

12-31-2024

## Passion for What? Key Considerations for Passion in the Sport Workplace

Steve Swanson  
s.swanson@deakin.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jasm>



Part of the [Education Commons](#), [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#), and the [Sports Management Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Swanson, Steve (2024) "Passion for What? Key Considerations for Passion in the Sport Workplace," *Journal of Applied Sport Management*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 4.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/jasm16fjdd>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jasm/vol16/iss4/6>

This article is brought to you freely and openly by Volunteer, Open-access, Library-hosted Journals (VOL Journals), published in partnership with The University of Tennessee (UT) University Libraries. This article has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Applied Sport Management* by an authorized editor. For more information, please visit <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jasm>.

---

## Passion for What? Key Considerations for Passion in the Sport Workplace

### Cover Page Footnote

The sporting world is replete with emotion. Intense feelings of many forms are experienced by a wide range of actors consuming sport, with passion receiving some of the greatest attention across a spectrum of emotions studied in sport management. The notion of passionate employees is ubiquitous in the sport environment, with research suggesting emotion from the sporting arena spills over to the workplace. This article highlights key considerations about sport employee passion that need addressing, including what it is that they are actually passionate about, the role that identity plays for these individuals, and whether sport employee passion is inherently good. Discussion ensues on the origin of sport employee passion, with a focus on leadership as a potential driver of this phenomenon. Approaches that may be well-positioned to effectively influence sport employee passion include emotionally intelligent leadership, empathic leadership, and identity leadership.

## Passion for What?

### Key Considerations for Passion in the Sport Workplace

**Steve Swanson**

*Deakin University*

---

Please send correspondence to Steve Swanson, [s.swanson@deakin.edu.au](mailto:s.swanson@deakin.edu.au)

#### **Abstract**

The sporting world is replete with emotion. Intense feelings of many forms are experienced by a wide range of actors consuming sport, with passion receiving some of the greatest attention across a spectrum of emotions studied in sport management. The notion of passionate employees is ubiquitous in the sport environment, with research suggesting emotion from the sporting arena spills over to the workplace. This article highlights key considerations about sport employee passion that need addressing, including what it is that they are actually passionate about, the role that identity plays for these individuals, and whether sport employee passion is inherently good. Discussion ensues on the origin of sport employee passion, with a focus on leadership as a potential driver of this phenomenon. Approaches that may be well-positioned to effectively influence sport employee passion include emotionally intelligent leadership, empathic leadership, and identity leadership.

*Keywords:* passion, leadership, identity, employees, workplace, sport management

There is a deep connection between sport and emotion. At the core of this relationship is the emotional space that sporting experiences provide for those taking part in sport—a wide range of individuals including high-performance athletes, youth participants, and community sport club members. Myriad feelings can surface in people playing sport, including both positive (e.g., joy and pride) and negative emotions (e.g., anger and frustration). Intense sporting activity can manifest feelings ranging from euphoria via goal achievement to frustration from physical strain. This range of emotions also extends to those who watch athletes compete in sport, where we see fans experience their own form of euphoria and pride via team success, as well as anxiety and depression in defeat.

Of the wide range of emotions studied in sport management, passion has garnered some of the greatest attention across the ecosystem of stakeholders in the sport environment, including athletes (Schellenberg, 2021), coaches (Peixoto, 2023), referees (Philippe et al., 2009), employees (Swanson & Kent, 2017a), board members (Zeimers et al., 2022), volunteers (Welty Peachey et al., 2014), fans (Wakefield, 2016), spectators (Magnusen et al., 2023), consumers (Aiken et al., 2018), and sport entrepreneurs (Winand et al., 2023). This body of research broadly indicates that people are passionate about sport through their respective points of connectivity, whether it be through participation, support, or vocation.

### **Traditional Conceptualization of Passion**

Research on passion in the sport environment has primarily drawn from the model developed by Robert Vallerand and colleagues, which generally characterizes passion as a strong feeling towards something that people like (or love), consider important, and devote their time and energy to (Vallerand et al., 2003; Vallerand et al., 2010). Known as the Dualistic Model of Passion, this conceptualization identifies two forms of passion differentiated by the way they are internalized. Harmonious passion is the result of autonomous internalization where people freely engage and willingly accept the focal entity (e.g., activity or object) as important (Marsh et al., 2013). In contrast, obsessive passion is viewed as stemming from a controlled internalization process where people experience an uncontrollable desire to engage due to perceptions of related contingencies (Vallerand et al., 2010). In sum, these different ways to experience passion can be distinguished by a sense of personal approval and volition (harmonious) versus a sense of pressure to engage for social acceptance, excitement, or self-esteem reasons (obsessive) (Vallerand et al., 2003). In terms of outcomes, research has generally shown a connection between harmonious passion and positive outcomes, with obsessive passion being associated with negative (or less positive) consequences (Vallerand, 2015).

### **Sport Employee Passion**

Passionate employees are associated with many individual and organizational benefits, such as greater satisfaction and interpersonal relations, and enhanced creativity and performance (Perttula & Cardon, 2011). In the sport environment, there are a multitude of passionate employee anecdotes, and many of us have experienced this first-hand in our research projects and practitioner work. Broadly speaking, foundational studies on sport employee passion have collectively provided evidence that (a) passion indeed exists in sport organisations, (b) it is associated with positive workplace outcomes, (c) passion from

the traditional sporting environment (e.g., from playing, coaching, and being a fan) appears to permeate the sport workplace, and (d) that, distinct from other contexts, obsessive passion can have positive effects in the sport workplace (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2016; Swanson & Kent, 2017a).

### **Passion for Work? Or Passion for Something Else?**

Passion research in the sport organizational setting has predominately utilized (or to some degree drawn from) Vallerand's dualistic conceptualization of passion, which has traditionally focused on work (i.e., "The Passion for Work Scale"). Some scholars have also operationalized these items to focus on one's job (e.g., Anagnostopoulos et al., 2016). An area needing further consideration is the bundle of meaning wrapped up in sport employees' conceptualizations of their "work" or "job." For starters, there is a difference in meaning between these words. Vallerand's early research refers primarily to passion with an activity (i.e., "work"), while noting that one's passion could also be directed toward an object (e.g., a "job"). An object is generally considered as a static entity, whereas an activity would be viewed more as a dynamic process. Distinctions such as this, and the specific focus of sport employee passion, may have important implications for how we view and interpret this phenomenon. Future qualitative research will need to unpack the true meaning of sport employee passion, including the actual focus of their passion (i.e., the actual work they do, the idea of their job, or something else).

### **Sport as a Major Factor in Being Passionate About a (Sport) Job**

A first contention here is that sport employees may be more passionate about the concept of "working in sport" than they are about their actual job or the specific work they do in that job. That is, when answering questions about how passionate they are about their *job*, what we are capturing may in large part be their passion for *sport* or the *sport industry*. There are several straightforward ways to consider this. First, we know through experience that a common initial response to the question "Why do you want this job?" is "because I love sport!" Therefore, lovers of sport will be more attracted to sport jobs and feel like they fit best within this industry (Todd & Kent, 2009). Second, sport is "cool." Telling people that you work in sport has "street cred," as it connects to something we see playing out live around us, with a high media presence and connection with famous people and social influencers. Sport employees recognize this high status reputation, popularity, and social prestige (Todd & Harris, 2009; Todd & Kent, 2009), and that likely feeds their passion in this work context. Considering Vallerand's definition, what employees in this context have a strong feeling towards (or love) is likely more about the *idea of sport*, than the *actual tasks* they do as part of their work role. Said another way, it might not be about the work they do, but instead what the job means to them.

### **The Role of Identity for Sport Employee Passion**

Although a key feature of Vallerand's perspective on passion is how the focal activity is internalized (i.e., autonomously for harmonious, and non-autonomously for obsessive), what is sometimes lost in this description is the internalization aspect is into one's *identity*. Indeed, the evolution of Vallerand's work includes an updated definition of passion that explicitly highlights the activity or object that one is passionate about becomes part of their identity (Vallerand, 2015). However, the specific way in which this

happens is less clear. For example, in which direction is the causal influence: Does passion lead to identity formation, or does identity bolster passion? On balance, it appears that the answer could be both—where they are so intertwined that a reciprocal, reinforcing relationship exists.

Although it is clear that passion is related to identity, what is not clear is how passion is situated in the nomological net of identity constructs at play in the sport context. As in other settings, sport employees can identify with traditional groups that they belong to as part of organizational hierarchies such as work-groups and teams, departments, and their overall organization. In addition, sport management research has also identified other foci of identification relevant to sport employees, including the sport teams (on the field) and the specific sport they work in (e.g., basketball) (Swanson & Kent, 2015, 2017b). Where then does sport employee passion fit into this literature on sport employee identification? Can sport employees be passionate about all the same focal entities (e.g., organizational passion, team passion, industry passion)? Is this passion across multiple aspects of the sport environment somehow captured in what we are currently referring to as sport employee passion?

### **Is Sport Employee Passion Inherently Good?**

Sport management research on employee passion has demonstrated associations with several positive workplace outcomes. However, this is possibly only telling half of the real story. For example, you can't find what you don't look for (i.e., in a research question, hypothesis, or statistical model). That is, it is likely that passion could to some degree be related to negative outcomes as well (e.g., burnout, anxiety). For example, if passion from the traditional sporting environment indeed permeates the sport workplace, then we should also consider relationships with several fan-related negative behaviors like aggression, harassment, or moral disengagement. Taken together, the more accurate depiction of sport employee passion may well be one that demonstrates its positive and negative influences simultaneously. Such findings would then force scholars to grapple with the relative importance of workplace outcomes (e.g., good vs. bad) and the net value and impact of passion. Another related question focuses on whether more passion is always good or if an optimal (maximum) level exists. The answer has significant implications. Should sport managers be looking for employees with the most passion? Is there a way to optimally manage and sustain this passion? Future consideration is also needed around how passion relates to the holistic well-being of sport employees (Swanson et al., 2022). For example, could it be that obsessive passion in the sport workplace has different effects on different well-being domains (e.g., positive for psychological well-being, neutral for social well-being, and negative for physical well-being)?

### **From Where Does Sport Employee Passion Come?**

The bulk of the passion literature focuses on the presence, type, and influence of passion rather than its antecedents. However, a fundamental question about sport employee passion relates to its origin. A simple typology of sport employee passion antecedents could be viewed as either related specifically to the individual (e.g., internal: characteristics and backgrounds) or the sport employees' interaction with the organizational environment (e.g., external: culture and management). In answering this question, an essential step is to gain insight on the true focus of sport employee passion (e.g., the work, the job, the industry, or sport more generally), as passion for different aspects of the work environment could stem from

different things. For example, passion for the sport industry could be largely driven by its distinctiveness and image, whereas passion for work might be more closely related to perceived fit and organizational culture.

### **Leadership as a Potential Driver for Sport Employee Passion**

Although there is a sense in the literature that sport employees generally have passion, a proposition of this paper is that leadership will also be a driver of this emotion. That is, leadership is to a large degree about inspiration (Bass, 2008), which is fundamentally about being stimulated to feel something that will propel you forward in a meaningful way. The sport environment (and popular culture) is replete with passionate sport leaders who motivate their teams to be passionate as well. Although Vallerand's conceptualization of passion gives a sense that this process starts with an employee's internalization of a focal activity or entity, in all likelihood other factors are at play that may stimulate and enhance this process. Indeed, leadership appears to be well-placed to make a difference in this space (i.e., to make sport employees even more passionate, to sustain their passion during difficult times, and to help them navigate the emotional rollercoaster of the sport workplace and life more generally). Furthermore, some leadership approaches may be better positioned than others to effectively influence sport employee passion.

#### ***Emotionally Intelligent Leadership***

A baseline for leading a passionate workforce is through emotionally intelligent leadership. As emotional intelligence is essentially about the awareness of emotion and the ability to manage emotions in the self and others (Goleman, 1995), it follows that this would be a critical factor for harnessing sport employee passion for positive workplace outcomes. For example, emotional intelligence essentially starts with being aware of one's emotions and managing them effectively. From this perspective, sport leaders who are aware of their own types (i.e., harmonious and obsessive) and levels of passion could arguably be more effective as leaders when they first manage these feelings from within. In turn, from this solid emotional foundation, sport leaders would then be better equipped to understand and influence the passion of their employees (Dee et al., 2018).

#### ***Empathic Leadership***

Being in tune with sport employee emotions should also be a fruitful avenue for leaders to shape positive outcomes from passion. Empathic leadership refers to an approach where leaders create emotional bonds and focus on understanding and addressing the perspectives, feelings, and needs of their group (Skinner et al., 2018). This approach might be especially relevant to the dualistic view of passion. For example, empathic leaders will understand and foster emotional connections to work, which should lead to harmonious feelings of passion. In addition, empathic leaders can vicariously experience employees' obsessive feelings, which should result in more productive and measured forms of this passion. In sum, it seems plausible that sport employee passion would be enhanced by a leadership approach predicated on understanding the emotional needs of their followers.

#### ***Identity Leadership***

Another leadership approach that might be especially relevant to sport employee passion is iden-

tity leadership (Hogg, 2001; Hogg & van Knippenberg, 2003). Stemming from social identity theory, this approach focuses on the leader's ability to represent, advance, create, and embed a collective identity (Haslam et al., 2022). It can be argued that all of these facets will be positively connected with sport employee passion in some way. That is, sport employees who feel their leader represents who they are, stands up for them, makes them feel they matter, and are part of the team (Steffens et al., 2014) will in turn likely be more passionate about their roles. Further, these levers of identity leadership are emotive by nature. Said differently, it is easy to see how sport leaders who represent and stick up for their employees, while creating a sense of belonging and cohesiveness, will enhance the passion those individuals have for their work.

### Conclusion

Significant opportunities exist for advancing our understanding of sport employee passion and how it relates to identification in the sport context. Throughout this journey it will be critical to gain insight on what sport employees are specifically passionate about, the ways in which employee passion develops in this context, and how both forms of passion (i.e., harmonious and obsessive) relate to sport employee well-being. In parallel to these efforts, leadership approaches with a clear connection to emotion have tremendous potential as drivers of passion in the sport workplace.

### References

- Anagnostopoulos, C., Winand, M., & Papadimitriou, D. (2016). Passion in the workplace: Empirical insights from team sport organisations. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 16(4), 385–412.
- Aiken, K. D., Bee, C., & Walker, N. (2018). From passion to obsession: Development and validation of a scale to measure compulsive sport consumption. *Journal of Business Research*, 87, 69–79.
- Bass, B. M. (2008). *The Bass handbook of leadership*. Free Press.
- Dee, K., Bryham, G., & Ferkins, L. (2018). Advancing leadership in sport management: Revealing the significance of emotional intelligence. *International Journal of Sport Management*, 19(1).
- Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. Bantam Books.
- Haslam, S. A., Gaffney, A. M., Hogg, M. A., Rast, D. E., III, & Steffens, N. K. (2022). Reconciling identity leadership and leader identity: A dual-identity framework. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 33(4), 101620.
- Hogg, M. A. (2001). A social identity theory of leadership. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 5, 184–200.
- Hogg, M. A., & van Knippenberg, D. (2003). Social identity and leadership processes in groups. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 35, pp. 1–52). Academic Press.
- Magnusen, M., Marsh, P., & Petersen, J. (2023). The collegiate sport experience: Reconceptualizing

- sport venues and college athlete satisfaction: Reconceptualizing sport venues. *Journal of Amateur Sport*, 9(1), 73-101.
- Marsh, H. W., Vallerand, R. J., Lafrenière, M. A. K., Parker, P., Morin, A. J., Carbonneau, N., Jowett, S., Bureau, J.S., Fernet, C., Guay, F., Abduljabbar, A.S., & Paquet, Y. (2013). Passion: Does one scale fit all? Construct validity of two-factor passion scale and psychometric invariance over different activities and languages. *Psychological Assessment*, 25(3), 796-809.
- Perttula, K. H., & Cardon, M. S. (2011). Passion. In K. S. Cameron & G. M. Spreitzer (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of positive organisational scholarship* (pp. 190–200). Oxford University Press.
- Peixoto, E. M., Palma, B. P., Romano, A. R., Vieira, T. C. H., & Galatti, L. R. (2023). Passion for work and job satisfaction in sports coaches: The mediating role of flow experiences. *International Sport Coaching Journal*, 11(1), 136–145.
- Philippe, F. L., Vallerand, R. J., Andrianarisoa, J., & Brunel, P. (2009). Passion in referees: Examining their affective and cognitive experiences in sport situations. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 31(1), 77–96.
- Schellenberg, B. J., Verner-Filion, J., & Gaudreau, P. (2021). Savoring sport: Connections with athlete passion and burnout. *Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology*, 16(1), 23–41.
- Skinner, J., Smith, A. C., & Swanson, S. (2018). *Fostering innovative cultures in sport: Leadership, innovation and change*. Springer.
- Steffens, N. K., Haslam, S. A., Reicher, S. D., Platow, M. J., Fransen, K., Yang, J., Ryan, M.K., Jetten, J., Peters, K., & Boen, F. (2014). Leadership as social identity management: Introducing the Identity Leadership Inventory (ILI) to assess and validate a four-dimensional model. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 25(5), 1001–1024.
- Swanson, S., & Kent, A. (2015). Fandom in the workplace: Multi-target identification in professional team sports. *Journal of Sport Management*, 29(4), 461–477.
- Swanson, S., & Kent, A. (2017a). Passion and pride in professional sports: Investigating the role of workplace emotion. *Sport Management Review*, 20(4), 352–364.
- Swanson, S., & Kent, A. (2017b). Sport identification and employee pride: Key factors in sport employee psychology. *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing*, 17(1–2), 32–51.
- Swanson, S., Todd, S., Inoue, Y., & Welty Peachey, J. (2022). Leading for multidimensional sport employee well-being: the role of servant leadership and teamwork. *Sport Management Review*, 25(5), 748–770.
- Todd, S. Y., & Harris, K. J. (2009). What it means when your work is admired by others: Observations of employees of professional sport organizations. *Journal of Behavioral & Applied Management*, 10(3), 377-395.

- Todd, S., & Kent, A. (2009). A social identity perspective on the job attitudes of employees in sport. *Management Decision*, 47(1), 173–190.
- Vallerand, R. J. (2015). A history and definition of passion. *The psychology of passion: A dualistic model*. Oxford University Press.
- Vallerand, R. J., Blanchard, C., Mageau, G. A., Koestner, R., Ratelle, C., Léonard, M., Gagne, M., & Marsolais, J. (2003). Les passions de l'ame: On obsessive and harmonious passion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85(4), 756-767.
- Vallerand, R. J., Paquet, Y., Philippe, F. L., & Charest, J. (2010). On the role of passion for work in burn-out: A process model. *Journal of Personality*, 78(1), 289–312.
- Wakefield, K. (2016). Using fan passion to predict attendance, media consumption, and social media behaviors. *Journal of Sport Management*, 30(3), 229–247.
- Welty Peachey, J., Lyras, A., Cohen, A., Bruening, J. E., & Cunningham, G. B. (2014). Exploring the motives and retention factors of sport-for-development Volunteers. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 43(6), 1052–1069.
- Winand, M., Bell, E., & Zeimers, G. (2023). “It's not just a job, it's a passion”: Passions and motivations of sport entrepreneurs. *Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal*, 13(3), 269–288.
- Zeimers, G., Shilbury, D., & McLeod, J. (2022). A qualitative study examining how passion impacts sport board functioning. *Leisure Sciences*, 1, 1–23.