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Parental Behaviors in Team Sports: How do Female Athletes Want Parents to Behave?

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Parents display various positive and negative behaviors at youth sport competitions. This study examined early adolescent female athletes' preferred parental behaviors at team sport competitions. Individual interviews were conducted with 36 female athletes (M age = 13.5 years) who frequently competed in team sports. Data analysis led to the identification of three categories of parental behavior across different phases of competition (before, during, after). Athletes indicated preferences related to preparation for competition, parental support and encouragement during competition, and the provision of feedback after competition. The results suggest that parents should engage in different types of behaviors as the temporal context of competitions change.

Parents play a critical role in facilitating their children's involvement in youth sport. Parents are primarily responsible for initiating children's engagement in sport (Wuerth, Lee, & Alfermann, 2004). Parents also help children to understand and interpret their sporting experiences and act as role models of appropriate behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs regarding sport and competition (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004). Consequently, parents have many opportunities to positively and negatively influence children's sporting experiences (Partridge, Brustad, & Babkes Stellino, 2008).

Competitions are one context in which parents may greatly influence young athletes. At competitions athletes perform in a public arena in which parents can provide relatively immediate verbal and non-verbal feedback through the behaviors they display (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004). Through their behaviors parents may communicate their goals for their children, the importance they place upon winning versus effort and attitude, and perceptions of their children's competence (e.g., Eccles & Harold, 1991). Appropriate parental behaviors, such as providing emotional support, praise, and showing understanding have been associated with high intrinsic motivation and sport enjoyment, enhanced feelings of sporting competence, and longevity of sporting engagement for youth athletes (Power & Woolger, 1994; Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006a; Woolger & Power, 2000). On the other hand, parental behaviors considered as inappropriate, such as overemphasizing winning and excessively criticizing performances, can result in athletes perceiving undue pressure to perform, developing fear of failure and competitive anxiety, and reducing perceived sporting competence (Bois, Lalanne, & Delforge, 2009; Leff & Hoyle, 1995; Sagar & Lavalley, 2010).

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Although it has been fairly well-established by researchers that some parental behaviors, are associated with positive psychosocial outcomes for athletes and others are associated with more negative psychosocial outcomes, surprisingly little is known about athletes' preferences for parental behaviors (for an exception, see Knight, Boden, & Holt, 2010). Much of the information regarding parental behaviors in youth sport has been gained from coaches (e.g., Gould et al., 2008) or from researchers proposing behaviors and asking athletes how they perceive them or how frequently parents display these behaviors (e.g., Bois et al., 2009; Leff & Hoyle, 1995; Power & Woolger, 1994). However, understanding athletes' preferences for behaviors is important because athletes' perceptions of parents' behaviors influence the psychosocial outcomes they report (Anderson, Funk, Elliott, & Smith, 2003).

Furthermore, little is known about when parents should engage in different types of behaviors. It is plausible that children prefer different types of parental behaviors in the periods before, during, and after competition, but research has yet to clearly articulate these issues. Although there is a well-developed body of parenting literature in sport psychology, several researchers agree that more work is needed to identify the specific behaviors that athletes find supportive (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2008; Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi, 2008). By identifying sport-specific parenting principles, more practical knowledge and guidance can be provided to parents (Lauer, Gould, Roman, & Pierce, 2010).

Parents may be unsure of how to behave or what types of behaviors their children want them to display (Harwood & Knight, 2009a). One result is that parents may unintentionally behave in inappropriate ways at competitions (Wiersma & Fifer, 2008). Although negative parental behaviors do not outweigh positive behaviors, negative behaviors clearly do occur. For example, a self-report survey of 189 sports parents identified that 13% of parents had criticized their child's performance (Shields, Bredemeier, LaVoi, & Power, 2005). Similarly, over 20% of 101 tennis parents reported displaying negative behaviors towards their child after a match (DeFrancesco & Johnson, 1997).

Observational studies recording the comments parents made during competitions have further indicated the behaviors parents display. For example, Kidman, McKenzie, and McKenzie (1999) recorded the comments made by approximately 250 parents of 6–12 year olds at 147 team sport competitions. Overall, 47.2% of parents' comments were coded as positive, 34.5% were negative, and the remainder were neutral. Extending this research, Holt, Tamminen, Black, Sehn, and Wall (2008) observed 120 hr of youth soccer competitions for youth aged 10–14 years. Holt et al. found parents provided praise and encouragement (35% of comments), performance contingent feedback (5%), instructions (35%), a balance between positive and negative remarks (10%), negative comments (10%), and derogatory comments (5%). Most recently, Bowker, Boekhoven, Nolan, Bauhaus, Glover, Powell, and Taylor (2009) observed parents of 11–14 year olds at 69 youth hockey games and coded the comments heard. Generally consistent with previous research, the majority of comments (66%) were classified as positive and 33% were classified as negative.

The aforementioned observational studies provide useful insights into the types of comments parents made and the behaviors they displayed during competition. However, they provide few insights into the types of parental behaviors athletes would prefer. A recent study of 42 male and female 12–15 year-old tennis players sought to identify what types of parental behaviors they preferred during competitions (Knight et al., 2010). Findings showed that, as an overarching principle, players liked their parents to be supportive without placing undue pressure upon them. Specific preferences were that parents should not provide technical and tactical advice, but they should comment on effort and attitude, provide practical advice, respect tennis etiquette, and match nonverbal behaviors with supportive comments. Clearly, athletes preferred certain behaviors at tennis competitions.

The Knight et al. (2010) study was conducted in an individual sport (tennis), which is played in a relatively confined area with a small number of competitors and spectators. It remains unknown whether the findings would apply to team sport settings. In fact, much of the information regarding parental behaviors in youth sport has been gained from individual sports (e.g., Bois et al., 2009; Gould, Tuffey, Udry, & Loehr, 1996; Gould et al., 2006, 2008; Leff & Hoyle, 1995; Woolger & Power, 2000). Parent-child interactions in team sports are different compared to that of individual sports (Lauer et al., 2010). In team sports parental behaviors are witnessed by teammates and may influence teammates as well as a parent's own child's performance and feelings (Omli & LaVoi, 2009). Athletes are also likely to have developed friendships and relationships with their teammates and desire their acceptance (Partridge et al., 2008). Thus, the importance of parents behaving in accordance with athletes' preferences in team sports may be important because they represent highly involved social environments in which behaviors can be witnessed by and influence other athletes. Although the observational studies reported above (i.e., Bowker et al., 2009; Holt et al., 2008) were conducted in team settings, they did not specifically examine athletes' preferences for parental behaviors before, during, and after competition.

It is particularly important to examine early adolescent (approximately 12 to 15 years old) athletes' preferences for parental behaviors at team sport competitions. During this period athletes are frequently engaged in competition and parents take an active interest in their children's competitive sporting involvement (Côté, 1999). Athletes are highly attuned to their parents' feedback and behaviors, especially before and after competitions when the atmosphere can be emotionally charged (Lauer et al., 2010). Adolescent athletes may be particularly sensitive to feedback and criticism as they are acutely self-conscious (Vernon, 2002). Additionally, athletes want to develop mature relationships with their peers and develop independence from their parents. However, athletes remain dependent upon their parents for practical and emotional support (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). As such, early adolescence can be a complicated time for athletes as they attempt to conform to what is required from parents and peers.

During this early adolescent period it may be important to study female athletes' preferences for parental behaviors because girls continue to be less likely to participate in sport than boys and a decrease in girls' sports participation during early adolescence is common (Statistics Canada, 2008). One of the main sources of enjoyment for girls in sport is positive parental involvement (McCarthy, Jones, & Clark-Carter, 2008). Understanding how female athletes would like their parents to behave at sports events may help to increase parents' positive involvement, and in turn, female athletes' enjoyment and continuing involvement in sport. To this end, the purpose of this study was to examine early adolescent female athletes' preferences for parental behaviors at team sport competitions. Adopting an exploratory approach, we also attempted to establish if and how athletes' preferences for parental behaviors changed before, during, and after competition. A practical issue underpinned the purpose of the study. That is, if we could establish how athletes prefer their parents to behave then we may be able to create more sophisticated and precise guidelines for parental behavior in youth sport.

METHOD

Given the purpose of the study, and the fact that little previous research has specifically inquired about how early adolescent female athletes prefer parents to behave at competitions, we selected a qualitative interview-based approach. Such research can be particularly useful in obtaining in-depth accounts of participants' subjective perceptions of social settings and is appropriate for understanding relatively unexamined issues (Patton, 2002).

Participants

In accordance with one of the primary principles of qualitative research, participants were purposefully sampled (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling criteria were based on (a) age (12–15 years old), (b) gender (female athletes), (c) type of sport involvement (i.e., team sport), and (d) frequency of sport involvement. The age range was selected because it reflects the specializing stage of youth sport participation, which is when athletes become committed to a sport and parents are highly involved in competition (Côté, 1999). In terms of their frequency of sport involvement, players were required to be competing at least once a month in team competitions, as an indicator of their commitment to the sport. These criteria were applied to ensure information-rich participants were sampled; individuals who could provide detailed information to address the research purpose.

The sample comprised 36 female athletes (M age = 13.5 years, SD = 1.0) recruited from summer camps hosted by a large university in Western Canada. Although all participants were recruited from volleyball and basketball camps, they in fact reported their “main” sport as soccer (n = 12), volleyball (n = 10), basketball (n = 9), ringette (n = 2), softball (n = 2), and ice hockey (n = 1). Participants had been engaged in their main sport for between 2 and 11 years (M duration of sport involvement = 5.69 years, SD = 2.73). Participants trained on average three times per week and competed on a bi-weekly (n = 2), weekly (n = 19), or twice weekly schedule (n = 15; hence meeting or exceeding the sampling criterion). Participants competed at high school (n = 3), community (n = 13), club (n = 18) or provincial level (n = 2). Participants were also asked to specify which parent was most involved in their competitions and the subsequent questions referred to this parent. Sixteen participants discussed their mothers’ behaviors, 11 participants discussed their fathers’ behaviors and nine participants discussed both their parents’ behaviors because they reported that both parents were equally involved.

Procedure

Institutional Research Ethics Board (REB) approval was obtained and approval to approach participants was obtained from summer camp directors and coaches. On the first day of camp a researcher convened a meeting with all campers. Campers were given an explanation of the study and the sampling criteria and given an information letter and consent form for their parents. Interested participants returned signed consent forms the following day and interviews were scheduled with eligible participants during the lunch breaks over the course of the camp.

Data Collection

Each participant took part in one semi-structured interview. An interview guide was created with questions based on previous studies of parental behaviors in youth sport (Gould et al., 2008; Knight et al., 2010) and through discussions among the research team. It was piloted with a 13 year-old athlete. Prior to each interview participants were provided with a verbal explanation of the study, given further opportunities to ask questions, and verbally assented to be involved in this study. It was re-emphasized that participation was voluntary, all information was confidential, and that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions. It was also reinforced that the interviews were not about participants’ perceptions of the summer camps but rather their views about parental behaviors in their main sport.

The interview guide was divided into four sections: ice-breakers, transition questions, main questions, and concluding questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005; See Appendix A). An activity-based exercise was also included at the end of each interview. Such activities have

been recommended when working with children because they provide a different way for them to express their opinions (Colucci, 2007). Participants were asked to compile a list of parental *dos and don'ts*. This activity helped summarize responses and was incorporated as a verification technique into the analysis. Excluding the time taken to explain the procedure, collect demographic information and answer study-related questions, interviews lasted for, on average, 35 min.

Due to ethical requirements, interviews were scheduled during camp lunch breaks to ensure children did not miss out on any instructional time. To accommodate the logistics and ensure all willing participants could be interviewed, a team of four interviewers were available. Twenty-nine interviews were conducted by the two lead researchers. Seven interviews were conducted by research assistants. The interviewing team were thoroughly prepared to ensure a consistent understanding and execution of the interview guide. All interviewers had received prior training and experience conducting qualitative research interviews in the past. To prepare for this specific study the four researchers met to discuss the purpose of the study, review the interview guide, and ask any questions about the study. Interviewers further reviewed the interview guide and independently met with a lead researcher (the first author) to practice questions and receive specific advice regarding clarification and elaboration probes.

Data Analysis

Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcribing service. Transcripts were checked for accuracy and any personal identifying information was removed. Pseudonyms were assigned to transcripts to help ensure participant anonymity. The transcripts were then read and reread by the lead researcher to ensure her immersion in the data. Data analysis was conducted by two researchers (the lead researcher and first co-author) working together. The two researchers independently coded the first two transcripts and met to compare their coding. Each researcher then independently coded five more transcripts before meeting to discuss the dimensions and themes they had identified and agree upon a coding scheme.

Initially, the analysis followed the steps of descriptive content analysis (as outlined by Miles & Huberman, 1994). The transcripts were coded to identify meaningful segments of information (i.e., raw data themes). These raw data themes were then assigned meaning units and grouped by content into themes and then more abstract general dimensions. Rules of inclusion were created and constant comparison techniques were used to help ensure that data included in each theme were similar but distinct from other themes. Thus, the first stage of analysis was more inductive.

As noted above, after the coding of the first five transcripts, a coding schema had been created and agreed upon. For the remaining transcripts a mixture of inductive and deductive analysis was used (Patton, 2002). That is, the remaining transcripts were analyzed using the coding schema that had been developed from the initial interviews (i.e., more deductive coding). However, as the data were compared to the previously developed coding schema, additional themes were identified and added to the coding structure (more inductive analysis). This mixture of more inductive and more deductive elements of analysis, often termed abductive analysis, is a common technique in qualitative research (Mayan, 2009).

Methodological Rigor

Techniques were conducted during and following analysis to enhance the rigor of data analysis. First, the results were produced by researchers working as a team. This was necessary because the first author had previously conducted a similar study with a different population

of athletes, and she was concerned that some preconceived ideas may be forced upon the data. Hence, the two researchers compared their coding of the first 12 transcripts. There was 100% agreement between the researchers regarding the coding of raw data into the general dimensions and a 95% agreement in the coding of data in the themes. The two researchers questioned each others' analysis and asked for explanations and justifications for the codes they produced. The minor disagreements were overcome through establishing one additional theme to account for issues that had been labelled differently between the researchers. The next analytic step involved the third author. He scrutinized the raw data themes and questioned the other researchers to demonstrate the themes were discrete and self-contained. This resulted in some reorganization of the grouping of the themes but not of the coding itself. The final phase of analysis was the writing of the results section because writing is viewed as part of the analysis in qualitative research (Richardson, 1994). The final results, which are presented below, were evaluated, discussed, and agreed upon by all three members of the research team. Although the basic themes remained the same, the written presentation of these themes went through several iterations before the final representation of the results was agreed upon.¹

RESULTS

We present three general categories of athletes' preferences for parental behavior organized temporally. Athletes' preferences for parental behaviors before competition, during competition, and after competition are reported. Before-competition parental behaviors related to preparation for the upcoming game. During-competition behaviors related to the need for parents to carefully monitor their involvement. In monitoring their involvement there were clear examples of behaviors parents should and should not engage in. Thus, the preferred behaviors during competitions are presented as parental *dos* and *don'ts*. Finally, preferred behaviors after competitions related to the provision of feedback from parents. In addition to presenting the behaviors that athletes prefer from parents, we have included quotes to illustrate the consequences of parents either displaying or not displaying certain behaviors. These consequences are in relation to individual athletes and the overall team and provided some insight into the reasons *why* athletes preferred certain behaviors.

The number of participants reporting each theme is presented after the theme heading. The large number of participants that reported each theme indicates the consistency in participants' responses. When analyzing the interviews each theme was considered in relation to the competitive standard of the participant, the gender of the parent the participant discussed, and the participant's years of sporting experience. There were no consistent differences in the reporting of any theme based on these participant demographics.

Before The Competition

Athletes specified two themes in relation to parents' behaviors before competitions that concerned assisting in their preparation. Specifically, athletes wanted parents to help them to physically and mentally prepare for competitions.

Help Athletes Physically Prepare For Competitions

($N = 30$ athletes). Parents could help athletes prepare physically for competitions by completing some fairly simple and basic functions. For example, as Hailey said, it could simply be a case of her mom helping her to "Get ready and make sure I'm on time and get me prepared and all that stuff." Samantha described another specific function when she said a positive behavior from her father was that he "Tapes my ankles for every game,

and he always makes me drink a lotta water.” Athletes reported that appropriate parental assistance in physically preparing for games could have an influence on performance. Heather highlighted this when she suggested that, in the absence of proper preparation from parents, her teammates would “Be really tired and miserable . . . they wouldn’t play as well.” Similarly, Crystal explained that parents help the whole team when they make sure “They’re [athletes] all ready, so they’re not worrying about anything and like help them to eat well so that they’re feeling good before their game . . . just make sure they’re prepared.”

Understand How Athletes Need Help to Mentally Prepare for Competitions

($N = 33$ athletes). Whereas parents’ roles in assisting with physical preparation were relatively straightforward, athletes’ preferences for parental behaviors in relation to mental preparation were more subtle and nuanced. The most frequently reported issue was that athletes wanted parents to understand their needs in terms of mental preparation. For example, some athletes did not want their parents discussing performance pre-competition. Nicole said, “I don’t want to get nervous and stuff before the game, like if she [mum] starts telling me what to do and stuff, like I might just get a little bit nervous . . . so we don’t really talk about the game before.” Tyler had developed a similar routine with her father, “Most of the time it’s like we don’t really talk about it because, well sometimes dad likes to talk about it, but ‘cause I’m usually really nervous we just like turn up the radio and we don’t talk about it.”

The above examples suggest that parents could, presumably unintentionally, create anxiety by discussing performance before the competition. In fact, athletes expressed a preference for parents helping them to relax. Alex said, “Like before a game, if I’m just like nervous, just like cheer for me and say something positive so I relax.” Kim wanted her parents to enhance her confidence before games, “Just make me feel good and confident, that helps me play better . . . just say ‘It’ll be fine, you’ll do well.’” Thus, parents could clearly play a role in helping their children with mental preparation, and as Lindsay explained, “Sometimes I’ve gone to games without my parents and I’m always way worse, ‘cause I’m so nervous and jumpy I drop the ball.” It seems that the key issue was that athletes wanted their parents to understand how to help them prepare mentally, whether this meant leaving them alone or helping them to relax.

During the Competition

Athletes’ preferences for parental behaviors during competitions were complex. In general athletes wanted parents to take a “step back” as competitions began. But they also identified several specific preferences for behaviors parents should and should not display. To organize these findings in a logical manner we separated the themes in terms of *dos* and *don’ts*. We identified four behaviors that athletes would like parents to display during competition (i.e., the *dos*) and three behaviors that athletes would prefer parents not to display (i.e., the *don’ts*).

Do: Encourage The Entire Team

($N = 36$ athletes). It appeared to be important that parents value team rather than individual performances. As Jocelyn stated, “She’s [mom] not just clapping for me, she’s clapping for the whole team. That’s what I like.” Similarly, Paige said that when parents support the entire team, “It tells me that they’re not just here to watch me, that they’re comfortable with my whole team too.” Jenna made an interesting point when she said, “When the parents know everybody . . . then like they’re cheering for everybody and like they’re not just cheering for one person ‘cause then if their mom couldn’t make it that week then they have somebody to cheer for them.”

Supporting the entire team was perceived to have a positive influence on the team. For example, Erin explained, “I think it [support] brings the whole team up. I think everyone is able to play better because you’re kind of excited that, that, people are supporting you.” Natasha compared the level of support she perceived from all the parents on two teams she had played for. She said, “Like I didn’t have that [team support from parents] for my volleyball team really but for my basketball team we had that and I think it makes you a closer team and you work harder together.” Ainsley shared the same perspective and said, “All the parents on our team were there and every time we’d get a basket they would cheer and we’d, it’d just make us feel happy and feel so good and made us go harder.”

Do: Focus on Effort Rather Than Outcome

($n = 36$ athletes). Athletes indicated a preference for parents to focus upon the effort the team displayed rather than being concerned with the outcome of the game. For example, Jordan liked the parents on her team because, “They’re always supportive they don’t really care if we win or lose just that we try our best.” Tracy explained how parents on her team stopped her worrying about the outcome, “They’ll be like ‘Oh I hope you have a good game, try as hard as you can.’ But they don’t really care, they’ll just be like ‘OK so I hope, I hope you have a good game today and however it goes it goes.’”

The apparent consequence here was that by emphasizing effort rather than outcome, athletes’ perceived little pressure to perform and had few concerns regarding their performance. However, if parents were focused upon the outcome rather than effort it made competition less enjoyable for athletes. For example, Claire felt that she always had to win to prevent her father from being critical. She said, “Sometimes like, my dad isn’t very supportive and stuff, it makes me not wanna go to my sport . . . my dad always says, well you could’ve done this, you should have done better, that kinda thing.”

Do: Interact Positively With Athletes Throughout The Game

($n = 34$ athletes). Encouragement for the team is displayed through positive interactions with athletes throughout competitions. As Annie explained, “[Parents should] keep on being positive, like don’t say anything negative like ‘cause you’re already under like a whole lot of pressure and just more negative, or [any] negativity would just like crack them.” Athletes appraised instances of parents criticizing during competitions in a very negative light. As Sarah stated, “Sometimes parents, they get a little like rowdy and they’re like, yell at you and they’ll say ‘No don’t do that, don’t do this or something.’ [They should] just be more encouraging and positive about it.”

Rather than criticizing players or displaying negativity during games, players would like their parents to clap and praise good plays. As Ainsley explained, they should “Just cheer . . . it’s all about the cheering.” Similarly Maddie said, “Probably cheering you on, that’s the thing I like the most . . . like I like them to say good job, keep going, that’s awesome and stuff.” Such support was deemed to be particularly important during a close match or when the team is losing. As Casey explained, “Just be like even more encouraging ‘cause I think that’s when you need your parents there the most . . . so when you’re down just to be like ‘Come on guys, you can make it, just a little harder.’”

Do: Maintain Control of Emotions

($N = 36$ athletes). Athletes wanted their parents to attend their games and show an interest in the team’s performance by clapping and cheering. However, athletes were clear that parents must maintain control of any extreme positive or negative emotions that may arise when they are watching games. Maddie explained:

When they stand up and start like yelling that kind of makes me mad . . . like it's kind of annoying but like they're really competitive, like, that always kind of bugs me it's like you're not even on the court so why are you being so competitive about it?

Claire reported a similar issue, saying, "Sometimes they just get outta control and stuff and I've seen, some of the hockey games, I've seen parents from other sides physically fight over games, that's not cool." Jaime had a similar story, "Parents get really into it and like yell at each other and then there was like a fight between a couple of people . . . I'm just like, ew, you know, that was a bit weird, I don't think that's really mature."

Do Not: Draw Attention to Yourself or Your Child

($N = 28$ athletes). These athletes were young adolescents and as such, appeared to be highly sensitive to parental behaviors that might draw attention either to their parent or themselves. For example, Hailey talked about her father's reactions in games, "Sometimes when my dad gets overexcited it makes me kind of feel embarrassed 'cause my dad's like 'Yes that's my daughter right there!'" Alicia also explained, "Like if I did really good I don't want them to like gloat in front of everyone else." In addition to embarrassing behaviors, parents acting differently from other parents can also be distracting. As Lindsey explained, "It's weird when everyone else is quiet and like no one else is cheering at anything, but if everyone's cheering I don't really care, because if everyone's cheering it's easy to block it out." Thus, athletes wanted parents to ensure that the behaviors they displayed did not embarrass, distract, or annoy them or the team.

Do Not: Coach

($N = 29$ athletes). During games parents should not try to coach the team. Paige explained the problems this could create when she said, "They [some parents] think they're the coach, making all these calls about what you should do, when really that's contradicting to what your coach told you to do. It's a little confusing . . . they act like the coach . . . which isn't their role." Heather explained the confusion that may arise, when she said "That [coaching] can be bad 'cause if it's your dad you try to do what he tells you to do but your coach tells you something different and you don't know what to do." Tessa agreed, stating "It annoys me because well, obviously they're not the coach and it can get people distracted and then they'll do the wrong thing." Thus, while it was plausible parents would try to provide "coaching-like" comments with the intention of helping the athletes, in fact the athletes found such comments to be confusing and distracting at both an individual and team level.

However, there is one caveat to this preference. That is, if athletes perceive a parent to have a high level of knowledge or experience in the sport or a good understanding of the team goals or tactics they may provide specific instruction to their child before or after the game. For example, Sarah liked her dad to provide her with a goal for the upcoming game. She said "My dad gives me one thing to work on during the game, like one thing I didn't do before that I should really concentrate on this game." Parents should only provide this information to their own child, it must reinforce the coaches' ideas, and be provided as a suggestion for the child rather than a requirement or an expectation.

Do Not: Argue With Officials

($N = 31$ athletes). We found that athletes viewed parents arguing with referees as a distraction and a source of embarrassment. For example, Josie referred to a situation when her dad had some issues with a referee and as she explained, "He [dad] did get in a fight with the ref. I was like 'You're being an idiot.' It was kind of embarrassing." Later in her interview

Josie returned to this idea and said “I think like cheering and stuff’s OK and if you’re into it like you can like say, ‘That was a foul,’ but you have to like drop it there. You can’t, you shouldn’t be arguing with the ref.” And Paige explained that parents arguing with the referee “Is pretty disrespectful. It makes me feel ashamed that they’re doing that for the, my team.” Hailey agreed with these perspectives when she said, “What’s even worse is when the parents start arguing with the ref. ‘Cause one, that’s kind of embarrassing for the kids ‘cause pushy parents, but it’s also the ref’s job and what the ref says goes.”

After the Competition

Finally, athletes also reported preferences for parental behaviors post-competition. Specifically they described how and when parents should provide feedback after games.

Provide Positive and Realistic Post-Game Feedback

($N = 33$ athletes). After the game athletes wanted to receive positively phrased feedback from their parents. Emily said, “They usually say to me at the end of the game like ‘Oh, you made some really good saves or you did some really good kicks’ or stuff like that yeah and so I like how they congratulate me.” Athletes also wanted to receive positive post-game feedback from their teammates’ parents. Natasha said “It’s really nice if you’ve come out after a game and somebody that like somebody else’s parent comes up to you and said ‘Oh you had a really good game,’ like that always is really, really nice.” Players indicated liking such positive feedback immediately after the game before the team dispersed, but any constructive criticism should be provided away from others.

A subtle issue when receiving feedback from their own parents was that athletes appreciated honesty. As Sarah stated, “They [my parents] are not like telling you ‘you did great’ when you really were horrible . . . like they’re being supportive but not to the extent of lying to you.” Further, athletes would like a balance of feedback from their own parents. Specifically, athletes indicated that they would like positive feedback first, followed by areas for improvement, and then more positive feedback. For example, Natasha explained, “My parents say like everything good that I did and then like just a couple of pointers maybe and then good stuff again.” However, parents must not focus too much on negative aspects of the performance. This idea was clearly illustrated by Claire when she compared the behavior of her mother and father, “I like my mom cause she actually comes and supports me . . . but my dad just criticizes me at the end of the game.” She continued to explain, “I’d like to keep my mom where she is [in terms of feedback] and just tell my dad not to focus so much on the negative.”

When providing this more evaluative individual feedback athletes indicated needing their parents to time their comments appropriately. Hailey explained, “They [parents] need to be able to read their kids . . . So when the parents can pick-up on that and just leave you be and let you focus then that’s good.” Crystal also explored this idea, she said “Sometimes at first I’m just like really upset, they still try to talk to me in the car and I’m like, ‘Can we just talk about it later?’ And then they just try to talk about it later.” In general it appeared that parents should first recognize that athletes wanted some time with their teammates immediately following games. For example, Chloe said, “If we have like a team meet, like when we have our team meeting outside like don’t go out because it’s just the team.”

DISCUSSION

This study examined early adolescent female athletes’ preferences for parental behaviors at team sport competitions. Findings were organized temporally in terms of athletes’ preferences

before, during, and after competitions. Before competitions athletes prefer parents ensure they are physically and mentally prepared for the competition so the team has the best chance of being successful. During games, maintaining a positive and relaxed environment was important for athletes. This could be achieved by parents providing positive and encouraging reactions and interacting with officials in a positive way. Behaviors parents display should not distract from the game or attract excessive attention. Following games parents should allow the team time to process the game outcome, provide positive comments to all the team, and ensure that athletes are prepared for the next game if necessary. These results provide clear guidelines regarding appropriate parental behaviors at youth sport competitions. Utilizing these findings to develop educational resources for parents may help to ensure that the behaviors parents display at competitions create the most supportive environment for youth sport teams.

Previous research has identified what behaviors parents display, or comments they make, during competitions (e.g., Bowker et al., 2009; Holt et al., 2008; Kidman et al., 1999). However, little consideration had been given to athletes' specific preferences for parental behaviors (Knight et al., 2010). The findings of the current study highlighted that coding parental behaviors positively or negatively is a difficult task. For example, athletes wanted their parents to provide positive encouragement during competition, but they did not want their parents to be excessively positive and draw attention to themselves for fear of causing embarrassment. It has generally been assumed in observations of parental behaviors that comments that reflect praise or encouragement are positive features of parental involvement (e.g., Bowker et al., 2009; Holt et al., 2008; Kidman et al., 1999). However, athletes' preferences for parental behaviors appear more complicated than may have been anticipated because, for example, excessive engagement as a "positive" behavior may not match athletes' preferences.

Athletes' preferences for parental behaviors varied in relation to temporal factors (i.e., before, during, or after competition). These findings suggest that a preference for parental behavior is not just the behavior per se, but a preference for displaying the behavior at the appropriate time, such as helping with physical and mental preparation before games. To our knowledge, this is the first study that has specifically addressed the different behaviors that athletes would like from their parents before, during, and after competitions. There are, however, some interesting parallels between the current findings and previous studies which have shown the stressors parents experience in relation to sport vary before, during, and after competition (Harwood & Knight, 2009a; Harwood & Knight, 2009b). For example, before competition, parental stressors include ensuring players are physically and mentally prepared for the game. During the game, the majority of stressors parents encounter are associated with controlling their own emotions and behaviors as they watch their children compete. Finally, post-competition stressors arise in relation to parents perceiving themselves to have a lack of skills to help children cope with the result of the game.

The time period following a competition may be particularly emotional for youth athletes and parents (Harwood & Knight, 2009a; Lauer et al., 2010). Thus, understanding how athletes would prefer parents to behave at this time is important to maximize athletes' positive reactions to competition. The current findings are consistent with previous research which has shown that parents should try to understand and "read" their children's emotions after games and provide feedback accordingly (Holt, Tamminen, Black, Mandigo, & Fox, 2009). Holt et al. suggested that such open communication was a sign of an autonomy-supportive parenting style (Grolnick, 2003).

Although this study was descriptive, several of the preferences reported appear to relate to theories of motivation and development. For example, findings relating to parents' encouraging the team, focusing on effort rather than outcome, and interacting positively with athletes during competitions reflect some of the hallmarks of a task-involved motivational climate.

Motivational climate represents the degree to which self-referenced success and improvement or norm-referenced achievement is encouraged, recognized, and rewarded within a social environment (Harwood, Spray, & Keegan, 2008). Interestingly, the current findings that relate to a task-involving climate were based on athletes' reported preferences for parental behavior during competition. By its very nature competition involves comparisons of ability against others—our findings therefore suggest that athletes wanted parents to perhaps help balance the comparative nature of competition by focusing more on effort and encouragement than the performance outcome.

Some findings also reflected the developmentally complex nature of parental and peer interactions in early adolescence. For example, issues such as maintaining control over emotions and not arguing with officials appeared to concern athletes because they could draw unwanted attention to themselves and their parents. This reflects the increasing importance of peer relationships during adolescence combined with the declining, yet still prominent, role of parents in sport (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), along with the acute self-consciousness adolescents may experience (Vernon, 2002). The importance of peers was also reflected by the fact that athletes wanted their parents to support all members of the team and not just their own children. Combined, the findings emphasize the fact that youth sport is a complex social environment and suggest that developmental studies of youth sport should take into account the interaction of multiple social agents in combination rather than in isolation (Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006b).

By focusing upon athletes' preferences for parental behaviors and how they varied before, during, and after competition, the findings of the current study address an important issue that may add to the literature. We suspect researchers need to consider the extent to which parents' actual behaviors match their children's preferences for parental behaviors. It is plausible that when parents' behaviors, and the timing of these behaviors, match children's preferences children would appraise their parents' behavior positively. Although this is a speculative conclusion that was not explicitly tested in the current study, it may help explain why different children could interpret the same parental behavior (e.g., cheering) in positive or negative ways. Teasing out the differences between preferred behaviors and actual behaviors within the temporal context of competitions may enable a more sophisticated study of parental behaviors, which can then be examined alongside different psychosocial variables (e.g., anxiety, enjoyment) and provide a greater understanding of the consequences of parental behaviors in sport.

A strength of the study was that athletes were from a narrow and conceptually similar age range (12–15 years), which helped to focus the findings around a specific developmental period during which parental involvement in sport becomes increasingly complex (see Côté, 1999). On the other hand, there was some variation in the athletes' experiences in sport, which was important given the remarkably consistent perspectives that were provided. Although the interviews were relatively short in duration, we recruited a sufficiently large sample to obtain an adequate level of data saturation. In fact, there was a high level of consistency between the athletes in terms of the findings we reported.

The results of this study should be judged in terms of certain limitations. We did not complete any member-checking interviews to confirm the veracity of our analyses with the participants. Additionally, whereas it is important to obtain young athletes' preferences for parental behavior to add to the literature, in the future it will also be important to compare athletes' preferences with how parents themselves believe they should behave at competitions. As with most qualitative studies, the concept of empirical generalizability does not apply. That is, these findings cannot be generalized far beyond the sample studied. Rather, the principle of naturalistic generalizability can be applied, which means that the findings may generalize to similar types of athletes in similar situations.

Another issue is that although there did not appear to be any differences in athletes' preferences for parental behaviors based upon parental gender, qualitative research designs are not particularly well-suited for assessing between group differences. Given that previous evidence has shown differences in children's perceptions of their parents' behaviors based upon the parents' gender (e.g., Babkes & Weiss, 1999; Leff & Hoyle, 1995; Sagar & Lavalley, 2010), it is likely that further research is required to understand how preferences for mothers' versus fathers' behaviors may vary.

The current findings may contribute to future research by demonstrating which behavioral preferences to assess before, during, and after competitions. Indeed, the primary contributions of the current study to the youth sport and applied sport psychology literature is that it revealed athletes' preferences for parental behaviors across different phases of competitions. These findings have the potential to inform practice and the development of educational materials for parents. We hope that by matching parents' behaviors with children's preferences parents will be able to create an enjoyable, team atmosphere at competitions, which will help athletes to perform and be confident and motivated.

FOOTNOTE

1. The final iteration of the results was influenced by feedback provided by the Associate Editor and two anonymous reviewers, to whom we are very grateful.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Icebreakers (discuss in a conversational manner)

- What is your name and how old are you?
- What sports do you play competitively and how long have you been playing them?
- How often do you train and compete for your sport?
- Which of your parents is most involved in your sport? (In all additional questions make specific reference to the parent (mother or father) the athlete identified as the most involved in their sport.)

Transition Questions: Parents at Games

First, I would like you to talk generally about parents' behaviors during sport events.

- When you have been competing (in said sport) have you ever seen any examples of really good parents? For example, parents who you feel were being very supportive of their child or who were behaving very well? Can you describe what you have seen?
(Probe: What makes these are good/positive things for parents to do?)
- Have you ever seen examples of parental behavior that you feel is inappropriate at sporting events? This does not have to refer to your own parents, but anything you have seen. Can you describe what you saw?
(Probe: What makes these are negative/bad things for parents to do?)

Parents' Behavior During Games

Now I want you to talk more specifically about your mother's/father's behaviors during your games. First, some short questions:

- How do you feel about your parents coming to watch you play?
(Probe: What do you like them doing? Would you like anything to be different?)
- Do you look at your parents when you are competing?
- Do you listen to what they say when you are competing?
- What kind of things do they say to you?
(Probe for children's thoughts and feelings in response to parents' comments)
- Do you ever notice your parents' 'body language' when you play? Body language includes things like how your parents are sitting, whether they are making any particular faces (whether they look happy, sad, angry), or if they are moving their arms around or sitting with their arms crossed
(Probe for children's thoughts and feelings in response to body language).

Now some slightly longer questions:

- What are some of the best things your parents do while you are competing?
(Probe: What do you like about them?)
- Are there any things you would like your parents to do differently while you are competing?
(Probe: What would you prefer them to do? What is it about this behavior that makes you want to change it?)
- Do you think your parents can influence your own performance in any way?
(If yes, how. If no, why not?)

Interviewer summarizes main behaviors that children reported they liked and disliked.

Parents' Behaviors During Games

Now I want to ask you about your changes in your mother's/father's behavior during games:

- Do you ever notice your parents' behavior changing during games?
(Probe: When you are winning, when you are losing, when it is close. How do behavior changes make you feel (e.g., nervous, tense, happy, relaxed etc)
- How would you like your parents to act during games?
(Probe: When you are winning, when you are losing, when it is close. Why?)

Parents' Behavior Before Games

Next I want to ask you about how your mother/father helps your preparation for games.

- Do your parents do anything before games that help you prepare?
(Probe for examples. Do they like what their parents do?)
- Is there anything you would like your parents to do differently before games?
(Probe for examples).
- Ideally, what would you like your parents to do before games?

Parents' Behavior After Games

Now I am going to ask you about your mother's/father's behaviors after games.

- What do you do when you have finished competing?
(Probe: do children react differently after a good/bad performance, a win or loss?)
- What things do your parents' do that you like after games?
(Probe for reasons children prefer certain behaviors).
- What things would you like your parents to do differently after games?
(Probe for reasons children prefer certain behaviors).
- How would you ideally like your parents to behave after games? What would you like them to say?

Ending Questions

- If you had a chance to tell your parents how they could help you when you are competing what would you say?
(Probe: Before a game, during a game, after a game)

Final Activity

- To summarize this interview and check we understood everything, we would like you to help us create a list of ‘dos and don’ts’ for parents in youth sport.

[At this point we will use a flip chart and write responses on paper. First children will be asked to list all the “do’s” which we will write down. The same process will be completed for the “don’t’s.” When the participants feel the list is complete, they will be thanked for their participation and the interview will end].