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## Using cases to frame parental support of high school basketball players in Japan

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### Introduction

Exceptional levels of sport skill require certain types of environmental support, special experiences, excellent teaching, and appropriate motivational encouragement. Parents play an important role as a contributing factor for talent development and athletes' sport experiences, because parents' psychological support is an essential element in the development of children's self-esteem, competence, and achievement during the sampling, specialization and investment phases of their careers (Côté, 1999). In the field of clinical psychology, family system theory focuses on the influence of parents and the interrelationship between family members (Côté, Fraser-Thomas, Robertson-Wilson, & Soberlak, 2004). In spite of the importance of the research on parents' contribution to children's sport performance development, more research is in great demand. The purpose of this study was to describe the perceptions of parental support of high school basketball players in Japan taking into account their family systems in relation to talent development.

### Methods and Procedure

*Participants.* Seventeen female players of a public high school basketball team in Japan and their parents and coaches served as participants for this study. Their average age of the players was 17.4 years old, and they had an average age of 5.7 years of playing experience. The players had represented their provincial team at the national high school competition.

*Procedure.* Focus-group interviews were conducted

with two groups of players; a third year high school group (8) and a second year group (9). In-depth open-ended interviews were used to gather data on 15 parents and two coaches. Each interview took approximately 40 to 60 minutes. Most of the questions were related to the perceptions of the role of parents regarding their supporting behaviors and its cognitive appraisal in the development of player performance. The interviews were systematically transcribed verbatim from the audio cassettes immediately after the completion of each interview, and a total of 276 meaning units were extracted from the data set. The data was decontextualized using an inductive procedure for analyzing unstructured qualitative data (Côté, Salmela, Baria, & Russell, 1993).

### Results

A total number of 57 meaning units were gathered related to the contextual component from a total of 276 gathered from the 17 players, 15 parents and two coaches. The inductive analysis process resulted in regrouping these interview transcripts into three categories corresponding to the players' different level of basketball participation: (stimulating, empowering and backing), and six properties (having feelings of sympathy, helping substantially, motivating, providing positive feedback, understanding, and respecting).

*Stimulating:* Strong flow experiences which players felt during playing basketball and the other times that they spent with their families in their initiation phase were important for fueling the motivational resources. Parents played an important role getting

children involved in various physical activities, and especially basketball. Parents encouraged their children with praise when they watched the practices, they sympathized with the feelings of their children during practice:

*Playing basketball is not work that a coach and parents impose upon children at the beginners' level where parents and coaches are asked to make children feel a pleasant sensation through physical activity. If children have a chance to reach the flow experience through playing basketball, they can devote themselves to tough, long-term training. This is one of the most important roles for coach and parents. (Coach A)*

All players made mention of the effects of communication with their parents during their initiation phase:

*My father was interested in various sports. He always took me and my sister to a lot of interesting places outside of the house. He always played with us in basketball, baseball, tag, mountain-walking and so on. This kind of communication with my father was deeply impressed on my mind. (Player 3)*

Some parents made mention of the substantial help for children such as financial support and providing transport. Parents did not feel that it was a burden on them and rather enjoyed doing it.

*We took children to and from the gymnasium by car when she started to play basketball. We talked in the car a lot about what she did and what we observed during practice. She liked to talk about her performance improvement, like I could make a basket, and so on. We enjoyed listening to her. (Parent D)*

*Empowering:* Once players started to commit to practice, it was necessary to inspire them towards greater efforts. But none forced their children into

playing basketball. They encouraged their children not to give up in despair. Most parents encouraged their children to achieve the things to which they aspired. Players recognized this as positive feedback from their parents.

*My mother taught me the importance to exert all possible effort in daily life. She had never forced me to play well, but she always encouraged me to do my best when I faced a difficult task or complained. I felt reassured by her sympathetic expression. She told it in a manner that children could understand. I learned the basic attitudes of an athlete. (Player 7)*

All parents provided positive feedback to their children, especially when they were injured and felt depressed, since many players experienced injuries while playing basketball. The sources of emotional support and challenges originated from their parents: listening, feeling sympathy, sharing reality, and providing positive feedback.

*I had a serious injury with my knee. It took a long time to recover. My parents always supported me. They listened to me. They encouraged me to do rehabilitation. They talked to me in positive terms, such as you can beat this thing. I really appreciated what they did for me, because without their support I would have never been recovered. (Player 12)*

*Backing:* During the full-scale practice phase, parents played an important role supporting their children in a different way. Players were relieved when they felt a sense of belonging to a family. Players had confidence that their parents understood their sport experience and respected the process to attain their ultimate goal.

*Parents had almost no power over the performance development of players during their high school days. The only thing that parents can do*

is to understand their experiences or respect their efforts. Sometimes I wanted to give her a scolding, such as you better study more, or you should practice much harder. But I think I have to entrust the basketball life to her. Conversely speaking, the only things that parents have to do is to trust them, to understand them, and to respect them. (Parent B)

When I played so bad in a practice and I had a good scolding, I did not want to talk with my family after I went back home. My parents left me as I was. I was thankful to them for their sympathetic understanding. (Player 5)

Parents played a crucial role to support their children's performance development in a manner that made an optimum psychological environment for players.

#### Discussion and Conclusions

This study found significant agreement between the perceptions of the concepts on how parents evaluated their supporting activities in relation to performance enhancement of basketball players and how this support affected their development in Japanese high school basketball. It must be understood that these young women were what Côté (1999) termed the specializing years and had not yet become elite international players.

The strong relationship between stimulating, empowering, and backing indicates that parents direct players to commit to deliberate practice as a way of overcoming the three constraints for talent development: motivation, effort, and resources (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993). While the athletes had less experience than those reported on other studies (Côté, Fraser-Thomas, Robertson-Wilson, & Soberlak, 2004), the patterns of the results were similar with this young Japanese population of women players.

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