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1 Running Head: PARENTAL BEHAVIORS IN TEAM SPORTS

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

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1 Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

11 Furthermore, little is known about *when* parents should engage in different types of
12 behaviors. It is plausible that children prefer different types of parental behaviors in the periods
13 before, during, and after competition, but research has yet to clearly articulate these issues.
14 Although there is a well-developed body of parenting literature in sport psychology, several
15 researchers agree that more work is needed to identify the specific behaviors that athletes find
16 supportive (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2008; Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi,
17 2008). By identifying sport-specific parenting principles more practical knowledge and guidance
18 can be provided to parents (Lauer, Gould, Roman, & Pierce, 2010).

19 Parents may be unsure of how to behave, or what types of behaviors their children want
20 them to display (Harwood & Knight, 2009a). One result is that parents may unintentionally
21 behave in inappropriate ways at competitions (Wiersma & Fifer, 2008). Although negative
22 parental behaviors do not outweigh positive behaviors, negative behaviors clearly do occur. For
23 example, a self-report survey of 189 sports parents identified that 13% of parents had criticized

1 their child's performance (Shields, Bredemeier, LaVoi, & Power, 2005). Similarly, over 20% of
2 101 tennis parents reported displaying negative behaviors towards their child after a match
3 (DeFrancesco & Johnson, 1997).

4 Observational studies recording the comments parents made during competitions have
5 further indicated the behaviors parents display. For example, Kidman, McKenzie, and McKenzie
6 (1999) recorded the comments made by approximately 250 parents of 6-12 year olds at 147 team
7 sport competitions. Overall, 47.2% of parents' comments were coded as positive, 34.5% were
8 negative, and the remainder were neutral. Extending this research, Holt, Tamminen, Black, Sehn,
9 and Wall (2008) observed 120 hours of youth soccer competitions for youth aged 10-14 years.
10 Holt et al. found parents provided praise and encouragement (35% of comments), performance
11 contingent feedback (5%), instructions (35%), a balance between positive and negative remarks
12 (10%), negative comments (10%), and derogatory comments (5%). Most recently, Bowker et al.
13 (2009) observed parents of 11-14 year olds at 69 youth hockey games and coded the comments
14 heard. Generally consistent with previous research, the majority of comments (66%) were
15 classified as positive and 33% were classified as negative.

16 The aforementioned observational studies provide useful insights into the types of
17 comments parents made and the behaviors they displayed during competition. However, they
18 provide few insights into the types of parental behaviors athletes would prefer. A recent study of
19 42 male and female 12-15 year old tennis players sought to identify what types of parental
20 behaviors they preferred during competitions (Knight et al., in press). Findings showed that, as
21 an overarching principle, players liked their parents to be supportive without placing undue
22 pressure upon them. Specific preferences were that parents should not provide technical and
23 tactical advice, but they should comment on effort and attitude, provide practical advice, respect

1 tennis etiquette, and match nonverbal behaviors with supportive comments. Clearly, athletes
2 preferred certain behaviors at tennis competitions.

3 The Knight et al. (in press) study was conducted in an individual sport (tennis), which is
4 played in a relatively confined area with a small number of competitors and spectators. It
5 remains unknown whether the findings would apply to team sport settings. In fact, the majority
6 of our information regarding parental behaviors in youth sport has been gained from individual
7 sports (e.g., Bois et al., 2009; Gould et al., 1996, 2006, 2008; Leff & Hoyle, 1995; Woolger &
8 Power, 2000). Parent-child interactions in team sports are different to individual sports (Lauer et
9 al., 2010). In team sports parental behaviors are witnessed by teammates and may influence
10 teammates as well as a parent's own child's performance and feelings (Omli & LaVoi, 2009).
11 Athletes are also likely to have developed friendships and relationships with their team mates
12 and desire their acceptance (Partridge, Brustad, & Babkes Stelliano, 2008). Thus, the importance
13 of parents behaving in an acceptable manner at team events may be even more important than in
14 individual sports because it is a more social environment and behaviors can be witnessed by and
15 influence other athletes. Although the observational studies reported above (i.e., Bowker et al.,
16 2009; Holt et al., 2008) were conducted in team settings, they recorded parents' comments and
17 did not specifically examine athletes' preferences for parental behaviors.

18 It is particularly important to examine early adolescent (approximately 12 to 15 years
19 old) athletes' preferences for parental behaviors at team sport competitions. During this period
20 athletes are frequently engaged in competition and parents take an active interest in their
21 children's competitive sporting involvement (Côté, 1999). Athletes are highly attuned to their
22 parents' feedback and behaviors, especially before and after competitions when the atmosphere
23 can be emotionally charged (Lauer et al., 2010). Adolescent athletes may be particularly

1 obtaining in-depth accounts of participants' subjective perceptions of social settings and is
2 appropriate for understanding relatively unexamined issues (Patton, 2002).

3 *Participants*

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

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

1 this parent. Sixteen participants discussed their mothers' behaviors, 11 participants discussed
2 their fathers' behaviors and 9 participants discussed both their parents' behaviors (because they
3 reported that both parents were equally involved).

4 *Procedure*

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

11 *Data Collection*

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

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

1 recommended when working with children because they provide a different way for them to
2 express their opinions (Colucci, 2007). Participants were asked to compile a list of parental ‘do’s
3 and don’t’s.’ This activity helped summarize responses and was incorporated as a verification
4 technique into the analysis. Excluding the time taken to explain the procedure, collect
5 demographic information and answer study-related questions, interviews lasted for, on average,
6 35 minutes.

7 Due to ethical requirements, interviews were scheduled during camp lunch breaks to
8 ensure children did not miss out on any instructional time. In order to accommodate the logistics
9 and ensure all willing participants could be interviewed a team of four interviewers were
10 available. Twenty nine interviews were conducted by the two lead researchers. Seven interviews
11 were conducted by research assistants. The interviewing team were thoroughly prepared to
12 ensure a consistent understanding and execution of the interview guide. All interviewers had
13 received prior training and experience conducting qualitative research interviews in the past. In
14 order to prepare for this specific study the four researchers met to discuss the purpose of the
15 study, review the interview guide, and ask any questions about the study. Each interviewer then
16 reviewed the interview guide and independently met with a lead researcher (the first author) to
17 practice questions and receive specific advice regarding probes or additional interview questions.

18 *Data Analysis*

19 Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcribing
20 service. Transcripts were checked for accuracy and any personal identifying information was
21 removed. Pseudonyms were assigned to transcripts to help ensure participant anonymity. The
22 transcripts were then read and reread by the lead researcher to ensure her immersion in the data.
23 Data analysis was conducted by two researchers (the lead researcher and first co-author) working

1 together. The two researchers independently coded the first two transcripts and met to compare
2 their coding. Each researcher then independently coded five more transcripts before meeting to
3 discuss the dimensions and themes they had identified and agree upon a coding scheme.

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

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

19 *Methodological Rigor*

20 Techniques were conducted during and following analysis to enhance the rigor of data
21 analysis. First, the results were produced by researchers working as a team. This was necessary
22 because the first author had previously conducted a similar study with a different population of
23 athletes, and she was concerned that some preconceived ideas may be forced upon the data.

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

15 Results

16 We present three general categories of athletes' preferences for parental behavior
17 organized temporally. Athletes' preferences for parental behaviors before competition, during
18 competition, and after competition are reported. Before competition parental behaviors related to
19 preparation for the upcoming game. During competition behaviors related to the need for parents
20 to carefully monitor their involvement. In monitoring their involvement there were clear
21 examples of behaviors parents should and should not engage in. Thus, the preferred behaviors
22 during competitions are presented as parental do's and don't's. Finally, preferred behaviors after
23 competitions were related to the provision of feedback by parents. In addition to presenting the

1 behaviors that athletes prefer from parents we have included quotes to illustrate the
2 consequences of parents either displaying or not displaying certain behaviors. These
3 consequences are in relation to individual athletes and the overall team and provided some
4 insight into the reasons *why* athletes preferred certain behaviors.

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

11 ***Before The Competition***

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

15 ***Help Athletes Physically Prepare for Competitions.*** ($n = 30$ athletes). Parents could help
16 athletes prepare physically for competitions by completing some fairly simple and basic
17 functions. For example, as Hailey said, it could simply be a case of her mom helping her to "Get
18 ready and make sure I'm on time and get me prepared and all that stuff." Samantha described
19 another specific function when she said a positive behavior from her father was that he "Tapes
20 my ankles for every game, and he always makes me drink a lotta water." Athletes reported that
21 appropriate parental assistance in physically preparing for games could have an influence on
22 performance. Heather highlighted this when she suggested that, in the absence of proper
23 preparation from parents, her teammates would "Be really tired and miserable...they wouldn't

1 play as well.” Similarly, Crystal explained that parents help the whole team when they make sure
2 “They’re [athletes] all ready, so they’re not worrying about anything and like help them to eat
3 well so that they’re feeling good before their game... just make sure they’re prepared.”

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

15 The above examples suggest that parents could (presumably unintentionally) create
16 anxiety by discussing performance before the competition. In fact, athletes expressed a
17 preference for parents helping them to relax. Alex said, “Like before a game, if I’m just like
18 nervous, just like cheer for me and say something positive so I relax.” Kim wanted her parents to
19 enhance her confidence before games, “Just make me feel good and confident, that helps me play
20 better... just say ‘It’ll be fine, you’ll do well.’” Thus, parents could clearly play a role in helping
21 their children with mental preparation, and as Lindsay explained, “Sometimes I’ve gone to
22 games without my parents and I’m always way worse, ‘cause I’m so nervous and jumpy I drop

1 the ball.” It seems that the key issue was that athletes wanted their parents to understand how to
2 help them prepare mentally, which primarily involved helping them to relax.

3 *During the Competition*

4 Athletes’ preferences for parental behaviors during competitions were complex. Although,
5 in general, athletes wanted parents to take a ‘step back’ as competitions began. They identified
6 several specific preferences for behaviors parents should and should not display. In order to
7 organize these findings in a logical manner we separated the themes in terms of ‘dos’ and
8 ‘don’t’s.’ We identified four behaviors that athletes would like parents to display during
9 competition (i.e., the ‘dos’) and three behaviors that athletes would prefer parents not display
10 (i.e., the ‘don’ts’)

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

19 Supporting the entire team was perceived to have a positive influence on the team. For
20 example, Erin explained, “I think it [support] brings the whole team up. I think everyone is able
21 to play better because you’re kind of excited that, that, people are supporting you.” Natasha
22 compared the level of support she perceived from all the parents on two teams she had played
23 for. She said, “Like I didn’t have that [team support from parents] for my volleyball team really

1 but for my basketball team we had that and I think it makes you a closer team and you work
2 harder together.” Ainsley shared the same perspective and said, “All the parents on our team
3 were there and every time we’d get a basket they would cheer and we’d, it’d just make us feel
4 happy and feel so good and made us go harder.”

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

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

19 ***Do: Interact Positively With Athletes Throughout The Game.*** ($n = 34$ athletes).
20 Encouragement for the team is displayed through positive interactions with athletes throughout
21 competitions. As Annie explained, “[Parents should] keep on being positive, like don’t say
22 anything negative like ‘cause you’re already under like a whole lot of pressure and just more
23 negative, or negativity would just like crack them.” Athletes appraised instances of parents

1 criticizing during competitions in a very negative light. As Sarah stated, “Sometimes parents,
2 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
3 this or something.’ Just be more encouraging and positive about it.”

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

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

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

19 Claire expanded on this point, saying, “Sometimes they just get outta control and stuff and I’ve
20 seen, some of the hockey games, I’ve seen parents from other sides physically fight over games,
21 that’s not cool.” Jaime had a similar story, “Parents get really into it and like yell at each other
22 and then there was like a fight between a couple of people... I’m just like, ew, you know, that
23 was a bit weird, I don’t think that’s really mature.”

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

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

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

9 ***Do Not: Argue With Officials.*** ($n = 31$ athletes). We found that athletes viewed parents
10 arguing with referees as a distraction and a source of embarrassment. For example, Josie referred
11 to a situation when her dad had some issues with a referee and as she explained, “He [dad] did
12 get in a fight with the ref. I was like ‘You’re being an idiot.’ It was kind of embarrassing.” Later
13 in her interview Josie returned to this idea and said “I think like cheering and stuff’s OK and if
14 you’re into it like you can like say, ‘That was a foul,’ but you have to like drop it there. You
15 can’t, you shouldn’t be arguing with the ref.” And Paige explained that parents arguing with the
16 referee “Is pretty disrespectful. It makes me feel ashamed that they’re doing that for the, my
17 team.” Hailey agreed with these perspectives when she said, “What’s even worse is when the
18 parents start arguing with the ref. ‘Cause one, that’s kind of embarrassing for the kids ‘cause
19 pushy parents, but it’s also the ref’s job and what the ref says goes.”

20 ***After the Competition***

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

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

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

22 When providing this more evaluative individual feedback athletes indicated needing their
23 parents to time their comments appropriately. Hailey explained, “They [parents] need to be able

1 to read their kids... So when the parents can pick-up on that and just leave you be and let you
2 focus then that's good." Crystal also explored this idea, she said "Sometimes at first I'm just like
3 really upset, they still try to talk to me in the car and I'm like, 'Can we just talk about it later?'
4 And then they just try to talk about it later." In general it appeared that parents should first
5 recognize that athletes wanted some time with their teammates immediately following games.
6 For example, Chloe said, "If we have like a team meet, like when we have our team meeting
7 outside like don't go out because it's just the team."

8 Discussion

9 This study examined early adolescent female athletes' preferences for parental behaviors
10 at team sport competitions. Findings were organized temporally in terms of athletes' preferences
11 before, during, and after competitions. Before competitions athletes prefer parents ensure they
12 are physically and mentally prepared for the competition so the team has the best chance of being
13 successful. During games, maintaining a positive and relaxed environment was important for
14 athletes. This could be done by parents providing positive and encouraging reactions and
15 interacting with officials in a positive way. Behaviors parents display should not distract from
16 the game or attract excessive attention. Following games parents should allow the team time to
17 process the game outcome, provide positive comments to all the team, and ensure that athletes
18 are prepared for the next game if necessary. These results provide clear guidelines regarding
19 appropriate parental behaviors at youth sport competitions. Utilizing these findings to develop
20 educational resources for parents may help to ensure that the behaviors parents display at
21 competitions create the most supportive environment for youth sport teams.

22 Previous research has identified what behaviors parents display, or comments they make,
23 during competitions (e.g., Bowker et al., 2009; Holt et al., 2008; Kidman et al., 1999). However,

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

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

1 stressors arise in relation to parents perceiving themselves to have a lack of skills to help children
2 cope with the result of the game.

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

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

22 A strength of the study was that athletes were from a narrow and conceptually significant
23 age range (12-15 years), which helped to focus the findings around a specific developmental

1 period during which parental involvement in sport becomes increasingly complex (see Côté,
2 1999). On the other hand, there was some variation in the athletes' experiences in sport, which
3 was important given the remarkably consistent perspectives that were provided. Although the
4 interviews were relatively short in duration, we recruited a sufficiently large sample to obtain an
5 adequate level of data saturation. In fact, there was a high level of consistency between the
6 athletes in terms of the findings we reported.

7 The results of this study should be judged in terms of certain limitations. Due to the fact
8 we collected data from children attending summer camps and, due to REB requirements, we
9 were unable to obtain personal information (such as e-mail addresses), we did not complete any
10 member-checking interviews to confirm the veracity of our analyses. Additionally, whereas it is
11 important to obtain young athletes' preferences for parental behavior to add to the literature, in
12 the future it will also be important to compare athletes' preferences with how parents themselves
13 believe they should behave at competitions. As with most qualitative studies, the concept of
14 empirical generalizability does not apply. That is, these findings cannot be generalized far
15 beyond the sample studied. Rather, the principle of naturalistic generalizability can be applied,
16 which means that the findings may generalize to similar types of athletes in similar situations.

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

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

9

1 Footnote

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

4

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4

5

1 Appendix A: Interview Guide

2 Icebreakers

- 3 • What is your name and how old are you?
- 4 • What sports do you play competitively and how long have you been playing them?
- 5 • How often do you train and compete for your sport?
- 6 • Which of your parents is most involved in your sport? (In all additional questions make
- 7 reference to the parent that is identified as most involved in the athletes' sport)
- 8

9 Transition questions: Parents at games

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

- 11 • When you have been competing (in said sport) have you ever seen any examples of really
- 12 good parents? For example, parents who you feel were being very supportive of their
- 13 child or who were behaving very well? Can you describe what you have seen?
- 14 (Probe: What makes these are good/positive things for parents to do?)
- 15 • Have you ever seen examples of parental behavior that you feel is inappropriate at
- 16 sporting events? This does not have to refer to your own parents, but anything you have
- 17 seen. Can you describe what you saw?
- 18 (Probe: What makes these are negative/bad things for parents to do?)
- 19

20 Parents' behavior during games

21 Now we want you to talk more specifically about your mother/fathers behaviors during your

22 games. First, some short questions:

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

34 Now so slightly longer questions:

- 35 • What are some of the best things your parents do while you are competing?
- 36 (Probe: What do you like about them?)
- 37 • Are there any things you would like your parents to do differently while you are
- 38 competing?
- 39 (Probe: What would you prefer them to do? What is it about this?)
- 40 • Do you think your parents can influence your own performance in any way?
- 41 (If yes, how. If no, why not?)
- 42

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

1 Parents' behaviors during games

2 Now we want to ask you if your parents' behavior changes during games:

- 3 • Do you ever notice your parents' behavior changing during games?
4 (Probe: When you are winning, when you are losing, when it is close.
5 How do behavior changes make you feel (e.g. nervous, tense, happy, relaxed etc)
6 • How would you like your parents to act during games?
7 (Probe: When you are winning, when you are losing, when it is close. Why?)
8

9 Parents' behavior before games

10 Next we want to ask you about how your parents might help you prepare for games.

- 11 • Do your parents do anything before games that help you prepare?
12 (Probe for examples. Do they like what their parents do?)
13 • Is there anything you would like your parents to do differently before games?
14 (Probe for examples).
15 • What would you like your parents to do before games?
16

17 Parents' behavior after games

18 Now we are going to ask about parents behaviors after games.

- 19 • What do you do when you have finished competing?
20 (Probe: do children react differently after a good/bad performance, a win or loss?)
21 • What things do your parents' do that you like after games?
22 (Probe for reasons children prefer certain behaviors).
23 • What things would you like your parents to do differently after games?
24 (Probe for reasons children prefer certain behaviors).
25 • How would you ideally like your parents to behave after games? What would you like
26 them to say?
27

28 Ending questions

- 29 • If you had a chance to tell your parents how they could help you when you are competing
30 what would you say? (Probe: Before a game, during a game, after a game)
31

32 Final Activity

- 33 • In order to summarize this interview and check we understood everything, we would like
34 you to help us create a list of 'dos and don'ts' for parents in youth sport.
35 [At this point we will use a flip chart and write responses on paper. First children will be
36 asked to list all the 'dos' which we will write down. The same process will be completed for
37 the 'don'ts'. When the participants feel the list is complete, they will be thanked for their
38 participation and the interview will end].
39
40