



Stress in youth sport: A developmental investigation of tennis parents

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study investigated the stage-specific stressors experienced by British tennis parents whose children were situated either in the sampling, specializing or investment stages of participation in the sport [Côté, J. (1999). The influence of the family in the development of talent in sport. *The Sport Psychologist*, 13, 395–417].

Design and method: A qualitative design was employed with semi-structured interviews conducted with twenty two British tennis parents; six parents representing each of the first two stages of sports participation and ten representing the investment stage. Data was analyzed through a process of inductive content analysis following the method proposed by Miles and Huberman [Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis*. London: Sage]. Data matrices were developed for each category of parent to allow for the comparison of the data between themes.

Results and conclusion: Three general dimensions of parental stressor emerged: Organizational, Competitive and Developmental. Organizational stressors included demands related to finance, time, training and coaching, and governing body systems; competitive stressors related to behavior, performance and morality-related issues associated with their child's matches; and developmental stressors centered on educational issues, uncertainty of tennis transitions, and future decision making. While sampling stage parents encountered few developmental stressors compared to later stage parents, a range of competitive stressors were highly prominent. Organizational stressors were particularly foremost for specializing and investment stage parents. Implications are discussed with reference to further research into the parental stress process and to the importance of stage-specific parent education initiatives.

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By the very nature of its participants, research into the domain of competitive youth sport focuses as much on the influential roles and behaviors of coaches, parents and peers as it does on the experiences and responses of the young athlete (e.g. Côté & Hay, 2002). For example, when we consider the social psychological research on sport parents, they are often portrayed in a more negative than positive light and through the lens of coaches and athletes' reported perceptions (see DeFrancesco & Johnson, 1997; Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi, 2006, 2008; Hellstedt, 1990; Leff & Hoyle, 1995). Youth tennis is one sport subculture that tends to attract this research attention due to problematic parental behavior that is frequently reported in the media (see Lichfield, 2006). However, very few studies have investigated parental

perceptions and experiences of youth sport from the parents' own perspectives (Holt, Tamminen, Black, Sehn, & Wall, 2008).

The recent prosecution of Christophe Fauvau, the father of two French teenage players found guilty of manslaughter after drugging his son's opponent, offers a reminder of the sometimes irrational human investment that parents may place in their child's sporting development. However, at a more rational level, it speaks to the taxing nature of youth sport and the stressors experienced by parents within their sport-parent roles (Hellstedt, 1987; Lazarus, 2006). Unfortunately, whilst the study of personal, competition, and organizational stressors faced by athletes and coaches have a well-developed literature base (e.g., Giacobbi, Foore, & Weinberg, 2004; Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1993; Hanton, Fletcher, & Coughlan, 2005; Holt & Hogg, 2002; Thelwell, Weston, Greenless, & Hutchings, 2008; Woodman & Hardy, 2001), limited attention has been afforded to the range of stressors experienced by parents as they support their child through their stages of sport development (Côté, 1999). Therein lies the precise focus for this current investigation.

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Parents play a critical role in children's socialization to sport and throughout their sporting lives (Brustad, 1996; Wuerth, Lee, & Alfermann, 2004). Fredricks and Eccles (2004) noted that parents fulfill three fundamental roles in their child's sport experience. These are firstly as 'provider' (e.g., of opportunities, finance, transport); as 'interpreter' of the sport experience for their child (e.g., emotionally reacting to competition in adaptive manners); and finally, as 'role model' (i.e., modeling the ideal attributes and behaviors in sport). The extent to which these roles are fulfilled by parents influences a child's beliefs and values and in turn, their motivated behaviors and performance.

Nevertheless, the extensive emotional, financial, and logistical support that parents prioritize for their children (see Baxter-Jones & Maffuli, 2003; Kirk, Carlson et al., 1997; Kirk, O'Connor et al., 1997; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005) may come at a cost with respect to the stress that they experience. Indeed, like Fauvau, the negative influence and impact of parents often reported by coaches and athletes anecdotally, and in youth sport research, is potentially related to stressors that they experience in their parental roles.

In establishing a line of research into stress from a parental perspective, Harwood and Knight (*in press*) investigated the stressors articulated by 123 British tennis parents. The wide range of stressors emerging from their open-ended survey coalesced into seven core themes of parental stress. These included stressors associated with attendance at matches and tournaments; coaches behaviors and responsibilities, financial and time demands placed upon the family; sibling resentment and unequal attention; inefficiencies and inequalities attributed to tennis organizations; and developmental concerns related to educational and future tennis transitions. Whilst this study provided a much needed insight into the scope of stressors experienced in the sport-parent role, it lacked an in-depth understanding of how such stressors may differ depending upon a child's stage of development (Côté, 1999). Such insights would provide practitioners, coaches, and governing body organizations with a deeper, evidence-based appreciation of the main issues and needs of parents across the key transitional stages of their child's sport participation.

A number of researchers have identified stages that athletes pass through during their sports career or involvement (e.g., Balyi, 2000; Bloom, 1985; Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004). Côté's (1999) stages of sport participation model is frequently adopted because it is sport specific and sensitive to the developmental transitions children experience (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). Within the context of this study, Côté's model is of interest because it focuses on the first eighteen years of an athlete's development, when parental requirements are likely to be at their greatest.

Côté (1999) identified four stages of participation: sampling, specializing, investment, and recreation; the first three of which are relevant to the current study. His model traces sport participation from early childhood to late adolescence and identifies differences in the experiences and requirements of athletes during each stage. The role and requirements of parents have also been noted to change throughout these stages (see Côté, 1999; Côté & Hay, 2002; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005).

In the sampling years, families play a central role in the athlete's development. Family time is devoted to a number of activities, but much time is devoted to sport. Parents play clear 'provider' roles and are responsible for initiating sports activities and ensuring transportation and access (Durand-Bush, Salmela, & Thompson, 2004). Parents are required to be highly committed to their child's sport, displayed through altered family routines as well as emotional and financial support (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). During this stage, however, fun is of utmost importance to athletes, emphasizing deliberate play rather than intense training (Côté & Hay, 2002).

During the specializing stage, sport-specific skills develop through practice, with a reduction in deliberate play (Côté & Hay, 2002). Parents take a growing interest in their child as an athlete and make an increasing financial and time commitment (Côté, 1999; Durand-Bush et al., 2004). The time commitment is such that other opportunities are often sacrificed for a child's sport. Furthermore, there is a premium placed on a parent's nurturing role alongside the provision of moral and socio-emotional support (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005; Wuerth et al., 2004).

Finally, athletes reach the investment years. At this stage the child pursues the aim of reaching an elite level in their chosen sport. Children increase the intensity of their commitment to one sport and there is a substantial increase in deliberate practice (Côté & Hay, 2002). Parents' levels of support and interest in their child-athlete may result in them displaying different treatment toward their other children (Durand-Bush et al., 2004; Wuerth et al., 2004). Nevertheless, during this stage, parents' actual requirements may begin to decrease as coaches play a larger role.

Considering the differing emotional, financial, and logistical requirements of parents, the experiences of athletes, and the changing competition and training demands associated with each stage of development, it is conceivable that parental stressors may also vary. Therefore, in extending the work of Harwood and Knight (*in press*), the purpose of this study was to conduct an in-depth, comparative examination of the stressors perceived by tennis parents whose children were located within one of the three stages of sport participation (Côté, 1999). The investigation formed part of a research initiative supported by Great Britain's tennis governing body, the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA). The overall aim was to develop a clearer understanding of stage-specific parental stressors so that appropriate resources and support would enable parents towards positive role-related influences on their children's talent development in the sport.

Method

Participants

The sample comprised 22 tennis parents: Nine mothers, five fathers, and four sets of parents who were interviewed together. The sample was divided into three groups: six parents of performance juniors, six parents of top county/low national standard players, and ten parents of national and international (academy) standard players. The performance juniors (three boys and two girls) were aged between 9 and 11 and were classified as being in the sampling stage. The second category accounted for parents of four boys and two girls aged from 11 to 16 and considered as being in the specializing stage. The final group comprised parents of academy players, aged 12–16. These players trained at national tennis academies and fulfilled the characteristics of athletes in the investment stage. Six players resided full time at the academies and two commuted daily, with all players on modified educational programs.

The classification of players to stages utilized Côté and Hay's (2002) criteria as closely as possible and occurred through discussion with the players' parents and coaches. These discussions revolved around (a) the current focus of training sessions (deliberate play or deliberate practice), (b) players involvement in other sports, and (c) the emphasis placed upon general motor skill development compared to tennis-specific skills training.

Procedure

A purposive sampling strategy highlighted 25 tennis parents who were available and interested in engaging in this study. These

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