

## Competitive Leadership Styles in Professional Handball: Evidence from the Iraqi Premier League

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### Abstract

**Background.** Leadership in competitive sport represents a multidimensional construct integrating tactical decision-making, emotional regulation, and communication precision. Despite growing international research on coaching leadership, empirical evidence from Middle Eastern professional handball remains limited

**Objectives.** This study aimed to identify competitive leadership styles adopted by coaches from the perspective of players in the Iraqi Handball Premier League (2022–2023 season).

**Materials and Methods.** A descriptive cross-sectional survey design was employed. The total population consisted of 229 players across 15 clubs, with 170 valid questionnaires analyzed. The Competitive Leadership Behavior Scale demonstrated acceptable reliability ( $\alpha = 0.73$ ).

**Results.** Results indicated variability in leadership dimensions ( $M = 1.001–3.982$ ). Tactical adaptability and communication timing ranked highest, whereas behavioral stability under fluctuating match conditions ranked lowest.

**Conclusions.** The findings reveal a tactically robust yet psychologically developing leadership profile. The study contributes context-specific empirical evidence and highlights the need to integrate emotional intelligence training into professional coaching development programs.

**Keywords:** leadership style, coaches, sports competition, handball, Iraqi Premier League.

### 1. Introduction

Leadership in sport is recognized as a multidimensional construct encompassing instructional guidance, emotional regulation, communication effectiveness, and behavioral influence. In competitive team sports, coaching leadership represents a central determinant of athlete motivation, team cohesion, and performance consistency. Contemporary research has demonstrated that leadership behaviors significantly predict collective efficacy and athlete engagement in elite sport environments (Cruz et al., 2021). Effective leadership during competition requires not only technical and tactical knowledge but also the ability to regulate emotions, adapt strategies under pressure, and deliver clear instructions in time-sensitive situations (Arnold et al., 2012).

Within high-intensity sports such as handball, the competitive environment is characterized by rapid tactical transitions, fluctuating scoring patterns, and elevated psychological demands. These contextual factors require coaches to demonstrate situational leadership,

which enables dynamic adaptation to match developments (Hersey & Chevalier, 2000). Moreover, communication timing during competition has been shown to enhance athlete responsiveness and reduce cognitive overload (Otte et al., 2020). Research further indicates that leadership adaptability is positively associated with team resilience in elite handball competitions (Massuça et al., 2014), while emotional intelligence in coaches contributes to greater psychological stability and trust within teams.

Theoretically, sport leadership models emphasize three primary behavioral dimensions: instructional behavior, democratic behavior, and social support behavior (Ghazwan Aziz Mohsen et al., 2021) (Rodolfo A. Ignacio et al., 2017). However, competitive leadership differs fundamentally from training leadership because it unfolds under heightened emotional arousal and situational uncertainty (Wachsmuth et al., 2025). Under such circumstances, the coach's behavior directly influences players' tactical execution and emotional control (González-García et al., 2020). reported that appropriate leadership behaviors during competition reduce burnout and enhance performance sustainability, underscoring the importance of balanced tactical and psychological leadership dimensions (OECD, 2023).

Despite the expanding international literature on sport leadership, empirical research addressing competitive leadership behaviors within Iraqi professional handball remains limited. Existing regional studies have primarily focused on general leadership traits rather than in-game behaviors during official matches (Al-Husseini et al., 2024). This gap restricts the development of evidence-based coaching frameworks tailored to the Iraqi Premier League context and limits the integration of modern leadership models within local coaching education systems.

The increasing professionalization of Iraqi handball and the growing psychological demands of high-stakes competition highlight the urgency of examining leadership patterns during official matches. Modern professional sport systems require integrative leadership approaches that combine tactical intelligence with emotional regulation and communication precision (Mohammed Saleem Najeeb & Mohammed Ghazi Alhayali, 2023). Understanding these dynamics is essential for enhancing coaching certification programs, improving competitive consistency, and strengthening psychological preparedness within Iraqi professional leagues.

Accordingly, the present study aims to identify the leadership styles adopted by coaches during sports competitions from the perspective of players participating in the Iraqi Handball Premier League (2022–2023 season). By analyzing tactical adaptability, emotional regulation, and communication timing within a unified framework, this research seeks to address an identified gap in the literature and provide context-specific empirical evidence that contributes to the advancement of sport leadership theory and applied coaching development in professional handball environments.

## **2. Methods**

### **Research Design**

The present study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional survey design, which is appropriate for examining perceptions and behavioral patterns within naturally occurring competitive environments. This design enables the systematic analysis of players' evaluations of their coaches' leadership behaviors during official league matches.

The descriptive approach was selected due to its suitability for investigating existing phenomena without manipulating variables, thereby allowing for objective assessment of competitive leadership patterns in the Iraqi Handball Premier League context.

## Participants

The study population consisted of all players participating in the Iraqi Handball Premier League during the 2022–2023 competitive season. The total population comprised 229 players distributed across 15 clubs.

A comprehensive sampling approach was initially adopted, including the entire population. The sample was subsequently divided into three subgroups for methodological purposes:

- Exploratory sample: 25 players (10.91%)
- Reliability (pilot stability) sample: 30 players (13.10%)
- Final application sample: 174 players (75.98%)

After excluding incomplete questionnaires, **170 valid responses** were retained for statistical analysis.

This sampling strategy ensured instrument validation prior to final data collection while maintaining representativeness of the league population.

## Instrumentation

The study employed the *Competitive Leadership Behavior Scale* developed by Ahmed (2023), which was originally standardized within the Iraqi sports environment.

## Content Validity

To establish content validity, the instrument was reviewed by 11 experts in sports management and coaching sciences. Experts evaluated the clarity, relevance, and suitability of each item for measuring competitive leadership behavior.

Five items that failed to achieve a minimum agreement threshold of 75% were removed. The final version of the scale consisted of 30 items assessing leadership behaviors during competition.

## Reliability

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient based on responses from the pilot reliability sample ( $n = 30$ ).

$$\alpha = 0.73 \quad \alpha = 0.73 \quad \alpha = 0.73$$

This coefficient indicates acceptable reliability according to conventional standards in social science research, suggesting adequate internal consistency among scale items.

## Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted during the official 2022–2023 season. The exploratory study was carried out to ensure clarity of questionnaire items and determine completion time. The final administration of the instrument was conducted on July 26, 2023.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and assured of confidentiality. Questionnaires were distributed and collected directly by the researchers to ensure response accuracy and completeness.

### Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The following statistical procedures were employed:

- Arithmetic Mean
- Standard Deviation
- Ranking of Items
- Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient

These statistical techniques enabled the identification of dominant and less prevalent leadership behaviors from the players' perspective.

### Ethical Considerations

Participation in the study was voluntary. Players were informed that their responses would be used solely for research purposes and would remain confidential. No identifying personal data were disclosed.

### Results

In order to achieve the objective of identifying the leadership styles adopted by coaches during sports competitions from the perspective of players participating in the Iraqi Handball Premier League (2022–2023 season), arithmetic means and standard deviations were calculated for all scale items, and rankings were determined accordingly (Table 1).

**Table 1**

the arithmetic mean, standard deviation, and ranking of the leadership styles scale

No.	Paragraphs	Mean	Standard deviation	Ranking
1	Supports the assistant coach to take his role in guiding the players	3.907	0.351	4
2	He leaves the option of replacing his team's goalkeepers to their coach during the match and critical times	2.487	0.799	19
3	He admits to violating the Law of the Game and suffers the penalty as a result	3.864	0.372	6
4	He puts himself first when any crises occur that strike the sports club	2.511	0.787	18
5	He is characterized by calmness when the team is ahead	3.900	0.364	5

	or behind on goal difference			
6	He is not disturbed by the presence of game characters to watch the match	3.932	0.332	2
7	It remains the same despite the many variables and stimuli in the match	1.001	2.091	30
8	He deals flexibly with the failure of offensive or defensive plans and tries to find solutions	2.329	0.865	20
9	He avoids aggression with his players in all its forms	1.986	1.001	24
10	He is aware of all the events of the match and links them with his accumulated experiences	3.812	0.393	8
11	He wisely addresses the problem of the team being late in goals	1.761	1.521	26
12	He has the ability to analyze and process post-match events	2.521	0.777	17
13	He has the ability to read the strengths and weaknesses of his team and the opposing team during the course of the match	2.001	0.991	23
14	He has the ability to find solutions for his players to confront the brilliance of the goalkeeper and the field players of the opposing team	3.982	0.321	1
15	The coach's positive thoughts help develop the players' technical and tactical capabilities in the correct manner.	2.214	0.811	21
16	Sends information during the match at the appropriate time	3.911	0.342	3
17	His instructions to his players are not affected when the pressure of the match increases	3.709	0.476	11
18	His hand signals are clear to implement agreed-upon plans	3.611	0.497	13
19	He does not show any signs of frustration, despite his loss of control over the events of the match	1.438	1.721	27
20	He listens during the team time-out to experienced players despite the short time	3.842	0.382	7
21	He has a comprehensive view and awareness of all events in every playing position	2.654	0.775	15
22	The coach chooses the appropriate defensive formation according to the data of the opponent's offensive formation.	2.112	0.954	22
23	Able to quickly change useless defensive formations.	1.871	1.291	25
24	He chooses to call for differential time-outs in a professional manner to change the outcome of the match	3.801	0.399	9
25	Able to give feedback during differential time-outs	1.112	1.987	29
26	Focuses on supporting players with tactical and psychological information during time-out	1.218	1.871	28
27	He succeeds in choosing the appropriate plan during critical times of the match	3.621	0.487	12
28	He bears his mistakes with players boldly	2.543	0.732	16
29	It has the ability to benefit from the application of any legal updates	3.587	0.521	14
30	He does not hesitate to include young players in	3.754	0.432	10

	important matches			
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Table 1 shows that responses varied across items, with arithmetic means ranging between 3.982 and 1.001, and standard deviations ranging between 0.321 and 2.091.

This range indicates substantial variability in players' perceptions of competitive leadership behaviors, suggesting that certain leadership dimensions are strongly present, whereas others require development.

**Table 2**

*Highest-Ranked Item: Tactical Problem-Solving Against Opposing Goalkeeper and Field Players*

No.	Paragraphs	Mean	Standard deviation	Ranking
14	He has the ability to find solutions for his players to confront the brilliance of the goalkeeper and the field players of the opposing team	3.982	0.321	1

**Table 3**

*Second Highest-Ranked Item: Coach Emotional Composure in the Presence of Spectators*

No.	Paragraphs	Mean	Standard deviation	Ranking
6	He is not disturbed by the presence of game characters to watch the match	3.932	0.332	2

**Table 4**

*Third Highest-Ranked Item: Timely Communication During Match Play*

No.	Paragraphs	Mean	Standard deviation	Ranking
16	sends information during the match at the appropriate time	3.911	0.342	3

**Table 5**

*Lowest-Ranked Item: Behavioral Stability Under Match Variables and Stimuli*

No.	Paragraphs	Mean	Standard deviation	Ranking
7	remains the same despite the many variables and stimuli of the match	1.001	2.091	30

In order to achieve the objective of identifying the leadership styles adopted by coaches during sports competitions from the perspective of players participating in the Iraqi Handball Premier League (2022–2023 season), arithmetic means and standard deviations were calculated, as presented in Table (1).

The results revealed that arithmetic means ranged between (3.982 – 1.001), with standard deviations ranging between (0.321 – 2.091), indicating variability in players' evaluations of competitive leadership behaviors.

### **Highest-Ranked Items**

The item related to the coach's ability to find solutions against opposing goalkeepers and field players ranked first ( $M = 3.982$ ;  $SD = 0.321$ ).

The item concerning emotional composure in the presence of spectators ranked second ( $M = 3.932$ ;  $SD = 0.332$ ).

The item addressing appropriate timing of information delivery during the match ranked third ( $M = 3.911$ ;  $SD = 0.342$ ).

These findings indicate that tactical adaptability, emotional composure in external contexts, and communication timing represent dominant leadership behaviors within the studied sample.

### **Lowest-Ranked Items**

The item concerning stability despite match variables ranked last ( $M = 1.001$ ;  $SD = 2.091$ ).

Lower mean values were also observed in items related to structured feedback during time-outs and psychological support during critical match phases.

These results demonstrate differential strength across leadership dimensions.

To enhance clarity, a graphical representation of the five highest and five lowest ranked items is recommended.

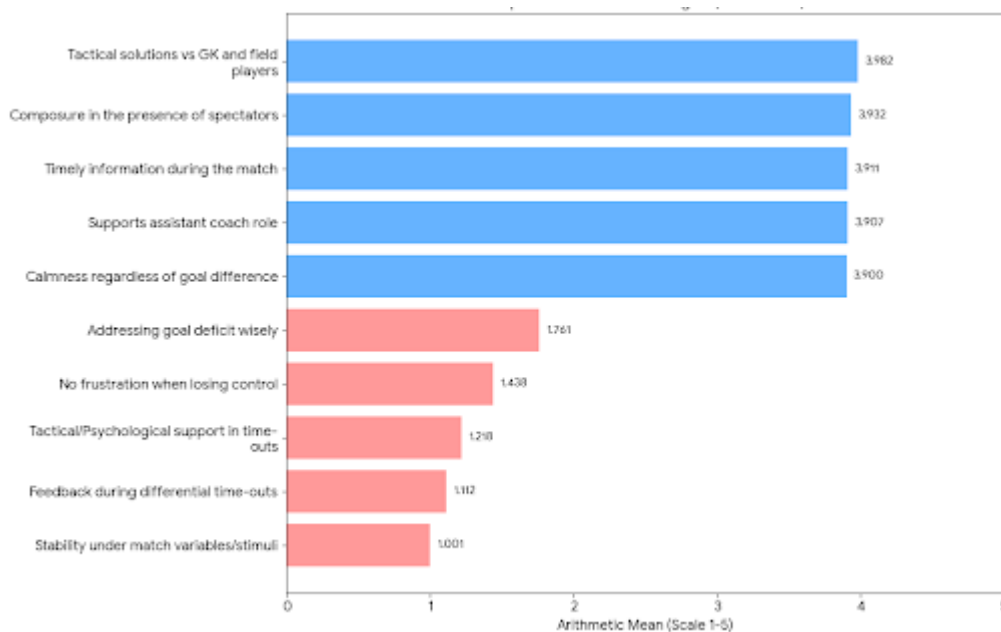


Figure 1 Top 5 vs Bottom 5 Leadership Behaviors Iraqi Handball Premier League (2022-2023)

#### 4. Discussion

The present findings reveal a leadership profile characterized primarily by strong tactical adaptability and communication precision. The highest-ranked behavior—tactical problem-solving against opposing players—suggests that Iraqi Premier League coaches prioritize strategic responsiveness during competition.

This finding aligns with research conducted in elite handball environments, where adaptive leadership has been associated with enhanced team resilience and match control, Similarly, situational leadership theory emphasizes the importance of behavioral flexibility in dynamic performance settings(Worley, 2024) .

However, the lowest-ranked item concerning behavioral stability under fluctuating match variables indicates potential inconsistency in emotional regulation during internally stressful moments(Englert et al., 2021). This contrasts with findings by (González-García et al., 2020), who reported that consistent leadership behavior during competitive stress contributes to reduced athlete burnout.

The discrepancy between tactical strength and emotional-support dimensions suggests that leadership development within the studied context may emphasize technical preparation more strongly than psychological training. This interpretation is consistent with Morales-Sánchez and (Fouraki et al., 2020), who argue that balanced instructional and social-support leadership yields more sustainable performance outcomes.

From a practical perspective, the findings indicate the necessity of integrating structured emotional intelligence training within coaching education programs. While tactical excellence is evident, systematic psychological reinforcement strategies—particularly during time-outs—may enhance overall leadership effectiveness.

Thus, the results collectively suggest that competitive leadership in the Iraqi Premier League reflects a performance-oriented tactical model, with emerging need for integrative psycho-tactical development frameworks.

## 5. Conclusions

The findings demonstrate that competitive leadership in the Iraqi Handball Premier League is predominantly characterized by tactical adaptability and communication effectiveness. However, comparatively lower ratings in emotional regulation and structured psychological reinforcement indicate areas requiring developmental attention. Effective competitive leadership emerges as an integrative construct combining strategic intelligence, emotional stability, and communication clarity. Advancing toward a balanced psycho-tactical leadership framework may enhance performance sustainability and professional coaching standards within Iraqi team sports.

## Study Limitations

Despite the theoretical and practical contributions of the present study, several methodological and contextual limitations should be acknowledged to ensure balanced interpretation of the findings.

First, the study relied exclusively on self-reported data collected from players' perceptions. Although perception-based evaluation is widely used in sport leadership research, it may be influenced by subjective bias, social desirability effects, or individual relational dynamics between players and coaches. The absence of direct behavioral observation or multi-source assessment (e.g., coach self-evaluation or independent expert ratings) may limit the objectivity of leadership behavior measurement.

Second, the cross-sectional design of the study restricts causal inference. While the findings identify dominant and less dominant leadership dimensions, they do not establish direct relationships between leadership styles and actual team performance outcomes. Longitudinal research designs would allow examination of how leadership behaviors evolve across competitive seasons and how they influence sustained performance indicators.

Third, the study was confined to a single competitive season within the Iraqi Handball Premier League. Contextual variables such as league competitiveness, institutional resources, and organizational culture may have influenced player evaluations. Consequently, generalization beyond the studied season or to other team sports should be approached with caution.

Fourth, although the instrument demonstrated acceptable internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.73$ ), the scale primarily measured perceived competitive leadership behaviors without incorporating psychological constructs such as athlete satisfaction, cohesion, or emotional resilience as mediating variables. Future research may benefit from integrating multidimensional models to explore structural relationships between leadership behaviors and psychological performance indicators.

Finally, cultural factors specific to the Iraqi sporting environment were not directly measured but may have implicitly shaped leadership expectations and evaluations. Investigating cross-

cultural comparisons could further clarify whether the identified tactical-dominant leadership profile is context-bound or representative of broader regional coaching paradigms.

Recognizing these limitations strengthens the interpretative framework of the study and provides a foundation for more comprehensive, multi-method, and longitudinal investigations into competitive leadership in professional sport environments.

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