The Effects of Athlete Retirement on Parents

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It is often parents who introduce their children to competitive sports and parents who then provide remarkable emotional and material support across their children’s athletic careers (Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999). Considerable research documents athletes’ retirement experiences (Baillie, 1993; Baillie & Danish, 1992; Svoboda & Vanek, 1982; Werthner & Orlick, 1982), yet none explores the effects of retirement on parents. The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of athletes’ disengagement from sport on parents. In-depth interviews were conducted with six parents of former female elite gymnasts who had been retired for three to five years and the data analyzed inductively (Côté, Salmela, Baria, & Russell, 1993; Lally & Kerr, 2005; Miller & Kerr, 2002, 2003). Their daughters’ withdrawal from gymnastics and their own immediate disengagement from the world of elite sport had a tremendous impact on the participants’ personal and social relationships, leaving them struggling with weighty self-doubts over their failure to intervene with abusive coaches.

The literature on talent development and the development of expertise in sport, as well as empirical work on athletes’ career progression, indicate parents play a critical role in the competitive careers of elite athletes. In many cases, it is actually parents who first introduce their children to physical activity and competitive sports (Bloom, 1985, Côté, 1999; Howard & Madrigal, 1990; Stevenson, 1990). In his examination of the influence of the family on talent development, Côté (1999) found parents were responsible for introducing their children to sport during the “sampling years.” Stevenson (1990) likewise reported parents played a significant role in the “sponsored recruitment” of their children to sport.

If their children stay in sport, parents then provide remarkable emotional and material support. In his seminal book, Developing Talent in Young People, Bloom (1985) described parents’ investment of time, money, and energy as incredible and critical to athletes’ progression from recreational to elite sport. Côté (1999) similarly found parents’ personal, familial, and financial sacrifices soared as their children moved from the initial “sampling years” when their children explored various sport interests, through the “specializing years” when their children committed to a single activity, and finally the challenging “investment years” when aspirations to high level sport were pursued.

As child athletes become increasingly committed to their sports and to their sporting worlds, so too do their parents (Bloom, 1985; Hasbrook, 1986; Snyder & Purdy, 1982). Parents attending daily practices, traveling enormous distances, and covering significant financial expenses are commonplace in developmental and elite sport. Indeed, researchers

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who investigate the role of parental involvement on athletes’ sport enjoyment and success often find very high levels of parental involvement (Feltz, Lirgg, & Albrecht, 1992; Green & Chalip, 1997; Leff & Hoyle, 1995, 1997; Stein & Raedeke, 1999; Wuerth, Lee & Alfermann, 2004). It is not uncommon for parents’ personal and family lives to revolve around child athletes’ training and competition schedules (Côte, 1999). In their study of male and female gymnasts, Weiss and Hayashi (1995) reported that 70% of parents felt their home life revolved around the gymnastics schedule of their child “to a great extent” and 72% felt that their personal life also revolved around gymnastics. In the most extreme cases, parents have left their jobs to provide transportation and support to child athletes, have relocated their families for their children to have access to particular coaches or training facilities, and have temporarily separated from their spouses and families to accompany children to new training locations (Bloom, 1985).

We will see that the parents in the current study fit the profile described above. They were initially responsible for enrolling their daughters in recreational gymnastics classes, and upon the advice of others, placed their daughters in more competitive clubs. This early introduction was followed by years of strenuous training and competing for the athlete and years of imposing material, financial, and emotional sacrifices for the parents.

Given the vast investments parents make to the careers of their elite child athletes and the overall socialization of parents into the sport culture, one wonders how athletes’ retirement from sport affects parents. A plethora of research exists with respect to athletes’ experiences following retirement from sport (Allison & Meyer, 1988; Baillie, 1993; Baillie & Danish, 1992; Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985; Svoboda & Vanek, 1982; Werthner & Orlick, 1982). Research indicates some athletes experience traumatic transitions associated with feelings of anger, depression, and grief-like emotions, while others navigate the process with ease (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Stephan, Bilard, Ninot & Deligni`eres, 2003; Werthner & Orlick, 1982). Several factors affect the quality of athletes’ retirement including the type of exit from competitive sport (Alfermann, 2000). Researchers, for example, have consistently shown that athletes who retire involuntarily experience far more difficult transitions than those who retire by choice and on their own terms (Brewer, 1994; Cecic Erpic, Wylleman & Zupancic, 2004; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994).

In comparison to all we know about athletes’ experiences of retirement and transition, no previous studies have investigated the effects of retirement on parents. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to explore the effects of athletes’ disengagement from sport on parents, a direction recommended by a number of researchers (Bloom, 1985; Green & Chalip, 1997).

**METHOD**

**Participants**

Participants were selected from among families of former elite, female gymnasts. The term “elite” referred to gymnasts who competed at the national and/or international levels. This group was chosen for several reasons. First, we delimited the study to elite athletes and their families because it is at the elite level of sport where parents and families are required to make the greatest investment of time, money, and energy. Second, we selected former gymnasts because of the young age at which gymnasts typically retire (~17 to 19 years of age). At this age, parents still have extensive involvement in their daughters’ lives and the athletes have yet to establish well-defined independence from their parents and families. Finally, we chose former elite female gymnasts in particular to increase the homogeneity with respect to developmental issues. Females have unique developmental characteristics (Rice, 2001) and
prior research has shown that parents interact with their athletic daughters differently than with their athletic sons (Brustad, 1996).

The parents of gymnasts who had been retired for three to five years were solicited to participate in this study. This time period was chosen in an attempt to balance the benefits of having some distance from the sport experience with the challenges of memory recall. The parents were contacted by phone, given an explanation of the study, and invited to participate. The researchers asked to interview the parent who had had the most extensive involvement with his or her daughter’s athletic career. While in the case of two-parent households, both parents are inevitably involved, there is usually one who does more of the driving and attends more practices than the other. Arrangements were made with those interested to conduct one-on-one interviews at a later date.

The final sample included six parents, four mothers and two fathers, of elite female gymnasts who had retired in the last three to five years. None of the gymnasts’ siblings had been involved in elite sport. Real names have been replaced with pseudonyms selected by study participants to protect their and their families’ identities.

**Participant Profiles**

Britt was the mother of a national team member who had retired three years earlier. Her daughter retired after not being selected for the Olympic team. In addition to her athlete child, Britt had one younger daughter. Britt had a part-time job, while her husband worked on a full-time basis.

Jennifer, the mother of a former Olympic team member who had been retired for five years, participated in an interview. She and her husband had two other children younger than their daughter who had been involved in gymnastics. Both parents were employed full-time. Jennifer’s daughter retired voluntarily after the Olympic Games.

Mikaela was the mother of a former national team member who had retired three years prior to the study. Both Mikaela and her husband worked full-time and had a second, younger daughter. Mikaela’s daughter retired after not being selected for the Olympic team.

Natalie was the mother of a former Olympic team member who had retired three years prior to the interview. Natalie and her husband both worked full-time outside the home and had an older child. Natalie’s daughter retired following the Olympic Games as was her plan.

Bill, the father of a national team member, agreed to be interviewed. He and his wife worked full-time and had no other children. His daughter had retired from gymnastics five years earlier when she lost interest in the sport and understood she was not a contender for the upcoming Olympic Games.

Steven was the father of a former Olympic Team member who had been retired from gymnastics for three years. Steven worked full-time and his wife worked part-time, and together they had two children older than the gymnast daughter. Steven’s daughter retired voluntarily after the Olympic Games.

**Data Collection**

The paucity of research dealing specifically with parents and athletic retirement and the exploratory nature of this study warranted use of a descriptive approach. Face to face, in-depth interviews were conducted with each of the participants. Before beginning the interview, each participant read a letter of information and signed a consent form, approved as part of an institutional review of the entire research protocol. Then, each interview began with a grand tour question (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Seidman, 1991) that resembled “Please tell me about your experiences as a parent of an elite gymnast.” The participant was invited to explore his/her
thoughts in response to this opening question while the researcher took notes. The interviewer used these notes and a list of probes (Appendix) to guide the rest of the interview. Participants were also encouraged to explore additional topics they felt were relevant to the question of athletic retirement. The interviews ranged between one and a half and two hours, were tape recorded with the participants’ permission, and later transcribed verbatim.

The transcriptions were sent to the participants to ensure the content accurately reflected their statements. The parents were invited to add, delete, or revise their transcriptions as needed, however, none did.

**Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed inductively by the first author according to procedures outlined and widely used in the sport psychology literature (Côté, Salmela, Baria, & Russell, 1993; Côté, Salmela, & Russell, 1995; Lally & Kerr, 2005; Miller & Kerr, 2002, 2003). Each transcribed interview was separated into a series of meaning units or segments of text that expressed a single thought or idea (Tesch, 1990). Each meaning unit was given a descriptive label or tag as it was separated from the full transcription. Where possible, the participants’ own words were used as tags, what researchers have commonly referred to as “in-vivo” tags (Côté et al., 1993). Meaning units with similar content were given the same tag and grouped together. Tags, with their corresponding meaning units, which were similar or linked conceptually were grouped together into categories. Categories, with their corresponding tags and meaning units, which were similar or linked conceptually were assembled into higher-order categories. The first author shared her initial conclusions with the second author and the two concurred in almost all cases. The few discrepancies that did emerge were resolved through exhaustive discussion and careful review of the transcripts and the authors’ research notes.

**FINDINGS**

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of retirement on parents and not on the athletes themselves. Therefore, only brief mention of the gymnasts’ reactions to retirement as reported by their parents is included here to provide a backdrop to the parents’ experiences. The participants described their daughters’ departure from elite gymnastics as mixed. Retirement provided the gymnasts with opportunities to explore other interests and devote themselves more seriously to their academic pursuits. In addition, they were no longer under the physical duress of intense training, travel, and competition. Yet, the participants felt their daughters wrestled with several transitional issues. Some continued to experience pain and discomfort from years of hard training. Steven, for example, assessed “I thought the retirement would help her pain and it did somewhat, but not completely. She still is having a rough time.” Others experienced significant physical changes that caused psychological distress. According to Mikaela, “[my daughter] gained a lot of weight which didn’t help how she felt about herself.”

The most common adjustment issue the gymnasts faced was trying to find an interest to replace gymnastics. The parents believed their daughters struggled to find something as meaningful to their sense of self as gymnastics had been. Says Steven: “I think she is lost without the challenge and thrill of gymnastics. Where else is she going to find that?” At the time of the interviews, three to five years post-retirement, parents reported their daughters were still searching for direction and a new sense of purpose.

The parents characterized their own adjustment to their children’s retirement as mixed. Their daughters’ withdrawal from gymnastics and their own immediate disengagement from the world of elite sport had a tremendous impact on their personal and social relationships, and
also left the participants struggling with weighty self-doubts. Both themes will be explored below and an illustration of the categories and themes can be found in Figure 1.

Comparisons were made throughout the data analysis between the responses of mothers and fathers, and between respondents whose daughters had retired involuntarily versus those whose daughters had freely decided to leave following Olympic Games. The experiences of mothers and fathers following their daughters’ departures from gymnastics did not notably differ, nor did the experiences of parents based on the voluntary or involuntary nature of their children’s retirement.

**Impact on Relationships**

Athletic retirement effected changes in the participants’ relationships with their partners, gymnast daughters, and finally their social networks. Each dynamic will be discussed in order.

**Parent-Parent**

The participants acknowledged the impact their daughters’ athletic careers had on their intimate relationships with their spouses. They spoke about “paying the price” in their marriage.
It was mostly my husband and I who paid the price in our relationship. It actually put some strain on our relationship. It’s hard enough for couples with kids to find time together and then you add training six days a week. (Natalie)

For the parents, their daughters’ commitment to gymnastics translated into extraordinary demands. The parents provided significant instrumental support through transportation to and from training and competitive events, financial support in the form of club fees, uniforms and other gymnastics apparel, physiotherapy and other rehabilitation bills. Demands on their time were perhaps the most overwhelming. In addition to traveling to and from and attending practices and competitions, including away meets and competitions, parents in competitive gymnastics clubs are often required to fulfill a quota of volunteer hours. Bill described the demands and time commitments as “tough.” Natalie recalled,

It seemed that so much of our daily activities revolved around gymnastics. Other than going to work and trying to fit in chores around the house, I was driving her to and from training, competitions, and physio, completing my mandatory volunteer hours for the club, and getting meals ready. It consumed over 10 years of my...our...lives.

Parents had no time left as a couple between these tasks and responsibilities with other children. As a result, post-retirement, the participants, and their spouses experienced an initial sense of discomfort or distance. They did not know what to say to one another, “At first, we didn’t know what to talk about without gymnastics. It really hit both my wife and I hard how much we had devoted to her gymnastics when it wasn’t there anymore. It felt very strange.” (Steven)

Although initially a shock, the participants appreciated the chance to renew their relationships. Gradually, they settled into new routines as they found other activities of interest to them both, as well as hobbies of personal appeal. “Not having much to talk about after [our daughter’s] retirement didn’t last too long. We soon found other things to focus on. My wife has taken up some craft work and I’ve returned to carpentry after not doing any for 20 years. It’s good.” (Bill)

**Parent-Child**

With the absence of travel, volunteer hours, and the host of other tasks that characterized their lives as parents of elite gymnasts, the participants anticipated being able to spend more quality time with their athlete daughters. Unexpectedly, they found they actually shared less time together. Without the demands of training and competition to bring them together, the former athletes were busy exploring new interests that did not necessitate parental involvement. Natalie experienced a particularly difficult transition as she had to adjust both to life without gymnastics and life without her daughter. “All that time I used to spend at the gym watching her train and driving back and forth—there should be a sense of freedom for me—but, I usually feel lost. I really miss her. I think it made it worse with her leaving for university so soon after the Olympics.”

**Parent-Peer**

Given the time demands associated with being a parent of an elite gymnast, parents established strong connections with one another and reported missing these friendships upon their daughters’ disengagement from the sport. Natalie talked about missing her gymnastics circle:
The other thing I miss is the friends at the gym. I made some great friendships with the other parents at the gym. All that time watching and waiting for our kids gives you a good chance to get to know people. And we have something in common. When we sit together at a competition, it feels like a big family. It was surprising to me that even though our daughters were competing against each other, we were never jealous of each other’s kid.

Britt also described the set of parents as a “close-knit group.” Fortunately, she was prepared for the loss of these relationships as she had seen it happen with families before hers. “I knew those friendships were tied to our kids... when your kid retires, you also lose those relationships... even when you stay in touch, it’s not the same.”

**Lingering Doubts**

**Child**

Three to five years after their daughters had withdrawn from competitive sport, the parents struggled with lingering doubts and self-recriminations about their children’s involvement in the world of elite gymnastics. One of their most significant concerns revolved around their daughters’ physical health. All of the gymnasts had experienced at least one serious injury during their careers, and several had endured numerous injuries. All had also experienced considerable pain, in some cases, chronic. “There were injuries and lots of them. By the end of her career, she was hurt and in pain pretty much all of the time.” (Natalie) It had been very difficult for the parents to see their daughters in pain.

When she was injured and kept pushing through the pain, I know some of that is necessary—an athlete’s not going to make it if they give up every time they are in pain—but to see her in tears so much was painful for me to watch. I felt so helpless. (Britt)

The participants worried about the long-term effects of these injuries and pain. “I worry that the injuries will cost her in the future. Should we have pulled her out when the injuries became so constant? These are the questions I ask myself a lot.” (Natalie)

After retirement, the parents also realized their daughters had devoted so much of their time and of themselves to gymnastics at very critical stages of their lives. As a result, they feared the strong, sometimes singular investment in gymnastics would have a detrimental impact on their daughters’ psychological health. Steven discussed his emerging fear that the narrow focus on gymnastics slowed his daughter’s development:

I worry partly because we—her mother and I—did not expose her to enough. All she wanted to do was gym and of course, we wanted her to be happy, so we let her do all the gym she wanted. My biggest regret is that we didn’t expose her to a bigger variety of things so she would have other interests outside gymnastics.

Devoting so much time to gymnastics meant the athletes had limited interactions with non-gymnast peers. The participants were anxious their daughters would experience difficulty interacting with peers outside the athletic setting. Bill shared:

The only thing I wonder about is whether she’s missed out on things that she’ll regret at some point. Spending so much time in the gym with the same people for years means you can’t do other things, don’t meet a lot of different people.
Natalie worried particularly about her daughter’s ability to make friends at university and deal with the social challenges she would encounter there,

I worry that she won’t be able to make friends outside of gym now that she’s at university. I’m hoping that she’ll meet other people through her university classes. I guess every parent worries about their kids going off to university and going crazy with partying and stuff, but I think these gym kids are even less prepared for the social life at university.

**Coaches**

As the participants reflected on their daughters’ athletic careers, concerns about their physical and psychological health were punctuated by questions about coaches’ behavior and their own failure to intervene. The participants often saw coaches push their daughters too far, insisting the gymnasts were not working hard enough. Coaches repeatedly encouraged the gymnasts to train and compete while in pain or injured. In addition to managing the training environment, coaches also made decisions about outside matters including which interests athletes should pursue, if any, how to spend their free time, what health care professionals they should see and when. Steven explained, “The coaches seemed to be telling our daughter what to do, when to do it, what to eat, whether she could go to a party or not. I really felt that they crossed the line into being parents.”

This blurring of roles and responsibilities created considerable distress for the parents. Steven spoke about losing control of his daughter:

I know they were trying to help and I just figured they knew how to make a champion but still, there were times I felt my daughter slipping out of my grasp—I didn’t like it at all. I felt like we weren’t in control anymore—not in control of our own daughter.

As coaches exerted greater control and overstepped their roles, parents recalled wanting to reproach them, but either being uncertain about their right to do so or being discouraged by their daughters from doing so. Mikaela described feeling powerless:

I became more and more upset with the way they were dealing with my daughter but she didn’t want me to talk to them about it. I was torn between helping my daughter by confronting the coach and helping her by not saying anything.

Parents were plagued post-retirement by regrets over their failure to intervene and worried their daughters would suffer long-term. One parent admitted:

I think she has been damaged by her experiences with the coaches. She doesn’t want anything to do with them again, not even to talk to them. I feel very guilty about that...like I didn’t stand up for her enough. It’s probably my biggest regret as a parent. I wish I had dealt with it better—with the coaches. (Mikaela)

Steven questioned, “I understand their job was to produce champions, but it was as if they forgot this kid was still a kid. I still wonder whether I should have stepped in more.” Mikaela revealed it was only after she retired that her daughter talked about some of the abuse, like being yelled at by coaches and being told she was lazy. Mikaela was surprised at her lack of awareness of what was happening at the gym:

I thought I knew what was going on in the gym but I bet I still don’t know the half of it. How could I not have known? I guess because she didn’t know it was wrong she didn’t tell me about
Mikaela spoke about the guilt she carried, “I feel guilty about my role as a parent through this whole gymnastics thing.”

Family

In addition to lingering doubts and self-recriminations about their daughters’ physical and psychological health and their failure to assert themselves, the participants worried about the stability of their familial relations. Participants acknowledged they had invested a great deal of time, money, and emotional support into one child’s athletic career and wondered if it had detracted from the quality of their relationships with remaining children and irrevocably fractured family ties. Jennifer questioned, “It really made me wonder if we had done things right. Were the commitments and sacrifices we made necessary or did we not do a good enough job of keeping balance in our lives?” Britt agonized, “I worry that my other daughter was short-changed somehow. She doesn’t seem to be bothered by it and when I raise it with her she says she doesn’t mind, but I don’t know.”

Despite the lingering doubts and strong self-reproach the parents were still dealing with three to five years later, the participants had yet to decide about the overall impact of their daughters’ gymnastics careers. They seemed to be reserving judgment until some later point, until some future event. One parent explained:

I wonder about the costs of being an elite gymnast. I worry that the injuries and narrow focus in life will cost her in the future. …but we’ll see. If she makes good friends outside sport, gets settled in a career and eventually in a relationship, then I can put my worries aside.

Another was equally deferential, “It’s early yet. …If she settles into a career and marriage, then I guess we did the right thing.”

DISCUSSION

The current findings indicate former gymnasts responded to their retirement from elite sport with mixed emotions. The gymnasts enjoyed the opportunity to explore new interests and invest more seriously in their academic studies, but also struggled to find meaningful direction in their lives, consistent with existing research (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Ogilvie & Howe, 1982; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Svoboda & Vanek, 1982). In a separate study with another population of elite female gymnasts, Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) found some of the women were still stagnating in a “nowhere land,” searching for a new ambition to replace gymnastics as long as five years post-retirement.

The most significant contribution of the current study is the description of parents’ responses to their daughters’ athletic retirement. This is an area where no previous research exists. The findings indicated parents were strongly affected by their daughters’ retirement from elite sport.

Notably, parents’ responses did not seem to be affected by the nature of their daughters’ exit from sport. Their reactions seemed to follow the same trend whether the athlete made the decision to retire after attaining her goal of competing in the Olympic Games or retired somewhat involuntarily after not being selected for the Olympic team. This sharply contrasts existing research on athlete retirement suggesting athletes whose retirement is involuntary due, for example, to age, injury or deselection, have more traumatic transition experiences.
Perhaps the predictability or controllability of retirement is a significant moderating variable for the athlete him or herself, but not for others in the sport dynamic. It may be parents are affected by the overall withdrawal process regardless of the degree of control that precipitated it. Additional research on this specific question is warranted.

The gender of the parents did not seem to influence their responses, consistent with the athlete retirement literature that suggests gender is not a significant moderating variable in the quality of athletic retirement. Recall, however, that the parent most involved in the gymnast’s athletic career was solicited so what the participants shared was not gender but their degree of involvement in competitive gymnastics.

The parents seemed to struggle psychologically as long as five years post-retirement. Some described themselves as “lost,” a striking resonance to the experiences of athletes following their withdrawal from competitive sport, many of whom have also described themselves as lost (Adler & Adler, 1991; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Sparkes, 1998). The parents described an initial sense of being lost in their relationships with their spouses, their gymnastic daughters, as well as their other children and their social circles. Overall, the parents adapted to retirement fairly well over time despite these initial difficulties. It was apparent, however, that the parents were, for the most part, ill-prepared for the impact their daughters’ retirement might have on them. The fact that one parent, Britt, had seen other parents cut-off from the gymnastics circle and was, therefore, less upset when it happened to her, suggests parents may benefit from pre-retirement planning, much like what has been recommended for athletes themselves (Baillie, 1993; Brown & Hartley, 1998; Grove, Lavallee, & Gordon, 1997; Perna, Ahlgren, & Zaichkowsky, 1999).

The participants in the current study, given the new perspective distance from the world of elite gymnastics retirement afforded, were left with serious self-doubts and recriminations. As long as five years post-retirement, the parents still questioned the effects of prolonged training and competition on their daughters’ physical and psychological health, their own detachment from their parental responsibilities, and the impact of their commitments and sacrifices on their families.

Parents expressed concern about the numerous injuries their daughters experienced and the chronic pain that marked their athletic careers and persisted into retirement. Although distressed over their daughters’ physical health during and after their athletic pursuits, the parents acknowledged they did not curtail the degree of their daughters’ involvement, nor did they question coaches when they pushed the gymnasts too hard or when they seemingly ignored injuries or pain. Nixon (1992, 1993) wrote about a culture of risk in high-level sport that normalized pain and injury. Nixon and others have since written about the contributing role coaches, sport administrators, athletic trainers, sport medicine personnel, and athletes themselves play in this culture of risk (Nixon, 1994, 1996; Safai, 2003; Young & White, 1995; Young, White, & McTeer, 1994). This is the first study to show the role parents play, highlighting the concept that well-meaning figures can be subtly enculturated into a world of elite sport where pain and suffering are accepted as normal. The current findings indicate efforts to displace this culture of risk must include parents, and that parents should be encouraged to closely monitor their child athletes’ physical health and question practices that threaten it.

Parents should also be encouraged to question the impact of prolonged exposure to competitive sport on their children’s psychological health. While acknowledging that elite sport involvement requires a narrow, if not exclusive focus, parents were concerned this came at the expense of their daughters’ psychosocial development. Indeed, considerable research has explored the strong and exclusive identification with athletics that occurs among many male and female competitive athletes and the negative consequences of doing so, including...
psychological distress during periods of transition (Brewer, 1994; Brewer, Selby, Linder, & Petitpas, 1999; Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). However, parents did not question this narrow focus until after their daughters left the world of elite gymnastics, a realization which triggered considerable guilt.

In fact, one of the most disconcerting findings of this study was the extent to which the participants felt they had failed as parents during their daughters’ long involvement in gymnastics. They felt extraordinary guilt as long as five years post-retirement over their failure to intervene when coaches risked their daughters’ physical health or when the consuming investment in elite gymnastics challenged their psychological health. The parents allowed the boundaries between parent and coach to blur because they believed coaches knew best how to develop talent. They were also afraid that approaching coaches would make things more difficult for their daughters or hurt their chances of being selected to national and/or Olympic teams.

These findings are consistent with previous research on the socialization of parents into the sport environment (Bloom, 1985; Czikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1997; Hasbrook, 1986), specifically with respect to the blurring or even violating of roles and responsibilities of parents by coaches (Burke, 2001; Snyder & Purdy, 1982; Weiss & Hayashi, 1995). As the youth athlete becomes more elite the relationship between coach and athlete intensifies. The increased commitment, closeness, and time spent together often involve withdrawal from other social networks, including parents (Drewe, 2002; Sprecher, Felmlee, Orbuch, & Willets, 2002; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Côté (1999) noted that at the elite level of sport, parents are relegated to the role of follower or supporter. As Jowett and Timson-Katchis (2005) found, at this stage, parents feel isolated, distant, and less influential. Perhaps this explains why the well-intentioned parents in the current study lacked awareness of events during training and why so many failed to intervene when their daughters were hurt or upset.

As previous research on sexual abuse in sport (Brackenridge, 2001) has shown, parents, even though they are highly involved, can be socialized to such an extent that they become misinformed, misguided, and fail to act on parental instincts of right and wrong. Parents in the current study reportedly sensed that some coaching behaviors were unhealthy, yet they decided not to intervene, assuring themselves that the coaches were the experts and that these behaviors were required to produce elite athletes. While previous literature has illustrated the significant power and control the coach has over athletes (Burke, 2001; Drewe, 2002; Hellstedt, 1987), this is the first study to indicate that coaches also have power over parents.

It was interesting to note that the parents were reticent to assert whether or not their daughters’ involvement in elite sport had been, in the end, a positive or a negative experience. Instead, they seemed to be waiting for some future indicator such as success at university, making new friends outside gymnastics, or forming an intimate relationship, to inform their decisions. Given the parents’ prolonged and extensive involvement in the sport, it seems odd they would not pass judgment. They would acknowledge the world of elite sport had molded their daughters’ physical selves into highly successful athletes. Perhaps they needed more time to determine if sport had a similarly positive effect on their daughters’ personal development. It is also possible, given the role they played in starting and supporting their daughters’ athletic careers, that the parents could not admit gymnastics had long-term negative developmental effects.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As the first examination of the impact of athlete retirement on the parents of elite athletes, we chose to focus exclusively on parents’ perspectives. We also chose to interview parents of
athletes who had already retired and, therefore, had to rely on retrospective data. It would be extremely interesting to compare the experiences of both athletes and their parents in a single study and to do so in a prospective manner. Future researchers are encouraged to adopt a longitudinal approach, collecting data prospectively from both athletes and their parents prior to and following retirement.

Notably, all of the families in this study were two-parent families. The demands on the parent and effects on family dynamics would undoubtedly differ in a single-parent family. Given the requirements of parents’ time, energy, and money identified in this and other studies (Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999), one wonders whether talented children in single-parent families are more likely to lack the supports needed to pursue elite level sport. As Byrne (1993, p.2) wrote, “...it is extremely difficult for children to take part and develop in sport without the close support of their parents.” It is also possible that each parent will have different perspectives on and responses to the athlete’s retirement. In this study, only one parent was interviewed. Given the documented differences in relationship dynamics within father-daughter and mother-daughter dyads (Czikszentmihalyi et al., 1997; Rice, 2001; Wuerth et al., 2004), it would be interesting for future studies to interview both parents.

CONCLUSIONS

What we know about parents from previous work is that they play a significant role in the athletic careers of their children. What the current findings indicate is that this involvement comes with significant personal and familial costs both during and following the athletes’ careers. It may be fruitful to educate parents about the nature of elite sport and to assist parents, athletes, and coaches to negotiate roles, responsibilities, expectations, and boundaries. In this way, the effectiveness of the “athlete triangle” or “athletic family” (Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1988) is tested. How can the parent and coach work collaboratively to pool their resources and expertise in the best interests of the child?

While we have known for some time now that retirement can be a difficult experience for athletes, this study suggests that there are also difficult elements for parents of athletes. Just as recommendations have been made to prepare athletes for retirement, perhaps parents would also benefit from such preparation. Sport psychology consultants are in an excellent position to provide this education.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX—Sample Probes

1. Tell me how your daughter got involved in gymnastics and about how her athletic career progressed from there.
2. Describe your relationship with your daughter throughout her athletic career.
3. Describe your relationship with your daughter after her retirement.
4. Describe relationships among family members throughout your daughter’s athletic career.
5. Describe relationships among family members after your daughter’s retirement.
6. Describe your relationship with your daughter’s coaches throughout your daughter’s athletic career.
7. Describe your relationship with your daughter’s coaches after her retirement.
8. Describe your involvement in the sport setting during your daughter’s athletic career.
9. Describe your involvement in the sport setting after your daughter’s retirement.