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1 Running Head: PARENTAL STRESS IN TENNIS

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7 Understanding parental stress: An investigation of British tennis parents

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## Abstract

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2 As part of a research and education initiative supported by the Lawn Tennis  
3 Association of Great Britain, the purpose of this study was to investigate the perceived  
4 stressors experienced by British tennis parents. One hundred and twenty three tennis parents  
5 from across the United Kingdom completed a extensive survey focused on the internal and  
6 external demands that they had encountered through having a child compete in the sport. The  
7 survey consisted of open-ended questions related to competition, coaching, organisational,  
8 personal and developmental issues. Inductive and deductive content analysis of the survey  
9 responses resulted in the development of seven core themes of tennis parental stress:  
10 competition, coaches, finance, time, siblings, organisation-related, and developmental.  
11 Results are discussed in terms of the diversity of competition and organisational stressors that  
12 emerge for parents in their support roles to young British players. Implications for the  
13 governing body and the importance of specific educational programmes for coaches and  
14 parents are presented alongside future research recommendations for this line of study.

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1 Understanding parental stress: An investigation of British tennis parents

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3 I could no longer cope. I had come to hate the sport ... Every match became a terrible  
4 anguish. I became convinced that I was being judged permanently by the success or  
5 failure of my children

6 Christophe Fauviau (cited in Lichfield, 2006)

7 In August 2003, the European tennis world was shocked by the arrest of Christophe Fauviau,  
8 a 43 year old French father of two teenage players. Over a number of preceding years he had  
9 spiked his son's opponent's drinks with Temesta, an anti-anxiety drug that caused severe  
10 dizziness and drowsiness on court. Fauviau explained that he could not cope with watching  
11 his children compete and came to regard drugging his children's opponents as a way of  
12 treating his own nerves (Lichfield, 2006). One of the 28 players that he was convicted of  
13 drugging was subsequently killed after losing control of his car following a match against his  
14 son. Fauviau was found guilty of manslaughter in March 2006 and sentenced to eight years in  
15 prison.

16 Tennis is a sport that has become synonymous with problem parents. Nick Bolletieri,  
17 the world-renowned coach of Andre Agassi and Maria Sharapova, recently stated that, "More  
18 tennis parents have a negative effect on a young person's tennis career than have a positive  
19 influence. . .the negative impact of parents. . . means that 80 percent of kids who play from  
20 the age of seven drop out completely by 14" (Newman, 2006, p. 63). However, whilst the  
21 body of negative anecdotal evidence on tennis parents continues to accumulate, the actual  
22 scientific study of the 'tennis parent' is limited in breadth and remains heavily one-sided.

23 The traditional bias in this area of research is reflected by the almost exclusive focus  
24 on others' perceptions of, or self-reported responses about, parents in sport (e.g., from  
25 athletes' or coaches' perspectives) without data collected on parents from the parents

1 themselves. Several studies have highlighted that athletes identify their parents as being  
2 overly involved and increasing the pressure they experience, often through excessive  
3 expectations and negative social evaluation (e.g., Brustad, 1988; Scanlan, 1986).  
4 Consequently, parents are identified as a contributing factor to burnout, lack of enjoyment,  
5 and increased anxiety in sport (Gould, Tuffey, Udry & Loehr, 1996; Hellstedt, 1990; Leff &  
6 Hoyle, 1995). Furthermore, parental pressure has been shown to produce feelings of distress  
7 and guilt (Donnelly, 1993) as well as compromising athletes' levels of self-esteem (McElroy,  
8 1982).

9         Most recently, Gould and colleagues (Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes & Pennisi, 2006,  
10 2008) conducted two studies of effective and ineffective tennis parenting behavior in relation  
11 to players and coaches for the United States Tennis Association (USTA). As a result of the  
12 extensive survey completed by 132 coaches (Gould et al., 2006) and focus groups with 24  
13 coaches (Gould et al., 2008), tennis parent education materials were generated for the USTA  
14 sport science division in an attempt to reduce the negative impact of parents and to enhance  
15 their positive influence across the stages of player development. To date, this research  
16 represents the most comprehensive insight into the perceived negative and positive practices  
17 of United States tennis parents. However, in concert with previous studies, the focus of the  
18 research question lay with coaches' perceptions and the emphasis on the consequences or  
19 behaviours of parents towards others as opposed to the experiences of *being the tennis parent*  
20 him or herself.

21         Both scientific and popular interest in sport-parents has revolved around the issue of  
22 stress, and more specifically, the competitive stress that parents potentially place on their  
23 children. A substantial body of literature has identified the stressors experienced by athletes  
24 and coaches (e.g., Duda, Balaguer & Crespo, 2003; Gould, Jackson & Finch, 1993; Kelly &  
25 Gill, 1993; Scanlan, 1986; Taylor 1992). Beyond competition stress, athletes have reported

1 coach-related and organisational stressors (Campbell & Jones, 2002; Fletcher & Hanton,  
2 2003; Woodman & Hardy, 2001), as well as time and financial stressors (Gould, et al., 1996;  
3 Scanlan, Stein & Ravizza, 1989). Similarly, research into coaching stressors range from  
4 conflict with parents and athletes (Pastore & Judd, 1993), to time demands (Duda et al.,  
5 2003), and expectations to produce results (Caccese & Mayerberg, 1984). Stress has also been  
6 recognized as a contributing factor to burnout in both athletes and coaches (see Goodger,  
7 Gorely, Lavallee & Harwood, 2007). Interestingly however, no research, to the authors'  
8 knowledge, has paid specific attention to the range of stressors encountered by parents as they  
9 support their child through his or her sport development and experience. The present study  
10 establishes this line of enquiry and seeks to appraise the internal and external demands placed  
11 on the parent as a key participant in the competitive and organisational processes of youth  
12 sport.

13 Parents play a pivotal function in children's socialization to sport (Brustad, 1996) and  
14 throughout their sporting lives (Bußmann & Alferman, 1994; Fredricks & Eccles, 2004).  
15 Fredricks and Eccles (2004) propose that parents fulfill three fundamental roles in their  
16 child's sport experience. These are as 'provider' (of opportunities, finance, transport etc), as  
17 'interpreter' of the sport experience (i.e., emotionally reacting in adaptive ways to wins and  
18 losses) and as 'role model' (i.e., modeling the ideal attributes and behaviours in sport). How  
19 well parents fulfill these roles serves to influence the child's beliefs and values and in turn,  
20 their motivated behaviours and performance.

21 Whilst executing these roles it is therefore inevitable that parents will spend large  
22 amounts of time in the sport environment and experience both a similar and different range of  
23 organisational stressors than those encountered by athletes and coaches (Kattan, 2001). The  
24 time commitment required from parents can impede their working, social, and family life  
25 (Kirk et al., 1997a). This can cause particular strain if their time and attention becomes

1 centered upon one child-athlete at the expense of non-sport siblings (Anderson & Anderson,  
2 2000).

3 Parents are also required to make a large financial commitment to their child's  
4 sporting participation (Baxter-Jones & Maffuli, 2003; Murphy, 1999). Kirk et al. (1997b)  
5 studied the economic impact that children's participation in junior sport had on families,  
6 noting that the costs of involvement can negatively affect both a child's sport participation  
7 and impact more widely throughout family life. Baxter-Jones and Maffuli (2003) supported  
8 these findings identifying that approximately 12% of the family budget of their sample was  
9 spent on tennis playing children, and 16% of tennis parents reported severe financial hardship  
10 as a result of supporting their child in tennis.

11 Beyond financial and time demands, and as 'interpreters' of the sport experience,  
12 parents are required to constantly provide their child-athlete with emotional support  
13 (Anderson & Anderson, 2000). This is noteworthy given that the child-athlete is tested  
14 competitively on an ostensibly more regular and public basis than non-athletic peers. The  
15 salience and frequency of sports participation for children necessitates the availability of  
16 emotional reassurance from parents, particularly following poor performances that can  
17 negatively affect children. In parallel, parents may identify with their children's endeavour  
18 and, in striving for them to be happy, may experience high levels of stress (and subsequent  
19 strain) when they witness disappointments (Murphy, 1999; Smoll, 2001). For many parents,  
20 their experience of stress may be exacerbated by the difficulties of placating pre-teenage  
21 players following a loss at a time when children possess a developmentally immature and  
22 rigid view of success and failure. In sum, whilst parents are required to provide their child  
23 with sufficient support, they are sometimes unable to cope with the emotional challenges that  
24 they face themselves (Kattan, 2001).

25 The nature of an individual sport such as tennis requires parents to deal with more





1 standard, and 52% competing at national and international standard.

## 2 *Survey Development*

3         Whilst the research question called for a broad, qualitative understanding of the  
4 stressors experienced by parents, it was felt beneficial to gain a quantitative feel for those  
5 stressors that most frequently permeated through the subculture of tennis parents (see Gould,  
6 Udry, Bridges & Beck, 1997). To achieve both ends therefore, an open-ended survey was  
7 developed to allow parents to articulate the stressors that they experienced across a range of  
8 pre-determined contexts and categories that were deemed to be central to their role as a  
9 participating parent. These stimulus categories were selected by considering the sources of  
10 stress themes experienced by athletes and coaches (e.g., Fletcher & Hanton, 2003), as well as  
11 themes central to family functioning in the talent development literature (Côté, 1999). In  
12 addition, the first author's background in tennis and his experience working with tennis  
13 parents as an accredited and chartered practitioner facilitated the identification of specific  
14 categories for parents to express their thoughts and experiences.

15         The survey was reviewed by a four Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) Level 5-qualified  
16 tennis coaches<sup>1</sup> and the Head of Coach Education for the LTA who considered the  
17 appropriateness of the categories and questions. In addition, three British tennis parents  
18 completed pilot surveys and offered feedback to the research team. These processes lead to  
19 some minor rewording alongside an acknowledgment from these parents that they appreciated  
20 the opportunity to articulate their thoughts and welcomed the exercise for other parents.

21         Following a request for anonymous demographic information, the final 'Tennis  
22 Parent' survey consisted of seven central categories: competitions and tournaments; coaches  
23 and coaching; the national governing body; county and club issues; personal, social, and  
24 family issues; finance, access, and resources; and developmental and transitional issues. A

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<sup>1</sup> The Level 5 Professional Coaches Award is the highest level qualification in the UK.

1 final section for any other comments was also provided. In support of Lazarus & Folkman's  
2 (1984) transactional approach to stress, a stressor was defined as any external and/or internal  
3 demand experienced/encountered by the parent that they felt pressure to deal with. Parents  
4 were oriented towards expressing issues that they found personally stressful and demanding  
5 about their child's participation, and their personal role, in tennis. Each category requested  
6 parents to articulate, in written form, their experiences of stressors with reference to that  
7 broad category including certain sub-contexts where appropriate (e.g., for 'competitions and  
8 tournaments', sub-contexts included: before matches; during matches; and after matches).  
9 Each section offered ample space for parents to complete the survey at their convenience and  
10 in as much detail as possible. A copy of the survey may be obtained from the first author.

#### 11 *Procedure*

12 The survey was distributed through three channels: (a) At the Ariel British Junior  
13 National Championships; (b) Via e-mail to all county administrators to forward to parents and  
14 distribute at their respective County championships; (c) Direct delivery to coaches to give to  
15 parents. This breadth of distribution ensured that parents with children of various standards  
16 and from across the country could complete the survey.

#### 17 *Data Analysis*

18 Each survey was read in its entirety to ensure an overall understanding of each  
19 participant's responses. Content analysis of the surveys then occurred following the guidance  
20 of Miles and Huberman (1994) and Côté, Salmela, Baria and Russell (1993), and mirrored the  
21 qualitative and quantitative procedures of Gould et al.'s (1997) study into season ending ski-  
22 injuries. In the first stage of analysis, meaning units were created by identifying and  
23 paraphrasing every discernible stressor reported by parents in their written responses to each  
24 question. Each meaning unit was then coded into a first order thematic category or essence  
25 phrase that essentially represented a cluster of similar stressors (Maykut & Morehouse,

1 1994). A frequency count of parental representation within each theme was consistently  
2 maintained for quantitative comparisons. Subsequently, a careful and reflexive cross-category  
3 analysis was conducted to investigate where themes may have been duplicative or have  
4 shared commonalities with themes emerging from other sections of the survey. This  
5 analytical process then progressed inductively to a higher thematic level culminating in a final  
6 set of core themes that represented the range, content and frequency of parental stress. This  
7 overall procedure was therefore deductive in the sense of using pre-determined categories as  
8 merely the 'filters' for initial content analysis, but progressively inductive as the data and data  
9 interpretation guided the research team towards non-predetermined core themes.

10 Consensus validation was a primary method of supporting the trustworthiness of this  
11 survey analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The second author identified the meaning units  
12 and created the initial thematic groupings across each section of survey. The first author then  
13 analysed 20% of the surveys to ensure that meaning units (i.e., reported stressors) had been  
14 appropriately identified and paraphrased. This process led to a 91% agreement with the  
15 second author. Following this stage, the first author checked the interpretive allocation of  
16 meaning units into their initial first order thematic categories. An 80% agreement rate was  
17 reached that required a reflective discussion and revising of certain thematic labels related to  
18 responses in the 'competition and tournaments' section of the survey. This process of  
19 verification between the two authors continued until the final set of core themes were agreed  
20 and descriptive frequencies of parental stress related to each theme were intact and verifiable.  
21 The Head of Coach Education subsequently served as an external auditor for the content of  
22 each of the core themes.

## 23 Results

24 Analysis of the survey responses resulted in the development of seven core themes of  
25 stress: competition, coaches, finance, time, siblings, organisation-related, and developmental

1 stressors. The substance of each core theme will be elaborated on alongside direct quotations  
2 as well as illustrating quantitative information on the percentage of parents who cited a  
3 particular stressor (*N%*).

#### 4 *Core Theme One: Competition*

5 Tournament and competition stressors were identified by all parents and represented  
6 by three higher order themes: Stressors experienced prior to a match or competition; during  
7 match stressors; and stressors that arise following matches. Table 1 presents these themes and  
8 the more specific, constituent sub-themes.

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

13 Their child's psychological state prior to the match was also a concern. Parents  
14 described the stress they experienced because their child did not appear to be focused for their  
15 forthcoming match or appeared to be anxious. One parent stated, "I want to know that my  
16 child is ready for the match and that she is looking forward to playing, not becoming too  
17 concerned and anxious". A number of parents reported worries about what the opponent's  
18 behaviour would be like, as well as the behaviour of other parents.

19 For many parents, a combination of factors seemed to conspire in a manner that causes  
20 them stress prior to competition. The following quote is one example of such a perception:

21 Getting to the venue on time: no traffic delays, finding the place if it is new to us.

22 Hoping the hotel room isn't double booked, it's happened and we had to spend a night  
23 in the car! Hoping it [the tournament] isn't called off when we get there. Warm-up  
24 courts, are there any available? Need time to settle down after long journeys before  
25 play begins. Trying to keep the child happy and relaxed beforehand. Are there indoor

1 courts if it rains.?

2 The stressors experienced during a match were more evenly distributed between  
3 themes related to their child, to others and to themselves. Over half of the parents cited  
4 stressors associated with their child's on-court behavior and self-control, with concerns about  
5 their performance and enjoyment also being noted. The following quote elaborates on a  
6 feeling identified by many parents:

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

11 Almost one third of parents reported stress associated with watching matches that  
12 involved gamesmanship and cheating by other parents and/or their child's opponent. For  
13 example, one parent stated, "Line calls with no umpire, scores being called incorrectly, other  
14 parents interfering, referees standing back. Constant concern over bad calls and how to deal  
15 with that." The stressors associated with opponents were also interlinked to the tournament  
16 referees. Parents explained that a lack of involvement or appropriate action from referees to  
17 deal with gamesmanship, cheating, or poor behaviour is also a stressor they regularly  
18 experience.

19 A variety of stressors emerged in relation to other parents at tournaments and their  
20 intimidating and interfering behaviours. Specifically parents indicated experiencing stress  
21 when they witnessed other parents placing pressure upon their own child, or making negative  
22 remarks about their child within earshot. Such pressure was displayed through parents  
23 interfering with matches (e.g., calling their child's lines), displaying excessive support for  
24 their child, or condoning cheating. This was viewed as particularly intimidating given that  
25 they felt unable to do anything to protect their child from this experience.

1           This latter point supports how parents' own feelings acted as a stressor. A number of  
2 parents identified, without qualification, that watching their child and dealing with their own  
3 feelings was stressful. They felt compelled to restrict any displays of disappointment or  
4 frustration as one mother stated, "It's a stressor trying not to show any signs of stress or  
5 agitation". Parents also explained how stressful it was to not know exactly what type of  
6 support to give in certain situations.

7           Following the match, the predominant stressor explained by parents was the effect of  
8 the result on their child and their lack of skills in helping or knowing how to help their child  
9 manage the resultant emotions. After a loss, for example, many parents noted how unsure  
10 they were of how or when to speak to their child:

11           Knowing how to communicate with my son in a way that doesn't upset him when he  
12 loses, and when to give feedback. I (& he) know that both myself and my husband  
13 have high expectations, we ask for his comments on how he has played and he is  
14 often self-critical. I worry sometimes if I/we are putting too much pressure on him to  
15 achieve but we do understand he can't win them all!

16           Additionally, some parents identified that it was more stressful following a match if  
17 there had been issues of cheating, a lack of input from referees during the match, or poor  
18 behaviour from their child that were perceived to impact upon the outcome. The  
19 inappropriate or 'over-competitive' behaviour and comments of other parents was also a  
20 prevalent stressor for some parents, as was the frustration of not being able to conduct a  
21 rational post-match analysis and to ensure that the player was fully recovered and prepared for  
22 the next match. Finally, a small group of parents reflected on the difficulty of managing their  
23 own emotions post-match, as well as their internalisation of negative feelings experienced by  
24 their child to poor performances.

25   *Core Theme Two: Coach-related stressors*

1           The behavior and attitude of coaches emerged as a stressor for almost half of the  
2 parental sample. Table 2 illustrates how five higher order themes represented the different  
3 ways in which coaches acted as a source of stress. Firstly, the tendency for coaches not to go  
4 to tournaments and watch their pupils play competitive matches was an issue for 27% of  
5 parents. In conjunction with not observing matches, this also included a lack of tactical and  
6 mental preparation for their child at events which parents felt was left for them to do.  
7 Secondly, a number of parents were aggravated by the unprofessional behaviour of coaches  
8 on court. Actions such as coaches using mobile phones during sessions, talking to other  
9 people during their child's lessons, and displaying a lack of interest in or attention to their  
10 child were cited as stressful . In addition, some parents noted occasions where coaches  
11 encouraged or failed to condone negative behaviours and attitudes in players, including one  
12 parent who stated, "coaches are not dealing successfully with pupils who are disruptive in  
13 sessions".

14           This also supports a smaller percentage of parents who questioned their coach's actual  
15 knowledge, ability and empathy to deal with children and parental logistics. One parent  
16 reported that, "coaches are not as qualified as they should be and also they do not work or  
17 cope with children appropriately." Similarly, another parent expressed that, "coaches do not  
18 understand the psychology of children", displaying a lack of appreciation of the demands  
19 upon them.

20           Beyond their behavior on court over 20 percent of parents also pinpointed the coach's  
21 organisational and communication skills as stressors they encountered. One parent noted that,  
22 "stress arises because of coaches not finding the time to talk to parents," whilst others  
23 described stress they experienced due to "coaches giving poor advice to players," or "not  
24 discussing the long term player development plans with player or parents". Some parents  
25 explained that they did not know what was expected of them or what the coaches' aims were.

1 They also articulated other organisational stressors related to coaches cancelling sessions with  
2 little notice and failing to be punctual. An element of this sub-theme was also finance-related  
3 with one parent observing how the coach “upped [i.e., increased] the prices for squads and  
4 then put more players into it!”, whilst another viewed the “unclear and ever changing pricing  
5 systems” as a stressor. A final higher order theme represented the stress associated with  
6 perceptions of the coach’s favouritism that was experienced by a small percentage of parents.  
7 Comments included how coaches reserved special treatment for certain players and their  
8 parents, or that certain families were treated differently or inconsistently.

### 9 *Core Theme Three: Financial stressors*

10 Financial issues were highlighted as another main stressor in the survey with five  
11 higher order themes representing the underlying reasons cited by parents (see Table 3).  
12 However, it must be noted that of the 79% of parents who acknowledged finance as a stressor,  
13 a large majority specified a general response and not always an underpinning issue. For  
14 example, as one mother wrote, “It’s a huge pressure, how much more of an explanation do  
15 you need?”. Whilst another stated, “To pay for tennis all other things must be sacrificed  
16 including family holidays or outings, small treats and the involvement of my son in other  
17 things that may have a financial commitment”.

18 For parents who indicated specific financial stressors, fees and expenses related to  
19 coaching were most reported. One father noted that, “Lessons, especially individual lessons,  
20 are extremely expensive.” Transport and accommodation expenses also represented heavy  
21 burdens with one parent summarising, “We seriously cannot afford to travel this winter” and  
22 another observing that “staying away at weekends is something that is a treat for other  
23 families but a constant cost for us”.

24 In addition to these themes, club membership and national governing fees as well as  
25 the cost of equipment and clothing emerged as financial stressors for parents. The following



1 quote perhaps sums up one parent's feelings about this overall factor:

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

6 *Core Theme Four: Time stressors*

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

22       In sum, a feeling developed through the data of the constancy of time stress in one  
23      guise or another. The stress of being unable to sit with their family and have meals; having to  
24      feed their children in the car; arranging time off school or work and using family holidays;  
25      and altering homework deadlines were some specific examples cited. One mother wrote,

1 “Time is always a stressor in our family,” and another stated, in relation to her perception of  
2 time, “We have none. We’re like hamsters going around on a wheel!”

### 3 *Core Theme Five: Sibling stressors*

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

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

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

22 Logistically, the requirements of tennis conflicted with the activities of other siblings  
23 and parents noted the stress of having to make decisions in favour of one over another. Some  
24 faced the stress of having to be in multiple places at once, and others in attempting to balance  
25 what they could do with each child. Inevitably related to the problems of such activity

1 scheduling, a number of parents reported the stress of regularly splitting the family, with one  
 2 parent spending all of their time with one child and vice versa. They noted their fears for the  
 3 quality of relationships with their children as well as the impact that these have upon family  
 4 life in general.

5 *Core Theme Six: Organisation-related stressors*

6 External to those stressors located within the family or competition, training and  
 7 coaching processes, the local and national organisations involved in structuring and managing  
 8 the game emerged as sources of stress for over half of the parents. Table 5 illustrates the three  
 9 higher order themes that emerged in relation to the national or county Lawn Tennis  
 10 Associations (LTA) and clubs. The primary stressors emerged at club and county level where  
 11 favoritism was noted in relation to aspects such as team and squad selections for young  
 12 players. A sense of parental frustration emerged in the data through a lack of transparency  
 13 regarding how teams are chosen. One parent highlighted that, “It’s all rather a closed shop at  
 14 county level.” Similarly, a lack of advice or communication was indicated in relation to team  
 15 selections. Parents also noted frustrations with the inefficiencies they experienced when  
 16 dealing with club or county bureaucracy, especially the lack of accessibility of courts for  
 17 juniors due to the priority given to seniors and adults.

18 Two systems operated by the national governing body were also cited as a source of  
 19 stress. Firstly, a number of parents felt that funding was unfairly distributed or was  
 20 insufficient. Perceptions of favouritism were embedded in comments such as, “Too much  
 21 emphasis is placed on younger children, and the funding doesn’t reward those who stick at it.”  
 22 The constant changes in the allocation policies of funding were also expressed as a stressor.

23 Secondly, a number of parents expressed stress due to the LTA rating system<sup>2</sup> that is

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<sup>2</sup> The LTA rating system provides all competing players with a rating that can be judged against other players and is based upon the win-loss ratio and number of matches that a child competes in.

1 employed in British tennis. One parent referred to, “The reliance on results and the penalties  
2 for losing which can have a huge negative impact on children”. One such impact is that it  
3 forms the basis for entry into tournaments, with another parent stating that, “The ratings  
4 system is stressful when children can’t get into tournaments based on it”. Coinciding with  
5 rating stressors, parents listed other competition stressors related to a lack of appropriate  
6 competition, limited team competitions, or an over emphasis on matches at a young age.

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

#### 11 *Core Theme Seven: Developmental stressors*

12 The final cluster of parental stressors were embedded in developmental issues and  
13 consisted of three well-populated higher order themes that together represented over 90% of  
14 the sample (see Table 7). These themes centred on educational conflicts, limited opportunities  
15 for other sports, and concerns over future transitions.

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

24 As parents we will not sacrifice schooling and education for tennis when the children  
25 are young. When the children are older and able to better decide for themselves we

1 will be more prepared to take decisions with regard to tennis and education. There is a  
2 fine balance to be struck between tennis development and opportunities and education  
3 and school life. The ongoing demands in these areas are stressful for parents.

4 Beyond these academic issues, a child's lack of engagement in other sports was also  
5 perceived as a stressor. Parents particularly lamented about their child being unable to engage  
6 in school sports, and when their school demanded their attendance. A father stated, "Children  
7 who are gifted at tennis are invariably able at other sports and their schools want them  
8 involved but they just don't have the time".

9 Finally, over 50% of parents cited varying stressors in relation to transitions to higher  
10 levels of the game. The potential burden of future financial, time, and social demands were  
11 articulated by parents. However, the most frequently reported concerns related to their child's  
12 own coping abilities and included: the pressure their child would experience; ambition  
13 fulfillment; making sufficient technical and physical improvements; and whether their child  
14 would develop at the same rate as their peers. One parent stated, "If he progresses higher I  
15 will worry about the amount of support we will be able to provide him mentally," whilst  
16 another noted with some resignation that "he couldn't cope with the added pressures,". A  
17 further parent commented on the effect of her own child's expectations, stating, "My  
18 daughter has great ambitions for herself and we worry if she has the ability and if she will be  
19 disappointed."

20 Almost as prevalent as concerns about their child's future coping potential were the  
21 decisions that parents would face. In addition to decisions about how much personal time and  
22 money to commit to tennis, parents needed reassurance about when or if their child should  
23 specialise in tennis and what this would mean for their education. There was apprehension  
24 about how much school their child should miss and whether their children should attend  
25 specialised tennis academies. One parent expressed that, "It's impossible to justify leaving

1 full time education unless truly exceptional”, whilst another stated, “I would hate for him to  
2 leave home early and go and live at an academy.” However, parents identified that such  
3 decisions must be made if their child were to fully achieve their potential in the game.

#### 4 Discussion

5 The role of parents in the development, performance and well-being of young athletes  
6 has featured heavily (and often critically) in the sport psychology literature (e.g., Côté, 1999;  
7 Fredricks & Eccles, 2004; Gould et al., 2006, 2008; Hellstedt, 1990; Leff & Hoyle, 1995).  
8 They are appropriately viewed as key participants in optimising the youth sport experience,  
9 and core functions of provider, interpreter, and role model have been attributed to them in this  
10 respect (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004). In addition, applied texts and educational manuals on  
11 ‘how to be a better sport parent’ proliferate bookshelves in the absence of any scientific study  
12 and understanding of the sport parent who is assigned these goals and expectations to live up  
13 to (e.g., Anderson & Anderson, 2000; Fish & Magee, 2001; Kattan, 2001; Wolff, 2003).

14 This lack of scientific understanding and attention is not the case for the athlete and  
15 coach as the remaining members of the athletic triangle (Hellstedt, 1987). Sport  
16 psychologists have a well developed literature base should they seek to develop an empathic  
17 awareness of the range of personal, competition and organisational stressors faced by athletes  
18 and coaches (e.g., Gould et al., 1993; Kelley & Gill, 1993; Fletcher, Hanton & Mellalieu,  
19 2006; Woodman & Hardy, 2001). If the world of youth sport seeks to optimise the roles of  
20 parents, and views them as worthy protagonists, then there is an equal premium placed on  
21 understanding the internal psychological factors and environmental demands that may impact  
22 on the quality of their roles. To this end, the primary focus of this study was to investigate the  
23 scope and nature of parental stress (within the sport of tennis) and, in so doing, to validate the  
24 sport parent as a participant who experiences stress in unique and diverse manners.

25 Seven core themes of parental stress were derived from the data. These broadly

1 included: stressors inherent within the processes of competition; the behaviour and  
2 responsibilities of coaches; financial and time demands placed upon the family; sibling  
3 inequalities and resentment; inefficiencies and inequalities attributed to tennis organizations;  
4 and developmental concerns related to educational and future tennis transitions.

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

#### 12 *The diversity of competition stress*

13         Adapted from Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress, Fletcher et  
14 al., (2006) referred to stress as "an ongoing process that involves individuals transacting with  
15 their environments, making appraisals of the situations they find themselves in, and  
16 endeavouring to cope with any issues that may arise" (p. 329). Within this process, stressors  
17 represent the environmental demands encountered by individuals and strain refers to the  
18 individual's negative psychological, physical and behavioural responses to stressors. Using  
19 this transactional model, researchers in the sport domain have started to make the distinction  
20 between those stressors linked specifically to competition and competitive performance (i.e.,  
21 competition stress) with the stressors associated primarily and directly with the organisation  
22 within which the individual is operating (i.e., organisational stress; Hanton, Fletcher &  
23 Coughlan, 2005; Hanton & Fletcher, 2005; Woodman & Hardy, 2001). Parental responses in  
24 this study offered support to the utility of such a differentiation between the origins of the  
25 stressor.

1 Tennis parents experienced a diversity of competition stressors that spoke greatly to the  
2 difficulties that they face in their roles as provider, interpreter and role model in a match  
3 context. A number of parents reported experiencing strain and anxiety 'by proxy' when  
4 watching their child compete, unsure of how to react to certain situations and unable to  
5 interpret the experience for their child in the middle of a match. In some cases, these  
6 emotions appeared to be driven by the parents' goals and expectations for their child's  
7 behaviour and performance (Sidebottom, 2001). However, in many cases, parental feelings of  
8 helplessness were triggered by knowing their child's expectations and anticipating their  
9 disappointment if they lost.

10 Parents appeared to struggle emotionally with the unsportsmanlike behaviour of  
11 opponents (e.g., cheating) and negative interference of other parents, as well as the docility of  
12 referees. In this respect, the provision of psychological safety and emotional security for their  
13 child seemed to be an important caring role for parents; a role that was hampered by the rules  
14 of the game in calling for audience restraint and encouraging players to work through their  
15 own adversities.

16 After matches, whilst parents may have sought to interpret the match for their child (in a  
17 positive light) and role model appropriate recovery behaviour, many parents cited the stress of  
18 either not being skilled enough to do this, or being thwarted in their attempt by the emotions  
19 of their child and/or by their own negative emotions about the match. A number of parents  
20 experienced the stress of not being able to conduct a rational post-match analysis, an issue  
21 that was perhaps mirrored by the concern of some parents prior to the match of the child's  
22 adequate preparation and readiness both physically and mentally.

23 The lack of a coach being present for many of their child's matches (cited as a related  
24 stressor) appeared to leave parents stuck between the role of parent and coach, but less  
25 equipped to offer skilled support before, during and after matches. Nonetheless, there was



1 strong evidence for the pertinence of Lazarus' (2000) notion of *relational meaning* vis a vis  
2 the emotional experience of parents at their children's competitions. Lazarus noted that an  
3 individual's emotional response to a stressor is influenced by the transacting significance of  
4 the context or event to the well-being of the individual. In this sample, it was clear that the  
5 'context' of tennis competition, and all of the potential issues associated with it, was highly  
6 significant and meaningful to parents through the perception of their child's well-being.

### 7 *Parental experiences of organisational stress*

8 In making the distinction between competition and organisational stress, Fletcher et al.,  
9 (2006) reinforced the importance of understanding those stressors that are attributable to  
10 engaging in the sport (and its structures, subcultures, and systems) as an organised entity, as  
11 opposed to those associated merely with the act of competing. Adapting the work of Cooper,  
12 Dewe and O'Driscoll (2001) in organisational psychology, Hanton and Fletcher (2005)  
13 differentiated between five dimensions of organisational stressor: factors intrinsic to the sport;  
14 roles in the sport organisation; sport relationships and interpersonal demands; athletic career  
15 and performance development issues; and, organisational structure and climate of the sport  
16 (see also Fletcher et al., 2006)

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

23 Firstly, parents cited a number of stressors that represented factors intrinsic to the sport  
24 of tennis. These included time stressors associated with travel, training, competition and  
25 tournament schedules as well as financial stressors associated with lessons, transport,

1 accommodation and equipment (Kirk et al., 1997a; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005)

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

10 Thirdly, parents cited a number of stressors associated with sport relationships and  
11 interpersonal demands. Beyond encounters with other tennis parents, their key relationship  
12 existed with coaches. However, for a number of parents this wasn't always a satisfactory  
13 experience. Parents noted a lack of professionalism, knowledge and empathy in terms of the  
14 coach's skills, policies and on-court behaviour, with lack of communication, feedback and  
15 match attendance being the most frequent stressors.

16 Fourthly, athletic career and performance development issues seem to represent key  
17 areas of concern for parents within the theme of developmental stressors. Almost half of the  
18 sample cited current conflicts between educational demands and tennis, with one third of  
19 parents concerned about future decisions regarding education and specialised tennis (Coakley,  
20 2006). Parents also disclosed financial and social worries associated with these future  
21 transitions, as well as the limited opportunity to develop in other sports. However, perhaps the  
22 most noteworthy finding was the 33% of parents who reported apprehensions about their  
23 child's ability and readiness to cope with higher levels of the game and potential  
24 disappointments.

25 The final dimension of Hanton & Fletcher's (2005) framework, the organisational

1 structure and climate of the sport, corresponded closely with the organisation-related stressors  
2 experienced by parents as a result of the local and national Lawn Tennis Associations. Some  
3 parents noted the structural inefficiencies of county governing bodies, clubs and tournament  
4 entry procedures including access problems and perceived favouritism. The national  
5 governing body's allocation and transparency of player funding and the results-oriented rating  
6 system were further stressors that reinforced the parent's position as somewhat of a 'pawn'  
7 who was unable to contribute to any of the decisions that affected themselves or their child.

#### 8 *Limitations and implications*

9 The thematic content that emerged in this study, as well as the utility of considering  
10 parents as part of an organisational stress framework, offers a more structured understanding  
11 of the pressures experienced by parents in one youth sport. Nevertheless, a number of  
12 limitations should be considered in order to accelerate future research in this particular  
13 domain.

14 Firstly, whilst the emphasis of this study was to identify the stressful elements of  
15 being a tennis parent, a sub-question within the survey allowed parents to highlight the  
16 positive outcomes they associated with having children involved in the sport. Positive factors  
17 that emerged included: parent's own enjoyment, the formation of social networks, children's  
18 peer friendships, a closer relationship with their child, the health and fitness benefits, and  
19 feeling proud of their child's achievements. As such it is critical to recognize that whilst these  
20 parents expressed many stressors, there were also many positive factors to potentially  
21 counteract these. The limitation here is that whilst parents cited stressors, and in some cases  
22 psychological strain through their negative response to the stressor, the study did not  
23 intentionally assess psychological strain, or the methods of coping that parents employed to  
24 deal with such stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Therefore, whilst it is clear that some  
25 parents lacked the resources to deal with a particular stressor, experienced negative emotions

1 and struggled to cope, future research should pay closer attention to the full stress and coping  
2 process in sport parents. For example, using the thematic content of stressors in this study,  
3 researchers may be encouraged to investigate strain from a quantitative perspective by  
4 examining the severity or frequency of parents' negative responses to a particular stressor. In  
5 addition, a qualitative methodology might initially be used to investigate parental methods of  
6 coping with identified stressors (Thomas, Gilbourne & Eubank, 2004). Both of these types of  
7 study would serve to enhance the scientific knowledge base of 'sport parent' stress and coping  
8 and furnish practitioners, parents and organisations with more precise intervention ideas,  
9 education and skills.

10 Secondly, whilst the survey approach employed here provided access to a large  
11 sample in order to give a more authentic quantitative feel to overall parental perceptions, a in-  
12 depth interview based approach may have offered even richer information. The survey was  
13 extensive and whilst many parents offered detailed paragraphs, a number offered only one or  
14 two sentences. In the future, in line with United States Tennis Association's attempt to  
15 specify positive parenting practices appropriate to the child's stage of development (USTA,  
16 2007; Côté, 1999), the current research might be extended to an in-depth investigation of  
17 parents who are at different stages in the tennis parenting journey. Again, this may offer  
18 practitioners and organisations with a deeper appreciation of the key issues and needs of  
19 parents during the sampling years, and through the specialising and investment transitions that  
20 their child may take (Côté, 1999)

21 From an applied perspective, this study promotes a number of educational and  
22 procedural implications that rest with practitioners, coaches and organizing bodies. Firstly, to  
23 enhance the positive roles, well-being and stress management of tennis parents, there appear  
24 to be at least three separate educational initiatives. The involvement of the LTA within these  
25 may also serve to enhance the communication channels and information flow between the



1 consider these. Over 75% of parents surveyed felt that the current level of support and parent  
2 education available to them was poor. The headline topics offered by parents included: more  
3 specialised information regarding appropriate parent and child behaviour at tournaments,  
4 including publicly displayed behavioural rules and stronger refereeing (for both); improved  
5 guidance on how to talk with their child pre and post competition; education to coaches  
6 regarding professional behaviour and the complexities of being a tennis parent; and improved  
7 communication and explanations from the national governing body regarding decisions that  
8 affect their child.

9 An objective of this study was to allow sport parents the opportunity to voice the  
10 issues that they experienced in their support roles. We believe that such a line of research (and  
11 subsequent practice) will not only ameliorate the behaviour and skills of parents, but will  
12 indirectly facilitate the work of all personnel in pursuit of optimal sport experiences for  
13 talented young athletes.

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DRAFT

Table 1 Core Theme 1: Competition stressors

Higher-order category/ 1 <sup>st</sup> order sub-themes	%N
Pre-match stressors	
• Planning, logistics and travel	63%
• Physical and nutritional preparation	53%
• Child's psychological state and 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	
• 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 <sup>st</sup> order sub-themes	%N
Match attendance and support	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of match attendance and player preparation/observation</li> </ul>	27%
On-court behaviour	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Unprofessional behaviours/lack of attention to session and child</li> <li>Encouraging or condoning negative behaviour/values</li> </ul>	20% 15%
Organisation and communication skills	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of feedback, interest and strategic advice to parents</li> <li>Cancellations, poor planning and non-punctuality</li> </ul>	22% 18%
Favouritism	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inconsistent and unequal treatment of players (and family)</li> </ul>	8%
Levels of knowledge and empathy	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited understanding of child development</li> <li>Lack of empathy with parental issues and logistics</li> </ul>	7% 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: Organisational stressors

Higher-order category/ 1 <sup>st</sup> order sub-themes	%N
Problems with club and county associations	
• Local favouritism re selection and opportunity	20%
• Inefficient club/county structures and access	13%
Governing body systems	
• Allocation and transparency of player funding	15%
• The ratings system and emphasis on results	10%
Tournament organisation	
• Inefficient entry procedures and communication of information	11%

Table 7 Core Theme 7: Developmental stressors

Higher-order category/ 1 <sup>st</sup> order sub-themes	%N
Current educational conflicts and issues	43%
Limited opportunity for multiple sports	31%
Future transitions	
• Uncertainties about player coping with transitions	33%
• Decisions about education	32%
• Financial and social worries	20%