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How Parents Influence Junior Tennis Players' Development: Qualitative Narratives

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Junior tennis coaches commonly argue that parents must push their children and be very involved to develop their talent, despite the strain on the parent-child relationship that may occur from these tactics. To examine parental influence on talent development and the parent-child relationship, nine professional tennis players, eight parents, and eight coaches were retrospectively interviewed about each player's junior development based Bloom's three stages of talent development (1985). Results are presented through aggregated, nonfiction stories of three tennis development pathways: smooth, difficult, and turbulent. Smooth pathways were typical of parents who were supportive and maintained a healthy parent-child relationship while facilitating talent development. Difficult and turbulent pathways involved parents who stressed the importance of tennis and created pressure by pushing their child toward winning and talent development. For difficult pathways, parent-child relationships were negatively affected but conflicts were mostly resolved, whereas for turbulent pathways, many conflicts remained unresolved.

Keywords: sport, triad, pathway, youth

In many western countries, parents are highly involved in their children's sports experiences. Watching their children compete in an important pursuit, with winning and losing and success and failure on the line, it is no surprise that many parents become very involved in monitoring and directing this experience. Yet while healthy involvement is often the intended goal, parental involvement can become excessive, involve much parental criticism of the child's performances, create pressure, hinder tennis development, and can harm the parent-child relationship (Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi, 2008).

Parents play an integral role in their children's sport development (e.g., Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999; Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi, 2006, 2008; Hellstedt, 1987, 1995; Woolger & Power, 1993). For example, they influence the activities children pursue early in their lives and provide the opportunities and resources needed to nurture their development (Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999; Csikszentmihalyi,

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Rathunde, Whalen, & Wong, 1993). In addition, parents provide support throughout the child's pursuit of excellence in many specific ways (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1993; Durand-Bush, Salmela, & Thompson, 2004; Gould et al., 2006, 2008; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005), including driving their children to practices every day, driving great distances for tournaments, and taking time away from work and family involvement. Moreover, they help plan the child's schedule, select coaches (Bloom, 1985; Gould et al., 2006, 2008), and teach the child life skills to help them deal with the emotional ups and downs of competitive sport (Gould, Dieffenbach, & Moffett, 2002).

In tennis, it is a commonly accepted belief that a child will only become elite if one of the parents is highly involved, supporting the child in what Csikszentmihalyi and colleagues (1993) have referred to as "disciplined involvement." Much time and effort must be placed into the sport, and the sacrifice of other endeavors and activities often occurs (Howe, 1999). A recent study by Wuerth, Lee, and Alfermann (2004) supports this assumption. Studying German youth soccer players, Wuerth et al. found that successful career progressions to higher levels of athletics were associated with greater levels of parental involvement; however, they also discovered that not all parental behaviors were facilitative, as perceived player pressure was correlated with directive and controlling parental behaviors.

The common belief among coaches that an elite player should have an intensely involved parent is likely to be concerning to sport psychologists, as such an attitude can influence parents to engage in excessive measures to develop a child's talent. Tofler, Knapp, and Drell (1998) have argued that when athletic talent development (or academic, musical, artistic talent) becomes the parents' primary goal, they are often willing to sacrifice the child's overall development in pursuit of talent development in this one domain (i.e., "achievement by proxy"). It has been suggested that the stress athletes experience from a parent's involvement often comes from controlling behaviors that are intended to enhance athletic development (Gould et al., 2008; Lee & MacLean, 1997; Wuerth et al., 2004).

While studies of sport parents provide general principles for facilitating positive youth development, sport-specific parenting principles should provide more practical and useful knowledge that can help parents navigate their child's developmental years. Anecdotally, it seems that parent-child interactions in tennis would differ from team sports because of the individual nature of the competition, the direct control over results a competitor feels, and the individual-referenced coaching that occurs. Furthermore, individual youth sports like tennis, golf, and skating involve structured programs that require young athletes to compete and train outside of the school environment, thus typically requiring close involvement from parents. As a result, such close involvement can impact the dynamic of parent-child interactions.

Few studies have examined and reported tennis parents' behaviors. DeFrancesco and Johnson (1997) learned from asking junior players and their parents that 20% of parents displayed inappropriate behaviors at matches that included walking away from the court, screaming at the child, and even physical abuse. In a recent focus group investigation, junior tennis coaches stated that 36% of parents created problems (Gould et al., 2006). The coaches reported many concerns with parental involvement, but most often discussed how parents overemphasized winning, held unrealistic expectations, and coached and criticized their children. In a follow up survey administered to coaches across the United States, Gould and colleagues

(2008) found similar concerns about parents. Apart from the previously cited concerns, junior coaches were concerned about parents placing excessive importance on tennis (e.g., the child not allowed to socialize during tournaments) and attempting to control the child's experience. Finally, Wolfenden and Holt (2005) described how the parents of three elite English junior tennis players provided great support and personal sacrifice, but simultaneously pressured their children by being over involved, having high expectations, and pushing the children to be successful.

Thus, a sport-parenting paradox appears to exist, as over involvement can have detrimental effects on children, yet at the same time can provide motivation for children to develop sport expertise. Therefore, several questions are posed to examine this paradox. What is an appropriate level of involvement for a parent of a highly talented tennis player? Should sport psychologists recommend that parents be less involved and less serious with their children in sport when they show great talent? Does an elite player need an over involved, intense parent to reach the top? Can an elite player be developed while strengthening the parent-child relationship? These are important questions in need of answers.

In pursuit of this objective, the first phase of this study involved retrospective interviews with junior tennis triads (parent, player, and coach). In this regard, Lauer, Gould, Roman, and Pierce (2009) have identified a number of positive (e.g., provided support, communicated effectively, helped make decisions, kept perspective) and negative (e.g., over emphasized tennis, yelled/criticized, exhibited uncontrolled emotional reactions) parental behaviors that are perceived to negatively affect tennis talent development. Evidence of how parental behaviors both change and remain consistent across the stages of talent development was also established.

The first phase of this study and previous sport parenting investigations have informed clinical sport psychology practice by identifying factors that influence the parent-child relationship and how that relationship influences important affective and behavioral outcomes; however, the nomothetic and reductionistic nature of many of these studies represents a gap in knowledge. Few studies have chronicled the stories of how individual parents interact with their children from first entering sport through the elite years of play. Ironically, qualitative research methodologies are well-suited to provide idiographic and comprehensive accounts of phenomena such as sport parenting, but the vast majority of qualitative sport psychology research conducted to date has focused on the content analysis and extraction of general themes across participants (e.g., positive sport parent behaviors, sources of stress) and have not reported case profiles that show how such themes operate within individuals, interact with other themes and contextual factors, and evolve across time. Thus, rich descriptions of individuals' developmental stories have been lacking. This study was therefore designed to accomplish this objective by conveying what Sparkes (2002) described as creative nonfiction accounts or "fiction in form but factual in content" (p. 155). We believe that the best way to inform clinicians of these talent development stories and protect confidentiality is to create stories based on events described by participants.

Method

Retrospective interviewing was employed to understand the nature of the parent-child relationships occurring in elite tennis. Moreover, athlete triad members were

able to provide rich descriptions of junior tennis careers when reflecting on the outcomes of parental involvement.

Participants

Nine ($N = 9$) American professional tennis players were selected based on the recommendations of the USTA Player Development Division. The following inclusion criteria were used to select these players: a professional ranking preferably in the top 300, the potential to successfully compete and win at the professional level, and a record of success at junior national and international tournaments. Finally, players from the same generation (6-year period across players) were contacted to control for differences in societal pressures and the general "parenting practices of the day."

To enhance trustworthiness, the parents most involved and the most influential developmental coach (based on each player's perception) were interviewed. In total, 25 interviews were conducted with nine players, eight parents, and eight coaches. For the nine players, the athlete-coach-parent triad was interviewed in eight cases, as one parent opted out because he believed his child's development was in progress and he was unable to speak completely to his role at the time.[1]

Interview Procedures

A semistructured interview guide was developed and piloted with player development staff to standardize questions while allowing the freedom to probe. Questions were structured around Bloom's (1985) talent development stages (i.e., the *early* years, when the child is just getting started in sport; the *middle* years, when the child often specializes in one sport and engages in more intense training; and the *elite* years [labeled by Bloom as the *later* years[2]], when the young adult trains year-round with a master coach with the hopes of achieving success at the highest level). The following questions were repeated for each stage: (a) What was the quality or "feel" of the time period (e.g., relaxed, intense, busy)? (b) What was the parent's role? (c) Which parental behaviors enhanced player development? (d) Which parental behaviors inhibited development? and (e) What were the parent-coach interactions like?

All interviews were led by the first author who has tennis coaching experience, an understanding of the talent development and parenting literature, qualitative research training, and an advanced degree in exercise and sport science with a specialization in sport psychology. A pilot interview was conducted and critiqued to refine the interview process. In preparation for interviews, player biographical reports were reviewed. For parent and coach interviews, completed triad interview notes, profiles, and transcriptions were reviewed and themes from the stages were noted as reminders and probes. Previous information gained from interviews was not disclosed to participants to maintain confidentiality.

Athlete interviews were conducted first and in person, while parent and coach interviews were completed over the phone. The reason for this process was so the player could allow the interviewer access to the parent and coach they personally selected. Coach and parent interview questions were slightly modified to make them appropriate for the interviewee and by asking questions relevant to the career phase each individual had knowledge (e.g., an elite year's coach was not asked about the early stages of development).

Participants were assured of the anonymity of their remarks, and informed consent was obtained. The interviewer discussed the importance of disclosing positive and negative stories involving their parents and to be as complete and accurate as possible. Next, questions were asked about the player's career, such as when participation in tennis began, when the player started competing, strengths, and who was influential in developing these strengths. Finally, players were asked to consider their development relative to Bloom's (1985) talent development career stages. Stages were defined and players were prompted to reflect on their career and then identify their age ranges relative to these stages based on defining moments that marked the transition from one stage to the next. Once the parameters of the player's career were identified, questions about the parent's involvement were asked. Interviews were audio recorded and ranged from 45 to 155 min. The reason for this range in time is that coaches had knowledge of only one or two stages of the player's development and thus the coaches' interviews were shorter, yet on the other hand, players and parents talked about all three stages.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

To capture the interview experience and enhance objectivity, notes and a summary of initial themes were logged to create a record trail (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Interviews were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy by a second member of the investigative team. Participant interview profiles were then created from reading the transcript and were summarized to accurately and succinctly describe and interpret the interview. Important themes were written into a story that chronologically followed player development. A three-person independent verification process of participant profiles occurred. Coach profiles, because of their relative brevity, were not interpreted using the three-person process. Instead, the interviewer reviewed his notes and the transcripts and created a summary of the interview that was less in depth (but still provided the themes of importance).

The individual profiles are not disclosed because of the highly publicized lives of the professional players (Sparkes, 2002). Profiles were categorized by the quality of the experience and then integrated into an aggregate profile by path. Three paths were created to illustrate the differing experiences of the participants. The aggregate profiles are an integration of the most important themes and examples from all of the interviews comprising each path type.

Interview analysis revealed three general (but not all-encompassing) paths of player development across stages. The first path was labeled *smooth*, where transitions included few problems across stages of development. These players faced minimal problems, and the parents generally were a positive influence in their development. The second group was identified as experiencing a *difficult* transition with some significant problems. This group often faced problems with their parents but overcame these problems and had a good junior tennis experience. Individuals in the third group, the *turbulent* transition, experienced significant unresolved problems, such as difficult relationships with parents that subsequently and significantly affected tennis. These issues were unresolved at the time of the interview.

Aggregate stories for each of the transition groups were written by reviewing the profiles of each triad member in the pathway and then creating a combined story that captured many of the themes and events discussed by participants. These stories

should be considered as the aggregation of the behaviors, situations, and outcomes that occurred in the pathway. Comparing these contrasting profiles highlights the timing of certain parental behaviors and how they corresponded with player development. Moreover, it provides a more comprehensive naturalistic version of how these nine players developed in junior tennis.

Enhancing Trustworthiness

Several methods were employed to enhance trustworthiness. Because of the personal topic of discussing family, we were concerned that players might provide socially desirable responses. Thus, the athlete triad was interviewed to obtain triangulation. Triangulation was used to assess if a member of the triad was not disclosing important aspects of the relationship as well as to minimize biased responses (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The coach interview was considered important because he had the ability to be more objective than those in the family structure. Attempts were made during interviews to clarify areas of disagreement through additional probing. Interviewees were not, however, contacted a second time after a triad member interview.

Results: Three General Pathways of Tennis Talent Development

The nine players were categorized into three qualitatively different pathways of development, labeled as smooth, difficult, and turbulent. In this section, stories of the experiences of these players, parents, and coaches are presented as aggregated cases based on information gained from the interviews. Tables 1 and 2 present the pathway demographics. Interestingly, male players started at a younger age, but by the time the early years ended, males and females were entering the middle years at approximately the same ages. From there, females quickly moved through the middle stage and into the elite stage, more than a year earlier than males. Overall, four of the nine players were considered to have smooth developmental transitions, with two of those being female players. It is also interesting that only the smooth path players all stayed on the tour, whereas the difficult and turbulent paths had players that left professional play.

The next section presents three nonfiction, aggregate stories that illustrate each of the pathways (i.e., smooth, difficult, and turbulent). These cases are not the story of one participant but the combining of themes from all participants in a pathway to create a story that protects confidentiality and describes the spirit of the experience for this group. Thus, names of the participants have been changed and identities protected.

Table 1 Player Age in the Phases of Talent Development by Gender

Gender	Early	Middle	Elite
Women	5.1–9.4	10.0–13.9	14.4—ongoing
Men	4.0–9.5	10.25–15.25	15.75—ongoing

Table 2 Three Pathways Demographics

Pathway	Player Gender	2003 Mean Ranking	2004 Mean Ranking	Parent Gender	Coach Gender[c]
Smooth	2 M, 2 F	74	128	1 M, 2 F	3 M[d], 0 F
Difficult[a]	1 M, 2 F	110	260	2 M, 1 F	3 M, 0 F
Turbulent[b]	1 M, 1 F	61	149	1 M, 1 F	2 M, 0 F

[a] One player proceeded to the professional tour.
[b] Both players took leaves from the professional tour.
[c] One coach worked with two of the players, thus one coach was interviewed twice.
[d] One coach was also a father (the mother was interviewed for the parent role).

Aggregated Pathway Stories: Smooth Pathway (With No Apparent Negative Consequences)

Angela: The Early Years. Angela was 4 years old when she started playing tennis. The early years lasted until she was approximately 10 years old. Angela began playing tennis when she would accompany her parents to the courts. Her mother would often hit balls at the local park with Angela after she and her husband were finished playing. Angela showed great ability to hit the ball at an early age, and she enjoyed playing. For her parents, this period was a joy, because they could spend quality time with Angela while keeping her active and teaching her a sport. Weekends often included playing tennis with family and sometimes driving to a local tournament once Angela turned 8 years old. At age 6, Angela took group lessons twice per week, but mainly played with her mother. Her parents got along very well with the coach, who emphasized fun and fundamentals. Angela also participated in soccer, softball, and ballet. Her parents thought she should be involved in multiple activities so she could have many different opportunities.

Angela's parents made sure she had fun and were "laid back," even in the few matches she played and lost. Angela never felt pressure from her parents to play tennis or to win. In fact, they never considered that they were helping to develop a professional tennis player. They just wanted her to be active and develop friendships through tennis. According to her parents, it was more important for her to be a good person than a good tennis player. Angela's parents emphasized that Angela show respect for her opponents. In one particular incident, around age 9, Angela became angry when she was playing poorly and threw her racket. Her father did not hesitate to pull her off of the court, and did not allow her to play for one week.

Angela received a great deal of support from her parents. They took her to practices and matches, and set times to hit with her. They wanted her to have every opportunity possible. Angela's first coach thought that her parents were doing too much for her, however, and wanted Angela to take on more responsibility, such as packing her equipment bag and having her talk to him directly about how to improve while playing on the weekends. Her parents attempted to allow her to be more responsible from that point forward. Angela's parents watched many practices and matches and tried to encourage Angela without responding emotionally when she would miss a shot.

As Angela's development rocketed, she began playing against "12 and under" competition and was winning matches. At that point, the time and intensity of her tennis commitment was increasing, as they were moving toward the middle years.

Angela: The Middle Years. Angela was in the middle years from ages 10–15. This time period was highlighted by practicing daily during the week with a local pro and practicing and traveling to tournaments on the weekends with her parents and her younger brother. Tennis became more serious for Angela as she was climbing the national rankings. She eventually reached the top 20 nationally in the "14 and under" division. The intensity of her involvement increased when she had a breakthrough win at a national tournament. Angela continued to play junior girls older than her and was still having success. She was very excited about the possibilities and enjoyed playing tennis. She had several friends with whom she spent time and who were also were hitting partners. With her success, however, the pressure also increased. There was little time for social activities; Angela sacrificed going to the mall and spending time with friends. She struggled with this issue, but decided to focus on tennis because she wanted to become a successful player. At age 13, she no longer played soccer, softball, or danced because of the time she was investing in her tennis training. She did, however, swim recreationally.

Angela's parents were highly involved during the middle years. She noticed how her parents were attempting to instill values, such as "if you're going to do it, do it right." They pushed her in what she thought was a "good" way when she didn't want to practice. This was one of their favorite lectures along with working very hard and behaving respectfully on the court. Toward the end of the middle years, like with many teenagers, Angela and her parents were arguing more often. She wished her parents would provide her with a little more space at times, especially after matches, and let her make her own decisions. Yet despite an occasional argument, she was very happy that they supported her and she knew that they loved her no matter the outcome of the match. She also reported that she knew how much her parents were spending on her tennis, and as such, she wanted to win matches and prove to them that such sacrifices were worth it. This weighed on her heavily.

Angela's parents made an honest effort to balance developing Angela's talents and having fun. Winning was regarded as important, but not as important as school or simply the joy of playing the game. Nonetheless, Angela felt some pressure at times, and sometimes her parents wondered why she felt such pressure (they would tell her it's just a game and who really cares if you win or lose). Yet overall, Angela enjoyed tennis. When Angela felt pressure, her parents reminded her that tennis was her decision and that they just wanted her to have fun and work hard. Angela's parents provided a great deal of support for her, including transporting her to practices and matches; paying for coaching, equipment, and tournament fees; organizing her hectic schedule; and providing the opportunity for her to develop as a player and an overall person.

Angela's parents thought it was important for her to have a normal childhood, even if her friends were touting her as the next U.S. Open champion. She was expected to do chores and complete her homework. They considered home schooling but Angela enjoyed being in a public school with friends, so they decided against it. They strived to have a stable home life by eating meals together and doing family activities. They also did not treat her any differently than her brother. Angela also

felt supported, as her parent's would never leave a match when she was not playing well, and instead would just encourage her to keep trying. Her mother was a little more nervous during matches (she knew how much playing well and winning meant to Angela), but Angela talked to her about this and she began maintaining a calmer demeanor. Her parents did not remind Angela of the sacrifices they were making. In fact, they only did what they could financially afford, thus hoping to minimize the pressure Angela felt. It was important to Angela's parents to not pressure her, so they would not discuss tennis right after a match, but instead would let her bring it up on her own. Finally, discussions at home were not always about tennis, and tennis was not allowed to be discussed at the dinner table.

Angela's parents got along very well with her coach and did not try to interfere with his teaching. They frequently spoke with him, but did not discuss finances or critically discuss her progress or any problems in front of her. Angela's mother watched most of her matches, so she would report on how Angela played to the coach. At age 15, Angela begged her parents to let her go to a tennis academy to train. They reluctantly allowed her to go, but only after they made sure she would be going to an excellent school and that her social needs would be met. The family decided to move a few hours south so they could be closer to the academy.

Angela: The Elite Years. The elite years began at age 16 when Angela won a national tournament and raised her national ranking to the top 5. Training intensity was increasing, and she did not play any other sports. Angela spent most of her time working with a new coach. She traveled great distances to play tournaments and even played international tournaments, traveling with her coach and other highly ranked juniors. Angela was highly motivated to meet her goal of playing professional tennis and she no longer relied on her parents to push her to practice. They were now just supportive versus directing her involvement, and they allowed Angela and her coach to make most of the decisions. They would travel to some tournaments but felt comfortable in letting Angela travel with the coach. Her parents talked to her coach frequently and occasionally watched practices.

When Angela made the semifinals of a major Junior Open at age 17, agents and sponsors were constantly contacting the family. Her parents attempted to shield Angela from this distraction by handling these requests, getting as much information as they could on agents, and then discussing it with her. They made a joint decision about the right agency. Angela and her parents would communicate about the many decisions that needed to be made in the elite years and then make a decision together, or at least address the consequences of a decision and then allow Angela to decide. With the increased expectations that Angela would be a tennis star, her parents were still able to keep things grounded. While winning was more important than in the past, they still were more concerned with her having fun and her long-term development. Angela's parents worked hard to maintain emotional control at her matches and just provide encouragement. Maintaining emotional control was hard for them despite their balanced perspective. Angela's on-court success only increased the economic stakes at play when she stepped on the court. At home, Angela was still required to do chores and attend family functions. Her parents attempted to maintain consistency at home even though she was achieving great success. They also emphasized academics and that she finish high school. Angela talked to her parents often about school and what her friends were doing.

As Angela started her professional tennis career full time at age 18, her parents understood their role to be more supportive. They took care of her finances, paid the bills, and helped to coordinate the many people on her support team, such as massage therapists and nutritionists. They were happy to do this so Angela could focus on tennis. Angela was very appreciative of these behind-the-scenes efforts.

When Angela became frustrated with the transition to professional tournaments, her parents would advise her to be patient. Angela was totally committed, but it still helped during these difficult times when her parents provided some mild prodding for her to get back to the court. Angela and her parents still had disagreements, and Angela often did not want to hear her parents' advice, but she reported that this was normal family "stuff" and she did not think her parents were "butting in" on her tennis. In fact, she believed they respected her space and allowed her and coach to make the tennis decisions.

Angela reported that she appreciated what her parents had done for her over the years and thought she would not have made it without their support. She enjoyed calling her parents to talk to them about her matches and the people she met at tournaments. Her parents continued to support her by encouraging her and telling her how proud they are of her.

Aggregated Pathway Stories: Difficult Transition (Negative Consequences Often Resolved)

Billy: The Early Years. Billy started playing tennis at 5 years old. He first became interested in tennis, according to his parents, when he would go to his two older brothers' matches, and instead of watching would hit a ball off the wall. Billy showed talent and hand-eye coordination early on, and a desire to play tennis all the time. His parents enjoyed that their son was so active and would take him to the club or park to hit four or five times per week. Billy enjoyed tennis because he liked running around and hitting the ball and getting to hit with his family on weekends. Billy's parents' evenings and weekends revolved around tennis. Billy's dad played tennis in college and looked forward to hours of hitting with his son.

In the early years, tennis for Billy and his parents was mostly fun, while at the same time trying to teach Billy the game. Often, Billy and his dad spent countless hours learning to hit the forehand and backhand. They also took him to lessons once per week. It was emphasized by Billy's father that he always gave full effort at practice and matches. While Billy showed great potential in tennis, his parents encouraged him to play multiple sports (baseball, basketball, and soccer), and he enjoyed these activities as well. Billy's parents wanted to develop a well-rounded child who had every opportunity he needed and wanted; however, they would not tolerate his tantrums when he played poorly. His father removed him from the court several times for this reason.

Once Billy started playing matches at age 7, his parents became even more involved. Billy's father spent a great deal of time on the court with Billy, having him engage in the drills that he saw his coach use, thus reinforcing the coach's teachings. Billy's father also pushed him to work hard at developing his strokes, including having him set goals and practice them in the mirror. At times, Billy would become overwhelmed by his father's intensity of involvement. He would tell his dad "I just want to have fun." Despite these times of frustration, the early

years were very good for the family. Billy's parents were supportive and drove him wherever he needed to go, and Billy enjoyed the attention he was getting because of tennis involvement.

Billy: The Middle Years. Billy entered the middle years of his tennis development at age 9 when he showed great promise and was noticed by a local junior coach. He continued to play tennis because he enjoyed it, was a skilled player, and thought of himself as a tennis player. He was at this point taking formal lessons on a daily basis and the intensity of his involvement increased greatly. In addition, the parental expectations for Billy's performance also rose dramatically during the middle years, and he felt this pressure at times. At age 12, Billy moved to an out-of-state tennis academy. His family moved with him to try to keep the family unit together. The first academy Billy attended was too intense for him at such a young age, so they moved to a less competitive academy, which Billy enjoyed.

With a streak of wins at age 14, Billy was ranked top 5 in the nation. With his great success, however, came pressure. Billy thought he needed to perform even better to make his father happy. He realized that his parents were spending a significant amount of money to fund his dream, which added more pressure even though his parents never discussed it with him. Billy also recognized that they were no longer taking vacations; tournaments were now the family's summer vacations. During this time, Billy occasionally wished they could take family vacations that did not involve tennis. Due to the amount of hours of practice, the pressure he was experiencing to live up to expectations, and his own frustration with imperfect performance, Billy thought of quitting at times. When he would discuss this with his parents they would tell him that he needed to follow through on his commitment for the season and then could quit if he wanted. He always decided to keep playing because he loved tennis and competing, but he also believed it would hurt his parents if he quit.

Billy's parents continued to support him and attempted to encourage him after losses. For example, when Billy lost a match, they would provide encouraging words and then move on to a different topic of discussion. His parents also continued to drive him to and monitor practices and matches and organized his hectic training schedule. Billy's father continued to hit with him on the side, usually feeding balls so he could work on specific shots or patterns of play. He also emphasized hard work and would yell at Billy if he believed he was not giving full effort. Billy's father was intensely involved and understood how badly Billy wanted to be a successful tennis player. Thus, matches were occasionally grueling and he would become overtly nervous, which he believed affected Billy. In this regard, Billy did not like to see his parents throw their hands in the air when he missed an easy shot. Although Billy's father was willing to do whatever it took to help his son became a great tennis player, at times he would become critical and push Billy very hard. His father also interacted with his coach frequently, discussing how Billy should train or the style of play he should be implementing. At times, Billy's father disagreed with the coach about a tactical approach, but otherwise reinforced his points and did not interfere.

Billy felt that winning was becoming very important to his parents. Much of the talk around the house was how he could win the next tournament and keep his ranking high (which meant sometimes not playing certain tournaments or players).

According to Billy, it was almost as if they were afraid for him to lose. He believed that his parents were becoming more negative about his tennis and would not be as encouraging after a loss. Moreover, at age 15, Billy wanted more space. He thought his parents were always talking about tennis, and he no longer wanted to discuss it. This, of course, was disconcerting to his father who was very involved in his tennis endeavors. Billy's father reacted by reinforcing that he was just trying to help his son develop his talent. He felt Billy was not taking his training seriously enough and needed to focus on tennis to meet his goals. Billy, in turn, felt like he did not have any friends outside of tennis and he did nothing but play tennis.

Billy: The Elite Years. The elite years began at age 16, with a string of tournament wins. Billy still enjoyed tennis and loved competing, but the intensity of his involvement was affecting other parts of his life. He knew, however, that to achieve his goal of becoming a professional tennis player, he needed to make difficult sacrifices. For example, he missed many days of schooling because he was traveling to tournaments, and he was unable to have much of a social life. Billy also selected a coach with whom he worked every day, refining his skills and sharpening his mental approach to the game.

Billy's father continued his intense on-court and tournament involvement. He did his best to make sure Billy had everything he needed to be successful and that he was staying on course to meet his goal of becoming a professional player; however, Billy wanted his father to maintain less involvement and desired to instead allow his coach to have more control. When Billy discussed this with his father at age 17, it was difficult for his father; however, he knew that he had to decrease his direct involvement and allow Billy to have some space. As this was needed to help Billy develop independence and a sense of responsibility, Billy's father accepted his new role as indirect supporter.

Billy's father viewed his new role as (a) supporter and (b) off-court manager of Billy's sport psychologist, personal trainer, serving coach, and nutritionist. He worked to ensure that they were communicating and that were helping Billy meet his goals. He often discussed these matters with Billy's coach, and the coach would keep him apprised of Billy's training and competitions. Billy's father and his coach got along well at this time. Billy's father also researched agents and helped his son make solid decisions on financial matters. His parents continued to be a great source of support for Billy, especially in handling off-court matters. For example, his mother started a foundation and also took care of taxes when he was on the professional tour. Billy's parents went to the larger tournaments, but found it difficult watch when he lost; however, his father made efforts to control his emotions because he knew Billy needed his support and confidence from the sidelines. After a loss, Billy's mother would simply encourage him and they would talk about what he could do differently next time.

Overall, Billy believed that his parents were positive after matches, but since he knew that winning was important to them, he continued to feel pressure. He perceived that tennis was still the major topic of discussion. In addition, Billy's parents would occasionally compare him to other players, which he did not appreciate because he believed that he knew what was needed to be successful. Billy liked to talk about tennis to his coach and support team, but did not believe his parents could provide useful advice anymore. Thus, arguments ensued when his parents would

offer advice, especially about off-court matters. When Billy would not respond to such advice, they would become angry. As a result, he believed that his parents were too negative, whereas his parents believed that they were simply expressing concern with the decisions Billy was making in his life. In retrospect, Billy realized that his parents were concerned for his well-being and that he should have heeded some of their advice. He still felt at times that winning was too important to his parents but recognized that they ultimately had his best interests in mind throughout his developmental years. Knowing this, at the time of interview, Billy and his parents reported having a good relationship. They talked less about tennis and more about his travels and tour friends, and they had accepted their role as behind-the-scenes supporters during these elite years.

Aggregated Pathway Stories: Turbulent Pathways (Negative Consequences Often Unresolved)

Jamie: The Early Years. Jamie started playing tennis with her parents on the weekends at 3 years of age. She showed a talent for hitting the ball early on. Her father, seeing this talent, played with her as often as he could at the park. Jamie's parents loved tennis, played it together, and were active most days of the week. Although Jamie played multiple sports during the early years, her mother wanted her to play tennis. Still, her father thought it was important for her to play different sports to develop fundamental motor skills.

The early years were fun for Jamie. She quickly became a good tennis player and she loved to compete and receive recognition for her abilities. Because of this, Jamie's mother and father decided they needed to develop her talents. Her mother thought that Jamie had the talent to be a college player. So they became very involved in working with Jamie, providing her every opportunity she needed to learn the sport, including hitting with her, providing instruction, and taking her to lessons several times per week. They took the development of their child seriously while still attempting to have fun.

Later in the early years, Jamie began to compete in tournaments and she was very successful, even when playing against a higher age group. Because of this success and Jamie's natural talent, her parents had high expectations for her, including winning and demonstrating professional behavior (e.g., it was emphasized that she have respect for her opponents, control her emotions, and make good tennis decisions). Training was also becoming serious. Jamie worked hard and she was pushed to practice her skills. Jamie's mother would sometimes become angry and yell at her, especially if she was not giving great effort in her training. However, Jamie knew that her mother loved her and just wanted the best for her. Along with pushing her, Jamie understood that her parents believed in her and were supportive. They taught her how to compete on the court and not give up, and they got along very well with her coach and allowed the coach to do her job. They would speak with the coach to find out what Jamie needed to do to improve and to make sure she was paying attention in lessons.

The intensity of tennis increased as the early years were coming to an end. The majority of conversations at home were about tennis and Jamie's training. Tennis and sport became more of a focus for Jamie than school, as well. She began to miss a few school activities to compete.

Jamie: The Middle Years. The middle years started at age 9 and consisted of increased training, competition, and travel for Jamie. Jamie continued to play tennis because she loved to compete and she really liked being known to her friends as a tennis player. Furthermore, she was not sure what she would she do if did not play tennis. She won a "12 and under" tournament at age 10, which motivated her and her parents to increase her training to daily practices with a coach about 30 min from home. In addition, they increased her competition schedule and traveled greater distances to participate in more elite competitions. The amount of travel, however, did not allow Jamie to spend much time with extended family because most of her weekends were spent on the road. These additions also conflicted with her academic homework, and she did not like to study in the car. During this time, she occasionally felt overwhelmed by the amount of training and expectations of winning.

The intensity of Jamie's tennis increased during the middle years. To increase her opportunity to become a professional tennis player, she and her parents made the difficult decision for her to attend a tennis academy at age 13. Tennis was becoming much more serious, as she hit every day for 3 hours and worked with several coaches. These 3 hours on the court were supplemented with an hour of off-court training. Both of her parents also became highly involved in her tennis and they were sacrificing larger amounts of time, effort, and money to fund her professional tennis dream. The sacrifice was evident; her mother moved out of state while her father stayed home to work. With all of these life changes in the service of her tennis goals, Jamie felt increasing pressure to make her parents happy and to win so their sacrifices would not be wasted. Concurrently, Jamie had thoughts of quitting so she would no longer experience such pressure and could be a normal kid like her friends back home. She loved tennis too much to quit, however, and knew it would disappoint her parents. She also believed that her parents' support was essential to maintaining her focus and commitment. Jamie's mother was instrumental in providing logistical support, such as scheduling tournaments, practices, and hitting partners and transporting her to matches. According to Jamie's coach, however, they may have done too much for Jamie because she was very dependent on her parents and would even look at them between every point during a match. Jamie's father communicated often with her coaches, but he knew his role. Jamie's father disagreed with her main coach at times about the tournament schedule, but otherwise trusted the coach and allowed her to do her job. Jamie's mother attended most group and private lessons and was highly involved. She would often pressure the coach to give Jamie more attention during the group practice, which embarrassed Jamie.

Jamie reported that her emotions often fluctuated during this time. Her parents were very supportive, yet also pushed her to practice and train. They yelled at her more frequently, especially if she was not focused in practice. Her parents did not understand she occasionally needed a break. Thus, the positive things they did, such as emphasizing work ethic, also bothered Jamie, because she was growing tired of the constant lectures. In response, she would occasionally not pay attention to their advice or do exactly the opposite of what they said. She purposely ignored her mother who was always "nagging" her about tennis. All of these factors enhanced the pressure she was feeling to compete and win.

By the end of the middle years, Jamie's parents were focused on developing a tennis champion. Since they believed she had the talent, they emphasized the

importance of holding a high ranking, because it was important to be noticed and get into the national tournaments. As a consequence, Jamie felt pressure to not lose to local girls and especially girls ranked lower than her. Jamie believed that her parents were afraid for her to lose. At this time, Jamie knew that she was capable of great achievements in tennis but she was not sure if it was worth the sacrifice. Jamie missed doing the activities that other teenagers were doing, and her parents often restricted social activities because she needed to be training or resting. Thus, Jamie thought she was missing out on being a teenager, which frustrated her greatly. This was often a source of arguments.

Jamie: The Elite Years. The elite years began at age 15 when the family selected an internationally respected coach to prepare Jamie for the professional tour. Jamie's parents, especially her mother, found it difficult to allow Jamie to travel with her new coach, and they still wanted to be highly involved in her development. After speaking with Jamie, Jamie's father knew that they could now place less pressure on her, as she was now self-motivated and had an expert coach who could handle her training. Although at times they would still push too much, Jamie's parents took on a more supportive role and assisted in managing her support team. They also handled Jamie's negotiations with sponsors and agents as well as finances and scheduling. At times, Jamie and her parents would disagree on tennis decisions. Jamie's parents attributed this to stubbornness, whereas Jamie believed she could make more of her own decisions. These arguments often ended in shouting matches, and Jamie reported that at those times she felt like she could never make her parents happy.

Jamie continued to play tennis because she thought of herself as a competent tennis player and she loved to compete and win. She still had thoughts of quitting, however, especially after long trips and early round losses. The pressure was still weighing on Jamie as she tried to meet her parents' high expectations and reward their sacrifices. Jamie knew that her parents' goal for her was to be a professional tennis player. Thus, she felt that it was sometimes more important for her to play a tournament and win at least a few rounds than to visit family. Discussions with her parents were always about tennis. She wished her family would ask her about other parts of her life. Jamie's mother also traveled with her frequently, and she reported that this put her in an awkward position. For example, at times Jamie wanted her mother's input such as for meals or clothing, but at other times did not. Quite often, Jamie's parents were not sure how to interact with their daughter, as she was having drastic emotional ups and downs. They learned after a few arguments not to compare her training to other players' or to talk too much to her before a match. They tried to encourage her and attempted to have positive discussions when she lost.

Jamie recognized how much her parents loved her and wanted her to do well, but at times it was just too much for her to handle. She decided to take a break from tennis at age 19 and attempted to bring some normality into her life. Jamie had lacked a social life while growing up, and sorely missed having friends outside of tennis. She talked to her parents about her need for them to be proud of her even if she did not play tennis and asked them to help her have a more balanced life. Jamie and her parents still disagreed quite a bit, and her parents were extremely frustrated that she was not playing tennis; however, they tried not to pressure her as they attempted to reconcile their relationship with Jamie. Yet, they felt Jamie was wasting her talent and could not help but push her to get back on the court.

Jamie was very disappointed about both not meeting her tennis goals and the belief that her parents seemed to care more than she did about tennis. Yet, she did not think she had the motivation to do the intense training and traveling needed to be a professional tennis player. Too many family issues distracted her and drained her passion for the game.

Discussion

The relationship between junior tennis players and their parents was retrospectively examined through the talent development stages to describe the complex and dynamic relationships in detail. These stories illustrate the common struggles that elite, adolescent tennis players face during the early, middle, and elite years of training. By conveying these stories, it is hoped that sport psychologists counseling young athletes and their parents can better understand these relationships and help facilitate positive sport experiences for those involved.

The developmental stages experienced by these nine athletes mirrored those found by Bloom (1985) and Côté (1999). Participants reported enjoyable early years, but the amount of effort and sacrifice increased greatly as they developed. In the middle years, tennis results and rankings were becoming important and they were more apt to experience emotional highs and lows. Thus, while the experiences of these athletes differed greatly based on their relationships with their parents, these stories illustrate the developmental progression of many young athletes.

Smooth Pathway Aggregate Observations

Junior tennis players, who had smooth developmental pathways like the aggregate case of Angela, had parents that exhibited many healthy attitudes and behaviors that enhanced tennis development and the parent-child relationship. This included providing unconditional love and support and allowing the child to increasingly make more of their own tennis decisions as they matured. The positive nature of the early years corroborates what Durand-Bush and colleagues (2004) found with an elite population of athletes.

Smooth pathway parents exhibited more positive behaviors than parents not in this pathway. Just as important, these smooth pathway parents avoided many of the negative or unintentionally detrimental behaviors seen in other tennis parents. In particular, they exhibited very few negative behaviors in the elite years, they were able to deftly avoid placing too much pressure on their children, and they did not draw attention to their investment. Thus, they refute the myth that to develop an elite tennis player, one must have an overly involved parent. Parents can facilitate the development of a successful tennis player while enjoying a healthy relationship with their children throughout the developmental years.

Smooth pathway parents found the balance between pushing the child to strive for excellence and also promoting a balanced lifestyle. They exhibited intentional efforts to maintain balance in the child's life despite the pressures to specialize early and push for outcomes (i.e., ranking points, wins). They also maintained a child development philosophy that kept the focus on what was personally important, such as academics and family, for example. Unlike some parents in the difficult and turbulent cases, smooth pathway parents also maintained consistent goals, and

thus a positive, balanced environment was created for the child. This, in turn, was perceived to reduce feelings of pressure, and enhanced the children's enjoyment.

Parents that navigated the junior tennis years successfully also appeared to be emotionally intelligent in their interactions with their child. They were able to read the emotional state of their child, monitor their own state, and communicate in a manner that maintained a positive, motivating climate. For example, smooth transition parents were often very good at knowing when to approach the child and what to communicate. Before and after matches are an emotional time, so these parents would plan their conversations with their child to limit stress and provide support. Salovey and Grewal (2005) have emphasized the importance of emotional intelligence in human interactions. Those that are high in emotional intelligence have the ability to read and regulate one's own emotions as well as to read and regulate the emotions of others. Emotional intelligence seems to be an important skill for knowing when and how to communicate with a child in the highly pressured environment of elite tennis.

Furthermore, parents that maintained a healthy relationship with their child were able to minimize the perceived importance of tennis. This was again done intentionally by talking about topics other than tennis right after the match, in the car ride home, or even as a rule at the dinner table. Likewise, parents who demonstrated an interest in other aspects of the child's life, and who did not overreact to losses or mistakes on the court, were better able to minimize the child's perceived pressure. Again, this was easier to achieve for parents who kept perspective about the sport and attempted to maintain balance in the child's life. Botterill and Patrick (2003) asserted that having perspective can be the key to a happy and satisfying experience. Yet, this *may* be contingent upon one's emotional intelligence. This is possibly where well meaning parents struggle. Their intention is to provide a healthy experience for their children, but when emotions are high during or just after competition, some parents may not personally have the emotional regulation skills to elicit helpful or positive behaviors. Thus, it seems that having an appropriate perspective of competition and life along with the ability to regulate one's emotions may be critical to the ability to successfully facilitate talent development and maintain a healthy parent-child relationship. Certainly, research is needed to examine the relationship among perspective (i.e., goals, motives), emotion regulation and emotional intelligence, behaviors, and athlete reactions.

Smooth pathway parents also intentionally related tennis experiences to other important life lessons with the intent of building life skills and character, which has been found in other effective parents of high achievers (Bloom, 1985; Gould et al., 2002). In addition, such parents took time during tournaments to visit the city hosting the tournament and emphasized involvement in other pursuits, including other sports even during the elite years. Parents that did not objectify the child's involvement also made academics a priority and required that their children attend and do well in school.

Difficult Pathway Aggregate Observations

Players that experienced a difficult transition in their development still reported positive experiences in the early years. In fact, difficult pathway parents exhibited many of the positive behaviors and attitudes of the smooth pathway parents,

regardless of the stage. Nonetheless, negative interactions with their child also existed and seemed to intensify with the middle years and adolescence. Like parents from each of the pathways, tennis was very important and they were heavily involved. At times, however, tennis may have become too important, and deviation from a healthy perspective often occurred. In other situations, parenting styles may have been appropriate, yet their child felt the serious pressure to please the parents, most likely because of the importance placed on tennis by the parents. While some negative interactions occurred, negative consequences were limited, as parents and players seemed to resolve most of their conflicts during the elite years. Difficult pathway parents recognized that their relationship with their child was strained and made efforts to alleviate the pressure, often through efforts at effective communicating and reducing direct involvement over time. Specifically, difficult transition parents were generally successful at increasing support and reducing involvement during the elite years. Yet, like most families, while some conflicts still existed, they generally had maintained a healthy parent-child relationship.

Turbulent Pathway Aggregate Summary

Similar to the smooth and difficult parent pathways, turbulent paths typically involved positive parent-child interactions in the early years. Yet during the early years, there were early signs that tennis and other sports were become very important and all-encompassing. The positive relationships that existed in the early years, when children enjoyed the attention from their parents, became strained with the mounting pressure to perform and increase rankings in the middle and elite years. Coupled with a child's basic desire for self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and the parents' desire to control the tennis experience, conflicts frequently occurred. A healthy perspective was at times lost in lieu of developing an elite tennis player, and problems that developed in the middle years continued to exist in the elite years. The players developed successful professional tennis careers, but efforts toward these achievements typically resulted in strained relationships with a parent. Yet, it should be stated that these parents were not uneducated or abusive. In fact, they had good intentions, wanted the best for their child, and were positive in many ways. The athletes generally perceived that the negative consequences, however, outweighed the positives, and they believed that tennis had become too important to their parents. In fact, one player indicated that his mother would rather see him win a tournament than come home to see her. This created a perception of conditional love and support, which in turn led to serious concerns about the parent-child relationship. Turbulent (and difficult) pathway parents often unintentionally suggested that love and support were conditional upon success (i.e., winning, development). As a result, the players understood the parents' investment in their tennis careers and wanted badly to provide them with positive results. Not surprisingly, this perceived pressure frequently impacted the child. For example, if the child missed a shot during a match and the parents visibly reacted to the missed shot, the child could experience increased pressure and perceive that the parents were upset. The perceived conditional support created strained relationships that continued into the elite years, where it was often a struggle for the parent to shift to increased support and reduced involvement. Thus, conflicts were often unresolved and led to detri-

mental consequences for the parent-child relationship. Finally, these players were more likely to leave the professional tour than their smooth pathway counterparts.

Degree and Quality of Parental Involvement

An important outcome from this study is that the data collected helps refute the tennis myth that to develop a great player, one has to have an over involved and overbearing parent to push the child to the limits to develop expertise. Coaches have posited that great players all had at least one parent that was highly involved to the point of being "pushy." Instead, this qualitative study shows that parental involvement does not have to be overbearing or negative and that parents can be positive and supportive and still help their child develop into a successful professional tennis player. There are multiple paths to expertise, including being forceful and demanding; however, over time forcefulness can damage the parent-child relationship in substantial ways. Stein, Raedeke, and Glenn (1999) argued that it is not the level of involvement but the degree or intensity that influences the enjoyment and stress that youth experience. Thus, creating a positive and mastery-oriented climate seems to be an optimal approach for balancing player satisfaction, reducing anxiety, and facilitating talent development (Smith, Smoll, & Cumming, 2007).

We reassert, however, that smooth pathway parents did push and motivate their children, and they also believed that the pursuit of athletic excellence was worthwhile. Yet, while they pushed their children to excel, they did so less frequently and for different reasons than turbulent pathway parents, and the smooth pathway parents seemed to display more emotional intelligence regarding the child's reactions. Pushing was also in perspective; it occurred when the parent was requiring sportsmanship, hard work in practice, and follow-through on commitments such as school and tennis. Smooth pathway players did, in fact, report being annoyed at times with their parents but recognized the importance of the parental support. In contrast, there was a qualitative difference within the difficult and turbulent groups. Players from these two groups expressed regrets about their teenage years; displayed more negative emotion during the interview; and while reflecting, were not as positive about their parent's involvement. In all, they believed their relationship had been negatively affected by their parents' tennis involvement. The turbulent group seemed to express even more frustration and sadness when talking about their relationships with their parents. Conflicts that occurred in the junior years were not resolved, and their relationships with their parents seemed to be changed in a more negative, permanent way. The emphasis placed on tennis by the parents, and the parent-child emotional attachment that existed, may have been fundamentally altered to the point where the child now perceives the parents' love and support as conditional and performance-based.

As can be seen, the degree and quality of parental involvement in the junior tennis experience is critical to parent-child relationships. In fact, sport scientists have recommended that an optimal level of parental involvement should be achieved to limit children's perceived pressure (Hellstedt, 1987). Unfortunately, there seems to be a fine line here, as parents want to push the child to excel but must also be careful that they are doing it in a healthy manner. Interestingly, Larson (2006) contended that to effectively mentor youth, adults should find ways to keep ownership for the activity in the hands of youth, while simultaneously trying to keep the activities

and developmental experiences on track (whether that be the development of a young person and/or athlete). The paradox seems to be finding the right balance of support and challenge. Too much structure and direction from adults can lead to a loss of this ownership. Lack of challenge and assistance, however, can also be unhelpful, as young people often do not have the self-regulation and problem solving skills needed to move forward toward their goals. As such, smooth pathway parents seemed to find a good balance between being supportive and challenging their children. On the other hand, difficult pathway parents seemed to struggle with this balance, but in the end resolved these dilemmas; and turbulent pathway parents were unable to find the right balance between support and challenge after the early years, thus culminating in strained relationships. While Larson's comments were aimed at mentors in general, they are apropos in explaining the parents studied in this investigation.

This study also revealed that the degree of parental involvement seems to change over time. Parents in the early years were involved out of necessity to provide the opportunities needed for their children to play tennis, but were also involved to promote enjoyment and to spend time with their children. Once the child demonstrated a talent, a decision was made to pursue more training and competition. In the middle years, as pressures and expectations changed, difficult and turbulent pathway parents often changed their goals and perspective to focus on tennis, while smooth pathway parents remained consistent. The majority lessened their involvement as the child entered the elite years, as these athletes were now young adults with a master coach, and who traveled to compete. As such, they needed to have the control because the parents could no longer provide the direction needed. These findings reflect past research showing that parents are highly involved during the early and middle years, but then transition into a less involved role during the elite years (Côté, 1999).

It is clear then that inappropriate parenting included pushing the child to win, thus creating feelings of pressure to appease the parents. Not discussed as frequently, but also important, is the concern that pushing a child to develop tennis talent over academics, family, and life pursuits is not promoting the development of the whole child. Thus, the goals and desires of both the parents and the child are important to consider. Tofler, Knapp, and Drell (1998) theorized about the pressures on high-achieving youth. Achievement by proxy (ABP) is a condition where parents control and direct children's experience to achieve success, even at the expense of the child's well rounded development. Specifically, involvement can be healthy if the parent takes pride and satisfaction in the child's achievements but does not allow the achievement domain to have deleterious effects on the child's overall development. The ABP spectrum's first stage is *risky sacrifice*, where the adult has a mild loss of the ability to differentiate their own needs for success from their child's needs and goals. This likely equates to what many coaches, parents, and athletes talk about as "living through the child." While reportedly bothersome to many coaches, parents that take a risky sacrifice are able to maintain some separation of their needs from their child's needs. The second stage is *objectification*, where the inability to differentiate between the parent and child's needs and goals becomes more severe. In this situation, the child is the means to achieve the parent's goals. Here, the parent believes they know what is best for the child, and they are often highly controlling of the child's experience. Finally, the third stage of ABP is *potential abuse*. Considered

the most severe form of ABP, there is no regard for the child's short- and long-term health consequences in the pursuit of the goal. Examples of potential abuse could be overtraining the child, providing performance enhancing substances, and forcing the child to play while "burned out" or injured.

Connecting these principles, the concept of risky sacrifice has important implications. Parents who push their children to be high achievers are risking a healthy relationship and the happiness of their child. Yet, they take this risk, either knowingly or unknowingly, in the hopes of developing the child's talents. Parents in the difficult cases were more apt to push very hard at times, but they were able to adjust when they became aware that these actions could have negative consequences. Thus, difficult cases were marked by some sacrifice that was eventually considered to be "worth it," and parent-child bonds were healed.

The turbulent cases most likely fit the objectification stage of the ABP model. These parents perceived that their actions were in the best interest of their child, believed that this was what their child wanted, and controlled their child's experiences; however, they overlooked signs of frustration, pressure, disappointment, and a lack of a social life in their children. This contradicts self-determination theory, which asserts that people are inherently motivated to be connected to others, effective and autonomous. When these factors exist, it is believed that individuals feel more satisfied with their life pursuits (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Unfortunately, the turbulent pathway parents were unwilling to suppress their goals (or what they perceived were the child's self-stated goals) and allow the child to make tennis-related decisions. In some cases, a fear existed that the child might withdraw from tennis, thus wasting their talent.

Recently, Coakley (2006) argued that parents may not only live vicariously through their children, but instead they may base their parental self-worth on the success of their child. He suggested that there is a societal trend where parents feel responsible for their children's successes and failures, and for this reason can become highly involved in their children's sporting lives. Hence, some parents feel an intense desire to provide the resources and opportunities for their child to excel based on an early detection of talent. Unfortunately, early talent identification is even considered by experts to be a suspect science (Abbott & Collins, 2004). In addition, since parents in the tennis community often have the finances to provide for their child's development, some parents may feel pressure to keep up with what other parents provide their children, such as traveling to out of state tournaments, employing expensive coaches, attending expensive clubs and camps, and buying expensive equipment.

Future Directions

Athletes make many academic, social, and emotional sacrifices to become great (Howe, 1999). The sacrifices often seem to be worth it if players achieve their goals, but what if players do not succeed? Do they still appreciate the experience and process of trying to reach such a high goal? Do these players think they missed out on a significant portion of their lives? It would be interesting to study players that made such sacrifices but did not reach the goal of being a high level athlete. Such a study could add to our understanding of the nuances of how parents successfully and unsuccessfully push their child to become an expert.

In addition, studies that examine a larger sample of athlete dyads (and triads, coach-athlete-parent) would further highlight the scope of parent-child concerns in tennis and would further illustrate the most effective ways parents could interact with their children across many situations. By establishing the characteristics of each pathway, researchers could then develop a tool to measure parent-child interactions to assess to what degree parents are facilitating talent development and maintaining healthy relationships with their children. This tool could be completed by family members, the player, and coaches to gather feedback from different sources.

Finally, studying team sports could provide an interesting comparison with individual sport triads. How different would the parents' role be under such circumstances? Would their interactions be influenced greatly by the team environment? Finally, it would be informative to conduct a longitudinal study with elite and nonelite tennis players to examine players' development and the parents' role, prospectively.

Limitations

Several limitations exist in this study. While in-depth interviews were conducted, we were only able to interview participants on a single occasion. It would have been helpful to conduct all three interviews, analyze the results, and then reinterview the participants relative to key findings. Moreover, interviewing both of a child's parents and other coaches from the junior development years would have created greater trustworthiness. For example, interviewing both parents would also allow us to learn how their parenting actions and styles interacted or complimented one another.

A second limitation is that interviews were retrospective in nature. Individuals' perceptions of the past could be shaped by their or their player's performance. For example, players might judge their parents' potentially harsh actions in less negative fashion if they won a series of recent professional tournaments. It is conceivable that teenagers in the middle of their talent development years may perceive parental actions differently than 21-year-old adults who may rationalize that their parent's actions must have been acceptable because they achieved their professional goals. Tracking players longitudinally across their career would be a stronger design, although extremely difficult to do. A second alternative would be to study parents and players within their current phase of development, an approach successfully employed by Wolfenden and Holt (2005).

Conclusion

This study is an initial step in understanding the comprehensive nature of the parent-child relationship in sport. More studies should chronicle the experiential stories of those athletes that have and have not developed and discuss these experiences relative to theory and research on child and talent development. By discussing parent-child experiences across stages of athletic talent development in a comprehensive manner, it is hoped that lessons are conveyed to clinicians that can help better inform their sessions with parents, athletes, and coaches. In so doing, we hope we have provided a greater understanding of the unique factors

and situations that create positive and negative outcomes in terms of relationships and talent development.

End Notes

[1] The ninth player was included in the study without accompanying parent and coach interviews because agreement across individuals was usually equivalent regarding the experience. Parents knew if there were substantial, unresolved issues discussed by participants. In addition, having talked to the parent who we didn't interview as well as members of the United States Tennis Association High Performance Staff who assisted us in obtaining the participants, it seemed that the pathway would not change (smooth). The father opted out because he believed his child's development was still continuing, and he did not feel the timing was right for him to talk about the experience. He approved of the inclusion of his child's data.

[2]Bloom (1985) listed the third stage as the "later years." In this study, it was termed "elite years" because the USTA was using this label to describe this stage.

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