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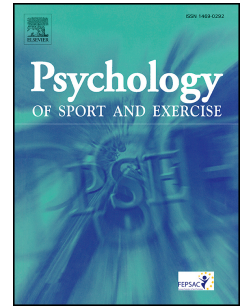
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"You really could be something quite special": A qualitative exploration of athletes' experiences of being inspired in sport

Sean Figgins, Matthew Smith, Christopher Sellars, Iain Greenlees, Camilla Knight



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4 **"You really could be something quite special": A qualitative exploration of athletes'**
5 **experiences of being inspired in sport.**
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7 Date of Submission: November 8, 2015
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9 Sean Figgins ^{a*}, Matthew Smith ^a, Christopher Sellars ^b, Iain Greenlees ^a, Camilla Knight ^c

10 ^aUniversity of Chichester, ^b University of Wolverhampton, ^c Swansea University
11

12 Author Note

13 Sean Figgins, Matthew Smith, and Iain Greenlees are with the Department of Sport and
14 Exercise Sciences, University of Chichester, Bishop Otter Campus, College Lane, Chichester,
15 PO19 6PE; Christopher Sellars is with the Institute of Sport, University of Wolverhampton,
16 Wulfrana Street, Wolverhampton, WV1 1LY; Camilla Knight is with the Applied Sports,
17 Technology, Exercise, and Medicine Research Centre, Swansea University, Bay Campus,
18 Fabian Way, Swansea, SA1 8EN.
19

20 * Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Sean Figgins, Department of
21 Sport and Exercise Sciences, University of Chichester, Bishop Otter Campus, College Lane,
22 Chichester, PO18 6PE.

23 Email: sfiggins@chi.ac.uk; Telephone: (+44) 1243 816 345.

4 experiences of being inspired.

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12 inspiration in sport. In Study 1, we explored (a) what inspires athletes in sport, and (b) the
13 consequences of being inspired. The aims of Study 2 were to explore (a) the contexts in
14 which leaders inspired athletes, (b) leader behaviours and actions that inspire athletes, and (c)
15 the consequences of being inspired by leaders.

16 **Design:** Two qualitative descriptive studies were conducted in order to explore athletes'
17 experiences of being inspired.

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

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

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

31

32 **Key Words:** Inspiration, awareness, leadership, qualitative description, evocation, role
33 models.

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

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

53 Initially, Thrash and Elliot (2003) reviewed the diverse literatures on inspiration (e.g.,
54 religious, creative, and interpersonal) and proposed a *tripartite conceptualization*, consisting
55 of: (a) *evocation*, suggesting that the occurrence of inspiration is evoked spontaneously by
56 something or someone outside of the self; (b) *transcendence*, when an individual gains
57 awareness of greater possibilities for themselves or others; and (c) *approach motivation*,
58 which involves the energisation or direction of behaviour to realise or achieve these

61 evocation and transcendence—which refers to being awoken to the perceived intrinsic value
62 of an external stimulus, and being inspired *to*—involving approach motivation—which refers
63 to the motivation to actualize or extend the inspiring qualities exemplified in the evocative
64 object. Thrash, Maruskin, et al. (2010) extended Thrash and Elliot’s (2003) conceptualization
65 by examining the *transmission model*, which contends that inspiration mediates the
66 transmission of the values exemplified by an evocative stimulus into some form of tangible
67 action. That is, intrinsically valued qualities of a stimulus evoke inspiration, which,
68 subsequently, compels an individual to pursue a newfound goal.

69 Research has also begun to examine the correlates and consequences of inspiration.
70 Within social psychology, researchers have shown inspiration to be positively associated with
71 a range of positive outcomes including self-determination and work-mastery motivation
72 (Thrash & Elliot, 2003), well-being (Thrash, Elliot, et al., 2010), goal progress (Milyavskaya,
73 Ianakieva, Foxen-Craft, Colantuoni, & Koestner, 2012), and productivity (Thrash & Elliot,
74 2004). Given such benefits in contexts where individuals’ perceive there to be high intrinsic
75 value (e.g., potential for self-growth), it is surprising that limited research attention has been
76 paid to inspiration in sport, where individuals often compete for intrinsic reasons (Ryan &
77 Deci, 2007). Indeed, only two studies have examined inspiration in sport. Gonzalez, Metzler,
78 and Newton (2011) used edited video clips to examine the influence of a coach’s team talk on
79 athletes’ levels of inspiration. Athletes who watched the inspirational video clip reported
80 higher feelings of inspiration, dominance, and motivation. In addition, Gucciardi, Jackson,
81 Hanton, and Reid (2015) found that tennis players who experienced inspiration more
82 frequently were more likely to exhibit mentally tough behaviours. Taken together these
83 findings indicate that inspiration may be evoked in sport and be associated with advantageous

86 sport psychologists.

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

95 **Methodology**

96 As the aim of the two studies was to produce a descriptive summary of athletes'
97 experiences of being inspired in sport (e.g., the sources and consequence of being inspired),
98 the research took a qualitative description approach. A qualitative description approach looks
99 to understand "the *who*, *what*, and *where* of events or experiences" (Sandelowski, 2000, p.
100 338). This approach has been successfully utilized in previous sport psychology research
101 when exploring novel research areas (e.g., coaching transitions; Knight, Rodgers, Reade,
102 Mrak, & Hall, 2015). Thus, given that little sport psychology research has examined
103 inspiration, this approach was deemed appropriate to fulfil the aims of this research.
104 Qualitative descriptive research is not limited to a specific philosophical or methodological
105 framework other than drawing from the general principles of naturalistic enquiry
106 (Sandelowski, 2000). However, the design and analysis of the research were consistent with
107 the perspective of critical realism that underpinned these studies. Critical realism proposes
108 that through research it is possible to identify patterns that underpin social phenomena, that

111 of interaction between the knowledge and experiences of the participants and the researchers.

112 **Study 1**

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

116 **Method**

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

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

129 Following the receipt of informed consent, participants were asked to write about a
130 situation in which they were inspired in sport¹. As this was the first study to explicitly explore
131 the concept of inspiration in a sporting context, written accounts were selected as the data
132 collection method because they provide rich qualitative data (Sparkes & Smith, 2013), and

135 guided by two main questions. The first question asked participants to describe what being
136 inspired in sport meant to them. The purpose of this question was to encourage participants to
137 consider what inspiration feels like in order to facilitate easier recall of a moment in which
138 they were inspired. The second question asked participants to describe a time when they had
139 been inspired in sport, which allowed us to examine sources and consequences of inspiration.

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

153 **Methodological Rigor.** Given the variety of methodologies and subsequent purposes
154 of qualitative research, it is difficult to assess all qualitative research against the same strict
155 criteria. Rather qualitative research should be judged against criteria that align with the
156 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

159 ensure that the questions asked were appropriate for the study and would provide rich data
160 (Tracy, 2010). The research team reviewed the pilot work to ensure the data obtained would
161 meet the intended aims of the research and produce results that described the phenomenon in
162 question. The first author also wrote a range of memos throughout data collection and
163 analysis in order to keep a clear and detailed account of the decisions made throughout the
164 data analysis (Cresswell & Miller, 2000). Further, the first author engaged with critical
165 friends who encouraged reflection upon and questioned the emerging interpretations of the
166 data. Of particular importance to these processes was that the analysis was arranged in a
167 manner appropriate for the data (i.e., a descriptive summary of participants' experiences).

168 **Results**

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

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

demonstrated that, while inspiration holds many shades of meaning, lay conceptualizations of the construct are clear and consistent (Thrash & Elliot, 2003).

183 experiences of inspiration were also associated with a noticeable change of mental state,
184 attitude, or behaviour. This was highlighted by one participant who referred to inspiration as,
185 “something that changes your mentality, a situation, or group.” The feeling of inspiration was
186 proposed to be something that takes hold and triggers action instantaneously, as one
187 participant wrote, “[inspiration is] seeing something that you see to be extraordinary,
188 sparking you into life.”

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

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

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

204 Participants were also inspired by their thoughts regarding their upcoming performances. For
205 example, one participant described being inspired by, “the thought that I could win . . . The

208 letting go of negative thoughts and remembering the effort expended previously inspired him.
209 I got the ‘fuck it’ factor. I said to myself “I have worked too hard to just give up. Next
210 time I get the opportunity I will get in the battle and show people I belong.” I was
211 aggressive and nothing was going to stop me. When I did bowl things worked for me
212 and it went very well.

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

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

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

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

228 Participants were also inspired by their perceptions of role models’ confidence in
229 themselves, as one participant said, “It was Phelps’ belief in himself; that he could achieve
230 his goal of 8 gold’s. There were some close calls where he nearly missed out, like the 100

233 The moment they won and the whole team celebrated together inspired me to improve my
234 game, make the team and have that experience myself.”

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

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

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

253 Individual talks with leaders also evoked inspiration. For example, one participant
254 recalled being spoken to by a national coach, “[The] England coach was watching me fight.
255 He pulled me to one side [during the fight] and said that he believed I was better than I knew,

258 commented that, [the captain] gave me a few pointers on how to improve in the game . . .
259 applying the new marking and feeling relaxed about it [the mistake] helped us to win.”

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

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

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

274 Finally, leaders inspired athletes by being role models and demonstrating high levels
275 of competency. As one participant recalled, he was inspired by the captain's effort and
276 persistence during competition because, “our captain never gave up when chasing the
277 opposition. [The captain] was very positive throughout and fully gave 110%.” Another
278 participant wrote, “We were representing East at nationals and lost against Wales. I was
279 feeling very defeated and [my teammate] motivated me to improve my performance . . . She
280 made every tackle, every run, and I wanted to be like that.”

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

298 Athletes in team sports also recalled how inspiration resulted in improved team
299 functioning including improved perceptions of team cohesion and a heightened sense of
300 belonging within a team. For instance, one participant reported identifying more with his
301 team following a speech by a senior player stating, “I have never felt more part of a team
302 before.” Episodes of inspiration also facilitated increased levels of trust within a team with
303 one participant writing, “[the coach] then listed every player’s qualities which allowed me
304 and my teammates to trust each other.”

307 recalled being, relieved, excited, and happy after being inspired. Participants also described
308 increased pride, enjoyment, and enthusiasm for their sport following an episode of
309 inspiration. This was alluded to by one participant who described the impact of watching a
310 role model perform, writing, “It [seeing the role model perform] showed me that any situation
311 can be enjoyable . . . it has had a long-term impact as I have always had this enthusiasm since
312 then in any games I have played.” Participants indicated that being inspired gave them a more
313 positive outlook on their own performances and could lead to a positive reappraisal of the
314 situation. For example, one participant described the influence of inspiration on their feelings
315 following a loss in an important cup-final, “We thought we could win; we had very little
316 doubt. We played well and fought for each other for the full 90 minutes, but we lost.
317 However, although we lost we were still proud of our performance.”

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

323 ***Behaviour and performance.*** In the main, participants experienced a range of
324 positive outcomes on their physical behaviour (e.g., increased effort, enhanced skill-level) as
325 a by-product of experiencing inspiration. Participants described feeling more energised and
326 aroused when inspired. For instance, one participant described their team’s response to a
327 team-talk from their coach stating, “All of us became more highly aroused and positive
328 before we went out for the second half.” Being inspired led to participants expending greater
329 effort in training and competition (e.g., to reach a new goal), as one participant wrote:

333 Ultimately, participants attributed improved performance to the experience of
334 inspiration. For example, one participant described how his coach's inspirational half-time
335 team-talk proved the catalyst for improved performance, "the performance after the half-time
336 talk was much better and we won 2-1." The effects of inspiration on performance were not
337 just limited to the specific context (e.g., current game) in which an individual or team were
338 inspired with one participant commenting that their manager's intervention, "inspired us and
339 our performances for the rest of the season."

340 **Discussion**

341 The purpose of this study was to explore athletes' experiences of being inspired in
342 sport. Firstly, we aimed to explore and understand what inspiration means to athletes.
343 Consistent with many of the propositions outlined in previous literature (cf. Thrash,
344 Moldovan, Oleynick, et al., 2014), participants perceived inspiration to be a highly emotive
345 and exciting state which has the power to alter perceptions of their or their team's capabilities
346 (in terms of potential or a specific situation) and direct their focus and effort towards a target.

347 Secondly, we aimed to explore the sources of inspiration, with athletes identifying
348 three major sources of inspiration. Athletes were inspired by their own unexpected successful
349 performances and the thought of potential success. These findings provide support for Thrash
350 and Elliot's (2003) contention that individuals are inspired when they gain awareness of new
351 or better possibilities. To explain, when an athlete produces a performance that exceeds their
352 perception of their capabilities they may be inspired as it presents an image of what they may
353 be capable of in the future. Participants were also inspired by the perceived positive
354 characteristics, dedication, and performances of other athletes competing at a higher level.

357 perceptions of their own potential (Thrash, Elliot, et al., 2010). The findings also support the
358 suggestion that leaders can have an inspiring influence on followers (e.g., Searle & Hanrahan,
359 2011). Indeed, the findings of the current study show leadership to be the major source of
360 inspiration for athletes in a sporting context. Specifically, participants reported being inspired
361 by verbal (e.g., team-talks) and nonverbal (e.g., setting a positive example) communication
362 and behaviour. These findings further our understanding of inspiration in the leadership
363 context by indicating that, in addition to providing a compelling vision of the future (e.g.,
364 Searle & Hanrahan, 2011), other behaviours may also be inspiring (e.g., setting an example
365 and expecting high standards of discipline).

366 As well as identifying potential sources of inspiration, the present study also
367 examined the consequences of being inspired. Previous research has found inspiration to
368 correlate with self-determined motivation and approach motivation (Thrash & Elliot, 2003,
369 2004), efficiency and productivity (Thrash, Maruskin, et al., 2010), goal progress
370 (Milyavskaya et al., 2012), energy (Hart, 1998), mental toughness (Gucciardi et al., 2015),
371 and positive affect (Thrash, Elliot, et al., 2010). The present study supports these findings but
372 also extends our understanding of the potential consequences of inspiration in the sporting
373 context. Indeed, as well as experiencing a range of positive cognitive, affective, and
374 behavioural outcomes, participants reported that inspiration may enhance group functioning,
375 specifically team-bond and identification. These findings provide some support for the
376 findings of previous research which suggests that leadership can improve cohesion (Smith,
377 Arthur, Hardy, Callow, & Williams, 2013) and impact upon a team's social identity (Slater,
378 Barker, Coffee, & Jones, 2014). Given that inspiration may lead to these important outcomes,
379 future research should take a more detailed look at how these are facilitated by inspiration.

382 coaches, captains, performance directors, and senior players), enhancing the inspirational
383 potential of leaders may hold numerous benefits for individuals and groups. However, little is
384 known regarding the ways in which leaders inspire followers (Frese, Beimeel, & Schoenborn,
385 2003). The findings of this study further knowledge of this area, but the design of this study
386 did not allow for in-depth exploration of *how* leaders inspired athletes. Further research to
387 explore what leaders do to inspire athletes was therefore deemed necessary.

388 **Study 2**

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

393 **Method**

394 **Participants.** Participants were 17 athletes (13 male, 4 female), aged between 18 and
395 38 years ($M = 27.12$, $SD = 7.07$) with between 5 and 30 years' sport experience ($M = 14.53$,
396 $SD = 8.47$). These participants had not taken part in study 1. Participants had competed at
397 semi-professional, professional, national or international standard in a range of sports
398 including hockey, athletics, soccer, sailing, triathlon, and basketball. To be eligible for the
399 study, participants had to: (a) have experienced leadership that had inspired them, and (b) be
400 willing to openly share thoughts, opinions, and experiences in an interview. These sampling
401 criteria were used to ensure that participants would be information-rich cases who would be
402 able to provide detailed information pertaining to the research aims.

403 **Procedure.** Prior to commencement of the main study, a pilot interview was
404 conducted with one participant in order to evaluate and refine the content and clarity of the

407 example, to allow a more free-flowing interview, the amount of direct questions was reduced.
408 Instead, in the initial part of the interview, participants were asked to recall situations in
409 which the leader inspired them, and these examples were recorded and then used as a
410 stimulus to structure the rest of the interview.

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

419 The interview began with introductory questions (e.g., tell us about your major
420 achievements and highlights of your career in your sport), which aimed to gain an
421 understanding of the participant's background and aid the development of rapport between
422 the interviewer and participant. Participants were then asked to talk generally about
423 inspirational leaders they had experienced in their career. Next, participants were asked to
424 identify moments in which leaders had inspired them; explaining what happened leading up
425 to these moments, what happened in the moments themselves, and the impacts of these
426 inspirational moments. All interviews were conducted face-to-face, and lasted between 45
427 and 120 minutes ($M = 82.47$, $SD = 24.91$). Interviews were recorded using a digital recorder
428 and transcribed verbatim.

431 transcripts were read and re-read to ensure familiarity with the data and identify initial codes.
432 The codes were then refined and sorted into broad themes relating to the inspirational
433 moment, the consequences of being inspired, and factors that influence athletes' perceptions
434 of their leader. Following this, key themes were identified that best represented the essence of
435 each candidate theme.

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

448 **Results**

449 In the following sections the categories that depict the participants' experiences of
450 inspirational leadership are presented. First, details surrounding inspirational moments
451 experienced by the participants are reported. Second, consequences of inspirational
452 leadership are presented, and finally, factors that influence athletes' perceptions of their
453 leader are outlined.

456 and inspiration was evoked by different leadership behaviours and actions. Thus, this section
457 is divided into two parts outlining (a) the context prior to inspiration, and (b) the leader
458 actions which inspired the participants.

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

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

475 I was like ‘I’m not going to be able to do it’. It was like fifty-eight miles and fifty-
476 eight hills, massive horrible hills . . . I was really, really nervous, thinking “there’s no
477 way I can do this. I’m going to fail.”

480 they're just going to smash us. Prior to the inspirational moments discussed, participants
481 also noted feeling a range of (mainly negative) emotions (e.g., frustration, worry). For
482 instance, following poor performance one athlete described feeling, "a bit stressed and angry
483 and a bit depressed."

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

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

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

500 [The coach] had a lot of contacts and was able to bring people at different levels in to
501 show us what we had to do to get to that next level . . . we had an ex-Olympian come

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

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

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

521 Participants also discussed being inspired by behaviours that they perceived to
522 demonstrated belief. This was evidenced by one participant's perception of their coach
523 turning up to train them individually despite adverse weather conditions, "The belief
524 [inspired me], that he [the coach] had belief in me. That he was willing to come down in the
525 snow to train just me, I must have had potential." Similarly, leaders attending competitions to
526 support participants was perceived as demonstrations of belief. As one participant described:

529 believed in me, I knew he wanted to work with me and get the best out of me.

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

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

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

540 **Cognitive outcomes.** Inspirational moments had an impact on participants' thoughts
541 and beliefs. For instance, participants reported inspiration to influence their motivation (e.g.,
542 to train, to return from injury), as one participant said, the inspirational leadership made them,
543 "want to do more to succeed." Inspiration was also seen to increase participants' confidence
544 in a range of areas. Participants described how their leaders' behaviour (e.g., demonstrating
545 belief in the athlete) led to increased confidence in their ability to accomplish further success.
546 This was highlighted by one participant who stated, "It was a really positive moment [coach's
547 reaction to performance], I actually realised then that I could achieve . . . it was massive."
548 Participants reported increased awareness and understanding of their potential as a result of
549 the inspirational moments. For example, one participant described how his leader's reaction
550 to their performance led him to reassess his athletic potential saying, "suddenly it [the
551 coach's reaction] made me think, well maybe I can improve a lot and . . . it just made me

554 were inspired, as one participant said, “In that moment [following the coach’s reaction] I
555 realised that I was okay at the physical side, but the technical side needed work.”

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

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

574 *Behavioural and performance outcomes.* The participants also perceived that
575 inspirational moments facilitated change in their training behaviours (e.g., dedicated more
576 time, increased effort). One participant described how they challenged themselves more in

579 inspirational moments were also reported to have an impact on performance, with one
580 participant explaining how her leader's reaction following poor performance facilitated
581 improved performance saying, "the next two days' racing my performance really improved
582 and went really well for me." As well as improved performance outcomes, participants
583 reported inspiration to influence other performance-related factors (e.g., increased effort). For
584 instance, one participant discussed the impact of a half-time team talk from her coach, "it
585 made me more persistent, so if I lost the ball I wouldn't just stand there, I'd chase back."

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

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

604 feelings participants held toward their leader. One aspect highlighted by participants was the
605 respect they had for their leader, with reasons for such respect including the leader's
606 reputation and conduct. For example, one participant highlighted how the whole team, "had
607 full respect for [the leader] because they knew what a competitor he was." Trust in
608 competence and on a personal level was seen to play an important role in the interactions
609 between participants and leaders. Indeed, one participant referred to the trust she had in her
610 coach's training structure:

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

615 **Discussion**

616 The purpose of Study 2 was to understand how leaders inspire athletes in sport.
617 Firstly, Study 2 explored the leadership behaviours that inspire athletes in sport. There
618 appears to be some overlap between our findings and previous leadership research and
619 theory. For instance, a key behaviour within transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1985)
620 is inspirational motivation, where leaders inspire followers by articulating a compelling
621 vision of the future. In support of this, participants in this study described being inspired
622 when leaders outlined their future potential. However, in addition to this, the findings
623 indicated that leaders inspired athletes by demonstrating other behaviours including showing
624 athletes the way forward in difficult circumstances, providing a positive example to follow,
625 providing support, cultivating opportunities to be inspired, and through emotional reactions to
626 athletes' accomplishments.

629 which leaders inspire followers. Searle and Hanrahan posited that leaders could pick the
630 “opportune” moment to inspire followers, without providing details of the contexts in which
631 leaders had inspired followers. Within the present study inspirational leader behaviour was
632 preceded by both negative and positive situations accompanied by a range of, mainly
633 negative, cognitions and emotions. These findings are consistent with previous research that
634 has found inspiration to occur on the same day as positive experiences and following
635 moments of difficulty, frustration, and struggle (Hart, 1998; Thrash & Elliot, 2003). Thirdly,
636 this study examined consequences of inspiring leadership. Consistent with the findings of
637 Study 1, inspiration was seen to impact on participants’ awareness of capabilities, confidence,
638 motivation, and behaviour.

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

650 Although not a predetermined aim of this study, participants also outlined a range of
651 factors that influenced their perceptions of leaders, which may influence the likelihood of

654 results in leaders having a stronger influence on their athletes (e.g., Manley, Greenlees,
655 Smith, Batten, & Birch, 2014). Such information might lead to an athlete having a greater
656 respect for their coach or developing stronger other efficacy beliefs (e.g., Jackson, Knapp, &
657 Beauchamp, 2009) that make it more likely for an athlete to be inspired.

658 **General Discussion and Conclusions**

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

667 The overall findings support Thrash and Elliot's (2003, 2004) conceptualization of
668 inspiration and extend it to the context of sport. A central tenet of the conceptualization is
669 that inspiration results from an "epistemic event in which new or better possibilities are
670 revealed by, or revealed in an evocative stimulus object" (Thrash & Elliot, 2004, p. 959).
671 Such an explanation aligns with ideas shared in our studies, which characterized inspiration
672 in sport as intense feelings of emotion and motivation, an appreciation of something new, a
673 change in cognitions, and a desire to act upon these feelings. The findings also support the
674 tripartite conceptualization of inspiration (Thrash & Elliot, 2003) because, in all the
675 inspirational moments described by the athletes, inspiration was *evoked* by an external source
676 (e.g., a leader), *transcended* their initial concerns (e.g., moving from a negative to positive

679 Our findings also revealed inspiration resulted in a change of athletes' cognitive and
680 affective states (e.g., from negative to positive) by influencing their perception or awareness
681 of their capabilities. This finding may be explained by self-regulation theory (cf. Carver &
682 Scheier, 1982), which posits that an individual will compare their perception of their present
683 (actual-) state against where they wish to be (ideal-self). If the actual-self does not match the
684 ideal-self, they will change their behaviour in order to reduce this discrepancy (providing
685 they have confidence in their ability and the knowledge to do so). In relation to our findings,
686 it appears that leaders are able to change athletes' perceptions of their capability and,
687 subsequently, increase athletes' expectancy of reducing this discrepancy, which subsequently
688 inspires them to strive towards their ideal- or ought-selves. Within the present study,
689 examples include the captain demonstrating exceptional effort that raises the teams'
690 awareness of what they should be doing (ought-selves) and the coach telling an athlete that
691 they have the potential to reach the elite-level (ideal-selves). In particular, it appears from our
692 findings that the ability to change athletes' perspectives is particularly salient when athletes
693 are feeling negative or at an early stage of their careers (where they perhaps do not have an
694 understanding of their own capability relative to others). Thus, leaders provided them with
695 the information required to counter the situation, which inspired them to behave in a manner
696 consistent with the information provided and subsequently lead to improved performance.
697 One question which arises from this suggestion regards the potential for inspiration to have a
698 negative impact on athletes. Specifically, when inspired, if athletes' perceptions of their
699 capabilities are raised significantly but their performances do not meet these expectations
700 could this have a detrimental impact on the athlete and their development.

703 leadership literature by identifying a range of inspiring leader behaviours (e.g.,
704 demonstrations of belief, setting an example, showing the way forward). Interestingly, these
705 behaviours appear to relate to the three forms of transmission (replication, actualization,
706 expression) that explain the way intrinsic qualities presented by a stimulus inspires an
707 individual to extend these qualities to a self-relevant object (cf. Thrash, Moldovan, Fuller, &
708 Dombrowski, 2014). To explain, setting an example relates to *replication* which refers to how
709 one is inspired by the qualities of a pre-existing object (e.g., dedication to self-improvement
710 displayed by a leader) in the environment and seeks to reproduce these qualities in a new
711 object (e.g., showing greater dedication to own training and development). Demonstrating
712 belief appears to overlap with *actualization*, where appreciation of a compelling seminal idea
713 enters awareness during a moment of insight (e.g., a leader outlining an athlete's potential)
714 and as such an individual is energized (e.g., the athlete has greater confidence and is
715 motivated to work towards this potential) by the possibility of bringing the idea into fruition.
716 Finally, showing the way forward has links with *expression*, whereby transmission is
717 facilitated by a compelling idea that is already well formed when it enters awareness (e.g.,
718 specific technical advice provided in order to counter a difficult situation) and is acted upon
719 immediately (e.g., the team have an understanding of how to deal with the situation and adapt
720 their behaviour accordingly).

721 **Limitations and Future Research**

722 The current studies provide an in-depth examination of the ways in which athletes are
723 inspired in sport and subsequently offer a number of future research avenues. However, this
724 research is not without its limitations. These include the use of single point of contact data
725 collection methods and the retrospective nature of recall. However, given that inspiration is

728 the research to examine the reasons why the sources identified were inspirational. In addition,
729 the present study only considered positive impacts of being inspired². However, it is
730 conceivable that there may be negative consequences of being inspired and future research
731 could examine more fully the consequences of being inspired. Research could also look to
732 examine potential differences regarding the experiences of inspiration of athletes across
733 standards to see whether contextual factors (e.g., contact time with a leader) may have an
734 impact on the frequency and intensity of inspiration.

735 Although research could look to examine the inspirational potential of personal
736 performances and thoughts, and role models in greater depth, considering the findings and the
737 impact leaders have on athletes, future research should look to understand the factors that
738 influence the potential of leaders to inspire athletes. Indeed, a recent critique of leadership
739 literature suggested that in order to further understanding, researchers should look to
740 investigate specific aspects of leadership (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). For example, the
741 words ‘inspire’ and ‘inspiration’ are often used in definitions, behavioural components, or
742 described as consequences within theories of leadership. However, very little research has
743 examined the ways in which leaders act and behave in order to inspire followers. While the
744 present research addresses this by directly examining inspirational leader behaviour in sport
745 further research should examine more fully the processes through which leaders impact on
746 followers. For instance, qualitative methods should be used that enable us to examine the
747 dynamic *process* of leadership in order to produce grounded theories (Shamir, 2011). Such
748 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.

752 Overall, the present findings suggest that the experience of inspiration can be evoked
753 in sport and lead to a range of positive outcomes. In turn, as these were the first studies to
754 explicitly explore inspiration in the context of sport, the results offer a promising foundation
755 from which future research can build in order to understand this complex process. In
756 particular, such research has the potential to enhance leadership practice and subsequently
757 improve athletes' experiences and performance in sport.

ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

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- 3 • Inspiration can be evoked by external sources in sport.
- 4 • Leaders are a major source of inspiration for athletes.
- 5 • Inspiration can change athletes' awareness of their capabilities.
- 6 • Inspiration can influence confidence, motivation and behaviour.

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