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Understanding parental stress: An investigation of British tennis parents

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Abstract

As part of a research and education initiative supported by the Lawn Tennis Association of Great Britain, the purpose of this study was to investigate the perceived stressors experienced by British tennis parents. One hundred and twenty-three tennis parents from across the United Kingdom completed an extensive survey focused on the internal and external demands that they had encountered through having a child compete in the sport. The survey consisted of open-ended questions related to competition, coaching, organisational, personal and developmental issues. Inductive and deductive content analysis of the survey responses resulted in the development of seven core themes of tennis parental stress: competition, coaches, finance, time, siblings, organisation-related, and developmental.

Results are discussed in terms of the diversity of competition and organisational stressors that emerge for parents in their support roles to young British players. Implications for the governing body and the importance of specific educational programmes for coaches and parents are presented alongside future research recommendations for this line of study.
Understanding parental stress: An investigation of British tennis parents

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

Christophe Fauviau (cited in Lichfield, 2006)

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

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

The traditional bias in this area of research is reflected by the almost exclusive focus on others’ perceptions of, or self-reported responses about, parents in sport (e.g., from athletes’ or coaches’ perspectives) without data collected on parents from the parents
themselves. Several studies have highlighted that athletes identify their parents as being overly involved and increasing the pressure they experience, often through excessive expectations and negative social evaluation (e.g., Brustad, 1988; Scanlan, 1986).

Consequently, parents are identified as a contributing factor to burnout, lack of enjoyment, and increased anxiety in sport (Gould, Tuffey, Udry & Loehr, 1996; Hellstedt, 1990; Leff & Hoyle, 1995). Furthermore, parental pressure has been shown to produce feelings of distress and guilt (Donnelly, 1993) as well as compromising athletes’ levels of self-esteem (McElroy, 1982).

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

Both scientific and popular interest in sport-parents has revolved around the issue of stress, and more specifically, the competitive stress that parents potentially place on their children. A substantial body of literature has identified the stressors experienced by athletes and coaches (e.g., Duda, Balaguer & Crespo, 2003; Gould, Jackson & Finch, 1993; Kelly & Gill, 1993; Scanlan, 1986; Taylor 1992). Beyond competition stress, athletes have reported
coach-related and organisational stressors (Campbell & Jones, 2002; Fletcher & Hanton, 2003; Woodman & Hardy, 2001), as well as time and financial stressors (Gould, et al., 1996; Scanlan, Stein & Ravizza, 1989). Similarly, research into coaching stressors range from conflict with parents and athletes (Pastore & Judd, 1993), to time demands (Duda et al., 2003), and expectations to produce results (Caccese & Mayerberg, 1984). Stress has also been recognized as a contributing factor to burnout in both athletes and coaches (see Goodger, Gorely, Lavallee & Harwood, 2007). Interestingly however, no research, to the authors’ knowledge, has paid specific attention to the range of stressors encountered by parents as they support their child through his or her sport development and experience. The present study establishes this line of enquiry and seeks to appraise the internal and external demands placed on the parent as a key participant in the competitive and organisational processes of youth sport.

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

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

Parental stress in tennis centered upon one child-athlete at the expense of non-sport siblings (Anderson & Anderson, 2000).

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

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

The nature of an individual sport such as tennis requires parents to deal with more
Parental stress in tennis

than simply the emotion-laden demands of the scoring system and the public evaluation of
their child (Harwood & Swain, 2002). The logistical requirements of tennis in Great Britain
places a burden on transportation to individual lessons and tournaments, where lift sharing or
car pooling is sometimes unfeasible due to differing start times for matches. The considerable
amount of time and money invested by parents of young players is often mirrored by their
attendance at the majority of coaching sessions, matches and tournaments that provide young
players with opportunities for rating and ranking points.

The perceived organisational and emotional demands placed upon tennis parents
recently led Judy Murray, the mother of the British No.1, Andy Murray, to establish
www.britishtennisparents.com as a guidance resource for parents. Nevertheless, a clearer
understanding of parental stressors is necessary to ensure the most appropriate resources are
produced for both parents and coaches, as well as to optimize the role of the national
governing body in supporting parents towards positive role-related influences on their
children’s engagement in sport. In light of this situation within the national game, the Lawn
Tennis Association funded a research and education initiative to enhance their awareness of
parental demands and to inform the tennis industry of potential roles to consider when
working with parents. The purpose of this present study, therefore, was to establish the scope
and nature of parental stress perceived by British tennis parents.

Method

Participants

The study comprised one hundred and twenty three British tennis parents from across
the United Kingdom. The sample comprised 74 mothers, 41 fathers, and four sets of parents
who jointly completed the survey. The sample accounted for parents of 52 female tennis
players and 78 male tennis players (12 parents failed to supply this information), who ranged
in age from U-8 to U-18 years (mean:13.74; SD: 2.65). A range of competitive standards
were represented with 48% of the participants’ children competing at club and county
standard, and 52% competing at national and international standard.

Survey Development

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

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

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

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1 The Level 5 Professional Coaches Award is the highest level qualification in the UK.
Parental stress in tennis

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

Procedure

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

Data Analysis

Each survey was read in its entirety to ensure an overall understanding of each
participant’s responses. Content analysis of the surveys then occurred following the guidance
of Miles and Huberman (1994) and Côté, Salmela, Baria and Russell (1993), and mirrored the
qualitative and quantitative procedures of Gould et al.’s (1997) study into season ending ski-
injuries. In the first stage of analysis, meaning units were created by identifying and
paraphrasing every discernible stressor reported by parents in their written responses to each
question. Each meaning unit was then coded into a first order thematic category or essence
phrase that essentially represented a cluster of similar stressors (Maykut & Morehouse,
Parental stress in tennis (1994). A frequency count of parental representation within each theme was consistently maintained for quantitative comparisons. Subsequently, a careful and reflexive cross-category analysis was conducted to investigate where themes may have been duplicative or have shared commonalities with themes emerging from other sections of the survey. This analytical process then progressed inductively to a higher thematic level culminating in a final set of core themes that represented the range, content and frequency of parental stress. This overall procedure was therefore deductive in the sense of using pre-determined categories as merely the ‘filters’ for initial content analysis, but progressively inductive as the data and data interpretation guided the research team towards non-predetermined core themes.

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

Results

Analysis of the survey responses resulted in the development of seven core themes of stress: competition, coaches, finance, time, siblings, organisation-related, and developmental
stressors. The substance of each core theme will be elaborated on alongside direct quotations as well as illustrating quantitative information on the percentage of parents who cited a particular stressor ($N\%$).

**Core Theme One: Competition**

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

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

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

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

Getting to the venue on time: no traffic delays, finding the place if it is new to us. Hoping the hotel room isn’t double booked, it’s happened and we had to spend a night in the car! Hoping it [the tournament] isn’t called off when we get there. Warm-up courts, are there any available? Need time to settle down after long journeys before play begins. Trying to keep the child happy and relaxed beforehand. Are there indoor
The stressors experienced during a match were more evenly distributed between themes related to their child, to others and to themselves. Over half of the parents cited stressors associated with their child’s on-court behavior and self-control, with concerns about their performance and enjoyment also being noted. The following quote elaborates on a feeling identified by many parents:

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

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

A variety of stressors emerged in relation to other parents at tournaments and their intimidating and interfering behaviours. Specifically parents indicated experiencing stress when they witnessed other parents placing pressure upon their own child, or making negative remarks about their child within earshot. Such pressure was displayed through parents interfering with matches (e.g., calling their child’s lines), displaying excessive support for their child, or condoning cheating. This was viewed as particularly intimidating given that they felt unable to do anything to protect their child from this experience.
This latter point supports how parents’ own feelings acted as a stressor. A number of parents identified, without qualification, that watching their child and dealing with their own feelings was stressful. They felt compelled to restrict any displays of disappointment or frustration as one mother stated, “It’s a stressor trying not to show any signs of stress or agitation”. Parents also explained how stressful it was to not know exactly what type of support to give in certain situations.

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

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

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

Core Theme Two: Coach-related stressors
The behavior and attitude of coaches emerged as a stressor for almost half of the parental sample. Table 2 illustrates how five higher order themes represented the different ways in which coaches acted as a source of stress. Firstly, the tendency for coaches not to go to tournaments and watch their pupils play competitive matches was an issue for 27% of parents. In conjunction with not observing matches, this also included a lack of tactical and mental preparation for their child at events which parents felt was left for them to do.

Secondly, a number of parents were aggravated by the unprofessional behaviour of coaches on court. Actions such as coaches using mobile phones during sessions, talking to other people during their child’s lessons, and displaying a lack of interest in or attention to their child were cited as stressful. In addition, some parents noted occasions where coaches encouraged or failed to condone negative behaviours and attitudes in players, including one parent who stated, “coaches are not dealing successfully with pupils who are disruptive in sessions”.

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

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

Core Theme Three: Financial stressors

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

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

In addition to these themes, club membership and national governing fees as well as the cost of equipment and clothing emerged as financial stressors for parents. The following
quote perhaps sums up one parent’s feelings about this overall factor:

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

Core Theme Four: Time stressors

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

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

Core Theme Five: Sibling stressors

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

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

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

Logistically, the requirements of tennis conflicted with the activities of other siblings and parents noted the stress of having to make decisions in favour of one over another. Some faced the stress of having to be in multiple places at once, and others in attempting to balance what they could do with each child. Inevitably related to the problems of such activity
scheduling, a number of parents reported the stress of regularly splitting the family, with one parent spending all of their time with one child and vice versa. They noted their fears for the quality of relationships with their children as well as the impact that these have upon family life in general.

Core Theme Six: Organisation-related stressors

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

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

Secondly, a number of parents expressed stress due to the LTA rating system\(^2\) that is

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

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

Core Theme Seven: Developmental stressors

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

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

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

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

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

Almost as prevalent as concerns about their child’s future coping potential were the
decisions that parents would face. In addition to decisions about how much personal time and
money to commit to tennis, parents needed reassurance about when or if their child should
specialise in tennis and what this would mean for their education. There was apprehension
about how much school their child should miss and whether their children should attend
specialised tennis academies. One parent expressed that, “It’s impossible to justify leaving
full time education unless truly exceptional”, whilst another stated, “I would hate for him to leave home early and go and live at an academy.” However, parents identified that such decisions must be made if their child were to fully achieve their potential in the game.

Discussion

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

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

Seven core themes of parental stress were derived from the data. These broadly
Parental stress in tennis included: stressors inherent within the processes of competition; the behaviour and responsibilities of coaches; financial and time demands placed upon the family; sibling inequalities and resentment; inefficiencies and inequalities attributed to tennis organizations; and developmental concerns related to educational and future tennis transitions.

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

The diversity of competition stress

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

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

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

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

The lack of a coach being present for many of their child’s matches (cited as a related stressor) appeared to leave parents stuck between the role of parent and coach, but less equipped to offer skilled support before, during and after matches. Nonetheless, there was
strong evidence for the pertinence of Lazarus’ (2000) notion of relational meaning vis a vis the emotional experience of parents at their children’s competitions. Lazarus noted that an individual’s emotional response to a stressor is influenced by the transacting significance of the context or event to the well-being of the individual. In this sample, it was clear that the ‘context’ of tennis competition, and all of the potential issues associated with it, was highly significant and meaningful to parents through the perception of their child’s well-being.

Parental experiences of organisational stress

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

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

Firstly, parents cited a number of stressors that represented factors intrinsic to the sport of tennis. These included time stressors associated with travel, training, competition and tournament schedules as well as financial stressors associated with lessons, transport,
Secondly, whilst parents did not play conventional roles in any specific sport organisation, they reported both sport-work role conflict and sport-family role conflict as a result of participation in tennis (see Kay, 2004). Within the organisational literature, Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) define work-family conflict as a form of interrole conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible. In this study, the role pressures of being a tennis parent conflicted with work requirements and with family activities and responsibilities leading to potential career problems, inequalities of spousal and sibling attention, and sibling resentment.

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

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

The final dimension of Hanton & Fletcher’s (2005) framework, the organisational
structure and climate of the sport, corresponded closely with the organisation-related stressors experienced by parents as a result of the local and national Lawn Tennis Associations. Some parents noted the structural inefficiencies of county governing bodies, clubs and tournament entry procedures including access problems and perceived favouritism. The national governing body’s allocation and transparency of player funding and the results-oriented rating system were further stressors that reinforced the parent’s position as somewhat of a ‘pawn’ who was unable to contribute to any of the decisions that affected themselves or their child.

Limitations and implications

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

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

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

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

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

Primarily, there is a need to educate and support parents through the motivational and emotional processes of competition and ensure that they have the necessary cognitive, behavioural, and motivational skills both to manage themselves and to influence the responses of their child. This type of education, perhaps through actual tournament workshops, will enhance their roles as ‘interpreter’ and ‘role model’ for their child before, during and after competition.

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

Finally, the findings of this project could be circulated to coaches, or located within coach education workshops, in order to increase awareness and empathy. It would be advisable to encourage coaches to regularly reflect on and monitor the nature of their own behaviour, communication skills, and quality of relationships with parents. It is worth noting that the LTA have begun to disseminate this work on their Level 5 coaching qualification, and published an educational article in their professional coaches journal (Harwood & Knight, 2007).

Conclusion

In fulfilling our researcher responsibilities, the report submitted to the LTA from this study addresses these findings and contains a range of practical recommendations offered by parents through the survey. The LTA subsequently established a small working group to
consider these. Over 75% of parents surveyed felt that the current level of support and parent education available to them was poor. The headline topics offered by parents included: more specialised information regarding appropriate parent and child behaviour at tournaments, including publicly displayed behavioural rules and stronger refereeing (for both); improved guidance on how to talk with their child pre and post competition; education to coaches regarding professional behaviour and the complexities of being a tennis parent; and improved communication and explanations from the national governing body regarding decisions that affect their child.

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

Acknowledgements:

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References


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USTA Web resource XXXX


Table 1: Core Theme 1: Competition stressors

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

Parental stress in tennis
Table 2 Core Theme 2: Coach-related stressors

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

Table 3 Core Theme 3: Financial stressors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Higher-order category</th>
<th>%N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coaching fees and expenses</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport expenses to lessons and tournaments</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equipment and clothing</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Club and Governing Body membership fees</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4  Core Theme 4: Time stressors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Higher-order category</th>
<th>%N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Restricted personal, partner and family time</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travelling to matches and tournaments</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work conflicts and commitments</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dead time at tournaments and match scheduling</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homework requirements and school conflicts</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5  Core Theme 5: Sibling stressors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Higher-order category</th>
<th>%N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unequal time, money and attention to tennis sibling</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling resentment and jealousy</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living a ‘split family’ life and conflicting activities</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6  Core Theme 6: Organisational stressors

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

Table 7  Core Theme 7: Developmental stressors

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