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The experiences of being a talented youth athlete: Lessons for parents

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Abstract

Involvement in organized sport can be highly demanding for young athletes who encounter many difficult situations and stressors. This can be exacerbated among youth athletes who have been recruited into talent-identification youth sport programs. Given that there are a range of negative consequences that can result when talent-identified (TI) youth athletes are unable to cope with the stressors they encounter, additional support is therefore necessary. Parents are uniquely situated to assist in this regard, but they are not always equipped to provide optimal levels of support. Therefore, the aim of this study was to understand the experiences of being a TI youth athlete and present the findings as ‘lessons’ for parents seeking to enhance their involvement in TI youth sport settings. This paper reports on qualitative data collected from the first year of a three-year longitudinal study involving TI youth athletes from South Australia. A total of 50 male athletes (M age = 14.6 years) participated in focus groups to hear their experiences of being a TI youth athlete and understand what difficulties they want their parents to know. From the thematic analysis, three major themes were identified from the focus groups with TI youth athletes: (a) Difficulties with being talented, (b) negotiating the future, and (c) playing for improvement. From the findings, a number of lessons for parents and youth sport organizations are offered to assist the transmission of knowledge to an applied setting.
Involvement in organized sport can be highly demanding for young athletes. For example, athletes may encounter stressors including injury, parental expectations, inconsistent coaching behavior, and fluctuating training performance (Hayward, Knight, & Mellalieu, 2016). For talent-identified\(^1\) (TI) youth athletes, particularly those in development and elite programs, there can also be additional stressors associated with sport. For example, many TI youth athletes engage in specialized programs at a young age and often experience role strain as they seek to balance academic study and increasing sporting demands (Kristiansen, 2017; Van Rens, Borkoles, Farrow, Curran, & Polman, 2016). Further, some TI youth athletes will encounter the challenging situation of being deselected in competitive sport (Neely, McHugh, Dunn, & Holt, 2017). Such deselection can be especially difficult for youth athletes who ‘pin’ their hopes on an athletic career as they progress through and (unwittingly) toward the end of their involvement in the talent development pathway (Brown & Potrac, 2009).

Given the negative consequences that can arise when athletes are unable to cope with the stressors they encounter (Hayward et al., 2016), finding ways to help youth athletes cope is important (Tamminen & Holt, 2010). Parents appear to be uniquely placed to support them in this regard (cf. Tamminen & Holt, 2012). Most parents are firmly involved by attending games, helping with team fundraising, and partaking in voluntary roles such as coach, trainer, or manager (Jeffery-Tosoni, Fraser-Thomas, & Baker, 2015). Parents are also involved ‘behind the scenes’ before and after competition, encouraging particular dietary behaviors and engaging in post-game debriefs (Elliott & Drummond, 2016; Elliott, Velardo, Drummond, & Drummond, 2016). In elite settings, parents also provide youth support by carefully considering how best to manage the increased responsibilities as a sport parent.

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\(^1\) Within this paper, talent-identified (TI) athletes are those who are identified by coaches as having the potential to develop toward a professional career in Australian football (AFL). Being involved in a TI program entails players receiving additional opportunities to experience high forms of competition, increased training loads, and greater access to education and highly credentialed coaches on a pathway toward the elite level.
Despite widely held beliefs that parental involvement decreases as youth get older and/or progress into elite programs, in reality, the sport parenting role changes but continues to influence both sporting performance and psychosocial outcomes (Dorsch, Lowe, Dotterer, Lyons, & Barker, 2016). Parents therefore play an important role in supporting young athletes’ transition into more specialized sport programs (Pummell, Harwood, & Lavallee, 2008).

Given the extent of the roles parents fulfil, it is perhaps not surprising, then, that parents exert a significant influence on motivation, behavior, and psychological growth in sport (Lauer, Gould, Roman, & Pierce, 2010). However, parents’ capacity to support TI youth athletes is not always guaranteed. Many parents struggle to know what to say and how to respond to children seeking social support to cope with sport-related stress (Hayward et al., 2016). Further, it is possible that the support parents provide may be inhibited by their own stress experiences in youth sport (Burgess, Knight, & Mellalieu, 2016). Such stress has the potential to influence how parents behave at youth sport events and ultimately, impact the nature and quality of their involvement (Harwood & Knight, 2015). So while some parents are well equipped to support their child, others require more information about how they can help youth athletes cope with their experiences (Knight & Holt, 2013).

Parents may also struggle to support TI athletes because they fail to understand their child’s sport experience. For example, it is not uncommon for parents and children to have conflicting views about supportive and pressuring parenting styles in youth sport (Kanters, Bocarro, & Casper, 2008). Parents can also fail to provide verbal support at times that are most appropriate for youth (Elliott & Drummond, 2016; Knight, Neely, & Holt, 2011). Moreover, parents also perceive their own behavior differently to other parent spectators and child participants (Elliott & Drummond, 2013; Lauer et al., 2010). One consequence of this is that parents can potentially perpetuate attitudes and behaviors that exert a negative influence
onto others without knowing. Those parents who are unaware of their influence may subsequently feel even more uncertainty regarding how to behave at future youth sport events (Harwood & Knight, 2009a). For parents of TI youth athletes especially, this is a crucial consideration given that parental involvement remains central to achieving elite status in youth sport (Holt & Knight, 2014).

One way to address this is by providing parents further information and guidance to enhance their involvement in their child’s sport (Knight & Holt, 2013). According to Knight and Holt (2014), additional informational support can help parents seeking to create an understanding emotional climate, which is conceptualized as an environment in which parents strive to demonstrate an understanding of children’s sporting experiences. This includes understanding the challenges inherent in competitive sport, the intricacies associated with athlete development and performance, the influence of external factors on sport experiences, and how sport ‘fits’ within children’s lives (Knight & Holt, 2014). The creation of such an understanding emotional climate is foundational to optimal parental involvement in sport and thus, efforts that lead to an increase in parents’ understanding of children’s sporting experiences are certainly encouraged.

To this end, there is value in listening to the voices of TI youth athletes about their perceptions and experiences of sport and presenting these as vital lessons for parents. For instance, a Canadian study by Knight, Boden, and Holt (2010) examined youth tennis players’ preferred parental behaviors and found that parents should avoid providing technical and tactical advice but should provide practical advice and match non-verbal behaviors with supportive comments. These findings are useful for parents who are seeking to optimize their verbal support while simultaneously avoiding upsetting youth with well-intentioned but non-preferred comments. A further study by Knight et al. (2011) found that children prefer different parental behaviors before, during, and after competition to create the most
supportive environment for youth sport teams. These examples not only offer new perspective for parents seeking to improve their involvement in youth sport, they also underline the value of listening to youth athletes about their experience. Beyond these studies however, there remains a limited understanding of TI youth sport experiences from the perspective of youth, particularly from sport settings outside North America. Scholarly attention in this area may better position parents to develop an understanding emotional climate to optimize their involvement (Knight & Holt, 2014), which is vital if parents are to support TI youth athletes experiencing stress associated with sport. Consequently, the aim of this study was to understand the nature of being a TI youth athlete and present the findings as ‘lessons’ for parents in pursuit of creating an understanding emotional climate in TI youth sport settings. The overarching research questions were: (1) What is the experience of being a TI youth athlete in Australian football? and, (2) What challenges do TI youth athletes want their parents to know?

Method

Study Design and Philosophical Underpinnings

This paper reports on qualitative data collected from the first year of a three-year longitudinal study involving TI youth athletes from South Australia. The study was underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm which is predicated on the ontological assumption that people actively construct and then act upon realities (relativism) they assign to events, actions, processes, ideologies and conditions in the world (Atkinson, 2012). Interpretivism focuses on how people make sense of their reality, and how collective definitions of reality shape and direct human thought and behavior (Atkinson, 2012). In line with this approach, an emphasis was placed on collecting data from the viewpoint of the participant and the researcher’s attempt to interpret meanings, values and explanations from the data (Jones, 2015).
Participants

In line with a qualitative tradition, participants were purposefully sampled from a 3-day Australian Football Elite Development Program (EDP) hosted by a large university in South Australia. Participants were recruited from the sport context of Australian football because it is one of the most popular sport preferences among children and youth in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). Australian football is a unique setting because it is a sport that is not renowned internationally compared to other team sports such as rugby and soccer. It is also unique given that it has a strong social and cultural significance in South Australia (Elliott & Drummond, 2016). Selection criteria were based upon age (15 years old) and status as a ‘talent-identified’ footballer, signified by their inclusion in the specialized program. This age range was selected because it reflects the transition between the end of the specializing years and the beginning of the investment years of sport development, which is where athletes and parents typically become highly invested and involved in one sporting pathway (Côté & Hay, 2002). Other indications of transition surrounded participants’ involvement in several other sports, yet high-level investment in structured and deliberated forms of practice during the off-season and in-season in relation to Australian football. It was important to recruit youth athletes who were involved in elite development programs in Australian football to ensure that the experiences of TI youth athletes were voiced, consistent with the research questions of the study. Participants were voluntarily recruited from this pool to discuss all matters relating to their development in Australian football, including the nature of their experience and stressors they encounter as TI youth athletes.

The sample included a total of 50 male athletes (M age = 14.6 years). All participants had achieved high success in Australian football, either representing state or regional teams, competing in adult level competition, and/or excelling in their age-group competition. The majority of the participants (n = 38) played in prominent positions such as the midfield...
(centre, wing, and/or rover), while others played as forwards \((n = 6)\), defenders \((n = 4)\) or as utilities (players who can play multiple positions) \((n = 2)\). Participants were currently training five-days a week including three game-based training sessions, three strength and conditioning sessions, and one recovery session.

**Procedure**

Human Research Ethics approval was granted by an Institutional Ethics Committee to approach youth involved in the EDP and seek their interest in participating in a focus group. Prior to the 3-day program commencing, the lead researcher attended a program induction session to introduce the research project and disseminate letters of interest, information sheets, and consent forms for players and parents. The lead researcher explained to parents and players that their involvement in the study was voluntary, and that there were no negative consequences associated with non-participation. Interested participants returned signed consent forms, including parental consent, three days after the induction session and prior to the beginning of the 3-day EDP. Subsequent focus groups were scheduled with eligible participants during discrete periods of the EDP including the lunch breaks, and before and after each day.

**Data Collection**

Participants took part in one of six focus groups over the 3-day EDP. Sparkes and Smith (2014) note that focus groups should ideally range from four to eight people and should not exceed more than ten participants per focus group. In line with these suggestions, the focus groups ranged between 6 and 10 members and were conducted in classrooms at the venue of the EDP. The rationale for using focus groups was predicated on strengths relating to their appropriateness for exploratory studies, capacity to invite dynamic dialogue, and potential to proliferate different perspectives (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The lead researcher developed a questioning route based on common themes from the literature relating to stress,
enjoyment, and parental involvement (see Elliott & Drummond, 2016; Hayward et al., 2016; McCarthy & Jones, 2007). Before each focus group, the lead researcher provided a verbal explanation of the study, asked participants if they had any questions, and re-emphasized that participation was voluntary. The lead researcher also reminded participants that the focus group discussions were seeking to understand their experiences and views on sport parenting, particularly as they solidified their involvement in the one sport.

Each focus group began with introductory questions to establish a level of comfort for participants and ‘set the tone’ for informal, yet rich dialogue. Example questions included: (a) Tell me your first name, age, and favourite playing position in football; (b) Could you also share your fondest memory from the current football season, and; (c) How have you found the 3-day EDP so far? A series of transition questions were then used to guide the focus groups toward the main questions relevant to the study. Some transition questions included: (a) As a talent-identified footballer, what are your career aspirations, and (b) How can parents continue to support your development in achieving your goals? Examples of main questions included: What are the most difficult aspects of being a TI youth athlete? Concluding and summary questions were then asked to clarify the responses from focus groups. For instance, (a) What is the most important thing you want others to understand about your football development at this point in time? Finally, and similar to the methods employed by Knight et al. (2011), an activity-based exercise was employed to confirm the participants summaries and provide closure to the focus group. This involved using a whiteboard to ‘mind-map’ their perspectives. The duration of focus groups ranged from 40 to 55 minutes ($M = 45\text{min 16 sec}, SD = 5.12$, $Range = 40-65 \text{ min}$).

Data analysis

The focus groups were audio recorded by the lead researcher and transcribed by a professional transcribing service. Transcripts were then checked for accuracy by listening to
select focus groups and reading the transcripts simultaneously. Personal information as well as other information revealing the identity of teams or leagues were replaced with pseudonyms. The transcripts were then thematically analysed by the lead researcher and first co-author.

Thematic analysis occurred following the steps described by Smith and Caddick (2012). The first step was immersion, which involved the lead research reading each transcript twice to ensure he was familiar with the data. Next, the researchers moved onto code generation and theme identification. The lead researcher generated initial codes by inductively coding each data set in a systematic fashion (reading and coding start-to-finish and mind-mapping ideas concurrently). With the assistance of a critical friend, the lead author then searched for, and identified, preliminary themes. The role of the critical friend was to help the lead researcher understand how the data was being analyzed and interpreted, and acknowledge the ‘multiple truths’ that exist during interpretation. In searching for and identifying themes, the lead researcher sorted different codes and gathered all of the relevant coding extracts to produce a set of candidate themes.

Next, the lead researcher then reviewed the themes by first considering if the candidate themes were coherent with the coding extracts. All but one of the coded extracts were deemed to fit the emergent themes with the exception being ‘money and the AFL’. Using mind-mapping and in re-coding the data, this extract was precluded because the lead author was unable to coherently organize it into one of the candidate themes, and there was not enough evidence to support its own theme. The lead author then defined and named candidate themes. This was aided by beginning to write the ‘story’ of each individual theme into segments of text in relation to the research question. This process led to the development of the following named themes: (a) difficulties with being talented, (b) negotiating the future, and (c) playing for improvement. Finally, in collaboration with the co-authors, the themes
were ‘tinkered’ with during the manuscript write up to best represent the data in the context of the research (i.e. instead of ‘challenges with being talented’, the theme was redefined as ‘difficulties with being talented’).

**Methodological rigor and qualitative excellence**

In articulating the means, methods, and practices used to enhance methodological rigor, the authors invariably used adopted the criteria for qualitative excellence synthesized by Tracy (2010), including (a) worthy topic; (b) rich rigor; (c) sincerity; (d) credibility; (e) resonance; (f) significant contribution; (g) ethical, and; (h) meaningful coherence.

Importantly, the criteria outlined by Tracy were not adopted as a fixed ‘checklist’ prior to starting the research but rather the result of an open-ended approach contingent upon the purpose and context of the research (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). This is in keeping with the relativist ontology and interpretivist epistemology underpinning the study. However, any use of universal criteria are only appropriate if researchers commit to using *all* criteria, because they are all ‘equal’ markers of research quality (Smith & McGannon, 2017). To this end, we now detail the means, methods, and practices used to enhance rigor by drawing on *all* criteria synthesized by Tracy.

- The research presented in this paper is indeed a *worthy topic* given its relevance and timeliness to the field of sport parenting research. As highlighted earlier, there is certainly a need to provide parents more practical and applicable advice to enhance their involvement in youth sport, especially in the TI setting, which is the backdrop to this paper.

- To achieve *rich rigor*, including sufficient, abundant, appropriate, and complex attention given to sampling, context, and data collection and analyses. A sufficient sample size (*n* = 50) was achieved for this qualitative study, leading to an abundant and rich source of qualitative data that yielded
Complexity was evident in the mixed and varied responses of the participants. The rich and diverse discussions highlight the complexity of individual stories, which ostensibly aligns with an interpretivist paradigm.

- Sincerity was achieved by adopting strategies that promoted self-reflexivity and transparency about the methods and challenges. To locate their role and position in the research, a specific form of reflexivity – ‘intersubjective reflection’ (Sparkes & Smith, 2014) – was practiced which involved an ongoing examination of the impact, position, and perspective of the researcher in designing questions and collecting and analysing data. The second author fulfilled a vital role as critical friend to promote intersubjective reflection by acting as a sounding board for the lead researcher to examine their own position and presence in the research and help them acknowledge the multiple interpretations that exist relating to the focus group data. Another tool included the use of a diary for reflexive practice, which prompted the researcher to offer entries throughout the research process. The entries (five in total) were used to explore methodological issues such as interview timing and probing quality, but also as a reminder to the researcher to continuously consider their position in the construction of knowledge. It was also used to acknowledge the methodological challenges associated with using focus groups. These included the energy required to effectively facilitate large focus groups and the capacity to listen without judgement.

- In the results, the use of thick descriptions to ‘show’ rather than ‘tell’ (Tracy, 2010) was a means through which to demonstrate the criteria credibility. Another marker of credibility is multivocality, evidenced by the representation...
of multiple perspectives captured using focus groups. The findings also
demonstrate tacit knowledge by highlighting who is talking and who is not
talking within the context of each focus group, which according to Tracy
(2010), is an important means for achieving credibility.

- The criteria resonance was self-evident in the evocative representation of the
findings to influence and move the reader. The authors have provided
sufficiently rich descriptions in the ensuing section so that ‘the readers
themselves can reflect upon it and make connections to their own situations’

- We also argue that the current study offers a significant contribution
capeutically, and practically to the academic and applied field of sport
parenting. Conceptually and practically, the current findings provide important
‘lessons’ for parents of talented youth athletes in Australian football. This not
only offers a new contribution to the field, but also to the many parents
seeking to enhance their support as their child moves into the talent pathway
in Australian football.

- The research considered a range of ethical issues relating to procedural ethics
and relational ethics. Procedural ethics was demonstrated by obtaining
institutional approval for the project and fulfilling the approved procedures
relating to consent, privacy and confidentiality, harm, data handling, and
reporting. Relational ethics involved the respectful and deliberate methods
undertaken to care for participants and ensure interdependence between
researcher and participants. This included the careful construction of questions
and the reciprocal interplay that emerged between the researcher and
participants during focus groups.
Finally, meaningful coherence was achieved by employing the appropriate methods and procedures to achieve the purpose of the project. We will leave judgement with the readers, but believe that this paper accurately reflects the meaningful connect between the literature, the research questions, the findings and the resultant interpretations.

**Results**

From the thematic analysis, three major themes were identified: (a) Difficulties with being talented, (b) negotiating the future, and (c) playing for improvement. What follows is a rich, descriptive account of these themes, representing the voices of TI youth Australian footballers, framed as potential lessons for parents seeking to optimize their involvement in their child’s sporting life.

**Difficulties with Being Talented**

There were two predominant difficulties discussed by participants in association with being recognized as ‘talented’ and ‘elite’ in Australian football. These were changing social relationships and dealing with pressure to perform when they returned from elite level competition to the community level. The first major difficulty discussed by participants was managing changing social relationships. Not only was it becoming increasingly difficult to spend quality time with friends due to training commitments, the nature of those relationships evolved into a potential source of stress for TI youth athletes. For instance, being talent-identified appeared to be synonymous with heightened expectations by their friends, as discussed in one focus group:

Pete: Making the AFL (Australian Football League) for them [friends] is pretty important I think yeah.

Leigh: It is pretty important for sure.
Elton: Because they know you’re good at footy and now they sort of like, expect that you’re going to make it to the highest level because they know you’re good at footy. It is hard. So I sort of take it one year at a time and try to achieve as much as I can as each season comes.

Albert: I guess they [my friends] want me to get to the highest level so it’s up to me pretty much, but same as Elton I take it a year at a time just so I don’t get too overwhelmed.

Flynn: For me, sometimes your friends like say stuff to you like, call you names, like good names of AFL players and they say like ‘you’re going to get in the AFL’ and it annoys you because sometimes you think that you’re not obviously going to make it. But at times you know that your mates have got that expectation for you, so you have to like, work up for it.

So while being recognized as a ‘good player’ by their friends was a common experience, it was referenced in the context of making the AFL which perpetuated a sense of expectation. Being called names and hearing comments that associated their status with the AFL was by no means offensive, but it did make the experience of being a TI youth athlete a bit harder as Elton described in the above focus group.

Another example of difficulty associated with changes in social relationships surrounded managing episodes of jealousy from their school peers. This was a particularly hard for participants to deal with as perceptions of jealousy and ‘Tall Poppy Syndrome’ had the capacity to make the athletes feel uneasy outside of sport:

Xavier: One of the worst things at the moment is feeling like some of your mates are a bit jealous of you because they want to be in, like, your kind of position kind of thing… it doesn’t ruin friendships, but it just makes it feel uncomfortable.

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2 Tall Poppy Syndrome is pejorative term used to describe a perceived tendency to discredit those who have achieved notable status in society and culture.
Payne: I mean in my case, I’m from a small country town and I’m the only one doing this. So everyone back home, you know, in a way, everyone is looking at me. I can tell that they want to be doing what I am doing which is fine but I can sense that they’re jealous you know, some of them, bit of tall poppy syndrome.

Paul: They don’t they give me a lot of grief but they still look at you and compare themselves and it makes me feel like ‘they’re getting there, getting quite good like me’ and I do you know, go harder at something or do something better to make sure that I keep that status of being a higher level player than those guys.

Tom: …and you know they look at you with jealousy, but while you don’t want to make your mates feel bad because they haven’t got to that level, you want to keep getting better.

Although friendship and social peers can comprise an important source of support for TI youth athletes, participants discussed that they also represent interactions that TI youth athletes can find difficult to negotiate. As such, it is possible that TI youth athletes may require additional support and assistance dealing with these difficulties that emerge from being highly talented at sport.

The other difficulty discussed by participants surrounded dealing with higher expectations from significant others to perform when they returned to their local teams after the elite program concluded. Expectations related to perceived pressure, which was described as a source of anxiety for many participants. Participants indicated that everyone except their parents reinforced these expectations:

Matthew: I think when you do go back to club there’s massive pressure on you to perform from the club and yourself because you’ve played at such a high level.

Reece: The players are looking up to you.
Wade: There’s definitely pressure when it comes to game day. There’s a big responsibility on you to carry the team and to play well. I think that the bonuses are that you are recognised as a really good player but then game day, if you do not perform the coaches are going to be like really hard on you.

Reece: For me it is more at training because earlier this year with the under 15s, like we would train as an elite squad and then get to training a bit later in the evening and then everyone would realise you know, you rocked up a bit late and you’ve got your elite brand shorts on and you feel like you have to do well here or else, you know, everyone’s going to think that I am not actually that good.

Matt: Yeah, the whole teams going ‘He is playing for Central Knights’ and for many clubs in the country there are only maybe two or three players that are actually playing for this team and on match day, everyone is saying ‘you have to perform because you are the most valuable player’ you know and sometimes it gets to you and you just don’t perform.

Given that these difficulties are commonly experienced among TI youth, they encourage some potentially important lessons for parents seeking to enhance their support. For instance, by developing a greater understanding of the difficulties TI youth encounter, parents may be able to tailor their emotional support to assist their child cope with heightened social expectations from peers.

In addition to experiencing pressure to perform, when elite youth footballers returned to their local clubs they also found it challenging because they had to train and play at a lower standard of competition. Although on the one hand, this reiterated expectations to ‘dominate’ and ‘carry the team’, on the other hand, they indicated that it was less enjoyable compared to playing and training at a higher level because the ability of their teammates varied greatly:
Ollie: Well at this current point when I am more developed than everyone else I find it harder to play with kids that are younger than me because they’re just, yeah, they’re not as mature as me, sort of thing, and I find that holds me back.

Riley: Same! When you go back to local club, it’s like you’re playing with kids that are not high level when you get back to club level.

Jordan: I ended up playing under 18s this year not under 16s because I just couldn’t really deal with the skill and the way they went about their football. They weren’t serious about it sort of thing.

Issues of expectations, anxiety, and enjoyment identified by participants are noteworthy because they highlight potential areas where parents can provide additional emotional support. Although one could be forgiven for placing a stronger emphasis on, for example, diet and training when youth progress into TI settings, parents may need to equally consider how they support TI youth who encounter difficulties dealing with changes to social friendships and expectations/pressure to play well.

Negotiating the Future

Another theme was the struggle for athletes to determine who they were and who they should be in the future (i.e., establish their identity). Although the athletes were aware of the opportunities in Australian football, they also understood the challenging ‘odds’ of reaching the highest level. This perspective created a good deal of discussion surrounding their current priorities, and the type of person they ‘should become’ in the future. Although coveting the ‘AFL dream’ was consistent for all athletes, most recognised the importance of having a back-up plan that included a ‘good education’. Some athletes were already considering the possibility of a university education and expressed interest in occupations such as ‘ocean photography’, ‘physiotherapy’, ‘teaching,’ and ‘journalism’. However, the majority were still trying to ascertain who they were at present, as well as what the future might hold for them:
Xavier: At the moment, it [the most important thing for me] is probably finishing school.

Tate: Probably go to university. I want to do footy as well but it’s important to have, like a second option as well because you’re not going to be playing footy forever. So you need something else to do if it doesn’t work out. You still need a solid base.

Ilario: Well if footy never works out, you have to have something to rely on so you’re not living on the streets or having a crappy job, but you can actually build up and actually still have a good life.

Trent: Footy for me.

Owen: Nah, probably school.

Victor: Footy.

Benjamin: Probably footy.

Lenny: I feel like a balance I think, yeah a balance yeah.

Adrian: It’s hard to choose one because they’re both so important right now and I can’t let one go.

Freddie: Yeah, but you don’t know if you’re going to make it to the highest level so school is probably just a bit more important.

Lenny: Yeah it opens more pathways school but it’s not as enjoyable.

As such debate indicates, there appeared to be a perception that, at least at some point, the athletes would have to make a decision between AFL and school.

Some athletes had decided to actively chase an AFL career following discussions with their parents. Being exposed to elite programs and higher forms of training and competition, although demanding, had taught this group of young athletes about the increasing level of dedication and commitment required to be a professional athlete. Consequently, some participants sought advice from parents in an attempt to make sense of their lives as a TI
athlete, particularly with respect to their immediate future given that a football pathway was imminently placed:

Rowen: Well to be honest, mum and dad sat me down and asked if this is what I really wanted to do, and I said ‘yes it is’ and they said that I have to work for it then – that they would be there to wake me up and get me out of bed in the morning and tell me to go for a run and do whatever it takes.

Walter: Yeah, so mostly the same for me, but they also said that I can do it if I’m willing to work for it – it’s up to me.

Sam: I’ve had the chat and now, you know, Dad just wants me to just be the best I can be, and of course, he is not going to be pushy but he just, he wants me to do be the best I can do. It’s not bad pressure, but kind of good to be pushed now.

In contrast to the participants above, others had decided to prioritise football as their primary (and often only) focus without having such discussions with their parents. The catalyst for this seemed to arise primarily because playing in the AFL had been a ‘lifelong dream’, but it was also aided by an awareness of the high parental commitment that has helped them reach an elite level. Although the athletes did not describe this experience as a form of pressure being placed upon them, they did perceive a sense of responsibility to justify their involvement given the magnitude of their parents’ financial and logistical support:

Liam: It’s pretty important right now to do well.

Elliot: Mum knows I am good at footy so I think there is sort of like an expectation that you’re going to make it to the highest level if they know you’re good at footy.

Matthew: I missed like the first half of the season because I was doing basketball instead and like, when I came back and I wasn’t the best because I was doing basketball and that. It kind of like changed, and kind of like felt that I was letting Dad down when I didn’t play up to a better standard.
Bronte: I don’t think it’s that important as my family will just support me with whatever I do but like, I put pressure on myself to do well for them because of what they have done for me, so it’s pretty important to make it to the AFL.

Aidan: Yeah

Taylor: I don’t know. You’re not going to be disappointed if you don’t make it to the highest level you can, but in a way if we don’t then they might be disappointed that we didn’t put in enough effort or anything like that.

Bronte: Yeah, but they can see it at home if you’re eating well or if you’re like instead of playing Xbox, you go out to the park and do a run or, you know, extra weights session at home or something like that.

Caleb: It’s just important to make sure you like, try your hardest. That’s the most important thing really.

Zayne: To my parents it means quite a lot. They also want the best for me. This could be the best pathway for me and they have invested a fair bit of time already and willing to invest more and so it is a big investment and I want it to pay off!

So while TI youth athletes are trying to make sense about their future, they also feel a sense of responsibility to pay back their parents through sport. Given that this can potentially develop into an emotional burden for TI athletes, parents might wish to dialogue with their child about this sense of responsibility and clarify its significance (or lack thereof). In doing so, parents can assist TI youth make sense about their future pathway without the distraction of having to pay back their parents.

**Playing for Improvement**

Participants reported that playing football was still enjoyable, but being a talent-identified athlete had changed how they perceive the meaning of their sport involvement overall. Most participants stated that they were now at a point where continual improvement
was most important to them than playing only for enjoyment. Some common responses included ‘you don’t want to be judged as par’ and ‘I just want to do well and earn it [respect] and command the respect like Fyfe and Dangerfield\(^3\) do’. Parents were perceived to understand the importance of improvement for athletes, and assisted them by displaying a high level of commitment to enable additional training and provide good nutrition in the domestic setting:

Fraser: Yeah my parents support me heaps. My mum takes me up to the oval so I can do laps and kick the footy so yeah they help me out there.

Nate: And pushing me like, my dad will sometimes help me when I work out doing fitness kind of things. They don’t pressure, but push in a good way.

Marcello: Mum makes sure I maintain a healthy diet and everything in the off-season as well as throughout the season. She makes sure I have heaps of energy before the game but it’s sort of your job as well but they definitely help a lot.

Michael: They drive me absolutely everywhere you know! If I wanted to go down to watch a grand final at Ascot, which is an hour away, they take me and then if I wanted to go to a recovery session at Ascot, they’d take me to that.

The other mechanism for assisting elite athletes develop was to seek honest feedback from parents, especially fathers. This, according to majority of participants, was motivating but also necessary so that they can focus their improvement to specific areas of their development. When discussing important forms of parental support and how parents could improve their involvement in their sport, many TI athletes seek feedback that can be used to aid their development as a footballer.

Paul: Yeah I wouldn’t mind it if they just said something that I could improve on.

Mav: [in agreement] I’d take it on board!

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\(^3\) Fyfe and Dangerfield refers to AFL players Nathan Fyfe and Patrick Dangerfield – two popular and highly revered players at the highest level of Australian football.
Luke: Same thing, kind of.

Karl: Yeah well my parents already do that so if I do something bad they’re open, they’ll tell me.

_Interviewer: and you don’t mind that?_

Joshua: Yeah I like that. It makes me want to improve in that area.

Karl: Yeah my Dad’s always giving me criticism like in a good way.

_Interviewer: what do you mean?_

Karl: Like he can tell you what you’ve done wrong and then he can tell you how you can improve.

_Interviewer: Is that a kind of parental behavior that you prefer?_

Joshua: Yeah so then I know what I’ve done wrong and I know I need to work on that and try and improve.

In contrast to the experiences described above, several participants claimed that they did not seek parental feedback because they spent more time with the coach and received feedback this way. However, they also claimed that they were now at a point in their development where they should drive their own improvement, and as such, relied less on parental feedback after games.

Jaydan: Getting to a high level now, they sort of need to step back a little bit and let you go where you feel you need to go or let you do it on your own because in a couple of years we’ll be on our own anyway so yeah it’s up to us now.

_Interviewer: Do you guys feel the same?_

Heath: Yeah I do because we’re sort of going into the stage where we have to be more responsible for our own improvement, you know, and be more independent later on in life so now is probably a pretty good time to start.

Jaydan: They’ve kind of let me go and given me a bit of leeway and stuff.
Zayne: I think certainly when you were younger because I went there to play footy with my mates I wasn’t so interested in the high level stuff, but now things have changed.

Such findings highlight a variety of support mechanisms that TI youth athletes require for athletic improvement. While some athletes prefer parental or coaches feedback, others require little assistance in this regard. Regardless, the purpose of their involvement in sport gravitated around the notion of improvement – in important insight for parents and coaches alike.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of being a TI youth athlete in Australian football and to draw on the findings to develop practical information and advice for parents seeking to increase their support. The following discussion frames the findings in this way which is particularly important in TI youth sport settings because (a) such settings can be a source of stress for athletes, (b) parents are a vital source of support for athletes encountering sport-related stressors, and (c) parents play a central role in supporting their child’s sport and achievement of elite status in sport.

The findings suggest that TI athletes experience a range of difficulties associated with being talent-identified. The findings are broadly consistent with Hayward et al. (2016) who identified numerous organizational, developmental, and competitive stressors that youth athletes and parents experience such as injury, varying interactions with coaches, and parental expectations. However, the current findings shed light on the intricacies of the challenges associated with changing social friendships outside of sport, as well as perceptions of jealousy and social expectations to perform well. Previous literature has found that peers (‘teammates’) can comprise a source of stress as competition and rivalry among teammates intensifies (Keegan, Harwood, Spray, & Lavallee, 2009). However, in-sport peers are also identified as a vital and valuable source of support, enhancing motivation of young athletes.
Yet in addition to peers situated ‘inside’ the sport experience such as teammates, the present findings add to the literature by illuminating how TI youth athletes have to cope with, jealousy, expectations, and changes to friendship quality with school peers and those who are not involved in advanced Australian football programs as a TI athlete. This is an important consideration because it suggests that TI youth athletes may experience insufficient peer support given that the nature and quality of these social relationships can be potentially challenging inside (teammates) and out (i.e. school friendships) of the sporting domain.

An understanding of these experiences may have implications for regular sport parenting practices including pre- and post-match conversations in Australian football. Recent studies have shown that parents’ verbal involvement with youth during and after games can be a source of stress for athletes (Elliott & Drummond, 2016). However, by having a greater understanding of the broader difficulties that are associated with being a TI youth athlete, parents may be better prepared to engage in sport-related discussions, sensitive to the possibility that social pressures, expectations, and changing social dynamics may exacerbate feelings of distress and disappointment. It is therefore important that parents not only learn about these potentially difficult aspects of being a TI youth athlete, but demonstrate their understanding of their child’s experience. Such understanding can be gained through a variety of means. For example, parents can seek greater understanding of their child’s sport through developing relationships with coaches and seeking information from them, spending time watching the sport, and speaking with other parents (Holt & Knight, 2014). Sports organizations can further facilitate understanding by providing literature for parents about the sport, the potential challenges and issues that children may encounter (Harwood & Knight, 2015), and also if possible providing opportunities for parents to speak with or hear from current or retired athletes who can provide pertinent insight.
Beyond this and perhaps most importantly, parents should make time to frequently engage in conversation with their child to learn about their experience and their desires for their parent’s involvement (Holt & Knight, 2014).

TI athletes also struggled to negotiate their future pathways between study and sport. On the one hand, they recognised that the football dream is ‘alive’ but on the other, they understood the improbability of reaching the AFL (elite level) and simultaneously the value of secondary and higher education. In previous studies, it was parents who have been worried about knowing if they were making the right decisions about school and sport for their child (Harwood & Knight, 2009a, 2009b). However, the current study shows that TI youth athletes are sharing this concern and in some instances, taking this out of the hands of the parents and making the decision themselves. Having TI youth athletes make a decision may not be optimal if, as the current findings suggest, they believe that they must choose either an academic or sporting pathway rather than attempt to balance both commitments. Ryba, Stambulova, Ronkainen, Bundgaard, and Selänne (2015) note that dual career athletes experience higher employability, reduced stress, a positive socialisation effect and positive effects on athletes’ self-regulation. So while balancing academic and training demands can be stressful for parents and youth athletes (Harwood & Knight, 2009a, 2009b; Hayward et al., 2016), there are indeed numerous benefits associated with maintaining a dual career.

Consequently, TI youth athletes involved in team sports may benefit from additional support as questions surrounding future pathways may gain momentum as athletes move into specialized programs. This has implications for parents who could be forgiven for assuming that their child wants to pursue an elite sporting pathway simply because they have been identified as talented. In this way, a possible lesson for parents is to align their involvement in a way that ably provides support for both sporting and academic futures, which are largely undecided, and in many cases, unclear, for TI youth athletes. This can include more balance
in the way that parents encourage (or discourage) pathway directions, or listening to TI youth athletes over a sustained period of time to learn about how they are negotiating this decision. Such advice may inadvertently help parents who are unsure how to support TI youth athletes’ ambitions and whom are also encountering stressors related to their child’s future in sport and academic study (Harwood & Knight, 2009a, 2009b).

The other key finding was that improvement was perceived by TI youth athletes as the most important driving force at this point of their developing careers. Although enjoying the sport remained important, the athletes found purpose from improvement in performance. This appears consistent with other studies which have found that competency and recognition are important sources of sport enjoyment for older youth athletes (McCarthy, Jones, & Clark-Carter, 2008). Critically, this perspective provides a useful blueprint for parents of TI athletes to reinforce current parenting practices, or reposition their involvement. For instance, conveying encouraging remarks and comments may be insufficient in the eyes of TI youth athletes who are seeking more specific forms of feedback to aid their improvement. While delivering critical comments and advice is a contentious aspect of parental involvement in youth sport (Elliott & Drummond, 2015, 2016), in TI and elite youth sport settings, this may be more appropriate depending on the child’s preference. This is consistent with the work by Knight and Holt (2014) who suggest that parents and children must have shared goals so that parents can appropriately tailor their feedback to these goals. In the present study, TI athletes remained steadfast on the importance of ‘enjoying football’, but now view enjoyment as synonymous with continued improvement in performance rather than strictly notions such as ‘playing for fun’ and playing with friends. This is a fundamental lesson for parents who are seeking to be supportive and encouraging influences. Subsequently, giving feedback such as ‘playing for fun’ may not be optimal if the focus for TI youth athletes is on improvement.
In summary, there are a number of important lessons for parents of TI youth athletes involved in Australian football. Although youth sport is often characterized by parents attending games and fulfilling voluntary roles as means of support (Bean, Jeffery-Tosoni, Baker, & Fraser-Thomas, 2016), parents can enhance their support by understanding that TI youth athletes (a) experience difficulties navigating changes in social relationships and heightened expectations to perform at a consistently high standard, (b) are attempting (but often, struggling) to decide if they should focus on school or sport at this stage of their development, and (c) play Australian football for continual self-improvement rather than playing only for enjoyment. Although the following examples are not exhaustive, parents of TI youth athletes can use this information to appropriately tailor their involvement in Australian football. For instance:

- By understanding that TI youth athletes find it hard to deal with changing social relationships and performance expectations, parents can rearticulate the strategies and types of advice they provide to best support their child’s development. This may include how parents communicate constructive feedback when their child performs poorly, sensitive to the external pressure and expectations that they are already dealing with.

- Parents can invest more time in dialogue with their child to understand their changing perspectives toward sport, school and potentially a dual career. An understanding in this regard may help parents develop more appropriate methods for encouraging future pathways in and beyond sport. Importantly, parental guidance may be vitally important given that the TI youth athletes in this study were attempting to make decisions about their future, which may not necessarily be optimal.

- Parents can help TI youth athletes to understand and revise their goals as they transition into more specialized programs. This can then benefit parents who have the
capacity to change goals over time based on their child’s developmental outcomes in
sport (Dorsch, Smith, Wilson, & McDonough, 2015).

- Parents can ‘sharpen’ the nature of the feedback that appropriately match the goals of
TI youth athletes who are concerned with improvement rather than idealistic notions
of ‘fun’ and participation. This may help parents enhance their influence in pre- and
post-game conversations which comprise vitally important sources of parental
support.

**Applied implications for youth sport**

Although the focus of this paper is rooted in understanding the experiences of being a
TI youth athlete to generate advice and information to enhance parental support, there are
also some applied implications that can be drawn from the findings to support parents support
youth. The following recommendations are intended for practitioners to assist parents
improve their involvement in TI youth sport settings like Australian football.

1. Organizations involved in providing families opportunities to take up TI and elite
sport programs could develop, trial, and make available resources and programs
designed to enhance parental communication in relation to listening, questioning,
and negotiation. This would appear especially important at a time where TI youth
athletes are struggling to make decisions about their future and may benefit from
adult support to determine their future pathway.

2. Coaches involved in TI youth sport settings could informally interview athletes
and their parents before and during their involvement in a designated sport
program to learn more about youth athletes difficulties beyond the sporting
domain. Such an approach may not only assist parents and coaches learn about
less visible stressors (i.e. jealous peers at school), it may help revise pedagogical
and support strategies to better meet the emotional needs of the athlete.
3. Educators involved in school-based settings could work closely with parents and coaches of TI youth athletes in an effort to support youth who are likely to experience changes in their social networks as they become further immersed in specialized sport programs. Educators may be able to provide further feedback and advice to parents in relation to peer interactions at school and the degree to which friendships change as TI youth athletes progress further along the talent development pathway.

Limitations and future directions

This study is not without limitations. The all-male cohort of the study does not necessarily reflect the experiences and attitudes of all TI youth athletes. Although the cohort were suitable to address the research questions of the study, there remains a need to examine these issues from a variety of other perspectives. For example, there is great potential to examine similar issues using a gendered theoretical lens with exclusively female TI youth athletes. Similarly, there are opportunities to examine the experiences of being TI at different ages. Those who specialize in sport at a much younger age may encounter different difficulties which would provide useful information for parents. Another limitation is that focus groups as a data collection method can be difficult to facilitate. It is plausible that some participants were unable to contribute to the extent they would have preferred given the large size of the focus groups (up to 10 participants in some focus groups). Despite being facilitated by a researcher experienced with using focus groups, and despite the rich and dynamic interplay captured in the results, focus groups can invite dominant voices to saturate discussions. Although every effort was made to draw out the views of all participants in a supportive manner, the voices of all participants are not evidenced in the findings.

Another challenge encountered was dealing with facilitator fatigue because of scheduling six focus groups over three days, and with large focus group sizes. Facilitator
fatigue may have influenced the tone and ‘energy’ projected to the participants. This may have affected their ability to create a climate where all participants felt comfortable and supported, especially for focus groups scheduled last. Notwithstanding the benefits of using focus groups, it is important acknowledge their own limitations within the broader study design. Future research in this regard should not be discouraged from using focus groups in youth sport research, but should undertake the necessary training and preparation prior to facilitation. Finally, it is important to discuss Australian football as a unique setting from which to draw recommendations. Australian football is not universally regarded an international sport so it is important to temper how the recommendations and lessons for parents are interpreted universally. That said, the richness of the data offers readers an opportunity to make sense of the findings in relation to their own sporting situations, in which case the recommendations can offer a form of resonance for practitioners and researchers in the field.

**Conclusion**

In summary, the paper provides parents, coaches, and educators a key information cautionary tale about supporting young TI athletes and the conflicting issues that are at play with respect to sports and their lives. The findings not only provide an insight into the experiences of being a TI youth athlete in Australian football, they also provide a basis from which lessons for parents can be teased out. The data provide evidence that this is a time in these young athletes’ lives that is both exciting and yet tumultuous in terms of decision making with respect to their futures; they are dealing with changes to sources of social support and how they understand sport enjoyment. These athletes are also cautious about the future and impending careers beyond sport. In many ways this appears to be a very mature approach. However, it is worthy of further discussion as to whether these young athletes have the skills and abilities to make such important decisions that may impact their lives into
adulthood. The findings provide a number of practical and reinforcing implications for sport parents and practitioners involved in talent development programs in Australian football and potentially other specialized sport programs more broadly. Although coaches and sport educators may also benefit from the lessons outlined in this paper, parents should continue to invest time and energy seeking to understand youth sport to optimize their current involvement.


Policy, education, and desired outcomes. Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics, 9, 124-141.


