

Applying Management Theories to the Entities of Sports Ecosystem

The paper aims to explore how classical and contemporary management theories can be applied to different entities within the sports ecosystem. The core entities—such as clubs, players, fans, and agents—and non-core entities like media, sponsors, and public bodies are examined. Qualitative analysis and real-world examples from the NBA, Euroleague, European football, and the NFL were used to map theories including scientific management, administrative theory, human relations, contingency, complexity, and open innovation to specific roles in sport. The findings demonstrate that no single theory is universally applicable; rather, effective sports management necessitates a combination of contextual factors and hybrid approaches. A comparative framework is presented to guide the application of management theory across the ecosystem. This paper bridges theory and practice, offering sports professionals a strategic lens for navigating organizational complexity through context-driven, hybrid management approaches.

Keywords: fan engagement, open innovation, organizational theory, sports ecosystem, sports management.

Šio straipsnio tikslas – išanalizuoti, kaip klasikinės ir šiuolaikinės vadybos teorijos gali būti taikomos skirtingiems sporto ekosistemos dalyviams. Nagrinėjami pagrindiniai dalyviai – klubai, žaidėjai, sirgaliai ir agentai – bei antriniai dalyviai, tokie kaip žiniasklaida, rėmėjai ir viešosios institucijos. Atlikta kokybinė analizė, pasitelkiant realius pavyzdžius iš NBA, Eurolygos, Europos futbolo ir NFL lygų, siekiant susieti tokias teorijas kaip mokslinė vadyba, administracinė teorija, žmoniškųjų santykių teorija, kontingencijos teorija, sudėtingumo teorija ir atviroji inovacija su konkrečiais sporto vaidmenimis. Tyrimo rezultatai parodė, kad nė viena teorija nėra universali – veiksmingas sporto valdymas reikalauja kontekstinių veiksmų derinio ir hibridinio požiūrio. Pateikiamas lyginamasis modelis, padedantis taikyti vadybos teorijas visoje ekosistemoje. Straipsnyje susieta teorija ir praktika, suteikiant sporto profesionalams strateginę perspektyvą organizaciniam sudėtingumui valdyti per kontekstui jautrius, hibridinius vadybos metodus.

Raktiniai žodžiai: sudėtingumas, kontingencijos teorija, sirgalių įsitraukimas, atviroji inovacija, organizacijų teorija, sporto ekosistema, sporto vadyba, suinteresuotųjų šalių valdymas.

Introduction

The evolution of management thought – from early 20th-century “classical” approaches to later human-centric and complex-systems views – provides a rich lens to examine how organizations function. Scholars have long contested

whether management concepts are universal or context-specific (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013; Koen, 2005; Miles, 2012). In the field of sport, organizations and stakeholders form an integrated sports ecosystem driven by distinct dynamics. Within this network, no single player functions in isolation; value is created

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collaboratively through their interactions. M. Buser et al. (2022) define the sport ecosystem as “a complex network of relationships” driven by economic, political, technological, and social influences, emphasizing that sport outcomes result from multi-actor interactions.

This paper analyzes how different management theories apply to entities within the sports ecosystem, focusing on core sports organizations—such as clubs, players, fans, agents, and media—while excluding non-core entities like sponsors, governing bodies, and similar peripheral actors.

Despite the widespread use of management in sport, it remains unclear which management theories work best for different types of entities. Therefore, **the scientific problem of this paper** deals with the central question: which management theories best fit the needs of different sports ecosystem entities?

The aim of the paper is to propose a comparative framework showing how each theory aligns with different entities. Consequently, the object of the paper is management theories applicable for different sports ecosystem entities.

To address the research problem, qualitative analysis and real-world examples from the NBA, Euroleague, European football, and the NFL were employed to map relevant theories including scientific management, administrative theory, human relations, contingency, complexity, and open innovation to specific roles in sport.

The contribution of the paper to the field of knowledge is threefold. Sports ecosystem framework is elaborated to better present the complexity of the phenomenon. Core management theories are aggregated and presented. Finally,

this paper bridges theory and practice, offering sports professionals a strategic lens for navigating organizational complexity through context-driven, hybrid management approaches.

Theoretical background

Sports ecosystem framework: core and peripheral entities

Based on business ecosystem theory (Moore, 1993), the sports ecosystem is defined as a network of organizations and stakeholders whose interactions produce the “sports product” – the competitions, entertainment, and value generated by sports. This definition extends beyond a single team or league to include all entities that directly or indirectly contribute to the sports experience. This study delineates between core entities (central to producing the sports product) and non-core entities (important but more peripheral to day-to-day sport delivery). Based on the research of numerous authors (Bailey et al., 2014; Brumbeloe, 2022; Centre for Sport and Human Rights, n.d.; Collignon & Sultan, 2014; Da Silva & Las Casas, 2018; Danglade & Maltese, 2014; Komskienė et al., 2015; Leopkey & Parent, 2015; Mendizabal et al., 2020; Pittz et al., 2021; Rundh & Gottfridsson, 2015; Shilbury et al., 2009), the main sports entities that were determined are: fans; media; sports clubs; players; sponsors; leagues; agents; athletes’ support groups; goods and service providers; facilities; governing bodies; philanthropic foundations; betting platforms (Figure 1).

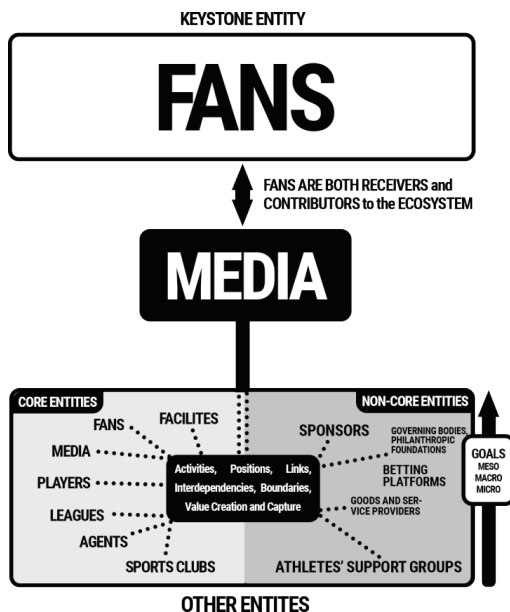


Fig. 1. Classification of sports ecosystem and core and non-core sports ecosystem entities

Source: elaborated based on the findings of B. Rundh and P. Gottfridson (2015); D. Shilbury et al. (2009); H. Collignon and N. Sultan (2014); J. P. Danglade and L. Maltese (2014); J. Bailey et al. (2014); D. Kornskenė et al. (2015); B. Leopkey and M. M. Parent (2015); S. Brumbeol (2022); T. Pittz et al. (2021); X. Mendizabal et al. (2020).

For the purposes of this paper, entities primarily focused on creating the sports product—fans, media, sports clubs, players, leagues, agents, and facilities—are identified as **core sports entities**. And these entities, who benefit from sports and do not focus on creating the sports product are identified as **non-core sports entities**: sponsors, athletes' support groups, goods and service providers, governing bodies, philanthropic foundations, and betting platforms. Only the core sports entities are analyzed in the following sections.

Numerous scholars have identified *fans* as the pivotal actors driving value at the center of the sports ecosystem. L. Bailey et al. (2014) describes fans as the “keystone” entity around which all other stakeholders revolve. A keystone is

an entity that is critical to the structure and health of an ecosystem (Iansiti & Levien, 2004). Fans play this role by creating the demand, revenue, and passion that power sports leagues and teams. Indeed, various models place fans at the core: for example, J. P. Danglade and L. Maltese (2014) position fans as the core drivers of the sports ecosystem, generating revenue through their engagement and ultimately influencing the success of leagues and teams. Fans' actions – attending games, viewing broadcasts, buying merchandise, and engaging on social media – are the catalyst for the entire sports industry's existence.

The *media* is another essential basic component. Media companies, such as radio stations, streaming services, television networks, and digital media, serve

as distribution channels for sports content in contemporary sports, reaching a wider audience. In addition to being a stakeholder in and of itself, the media also adds value for other organizations. Media firms produce sports news and narratives, broadcast live games, and interact with fans outside of stadiums around the clock. According to H. Collignon and N. Sultan (2014), the media not only disseminates sports merchandise but also crafts the narratives and affective bonds that strengthen fan loyalty.

Another essential component is the *sports club*, which is more than just a gathering of players; it is a formal organization that manages a variety of responsibilities, including athlete development and coaching, marketing, and operations. Clubs field sporting teams, which often include owners, executives, coaches, support staff, and, in some cases, young academies.

Closely related are the *players (athletes)* themselves. One can consider players as part of clubs (employees), but top athletes today also function as individual brands or enterprises (with personal sponsors, social media followings, etc.). Athletes are the ones who perform and create the entertainment value on the field. Their centrality is evident – without their “on-field” or “on-court” actions, there is no sports product to sell. As H. Collignon and Sultan (2014) note, players deliver competitive drama and skill that attract fans, generate media content, and draw sponsorships.

Leagues and sport's governing bodies provide the organizational framework for competition. As described by D. Shilbury et al. (2009) and Collignon and N. Sultan (2014), leagues play a key

role in structuring the sports ecosystem. Leagues (such as the NBA, English Premier League, or Euroleague) organize schedules and tournaments, enforce rules of play, and often handle collective business aspects (like negotiating league-wide media contracts or merchandising). Governing bodies (like the International Olympic Committee, FIFA in soccer, or national federations) set sport regulations, oversee rule enforcement, and interface with governments. These bodies ensure that sport is staged in an orderly, fair, and sustainable manner. They tend to have formalized, bureaucratic structures (committees, constitutions, rulebooks), especially at the international level.

Another core entity in the sports ecosystem is *agents*, who represent athletes in negotiations with clubs and sponsors and essentially operate in the talent marketplace. They connect players with teams (contract negotiations, transfers) and with endorsements. In doing so, they occupy a pivotal position in the network of relationships – a classic middleman role that has implications for labor market efficiency and power dynamics.

Venues (stadiums, arenas, training centres) are not necessarily sports-oriented, as they can host various events, but they are crucial to the final product. Facilities enable the live spectator experience and often carry huge financial and operational demands.

Overview of management theories

Management theory has evolved over the past century through various schools of thought, each offering different assumptions about how organizations function.

This section briefly outlines the main theoretical perspectives that inform the analysis.

Scientific Management (Taylor, 1911). The approach prioritizes efficiency by means of task optimization, standardization, and managerial control. It assumes that workers are motivated primarily by pay and perform better with clearly defined tasks and incentives. Strengths include increased productivity and the use of time-motion studies. Limitations include neglecting human needs and being poorly suited for creative or dynamic environments.

Administrative Management (Fayol, 1949). Emphasizes formal structure and universal managerial functions: planning, organizing, commanding, coordinating, and controlling. Assumes general principles can be applied across organizations. Strengths include a foundational framework for management education. Limitations include rigidity and lack of adaptability.

Bureaucratic Theory (Weber, 1922/1978). The theory focuses on rational-legal authority, hierarchy, and formal procedures. It is assumed that organizations operate most efficiently under standardized roles and impersonal relationships. Strengths include fairness and predictability. Limitations include rigidity, resistance to change, and potential alienation.

Human Relations Theory (Mayo, 1933). The theory places significant emphasis on social dynamics, morale, and informal networks. Based on findings from the Hawthorne studies, it argues that recognition and group belonging increase productivity. Strengths include a focus on employee well-being and

teamwork. Limitations include possible naivety and difficulty in measurement.

Theory X and Theory Y (McGregor, 1960). Contrasts two managerial views: Theory X (people dislike work, need control) and Theory Y (people are self-motivated, seek responsibility). Strengths include reflection on managerial assumptions and support for participative management. Limitations include oversimplification and varying worker preferences.

Theory Z (Ouchi, 1981). This theory integrates both Japanese and Western management practices. The organization places a strong emphasis on trust, long-term employment, and collective responsibility. Strengths include high loyalty, morale, and group cohesion. Limitations include cultural transferability and slow decision-making.

Contingency Theory (Fiedler, 1964; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). The theory posits that effective management hinges on the alignment of organizational variables with environmental factors. Strengths include flexibility and realism. Limitations involve complexity and a lack of universal guidelines.

Learning Organization (Senge, 1990). Encourages continuous learning and organizational adaptation. It emphasizes the importance of systems thinking, team learning, and a shared vision. Strengths include innovation, knowledge sharing, and resilience. Limitations include implementation difficulty and long-term ROI uncertainty.

Complexity Theory (Stacey, 1996; Wheatley, 2006). The theory perceives organizations as adaptive systems, moulded by non-linear dynamics, feedback loops, and emergence. Strengths include

adaptability and suitability for turbulent environments. Limitations include abstraction and lack of practical tools.

Open Innovation Theory (Chesbrough, 2003). Proposes that organizations can and should use both internal and external ideas to advance innovation, breaking away from the traditional closed R&D model. It assumes that valuable knowledge exists beyond organizational boundaries and that collaborating with external partners such as startups, universities, and users can enhance competitiveness. Strengths include faster innovation, access to diverse expertise, and cost-effective development. Limitations include challenges in managing intellectual property, cultural resistance to external input, and the need for trust-based partnerships.

Research methods

This research employs a qualitative, conceptual methodology to explore the applicability of management theories within the sports ecosystem. Academic articles were reviewed to identify the main components of the sports ecosystem, like fans, players, clubs, and leagues, and chose key management theories such as Scientific Management, Administrative Theory, Bureaucracy, Human Relations, Theory X/Y, Theory Z, Contingency Theory, Learning Organization, Complexity Theory, and Open Innovation.

Each theory was analyzed by identifying core principles and mapping them to real-world practices and dynamics in sport. Secondary sources—including

peer-reviewed literature, case studies, and high-profile examples—were used from the NBA, Euroleague, top-tier European football, NFL, MMA, MLS, and global boxing events. These contexts allowed us to observe different organizational forms (e.g., franchise leagues, international tournaments, individual vs. team sports) and assess theory relevance under varied conditions.

The analysis is structured by theory rather than by entity to assess explanatory power of each framework across various sports actors. For example, Taylorist ideas are considered in relation to player training regimes and operational efficiency; human relations theory is examined through team culture and player morale; and bureaucracy is applied to league governance structures.

To strengthen validity, academic sources were triangulated with real-world cases and media reports. The findings were synthesized into a comparative framework (see Table 1), identifying which management theories align best with specific sports ecosystem entities and where hybrid approaches may be most effective.

The research logic. This study adopts a deductive conceptual mapping approach: applying established theoretical models to a specific, underexplored domain (sports ecosystems). The logic is exploratory-theoretical, aimed at generating interpretive insights and proposing new linkages rather than testing hypotheses empirically.

The research problem. Despite the widespread application of management practices in sport, it remains unclear which management theories best fit the

needs of different entities in the sports ecosystem.

The objective of research. To analyze classical and contemporary management theories in the context of sports and evaluate their relevance and usefulness for different ecosystem entities.

The research goals. Through conceptual mapping and qualitative content analysis, the applicability of management theories to sports ecosystem entities is explored. The process involves (1) identifying and grouping important sports organizations, (2) outlining major traditional and contemporary management theories, (3) examining how these theories are seen in sports through real-life examples, and (4) creating a comparison system that connects each theory to functions within the ecosystem.

The research limitations. This research is conceptual in nature and does not involve original empirical fieldwork. Findings are based on secondary literature and well-documented cases. While the result allows for broad theoretical integration, it limits causal inference. The study's aim, however, is exploratory: to provide a theoretical foundation that future empirical research can test and expand upon.

Research results

The application of classical and contemporary management theories across the sports ecosystem reveals differentiated value across stakeholder types. From players and coaches to fans, media, leagues, agents, and facilities, each group aligns best with particular management logics. This section summarizes how

each theory manifests in practice, supported by academic and journalistic examples from elite sport contexts.

Scientific Management. Emphasizes efficiency, standardization, and data-driven task optimization. Most applicable to: Players, Facilities, Sports Clubs (Organization).

- **Players:** Training regimes based on biomechanics, GPS tracking, and load management reflect scientific management. European clubs like Bayern Munich use time-motion analysis to fine-tune athlete output (Lepschy et al., 2020). In the NBA, “load management” for players like Kawhi Leonard optimizes physical output across a season (Uggetti, 2019).
- **Facilities:** Stadiums such as Tottenham Hotspur Stadium deploy queue-optimization technology and staff workflows modeled after industrial efficiency (Chandler, 2019).
- **Sports Clubs (Operational Staff):** Front-office ticket sales departments often run like call centers with scripted pitches and KPIs. For instance, NBA franchises track call volumes and conversion rates per rep, echoing Taylorist metrics (Neel, 2008).

Administrative Management. Focuses on structured planning, hierarchy, coordination, and control (Fayol, 1949). Most applicable to: Sports Clubs (Organization), Leagues, Facilities.

- **Sports Clubs (Organization):** UEFA's licensing system compelled clubs to professionalize internal management by introducing departments and executive roles (Samur, 2017).
- **Leagues:** The NBA centrally manages schedule planning, financial control, and compliance, reflecting Fayol's

coordination and control principles (Taylor et al., 2015).

- Facilities: Event coordination and staffing at global tournaments (e.g., UEFA EURO or Olympics) demonstrate administrative rigor, particularly in logistics and role division (Toohey & Veal, 2007).

Bureaucratic Theory. The theory is based on the principles of hierarchy, rule formalization, and procedural consistency. Most applicable to: Leagues and Sports Governing Bodies, Sports Clubs (Organizations), Facilities.

- Leagues: FIFA and UEFA operate complex bureaucracies with formalized rulebooks, layered approval processes, and disciplinary committees (Dowling et al., 2018).
- Sport's Governing Bodies: The IOC's credentialing, athlete eligibility, and protest handling reflect classic bureaucratic administration.
- Sports Clubs (Governance): Clubs like Real Madrid have layered governance structures separating board control, executive management, and coaching.
- Facilities: Olympic venues run detailed accreditation systems and operations under bureaucratic planning structures (Toohey & Veal, 2007).

Human Relations Theory. The theory places significant emphasis on team cohesion, emotional well-being, and interpersonal relationships. Most applicable to: Sports Clubs (Team), Players, and Fans.

- Sports Clubs (Team) and Players: Klopp's emotionally intelligent leadership style at Liverpool has driven both performance and morale (Conroy, 2023). Golden State Warriors'

championship run was underpinned by strong locker-room chemistry and mutual trust (Sportskeeda, n.d.).

- Fans: Supporter identity and emotional rituals (e.g., Liverpool's anthem) build a social bond with the club (Cialdini, 2001).

Theory X and Theory Y. The theory draws a contrast between the authoritarian (X) and the empowering (Y) managerial assumptions. Most applicable to: Sports Clubs (Teams and Organizations), Agents.

- Sports Clubs (Teams): Coaches such as Bobby Knight at Indiana University, known for his strict leadership style, embody the assumptions of Theory X. He held the belief that players required rigorous discipline and continuous reprimands to excel. Knight achieved wins but at significant cost: his autocratic, often abusive style eventually was deemed unacceptable, and he was forced out, and former players spoke of the psychological harm it caused (Reed, 2023). An example of Theory Y can be seen in coaches such as Steve Kerr, who led the Golden State Warriors to multiple NBA championship titles by empowering players to co-create the game plan (Moore, 2019).
- Sports Clubs (Leadership): NBA executives often alternate between strict and player-friendly GMs based on roster maturity and locker-room climate.
- Agents: Modern sports agents often empower athletes as brands, reflecting Theory Y belief in self-direction (Johnson, 2019).

Theory Z encourages loyalty, long-term relationships, and cultural

integration. Most applicable to: Fans, Sports Clubs (Team), Players.

- Fans: Clubs like Celtic FC and Liverpool FC embody Theory Z through generational loyalty and deep cultural traditions.
- Sports Clubs (Team): San Antonio Spurs under Popovich exemplify trust, consistency, and retention of core players. The Pittsburgh Steelers' stable leadership structure (only 3 head coaches since 1969) exemplifies long-term employment and organizational loyalty (Fowler, 2016). Similarly, FC Barcelona's La Masia academy fosters lifelong club identity.
- Sports Clubs (Organizations): Clubs offering post-retirement roles (e.g., Tim Duncan as Spurs assistant, Jankūnas as Žalgiris GM) reflect lifetime employment and loyalty models. Increase the value of the organization by having famous names stay with the organization as symbols.

Contingency Theory. The theory advocates adapting management style to situational demands. Most applicable to **ALL**: Fans, Media, Sports Clubs (both Teams and Organizations), Leagues, Facilities, and Agents.

- Fans: Supporter groups often adjust their engagement strategies based on team performance. For instance, Manchester United fans protested against the club's ownership due to concerns over ticket price increases and job cuts, demonstrating adaptive responses to management decisions (Robson, 2025).
- Players: Athletes must be prepared for unforeseen challenges, such as injuries or league disruptions. The NBA's 2020 "bubble" required players

to adapt to new routines and isolation protocols, showcasing resilience in unprecedented circumstances (Golliver, 2020).

- Media: Sports media outlets must swiftly adjust their coverage in response to dynamic events, sometimes even those that at first sight are not related to the sports ecosystem at all. The rapid reporting on the Milwaukee Bucks' 2020 playoff boycott in protest of social injustice illustrates the media's need for adaptability (The Guardian, 2020).
- Sports Clubs (Teams): Teams often tailor their strategies to specific opponents. Bill Belichick's New England Patriots exemplify such practices by varying game plans weekly to exploit opponents' weaknesses (Dussault, 2021).
- Sports clubs (Organizations): Organizational structures within clubs may shift based on objectives. During rebuilding phases, clubs might focus on youth development, whereas title pursuits could prompt investments in experienced talent (Nicholson, 2017).
- Leagues: The NBA's implementation of the 2020 "bubble" was a contingency response to the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring the season's completion while prioritizing health and safety (Golliver, 2020).
- Facilities: Post-pandemic, sports venues have adapted by redesigning workflows, incorporating contactless entry, and enhancing sanitation protocols to meet new health standards (Berg, 2022).
- Agents: Sports agents tailor their negotiation and branding strategies to align with individual athlete profiles

and market conditions, ensuring optimal outcomes in diverse scenarios (Lindenwood University, 2025).

Learning Organization. Encourages continuous improvement, team learning, and knowledge transfer. Most applicable to: Sports Clubs (Teams and Organizations), Players, Leagues.

- Sports Clubs (Organizations): Kroger (2020) attributes the success of the New England Patriots to constant adaptation and a learning-based strategy.
- Sports Clubs (Teams)/Players: Some sports franchises have even institutionalized learning: the Seattle Seahawks under Pete Carroll famously set up a “Tell the Truth Monday” routine, where after each game the team collectively reviews film and discusses errors openly to learn and adjust (Carroll & Kershaw, 2010). Another example is the Golden State Warriors during their 2015–2019 championship runs – the team openly embraced new ideas like modern shot analytics (e.g., increasing three-point attempts) and incorporated feedback from players to refine their approach each season, effectively learning and evolving their playing style (Moore, 2019) Also, having veteran players, or players who have been with the organization, to transfer the knowledge is crucial.
- Leagues: NBA uses G-League as a sandbox for rule testing and organizational learning.

Complexity Theory. The theory perceives organizations as dynamic, nonlinear systems that produce emergent outcomes. Most applicable to: Leagues, Players, Media, Sports Clubs (Teams and

Organizations). According to P. M. Salmon and S. McLean (2020), sports managers and leagues must shift from reductionist thinking to approaches that recognize performance emerges from dynamic interactions across levels—and that understanding the whole system, not just its parts, is key to success.

- Leagues: As clubs unite organizations that operate in many different environments, the leagues must be able to adapt to any crisis that happens to the league or one of its members.
- Players: In unpredictable environments, elite athletes frequently make snap decisions. For instance, playmakers like Lionel Messi adapt their strategies in real time, reflecting the nonlinear dynamics emphasized in complexity theory.
- Media: Social media platforms can rapidly amplify fan sentiments, influencing official narratives. The widespread coverage of athlete activism, such as NFL national anthem protests, showcases how decentralized events can reshape media discourse (Bailey, 2020).
- Sports Clubs (Teams): Coaches like Pep Guardiola employ flexible tactical frameworks that allow players to self-organize on the field. His emphasis on positional play and spatial control demonstrates the application of complexity principles in sports strategy (Varghese, 2024).
- Sports Clubs (Organizations): Leicester City’s 2015–2016 Premier League victory exemplifies emergent success in complex systems. Despite pre-season odds of 5000–1, their triumph resulted from a combination

of strategic management, team cohesion, and adaptive tactics (Adams, 2016).

Open Innovation Theory. Essence: Promotes collaboration beyond organizational boundaries for shared innovation. Most applicable to media, leagues, sports clubs (organizations), and facilities. The open innovation approach in sports breaks the old notion of closed secrets or proprietary strategies; instead, teams and leagues realize that tapping into the collective creativity of fans, academia, and industry yield faster and more radical innovation, from on-field tactics to off-field fan services (Ratten, 2016).

- Media: Fan-created content and co-production (e.g., Amazon's "All or Nothing") redefine narrative ownership.

- Leagues: NFL's "1st and Future" contest opens R&D to entrepreneurs and scientists.
- Sports Clubs (Organization): Man City's hackathons and Barça Innovation Hub crowdsource tech and fan engagement ideas (Prior, 2017).
- Facilities: Integration of AR tech, smart ticketing, and fan-led design input in stadium planning demonstrates open-system evolution.

After analyzing classical and contemporary management theories in the context of sports and evaluating their relevance and usefulness for different ecosystem entities, the findings were synthesized into a comparative framework (Table 1), identifying which management theories align best with specific sports ecosystem entities and where hybrid approaches may be most effective.

Table 1. Alignment of management theories with types of sports entities

Theory	Players	Fans	Media	Sports Clubs (Team)	Sports Clubs (Org)	Leagues	Agents	Facilities
Scientific Management	✓				✓			✓
Administrative Management					✓	✓		✓
Bureaucratic Theory					✓	✓		✓
Human Relations	✓	✓		✓				
Theory X & Y				✓	✓		✓	
Theory Z		✓		✓	✓			
Contingency Theory	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Learning Organization	✓			✓	✓	✓		
Complexity Theory	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		
Open Innovation			✓		✓	✓		✓

Conclusions

This paper sets out to map the application of classical and contemporary management theories across distinct entities within the sports ecosystem. The research revealed that sports organizations are far from homogeneous—they function through a dynamic interplay of operational logic, emotional drivers, cultural identity, and contextual adaptation. Each management theory provided a different lens to understand this complexity, ranging from task-driven optimisation and formal bureaucracy to social motivation, innovation, and strategic flexibility.

A central insight from the analysis is that no single theory sufficiently captures the full reality of sports operations. Instead, high-performing sports entities tend to blend multiple theoretical perspectives to align internal management with external demands. For example, successful clubs often combine Taylorist scientific efficiency in training with Mayo-inspired human-centric coaching to enhance performance and morale simultaneously. Leagues and governing bodies adopt bureaucratic structures to ensure fairness and consistency but must also remain agile enough to respond to unpredictable challenges—requiring contingency thinking. Similarly, innovation-driven clubs and leagues increasingly turn to open innovation models, drawing ideas from fans, startups, and academic research in a co-creative process that would be unimaginable under older, closed leadership systems.

The analysis also reaffirmed the importance of context. The same team may shift its management philosophy

over time based on performance, leadership changes, or shifting stakeholder demands. For example, an authoritarian coaching style may be effective in a rebuilding year but less so in a mature team with empowered players. Similarly, crisis events—such as the COVID-19 pandemic or scandals—require sudden pivots from routine systems to adaptive, resilient structures. These findings emphasize that management in sports is not static but responsive to both internal evolution and external pressures. That is also the reason why contingency theory seemed to be applicable to every single sports entity – at its core there is no single best management style or structure—the optimal approach depends on the specific internal and external conditions.

Beyond immediate operational insights, the study contributes to the broader understanding of how modern sports organizations create value. They do so not merely through performance on the pitch, but through careful coordination between management approaches, stakeholder relationships, and long-term cultural positioning. In this sense, management theories are not abstract academic frameworks but practical tools that, when selectively applied, guide real-world decision-making and institutional growth.

This research also uncovered certain structural tendencies across entities. Governing sports bodies and league organizations remain more bureaucratic and rule-driven due to the need for compliance and standardization, while clubs and teams require more flexible, human-centered approaches. Facilities benefit from efficiency frameworks but increasingly incorporate open innovation through technology and design. Media entities

function in complex, fast-evolving environments shaped by fan behavior, virality, and narrative feedback loops—mirroring principles from complexity theory.

Recommendations. It is recommended that sport managers build hybrid management strategies—blending efficiency, empathy, flexibility, and co-creation—to better match their organizational environment. Second, academic training in sports management should avoid one-size-fits-all thinking and instead emphasize theoretical plurality and context-sensitive applications. Third, leagues and institutions should foster knowledge transfer and continuous learning between franchises, regions, and sports, encouraging experimentation and adaptive learning structures that mirror Senge's learning organization.

Limitations. This research is conceptual in nature and does not involve original empirical fieldwork. Findings are based on secondary literature and well-documented cases. While the result allows for broad theoretical integration, it limits causal inference. The methodological approach of this research is exploratory in

nature, aiming to provide a theoretical foundation that future empirical studies can test and expand upon. The examples used focused primarily on elite leagues such as the NBA, Euroleague, Premier League, and NFL. While these offer rich insights, smaller leagues, women's sports, and community-based clubs may exhibit different patterns of management alignment. Furthermore, future work may enrich the qualitative nature of the analysis with empirical data, despite its foundation in peer-reviewed and journalistic sources.

Future research. First, longitudinal studies might track how management styles evolve across a club's lifecycle (e.g., promotion, relegation, ownership change). Second, more comparative studies between sports (e.g., football vs. boxing) could deepen understanding of how different environments prioritize certain theories. Third, research should examine digital-era dynamics—such as the rise of athlete influencers, esports, or AI-driven decision-making—and assess how these emerging factors reshape traditional management theory applications.

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VADYBOS TEORIJŲ PRITAIKYMAS SPORTO EKOSISTEMOS SUBJEKTAMS

S a n t r a u k a

Straipsnyje siekiama išanalizuoti klasikinių ir šiuolaikinių vadybos teorijų pritaikomumą skirtingiems sporto ekosistemos subjektams. Sporto ekosistema apibrėžiama kaip sudėtingas organizacijų ir suinteresuotųjų šalių tinklas, kurio sąveika generuoja sporto produktą – ne tik varžybas ar žaidimą, bet ir emocinę, kultūrinę bei ekonominę vertę. Remiantis moksliniais šaltiniais, identifikuotos pagrindinės (*core*) ir antrinės (*non-core*) subjektų grupės. Pagrindiniai subjektai yra tie, kurie tiesiogiai prisideda prie sporto produkto kūrimo: žaidėjai, sirgaliai, sporto klubai, lygos, agentai, žiniasklaida ir infrastruktūra. Antriniai subjektai – tokie kaip rėmėjai, paslaugų teikėjai, valstybinės institucijos ar labdaros organizacijos – taip pat svarbūs, bet jų įsitraukimas dažniausiai yra netiesioginis.

Straipsnyje teorinis dėmesys skiriamas klasikinių ir šiuolaikinių vadybos teorijų pritaikymui skirtingiems sporto subjektams. Kiekviena teorija apžvelgiama trumpai, pabrėžiant jos pagrindinius principus bei vertinant, kaip jie pasireiškia realioje sporto praktikoje. Tyrimas grindžiamas conceptualiu kokybiniu metodu – pasitelkta mokslinė literatūra, atvejų analizė bei pavyzdžiai iš pasaulinio lygio sporto struktūrų (NBA, Eurolyga, Europos futbolas, NFL, MMA, bokso varžybos). Šios lygos ir organizacijos pasirinktos dėl įvairovės, profesionalumo lygio ir plačios dokumentacijos, leidžiančios nuosekliai analizuoti vadybinių principų taikymą įvairiuose kontekstuose.

Rezultatai rodo, kad nė viena vadybos teorija nėra universaliai tinkama visiems sporto ekosis-

temos subjektams. Skirtingiems subjektams reikia skirtingų valdymo logikų. Pvz., sporto infrastruktūroje ar treniruočių procese itin tinka mokslinės vadybos principai, grindžiami efektyvumu ir standartizacija. Sporto klubų vidinėje kultūroje ar žaidėjų bei sirgalių sąveikoje svarbesnės tampa žmogiškųjų santykių, pasitikėjimo ir bendros vizijos teorijos. Agentų veikloje ryškūs kontingencijos ir derybinių teorijų aspektai, o žiniasklaida bei lygos, susiduriančios su greitais pokyčiais, geriausiai veikia pagal sudėtingumo teorijos principus.

Svarbu pažymėti, kad daugelis pažangiausių sporto organizacijų sėkmingai integruoja kelias teorijas vienu metu. Taip pat pažymima, kad efektyvus sporto organizacijų valdymas priklauso ne tik nuo pasirinktos teorinės krypties, bet ir nuo gebėjimo reaguoti į išorinius veiksnius – pandemijas, visuomenės lūkesčių kaitą, technologinius pokyčius (pvz., socialinių tinklų įtaka), sirgalių elgsenos transformacijas.

Straipsnis taip pat prisideda prie platesnio supratimo, kaip sporto subjektai kuria vertę – ne tik per varžybų rezultatą, bet ir per ilgalaikį kultūrinį, emocinį bei strateginį santykį su auditorijomis ir partneriais. Tyrimo išvados gali būti aktualios sporto vadybininkams, treneriams, strategams, sporto organizacijų vadovams, mokslininkams bei studentams, siekiantiems geriau suprasti, kaip skirtingos vadybos teorijos praktiškai taikomos sporto srityje, kokios jų stiprybės, ribotumai ir integracijos galimybės. Tai pamatinis tyrimas, galintis tapti teoriniu pagrindu būsimam empiriniam darbui.