

What is it like to be a parent of an elite junior tennis player?

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an Interpretative Phenomenological Analyses (IPA) into the experiences of parents of elite junior tennis players. "Performance narratives" have received attention in professional sports settings, but research has yet to fully investigate the effects on parents of junior tennis players. Parents are a psychologically significant network member of coach-athlete relationships. Narrative theory states that through creating personal stories people can make sense of their lives. A "performance narrative" is a story of dedication to sport performance, where, winning, results, achievements are pre-eminent and link closely to the story tellers' identity. The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of 8 parents of elite junior tennis players and describe what it is like to be a parent in the elite junior tennis context. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of 8 parents of elite junior tennis players describes their experiences of elite junior tennis tournaments. This study found that (a) parents struggle with the development versus winning paradigm in junior tennis (b) "performance narratives" influence how parents evaluate player improvement (c) "performance narratives" influence parents' behaviours at competition. This paper recommends more face-to-face coach-parent communication to help parents adhere to development narratives and increasing the frequency / relevancy of parent education workshops that give a realistic depiction of the elite junior tennis pathway.

Key words: Junior tennis, Parent attitudes, Performance narratives.

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WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE A PARENT OF AN ELITE JUNIOR TENNIS PLAYER?

Parents are not merely a taxi service who ferry their children to tennis and sit disinterested whilst their child competes. Parents are a psychologically significant network member of coach-athlete relationships who give their young tennis playing children opportunity, support, and information that has a strong influence over coach-athlete dyads. The information that parents communicate to their children has a significant impact on their relationship with the coach and their enjoyment of tennis more generally (Jowett & Timson-Katchis, 2005). Coaches work tirelessly to give the best support to young tennis players so they can maximise their potential in tennis, but they cannot do it alone. Parents are critical in supporting their children to excel in tennis, and it is important governing bodies, coaching programmes, and coaches support parents along the junior tournament pathway to ensure consistent adherence to developmentally rich, coaching messages. Thus, parent education and support are crucial additives to develop and maintain effective coach-athlete relationships so young tennis players experience of tennis is as positive as possible.

Parents face significant emotional challenges in junior tennis when 'expected' tennis experiences, such as, improving, having fun, and enjoying competition are contradicted by 'actual' tennis experiences, such as, needing to win, the race for



selection, and comparison with peers on websites (Peet et al, 2013). For as long as junior sport has existed, there have been (and will continue to be) challenges with the development versus winning paradigm. In other words, do parents focus on skill acquisition as a measurement of development; or do parents focus on results / ranking as a measurement of development? The search for a "one size fits all approach is a

fools' errand", so how do we support parents in tennis while they try to learn, understand, accept and adapt to a unique sporting context, whilst seeking the most appropriate balance of coaching, competing, learning, improving, developing, and enjoying, for their child (Cassidy, Jones, & Potrac, 2016).

Increased support for parents that is considerate of the nuances of competitive junior tennis can help them focus on healthy development narratives for their child's development. Development narratives tell a story of commitment to improvement and long-term personal development – often rewarding improvement over results (Douglas & Carless, 2012). Junior tennis is known to have a competition system which prioritises ranking / selection / representation (Lauer et al., 2010); rely on considerable financial investment from parents (Dunn et al., 2016); contain high levels of interpersonal conflict (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005; Smoll, Cumming, & Smith, 2011); and display contradictory values associated with development and winning (Gowling, 2019). Without careful monitoring and criticality of the conscious or sub-conscious messages that parents absorb along the junior tennis journey, it is possible that flawed learning outcomes are internalised and 'winning' takes on too much importance in the mind of parents.

Research must consider the effects of performance narratives on the behaviours of people who are most responsible for supporting children through competitive junior tennis – the parents. Performance narratives provide a story of dedication to sport performance, where, winning, results, achievements are pre-eminent and link closely to the story teller's identity (Douglas & Carless, 2012). Tennis is an expensive sport where early specialisation is common, and this presents challenges for parents due to sustained exposure to a competitive environment where win / loss ratios, points, and rankings are unavoidable phenomena.

Increasing education around the effect of performance narratives on parent attitudes, would improve the support for parents struggling to 'make sense' of a competitive environment that promotes rankings and tournament acceptance, whilst simultaneously encouraging parents to be patient and prioritise performance over winning. Furthermore, a deeper understanding of existing narratives in junior tennis will enable governing bodies, coach educators, coaches, and parents to communicate narratives which are appropriate for long-term, positive, emotional development of junior tennis players no matter what their aspirations in tennis are, for example, developmental narratives.

This paper looks at the experiences of 8 parents of elite junior tennis players and highlights challenges associated with the development versus winning paradigm in junior tennis.

METHOD

This study was an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of 8 parents of elite junior tennis players in the UK. The participants included 3 males and 5 females. Participants were parents of elite junior tennis players, and this was defined as competing at national level competition and above (Rees et al., 2016). Interviews were semi-structured, and the aim was to understand parental experiences of elite junior tennis competitions, for example "do you enjoy taking your child to competitions?" Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 90 minutes and were audio recorded. Interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim, printed out, and analysed following the IPA procedure, namely: (1) reading and re-reading

transcripts, (2) initial noting, (3) developing emergent themes, (4) searching for connections across emergent themes, (5) looking for patterns across cases. (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The results section includes pseudonyms to ensure participants anonymity.

RESULTS

There are three main findings: (a) parents struggle with the development versus winning paradigm in junior tennis (b) "performance narratives" influence how parents evaluate player improvement (c) "performance narratives" influence parents' behaviours at competition.

PARENTS STRUGGLING WITH THE DEVELOPMENT VERSUS WINNING PARADIGM

A core value for parents along the junior tennis pathway is to promote their child's best interests. Parents try to adequately balance their involvement and promote their child's best interests by providing them with the opportunity to play the necessary hours to develop their tennis in a healthy environment (Knight, Berrow, & Harwood, 2017). However, parents question the real values inherent within junior tennis compared with their expected values. Amy said "Everyone, says it's about the process. But it isn't. It's about the winning. It doesn't feel like there is a long term outlook. It is about who wins now." Consistently, parents described issues in trying to understand the real values in junior tennis.

An unsolved question in broader junior sports conversations relates to the development versus winning paradigm. 'Trust the process' is a phrase often used within sports coaching, and it neatly summarises an attitude towards long term personal development and maximising human potential. The day-to-day reality of junior tennis challenged parents' belief in idealistic statements. Brian said, "how do you tell your child not to worry about the result and just play, when everything eventually comes down to their rating or ranking, and this will limit their opportunities to play tournaments?" There was a unanimous trend throughout the responses for parents to perceive tournament acceptance at the highest graded events as evidence they were giving their children with the best opportunity to develop in tennis. Mary said, "If you don't get into the highest graded tournaments, you don't get the best matches. You fall behind." It appeared difficult for parents to separate tournament acceptance from their perception of providing their children with the best opportunity to develop their tennis.

Continually the parents described internal conflict between wanting to prioritise long-term growth and a perceived pressure to achieve results for tournament acceptance. There was evidence of financial pressure influencing the responses. Colin said, "I understand that you can't put pressure on them (children), but you have to win matches, to get into the tournaments, to justify the investment. It's this vicious circle you can't get out of". Previous studies have shown that junior tennis players are hyper-aware of the financial sacrifices that parents make for their tennis participation which acts as a stressor during matches (Gowling, 2021). The parents described a financial pressure associated with junior tennis as an influence on how they assess the effectiveness of training. Nicky said, "Something has to give. We (family) understand there isn't a formula for success, but we don't have a limitless pot of money". A mix of confused messaging around the importance of results and financial pressures were a strongly

associated with the parents' discomfort with the development versus winning paradigm.

PERFORMANCE NARRATIVES INFLUENCE HOW PARENTS EVALUATE PLAYER IMPROVEMENT

The attitudes, beliefs, and values of parents have a powerful influence on the effectiveness of coach-athlete relationships. Without consistent communication from coaches and careful monitoring of shared goals, it is possible the flawed values can be internalised by parents along the journey, which may interfere with coaching messages. Performance narratives can steer parents off track from coach driven goals aimed at long term development. For example, Tony said, "You do lose perspective after a while. The whole environment seems to push you towards equating improvement with a better ranking." Sustaining their personal values such as provision of opportunity, lifelong learning, learning to cope with defeat, improvement through practice, enjoying what you do, taking pride in your performance, was challenging for the parents when they felt pressure to use results as measurement of improvement. Lucy said, "It feels quite toxic when you're at tournaments. I try to stay well away from the 'who has beaten who' conversations but even then, I find myself checking out results. You just want your kids to do well." Constant communication of development goals is required to help parents maintain the long-term perspective and focus on development above winning.

Coaches may find that development goals set at the beginning of a training block, are usurped by an innocent switch to short term prioritisation of results to gain entry to a higher graded event. Colin said, "xxx (child) had the goal of playing in a grade 1. We needed some more points to get there, so we had to do the miles. I felt daft doing it, but it was good for xxx's confidence to feel like he's part of the crowd." Parents feel an internal conflict between focussing on development goals (improvement) and outcome goals (results) causing them anxiety. Their anxiety related to what they should do for the benefit of their children, the goals set by their coach, and the mismatch with what they perceived the competition system to demand from them to provide opportunities for their children. Nicky said, "Her coach told her not to play but if she didn't play, she'd miss out on getting into xxx (competition). What do you do? She'd have been devastated to miss out". Support for parents must provide reassurance to commit to long-term, development goals over short term focus on gaining points.

PERFORMANCE NARRATIVES INFLUENCE PARENTS' BEHAVIOURS AT COMPETITION

The emotional climate and parent behaviours have a strong influence on children's experience tennis (Knight & Holt, 2014). There have been studies used to develop models of best practice for parent behaviours at competition born out of an understanding that negative parenting behaviours result in negative learning outcomes for children (Armour, 2013). It is not the aim of this paper to add to the list of dos and do nots of parenting in junior sport. This paper adds to a growing body of literature, which offers an illustration of performance narratives adding to the over-emphasis on results amongst parents.

Understanding performance narratives and how they permeate youth sport can give coaches the knowledge and confidence to educate parents who are struggling to make

sense of a competition system containing contradictory values and behaviours. Colin said, "It can be a toxic environment for everyone. Kids are desperate to win. Coaches are desperate for their players to win. We as parents, aren't immune either. There is a lot of questionable behaviour from everyone at tournaments." Sarah described a similar set of experiences, "When you see the environment and how people behave, you do question why you are doing it." Observations of a negative / tense environment around competitions were prevalent throughout the responses and Mary highlighted over emphasis on winning as the primary cause. Mary said, "I thought this was meant to be fun. My whole body is tense at tournaments. You have to walk away sometimes when you see other parents trying to put kids off, just so their child can win. It's pathetic." Research has shown that children are aware of the behaviours of spectators at competition, and they will formulate their own ideas about what is important to them based on how others behave (Knight & Holt, 2014). If children witness emotional and 'toxic' behaviours at competition from adults who become overly involved in matches, it could potentially confirm in their mind that winning is most the important thing.

The data in this study shows that there is a long way to go to ensure parents adhere to development narratives at competition. Colin said, "It's toxic. We all want our kids to win but some of the desperation in the parents' behaviour is quite shocking. You feel for the kids". Further studies are needed to highlight the gritty reality lived by parents at competitions and illustrate the effects of performance narratives on behaviour at competition.

DISCUSSION

The data in this study illustrates parents of junior tennis players struggling to balance contradictory narratives (e.g., development and performance narratives). Over reliance on winning to assess improvement makes it difficult to stay focussed on development goals, informs attitudes toward player improvement, and contributes to negative behaviours at competition. There are two main recommendations from this paper.

First, early specialisation and sustained participation in the competition system are strong influences on parents understanding of the values within junior tennis. Parents are conflicted by the development versus winning paradigm within junior sport and struggle to balance long-term player development with a perceived need to gain entry to the highest graded competitions. Consistent, face-to-face coach-parent communication is necessary to maintain a cohesive support network around junior tennis players and ensure adherence to developmental narratives which prioritise long-term player development over seeking short term approaches aimed at solely gaining wins / points.

Second, a desire to provide their children with the best opportunity to develop was associated with emphasis on gaining acceptance into the highest graded competitions. Parents described feeling pressure to prioritise results because playing in higher graded was closely associated with their understanding of player improvement. Increasing the frequency of parent education workshops would help to support parents who are trying to provide their children with the best opportunity to develop in tennis. Clubs and academies can host more parent education workshops that take a bold approach and include realistic depictions of

the gritty reality of the competition environment which (a) highlight negative behaviours associated with performance narratives, (b) illustrate the effect negative behaviours have on player development, (c) promote the benefits of long-term, developmental narratives.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this research contribute to an evolving, problematic epistemology of junior tennis coaching and confirms that the attitudes of parents of young tennis players are influenced by performance narratives. Parents struggle with the development versus winning paradigm in junior tennis and performance narratives influence how parents evaluate player improvement and their behaviour around competition. The findings recommend increased parent support through increasing face-to-face coach parent interactions and parent education workshops. Failure to address the influence of performance narratives in junior tennis and increase the frequency of parent support threatens the experiences of parents and their children in tennis. Further work must be done to monitor the influence of performance narratives in junior tennis, and to alleviate the misuse / misapplication of tournament systems that places too much emphasis on winning and rankings in the eyes of parents.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND FUNDING

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