

## Understanding parental stressors: An investigation of British tennis-parents

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(Accepted 5 November 2008)

### Abstract

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

**Keywords:** *Sport-parents, stress, tennis*

### Introduction

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

Such an acute, real-life tragedy stimulates youth sport researchers to perhaps painfully reflect upon what has happened to lead to this and whether we are in a scientifically strong enough position to explain sport-parental behaviours such as this. Recently,

Gould and colleagues (Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi, 2006, 2008) conducted two studies of effective and ineffective tennis parenting behaviour in relation to players and coaches for the United States Tennis Association (USTA). Both studies revealed a number of positive perceptions about the commitment of parents and their interactions with their child-athletes. However, both studies also reported pressurizing behaviours and negative parenting practices with 36% of parents perceived to have had a negative influence on their player's development (Gould et al., 2006). These results and the substantial body of previous research on sport-parents (e.g. DeFrancesco & Johnson, 1997; Gould, Tuffey, Udry, & Loehr, 1996; Hellstedt, 1990; Leff & Hoyle, 1995) speak to their often misguided, maladaptive, and harmful behaviours. Yet, however negative the portrayal of parents might be, descriptions within this research also signify a deep human investment from parents whose potentially taxing experiences in sport are worthy of their own investigation.

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

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

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

While executing these roles, parents will spend large amounts of time in the sport environment and experience both a similar and different range of organizational stressors that are encountered by

athletes and coaches. The time commitment required from parents can impede their occupational, social, and family life (Kirk et al., 1997b). This can cause particular strain if their time and attention become centred upon one child-athlete at the expense of non-sport siblings (Anderson & Anderson, 2000).

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

Beyond financial and time demands, and as "interpreters" of the sport experience, parents are required to constantly provide their child-athlete with emotional support (Anderson & Anderson, 2000). This factor is noteworthy given that the child-athlete is tested competitively on a more regular and public basis than non-athletic peers. The salience and frequency of sports participation for children necessitates the availability of emotional reassurance from parents, particularly following poor performances that can negatively affect children. In parallel, parents may identify or in some cases over-identify with their children's endeavour and, in striving for them to be happy, may experience high levels of strain when they witness disappointments (Murphy, 1999; Smoll & Cumming, 2006). This is particularly pertinent for parents who have fallen into a "reverse dependency" trap (whereby parents over-identify with their children) and as such experience their children's losses and disappointments as if they themselves have experienced them (Smoll & Cumming, 2006). In summary, while parents are required to provide their children with sufficient support, they are sometimes unable to cope with the emotional demands that they face themselves.

The nature of an individual sport such as tennis requires parents to deal with more than simply the emotion-laden demands of the scoring system and the public evaluation of their child (Harwood & Swain, 2002). The logistical requirements of tennis place a burden on transportation to individual lessons and tournaments, where lift sharing or car pooling is sometimes not feasible due to differing start times for matches. The considerable amount of time and money invested by parents of young players is often embodied by parental attendance at most

coaching sessions, matches, and tournaments that provide young players with opportunities to earn rating and ranking points.

A clearer understanding of parental stressors is necessary to ensure that the most appropriate educational resources are produced for parents, coaches, and organizations so that parents may have positive role-related influences on their children's engagement in sport. In light of this need within the game, we attempted to increase the awareness of parental stressors and to inform the tennis industry of potential issues to consider when working with parents. The purpose of the study, therefore, was to investigate the scope of perceived stressors currently experienced by an active cross-section of tennis-parents.

## Methods

### *Participants*

Altogether, 123 tennis-parents were recruited from across the United Kingdom. The sample comprised 74 mothers, 41 fathers, and four sets of parents who jointly completed the survey. Participants reported being an active tennis parent for an average of 6.4 years ( $s = 3.7$ ), with 51% supporting one tennis-playing child, 38% supporting two child-players, and a further 11% supporting three or more players in the family. In summary, the sample accounted for over 190 junior players with the highest standard player in each family ranging in age from 8 to 18 years (mean 13.74,  $s = 2.65$ ). A range of competitive standards was represented, with 48% of the participants' highest standard children competing in club and county competition, and 52% competing in national and international competition. As an indicator of parental commitment, 53% of parents reported watching 75–100% of their child's matches, a further 20% watched over 50% of matches, with only 11% watching less than 25% of matches played.

### *Survey development*

In view of the newness of the topic area, there was an interest in gaining a quantitative appreciation of those stressors that were most prevalent within the existing subculture of tennis-parents. However, it was felt vital to allow parents to express their experience of stressors in their own terms. To achieve both ends, therefore, an open-ended survey was developed to allow parents to articulate their stressors across a range of predetermined contexts and categories that were deemed to be central to their role. These stimulus categories were selected by considering the sources of stress themes experienced

by athletes and coaches (e.g. competition, organizational, interpersonal issues), as well as themes central to family functioning in the talent development literature (e.g. family time, attention to siblings, financial implications) (Côté, 1999). The survey was reviewed by four Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) Level 5-qualified professional tennis coaches and the Head of Coach Education for the LTA, who considered the appropriateness of the categories and questions. In addition, three British tennis-parents completed pilot surveys and provided feedback to the research team.

Following a request for anonymous demographic information, the "Tennis Parent" survey incorporated an introductory paragraph entitled "Parental issues and experiences". This paragraph oriented parents towards expressing their personal experience of being a "tennis-parent" and the stressors with which they felt they needed to cope. It asked parents to offer their personal perspectives on the issues and demands that they faced regarding their children's participation and their personal role in tennis. After this introduction, the survey progressed through seven central sections: competitions and tournaments; coaches and coaching; the National Governing Body; county and club issues; personal, social, and family issues; finance, access, and resources; and developmental and transitional issues. A final section for any further stressors or comments was provided.

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

### *Procedure*

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

### *Data analysis*

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

Consensus validation was a primary method of supporting the trustworthiness of this survey analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The second author, trained in qualitative data analysis, identified the meaning units and created the initial themes across each section of survey. The first author, with experience of analysing and publishing qualitative research, then examined 20% of the surveys to ensure that meaning units (i.e. reported stressors) had been appropriately identified and paraphrased. This process led to a 91% agreement with the second author. Following this stage, the first author checked the interpretive allocation of meaning units into their initial first-order themes. An 80% agreement was reached that required a reflective discussion between the two authors and agreed revisions in certain thematic labels associated with responses related to competitions and tournaments. This process of reflection and verification between the two authors

continued until the final set of core themes was agreed and the percentages associated with each sub-theme of parental stressor were intact and verifiable. Subsequently, the Head of Coach Education for the LTA served in the capacity of a "critical friend" (Cresswell, 1998) by discussing and reviewing the authors' decisions with respect to the location of specific themes and the overall integrity of the emergent structure.

### **Results**

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

#### *Core theme 1: Competition stressors*

Tournament and competition stressors were identified by all parents and encompassed three higher-order themes: stressors experienced before a match or competition; in-match stressors; and stressors that arise following matches. Table I presents these themes and the more specific, constituent sub-themes.

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

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

Table I. Core theme 1: Competition stressors.

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

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

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

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

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

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

For some parents, their own feelings of strain seemed to act as a meta-stressor. A number of parents identified, without qualification, that watching their child and dealing with their own feelings was stressful. They felt compelled to restrict any displays of disappointment or frustration. As one mother stated, "It's a stressor trying not to show any signs of stress or agitation". Parents also explained the problem of not knowing exactly what type of support to provide in certain circumstances.

Following the match, the predominant stressor explained by parents was the effect the result had on their child and their lack of skills in helping or knowing how to help their child manage the resultant emotions. After a loss, for example, many parents described the difficulties of how or when to speak to their emotional and often self-critical child. Additionally, some parents identified that it was more stressful following a match if there had been issues of cheating, a lack of input from referees during the match or poor behaviour from their child that were perceived to impact upon the outcome. The inappropriate or "over-competitive" behaviour and comments of other parents was also a prevalent stressor for some parents, as was the inability to conduct a rational post-match analysis and to ensure that the player was fully recovered and prepared for the next match. Finally, a few parents found it stressful trying to manage their own emotions post-match towards their child, and articulated the strain

from internalizing the negative feelings of their child following a poor performance.

#### *Core theme 2: Coach-related stressors*

The behaviour and attitude of coaches emerged as a stressor for almost half of the parent sample. Table II illustrates how five higher-order themes represented the different ways in which coaches acted as a source of stress. First, the tendency for coaches not to attend tournaments and watch their pupils play competitive matches was an issue for 27% of parents. In conjunction with not attending matches, parents described stressors arising due to the lack of tactical and mental preparation for their child at events, which was consequently left to parents. Second, a number of parents were aggravated by the unprofessional behaviour of coaches on court. Actions such as coaches using mobile phones during sessions, talking to other people during their child's lessons, and displaying a lack of interest in or attention to their child were cited as stressful. In addition, some parents noted occasions where coaches encouraged or failed to condone negative behaviours and attitudes in players, including one parent who stated, "coaches are not dealing successfully with pupils who are disruptive in sessions". This observation also supports a smaller percentage of parents who questioned their coach's actual knowledge, ability, and empathy to deal with children and parental logistics. One parent reported that "coaches are not as qualified as they should be and also they do not work or cope with children appropriately". Similarly,

another parent expressed that "coaches do not understand the psychology of children".

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

#### *Core theme 3: Financial stressors*

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

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

#### *Core theme 4: Time stressors*

Five higher-order themes represented the varying experience of time stressors articulated by parents (see Table IV), with one parent noting that "the time

Table II. Core theme 2: Coach-related stressors.

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

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

In summary, a feeling developed through the data of the constancy of time stressors in one guise or another. Specific examples cited included: the stress of being unable to sit with their family and have meals; having to feed their children in the car; arranging time off school or work and using family holidays; and altering homework deadlines. One mother wrote in relation to her perception of time, "We have none. We're like hamsters going around on a wheel!"

Table III. Core theme 3: Financial stressors.

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

Table IV. Core theme 4: Time stressors.

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

#### Core theme 5: Sibling stressors

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

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

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

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

#### Core theme 6: Organization-related stressors

External to those stressors located within the family or competition, training, and coaching processes, the

Table V. Core theme 5: Sibling stressors.

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

local and national organizations involved in structuring and managing the game emerged as sources of stress for over half of the parents. Table VI illustrates the three higher-order themes that emerged in relation to the national or county Lawn Tennis Associations (LTA) and clubs. The primary stressors emerged at club and county level where favouritism and lack of transparency were perceived in relation to aspects such as team and squad selections for young players (e.g. “it’s all rather a closed shop at county level”). Similarly, a lack of advice or communication was indicated in relation to team selections. Parents also noted the inefficiencies they experienced when dealing with club or county bureaucracy, especially the lack of accessibility of courts for juniors due to the priority given to seniors and adults.

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

Second, a number of parents expressed stress due to the LTA rating system that is employed in British tennis to evaluate the current standard of a player. One parent referred to “the reliance on results and the penalties for losing, which can have a huge negative impact on children”. One such impact is that it forms the basis for entry into tournaments, with another parent stating that “the ratings system is stressful when children can’t get into tournaments based on it”. Coinciding with rating stressors, parents listed other competition stressors related to a lack of appropriate competition, limited team competitions, and an over-emphasis on matches at a young age.

Finally, inefficiencies in tournament organization arose as source of stress in relation to “constantly

duplicating paper work” and “the complexity of entering tournaments”. One parent suggested the need for a more streamlined, online approach to entering tournaments that would reduce the time spent on the constant duplication of personal details.

#### *Core theme 7: Developmental stressors*

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

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

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

Beyond these academic issues, a child’s lack of engagement in other sports was also perceived as a stressor. Parents particularly lamented about their child being unable to engage in school sports, and the problems when their school demanded their

Table VI. Core theme 6: Organization-related stressors.

Higher-order category/First-order sub-themes	%N
Problems with club and county associations	
• Perceived local favouritism regarding selection and opportunity	20%
• Inefficient club/county structures and access	13%
Governing body systems	
• Allocation and transparency of player funding	15%
• The ratings system and emphasis on results	10%
Tournament organization	
• Inefficient entry procedures and communication of information	11%

Table VII. Core theme 7: Developmental stressors.

Higher-order category/First-order sub-themes	%N
Current educational conflicts and issues	43%
Limited opportunity for multiple sports	31%
Future transitions	
• Ability of player to cope with transitions	33%
• Decisions about education	32%
• Financial and social issues	20%



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

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

## Discussion

The main aim of this study was to investigate perceived stressors experienced by tennis parents and, in so doing, to gain a more balanced and empathic understanding of key participants in the youth sport development process. Seven core themes of parental stressor were derived from the data. These broadly included: stressors inherent within the processes of competition; the behaviour and responsibilities of coaches; financial and time demands placed upon the family; sibling inequalities and resentment; inefficiencies and inequalities attributed to tennis organizations; and developmental concerns related to educational and future tennis transitions.

Although many of these themes appear to be unique and specific to parents, they can nevertheless be conceptually appraised and interpreted through existing knowledge of stressors in the sport and organizational literature. The following sections of

the Discussion will therefore attempt to locate and integrate these findings into existing theory. However, at all times, the reader is encouraged to reflect and consider how sport-parents experience rather unique and role-specific demands that re-emphasize the academic value of studying this youth sport population.

### *The diversity of competition stress*

Adapted from Lazarus's (1999) work, Fletcher and colleagues (Fletcher, Hanton, & Mellalieu, 2006) referred to stress as "an ongoing process that involves individuals transacting with their environments, making appraisals of the situations they find themselves in, and endeavouring to cope with any issues that may arise" (p. 329). Within this process, stressors represent the environmental demands encountered by an individual and strain refers to the individual's negative psychological, physical, and behavioural responses to stressors. Using this transactional model, researchers in the sport domain have made the distinction between those stressors linked specifically to competition and competitive performance (i.e. competitive stress) with the stressors associated primarily and directly with the organization within which the individual is operating (i.e. organizational stress) (Hanton & Fletcher, 2005; Hanton, Fletcher, & Coughlan, 2005; Woodman & Hardy, 2001). Parental responses in this study offer support to the utility of such a differentiation between the origins of the stressor.

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

The unsporting behaviour of opponents (e.g. cheating), negative interference of other parents, and the docility of referees were further sources of stress in the competitive environment. In this respect, the provision of psychological safety and emotional security for their child seemed to be an important caring role for parents, a role that was hampered by the rules of the game in calling for

audience restraint and encouraging players to work through their own adversities. The ecological relevance of the above points was recently reinforced in the national press by the plight of an 8-year-old female player. She was disqualified from an Under-10 tennis event for wearing a secret earpiece under her headband (Barrowclough, 2008). Her father claimed that he had placed it there to secretly transmit line calling instructions because she could not cope on her own.

After matches, many parents cited stressors associated with reviewing matches and helping their child to recover mentally. Some acknowledged that they were either not skilled enough to do this, or were thwarted in their attempt of doing a rational post-match analysis by the emotions of their child and/or by their own negative emotions about the match. The fact that stressors also emerged before the match due to their child's lack of adequate preparation and readiness suggests that the overall match process may be a highly demanding experience.

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

#### *Parental experiences of organizational stress*

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

Research on organizational stress in sport is currently limited to athletes' experiences of such issues as travel, finance, selection, coach relationships, and team conflicts (Fletcher & Hanton, 2003; Woodman & Hardy, 2001). However, the data from

tennis-parents emphasize the role that they play as somewhat "controlled" but active consumers in organized youth sport. Furthermore, the content of their stress themes can be interpreted through the lens of the five dimensions of organizational stress.

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

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

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

Fourth, athletic career and performance development issues seem to represent key areas of concern for parents within the theme of developmental stressors. Almost half of the sample cited current conflicts between educational demands and tennis, with one-third of parents concerned about future decisions regarding education and specialized tennis. Parents also disclosed financial and social stressors associated with these future transitions, as well as the limited opportunity to develop in other sports. However, perhaps the most noteworthy finding was the 33% of parents who reported issues about their child's ability and readiness to cope with progression to higher levels of the game and potential disappointments. Conspicuous by their absence in this sample were any developmental stressors related to the

demands of training upon health and injury-related issues. Few parents articulated their experience of injury in their children, but this may be a factor worthy of exploration in future investigations.

The final dimension of Fletcher and colleagues' (2006) framework – the organizational structure and climate of the sport – corresponded closely with the organization-related stressors experienced by parents as a result of the local and national Lawn Tennis Associations. Some parents noted the structural inefficiencies of county governing bodies, clubs, and tournament entry procedures including access problems and perceived favouritism. The National Governing Body's allocation and transparency of player funding and the results-oriented rating system were further stressors that reinforced parents' position as "pawns" who were unable to contribute to any of the decisions that affected themselves or their child.

#### *Limitations and implications*

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

First, although the emphasis of this study was on identifying the stressors associated with being a tennis-parent, a sub-question within the personal issues section of the survey allowed parents to highlight the positive outcomes they associated with having children involved in the sport. Positive factors that emerged included: parent's own enjoyment, the formation of social networks, children's peer friendships, closer relationships with their child, the health and fitness benefits, and feeling proud of their child's achievements. As such, it is critical to recognize that while these parents expressed many stressors that carried a negative connotation, there were also positive themes and factors expressed by parents about their tennis experience. A related limitation of this study is that we did not investigate the full stress, appraisal, and coping process in parents. Mellalieu and colleagues (Mellalieu, Hanton, & Fletcher, 2006) argue that stressors are not inherently negative or positive and that it is the individual's appraisal of such events that makes them negative or positive. Some parents expressed stressors in a manner that included their negative appraisal, negative emotions, and lack of coping resources. However, we cannot assume that this is the case for all parents. Future research should pay closer attention to understanding the full stress and coping process in sport-parents

to furnish practitioners, parents, and organizations with more precise intervention ideas, education, and skills.

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

From an applied perspective, this study promotes a number of educational and organizational initiatives designed to enhance the positive roles, well-being, and stress management of tennis-parents. The involvement of the National Governing Body in enhancing the communication channels and information flow to parents is relevant here. Primarily, there is a need to educate and support parents through the motivational and emotional processes of competition and ensure that they have the necessary cognitive, behavioural, and motivational skills both to manage themselves and to influence the responses of their child. This type of education, perhaps through tournament workshops, will enhance their roles as "interpreter" and "role model" for their child before, during, and after competition.

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

Finally, the findings of this project could be circulated to coaches to increase awareness and empathy. It would be advisable to encourage coaches to regularly reflect on and monitor their own behaviour, communication skills, and relationships with parents. It is worth noting that the LTA have begun to disseminate this work on their Level 5 coaching qualification, and published an educational article in their professional coaches' journal

(Harwood & Knight, 2007). In conclusion, we believe that such a line of applied research, aided by the positive support of the National Governing Body, will not only ameliorate the behaviour and skills of parents, but will indirectly facilitate the work of all personnel in pursuit of optimal sport experiences for talented young athletes.

## Acknowledgements

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

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