findings of Study 1, inspiration was seen to impact on participants’ awareness of capabilities, confidence, motivation, and behaviour.

Thirdly, this study examined the consequences of inspirational leadership. As with Study 1 inspiration was posed to result in a positive impact on cognitions, affect and behaviour. However, Study 2 did hint at potential temporal differences in relation to these consequences. The findings indicate that inspiration might have both short-term (e.g., having an impact on a team’s performance in the second half of a match) and long-term (e.g., raising an athlete’s perceptions of what they may be capable of in the long-term) impacts on athlete cognitions and behaviour. This suggests that the duration of the impact may depend upon the context and message delivered by an inspiring stimulus. For example, a team-talk delivered at half time may impact team performance in the second half of a game, whereas a discussion which raises an athlete’s awareness of their long-term potential may produce a more enduring change in behaviour in order to achieve a long-term goal.

Although not a predetermined aim of this study, participants also outlined a range of factors that influenced their perceptions of leaders, which may influence the likelihood of
leaders being seen as a source of inspiration. For instance, the participants frequently mentioned the reputation of the leader. Research has shown positive reputation information results in leaders having a stronger influence on their athletes (e.g., Manley, Greenlees, Smith, Batten, & Birch, 2014). Such information might lead to an athlete having a greater respect for their coach or developing stronger other efficacy beliefs (e.g., Jackson, Knapp, & Beauchamp, 2009) that make it more likely for an athlete to be inspired.

**General Discussion and Conclusions**

The two studies conducted are the first to explicitly explore athletes’ experiences of inspiration in sport. Findings indicate that inspiration is a powerful experience that can be evoked and experienced in sport, and can subsequently lead to a range of positive individual- and group-related outcomes. Consequently, these results contribute to the body of literature on inspiration in three main ways by, (a) building upon Thrash and Elliot’s (2003) previous conceptualization of inspiration and extending it to the context of sport; (b) identifying potential sources of inspiration in sport, and; (c) outlining a range of individual- and group-related consequences of being inspired.

The overall findings support Thrash and Elliot’s (2003, 2004) conceptualization of inspiration and extend it to the context of sport. A central tenet of the conceptualization is that inspiration results from an “epistemic event in which new or better possibilities are revealed by, or revealed in an evocative stimulus object” (Thrash & Elliot, 2004, p. 959). Such an explanation aligns with ideas shared in our studies, which characterized inspiration in sport as intense feelings of emotion and motivation, an appreciation of something new, a change in cognitions, and a desire to act upon these feelings. The findings also support the tripartite conceptualization of inspiration (Thrash & Elliot, 2003) because, in all the inspirational moments described by the athletes, inspiration was *evoked* by an external source (e.g., a leader), *transcended* their initial concerns (e.g., moving from a negative to positive
state) and increased their awareness of possibilities, and influenced motivation as athletes’
behaviour was energized and directed (e.g., increased effort to reach potential).
Our findings also revealed inspiration resulted in a change of athletes’ cognitive and
affective states (e.g., from negative to positive) by influencing their perception or awareness
of their capabilities. This finding may be explained by self-regulation theory (cf. Carver &
Scheier, 1982), which posits that an individual will compare their perception of their present
(actual-) state against where they wish to be (ideal-self). If the actual-self does not match the
ideal-self, they will change their behaviour in order to reduce this discrepancy (providing
they have confidence in their ability and the knowledge to do so). In relation to our findings,
it appears that leaders are able to change athletes’ perceptions of their capability and,
subsequently, increase athletes’ expectancy of reducing this discrepancy, which subsequently
inspires them to strive towards their ideal- or ought-selves. Within the present study,
examples include the captain demonstrating exceptional effort that raises the teams’
awareness of what they should be doing (ought-selves) and the coach telling an athlete that
they have the potential to reach the elite-level (ideal-selves). In particular, it appears from our
findings that the ability to change athletes’ perspectives is particularly salient when athletes
are feeling negative or at an early stage of their careers (where they perhaps do not have an
understanding of their own capability relative to others). Thus, leaders provided them with
the information required to counter the situation, which inspired them to behave in a manner
consistent with the information provided and subsequently lead to improved performance.
One question which arises from this suggestion regards the potential for inspiration to have a
negative impact on athletes. Specifically, when inspired, if athletes’ perceptions of their
capabilities are raised significantly but their performances do not meet these expectations
could this have a detrimental impact on the athlete and their development.
Considering the above point and the findings of Study 1, leaders appear to have the greatest potential to inspire athletes. Thus, our findings also make a unique contribution to the leadership literature by identifying a range of inspiring leader behaviours (e.g., demonstrations of belief, setting an example, showing the way forward). Interestingly, these behaviours appear to relate to the three forms of transmission (replication, actualization, expression) that explain the way intrinsic qualities presented by a stimulus inspires an individual to extend these qualities to a self-relevant object (cf. Thrash, Moldovan, Fuller, & Dombrowski, 2014). To explain, setting an example relates to replication which refers to how one is inspired by the qualities of a pre-existing object (e.g., dedication to self-improvement displayed by a leader) in the environment and seeks to reproduce these qualities in a new object (e.g., showing greater dedication to own training and development). Demonstrating belief appears to overlap with actualization, where appreciation of a compelling seminal idea enters awareness during a moment of insight (e.g., a leader outlining an athlete’s potential) and as such an individual is energized (e.g., the athlete has greater confidence and is motivated to work towards this potential) by the possibility of bringing the idea into fruition. Finally, showing the way forward has links with expression, whereby transmission is facilitated by a compelling idea that is already well formed when it enters awareness (e.g., specific technical advice provided in order to counter a difficult situation) and is acted upon immediately (e.g., the team have an understanding of how to deal with the situation and adapt their behaviour accordingly).

Limitations and Future Research

The current studies provide an in-depth examination of the ways in which athletes are inspired in sport and subsequently offer a number of future research avenues. However, this research is not without its limitations. These include the use of single point of contact data collection methods and the retrospective nature of recall. However, given that inspiration is
not something that occurs all the time it may be difficult to study in situ. Further, as the study was looking to describe athletes’ experiences of being inspired, it was beyond the scope of the research to examine the reasons why the sources identified were inspirational. In addition, the present study only considered positive impacts of being inspired\(^2\). However, it is conceivable that there may be negative consequences of being inspired and future research could examine more fully the consequences of being inspired. Research could also look to examine potential differences regarding the experiences of inspiration of athletes across standards to see whether contextual factors (e.g., contact time with a leader) may have an impact on the frequency and intensity of inspiration.

Although research could look to examine the inspirational potential of personal performances and thoughts, and role models in greater depth, considering the findings and the impact leaders have on athletes, future research should look to understand the factors that influence the potential of leaders to inspire athletes. Indeed, a recent critique of leadership literature suggested that in order to further understanding, researchers should look to investigate specific aspects of leadership (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). For example, the words ‘inspire’ and ‘inspiration’ are often used in definitions, behavioural components, or described as consequences within theories of leadership. However, very little research has examined the ways in which leaders act and behave in order to inspire followers. While the present research addresses this by directly examining inspirational leader behaviour in sport further research should examine more fully the processes through which leaders impact on followers. For instance, qualitative methods should be used that enable us to examine the dynamic process of leadership in order to produce grounded theories (Shamir, 2011). Such research would allow us to understand the process as a whole (e.g., how leaders are able to

\(^2\) We asked participants to discuss instances where they were inspired without providing them with information or suggestion that this required them to recall instances that were positive. Thus, based upon our findings, it appears that implicitly people perceive inspiration as a positive experience.
develop an inspiring influence over time), has the potential to inform leadership development programs, and could drive future research examining inspirational leadership.

Conclusions

Overall, the present findings suggest that the experience of inspiration can be evoked in sport and lead to a range of positive outcomes. In turn, as these were the first studies to explicitly explore inspiration in the context of sport, the results offer a promising foundation from which future research can build in order to understand this complex process. In particular, such research has the potential to enhance leadership practice and subsequently improve athletes’ experiences and performance in sport.
ATHLETES’ EXPERIENCES OF BEING INSPIRED IN SPORT

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ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

ATHLETES’ EXPERIENCES OF BEING INSPIRED IN SPORT


ACTIONS OF BEING INSPIRED IN SPORT


Highlights:

- Two studies examining inspiration in sport.
- Inspiration can be evoked by external sources in sport.
- Leaders are a major source of inspiration for athletes.
- Inspiration can change athletes’ awareness of their capabilities.
- Inspiration can influence confidence, motivation and behaviour.