



DOES THE UNIQUE LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS OF OLYMPIC ATHLETES ENHANCE THEIR EMPLOYABILITY?

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ABSTRACT

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Olympic athletes possess unique physical, mental, and leadership characteristics. Identifying and quantifying their leadership skills can enhance their employability, leading to a successful career transition. The researcher assessed 119 Olympic athletes, medalists ($n = 72$), and non-medalists ($n = 45$) who competed in 11 different sports, representing both genders, various age groups, and from 20 countries, and competed in at least one Olympic game. Using the Leadership Trait Questionnaire (LTQ) survey, out of the possible 70 points, the entire population surveyed had the mean LTQ score of 62.48, medalists scored 61.49 and non-medalists scored 62.70. With no significant differences in LTQ scores, the conclusion can be drawn that all Olympians possess unique leadership characteristics. To explore how to enhance the employability of elite athletes, the researcher investigated if a correlation exists between their total LTQ scores and their chosen careers. Out of 119 participants, most remained in the sporting world as coaches ($n=46$), with others mostly remaining in sports related fields. The correlation between the LTQ scores and their age, gender, sports, highest placement was also analyzed. In conclusion, the employability of elite athletes can be improved by empowering them to have a better understanding of their unique leadership characteristics alongside other exceptional skills they already possess and apply them as they transition to life after sports.

Contribution/Originality: This is an innovative research project that examines the leadership characteristics of Olympic athletes, to identify the skills, they already possess so they can transition more smoothly into their new careers.

1. INTRODUCTION

In comparison to other athletes and individuals, Olympians have unique physical and psychological characteristics. With the necessary mental preparation, Olympians can remain focused on their goals, maintain their unwavering self-confidence, and control their emotions by blocking out all distractions in their quest to achieve their set goals. Although numerous research studies have focused on identifying certain personal characteristics and coping strategies to overcome various stressors, ensuring optimal performance has been a challenge (Gould, Dieffenbach, & Moffett, 2002; Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1993a) while measurement of the leadership skills of Olympians has not been attempted. The current research contributes to the literature by identifying the leadership skills of Olympic athletes in effort be used as a valuable tool in their transition from athletic competitions to their professional careers. The ability to recognize their leadership skills will enable the elite athletes to enhance their

employability by quantifying their exceptional abilities and use them to influence and inspire others to pursue and achieve their goals, thus enhancing their value for any organization.

A leader is defined in the business world as someone who can communicate their vision to others, and followers see them as the person who is committed to always doing the right thing (Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 2015) or as someone who serves as a good example (Gould, Voelker, & Griffes, 2013) through their leadership and daily actions in which they demonstrate desired behaviors, ethical conduct, and a winning attitude they would expect from their followers. Successful leaders possess certain attributes that make them stand out and enhance their ability to act in a meaningful and impactful way even in highly stressful situations. The ability to think clearly in various and unpredictable circumstances require a special set of skills which are developed through time. Through their management and daily actions, leaders set an example for their followers of the desired behavior, ethical conduct, and winning attitude they expect from them (Gould et al., 2013). Leaders must motivate, inspire, and mold the minds of their members to achieve their common goals. The effectiveness of a leader is measured by leader's ability to move people "in some direction through (mostly) noncoercive means" (Kotter, 1988). Scholars agree that leaders should motivate their followers to accomplish the set goals and the amount of their success is measured by the level of direct involvement by the leader (Barker, 2001). It has been shown that the personality of the leader also plays an important role in his or her leadership since some are narcissistic and can impose their desires on followers, which are "positively related to both affective and social components of motivation to lead" (Chen, 2016) while others lead with humility, choosing to gain respect from their followers through their humble motivational style.

Olympians are natural leaders who inspire others to success through their remarkable qualifications, abilities, skills, and values, making them actual change makers. Through their ability to react quickly to both internal and external factors that influence the outcome, they change the dynamic and sometimes the direction of the organization. During their long and arduous road to compete in the Olympic Games, elite athletes develop extraordinary competences to remain focused on their goal and overcome the multitude of obstacles and challenges, while performing at their highest capabilities. What makes elite athletes to achieve optimal performance and develop coping strategies to overcome various stressors has been the subject of numerous research studies (Conroy & Elliot, 2004; Feltz, 1988; Gould et al., 2002; Gould et al., 1993a; Mahoney, 1989). In their preparation for competitions, Olympic athletes are trained to overcome unforeseen events, both organizational and competitive stress much faster than other elite athletes (Gould et al., 1993a). A leader's ability to stay calm and focused during a stressful situation is one of the keys to their success. Performing at the highest level and achieving success at competitions provided the ideal training ground for the elite athletes to become strong leaders who can deal with demanding situations. The Olympic Games itself raises the stakes, as the premier global competition that reunites athletes from around the world to declare its winner only every four years. Being watched by millions of people from around the globe and carrying the hopes of their nation, Olympians remain focused in the realization of their lifelong dream while coping with the tremendous stress placed upon them. Their unique ability to manage this stress was examined by several studies which analyzed the relationship between stress and other psychological variables to cope with the extraordinary stress experienced by Olympians (Pensgaard & Duda, 2003; Pensgaard & Roberts, 2000).

Looking at these exceptional skills of Olympic athletes, certain characteristics stand out as key elements to their success. They possess some of the most prominent characteristics such as mental toughness, having a strong self-belief in their ability to achieve competition goals, believing that they possess skills and abilities that make them superior to their competitors, and having a strong desire and internalized motivation to succeed. Furthermore, they are known for achieving their goals regardless of barriers they must overcome. Their self-belief in their ability to achieve their competition goals is unshakable, as they have unique abilities that make them more competitive than their opponents. In addition to an insatiable desire, internalized motivation, and the ability to

bounce back from setbacks, elite athletes are also highly competitive and thrive on pressure (Jones, Hanton, & Connaughton, 2002). Table 1 enumerates the psychological factors associated with Olympic success.

Table 1. Psychological factors associated with Olympic success.

Psychological /emotional state or attribute	Cognitive and behavioral strategies	Personal disposition
Confidence/self-belief	Self-talk	Self-talk
Concentration/attentional focus	Goal orientations (task, ego)	Optimism
Determination/motivation/Commitment	Goal setting	Goal orientation (task, ego)
Optimal zone of emotions/Arousal/anxiety	Competitive simulations	Adaptive perfectionism
Emotional control	Competitive plans/refocusing plans/routines	Competitiveness
Automaticity	Distraction preparation strategies	Sport intelligence
Motivation-commitment	Mistake management strategies	Trait hope
Body awareness	Fun/enjoyment strategies	Locus of control
Pain management	Environmental control	Intrinsic/extrinsic motivation orientation
Self-awareness		

From Psychological preparation for the Olympic Games by Gould and Maynard (2009), *Journal of Sports Sciences*, p. 1396. Copyright 2009 by Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.

Although all these skills and traits are transferable to real life, Olympic athletes struggle to transition into the workforce after they conclude their athletic endeavors and retire from the sport, to which they have dedicated their entire lives. Their transition needs to be facilitated by identifying their strengths and using them as the foundation for a successful career change. Some Olympians were able to identify and use their leadership skills and successfully transition from sports to become successful in their new careers. British double Olympic gold medalist runner, Sebastian Coe's career transition from athlete to politician was a quick one as he served in the British Parliament, chairman of the organizing Committee for the London Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2012, president of the International Association of Athletics Federation (IAAF), and more recently becoming a member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC).

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Participants

Participants of the study were 119 Olympic athletes, verified through the International Olympic Committee (IOC) official results database, as Olympic participation was a prerequisite for qualifying as a valid participant in the study. The survey participants included Olympic medalists ($n = 72$), who placed in the top three in their events and non-medalists ($n = 45$). Eleven individual or team sports were featured, such as swimming ($n= 43$) rowing ($n= 25$), gymnastics ($n= 14$), handball ($n= 11$), fencing ($n= 8$), athletics ($n= 7$), canoe-sprint ($n=4$), boxing ($n=2$), cycling ($n=1$), judo ($n=1$), and triathlon ($n=1$). Both genders were represented in almost equal numbers, women ($n= 64$) and men ($n= 55$). There were a variety of ages exemplified in the survey, ranging from 21 years old to 70 years old, with most of the respondents between the ages of 41 and 50 ($n=35$) and 51 and 60 ($n=45$). Having a diverse representation of life experiences was a critical objective. The surveyed Olympians were representing 20 countries, with the majority being from Romania ($n= 59$) the home country of the researcher, followed by Germany ($n=16$), and USA ($n= 13$).

2.2. Data Collection

The Leadership Trait Questionnaire (LTQ) developed by Northouse (2016) was used to assess the Olympians' personal characteristics of leadership. The LTQ quantifies the perceptions of the individual leader regarding the

personal attributes that he/she possesses, identifying special strengths or weaknesses he/she has. The athletes were asked to rate 14 leadership characteristics using a 5-point Likert scale from strongly disagree worth 1 point to strongly agree which was given 5 points. The survey participants were asked to express the importance of a leader's ability to be communicative, perceptive, self-confident, self-assured, persistent, determined, trustworthy, dependable, friendly, outgoing, conscientious, diligent, sensitive, and empathetic. Table 2 shows the spread of the answers for each of the fourteen leadership questions.

Table 2. Spread of answers to all the leadership trait questions.

Leadership	1=Strongly Disagree	2= Disagree	3= Neutral	4= Agree	5= Strongly Agree
Leader is Articulate	1	0	2	42	75
Leader is Perceptive	2	0	7	37	73
Leader is Self-Confident	2	1	2	41	73
Leader is Self-Assured	0	11	16	43	48
Leader is Persistent	0	0	10	43	66
Leader is Determined	0	1	8	39	71
Leader is Trustworthy	1	0	2	15	101
Leader is Dependable	1	0	6	36	76
Leader is Friendly	1	3	25	44	48
Leader is Outgoing	0	6	31	38	45
Leader is Conscientious	1	0	14	39	65
Leader is Diligent	0	0	5	32	82
Leader is Sensitive	2	5	17	51	45
Leader is Empathic	0	2	11	49	57

3. RESULTS

The results of the fourteen (14) Leaderships trait questionnaire are shown in the table.

Assuming the role of a leader, the Olympic athletes used a 5-point Likert scale to indicate how significant they thought leadership characteristics were. According to the data collected, there is a clear consensus among Olympians as to which of the leadership traits are most meaningful. After tabulation of the responses, from a possible 70 points, the entire population surveyed achieved a mean LTQ score of 62.48. Additionally, the author investigated any differences in the leadership scores between Olympic medalist, defined as an athlete who achieved top 3 placing in their respective sport and non- medalists who placed from fourth place and beyond. When comparing the two distinct groups, the medalists received a mean score of 61.49, while the non-medalists obtained a mean score of 62.

4. DISCUSSION

According to our analysis, certain patterns in LTQ scores have emerged. The importance placed by the surveyed Olympic athletes on each of the individual leadership characteristics was striking when analyzing each characteristic individually. According to a survey of 119 Olympians, the majority (n=101) of them stated that trustworthiness was one of their most important qualities as a leader. It's not surprising that Olympians value trustworthiness as the most essential trait of a leader. Sports is governed by strict and clear rules that requires athletes to follow them in their individual sport, exhibiting sportsmanship, and fairness always. To underscore the importance of honesty in competition, as part of the Olympic Games opening ceremony, participating athletes take an oath which includes the following statement: "We promise to take part in these Olympic Games, respecting and abiding by the rules and in the spirit of fair play, inclusion, and equality" (What is the Olympic Oath?, 2020). To maintain fairness throughout the competition, athletes respect and follow the established rules, ensuring an equal playing field for everyone. A leader can only be successful in inspiring its followers if it can be reliable and trustworthy in all their words and actions.

The second most important leadership trait the Olympians identified with was diligence, with 82 strongly agreeing and 32 agreeing. To qualify and participate in the Olympic games, it takes years of hard work and determination. Being diligent and focused on the main goal is essential in achieving the lifelong dream. The concentration and tenacity developed in sports is an important skill that is not only easily transferable from sports to real life, but also necessary to be successful in any career. Accomplished female entrepreneurs credit their current successes on the skills learned in sports, the steadfast focus on all challenges they encounter in the business world (Schiffman & Ingram, 2020). This diligence is achieved by the Olympic athletes through exceptional mental toughness which helps them deal with competitions and organizational stress. Researchers have defined mental toughness in a wide variety of ways with some have described it as one's ability to cope with pressure, stress, and adversity (Goldberg, 1998; Williams, 1988) the ability to overcome failures (Goldberg, 1998; Gould, Hodge, Peterson, & Petlichkoff, 1987; Woods, Hocton, & Desmond, 1995) the ability not to quit (Goldberg, 1998; Gould et al., 1987); resilience (Goldberg, 1998); or ones superior cognitive skills (Bull, Albinson, & Shambrook, 1996; Loehr, 1982; Loehr, Jansen, & Evert, 1995). Mental toughness helps with overcoming obstacles, with Bouchard-Hall stating that, "failure makes you stronger: Being in an environment with lots of setbacks is valuable for developing things like resilience, confidence, and optimism" (Burtka, 2016). Diligence is also achieved by setting clear goals and working assiduously towards them. Moskowitz (2012) has defined goals in general terms as "an end state that the organism has not yet attained (and is focused toward attaining in the future) and that the organism is committed to approach or avoid" (p. 1). In the world of sports, goals are broadly described as an objective or aim that an athlete is trying to accomplish, usually within a specified time frame (Weinberg, 2013). Over the four years of the Olympic cycle, athletes have a summary of short- and long-term goals so they have a sense of purpose and direction when there is a target to reach. As an athlete, it is imperative to be able to set goals that you believe you can achieve if you want to increase your chances of success. Simões, Vasconcelos-Raposo, Silva, and Fernandes (2012) concurs that the objectives set by athletes should be specific, realistic, and short-term, thus enhancing the process of achieving proficiency. Despite research supporting the common wisdom that one should set realistic and attainable goals, Olympians typically set difficult goals that are above the level at which they currently compete (Weinberg, Yukelson, Burton, & Weigand, 2000) challenging themselves to new levels of achievement.

Olympic athletes also strongly agree that being dependable (n=76) and articulate (n=75) are very important leadership traits. The ability to lead a team with a clear plan of action is an essential characteristic of a successful leader. Such a plan explains how the team will work together to accomplish their objectives. Olympians learn early on how to work within a team, how to communicate in an effective way with their teammates to be victorious. Successfully working with various personalities, motivations, and abilities of each team member will shape the character of a leader. Team cohesiveness which has been shown to be one of the predictors of team success is directly influenced by the leader's personal characteristics and leadership. Transferring the skills learned in sport to the current careers, will offer an additional edge to the Olympians who are used to finding ways to successfully work cohesively together in a group to achieve success. Any organization will attain and surpass their set goals by working together as a team, drawing for each other's strengths, experiences, and creativity. Team sports teaches athletes how to collaborate across wide ranging personalities and talents by using these strengths to achieve victory. Teamwork based on mutual respect will also create an environment where these different personalities will "engage in healthy conflict, commit to decisions and accept accountability for the outcomes" (Altobello, 2017, as cited in Kelly (2017)).

From their feedback, it was clear that almost an even split of high agreement/strong agreement responses was received from the Olympians surveyed. A leader's capacity to demonstrate self-assurance, friendliness, sensitivity, and empathetic traits were all viewed as essential. In a surprising part of the findings of the study, Olympic athletes had the most balanced answers to the questions regarding confidence and extroversion. The results of the survey indicated that 91 respondents agreed with this statement or strongly agreed with it. This implies that this is one of

the most essential characteristics of a leader. In contrast, 16 out of the respondents were neutral, while 11 of the respondents disagreed with the assertion that a confident leader is a valuable quality. As noted in their survey, the Olympic athletes found that they disagreed most vehemently with the requirement for a leader to demonstrate self-confidence. Thirty-one of the athletes surveyed were neutral with respect to leadership traits, i.e., did not consider it to be an influential quality, while 82 athletes agreed and strongly agreed (n = 38), and six athletes disapproved. This constitutes an interesting finding as Olympic athletes are well-known for radiating self-confidence in their ability to perform at the highest level under increased levels of stress during competition. Numerous studies have demonstrated that athletes who have the greatest confidence in their abilities will be the most successful in achieving their goals if they are focused on their mental, physical, and emotional preparation. Confidence is achieved by the proper preparation for competition, including mental, physical, and holistic preparation, as well as accomplishments in both training and competition. Using specific and extensive mental training, Olympians can stay focused, keeping their emotions under control regardless of the stressors and obstacles in their way to successfully achieve their set goals (Robazza & Bortoli, 1998).

Additionally, Olympians, just like elite athletes have the exceptional ability to assess the risks they must take to win and can be bolder than others in their approach to competition and tactics used to achieve a successful outcome (Kay & Shipman, 2014). Confidence shown when assessing risks associated with the making decisions and how these risks are managed are qualities of a successful leader. Confidence is also expressed to one’s ability to be open to receive any criticism. In general terms, feedback is about telling people what we think of their performance and how they should do it better. Ensuring that the person receiving the feedback does not become defensive to the criticism offered can be achieved by working together with the recipient of the feedback to create the next steps by developing new opportunities. With both the managers and the workers wanting to complete their jobs well, everyone can benefit when the feedback produces new ideas and solutions and the recipients of feedback are using what they heard as a motivation to make the necessary changes (Gnepp, Klayman, Williamson, & Barlas, 2020). Throughout their careers, Olympians have been coached and guided by skilled mentors and coaches whose job was to bring out the best in them, even beyond their perceived capabilities. This acquired trait can be transferred to real-life situations, where a confident leader will understand the value to “be coachable toward getting what you want” (Burtka, 2016).

When analyzing the individual leadership scores, there was a large range of scores from a maximum of 70 points to a minimum of 32 points. The most frequent score (n=16) obtained by the survey athletes was the maximum score of 70, followed by the score of 64 obtained by 11 athletes. Figure 1 gives the spread of the individual scores of the Olympians in terms of their LTQ scores.

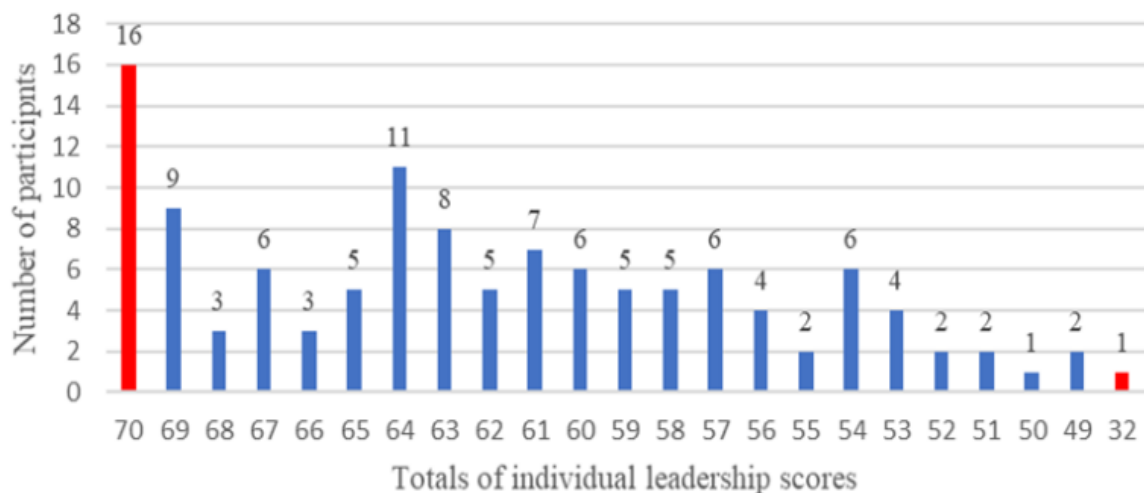


Figure 1. Individual leadership scores.

Considering their learned leadership skills of the elite athlete, the number of Olympic games they have competed could represent another variable that might potentially influence the mean LTQ score. Analyzing the scores, most surveyed athletes (n=45) participated in one Summer Olympic Game and obtained an average LTQ score of 63.8, while the unmatched achievement in competing in six Summer Games achieved by 2 athletes obtained a mean LTQ score of 62. The results of the survey show that number of Olympic games participation does not produce a statistically significant difference between the LTQ scores of athletes who participated in one or more games. The data obtained from crosstabulation between LTQ scores and number of Olympic Games participation can be seen in Figure 2.

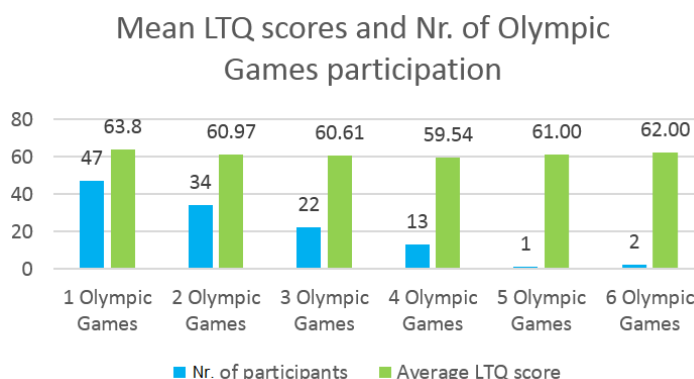


Figure 2. Cross tabulation of mean LTQ scores and number of Olympic Games participation.

Gender differences between the mean LTQ scores were also analyzed. Female Olympians (n=64) scores higher, 62.53 compared to their male counterparts (n=55) who's mean LTQ score was 61.14. By comparing the mean LTQ scores for each age group, we can conclude that a person's ability to develop leadership skills during their career and life is steadily increasing, as the results show in Figure 3.

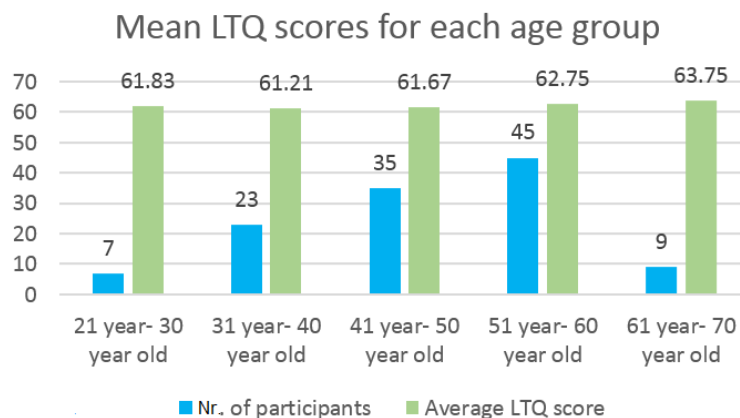


Figure 3. Cross tabulation of mean LTQ scores and age groups.

The career choices made by Olympians after completing their sporting careers varied but most Olympians surveyed relied upon their sport-specific knowledge gained through years of training and competition and became coaches (n=46). There were also others who remained in the sporting world, taking up careers such as a consultant (n=7), a college professor (n=4), teachers (n=4), or physical therapists (n=1). Other elite athletes in our survey have ventured into other fields such as law, technical support, engineering, and accounting, while others have already retired (n=5). The researcher examined if there was any correlation between the choice of career and the average LTQ of elite athletes. According to data collected, there is no significant correlation between an individual's LTQ score and their career choices, as shown in Figure 4.

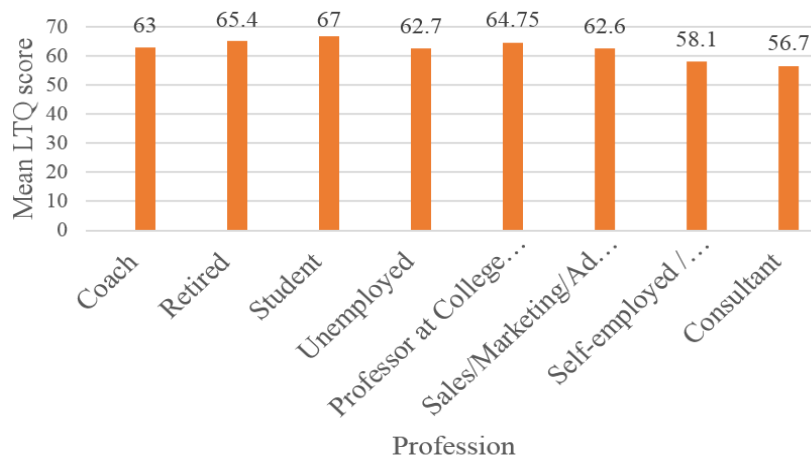


Figure 4. Correlation between profession and LTQ score.

Research has indicated that many Olympians choose to become coaches because they believe that their guidance and influence on the next generation of athletes is crucial since they can impart a valuable experience that will aid the next generation to succeed. According to this study, only a few Olympians have ventured into other professions outside of the sports world, where they utilize their distinctive leadership traits.

5. CONCLUSION

The ability to inspire others to work hard is a natural characteristic of Olympic athletes who lead by example. Nevertheless, it is imperative that the Olympians be aware of their own leadership qualities. The transferrable nature of all these characteristics will allow them to transition into a career after sports smoothly. There are many reasons why athletes make excellent employees. The ability to overcome challenges, recover from setbacks, and learn from these experiences enables them to acquire an extraordinary skill set that is only developed through numerous competitions. Olympic athletes also possess excellent time management skills and the ability to concentrate on the task at hand, enabling them to achieve their goals. The ability to work with a team is a crucial part of being an athlete. Using each team member's strengths and communicating effectively with each other are central to teamwork, as I mentioned in the previous paragraph. Furthermore, they are accustomed to and welcome feedback as a tool to improve themselves and their performance. The hiring of an employee with all these characteristics would be of significant value to a company, as they are essential for a successful employee. Several Olympians have successfully transitioned from sports to new careers by recognizing and utilizing their leadership characteristics. A former Olympic gold medalist swimmer, Nancy Hogshead-Makar is a civil rights lawyer advocating for women in cases relating to gender equity, sexual harassment, sexual abuse, employment discrimination, and Title IX through her nonprofit organization, The Champion Women. She pushes herself to get a little bit better every day, living by her own words "If you have big goals, the time you have to work toward them is precious" (Burtka, 2016). Derek Bouchard-Hall president and CEO of USA Cycling, Olympian, credits cycling to exposing him to various leadership styles thanks to his coaches. While these leadership styles were successful, Bouchard- Hall learned to adapt the skills observed to his own personality, learning the most from failures and understanding the value of "leading in a way consistent with your natural ability" (Burtka, 2016). Michelle Kwan transferred her skills as an Olympic medalist skater to politics when she was appointed as the first Public Diplomacy Envoy in 2006. As a representative of the State Department, I engage youth throughout the world on social and educational issues. Earlier this year, President Biden appointed her ambassador to Belize. Alyson Felix, the multiple Olympic gold medalist runner, is a health advocate for women. In response to Nike, her sponsor, refusing to offer salary protection for female athletes during and after pregnancy, she became a vocal advocate for maternal protection. As a result of her efforts, Nike

changed their policy in 2019. Several Olympians have successfully transferred their leadership skills to various national and international sports organizations, such as national Olympic committees, sports ministries, and sports federations. Among the many leadership qualities that Olympic athletes possess, such as "the ability to communicate, the ability to work well with others, and competitiveness" (Stevenson, 2010) these traits were not only developed through participation and competition in sports but also easily transferable throughout life. Olympic and elite athletes are highly employable because of their natural ability to lead by example, demonstrate superior leadership skills, and display a host of other qualities. Every organization would be proud of having on their team. Leaders in the industry can take advantage of the findings of the research by employing Olympic athletes who will result in enhanced productivity and success for their organizations.

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