



Managerial Skills of Athlete Managers in Ethiopian Middle- and Long-Distance Running: Athletes Perspective

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Abstract

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Today's sport demands better management for its effect; hence, possessing the managerial skill becomes crucial. Proper management of athletes in sports ensures success; in doing so, athlete managers are expected to possess a great deal of managerial skills. To this end the study tries to assess the managerial skills exhibited by athlete managers while working with Ethiopian elite athletes. The study relies on the three managerial skills proposed by Katz: conceptual, technical, and human/interpersonal skills. The participants of the study were 248 athletes working with athlete managers in middle- and long-distance running, who are living in Addis Ababa. Both male and female athletes who were enrolled in different club setting and running disciplines participated in the study. A 5-point Likert scale questionnaire was used to collect data from the subjects. SPSS version 27 was used to analyze data. For the descriptive statistics, frequency and percentage were used; and for the inferential statistics, non-parametric tests, specifically Mann-Whitney and Kruskal-Wallis tests, were employed to the assess the group difference. The internal consistency for the questionnaire items was found to be 0.93. The findings portray significant differences observed in the athlete's sex, club enrollment and average monthly income ($p < .05$). Female athletes were better off in perceiving the managerial skills of their managers, $P < .05$. No significant difference was observed in the managerial skills employed regarding athletes' running discipline; athletes were treated equally irrespective of their running discipline. The conceptual skills of athlete managers were found to be better with a slight limitation on the technical skill. Nevertheless, much work should be done on the interpersonal skills since they fail to make prolonged contact with the athletes and have poor relationships with the athletes' club and the EAF. Hence, addressing all managerial issues becomes paramount requiring the managers to equip themselves with the managerial skills to meet the desired goal.



1. Introduction

Management is a key issue in different aspects since it is concerned with the effective development of sufficient resources to achieve an agreed set of objectives (Pedersen & Thibault, 2019). In a sports context, the management of an athlete, athlete management, is concerned with the proper handling of the athlete in different aspects to make them feel safe and secured as they are expected to focus on the task at hand: training, competition, and recovery.

Elite athletes, as professionals, require better care and treatment. As they are expected to excel in their chosen discipline, better handling of these athletes becomes a key issue in exploiting their potential. With this regard, the presence of athlete managers becomes a crucial phenomenon, reflecting growing interest in the development and success of elite athletes (Maleske & Sant, 2022). The quality of athlete managers profoundly influences the overall promotion of an elite athlete's career, contributing to enhanced development, performance, and long-term sustainability within their respective sport (Chen et al., 2013; Jolly et al., 2021).

Athlete managers are responsible for various aspects of an athlete's career, including contract negotiations, endorsement deals, public relations, and strategic planning. They serve as an agent that binds the sport and the athlete. Agents are generally considered to be

necessary (or some might say a necessary evil) for the sporting industry, in the representation of sportsmen/women, the consultation of sports clubs and franchises, or the facilitation of employment contracts and transfer deals (Bull & Faure, 2022). All in all, they serve as a mediator between the athlete and the sports industry via providing holistic support. Requiring special care and skill.

The present study is anchored in the recognition that the managerial skills of athlete managers play a decisive role in shaping the career trajectories of Ethiopian middle- and long-distance runners. Drawing on Katz's (1974) three-skill approach and Mintzberg's (1973) managerial roles, the study conceptualizes managerial effectiveness as a multidimensional construct encompassing conceptual skills, human/interpersonal skills, and technical skills. The study lies with the assumption that the athlete's perception and lived experience impart the managerial skills and the developmental outcome portrayed. This is in line with the contemporary sports management literature emphasizing the centrality of the athlete's view in evaluating the managerial practices (Taylor & Garratt, 2010). Elite athletes are usually expected to amaze and entertain via meeting the standard and goes beyond. To this effect, athlete managers who are influencing every bit of the athlete are expected to possess managerial skills pertinent to the stage.



Most coaches and athlete managers or agents in Ethiopia have ample experience in the sport they are currently engaged in. The former athletes are now coaches and are also athlete managers who give due emphasis to the continuation of the sports legacy. Their prior engagement and experience in athletics makes them understand the demands of the sport in a and promotion, human resource management, 2022). All those aspects determine the success of both the athlete and the manager; it, in turn, impacts a nation's sport. Having earlier exposure and experience in the sport only does not ensure success in the management of athletes, which is evidenced by the non-continual success of Ethiopian athletes. With this in mind, the study attempts to address the following research questions:

- What are the skills needed in the management of elite athletes?
- Do athlete managers possess the required managerial skills to meet the demand of the sport?
- How do athletes perceive the managerial skills of their managers?
- Which managerial skills is best practiced in the Ethiopian distance running?

2. Methodology

Descriptive survey research design was employed to assess the perception of athletes on the managerial skills of their managers.

better way, which amplifies the importance of having knowledgeable professionals who have better insight and management expertise in the area. Athlete managers are usually tasked with navigating a complex set of responsibilities, including strategic planning, financial overseeing, marketing

and legal compliance (Guidotti et al., 2022). The target population for the study was athletes who are working with athlete managers. By using Cochran's sample size determination formula (1963:75), 265 athletes were selected, of which 248 athletes responded to the questionnaire, entailing a 94% response rate. Hence available sampling was used since most of the elite athletes are subjected to frequent travel and tight training schedules.

Data were collected by using a structured 5-point Likert scale questionnaire developed by the researcher, which underwent a rigorous validation protocol (expert review and pilot tests). The questionnaires were distributed in person to the selected athletes, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity of their responses.

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics by using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 27. Frequency and percentage were used to analyze the responses on the managerial skills, and non-parametric tests (Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis H tests) were employed to assess the group differences



in the perception of the managerial skills employed on the basis of the athlete's sex, running discipline, club enrollment, and average monthly income.

Institutional review board of the collage of natural and computational science, Addis Ababa university granted the ethical clearance to conduct the study.

3. Results and discussion

The main objective of the study was to assess the perception of elite middle- and long-distance runners on the managerial skills of their managers. Non parametric tests, more specifically Mann Whitney and Kruskal Wails test were employed to assess the group difference on/across sex, running discipline, club setting, educational status, age and marital status. The internal consistency for the instrument were found to be 0.927 and ranges from 0.810 to 0.814 across the sub themes of the managerial skills ($0.81 \leq \alpha \geq 0.814$).

Demographic characteristics

The study includes 248 athletes, comprising 151 male and 97 female athletes. The athletes participate in middle distance (34), long distance (171), and both middle and long distance (43) running. The athletes had on average 8 years of training age and 4 ± 2 years of experience in working with athlete managers. Participants were drawn from different club settings: governmental (171), private (19), and individual (27), and 27 of them were self-help.

Managerial skills / Descriptive statistics/

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Of the 248 surveyed athletes, 62% reported that their managers have knowledge about the nature of the sport. Besides, more than half of them reflect that they update themselves. From this we can infer that athlete managers who are working with Ethiopian elite athletes possess conceptual skills with a better understanding of the know-how of the sport and the dynamic nature of the sport. Since sports activities have got their own culture, which requires understanding of its peculiar aspects to its effect; the know-how about the sport and its elements is crucial in helping both the athlete and the manager to work efficiently. According to Katz, conceptual skills involve the ability to see the enterprise as a whole, recognizing how the various functions of the organization depend on one another and how changes in any one part affect all the others (Katz, 1974). Some scholars refer to it as system/analytical thinking since it involves the ability to arrive at ideas, create a vision, and plan for the future (Lussier& Kimball, 2023; Quinn, 2010).

This study also analyzed the effect of human skills on athlete career development and success, and 71.8% argued that they have a good relationship with their manager. More than half of the respondents contended that



their managers are very close to them and have good relations with their club and the federation. From this we can see that athlete managers have a smooth relationship with all parties surrounding their circle, which can be seen as an asset to get everything done easily. The human skills, also referred to as interpersonal skills, demonstrate the ability to work well in cooperation with others, both individually and in a group setting (Quinn, 2010). Proper handling and treatment of athletes is crucial in helping them feel important, responsible, and respected.

In relation to the technical skills, 69.8% of athlete respondents showed their agreement on the supervision of the training and competition by their respective athlete managers. On the other hand, half of the respondents claim that they stay for a short period with athlete managers and do not get a quick and right response. Technical skills in management play level of managerial responsibility (Pedersen & Thibault, 2019; Quinn, 2010). The technical skills must be complemented by conceptual and human skills to ensure holistic effectiveness (Masteralexis et al., 2012; Chelladurai&Kerwin, 2017). These skills can also be seen as intertwined aspects with

a decisive role since they imply an understanding of, and proficiency in, a specific kind of activity, particularly one involving methods, processes, procedures, or techniques. (Katz, 1974). This skill requires the ability to use methods and techniques and/or special proficiency and expertise to perform particular tasks (Lussier& Kimball, 2023). Since it is purely operational, it is regarded as the most familiar skill for being the commonest. In a sport setting, technical skills could include coaching and facility management; it could be considered as an asset to good management, and the absence of or lack of it could be a hindrance to good management (Hysong, 2008).

The aforementioned managerial skills do not function in isolation; most managers display multiple managerial skills at any given time, and their relative importance tends to vary by

Mintzberg's managerial roles (1991); that is to say, the interpersonal roles and informational roles (Mintzberg, 1991) involve human/interpersonal skills; on the other hand, the conceptual skills are paramount in playing a decisional role as a manager.



Table 1

Athletes' perception on athlete managers' Managerial Skills (N=248)

Managerial skills	Items	Disagree		Neutral		Agree	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Conceptual skill	Knowledge about the sport.	48	19.3%	46	18.5%	154	62%
	Follow the current trends of the sport.	70	28.2%	37	14.9%	141	56.8%
Human skill	Close to the athletes.	70	32.2%	18	7.3%	150	60.5%
	Have good relationship with athletes.	60	24.2%	10	4.0%	178	71.8%
	Have good relationship with my club.	66	26.7%	46	18.5%	136	54.9%
	Have good relationship with the federation.	58	23.4%	55	22.2%	135	52.4%
	Work in collaboration with other athlete managers.	78	31.5%	43	17.3%	127	51.2%
	Supervise the training & competition.	61	24.6%	14	5.6%	173	69.8%
Technical skill	Handle financial issues.	70	28.2%	50	20.2%	128	51.6%
	Work with athletes for long periods.	91	36.7%	33	13.3%	124	50%
	Provide the right response for the problem.	120	48.4%	30	12.1%	98	39.5%
	Handle athletics-related problems.	120	48.4%	27	10.9%	101	40.7%
	Involve athletes in the problem-solving.	80	32.3%	49	19.8%	119	48%

Note. N=number of subjects, % =percentage

Group differences/Inferential statistics/
The Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to examine the difference in test scores between male and female athletes. Table 2 presents the summary results indicating the overall managerial skills along its subdivisions were found to be significantly differ in terms of athletes' sex. To determine which sex is better influenced, the mean rank scores were compared. Accordingly, the mean scores were higher in female athletes than their male counterparts, indicating female athletes

their perception impacts their motivation, trust, and development (Chelladurai & Saleh, 2007; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011). The most recent research by Meier and her friends examines

perceive their managers possess managerial skills pertinent to their development/involve ment.

Female athletes' higher evaluation of their managers may indicate stronger interpersonal and developmental competencies exhibited by their managers. The finding highlights the importance of gendered perspectives and approaches in the management of athletes whereby

the gender disparities in elite athletics participation and performance, showing how structural and managerial support influences female athletes' success (2021). Addressing female athletes' demands gives light to better



performance of female athletes, which is further highlighted by Watt entailing the importance of adapting leadership to the cultural and gendered realities of athletes (2003), which can be considered as a crucial aspect in the context of Ethiopian sports, where female athletes were not privileged to

access sports. Moreover, the results are consistent with the performance trends of Ethiopian athletes in major athletic events where female athletes' performance surpasses male athletes (World Athletics, 2024).

Table 2.

Summary of Mann-Whitney test for Managerial Skills(N=248)

Grouping Variable	Test statistics			
	MR	Mann-Whitney U	z	Sig.
Conceptual skills	Male	6159.50	-2.12	.034*
	Female	136.50		
Technical skills	Male	5535.50	-3.25	.001**
	Female	142.93		
Interpersonal skills	Male	5272.00	-3.75	< .001***
	Female	145.65		

*Note. Grouping variable: athlete's sex; MR: Mean rank; Significant levels: *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001,*

A Kruskal-Wallis H Test was conducted to compare the conceptual skills, technical skills, and human skills exhibited by athlete managers across athletes in different running disciplines, club enrollments, educational levels and monthly average incomes (Table 3). In relation to the conceptual skills, the result indicated that a statistical difference was observed across athletes' club enrollment ($H (3) = 19.10, p < .001$), educational level ($H (2) = 13.18, p = .001$), and average monthly income ($H (3) = 31.97, p < .001$) of the athlete. To determine which subgroup better experiences the conceptual skills, mean ranks athletes in different groups. As shown in Table 3, a statistical difference was observed across

were compared. Accordingly, athletes with no club (self-help), athletes with a secondary educational level, and athletes who earn more than 11,001 birrs on a monthly basis were found to have higher mean rank scores, indicating they benefited as compared to the rest found in the subgroups. Hence, athlete managers should consider the disparities in each group to keep athletes in shape. The running discipline, on the contrary, does not substantially influence the competency and utilization of conceptual skills.

Similarly, the Kruskal-Wallis H test was also conducted to compare the technical skills exhibited by athlete managers across athletes' club enrollment $H (3) = 12.35, p = .006$;



educational level $H (2) = 20.90$, $p < .001$; and average monthly income $H (3) = 22.20$, $p < .001$ of the athletes. To determine which subgroup better experiences the technical skills, mean ranks were compared; accordingly, athletes in private clubs, athletes with a tertiary educational level, and athletes

who earn more than 11,001 birrs on a monthly basis were found to have higher mean rank scores, indicating they benefit as compared to the rest found in the subgroups. These suggest that the running discipline do not significantly influence the exploitation of technical skills.

Table 3

Summary of Kruskal-Wallis test for Managerial skills (N=248)

Variables	df	Conceptual skills		Technical skills		Human skills	
		H	Sig.	H	Sig.	H	Sig.
Discipline	2	2.37	.306	5.06	.080	3.97	.137
Club	3	19.10	<.001***	12.35	.006**	24.11	<.001***
Education	2	13.18	.001**	20.90	<.001***	5.16	.076
Income	3	31.97	<.001***	22.20	<.00***	28.49	<.001***

*Note: df=degree of freedom; Significant levels: *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001,*

Since the nature of the sport and its elements are dynamic, scholars in the area argued that technical skills must be in line with the current state via considering lifelong learning and practical training (Guidottiet al., 2023; &Alshahrani, 2024). This indicates athlete managers can fill their technical gap via learning. The finding portrays that the economic state of the athletes also determines the perception of athletes towards their manager; in this regard, Guidotti and his colleagues noted that athletes with higher earnings are more likely to access advanced facilities and professional support. They, further claim that technical skills are ranked as essential for sports management globally across all sports rather than discipline-specific (Guidotti et al., 2023).

With regard to the human skill, the results of the Kruskal-Wallis H Test indicated that a statistical difference was observed across athletes' club enrollment ($H (3) = 24.11$, $p < .001$) and average monthly income ($H (3) = 28.49$, $p < .001$) of the athlete. To determine which subgroup better experiences the human skills, mean ranks were compared; accordingly, athletes with no club (self-help) and athletes who earn more than 11,001 birrs on a monthly basis were found to have higher mean rank scores, indicating they benefit as compared to the rest found in the subgroups. These suggest that the running discipline and educational status of the athlete do not significantly influence the exploitation of human skills.

The results are aligned with Katz's (1974)



managerial skills, which emphasize human skills as essential for effective communication and interaction. Such skill remains in athlete management, i.e., leadership and team cohesion (Cotterill&Fransen, 2021). Being highly paid, on the other hand, increases the access to diverse social networks, training, and Athletes with higher income and those out of formal club structure assume the responsibility

support (Wachsmuthet al., 2020). No significant influence on the educational status and running discipline indicates that these variables are not predictors of human skill employment; besides, it challenges the assumption that educational status inherits strong interpersonal competences. vested upon them.

4. Conclusion

Evaluating the material skills of athlete managers was the main concern of the study. Athlete managers have the authority and responsibility to use available resources in the management of athletes. In doing so, they have to plan, organize, train, and control everything under their supervision. To guide and lead athletes to a better performance level, knowledge and application of the managerial skills become crucial. The interpersonal, technical, and conceptual skills as noted by Katz (1974) will assist efficient use of available resources. Earlier exposure of athlete managers to the sport, coupled with continual updating of their management, will make everything smooth and attainable. In the study, athlete managers were found to have better managerial skills in terms of their conceptual and human skills, and minor gaps were found in the technical aspects. Athlete managers are equipped with better conceptual skills, which help them understand the scenario, but are late in providing responses to the athlete's demand.

The latter could demotivate and erode the trustworthiness. The athlete's day-to-day demands related to training, competition, and financial aspects should not be neglected and should be answered immediately or accordingly. Hence, capacity-building programs or management trainings are needed to improve managerial competency. Besides, the importance of prolonged contact among coaches, athletes, and athlete managers should not be undermined since it had a tendency to build a culture whereby positive influences could be instilled. The study was limited to the elite middle- and long-distance athletes; hence, further studies in the area could contribute to a better understanding of athlete management.

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