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EXPLORING THE PARENT-COACH AND CHILD-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP IN THE RECREATIONAL SPORT CONTEXT

BY

NICHOLAS PITAS

Baccalaureate Degree, American University, 2010

THESIS

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire

In Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Science

in

Recreation Management and Policy

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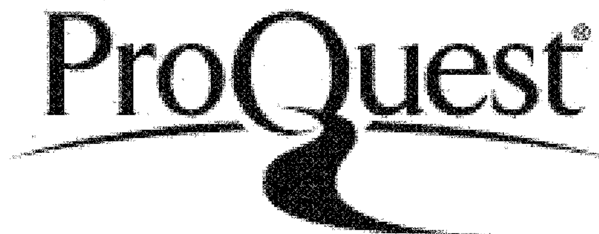

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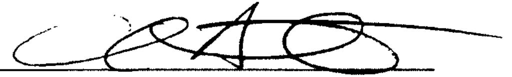

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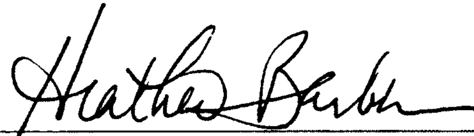

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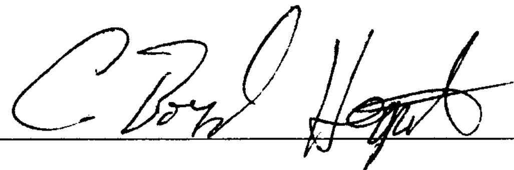

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Thanks to my parents and family.

Thanks Kirstin.

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ABSTRACT

EXPLORING THE PARENT-COACH AND CHILD-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP IN THE RECREATIONAL SPORT CONTEXT

By

Nicholas Pitas

University of New Hampshire, December, 2012

Parent-coaches are individuals who coach their own children (child-athletes) in sports. Although their presence is widespread in the realm of recreational sports, little research has been conducted on the relationship between parent-coach and child-athlete. This is an exploratory study with the goal of better understanding the parent-coach phenomenon in the recreational sports context, from the perspective of both parent-coaches and child-athletes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine parent-child dyads, focusing on positives, negatives, and the unique nature of the parent-coach and child-athlete relationship. Inductive analysis revealed a number of positive and negative themes, many of which were identified by both parent-coaches and child-athletes. Both parent-coaches and child-athletes perceived higher expectations for child-athletes, as well as a desire for equal treatment of all athletes on a team. Suggestions for applications to coaching education, as well as possible implications for future research are discussed.

Keywords: youth sports, recreational sports, coaching education, parents

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Youth sports are an integral part of American culture, with anywhere from 20-60 million young participants annually (Conroy & Coatsworth, 2006; NCYS, 2008). Sports provide exercise and a healthy outlet for the competitive drive, as well as significant opportunities for youth development. Adults play a large role in youth sports, facilitating leagues, delivering players to practices and games, and providing vital instruction as parent-coaches. Aspects of the youth sports experience such as self-esteem, motivation, behavior, and moral development can be influenced by the interaction between adults and children (Duda & Hom, 1993; Gershgoren, Tenenbaum, Gershgoren, & Eklund, 2011; Ommundsen &Vaglum, 1991). One adult figure, the parent-coach, embodies two significant adult roles. Although the separate roles of parent and coach have been studied extensively, there is a lack of research into this dual-role phenomenon.

The Youth Sports Experience

A good sports experience has the potential to positively impact the physical, cognitive, and social health of participants. With more than one-third of American children are overweight or obese (Ogden et al., 2010), youth sports may have a substantial part to play in slowing or reversing this disturbing trend. Current guidelines from the United States Department of Health and Human Services recommend than individuals aged 6-17 participate in at least one hour of physical activity daily (2008). Youth sports represent a healthy choice for young Americans, with adolescents investing more time in youth sports than any other out-of-school-time organized activity (Conroy

& Coatsworth, 2006). At a time when physical education classes are being cut or reduced (CDC, 2012), out-of-school time activities such as sports are gaining importance.

Sports provide social and cognitive benefits as well. Physical conditioning is associated with an increased ability to stay on task, and active young people show greater academic achievement as a group (CDC, 2010; Zaff, Moore, Papillo, & Williams, 2003). Long school days require mental and physical stamina, and sedentary youngsters perform more poorly in academic settings (Castelli, Hillman, Buck, & Erwin, 2007). In addition, youth sport participants are likely to be better adjusted socially (Zaff, Moore, Papillo, & Williams, 2003), and find greater career success than non-athletes (Conroy & Coatsworth, 2006). Participation over time also has the potential to foster a sense of belonging to a community (Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003), and leads to lower levels of social isolation than non-athletes (Conroy & Coatsworth, 2006). Young athletes also display greater psychological resilience (Bartko & Eccles, 2003), and develop socially desirable physical skills (Smoll, Smith, Barnett, & Everett, 1993).

How an athlete feels about their sports experience goes a long way towards whether or not they will continue to participate, as well as other more serious decisions. With some research linking athletic participation to increased substance abuse and risky behavior (Bartko & Eccles 2003; Baumert et al., 1998), a positive coaching presence is extremely important. A good team atmosphere with a well liked coach may provide a positive experience for one participant, while another young athlete in the same situation may not find the social connections that help ensure a positive experience. Conroy and Coatsworth (2006) suggest that the quality of the experience as well as the quantity must be taken into account when examining the impact of youth sports. Importantly for this

study, it appears that enjoyment is more strongly tied to the emotional involvement of a significant adult than to other factors (Ommundsen &Vaglum, 1991).

Positive Parental Involvement

Although sports provide the possibility for a number of positive outcomes, their occurrence cannot be assumed. The involvement of parents helps facilitate the existence of youth sports leagues, as well as provides the encouragement and instruction necessary for an enriching sports experience. Parental participation however, is not necessarily positive. Anecdotal accounts of bad parent behavior from the bleachers and the bench abound, and terms such as "hockey parent," "soccer mom" or "football dad" are colloquial expressions for overinvolved, aggressive, intense individuals. With this in mind, positive parental involvement is possible, and much more common than a few highly public reports would indicate.

The Eccles' expectancy-value model helps to explain the association between parents' beliefs and their children's behavior in activities such as sports (Simpkins, Fredricks, & Eccles, 2012). How parents think about their children's ability impacts how they act, and this in turn influences how their children act. The extent to which children incorporate their parents' beliefs and attitudes has to do with the amount of encouragement and reinforcement parents provide. The expectancy-value model also explains that parental attitudes also affect the youths' motivational beliefs and definitions of success (Simpkins et al.) Viewed in this light, parental involvement in youth sports becomes about more than teaching physical skills and winning games.

For fathers especially, interacting through sports may provide a context for them to feel comfortable and knowledgeable (Marsiglio, Roy, & Fox, 2005). As Trussell and

Shaw (2012) note, the role of father in American society has shifted significantly, such that the current cohort of fathers find themselves fulfilling different roles than their own fathers. Whereas previous generations of fathers were evaluated largely on their ability to provide financially for their family, the new definition of fatherhood includes spending meaningful time with their children (Daly, 1996). Sports provide an excellent opportunity for fathers to fulfill these new obligations, and to provide their children with a significant childhood experience (Trussell and Shaw).

Motivation

When asked why they participate in a sport, a young athlete will most likely respond simply, because it's fun (Barber, Sukhi, & White, 1999). An appropriate level of parental involvement fosters this desire to compete, allowing children to dictate their own level of investment. However, when parents become over-involved, participant motivation may change. Many parents push their children towards rigorous practice regimens and sport-specific training at an early age. When a demand for victory from parents or coaches takes priority over the original intentions of the athlete, dropout rates increase (Siegenthaler & Gonzalez, 1997). It may be important to note that some children are more dedicated than others, and that these negative outcomes occur largely when this shift in focus occurs at the behest of others, rather than the athlete themselves.

Defining Success

Parents also influence how their children define athletic success and competency (Duda & Hom,1993). Although youth sports participants stated their parents goal orientations were highly influential, there was no relationship between the actual goal orientation of the parents and that of their children. This suggests that although parents'

are important in shaping their children's goal orientation in sport, they are not effective at communicating their values to their children (Duda & Hom). In order to foster positive development, parents must encourage the autonomy of their children, allowing them to make decisions within a defined framework (Conroy & Coatsworth, 2006). Parents can also help by promoting a mastery (task) goal orientation, where success is defined through personal improvement and hard work. Such an orientation has been linked to positive outcomes both in and out of the sports context (Stuntz & Weiss, 2009).

Over Involvement

Whereas positive parental involvement has been linked to outcomes such as greater enjoyment and self-esteem among players (Ommundsen & Vaglum, 1991), parental over involvement may mitigate these outcomes. Stein, Raedeke, and Glenn (1999) demonstrated that an optimal level of parental emotional involvement may exist. The threshold may lie at the point where parents, most often the father, become emotionally involved to a high degree and start to make decisions on their child's behalf. The parent shifts to the roles of coach, manager, and agent rather than an unconditionally supportive family member (Coakley, 2006). Negative or over controlling behavior by parents and coaches is linked to a less positive sports experience for participants (Ommundsen & Vaglum, 1991).

Coaching Education Programs

The evident influence of coaches raises the question of how they can be most effective, and whether universal standards should be adopted for their training. Coaching education programs address best practices in coaching, and have long been proposed and supported by empirical research. Programs such as Coach Effectiveness Training (CET),

Mastery Approach to Coaching (MAC), and the Pennsylvania State University Coach Training Program are designed to modify coaching behavior and improving the sports experience of young athletes. These programs aim to maximize the benefits associated with youth sports participation by helping coaches learn to design appropriate programs. The ultimate goal is not winning, but providing the best possible experience for each athlete. Through the use of positive reinforcement, encouragement, and autonomy-supporting strategies, coaches can have a direct impact on the sports experience and the potential developmental outcomes (Conroy & Coatsworth, 2006; Gilbert & Trudel, 2004; Smith, Smoll & Cumming, 2007; Wells & Arthur-Banning, 2008).

Despite the evidence that coaching education can be an effective tool, most youth leagues have no educational requirements for coaches. These coaches instead rely on common-sense behavioral repertoires: coaching methodologies based on intuition rather empirical research. Although well intentioned, these intuition-based coaching methodologies may be ineffectual, or at their worst, damaging to youth sports participants (Barnett, Smoll & Smith, 1992; Smith & Smoll, 1997). Evidence clearly suggests that coaching education programs support better developmental outcomes for youth sports participants. Given the prevalence of parent-coaches, it is surprising that they are not commonly included in the coaching education literature, an area where this study may contribute. While teaching skills and competencies may comprise a part of the job of a coach, the relational aspect may be equally important. Positive relationships between coaches and athletes can help to increase the chances of positive developmental outcomes from youth sports participation, such as self-esteem enhancement, moral development, and autonomy (Smith & Smoll, 1990; Guivernau & Duda, 2002).

Parent-Coaches and Child-Athletes

It is very common for parents to also fill the role of coach of their children's athletic teams, with some sources estimating that parent-coaches make up 90% of community recreation coaches (Weiss & Fretwell, 2005, p. 287). This dual-role phenomenon is poorly understood, and represents an avenue for potentially important research into an area that has yet to be adequately explored. Although little research into the dual-role phenomenon has been conducted, two studies have defined the parent-coach and child-athlete relationship, setting the stage for the current study.

A quantitative study by Barber et al. (1999) examined the influence of parent-coaches on competitive anxiety and motivation in youth sports participants, and detected no difference between parent-coached and nonparent-coached participants. Motivation and anxiety are important components of the overall sports experience, as well as the level of parental involvement. If participants have a negative sports experience, their desire to continue participating will be diminished. The authors note that while factors such as age, gender, perceived ability, and level of competition have been studied for their impact on motivation, there has been very little research into the role that parents play in this regard.

The level of parental involvement is another factor that Barber et al. (1999) highlight. The authors argue that how involved a parent is makes a statement about how important the youth sports domain is to them. Parental involvement may be viewed on a scale, with under-involved parents on one end and overinvolved parents on the other (Hellstedt, 1987). While under-involved parents take no interest in their children's sports experience, overinvolved parents tend to emphasize winning and attempt to coach from

the sidelines. Whether or not parent-coaches necessarily fall into the category of overinvolved remains to be seen. Much may depend on the nature of their involvement. It is possible that parent-coaches who do not emphasize winning over other outcomes and practice autonomy supporting behaviors can add positively to the youth sports experience.

A 2005 study by Weiss and Fretwell serves as another launching point for the current study. A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with six father-son dyads involved in an 11-12 year old soccer league, as well as with two other players on each of those teams. The goal of these interviews was to better understand the parent-coach and child-athlete relationship from both perspectives. The interviews revealed both positive and negative aspects of the relationship from the parent and child perspectives. Parents pointed to quality time, a chance to teach life skills, and pride as positive elements of the experience; negatives included a conflict of interest, and challenges separating the roles of parent and coach. Their children enjoyed the quality time and improved instruction; negatives included higher pressure to perform, and a lack of separation between the coach and parent role. With such a small sample size, the authors suggest that future research be conducted on the topic, expanding the investigation to include varying competition levels, genders, and sports.

This study will be a first step towards filling the gap by further examining the parent-coach and child-athlete relationship; perhaps just as importantly it will open the door to future research, and contribute by highlighting the lack of information on this topic. It will aim to better understand the interaction between parent-coaches and child-athletes in the recreational sports context. Specifically, it will try to accomplish the

following: (a) understand how parent-coaches and child-athletes perceive their relationship in the sports context; and (b) better comprehend the dual-role phenomenon, where one individual occupies both the role of parent and coach.

CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY

Participant Selection Criteria

Participants were identified and recruited for this study using a set of criteria. Parent coaches were required to have a minimum of two seasons of experience coaching their children (with a season defined by the organized sports league they participate in), and reside in the northeast region of the United States. Child athletes were required to be between the ages of nine and 14 years old; be a participant in one of a pre-determined set of sports (baseball, softball, basketball, soccer, football, or wrestling); and reside in the northeast region of the United States. The specific age range was chosen in order to capture participants in recreational level sports, rather than middle or high-school sports. The rationale for such an age range was a focus on recreational sports, where parents may be more likely to coach. The experience requirement for parent-coaches was established in order to select parent-child dyads with more mature, stable relationships. Multiple seasons of involvement together may provide a sense of perspective on the parent-coach and child-athlete relationship that newer dyads may not have.

A total of nine parent-coaches and 11 child-athletes were identified (one parent having three eligible children). Six fathers and three mothers were interviewed, as well as three female child-athletes and eight male child-athletes; one child-athlete interview was not included in the final analysis, as the length and content of the interview were not deemed satisfactory. Combinations included six father-son dyads, two father-daughter dyads, one mother-daughter dyad, and two mother-son dyads. All six of the possible

sports were represented: two children played football, two played baseball, three played soccer, two played softball, one played basketball, and one wrestled. Parent-coach experience in the sport coached ranged from no prior experience, to high school and junior college level participation.

Development of the Interview Guide

A preliminary pilot interview was conducted with a former parent-coach and child-athlete dyad. The interview was not recorded, and specific information from that interview was not included in the final report. The pilot interview served as a means to develop appropriate questions and interview techniques for the parent-coach and child-athlete participants. The participants in the pilot interview provided feedback on content, as well as style, allowing the researchers to finalize the interview procedures for the study. Questions for the interview guide were drawn from previous research into the parent-coach phenomenon (Weiss & Fretwell, 2005), as well as the previous research experience of the authors. Effort was made to avoid leading questions and judgmental responses. Probing questions, follow-up questions, and techniques such as asking for clarification and specific examples were used to encourage deep narrative content. Separate interview guides were developed for parent-coaches and child-athletes.

Interview Procedures

Data collection took place through a series of audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews with parent-coach and child-athlete dyads. During these semi-structured interviews, the interview guide was used as a means of informing the direction of the interview. Questions were purposefully designed to be open-ended in nature, and to induce lengthy, in-depth responses. Although the interview guide provided a structure,

the actual course of the discussion was largely guided by participant responses. Interviewers asked follow-up questions and allowed participants to respond at length when appropriate. Interview guides for both parent-coaches and child-athletes are included in appendices A and B. In addition to audio-recording, the interviewer took contextual notes during the interview for future reference.

Interviews began with questions about basic information, such as what sports participants were involved in, and for how long. Parent-coaches were asked why they had begun coaching, and then why specifically they had begun coaching their own child, as well as about their playing experience as a youth. After these introductory questions, the interviewers asked about experiences, positive and negative, that parent-coaches and child-athletes had in the parent-coach child-athlete relationship. Other topics included what their perceptions were of other parent-coach and child-athlete pairs, as well as what they perceived teammates and parents thought about their parent-child and child-athlete relationship. The interview concluded with the interviewer asking for suggestions for a hypothetical coaching education curriculum targeted at parent-coaches.

Parent-coaches and child-athletes were interviewed separately, unless parents requested to be present for their children's interview, which occurred on three occasions. Child-athletes were interviewed first so as to capitalize on the limited attention span of younger participants. Interviews took place in locations requested by participants, including participant's homes, public spaces, and university offices. Interviews with child-athletes lasted from 15-35 minutes, while interviews with parent-coach ranged from 25-45 minutes.

As with much qualitative research, the researchers serve as the main instrument of data collection during the study. Both the first and second author have experience playing and coaching youth sports. The second author is currently a parent-coach, and has conducted significant research into youth development and youth sports. The researchers in this study were at no time in a position of authority or power over the participants. Participants were not pressured in any way to participate, nor did refusal to participate result in any negative consequences.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was an ongoing process, occurring simultaneously with data collection. Recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by the first author. As each interview was taken and transcribed, both authors began separately reading and coding the data. Each author identified themes, as well as text quotations that represented those themes. After separately coding all data, both authors met in order to discuss the narrative content and finalize a coding structure for the study. After a coding structure was finalized, the first author completed transcription of the remaining interviews and wrote the formal results section.

Coding separately during the initial phases of data analysis allows for both researchers to conduct data analysis without interference or influence from one another. This sort of independent coding is one method used to increase the validity of the results (Thomas, 2006). Other strategies included member checking, where participants provided feedback on the interpretation of data, ensuring that it is an accurate representation of the their experience, and allowing for greater authenticity (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Researcher and participant will spend a significant amount of time

together throughout the interview process and member checking procedure; this will allow for rapport, trust and a greater appreciation of the context of the information being provided by participants (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

The data analysis procedures for this study followed a general inductive approach, as described in Thomas (2006). The inductive approach is a systematic approach to analyzing qualitative data, without the formal guidelines and terminology of specific traditions of qualitative research (i.e., grounded theory and narrative analysis). The purpose of inductive analysis is to allow results to emerge from the raw data organically, without restrictive structures and guidelines. Key themes and categories are observed, and allowed to form the basis for a rich summary of extensive raw data. Links between categories are drawn, and eventually a model of the underlying structure of the data is derived (Thomas, 2006).

CHAPTER III

RESULTS

Child-Athletes

This section will present significant themes identified for child-athletes, providing representative quotations from participants. Table 1 provides an overview of those themes, along with a brief description.

Positives

Child-athletes identified multiple positive aspects or benefits of their relationship. Themes included in this category for child-athletes were: familiarity with coach, knowledge, spending time together, encouragement, and extra practice/feedback.

Familiarity with coach. This theme was characterized by feelings that parent-coaches knew the skills and abilities of the child-athlete more thoroughly than other coaches, and both parent-coach and child-athlete felt more comfortable with one another. One participant said this was a positive because of the fact that, "...he knows me well, and that I know him well." Other examples are , "It's a good thing because you get to work with someone you know," and "...it's fun because it's not somebody else. So it's almost easier." One participant described the relationship as follows: "I like how he pushes you a little more. I think a regular coach would be kind of timid to push their kid, like a kid that's not theirs, harder. But I think the way he does it kind of makes you a lot better at that sport."

Knowledge. This theme involved child-athletes having knowledge of how practices or games would be conducted that other athletes would not have. One participant said: "I

Table 1

Results for child-athletes

Category	Theme	Description
Positives	Familiarity with coach	PC knows about CA's skills, and as a person better than other coaches. CA feels more comfortable with PC.
	Knowledge	CA possesses special knowledge of how practices/games will be run.
	Spend time together*	CA and PC get to spend extra time together.
	Encouragement	PC is encouraging of effort and performance.
	Extra practice or feedback	CA gets extra practice or instruction outside of official practices and games.
Negatives	Unwanted criticism, anger	PC and CA argue, PC gives unwanted feedback or gets angry with CA.
	Pressure*	Pressure in practices and games may be higher on CA than other athletes.
Experience	Distinct roles	"Coach" and "parent", as well as "child" and "athlete" are distinct roles.
	No perception of special treatment	CA does not perceive any special treatment from PC during practices and games.
Expectations	Higher for effort/performance*	Expectations for CA are higher in terms of effort and/or performance in practices and games.
	Higher for behavior*	Expectations for CA are higher in terms of behavior at practices and games.
Suggestions	Equal treatment	Suggestion that PC strives to treat all players equally at practices and games.
	Feedback	Suggestion that PC balances positive and negative feedback.

* *Theme shared with parent-coaches*

like to know how we're going to do stuff at practices, and when we're going to do it... And I like being able to know where I'm going to play, and who I'm going to play with on the field for games. Because I can talk to them and help them with what to do, or some certain situations."

Other participants said, "I feel like I know what she's going to do and how she's going to do it more than the other kids because she's my mom," and "I like it, because I like to know where I'm going to play, and I like to know ahead, instead of being surprised at the game."

A connection may be drawn between this theme and the themes of "higher expectations" discussed later. Child-athletes felt that as they had greater knowledge of the workings of the team, they were sometimes looked to as leaders or role models.

Spending time together. Numerous child-athletes stated that they valued the chance to spend time with their parent. One child-athlete who does not live with his father full time said of practice and the ride home, "Well I mean like, we have a nice ride back. We have good practice and, it's good to spend time with him." Another participant noted that spending time in sports was valuable, partially because of the activity itself, "It's fun because you're always with them, and you're having fun with them, and you're just playing sports with them."

Encouragement. Encouragement and positive feedback from the parent-coach was identified as a positive aspect of the relationship. Participants said, "...he just makes me proud when he's like 'Good job, great job,'" and "sometimes, I'll be in a bad mood, and I don't think I did as well as I could of. And then she'll tell me that I did a lot better than I thought I did." When asked about the nature of the feedback they received from their

parent-coach after a poor performance, one participant said it was "usually positive, most of the time positive."

Extra feedback or practice. Many child-athletes stated that they were able to practice more than other athletes, by engaging in instruction and drilling with their parent-coach outside of official practices or games. Comments included, "...if you're with your coach all the time, they can always point out things that you did well because they're watching everything you do if they're your coach." Another participant identified this as a direct advantage over other athletes: "After the game you can really discuss the games more thoroughly than if your dad wasn't coaching, because they'll be watching every detail of the game...If your dad wasn't going to practices and games, they couldn't really help you become a better player. But if they are, if they're your coach, they can help you."

Negatives

Along with the positive characteristics of the parent-child relationship, child-athletes also identified aspects they perceived to be negative. In this category child-athletes identified unwanted criticism or feedback, as well as the perception that they were under greater pressure than other athletes.

Unwanted criticism, anger. Child-athletes stated that sometimes feedback from their parent-coach became excessive in scope or negativity: "The car ride isn't always good if you had a bad game. You have to drive home with him telling you all the stuff you did wrong." Others noted that parents sometimes used negative tactics such as shaming while disciplining them: "In practice he'll always make fun of you if you do something wrong, he'll try to get the other teammates to laugh at you." One participant

stated that they sometimes felt that criticism from their parent-coach was excessive, saying "When you do something negative and then he just keeps on talking and talking about it, sometimes I feel like ugh, can you just stop talking about it!"

Pressure. Pressure to perform in practices and games was a commonly noted negative among child-athletes. In some cases the pressure was not directly from parent-coaches, but rather from their role as the coach's child: "I feel and I'm not sure if my mom feels, but I feel like I am more responsible for some things than others." Other participants felt that their parent-coach directly put more pressure on them. One said, "...if you have a bad game, they see everything you did. So they might be harder on you," while another said that of them and their siblings, "we kind of know what our dad will react to when we do something bad, so if you know you made a really bad play, it's almost like you're nervous to see what your dad would say, if like you had another coach, the reaction probably wouldn't be the same just because the coach wouldn't go as hard on you if you made a mistake."

Experience

Themes within this category included the separation of roles between home and sports, in particular how "coach" and "parent", as well as "child" and "athlete" were distinct roles; as well as a perception by child-athletes that they did not receive special treatment from their parent-coach.

Distinct roles. One participant noted that this was a possible negative, stating that "if you do something bad in a practice, your coach might get mad at you, but if it's your dad, they'd be mad at you after the practice." Other participants did not rate this as either positive or negative, but simply as a feature of being in a parent-coach and child-athlete

relationship: "She makes me call her coach, but if I need something that's like it, if like I have a question about the drill, I have to call her coach, I can't call her mom. But if like I need my hair done over, then I have to call her mom."

Another participant gave his preference for distinct roles, "I call him coach (father's name), but some kids call their dad 'daddy,' I don't really like that because it might make the dad treat the kid better."

<u>No perception of special treatment.</u> Although many participants had experiences where they perceived other coaches had given special treatment to their own child-athletes, none felt they themselves received special treatment. Sometimes child-athletes felt that they were treated worse than other athletes, in order to avoid accusations of favoritism. One said,

> I know that I'm never going to be the captain, because that would be almost favoring. And I probably won't be starting all the games, because that would also be favoring...she doesn't use me if she's trying to explain a drill, she won't use me as an example. And she won't use me to show if I do something well. She won't show me give an example of how I'm doing it well. And again she won't let me start most of the games.

Suggestions From Child-Athletes

Child-athletes were asked to give suggestions for a future coach-training curriculum, focusing specifically on parent-coaches. Major suggestions included treating all players equally, and balancing positive and negative feedback.

<u>Equal treatment.</u> Most participants suggested that parent-coaches treat all athletes the same, regardless of whether they were their child-athlete or not. One participant suggested that parent-coaches should, "be friendly to the entire team, not just your kid because you know your kid better," while another said that parent-coaches "should probably put the other players in first." One participant described a strategy used by their

parent-coach, which the child-athlete approved of: "You should pretend if you're coaching a team that does tryouts, you should pretend to just not know your kid during tryouts. You shouldn't really watch them more than the other players, maybe even watch the other players more than your kid. Because then it looks like you're viewing your child the same amount as the other players."

Some participants felt that in the past they had been on teams where other parent-coaches had given special treatment to their child-athlete, and did not like it. One stated that on the other team, "Sometimes I felt left out, because we're all, equally as good, just they don't get to play very much because it's the coach's kid gets to play."

Balancing feedback. Many child-athletes suggested that parent-coaches should balance their negative and positive feedback. Instead of focusing solely on positives or negatives, coaches should "find a healthy medium or not taking it too far. I think it's important to give critiques, but when it goes to a level when you're making them feel bad about themselves, that's going too far." Participants did not state that they did not want criticism, but rather that it should be delivered in a constructive manner. One said, "it's okay to criticize, but don't keep doing it so that it makes them feel bad," while another said that parent-coaches should "tell them what to do, but tell them how they can fix it."

Parent-Coaches

This section will present significant themes identified for parent-coaches, providing representative quotations from participants. Table 2 provides an overview of those themes, along with a brief description.

Table 2

Results for parent-coaches

Category	Theme	Description
Positives	Pass on lessons/values	Pass on values/lessons beyond sport skills.
	Spend time together*	Sports provide a chance to spend time together, produces a strong and unique relationship.
Negatives	Pressure*	Pressure may be higher on CA than other athletes.
	Focus on winning	Some coaches put undue focus on winning.
	Favoritism	PC is aware of favoritism. CA may play less, or receive le: attention in an attempt to avoid appearance of favoritism.
Motivation	Facilitate team/league	Began coaching to start a team or keep a team going.
	Provide good experience	Began coaching to provide a good sports experience and quality coaching.
Coaching practices	Value development	Value development of skills and as a person over winning.
	Try to be egalitarian	PC attempts to treat all players in an equal fashion.
	Responsibility	PC feels a sense of responsibility to all players and parents
	Pursue other coaches	PC pursues other coaches for CA.
Expectations	Higher for behavior*	Expectations for CA are higher for behavior.
	Higher for performance/effort*	Expectations for CA are higher for performance or effort.

** Theme shared with child-athletes*

Positives

Parent-coaches also identified multiple positive aspects of the relationship with their child. Themes included in this category were: passing on lessons/values, and spending time together.

Passing on lessons/values. This theme involved parent-coaches being able to pass on their own values, as well as lessons and skills that extended beyond the sports realm. One participant highlighted community service, saying that he was "building the next group of volunteers, for the next generation." Another parent-coach said that lessons learned through sports would "apply to a homework assignment some night, or something later on in life."

Spending time together. Parent-coaches identified spending time together with their child as a positive, specifically the way that it strengthened that relationship. One participant said of sports, "it's a good basis for our relationship," while another said, "it's absolutely a bond." Even parents who spent significant amounts of time with their children outside of sports noted the value of spending time together in the sports context: "You're both engaged in something that involves exercising your body and your mind. You can talk about it afterwards." The relationship formed through sports participation was often cited as unique, and distinct from the relationship with their children who they had never coached. One participant said that the child he did not coach was "probably envious a little bit that she hasn't had those experiences with me." Another said, "I have a great relationship with my daughter, but the way that I relate to her on certain things is definitely different."

Negatives

In addition to the positive characteristics of the relationship with their child, parent-coaches identified several negative aspects as well. Themes in this category included pressure, focus on winning, and favoritism.

Pressure. Parent-coaches spoke of increased pressure on child-athletes, either directly from them (intentionally or otherwise), as well as indirectly from their role on the team. One parent-coach admitted that the pressure was higher on their child-athlete than other players on the team, and they often ask themselves, "am I putting too much burden on him…? I don't want to do that, and there are times when I think that I am." Another parent-coach who intentionally pushes his own children harder, talked about the positive aspects of pressure: "you learn so much... being in pressure situations, knowing how to handle pressure." Another participant said that often relationships become frayed over the issue of pressure, citing an instance "where the coach, perhaps because of his intensity or necessity to will his child to win like he did, has ruined their relationship."

Focus on winning. Parent-coaches interviewed for this study cited numerous examples of other coaches abusing their position in search of victory. One participant stated that some parent-coaches, "when they play the easy teams, then their weaker players get more playing time, when they play the tougher teams their stronger players (get more playing time)." In this instance, although playing time becomes equal for all players, it is not equitably distributed. One participant said that other coaches were "more winning focused than developmentally focused." Another participant spoke of coaches who fostered an overly competitive atmosphere, saying "I heard trash talk from other teams… heard other coaches shouting, 7-8-9! Basically disparaging the kids at the bottom of the lineup."

Favoritism. Participants spoke of the phenomenon of favoritism, other parent-coaches giving special treatment to their own children, as a major negative. As a result of this awareness, participants spoke of modifying their own coaching practices to treat their own children less favorably. One participant said that as a parent-coach they felt "under the microscope," and that they " do not want to ever give the impression that I'm favoring (my own child)." Another said they "wanted everyone to see that I wasn't treating him (child-athlete) any differently," and that their child would "bat lower than where he might have batted." Another participant said that when dealing with their own child, their coaching was characterized by "higher expectations, the lower level of tolerance… I may, as (child) put it, clamp down a little bit harder."

Motivation

Motivation to start coaching was described in two ways, either in order to facilitate a team/league, or because of a desire to provide quality coaching and a good sports experience.

Facilitate team/league. Some participants cited a need for volunteers to facilitate the creation/continuation of a team or league. In leagues that require volunteers to function, most are parents. One participant put it succinctly: "We live in a community that has a youth sports organization which is run on parent volunteers, if there are no parent volunteers there's no league." While some parent-coaches signed up willingly, others came to coaching because no one else would: "I wasn't planning on being head coach, but no one else stepped forward."

Provide quality coaching and a good sports experience. Some participants started coaching in order to foster a good sports experience for their children and others. In most

instances, participants cited poor coaching as a concern and a part of that motivation. One parent said that they "wanted to be involved, a lot of parents were complaining and not really doing anything." One parent-coach shared the following experience, during a sports season when his child did not receive equitable playing time: "One night my son was reading a book… about a boy who didn't get to play and everything, and he busts into tears. I said 'that's it, I'm getting involved because I don't want any kid to ever feel that way.'"

Coaching Practices

In regards to how participants conducted their practices and games, the following themes emerged: valuing development, trying to be egalitarian, responsibility to all participants, and pursuing other coaches for their children.

Valuing development. Coaches interviewed for this study stated that they valued development in their players, as both individuals and athletes, over victory. One parent-coach said, "My goals are not to produce the next great athlete. My goals are to produce a well rounded, healthy minded, child." Another stated that while winning is rewarding, "if I see the kids improve, I'm happy about that." For some participants, a focus on development was in conflict with the goals of other coaches, and at times the parents and athletes on their team: "Even though it (victory) drives them and their parents, it's not what drives me."

Try to be egalitarian. This theme involved consistent, concerted efforts on the part of participants to treat all members of the team in an egalitarian fashion, and may be linked to the previous theme of favoritism. One parent-coach said that with their own child, "I'm not pulling him to the front or to the back (of the line in drills)," while another

said that "I had 11 players so two would sit, I made sure that he was sitting as much as everybody." Another described how they tried not to interact with their child more than other athletes: "If I see him doing something perhaps not correctly… I try to catch myself and not spend as much time focused on him."

Responsibility to all participants. This theme involved a sense among parent-coaches that they had a responsibility to honor the expectations of all participants involved with their team, including athletes and parents. One participant said that they had a duty "to the 12 kids on that team, and the families, to give them a better experience," not only to his own child. Another participant described their feelings about their athletes in this way: "When they're there they're mine."

Pursuing other coaches. Participants described a desire to find other coaches to instruct their own children, as well as teams and situations where they are not coaching. One parent-coach said, "I have been actively looking… for him to play on (a team) where I'm not the coach, because I think when you get to a certain age you need to move on." Another said they valued "different perspectives, or different teaching" for their child. Other coaches spoke of encouraging assistant coaches or other coaches to interact with their children at practices and games: "I tell them (assistant coaches) right off the bat, if you notice something… say something."

Expectations

Both parent-coaches and child-athletes raised the topic of high expectations. Most child-athletes felt that their parent-coach had higher expectations for them, either in terms of effort/performance, or their behavior at practices and games. Most parent-coaches stated that they had higher expectations for their own children, either in the realm of

behavior, or in terms of their performance or effort. These perceived expectations were seen as positive by some participants, negative by some, and as a neutral feature by others.

Higher Expectations for Effort/Performance

Most child-athletes felt that their parent-coach expected them to work harder, and perform better than other players on the team. For some this was a positive, with one athlete saying that it was "good because I can work harder, and that makes me work, and do my thing." Others felt it was more negative: "if someone does something wrong, he'll like kind of yell at them, but if I do something wrong, he'll yell at me cause he expects a lot more from me." Others did not assign this phenomenon a positive or negative label, but just viewed it as part of being a child-athlete: "out of all the players he expects us to do the best, be the leaders and he just has, expects us to do a lot more than anyone else on the team."

Many parent-coaches expressed higher expectations in terms of performance or effort. One parent said, "I expect him to be able to perform better... just because he's around it so much." Another parent explained why they held their child to higher standards: "My expectations are probably higher for him naturally. Every parent wants their child to succeed." One participant described it thusly: "I don't have the expectation that they're going to be superstars, I have the expectations that they're going to try to be superstars and put forth that kind of effort all the time."

Higher expectations for Behavior

In addition to higher expectations of performance/effort, most child-athletes felt that there were higher standards of behavior set for them. One reason for this was that as

a parent-coach and child-athlete dyad, they were under additional scrutiny from other players and parents. One athlete said, "She wants me to set an example for the other kids. She says people are going to look to me because I'm the coach's daughter," while another felt that "if the parents are watching the games, and I'm goofing off, it might reflect on him, his son's goofing off, he might not parent him right. He might be goofing off and not teaching stuff in practice." One athlete said that behavioral missteps at practices and games were dealt with through the use of public rebukes, saying if they acted up their parent-coach "would insult you first, then he'd tell you to go do something."

Many parent-coaches stated that they had higher expectations of their own children in terms of their behavior at practices and games. For some parents these higher expectations were subconscious or non-intentional: "Your anger level, your patience is a little less with your own son." One participant stated that they "speak to (child) the way that I wish that I could speak to the other kids." Another parent spoke of their child as a role model for other children: "I expect him to be able to model that only because of all the things we've already talked about: the conversations in the car, the conversations at home."

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

Thematic Discussion

The purpose of this study was to help develop understanding of the parent-coach and child-athlete relationship. Although the parent-coach phenomenon is common in youth sports, it has not been thoroughly investigated in past research. The parent-coach embodies two significant roles, both of which have been studied extensively, but rarely in combination with each other. By interviewing both parent-coaches and child-athletes, we were able to take into account both major participants in this relationship, and provide a more thorough analysis of its structure. Semi-structured interviews revealed a number of positive and negative themes, as well as aspects of the relationship that were defined in more neutral terms. Several of those themes were shared between parent-coaches and child-athletes.

Both parent-coaches and child-athletes specified several positive aspects of their relationship. The opportunity to spend time with one another, especially in the sports context, was identified as a positive by both groups. Time spent together in sports was identified as particularly engaging, with both parents and children highlighting the importance of doing an activity together. Parents spoke of common experiences in sports as a basis for the relationship with their child, with some adding that their relationship with children they had never coached was not the same. For some participants, sports were particularly important, as they did not have the chance to spend significant time together in other aspects of their daily lives, whether due to work or unique family

situations. This speaks directly to the research pointing towards sports as a context for parents, and especially fathers, to interact with their children, and to fulfill the obligations that come with a contemporary definition of fatherhood (Daly, 1996; Marsiglio et al., 2005; Trussel & Shaw, 2012).

Three other significant positives identified by child-athletes were positioned around knowledge in some way. Child-athletes cited a familiarity with the parent-coach, knowledge of how practices or games would be conducted, and extra feedback or practice as positive aspects of their status as child-athletes. Being familiar with a parent-coach was seen as positive because athletes felt that their parent-coach knew their strengths and weaknesses as players more precisely. Related to this was a feeling that having a parent-coach allowed for a greater opportunity to receive sports-based feedback and hone skills outside of official practices or games. Knowledge of how games or practices would be conducted had less to do with sports skills, and mainly included having privileged knowledge that other athletes did not have.

Parent-coaches also identified the opportunity to pass on lessons or values as a positive. These lessons were not sports-based in nature, but rather extended to life beyond the scope of sports. These experiences shared by parent-coaches are consistent with research identifying sports participation as an excellent opportunity to develop highly valuable life skills. Much like the physical skills of sports participation, life skills are learned through observation and repetition (Papacharisis et al., 2005). Parent-coaches have the opportunity to model adaptive behavior, attitudes, and belief that apply beyond the sports context.

Parent-coaches spoke of "building the next group of volunteers," and teaching lessons that would apply "later on in life." Feedback from parent-coaches was chiefly viewed as positive by child-athletes, but was sometimes seen as a negative. This largely occurred when feedback was perceived to be excessive in scope or negativity. Past research has identified fun as the most powerful motivator for child-athletes to participate (Barber et al., 1999); however, child-athletes in this study described how excessive feedback from a parent-coach decreased their enjoyment of the activity. Their experiences were consistent with research that points to parental over-involvement as a main factor in youth sports dropouts (Siegenthaler & Gonzalez, 1997).

Both parent-coaches and child-athletes identified pressure on child-athletes as a significant negative aspect of their relationship. Some parent-coaches intentionally increased pressure on their child, while others admitted to doing so unintentionally. Both child-athletes and parent-coaches recognized that increased pressure also came indirectly from the role of being the coach's child. Child-athletes mentioned that they felt like they had to perform, and that the other players and parents watched them particularly closely. Many parent-coaches spoke of other coaches who they felt put excessive pressure on their athletes through an undue focus on winning; no parent-coach participating in this study admitted to being overly focused on winning.

Themes centered around knowledge and pressure also related to a perception from both parents and children that expectations were higher for child-athletes in terms of effort and performance, as well as behavior. Some parents and children identified this as positive, some as negative, and some as neither. Although child-athletes expressed that they felt as if their parent-coach expected them to work harder and perform better than

their peers, parent-coaches were hesitant to say they expected better performance from their children. Although most parent-coaches stated they wanted their child to succeed and had high expectations, those expectations were mainly based around effort rather than performance.

Expectations of good behavior were centered around acting as a role model for other athletes. Parent-coaches and child-athletes also felt they were under increased scrutiny by other parents and athletes. Child-athletes mentioned that they felt as if other parents were watching them in practices and games, and that they knew their actions reflected on their parent-coach. This additional scrutiny was consistent with the theme of favoritism that parent-coaches identified. Parent-coaches felt that their actions were being analyzed closely by parents, and were highly aware that the perception of favoritism existed. Many parent-coaches reported changing their coaching behavior as a result of this perceived scrutiny, treating their own child less favorably than other athletes. This came mainly through reduced playing time for child-athletes, or the assignment of less desirable positions than other athletes.

Although elevated levels of pressure and expectations may be related, they should not be confused as identical. Whereas excessive pressure may be perceived as a negative, Eccles' expectancy-value model identifies high parental expectations as driver of high levels of self-concept among their children (Simpkins et al., 2012). Expectations reflect parental beliefs about their children, and their confidence in their abilities in certain activities. It may be that high expectations, along with high levels of support and encouragement are significant positives for young athletes. Simpkins et al. also point to parent and child coactivity (engaging in an activity together) as a context for parents to

offer encouragement, feedback, and role modeling; which may provide benefits for child-athletes that their peers do not have access to.

Child-athletes did not perceive that they received any special treatment, which is consistent with what parent-coaches observed about their own coaching practices, and the presence of favoritism in youth sports. Although many child-athletes described experiences where other parent-coaches had given their child special benefits, none of the participants felt they had ever received preferential treatment. Many described interacting with their parent-coach in a very professional manner at practices and games, and some recognized that they played less than their peers, regardless of their skill level. Related to this was a perception among child-athletes that there was distinct role-separation between sports and their life outside of sports.

Implications for Practice

In sports, children identify their parents as an important influence on how they define success and evaluate their own performance. There is no relationship between the reported goal orientation of parents and their children however, suggesting that communication is largely ineffective (Duda & Hom, 1993). Given the high level of influence of parent-coaches, open communication about goals, expectations, and practices would be a logical progression for parents and children in this relationship. Holt et al. (2009) also support open communication between parents and children in sports, noting that it builds autonomy and increases enjoyment by participants.

When asked for suggestions they might give parent-coaches, many child-athletes recommended that parent-coaches treat all athletes the same, favoring an egalitarian approach. Consistent with this suggestion, parent-coaches spoke of a responsibility to

everyone involved with the team, as well as conscious efforts to act in an egalitarian manner. Parent-coaches felt that they had a duty to ensure that all athletes, as well as their parents or guardians, had a positive experience while on their team.

A coaching education program specifically designed for parent-coaches may eventually be developed, or a component for parent-coaches may be added to an existing coaching education program. Any educational program should focus on maximizing the benefits of participation by parent-coaches, while minimizing the negative aspects identified in this study. Preparing parent-coaches for the added scrutiny that comes with the position is another possible topic for such an education program. Participants in this study were aware of how other parents perceived their actions, and many spoke of modifying their behavior in order to avoid conflict with other parents. This behavior modification took the form of parent-coaches decreasing the playing time of their own child, or playing them in less important positions in the competition. Although child-athletes participating in this study did not experience significant negatives as a result, it is possible that may occur if parent-coaches are not prepared to deal with additional scrutiny and pressure effectively.

Future Research

Although they provided adequate data for analysis, participants in this study represented only a small geographical and demographic cross-section. The region of New England in which this study took place did not provide for racial diversity among participants. Future research into the parent-coach phenomenon should expand on the size and scope of this study by including a larger and more diverse group of participants. Also, in some instances parents requested to be present for their child's interview, or

interviews were held in public places where privacy could not be ensured. It is impossible to know how the presence of a parent influenced the responses that child-athletes made to interview questions. To address this, a permanent and comfortable interview location should be used in future research.

The parent-coach phenomenon has not been adequately explored, and as such this study is largely exploratory in nature. The specific criteria for participation in this study means that data may not be transferable to older or younger athletes, higher levels of competition, or purely individual sports (i.e., golf or tennis). Future research may focus on specific sports, ages, or geographic areas. Research with the express goal of creating or modifying existing coaching education should also be undertaken. Parent-coaches are prevalent, and not likely to become less so, and efforts should be made to maximize the benefits of their participation.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Child-Athlete Interview Guide

- How long have you been playing sports?
- How long has your parent been your coach in sports?
- Why did your parent coach you instead of someone else?
- What are some of the good things about being coached by your own parent?
- What are some of the bad things about being coached by your own parent?
- Did you feel your parent as a coach expected more or less of you as compared to teammates? Why was this? Can you provide some examples?
- Why do you think that this relationship did/didn't work out for you? Do you know anyone who had a different experience?
- Did being coached by your own parent influence your experience playing sports?
- Do you think about sports differently than kids who were coached by people who aren't their parents?
- What do your teammates think about your parent being the coach?
- What do you think are some of the most important things that parents who coach their own children should do to make the sports experience as good as possible for their own kids and their teammates?
- Based on your experience, what do you think of parents coaching their own children in sport?
- Is there anything else about the parent-coach and child-athlete relationship that you would like to talk about?

APPENDIX B

Parent-Coach Interview Guide

- How long have you been coaching? What was your background before you got into coaching?
- How did you begin coaching your own child? Why did you start coaching your own child? Is it just one child, or multiple?
- Do you have experience playing the sport(s) that you're coaching?
- What are some of the good things about the parent-coach and child-athlete relationship that you have formed through sports?
- What are some of the bad things about the parent-coach and child-athlete relationship that you have formed through sports?
- How do your expectations of your own child compare to other players on the team?
- Why was/wasn't this relationship a positive one for you? Do you know anyone who had a different experience, and why do you think it was different?
- Has coaching your own child changed your coaching practices?
- Can you describe your interaction with your child during practices and games compared to other athletes on your team.
- How do you believe your child feels about this relationship that you have through sports?
- If you have children who you have not coached, please the describe how that relationship is different from this one.
- Based on your experience, what is your opinion of parents coaching their own children in sports?
- What do you have as suggestions for educators/parents/coaches/administrators/athletes?
- Is there anything else about the parent-coach and child-athlete relationship that you would like to talk about today?

APPENDIX C

IRB Approval

University *of* New Hampshire

Research Integrity Services, Service Building
51 College Road, Durham, NH 03824-3585
Fax: 603-862-3564

10-May-2012

Pitas, Nicholas
RMP, Hewitt Hall
1022 Spruce Street
Falls Church, VA 22046

IRB #: 5463
Study: Exploring the Parent-Coach and Child-Athlete Relationship in the Recreational Sport Context
Approval Date: 08-May-2012

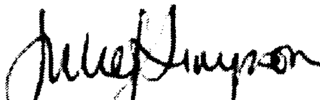
The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB) has reviewed and approved the protocol for your study as Expedited as described in Title 45, Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Part 46, Subsection 110.

Approval is granted to conduct your study as described in your protocol for one year from the approval date above. At the end of the approval period, you will be asked to submit a report with regard to the involvement of human subjects in this study. If your study is still active, you may request an extension of IRB approval.

Researchers who conduct studies involving human subjects have responsibilities as outlined in the attached document, *Responsibilities of Directors of Research Studies Involving Human Subjects*. (This document is also available at http://unh.edu/research/irb-application-resources.) Please read this document carefully before commencing your work involving human subjects.

If you have questions or concerns about your study or this approval, please feel free to contact me at 603-862-2003 or Julie.simpson@unh.edu. Please refer to the IRB # above in all correspondence related to this study. The IRB wishes you success with your research.

For the IRB,



Julie F. Simpson
Director

cc: File
Harrist, Christopher