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Understanding parental stressors: An investigation of British tennis parents

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Published in 2009 in the Journal of Sport Sciences, 27, pages 339-351.

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1 Abstract

2 In this study, we examined the stressors experienced by British tennis parents. Tennis
3 parents (N=123) completed an extensive survey focused on the internal and external demands
4 that they had encountered through having a child compete in the sport. The survey consisted
5 of open-ended questions related to competition, coaching, organizational, personal, and
6 developmental issues. Inductive and deductive content analysis resulted in the development of
7 seven core themes of tennis parental stressor: competition, coaches, finance, time, siblings,
8 organization-related, and developmental. Parents experienced a diverse amount of
9 competitive stressors indicating the particular difficulties they faced with before, during and
10 after match situations involving their child, opponents, other parents and officials. They also
11 reported a wide range of organizational stressors that paralleled the financial, social and
12 personal investments that accompanied their support roles. The results of this research
13 reinforce the importance of parents possessing the necessary skills to cope with the
14 psychological, developmental and logistical demands of competitive tennis. Implications
15 with respect to induction workshops and education for coaches and parents are presented, as
16 well as consideration for governing bodies to enhance their communication channels and
17 logistical support. Future research recommendations are posed to build upon the study of this
18 domain in youth sport.

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21 Acknowledgements:

22 This research was supported by the Lawn Tennis Association and we would like to
23 acknowledge the support of staff at the National Tennis Centre.

24
25 Introduction

1 Youth tennis represents a sport setting that has become synonymous with the
2 problematic behaviours of parents. In March 2006, Christophe Fauviau, a 43 year old father
3 of two French teenage players was found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to eight years
4 in prison. Over a number of preceding years he had spiked his son's opponents' drinks with
5 Temesta, an anti-anxiety drug that caused severe dizziness and drowsiness on court. One of
6 the players Fauviau was convicted of drugging was fatally injured after losing control of his
7 car following a match against Fauviau's son. In court, Fauviau explained that he could not
8 cope with watching his children compete and came to regard drugging his children's
9 opponents as a way of treating his own nerves (Lichfield, 2006).

10 Such an acute, real life tragedy stimulates youth sport researchers to perhaps painfully
11 reflect upon what has happened to lead to this outcome and whether we are in a scientifically
12 strong enough position to explain sport-parental behaviours such as this. Recently, Gould and
13 colleagues (Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes & Pennisi, 2006, 2008) conducted two studies of
14 effective and ineffective tennis parenting behavior in relation to players and coaches for the
15 United States Tennis Association (USTA). Both studies revealed a number of positive
16 perceptions about the commitment of parents and their interactions with their child .
17 However, both studies also reported pressurizing behaviours and negative parenting practices
18 with 36% of parents perceived to have had a negative influence on their player's development
19 (Gould et al., 2006). These results and the substantial body of prior research on sport-parents
20 (e.g., DeFrancesco & Johnson, 1997; Gould, Tuffey, Udry & Loehr, 1996; Hellstedt, 1990;
21 Leff & Hoyle, 1995) speak to their often misguided, maladaptive and harmful behaviours.
22 Yet, however negative the portrayal of parents might be, descriptions within this research also
23 signify a deep human investment from parents whose potentially taxing experiences in sport
24 are worthy of their own investigation.

25 In reality, the actual scientific study of parents in sport is limited in breadth and

1 remains heavily one-sided towards a focus on others' perceptions (e.g., coaches, athletes) of
2 parental attitudes and behaviour in sport. Few studies in sport psychology have collected data
3 from parents themselves on the experience of being a sport-parent. Scientific and popular
4 interest has often revolved around the issue of stress, and more specifically, the competitive
5 stress that parents potentially place on their children (e.g. Leff & Hoyle, 1995) . However, to
6 our knowledge, no researchers have paid specific attention to the range of stressors
7 encountered by parents as they support their child through his or her sport experience. This
8 line of enquiry is important in providing researchers, practitioners, coaches and organizations
9 with a clearer understanding of sport-parent behavior, the challenges of the sport-parent role
10 and potential educational needs for the optimal support of their child-athlete.

11 It is noteworthy that a substantial body of literature has identified the stressors
12 experienced by athletes and coaches (e.g., Frey, 2007; Noblet & Gifford, 2002; Taylor 1992;
13 Thelwell, Weston, Greenlees, & Hutchings, 2008). Beyond competitive stressors such as
14 performance expectations, athletes have reported coach-related and organizational stressors
15 (Fletcher & Hanton, 2003; Woodman & Hardy, 2001), with selection, finances, travel,
16 communication/feedback and coaching style appearing particularly pertinent. Similarly,
17 research into coaching stressors vary from conflict with parents and athletes (Scantling &
18 Lackey, 2005) to self- and athlete expectations, competition, post-competition and
19 organizational issues (Frey, 2007; Thelwell et al., 2008). With parents being equally key
20 participants in the competitive and organizational processes of youth sport, it is perhaps
21 timely to investigate the stressors that are specific to this particular stakeholder.

22 Parents play a pivotal function in children's socialisation to sport (Brustad, 1996) and
23 throughout their sporting lives (Baumann & Alferman, 1994; Fredricks & Eccles, 2004).
24 Fredricks and Eccles (2004) propose that parents fulfill three fundamental roles in their
25 child's sport experience. These are as 'provider' (e.g., of opportunities, finance, transport etc),

1 as ‘interpreter’ of the sport experience (i.e., emotionally reacting in adaptive ways to wins and
2 losses) and as ‘role model’ (i.e., modeling the ideal attributes and behaviours in sport). How
3 well parents fulfill these roles serves to influence the child’s beliefs and values and in turn,
4 their motivated behaviours and performance.

5 Whilst executing these roles, parents will spend large amounts of time in the sport
6 environment and experience both a similar and different range of organizational stressors than
7 those encountered by athletes and coaches. The time commitment required from parents can
8 impede their occupational, social, and family life (Kirk et al., 1997a). This can cause
9 particular strain if their time and attention becomes centered upon one child-athlete at the
10 expense of non-sport siblings (Anderson & Anderson, 2000).

11 Parents are also required to make a large financial commitment to their child’s
12 sporting participation (Baxter-Jones & Maffuli, 2003; Murphy, 1999). Kirk et al. (1997b)
13 studied the economic impact that children’s participation in junior sport had on families. Kirk
14 and colleagues noted that the costs of involvement can negatively affect a child’s sport
15 participation and impact more widely throughout family life. Baxter-Jones and Maffuli (2003)
16 supported these findings identifying that approximately 12% of the typical family budget was
17 spent on children playing tennis, and 16% of tennis parents reported severe financial hardship
18 as a result of supporting their child in the sport.

19 Beyond financial and time demands, and as ‘interpreters’ of the sport experience,
20 parents are required to constantly provide their child-athlete with emotional support
21 (Anderson & Anderson, 2000). This factor is noteworthy given that the child-athlete is tested
22 competitively on a more regular and public basis than non-athletic peers. The salience and
23 frequency of sports participation for children necessitates the availability of emotional
24 reassurance from parents, particularly following poor performances that can negatively affect
25 children. In parallel, parents may identify or in some cases over identify with their children’s

1 completed the survey. Participants reported being an active tennis parent for an average of
2 6.4 years (SD:3.7) with 51% supporting one tennis playing child, 38% supporting two child-
3 players, and a further 11% supporting three or more players in the family. In sum, the sample
4 accounted for over 190 junior players with the highest level player in each family ranging in
5 age from 8 to 18 years (mean: 13.74; SD: 2.65). A range of competitive standards were
6 represented, with 48% of the participants' highest level children competing at club and county
7 standard, and 52% competing at national and international standard. As an indicator of
8 parental commitment, 53% of parents reported watching 75 to 100% of their child's matches,
9 a further 20% watched over 50% of matches, with only 11% watching less than 25% of
10 matches played.

11 *Survey Development*

12 In view of the newness of the topic area, there was an interest in gaining a quantitative
13 appreciation of those stressors that were most prevalent within the existing subculture of
14 tennis parents. However, it was felt vital to allow parents to express their experience of
15 stressors in their own terms. To achieve both ends therefore, an open-ended survey was
16 developed to allow parents to articulate their stressors across a range of pre-determined
17 contexts and categories that were deemed to be central to their role. These stimulus
18 categories were selected by considering the sources of stress themes experienced by athletes
19 and coaches (e.g., competition, organizational, interpersonal issues), as well as themes central
20 to family functioning in the talent development literature (e.g., family time, attention to
21 siblings, financial implications) (Côté, 1999). The survey was reviewed by four Lawn Tennis
22 Association (LTA) Level 5-qualified professional tennis coaches and the Head of Coach
23 Education for the LTA who considered the appropriateness of the categories and questions. In
24 addition, three British tennis parents completed pilot surveys and provided feedback to the
25 research team.

1 Following a request for anonymous demographic information, the ‘Tennis Parent’
2 survey incorporated an introductory paragraph entitled ‘Parental issues and experiences’. This
3 paragraph oriented parents towards expressing their personal experience of being a ‘tennis
4 parent’ and the stressors with which they feel they need to cope. It asked parents to offer their
5 personal perspectives on the issues and demands that they faced regarding their child’s
6 participation and their personal role in tennis. Following this introduction, the survey then
7 progressed through seven central sections: competitions and tournaments; coaches and
8 coaching; the National Governing Body; county and club issues; personal, social, and family
9 issues; finance, access, and resources; and developmental and transitional issues. A final
10 section for any further stressors or comments was provided

11 Each section requested parents to articulate, in written form, their experiences of
12 stressors with reference to that broad category including certain sub-contexts where
13 appropriate (e.g., for ‘competitions and tournaments’, parents were asked ‘ what do you feel
14 are the main stressors and issues that you face as a parent (a) before, (b) during, and (c) after a
15 match?’). Each section question offered ample space for parents to complete the survey at their
16 convenience and in as much detail as possible.

17 *Procedure*

18 Distribution of the survey was organized through three main channels to ensure that
19 parents with children of various standards across the country could complete the survey.
20 Firstly, 320 surveys were distributed in parent packs at the Ariel British Junior National
21 Championships. 70 were returned for a response rate of 22%. Secondly, following
22 communication with county administrators, 50 surveys were distributed to parents from five
23 different regions with a response rate of 54%. Finally, 30 surveys were given directly to
24 individual coaches, through personal contacts, to hand over to parents. This yielded a 73%
25 response rate.

1 *Data Analysis*

2 Each survey was read in its entirety to ensure an overall understanding of each
3 participant's responses. Employing Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional approach, a
4 stressor was defined as any external and/or internal demand experienced by the parent within
5 their specific roles in tennis . Content analysis of the surveys then occurred following the
6 guidance of Miles and Huberman (1994) and Côté, Salmela, Baria and Russell (1993), and
7 mirrored the qualitative and quantitative procedures of Gould, Udry, Bridges and Beck's
8 (1997) study into season ending ski-injuries. In the first stage of analysis, meaning units were
9 created by identifying and paraphrasing every discernible stressor reported by parents in their
10 written responses to each question. Each meaning unit was then coded into a first order theme
11 or essence phrase that essentially represented a cluster of similar stressors (Maykut &
12 Morehouse, 1994). A frequency count of parental representation within each theme was
13 consistently maintained for later percentage comparisons (Gould et al., 1997). Subsequently, a
14 reflexive cross-category analysis was conducted to investigate where themes may have been
15 duplicated or have shared commonalities with themes emerging from other sections of the
16 survey. This analytical process then progressed inductively to a higher thematic level
17 culminating in a final hierarchy of core themes that represented the range and content of
18 parental stressors. This overall procedure was therefore deductive in the sense of using pre-
19 determined categories as merely the 'filters' for initial content analysis, but progressively
20 inductive as the data and their interpretation guided the research team towards non-
21 predetermined themes.

22 Consensus validation was a primary method of supporting the trustworthiness of this
23 survey analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The second author, trained in qualitative data
24 analysis, identified the meaning units and created the initial themes across each section of
25 survey. The first author, with experience of analysing and publishing qualitative research,

1 then examined 20% of the surveys to ensure that meaning units (i.e., reported stressors) had
2 been appropriately identified and paraphrased. This process led to a 91% agreement with the
3 second author. Following this stage, the first author checked the interpretive allocation of
4 meaning units into their initial first order themes. An 80% agreement was reached that
5 required a reflective discussion between the two authors and agreed revisions in certain
6 thematic labels associated with responses related to competitions and tournaments. This
7 process of reflection and verification between the two authors continued until the final set of
8 core themes were agreed and the percentages associated with each sub-theme of parental
9 stressor were intact and verifiable. Subsequently, the Head of Coach Education for the LTA
10 served in the capacity of a 'critical friend' (Cresswell, 1998) by discussing and reviewing the
11 authors' decisions with respect to the location of specific themes and the overall integrity of
12 the emergent structure..

13 Results

14 Analysis of the survey responses resulted in the development of seven core themes of
15 stressor: competition, coaches, finance, time, siblings, organisation-related, and
16 developmental stressors. The substance of each core theme will be explored using direct
17 quotations and quantitative information on the percentage of parents who cited a particular
18 stressor (%N). It is important to note that in some cases parents expressed the stressor in
19 terms of their emotional responses or coping attempts related to that stressor. We have
20 included some of these quotes and insights as they represent the parent's personal experience
21 of that stressor. However, we acknowledge that not all parents respond to stressors in the
22 same way and these results do not represent an investigation of the full stress process in
23 parents (i.e., appraisal and coping responses).

24 *Core Theme One: Competition*

25 Tournament and competition stressors were identified by all parents and encompassed

1 by three higher order themes: Stressors experienced prior to a match or competition; during
2 match stressors; and stressors that arise following matches. Table 1 presents these themes and
3 the more specific, constituent sub-themes.

4 Prior to competition, the most commonly cited stressors were logistics and travel, as
5 well as the physical and nutritional preparation of their child. Particularly pertinent to parents
6 was ensuring that all the necessary arrangements were made for their trip away and that all
7 other aspects, such as work and their other children were organised.

8 Their child's psychological state prior to the match was also an issue. Parents
9 described the stress they experienced because their child did not appear to be focused for their
10 forthcoming match or appeared to be anxious. One parent stated, "I want to know that my
11 child is ready for the match and that she is looking forward to playing, not becoming too
12 concerned and anxious". A number of parents reported stressors associated with what the
13 opponent's behaviour would be like, as well as the behaviour of other parents.

14 The stressors experienced during a match were more evenly distributed between
15 themes related to their child, to others, and to themselves. Over half of the parents cited
16 stressors associated with their child's on-court behavior and self-control, with subsequent
17 concerns about their performance and enjoyment also being noted. The following quote
18 elaborates on circumstances identified by many parents:

19 I find watching his matches a stressful experience, wanting my child to perform well,
20 wanting my child to behave well. It is extremely embarrassing as a parent if your child
21 is misbehaving, as you cannot intervene. It is usually due to frustration at his own
22 mistakes, perceived poor play, or due to opposition 'cheating'.

23 Almost one third of parents reported stressors associated with watching matches that
24 involved gamesmanship and cheating by other parents and/or their child's opponent. For
25 example, one parent stated, "Line calls with no umpire, scores being called incorrectly, other

1 parents interfering, referees standing back; constant concern over bad calls and how to deal
2 with that.” . The behavioural interference of other parents included: parents repeatedly calling
3 the lines for their child, coaching in-between points, and loudly clapping shots that were out
4 to influence the opponent’s call. The stressors associated with opponents were also
5 interlinked to the tournament referees. Parents explained that a lack of involvement or
6 appropriate action from referees to deal with gamesmanship, cheating, or poor behaviour is
7 also a stressor they regularly experience.

8 A variety of stressors emerged in relation to other parents at tournaments and their
9 intimidating and interfering behaviours. Specifically parents indicated experiencing stress
10 when they witnessed other parents placing pressure upon their own child, or making negative
11 remarks about their child within earshot. Such pressure was displayed through parents
12 interfering with matches (e.g., calling their child’s lines), displaying excessive support for
13 their child, or condoning cheating. Such stressors were often accompanied by feelings of
14 intimidation because parents also expressed how they felt unable to do anything to protect
15 their child from this experience.

16 For some parents, their own feelings of strain seemed to act as a meta-stressor. A
17 number of parents identified, without qualification, that watching their child and dealing with
18 their own feelings was stressful. They felt compelled to restrict any displays of
19 disappointment or frustration as one mother stated, “It’s a stressor trying not to show any
20 signs of stress or agitation”. Parents also explained the problem of not knowing exactly what
21 type of support to give in certain situations.

22 Following the match, the predominant stressor explained by parents was the effect the
23 result had on their child and their lack of skills in helping or knowing how to help their child
24 manage the resultant emotions. After a loss, for example, many parents described the
25 difficulties of how or when to speak to their emotional, and often self-critical child.

1 Additionally, some parents identified that it was more stressful following a match if there had
2 been issues of cheating, a lack of input from referees during the match, or poor behaviour
3 from their child that were perceived to impact upon the outcome. The inappropriate or ‘over-
4 competitive’ behaviour and comments of other parents was also a prevalent stressor for some
5 parents, as was the inability to conduct a rational post-match analysis and to ensure that the
6 player was fully recovered and prepared for the next match. Finally, a small group of parents
7 found it stressful trying to manage their own emotions post-match towards their child, and
8 articulated the strain from internalising the negative feelings of their child following a poor
9 performance.

10 *Core Theme Two: Coach-related stressors*

11 The behaviour and attitude of coaches emerged as a stressor for almost half of the
12 parental sample. Table 2 illustrates how five higher order themes represented the different
13 ways in which coaches acted as a source of stress. First, the tendency for coaches not to attend
14 tournaments and watch their pupils play competitive matches was an issue for 27% of parents.
15 In conjunction with not attending matches, parents described stressors arising due to the lack
16 of tactical and mental preparation for their child at events, which was consequently left to
17 parents. Second, a number of parents were aggravated by the unprofessional behaviour of
18 coaches on court. Actions such as coaches using mobile phones during sessions, talking to
19 other people during their child’s lessons, and displaying a lack of interest in or attention to
20 their child were cited as stressful. In addition, some parents noted occasions where coaches
21 encouraged or failed to condone negative behaviours and attitudes in players, including one
22 parent who stated, “coaches are not dealing successfully with pupils who are disruptive in
23 sessions”.

24 This observation also supports a smaller percentage of parents who questioned their
25 coach’s actual knowledge, ability, and empathy to deal with children and parental logistics.

1 One parent reported that, “coaches are not as qualified as they should be and also they do not
2 work or cope with children appropriately.” Similarly, another parent expressed that, “coaches
3 do not understand the psychology of children”,.

4 Aside from the perceived unprofessional behavior on court over 20% of parents also
5 pinpointed the coach’s organizational and communication skills as stressors they encountered.
6 One parent noted that, “stress arises because of coaches not finding the time to talk to
7 parents,” whilst others described stress they experienced due to “coaches giving poor advice
8 to players,” or “not discussing the long term player development plans with player or
9 parents”. Some parents explained that they did not know what was expected of them or what
10 the coaches’ aims were. They also articulated other organizational stressors related to
11 coaches cancelling sessions with little notice and failing to be punctual. An element of this
12 sub-theme was also finance-related with one parent observing how the coach “upped [i.e.,
13 increased] the prices for squads and then put more players into it!”, whilst another viewed the
14 “unclear and ever changing pricing systems” as a stressor. A final higher order theme
15 represented the stress associated with perceptions of the coach’s favouritism that was
16 experienced by a small percentage of parents. Comments included how coaches reserved
17 special treatment for certain players and their parents, or that certain families were treated
18 differently or inconsistently.

19 *Core Theme Three: Financial stressors*

20 Financial issues were highlighted as another main stressor in the survey with five
21 higher order themes representing the underlying reasons cited by parents (see Table 3). For
22 the 79% of parents who acknowledged finance as a stressor, fees and expenses related to
23 coaching and tournaments were most reported. One father observed that “staying away at
24 weekends is something that is a treat for other families but a constant cost for us”. The
25 following quote perhaps sums up one parent’s feelings about this overall factor:

1 The cost is phenomenal. The cost of individual lessons, squads, tournament entries,
2 travel, clothing, restringing of racquets, club membership, court fees.....Oh my God
3 I'm getting even more stressed!! Thankfully I only have two children. Tennis is just a
4 license to make money from mugs like me!

5 *Core Theme Four: Time stressors*

6 Five higher order themes represented the varying experience of time stressors
7 articulated by parents (see Table 4) with one parent noting that “the time devoted to the game
8 is stressful in everyway that you care to mention”. The most regularly recalled time stressor
9 was the impact of being a tennis parent on personal, spousal, and family life, followed closely
10 by time spent traveling to competitions around the country. A moderate percentage of parents
11 noted a negative impact on their jobs as a result of trying to deal with work conflicts and the
12 ‘taxi-service’ travel demands of youth tennis. One father stated, “My career has suffered as I
13 have to decline courses and not stay behind that would earn me brownie points or deal with
14 peaks at work.” The frustration appeared to be exacerbated in some parents by the subsequent
15 ‘dead time’ at tournaments, uncertain match schedules, and the inevitable waiting around for
16 matches to start and finish. This was particularly the case for parents who noted long distance
17 travel stress where access to facilities or competitions required an extensive amount of time
18 driving. Beyond the court, some parents noted the stress of limited time for normal domestic
19 chores, for fitting in the child’s homework as well as problematic conflicts with the school in
20 getting time off for tennis lessons and certain events.

21 In sum, a feeling developed through the data of the constancy of time stressors in one
22 guise or another. The stress of being unable to sit with their family and have meals; having to
23 feed their children in the car; arranging time off school or work and using family holidays;
24 and altering homework deadlines were some specific examples cited. One mother wrote. in
25 relation to her perception of time, “We have none. We’re like hamsters going around on a

1 wheel!”

2 *Core Theme Five: Sibling stressors*

3 Parents’ expressions of time stressors noted in the previous theme extended to issues
4 associated with spending excessive time with one child compared to others in the family.
5 However, this factor represented only a partial picture of an overall theme that captured
6 sibling-related stressors. For 25% of the sample this issue was not applicable but, for those
7 parents with more than one child, over 70% of them expressed sibling issues (see Table 5).

8 Beyond the disproportionate amounts of time to the tennis sibling, the lack of attention
9 and money that parents could provide for their other children was one of the most stated
10 stressors. One parent confirmed how, “tennis causes us stress with our non-playing daughter
11 in terms of equality of attention.” This statement was extended by another parent who
12 disclosed, “As a single parent my elder son has been left to organize himself from the age of
13 13, even over weekends.”

14 Not surprisingly, sibling jealousy or resentment of tennis provided a moderate number
15 of parents with problems to deal with. Statements such as, “ My older daughter feels tennis
16 dominates our life” and “My other son is resentful and says it is tennis, tennis, tennis” were
17 consistently apparent when analysing the data. Parents were faced with such feelings
18 alongside an awareness of the potential negative effects that such a regime may have on their
19 children.

20 Logistically, the requirements of tennis conflicted with the activities of other siblings
21 and parents noted the stress of having to make decisions in favour of one over another. Some
22 faced the stress of having to be in multiple places at once, and others in attempting to balance
23 what they could do with each child. Inevitably related to the problems of such activity
24 scheduling, a number of parents reported the stress of regularly splitting the family, with one
25 parent spending all of their time with one child and vice versa. They noted their fears for the

1 quality of relationships with their children as well as the impact that these have upon family
2 life in general.

3 *Core Theme Six: Organisation-related stressors*

4 External to those stressors located within the family or competition, training, and
5 coaching processes, the local and national organisations involved in structuring and managing
6 the game emerged as sources of stress for over half of the parents. Table 6 illustrates the three
7 higher order themes that emerged in relation to the national or county Lawn Tennis
8 Associations (LTA) and clubs. The primary stressors emerged at club and county level where
9 favouritism and lack of transparency were perceived in relation to aspects such as team and
10 squad selections for young players (e.g., “it’s all rather a closed shop at county level”)
11 Similarly, a lack of advice or communication was indicated in relation to team selections.
12 Parents also noted the inefficiencies they experienced when dealing with club or county
13 bureaucracy, especially the lack of accessibility of courts for juniors due to the priority given
14 to seniors and adults.

15 Two systems operated by the National Governing Body were cited as a source of
16 stress. First, a number of parents felt that funding was unfairly distributed or was insufficient.
17 Perceptions of favouritism were embedded in comments such as, “too much emphasis is
18 placed on younger children, and the funding doesn’t reward those who stick at it.” The
19 constant changes in the allocation policies of funding were also expressed as a stressor.

20 Secondly, a number of parents expressed stress due to the LTA rating system that is
21 employed in British tennis to evaluate the current standard of a player. One parent referred to,
22 “the reliance on results and the penalties for losing which can have a huge negative impact on
23 children”. One such impact is that it forms the basis for entry into tournaments, with another
24 parent stating that, “the ratings system is stressful when children can’t get into tournaments
25 based on it”. Coinciding with rating stressors, parents listed other competition stressors

1 related to a lack of appropriate competition, limited team competitions, or an over emphasis
2 on matches at a young age.

3 Finally, inefficiencies in tournament organisation arose as source of stress in relation
4 to “constantly duplicating paper work,” and “the complexity of entering tournaments.” One
5 parent suggested the need for a more streamlined, online approach to entering tournaments
6 that reduced the time spent on the constant duplication of personal details.

7 *Core Theme Seven: Developmental stressors*

8 The final cluster of parental stressors were embedded in developmental issues and
9 consisted of three well-populated higher order themes that together were mentioned by over
10 ninety percent of the sample (see Table 7). These themes centred on educational conflicts,
11 limited opportunities for other sports, and issues related to future transitions.

12 For a substantial number of parents, educational issues were not a stressor, with one
13 parent stating, “education comes first, no compromise”. However, almost half of the sample
14 noted educational problems as a result of tennis demands. Statements such as, “midweek
15 sessions result in homework issues that I have to deal with,” were provided, as were problems
16 with catching up work due to missing lessons for tournaments or training sessions. One parent
17 described how “we have a chaotic lifestyle during term time,” and that this causes stress when
18 they witness their child struggling to complete schoolwork. The following quote perhaps
19 summarizes a temporal process felt by many parents regarding education:

20 As parents we will not sacrifice schooling and education for tennis when the children
21 are young. When the children are older and able to better decide for themselves we
22 will be more prepared to take decisions with regard to tennis and education. There is a
23 fine balance to be struck between tennis development and opportunities and education
24 and school life. The ongoing demands in these areas are stressful for parents.

25 Beyond these academic issues, a child’s lack of engagement in other sports was also

1 perceived as a stressor. Parents particularly lamented about their child being unable to engage
2 in school sports, and the problems when their school demanded their attendance. In addition,
3 over 50% of parents cited varying stressors in relation to transitions to higher levels of the
4 game. The potential burden of future financial, time and social demands were articulated by
5 parents. However, the most frequently reported concerns related to their child's own coping
6 abilities and included: the pressure their child would experience; ambition fulfillment; making
7 sufficient technical and physical improvements; and whether their child would develop at the
8 same rate as their peers. One parent stated, "if he progresses higher I will worry about the
9 amount of support we will be able to provide him mentally," whilst another noted with some
10 resignation that "he couldn't cope with the added pressures". A further parent commented on
11 the effect of her own child's expectations, stating, "My daughter has great ambitions for
12 herself and we worry if she has the ability and if she will be disappointed."

13 Almost as prevalent as perceptions about their child's future coping potential were the
14 decisions that parents would face. In addition to decisions about how much personal time and
15 money to commit to tennis, parents needed reassurance about when or if their child should
16 specialise in tennis and what this would mean for their education. There was apprehension
17 about how much school their child should miss and whether their children should attend
18 specialised tennis academies. One parent expressed that, "it's impossible to justify leaving
19 full time education unless truly exceptional", whilst another stated, "I would hate for him to
20 leave home early and go and live at an academy." However, many parents identified that they
21 must contemplate such decisions if their child were to fully achieve their potential in the
22 game.

23 Discussion

24 The primary aim of this study was to investigate perceived stressors experienced by
25 tennis parents and, in so doing, to gain a more balanced and empathic understanding of key

1 participants in the youth sport development process. Seven core themes of parental stressor
2 were derived from the data. These broadly included: stressors inherent within the processes of
3 competition; the behaviour and responsibilities of coaches; financial and time demands placed
4 upon the family; sibling inequalities and resentment; inefficiencies and inequalities attributed
5 to tennis organizations; and developmental concerns related to educational and future tennis
6 transitions.

7 Whilst many of these themes appear to be unique and specific to parents, they can
8 nevertheless be conceptually appraised and interpreted through existing knowledge of
9 stressors in the sport and organizational literature. The following sections of the discussion
10 will therefore attempt to locate and integrate these findings into existing theory. However, at
11 all times, the reader is encouraged to reflect and consider how sport-parents experience rather
12 unique and role-specific demands that re-emphasise the academic value of studying this youth
13 sport population.

14 *The diversity of competition stress*

15 Adapted from Lazarus's (1999) work, Fletcher et al., (2006) referred to stress as "an
16 ongoing process that involves individuals transacting with their environments, making
17 appraisals of the situations they find themselves in, and endeavouring to cope with any issues
18 that may arise" (p. 329). Within this process, stressors represent the environmental demands
19 encountered by an individual and strain refers to the individual's negative psychological,
20 physical and behavioural responses to stressors. Using this transactional model, researchers
21 in the sport domain have made the distinction between those stressors linked specifically to
22 competition and competitive performance (i.e., competitive stress) with the stressors
23 associated primarily and directly with the organisation within which the individual is
24 operating (i.e., organizational stress; Hanton, Fletcher & Coughlan, 2005; Hanton & Fletcher,
25 2005; Woodman & Hardy, 2001). Parental responses in this study offered support to the

1 utility of such a differentiation between the origins of the stressor.

2 Tennis parents experienced a diversity of competition stressors that highlighted the
3 difficulties that they face in their roles as provider, interpreter and role model in relation to
4 matches and tournaments (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004). A number of parents reported the
5 demands of watching their child compete on their own, seeing them making mistakes or
6 becoming upset yet unable to intervene and help their child out. In some cases, these
7 stressors appeared to be associated with negative emotions that were moderated by their goals
8 and expectations for their child's behaviour and performance (Sidebotham, 2001). However,
9 in other cases, the stressor of watching matches without being able to directly intervene was
10 associated with feelings of helplessness from knowing their child's expectations and
11 anticipating their disappointment if they lost.

12 The unsportsmanlike behaviour of opponents (e.g., cheating), negative interference of
13 other parents, and the docility of referees, were further sources of stress in the competitive
14 environment. In this respect, the provision of psychological safety and emotional security for
15 their child seemed to be an important caring role for parents; a role that was hampered by the
16 rules of the game in calling for audience restraint and encouraging players to work through
17 their own adversities. The ecological relevance of the above points was recently reinforced in
18 the national press by the plight of an eight year old female player. She was disqualified from
19 an Under 10 tennis event for wearing a secret earpiece under her head band (Barrowclough,
20 2008). Her father claimed that he had placed it there to secretly transmit only line calling
21 instructions because she could not cope on her own.

22 After matches, many parents cited stressors associated with reviewing matches and
23 helping their child to recover mentally. Some acknowledged that they were either not skilled
24 enough to do this, or were thwarted in their attempt of doing a rational post match analysis by
25 the emotions of their child and/or by their own negative emotions about the match. The fact

1 that stressors also emerged prior to the match due to their child's lack of adequate preparation
2 and readiness suggests that the overall match process may be a highly demanding experience.

3 Finally, the lack of a coach being present for many of their child's matches (cited as a
4 related stressor) appeared to leave parents divided between the role of parent and coach, and
5 feeling they were less equipped to offer skilled support before, during and after matches than
6 coaches. The above observations point to the value of considering the role-related literature
7 (Beauchamp, Bray, Eys & Carron, 2002) when studying the potential role overload, role
8 ambiguity and role efficacy of sport parents within the context of athlete development.

9 *Parental experiences of organizational stress*

10 In making the distinction between competitive and organizational stress, Fletcher et al.,
11 (2006) reinforced the importance of understanding those stressors that are attributable to
12 engaging in the sport (and its structures, subcultures and systems) as an organised entity, as
13 opposed to those associated with the act of competing. Adapting the work of Cooper, Dewe
14 and O'Driscoll (2001) in organizational psychology, Fletcher et al., (2006) differentiated
15 between five dimensions of organizational stressor in sports performers: factors intrinsic to
16 the sport; roles in the sport organisation; sport relationships and interpersonal demands;
17 athletic career and performance development issues; and, organizational structure and climate
18 of the sport (see also Fletcher et al., 2006)

19 Research on organizational stress in sport is currently limited to athletes' experiences of
20 issues such as travel, finance, selection, coach relationships and team conflicts (Fletcher &
21 Hanton, 2003; Woodman & Hardy, 2001). However, the data from tennis parents emphasises
22 the role that they play as somewhat 'controlled' but active consumers in organised youth
23 sport. Furthermore, the content of their stress themes can be interpreted through the lens of
24 the five dimensions of organizational stress.

25 First, parents cited a number of stressors that represented factors intrinsic to the sport of

1 tennis. These included time stressors associated with travel, training, competition and
2 tournament schedules as well as financial stressors associated with lessons, transport,
3 accommodation and equipment (Kirk et al., 1997a; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). The extensive
4 number of parents who cited financial issues continues to have implications for growing the
5 game in the Britain and the importance of supporting lower-income families whose children
6 have been identified as talented and gifted.

7 Second, whilst parents did not play conventional roles in any specific sport
8 organisation, they reported both sport-work role conflict and sport-family role conflict as a
9 result of their child's participation in tennis (see Kay, 2004). Within the organizational
10 literature, Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) define work-family conflict as a form of interrole
11 conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually
12 incompatible. In this study, the role pressures of being a tennis parent conflicted with work
13 requirements and with family activities and responsibilities leading to potential career
14 problems, inequalities of spousal and sibling attention, and sibling resentment.

15 Third, parents cited a number of stressors associated with sport relationships and
16 interpersonal demands. Beyond encounters with other tennis parents, their key relationship
17 existed with coaches. However, for a number of parents this was not always a satisfactory
18 experience. Parents noted a lack of professionalism, knowledge and empathy in terms of the
19 coach's skills, policies and on-court behaviour, with lack of communication, feedback and
20 match attendance being the most frequent stressors.

21 Fourth, athletic career and performance development issues seem to represent key areas
22 of concern for parents within the theme of developmental stressors. Almost half of the sample
23 cited current conflicts between educational demands and tennis, with one third of parents
24 concerned about future decisions regarding education and specialised tennis. Parents also
25 disclosed financial and social stressors associated with these future transitions, as well as the

1 limited opportunity to develop in other sports. However, perhaps the most noteworthy finding
2 was the thirty three percent of parents who reported issues about their child's ability and
3 readiness to cope with higher levels of the game and potential disappointments. Conspicuous
4 by their absence in this sample were any developmental stressors related to the demands of
5 training upon health and injury-related issues. Few parents articulated their experience of
6 injury in their children, but this may be a factor to consider exploring in future investigations.

7 The final dimension of Fletcher et al.'s (2006) framework - the organizational structure
8 and climate of the sport - corresponded closely with the organisation-related stressors
9 experienced by parents as a result of the local and national Lawn Tennis Associations. Some
10 parents noted the structural inefficiencies of county governing bodies, clubs and tournament
11 entry procedures including access problems and perceived favouritism. The National
12 Governing Body's allocation and transparency of player funding and the results-oriented
13 rating system were further stressors that reinforced the parent's position as somewhat of a
14 'pawn' who was unable to contribute to any of the decisions that affected themselves or their
15 child.

16 *Limitations and implications*

17 The thematic content that emerged in this study, as well as the utility of considering
18 parents as part of an organizational stress framework, offers a more structured understanding
19 of the pressures experienced by parents in one individual youth sport. Nevertheless, a number
20 of limitations should be considered in order to accelerate future research in this particular
21 domain.

22 First, whilst the emphasis of this study was to identify the stressors associated with
23 being a tennis parent, a sub-question within the personal issues section of the survey allowed
24 parents to highlight the positive outcomes they associated with having children involved in
25 the sport. Positive factors that emerged included: parent's own enjoyment, the formation of

1 social networks, children's peer friendships, closer relationships with their child, the health
2 and fitness benefits, and feeling proud of their child's achievements. As such it is critical to
3 recognise that whilst these parents expressed many stressors that carried a negative
4 connotation, there were also positive themes and factors expressed by parents about their
5 tennis experience. A related limitation of this study is that we did not investigate the full
6 stress, appraisal and coping process in parents. Mellalieu, Hanton & Fletcher (2006) argue
7 that stressors are not inherently negative or positive and that it is the individual's appraisal of
8 such events that makes them negative or positive. Some parents expressed stressors in a
9 manner that included their negative appraisal, negative emotions and lack of coping resources.
10 However, we cannot assume that this is the case for all parents. Future research should pay
11 closer attention to understanding the full stress and coping process in sport parents in order to
12 furnish practitioners, parents and organisations with more precise intervention ideas,
13 education and skills.

14 Second, whilst about 90% of parents fully engaged the survey by offering paragraphs
15 detailing their stressors, parents inevitably chose to write extensively for some questions and
16 only one or two sentences for others. Hence, whilst the survey approach facilitated a large
17 sample and uncovered a wide range of tennis-specific parental stressors, in-depth interviews
18 may furnish a deeper understanding of the specific sub-themes. A progression from this study
19 might be to interview parents at different stages and transitions of the tennis parenting journey
20 to gain a stronger appreciation of any stage-specific issues. This would align with the United
21 States Tennis Association's recent attempt to specify positive parenting practices appropriate
22 to the child's stage of development (USTA, 2006; Côté, 1999)

23 From an applied perspective, this study promotes a number of educational and
24 organizational initiatives designed to enhance the positive roles, well-being and stress
25 management of tennis parents. The involvement of the National Governing Body in

1 enhancing the communication channels and information flow to parents is relevant here.
2 Primarily, there is a need to educate and support parents through the motivational and
3 emotional processes of competition and ensure that they have the necessary cognitive,
4 behavioural, and motivational skills both to manage themselves and to influence the responses
5 of their child. This type of education, perhaps through actual tournament workshops, will
6 enhance their roles as 'interpreter' and 'role model' for their child before, during, and after
7 competition.

8 Second, consideration should be given towards developing specific induction
9 materials for new tennis parents so that they have an advanced awareness of the financial,
10 social and educational issues that they may face as their child progresses through the sport.
11 Information to help manage certain stressors (e.g., gaining sponsorship; lift sharing;
12 educational decisions) from tennis parents who have been through the system would also be
13 valuable. This type of project would help parents to plan effectively, address potential sport-
14 work/family conflicts and enhance their readiness to be an optimal 'provider' for their child.

15 Finally, the findings of this project could be circulated to coaches in order to increase
16 awareness and empathy. It would be advisable to encourage coaches to regularly reflect on
17 and monitor their own behaviour, communication skills, and relationships with parents. It is
18 worth noting that the LTA have begun to disseminate this work on their Level 5 coaching
19 qualification, and published an educational article in their professional coaches journal
20 (Harwood & Knight, 2007). In conclusion, we believe that such a line of applied research,
21 aided by the positive support of a National Governing Body, will not only ameliorate the
22 behaviour and skills of parents, but will indirectly facilitate the work of all personnel in
23 pursuit of optimal sport experiences for talented young athletes.

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Table 1 Core Theme 1: Competition stressors

Higher-order category/ 1 st order sub-themes	%N
Pre-match stressors	
• Planning, logistics and travel	63%
• Physical and nutritional preparation	53%
• Child's psychological state and pre-match behaviour	34%
• Behaviour of opponents and problem parents	18%
• Match environment and tournament organisation	16%
During-match stressors	
• Child's emotional control and behaviour	55%
• Child's level of performance and enjoyment	35%
• Other parents' interference, intimidation or gossiping	35%
• Controlling feelings of helplessness and offering correct support	32%
• Opponent's behaviour and line calling	31%
Post-match stressors	
• Lack of skills in helping child to manage emotions associated with result	70%
• Other parents' inappropriate comments and competitiveness	20%
• Ensuring appropriate physical recovery for the next match	19%
• Conducting a rational post-performance analysis	10%
• Managing own negative emotions and match perceptions	8%
• Seeing/feeling child's emotional responses to loss/poor performance	8%
• Addressing children's poor behaviour	3%

Table 2 Core Theme 2: Coach-related stressors

Higher-order category/ 1 st order sub-themes	%N
Match attendance and support	
• Lack of match attendance and player preparation/observation	27%
On-court behaviour	
• Unprofessional behaviours/lack of attention to session and child	20%
• Encouraging or condoning negative behaviour/values	15%
Organisation and communication skills	
• Lack of feedback, interest and strategic advice to parents	22%
• Cancellations, poor planning and non-punctuality	18%
Favouritism	
• Inconsistent and unequal treatment of players (and family)	8%
Levels of knowledge and empathy	
• Limited understanding of child development	7%
• Lack of empathy with parental issues and logistics	7%

Table 3 Core Theme 3: Financial stressors

Higher-order category	%N
Coaching fees and expenses	33%
Transport expenses to lessons and tournaments	28%
Equipment and clothing	17%
Accommodation	13%
Club and Governing Body membership fees	7%

Table 4 Core Theme 4: Time stressors

Higher-order category	%N
Restricted personal, partner and family time	31%
Travelling to matches and tournaments	24%
Work conflicts and commitments	15%
Dead time at tournaments and match scheduling	12%
Homework requirements and school conflicts	12%

Table 5 Core Theme 5: Sibling stressors

Higher-order category	%N
Unequal time, money and attention to tennis sibling	28%
Sibling resentment and jealousy	17%
Living a 'split family' life and conflicting activities	17%

Table 6 Core Theme 6: Organizational stressors

Higher-order category/ 1 st order sub-themes	%N
Problems with club and county associations	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceived local favouritism re selection and opportunity • Inefficient club/county structures and access 	20% 13%
Governing body systems	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allocation and transparency of player funding • The ratings system and emphasis on results 	15% 10%
Tournament organisation	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inefficient entry procedures and communication of information 	11%

Table 7 Core Theme 7: Developmental stressors

Higher-order category/ 1 st order sub-themes	%N
Current educational conflicts and issues	43%
Limited opportunity for multiple sports	31%
Future transitions	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability of player to cope with transitions • Decisions about education • Financial and social issues 	33% 32% 20%