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### **Paper:**

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1 Running Head: LESSONS FOR SPORT PARENTS

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8 The experiences of being a talented youth athlete: Lessons for parents

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## Abstract

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Involvement in organized sport can be highly demanding for young athletes who encounter many difficult situations and stressors. This can be exacerbated among youth athletes who have been recruited into talent-identification youth sport programs. Given that there are a range of negative consequences that can result when talent-identified (TI) youth athletes are unable to cope with the stressors they encounter, additional support is therefore necessary. Parents are uniquely situated to assist in this regard, but they are not always equipped to provide optimal levels of support. Therefore, the aim of this study was to understand the experiences of being a TI youth athlete and present the findings as ‘lessons’ for parents seeking to enhance their involvement in TI youth sport settings. This paper reports on qualitative data collected from the first year of a three-year longitudinal study involving TI youth athletes from South Australia. A total of 50 male athletes (M age = 14.6 years) participated in focus groups to hear their experiences of being a TI youth athlete and understand what difficulties they want their parents to know. From the thematic analysis, three major themes were identified from the focus groups with TI youth athletes: (a) Difficulties with being talented, (b) negotiating the future, and (c) playing for improvement. From the findings, a number of lessons for parents and youth sport organizations are offered to assist the transmission of knowledge to an applied setting.

38           Involvement in organized sport can be highly demanding for young athletes. For  
39 example, athletes may encounter stressors including injury, parental expectations,  
40 inconsistent coaching behavior, and fluctuating training performance (Hayward, Knight, &  
41 Mellalieu, 2016). For talent-identified<sup>1</sup> (TI) youth athletes, particularly those in development  
42 and elite programs, there can also be additional stressors associated with sport. For example,  
43 many TI youth athletes engage in specialized programs at a young age and often experience  
44 role strain as they seek to balance academic study and increasing sporting demands  
45 (Kristiansen, 2017; Van Rens, Borkoles, Farrow, Curran, & Polman, 2016). Further, some TI  
46 youth athletes will encounter the challenging situation of being deselected in competitive  
47 sport (Neely, McHugh, Dunn, & Holt, 2017). Such deselection can be especially difficult for  
48 youth athletes who ‘pin’ their hopes on an athletic career as they progress through and  
49 (unwittingly) toward the end of their involvement in the talent development pathway (Brown  
50 & Potrac, 2009).

51           Given the negative consequences that can arise when athletes are unable to cope with  
52 the stressors they encounter (Hayward et al., 2016), finding ways to help youth athletes cope  
53 is important (Tamminen & Holt, 2010). Parents appear to be uniquely placed to support them  
54 in this regard (cf. Tamminen & Holt, 2012). Most parents are firmly involved by attending  
55 games, helping with team fundraising, and partaking in voluntary roles such as coach, trainer,  
56 or manager (Jeffery-Tosoni, Fraser-Thomas, & Baker, 2015). Parents are also involved  
57 ‘behind the scenes’ before and after competition, encouraging particular dietary behaviors  
58 and engaging in post-game debriefs (Elliott & Drummond, 2016; Elliott, Velardo,  
59 Drummond, & Drummond, 2016). In elite settings, parents also provide youth support by  
60 carefully considering how best to manage the increased responsibilities as a sport parent

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<sup>1</sup> Within this paper, talent-identified (TI) athletes are those who are identified by coaches as having the potential to develop toward a professional career in Australian football (AFL). Being involved in a TI program entails players receiving additional opportunities to experience high forms of competition, increased training loads, and greater access to education and highly credentialed coaches on a pathway toward the elite level.

61 (Clarke & Harwood, 2014). Despite widely held beliefs that parental involvement decreases  
62 as youth get older and/or progress into elite programs, in reality, the sport parenting role  
63 changes but continues to influence both sporting performance and psychosocial outcomes  
64 (Dorsch, Lowe, Dotterer, Lyons, & Barker, 2016). Parents therefore play an important role in  
65 supporting young athletes' transition into more specialized sport programs (Pummell,  
66 Harwood, & Lavalley, 2008).

67         Given the extent of the roles parents fulfil, it is perhaps not surprising, then, that  
68 parents exert a significant influence on motivation, behavior, and psychological growth in  
69 sport (Lauer, Gould, Roman, & Pierce, 2010). However, parents' capacity to support TI  
70 youth athletes is not always guaranteed. Many parents struggle to know what to say and how  
71 to respond to children seeking social support to cope with sport-related stress (Hayward et al.,  
72 2016). Further, it is possible that the support parents provide may be inhibited by their own  
73 stress experiences in youth sport (Burgess, Knight, & Mellalieu, 2016). Such stress has the  
74 potential to influence how parents behave at youth sport events and ultimately, impact the  
75 nature and quality of their involvement (Harwood & Knight, 2015). So while some parents  
76 are well equipped to support their child, others require more information about how they can  
77 help youth athletes cope with their experiences (Knight & Holt, 2013).

78         Parents may also struggle to support TI athletes because they fail to understand their  
79 child's sport experience. For example, it is not uncommon for parents and children to have  
80 conflicting views about supportive and pressuring parenting styles in youth sport (Kanters,  
81 Bocarro, & Casper, 2008). Parents can also fail to provide verbal support at times that are  
82 most appropriate for youth (Elliott & Drummond, 2016; Knight, Neely, & Holt, 2011).  
83 Moreover, parents also perceive their own behavior differently to other parent spectators and  
84 child participants (Elliott & Drummond, 2013; Lauer et al., 2010). One consequence of this is  
85 that parents can potentially perpetuate attitudes and behaviors that exert a negative influence

86 onto others without knowing. Those parents who are unaware of their influence may  
87 subsequently feel even more uncertainty regarding how to behave at future youth sport events  
88 (Harwood & Knight, 2009a). For parents of TI youth athletes especially, this is a crucial  
89 consideration given that parental involvement remains central to achieving elite status in  
90 youth sport (Holt & Knight, 2014).

91         One way to address this is by providing parents further information and guidance to  
92 enhance their involvement in their child's sport (Knight & Holt, 2013). According to Knight  
93 and Holt (2014), additional informational support can help parents seeking to create an  
94 understanding emotional climate, which is conceptualized as an environment in which  
95 parents strive to demonstrate an understanding of children's sporting experiences. This  
96 includes understanding the challenges inherent in competitive sport, the intricacies associated  
97 with athlete development and performance, the influence of external factors on sport  
98 experiences, and how sport 'fits' within children's lives (Knight & Holt, 2014). The creation  
99 of such an understanding emotional climate is foundational to optimal parental involvement  
100 in sport and thus, efforts that lead to an increase in parents' understanding of children's  
101 sporting experiences are certainly encouraged.

102         To this end, there is value in listening to the voices of TI youth athletes about their  
103 perceptions and experiences of sport and presenting these as vital lessons for parents. For  
104 instance, a Canadian study by Knight, Boden, and Holt (2010) examined youth tennis  
105 players' preferred parental behaviors and found that parents should avoid providing technical  
106 and tactical advice but should provide practical advice and match non-verbal behaviors with  
107 supportive comments. These findings are useful for parents who are seeking to optimize their  
108 verbal support while simultaneously avoiding upsetting youth with well-intentioned but non-  
109 preferred comments. A further study by Knight et al. (2011) found that children prefer  
110 different parental behaviors before, during, and after competition to create the most

111 supportive environment for youth sport teams. These examples not only offer new  
112 perspective for parents seeking to improve their involvement in youth sport, they also  
113 underline the value of listening to youth athletes about their experience. Beyond these studies  
114 however, there remains a limited understanding of TI youth sport experiences from the  
115 perspective of youth, particularly from sport settings outside North America. Scholarly  
116 attention in this area may better position parents to develop an understanding emotional  
117 climate to optimize their involvement (Knight & Holt, 2014), which is vital if parents are to  
118 support TI youth athletes experiencing stress associated with sport. Consequently, the aim of  
119 this study was to understand the nature of being a TI youth athlete and present the findings as  
120 ‘lessons’ for parents in pursuit of creating an understanding emotional climate in TI youth  
121 sport settings. The overarching research questions were: (1) What is the experience of being a  
122 TI youth athlete in Australian football? and, (2) What challenges do TI youth athletes want  
123 their parents to know?

## 124 **Method**

### 125 **Study Design and Philosophical Underpinnings**

126 This paper reports on qualitative data collected from the first year of a three-year longitudinal  
127 study involving TI youth athletes from South Australia. The study was underpinned by an  
128 interpretivist paradigm which is predicated on the ontological assumption that people actively  
129 construct and then act upon realities (relativism) they assign to events, actions, processes,  
130 ideologies and conditions in the world (Atkinson, 2012). Interpretivism focuses on how  
131 people make sense of their reality, and how collective definitions of reality shape and direct  
132 human thought and behavior (Atkinson, 2012). In line with this approach, an emphasis was  
133 placed on collecting data from the viewpoint of the participant and the researcher’s attempt to  
134 interpret meanings, values and explanations from the data (Jones, 2015).

135

136 **Participants**

137           In line with a qualitative tradition, participants were purposefully sampled from a 3-  
138 day Australian Football Elite Development Program (EDP) hosted by a large university in  
139 South Australia. Participants were recruited from the sport context of Australian football  
140 because it is one of the most popular sport preferences among children and youth in Australia  
141 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). Australian football is a unique setting because it is a  
142 sport that is not renowned internationally compared to other team sports such as rugby and  
143 soccer. It is also unique given that it has a strong social and cultural significance in South  
144 Australia (Elliott & Drummond, 2016). Selection criteria were based upon age (15 years old)  
145 and status as a ‘talent-identified’ footballer, signified by their inclusion in the specialized  
146 program. This age range was selected because it reflects the transition between the end of the  
147 specializing years and the beginning of the investment years of sport development, which is  
148 where athletes and parents typically become highly invested and involved in one sporting  
149 pathway (Côté & Hay, 2002). Other indications of transition surrounded participants’  
150 involvement in several other sports, yet high-level investment in structured and deliberated  
151 forms of practice during the off-season and in-season in relation to Australian football. It was  
152 important to recruit youth athletes who were involved in elite development programs in  
153 Australian football to ensure that the experiences of TI youth athletes were voiced, consistent  
154 with the research questions of the study. Participants were voluntarily recruited from this pool  
155 to discuss all matters relating to their development in Australian football, including the nature  
156 of their experience and stressors they encounter as TI youth athletes.

157           The sample included a total of 50 male athletes (*M* age = 14.6 years). All participants  
158 had achieved high success in Australian football, either representing state or regional teams,  
159 competing in adult level competition, and/or excelling in their age-group competition. The  
160 majority of the participants (*n* = 38) played in prominent positions such as the midfield



161 (centre, wing, and/or rover), while others played as forwards ( $n = 6$ ), defenders ( $n = 4$ ) or as  
162 utilities (players who can play multiple positions) ( $n = 2$ ). Participants were currently training  
163 five-days a week including three game-based training sessions, three strength and  
164 conditioning sessions, and one recovery session.

## 165 **Procedure**

166 Human Research Ethics approval was granted by an Institutional Ethics Committee to  
167 approach youth involved in the EDP and seek their interest in participating in a focus group.  
168 Prior to the 3-day program commencing, the lead researcher attended a program induction  
169 session to introduce the research project and disseminate letters of interest, information  
170 sheets, and consent forms for players and parents. The lead researcher explained to parents  
171 and players that their involvement in the study was voluntary, and that there were no negative  
172 consequences associated with non-participation. Interested participants returned signed  
173 consent forms, including parental consent, three days after the induction session and prior to  
174 the beginning of the 3-day EDP. Subsequent focus groups were scheduled with eligible  
175 participants during discrete periods of the EDP including the lunch breaks, and before and  
176 after each day.

## 177 **Data Collection**

178 Participants took part in one of six focus groups over the 3-day EDP. Sparkes and  
179 Smith (2014) note that focus groups should ideally range from four to eight people and  
180 should not exceed more than ten participants per focus group. In line with these suggestions,  
181 the focus groups ranged between 6 and 10 members and were conducted in classrooms at the  
182 venue of the EDP. The rationale for using focus groups was predicated on strengths relating  
183 to their appropriateness for exploratory studies, capacity to invite dynamic dialogue, and  
184 potential to proliferate different perspectives (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The lead researcher  
185 developed a questioning route based on common themes from the literature relating to stress,

186 enjoyment, and parental involvement (see Elliott & Drummond, 2016; Hayward et al., 2016;  
187 McCarthy & Jones, 2007). Before each focus group, the lead researcher provided a verbal  
188 explanation of the study, asked participants if they had any questions, and re-emphasized that  
189 participation was voluntary. The lead researcher also reminded participants that the focus  
190 group discussions were seeking to understand their experiences and views on sport parenting,  
191 particularly as they solidified their involvement in the one sport.

192 Each focus group began with introductory questions to establish a level of comfort for  
193 participants and 'set the tone' for informal, yet rich dialogue. Example questions included: (a)  
194 Tell me your first name, age, and favourite playing position in football; (b) Could you also  
195 share your fondest memory from the current football season, and; (c) How have you found  
196 the 3-day EDP so far? A series of transition questions were then used to guide the focus  
197 groups toward the main questions relevant to the study. Some transition questions included:  
198 (a) As a talent-identified footballer, what are your career aspirations, and (b) How can parents  
199 continue to support your development in achieving your goals? Examples of main questions  
200 included: What are the most difficult aspects of being a TI youth athlete? Concluding and  
201 summary questions were then asked to clarify the responses from focus groups. For instance,  
202 (a) What is the most important thing you want others to understand about your football  
203 development at this point in time? Finally, and similar to the methods employed by Knight et  
204 al. (2011), an activity-based exercise was employed to confirm the participants summaries  
205 and provide closure to the focus group. This involved using a whiteboard to 'mind-map' their  
206 perspectives. The duration of focus groups ranged from 40 to 55 minutes ( $M = 45\text{min } 16 \text{ sec}$ ,  
207  $SD = 5.12$ ,  $Range = 40\text{-}65 \text{ min}$ ).

## 208 **Data analysis**

209 The focus groups were audio recorded by the lead researcher and transcribed by a  
210 professional transcribing service. Transcripts were then checked for accuracy by listening to

211 select focus groups and reading the transcripts simultaneously. Personal information as well  
212 as other information revealing the identity of teams or leagues were replaced with  
213 pseudonyms. The transcripts were then thematically analysed by the lead researcher and first  
214 co-author.

215         Thematic analysis occurred following the steps described by Smith and Caddick  
216 (2012). The first step was immersion, which involved the lead research reading each  
217 transcript twice to ensure he was familiar with the data. Next, the researchers moved onto  
218 code generation and theme identification. The lead researcher generated initial codes by  
219 inductively coding each data set in a systematic fashion (reading and coding start-to-finish  
220 and mind-mapping ideas concurrently). With the assistance of a critical friend, the lead  
221 author then searched for, and identified, preliminary themes. The role of the critical friend  
222 was to help the lead researcher understand how the data was being analyzed and interpreted,  
223 and acknowledge the ‘multiple truths’ that exist during interpretation. In searching for and  
224 identifying themes, the lead researcher sorted different codes and gathered all of the relevant  
225 coding extracts to produce a set of candidate themes.

226         Next, the lead researcher then reviewed the themes by first considering if the  
227 candidate themes were coherent with the coding extracts. All but one of the coded extracts  
228 were deemed to fit the emergent themes with the exception being ‘money and the AFL’.  
229 Using mind-mapping and in re-coding the data, this extract was precluded because the lead  
230 author was unable to coherently organize it into one of the candidate themes, and there was  
231 not enough evidence to support its own theme. The lead author then defined and named  
232 candidate themes. This was aided by beginning to write the ‘story’ of each individual theme  
233 into segments of text in relation to the research question. This process led to the development  
234 of the following named themes: (a) difficulties with being talented, (b) negotiating the future,  
235 and (c) playing for improvement. Finally, in collaboration with the co-authors, the themes

236 were ‘tinkered’ with during the manuscript write up to best represent the data in the context  
237 of the research (i.e. instead of ‘challenges with being talented’, the theme was redefined as  
238 ‘difficulties with being talented’).

### 239 **Methodological rigor and qualitative excellence**

240 In articulating the means, methods, and practices used to enhance methodological  
241 rigor, the authors invariably used adopted the criteria for qualitative excellence synthesized  
242 by Tracy (2010), including (a) worthy topic; (b) rich rigor; (c) sincerity; (d) credibility; (e)  
243 resonance; (f) significant contribution; (g) ethical, and; (h) meaningful coherence.  
244 Importantly, the criteria outlined by Tracy were not adopted as a fixed ‘checklist’ prior to  
245 starting the research but rather the result of an open-ended approach contingent upon the  
246 purpose and context of the research (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). This is in keeping with the  
247 relativist ontology and interpretivist epistemology underpinning the study. However, any use  
248 of universal criteria are only appropriate if researchers commit to using *all* criteria, because  
249 they are all ‘equal’ markers of research quality (Smith & McGannon, 2017). To this end, we  
250 now detail the means, methods, and practices used to enhance rigor by drawing on *all* criteria  
251 synthesized by Tracy.

- 252 • The research presented in this paper is indeed a *worthy topic* given its  
253 relevance and timeliness to the field of sport parenting research. As  
254 highlighted earlier, there is certainly a need to provide parents more practical  
255 and applicable advice to enhance their involvement in youth sport, especially  
256 in the TI setting, which is the backdrop to this paper.
- 257 • To achieve *rich rigor*, including sufficient, abundant, appropriate, and  
258 complex attention given to sampling, context, and data collection and  
259 analyses. A sufficient sample size ( $n = 50$ ) was achieved for this qualitative  
260 study, leading to an abundant and rich source of qualitative data that yielded

261 48 pages of single-spaced text and 40,000 words of focus group data.  
262 Complexity was evident in the mixed and varied responses of the participants.  
263 The rich and diverse discussions highlight the complexity of individual stories,  
264 which ostensibly aligns with an interpretivist paradigm.

- 265 • *Sincerity* was achieved by adopting strategies that promoted self-reflexivity  
266 and transparency about the methods and challenges. To locate their role and  
267 position in the research, a specific form of reflexivity – ‘intersubjective  
268 reflection’ (Sparkes & Smith, 2014) – was practiced which involved an  
269 ongoing examination of the impact, position, and perspective of the researcher  
270 in designing questions and collecting and analysing data. The second author  
271 fulfilled a vital role as critical friend to promote intersubjective reflection by  
272 acting as a sounding board for the lead researcher to examine their own  
273 position and presence in the research and help them acknowledge the multiple  
274 interpretations that exist relating to the focus group data. Another tool  
275 included the use of a diary for reflexive practice, which prompted the  
276 researcher to offer entries throughout the research process. The entries (five in  
277 total) were used to explore methodological issues such as interview timing and  
278 probing quality, but also as a reminder to the researcher to continuously  
279 consider their position in the construction of knowledge. It was also used to  
280 acknowledge the methodological challenges associated with using focus  
281 groups. These included the energy required to effectively facilitate large focus  
282 groups and the capacity to listen without judgement.
- 283 • In the results, the use of thick descriptions to ‘show’ rather than ‘tell’ (Tracy,  
284 2010) was a means through which to demonstrate the criteria *credibility*.  
285 Another marker of credibility is multivocality, evidenced by the representation

286 of multiple perspectives captured using focus groups. The findings also  
287 demonstrate tacit knowledge by highlighting who is talking and who is not  
288 talking within the context of each focus group, which according to Tracy  
289 (2010), is an important means for achieving credibility.

- 290 • The criteria *resonance* was self-evident in the evocative representation of the  
291 findings to influence and move the reader. The authors have provided  
292 sufficiently rich descriptions in the ensuing section so that ‘*the readers*  
293 *themselves* can reflect upon it and make connections to their own situations’  
294 (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 184).
- 295 • We also argue that the current study offers a *significant contribution*  
296 conceptually, and practically to the academic and applied field of sport  
297 parenting. Conceptually and practically, the current findings provide important  
298 ‘lessons’ for parents of talented youth athletes in Australian football. This not  
299 only offers a new contribution to the field, but also to the many parents  
300 seeking to enhance their support as their child moves into the talent pathway  
301 in Australian football.
- 302 • The research considered a range of *ethical* issues relating to procedural ethics  
303 and relational ethics. Procedural ethics was demonstrated by obtaining  
304 institutional approval for the project and fulfilling the approved procedures  
305 relating to consent, privacy and confidentiality, harm, data handling, and  
306 reporting. Relational ethics involved the respectful and deliberate methods  
307 undertaken to care for participants and ensure interdependence between  
308 researcher and participants. This included the careful construction of questions  
309 and the reciprocal interplay that emerged between the researcher and  
310 participants during focus groups.

311           • Finally, *meaningful coherence* was achieved by employing the appropriate  
312           methods and procedures to achieve the purpose of the project. We will leave  
313           judgement with the readers, but believe that this paper accurately reflects the  
314           meaningful connect between the literature, the research questions, the findings  
315           and the resultant interpretations.

## 316 **Results**

317           From the thematic analysis, three major themes were identified: (a) Difficulties with  
318           being talented, (b) negotiating the future, and (c) playing for improvement. What follows is a  
319           rich, descriptive account of these themes, representing the voices of TI youth Australian  
320           footballers, framed as potential lessons for parents seeking to optimize their involvement in  
321           their child's sporting life.

### 322 **Difficulties with Being Talented**

323           There were two predominant difficulties discussed by participants in association with  
324           being recognized as 'talented' and 'elite' in Australian football. These were changing social  
325           relationships and dealing with pressure to perform when they returned from elite level  
326           competition to the community level. The first major difficulty discussed by participants was  
327           managing changing social relationships. Not only was it becoming increasingly difficult to  
328           spend quality time with friends due to training commitments, the nature of those relationships  
329           evolved into a potential source of stress for TI youth athletes. For instance, being talent-  
330           identified appeared to be synonymous with heightened expectations by their friends, as  
331           discussed in one focus group:

332           Pete: Making the AFL (Australian Football League) for them [friends] is pretty  
333           important I think yeah.

334           Leigh: It is pretty important for sure.

335 Elton: Because they know you're good at footy and now they sort of like, expect that  
336 you're going to make it to the highest level because they know you're good at footy. It  
337 is hard. So I sort of take it one year at a time and try to achieve as much as I can as each  
338 season comes.

339 Albert: I guess they [my friends] want me to get to the highest level so it's up to me  
340 pretty much, but same as Elton I take it a year at a time just so I don't get too  
341 overwhelmed.

342 Flynn: For me, sometimes your friends like say stuff to you like, call you names, like  
343 good names of AFL players and they say like 'you're going to get in the AFL' and it  
344 annoys you because sometimes you think that you're not obviously going to make it.

345 But at times you know that your mates have got that expectation for you, so you have to  
346 like, work up for it.

347 So while being recognized as a 'good player' by their friends was a common  
348 experience, it was referenced in the context of making the AFL which perpetuated a sense of  
349 expectation. Being called names and hearing comments that associated their status with the  
350 AFL was by no means offensive, but it did make the experience of being a TI youth athlete a  
351 bit harder as Elton described in the above focus group.

352 Another example of difficulty associated with changes in social relationships  
353 surrounded managing episodes of jealousy from their school peers. This was a particularly  
354 hard for participants to deal with as perceptions of jealousy and 'Tall Poppy Syndrome'<sup>2</sup> had  
355 the capacity to make the athletes feel uneasy outside of sport:

356 Xavier: One of the worst things at the moment is feeling like some of your mates are a  
357 bit jealous of you because they want to be in, like, your kind of position kind of thing...  
358 it doesn't ruin friendships, but it just makes it feel uncomfortable.

---

<sup>2</sup> Tall Poppy Syndrome is pejorative term used to describe a perceived tendency to discredit those who have achieved notable status in society and culture.



359 Payne: I mean in my case, I'm from a small country town and I'm the only one doing  
360 this. So everyone back home, you know, in a way, everyone is looking at me. I can tell  
361 that they want to be doing what I am doing which is fine but I can sense that they're  
362 jealous you know, some of them, bit of tall poppy syndrome.

363 Paul: They don't they give me a lot of grief but they still look at you and compare  
364 themselves and it makes me feel like 'they're getting there, getting quite good like me'  
365 and I do you know, go harder at something or do something better to make sure that I  
366 keep that status of being a higher level player than those guys.

367 Tom: ....and you know they look at you with jealousy, but while you don't want to  
368 make your mates feel bad because they haven't got to that level, you want to keep  
369 getting better.

370 Although friendship and social peers can comprise an important source of support for TI  
371 youth athletes, participants discussed that they also represent interactions that TI youth  
372 athletes can find difficult to negotiate. As such, it is possible that TI youth athletes may  
373 require additional support and assistance dealing with these difficulties that emerge from  
374 being highly talented at sport.

375 The other difficulty discussed by participants surrounded dealing with higher  
376 expectations from significant others to perform when they returned to their local teams after  
377 the elite program concluded. Expectations related to perceived pressure, which was described  
378 as a source of anxiety for many participants. Participants indicated that everyone except their  
379 parents reinforced these expectations:

380 Matthew: I think when you do go back to club there's massive pressure on you to  
381 perform from the club and yourself because you've played at such a high level.

382 Reece: The players are looking up to you.

383 Wade: There's definitely pressure when it comes to game day. There's a big  
384 responsibility on you to carry the team and to play well. I think that the bonuses are that  
385 you are recognised as a really good player but then game day, if you do not perform the  
386 coaches are going to be like really hard on you.

387 Reece: For me it is more at training because earlier this year with the under 15s, like we  
388 would train as an elite squad and then get to training a bit later in the evening and then  
389 everyone would realise you know, you rocked up a bit late and you've got your elite  
390 brand shorts on and you feel like you have to do well here or else, you know,  
391 everyone's going to think that I am not actually that good.

392 Matt: Yeah, the whole teams going 'He is playing for Central Knights' and for many  
393 clubs in the country there are only maybe two or three players that are actually playing  
394 for this team and on match day, everyone is saying 'you have to perform because you  
395 are the most valuable player' you know and sometimes it gets to you and you just don't  
396 perform.

397 Given that these difficulties are commonly experienced among TI youth, they encourage  
398 some potentially important lessons for parents seeking to enhance their support. For instance,  
399 by developing a greater understanding of the difficulties TI youth encounter, parents may be  
400 able to tailor their emotional support to assist their child cope with heightened social  
401 expectations from peers.

402 In addition to experiencing pressure to perform, when elite youth footballers returned to  
403 their local clubs they also found it challenging because they had to train and play at a lower  
404 standard of competition. Although on the one hand, this reiterated expectations to 'dominate'  
405 and 'carry the team', on the other hand, they indicated that it was less enjoyable compared to  
406 playing and training at a higher level because the ability of their teammates varied greatly:

407 Ollie: Well at this current point when I am more developed than everyone else I find it  
408 harder to play with kids that are younger than me because they're just, yeah, they're not  
409 as mature as me, sort of thing, and I find that holds me back.

410 Riley: Same! When you go back to local club, it's like you're playing with kids that are  
411 not high level when you get back to club level.

412 Jordan: I ended up playing under 18s this year not under 16s because I just couldn't  
413 really deal with the skill and the way they went about their football. They weren't  
414 serious about it sort of thing.

415 Issues of expectations, anxiety, and enjoyment identified by participants are noteworthy  
416 because they highlight potential areas where parents can provide additional emotional  
417 support. Although one could be forgiven for placing a stronger emphasis on, for example,  
418 diet and training when youth progress into TI settings, parents may need to equally consider  
419 how they support TI youth who encounter difficulties dealing with changes to social  
420 friendships and expectations/pressure to play well.

### 421 **Negotiating the Future**

422 Another theme was the struggle for athletes to determine who they were and who they  
423 should be in the future (i.e., establish their identity). Although the athletes were aware of the  
424 opportunities in Australian football, they also understood the challenging 'odds' of reaching  
425 the highest level. This perspective created a good deal of discussion surrounding their current  
426 priorities, and the type of person they 'should become' in the future. Although coveting the  
427 'AFL dream' was consistent for all athletes, most recognised the importance of having a  
428 back-up plan that included a 'good education'. Some athletes were already considering the  
429 possibility of a university education and expressed interest in occupations such as 'ocean  
430 photography', 'physiotherapy', 'teaching,' and 'journalism'. However, the majority were still  
431 trying to ascertain who they were at present, as well as what the future might hold for them:

432 Xavier: At the moment, it [the most important thing for me] is probably finishing  
433 school.

434 Tate: Probably go to university. I want to do footy as well but it's important to have,  
435 like a second option as well because you're not going to be playing footy forever. So  
436 you need something else to do if it doesn't work out. You still need a solid base.

437 Ilario: Well if footy never works out, you have to have something to rely on so you're  
438 not living on the streets or having a crappy job, but you can actually build up and  
439 actually still have a good life.

440 Trent: Footy for me.

441 Owen: Nah, probably school.

442 Victor: Footy.

443 Benjamin: Probably footy.

444 Lenny: I feel like a balance I think, yeah a balance yeah.

445 Adrian: It's hard to choose one because they're both so important right now and I can't  
446 let one go.

447 Freddie: Yeah, but you don't know if you're going to make it to the highest level so  
448 school is probably just a bit more important.

449 Lenny: Yeah it opens more pathways school but it's not as enjoyable.

450 As such debate indicates, there appeared to be a perception that, at least at some point, the  
451 athletes would have to make a decision between AFL and school.

452 Some athletes had decided to actively chase an AFL career following discussions with  
453 their parents. Being exposed to elite programs and higher forms of training and competition,  
454 although demanding, had taught this group of young athletes about the increasing level of  
455 dedication and commitment required to be a professional athlete. Consequently, some  
456 participants sought advice from parents in an attempt to make sense of their lives as a TI

457 athlete, particularly with respect to their immediate future given that a football pathway was  
458 imminently placed:

459 Rowen: Well to be honest, mum and dad sat me down and asked if this is what I really  
460 wanted to do, and I said 'yes it is' and they said that I have to work for it then – that  
461 they would be there to wake me up and get me out of bed in the morning and tell me to  
462 go for a run and do whatever it takes.

463 Walter: Yeah, so mostly the same for me, but they also said that I can do it if I'm  
464 willing to work for it – it's up to me.

465 Sam: I've had the chat and now, you know, Dad just wants me to just be the best I can  
466 be, and of course, he is not going to be pushy but he just, he wants me to do be the best  
467 I can do. It's not bad pressure, but kind of good to be pushed now.

468 In contrast to the participants above, others had decided to prioritise football as their  
469 primary (and often only) focus without having such discussions with their parents. The  
470 catalyst for this seemed to arise primarily because playing in the AFL had been a 'lifelong  
471 dream', but it was also aided by an awareness of the high parental commitment that has  
472 helped them reach an elite level. Although the athletes did not describe this experience as a  
473 form of pressure being placed upon them, they did perceive a sense of responsibility to justify  
474 their involvement given the magnitude of their parents' financial and logistical support:

475 Liam: It is pretty important right now to do well.

476 Elliot: Mum knows I am good at footy so I think there is sort of like an expectation that  
477 you're going to make it to the highest level if they know you're good at footy.

478 Matthew: I missed like the first half of the season because I was doing basketball  
479 instead and like, when I came back and I wasn't the best because I was doing basketball  
480 and that. It kind of like changed, and kind of like felt that I was letting Dad down when  
481 I didn't play up to a better standard.

482 Bronte: I don't think it's that important as my family will just support me with  
483 whatever I do but like, I put pressure on myself to do well for them because of what  
484 they have done for me, so it's pretty important to make it to the AFL.

485 Aidan: Yeah

486 Taylor: I don't know. You're not going to be disappointed if you don't make it to the  
487 highest level you can, but in a way if we don't then they might be disappointed that we  
488 didn't put in enough effort or anything like that.

489 Bronte: Yeah, but they can see it at home if you're eating well or if you're like instead  
490 of playing Xbox, you go out to the park and do a run or, you know, extra weights  
491 session at home or something like that.

492 Caleb: It's just important to make sure you like, try your hardest. That's the most  
493 important thing really.

494 Zayne: To my parents it means quite a lot. They also want the best for me. This could  
495 be the best pathway for me and they have invested a fair bit of time already and willing  
496 to invest more and so it is a big investment and I want it to pay off!

497 So while TI youth athletes are trying to make sense about their future, they also feel a sense  
498 of responsibility to pay back their parents through sport. Given that this can potentially  
499 develop into an emotional burden for TI athletes, parents might wish to dialogue with their  
500 child about this sense of responsibility and clarify its significance (or lack thereof). In doing  
501 so, parents can assist TI youth make sense about their future pathway without the distraction  
502 of having to pay back their parents.

### 503 **Playing for Improvement**

504 Participants reported that playing football was still enjoyable, but being a talent-  
505 identified athlete had changed how they perceive the meaning of their sport involvement  
506 overall. Most participants stated that they were now at a point where continual improvement

507 was most important to them than playing only for enjoyment. Some common responses  
508 included ‘you don’t want to be judged as par’ and ‘I just want to do well and earn it [respect]  
509 and command the respect like Fyfe and Dangerfield<sup>3</sup> do’. Parents were perceived to  
510 understand the importance of improvement for athletes, and assisted them by displaying a  
511 high level of commitment to enable additional training and provide good nutrition in the  
512 domestic setting:

513 Fraser: Yeah my parents support me heaps. My mum takes me up to the oval so I can  
514 do laps and kick the footy so yeah they help me out there.

515 Nate: And pushing me like, my dad will sometimes help me when I work out doing  
516 fitness kind of things. They don’t pressure, but push in a good way.

517 Marcello: Mum makes sure I maintain a healthy diet and everything in the off-season as  
518 well as throughout the season. She makes sure I have heaps of energy before the game  
519 but it’s sort of your job as well but they definitely help a lot.

520 Michael: They drive me absolutely everywhere you know! If I wanted to go down to  
521 watch a grand final at Ascot, which is an hour away, they take me and then if I wanted  
522 to go to a recovery session at Ascot, they’d take me to that.

523 The other mechanism for assisting elite athletes develop was to seek honest feedback from  
524 parents, especially fathers. This, according to majority of participants, was motivating but  
525 also necessary so that they can focus their improvement to specific areas of their  
526 development. When discussing important forms of parental support and how parents could  
527 improve their involvement in their sport, many TI athletes seek feedback that can be used to  
528 aid their development as a footballer.

529 Paul: Yeah I wouldn’t mind it if they just said something that I could improve on.

530 Mav: [in agreement] I’d take it on board!

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<sup>3</sup> Fyfe and Dangerfield refers to AFL players Nathan Fyfe and Patrick Dangerfield – two popular and highly revered players at the highest level of Australian football.

531 Luke: Same thing, kind of.

532 Karl: Yeah well my parents already do that so if I do something bad they're open,  
533 they'll tell me.

534 *Interviewer: and you don't mind that?*

535 Joshua: Yeah I like that. It makes me want to improve in that area.

536 Karl: Yeah my Dad's always giving me criticism like in a good way.

537 *Interviewer: what do you mean?*

538 Karl: Like he can tell you what you've done wrong and then he can tell you how you  
539 can improve.

540 *Interviewer: Is that a kind of parental behavior that you prefer?*

541 Joshua: Yeah so then I know what I've done wrong and I know I need to work on that  
542 and try and improve.

543 In contrast to the experiences described above, several participants claimed that they  
544 did not seek parental feedback because they spent more time with the coach and received  
545 feedback this way. However, they also claimed that they were now at a point in their  
546 development where they should drive their own improvement, and as such, relied less on  
547 parental feedback after games.

548 Jaydan: Getting to a high level now, they sort of need to step back a little bit and let you  
549 go where you feel you need to go or let you do it on your own because in a couple of  
550 years we'll be on our own anyway so yeah it's up to us now.

551 *Interviewer: Do you guys feel the same?*

552 Heath: Yeah I do because we're sort of going into the stage where we have to be more  
553 responsible for our own improvement, you know, and be more independent later on in  
554 life so now is probably a pretty good time to start.

555 Jaydan: They've kind of let me go and given me a bit of leeway and stuff.



556           Zayne: I think certainly when you were younger because I went there to play footy with  
557           my mates I wasn't so interested in the high level stuff, but now things have changed.  
558 Such findings highlight a variety of support mechanisms that TI youth athletes require for  
559 athletic improvement. While some athletes prefer parental or coaches feedback, others  
560 require little assistance in this regard. Regardless, the purpose of their involvement in sport  
561 gravitated around the notion of improvement – in important insight for parents and coaches  
562 alike.

### 563   **Discussion**

564           The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of being a TI youth athlete in  
565 Australian football and to draw on the findings to develop practical information and advice  
566 for parents seeking to increase their support. The following discussion frames the findings in  
567 this way which is particularly important in TI youth sport settings because (a) such settings  
568 can be a source of stress for athletes, (b) parents are a vital source of support for athletes  
569 encountering sport-related stressors, and (c) parents play a central role in supporting their  
570 child's sport and achievement of elite status in sport.

571           The findings suggest that TI athletes experience a range of difficulties associated with  
572 being talent-identified. The findings are broadly consistent with Hayward et al. (2016) who  
573 identified numerous organizational, developmental, and competitive stressors that youth  
574 athletes and parents experience such as injury, varying interactions with coaches, and parental  
575 expectations. However, the current findings shed light on the intricacies of the challenges  
576 associated with changing social friendships outside of sport, as well as perceptions of  
577 jealousy and social expectations to perform well. Previous literature has found that peers  
578 ('teammates') can comprise a source of stress as competition and rivalry among teammates  
579 intensifies (Keegan, Harwood, Spray, & Lavalley, 2009). However, in-sport peers are also  
580 identified as a vital and valuable source of support, enhancing motivation of young athletes

581 (Ullrich-French & Smith, 2009). Yet in addition to peers situated ‘inside’ the sport  
582 experience such as teammates, the present findings add to the literature by illuminating how  
583 TI youth athletes have to cope with, jealousy, expectations, and changes to friendship quality  
584 with school peers and those who are not involved in advanced Australian football programs  
585 as a TI athlete. This is an important consideration because it suggests that TI youth athletes  
586 may experience insufficient peer support given that the nature and quality of these social  
587 relationships can be potentially challenging inside (teammates) and out (i.e. school  
588 friendships) of the sporting domain.

589         An understanding of these experiences may have implications for regular sport  
590 parenting practices including pre- and post-match conversations in Australian football.  
591 Recent studies have shown that parents’ verbal involvement with youth during and after  
592 games can be a source of stress for athletes (Elliott & Drummond, 2016). However, by  
593 having a greater understanding of the broader difficulties that are associated with being a TI  
594 youth athlete, parents may be better prepared to engage in sport-related discussions, sensitive  
595 to the possibility that social pressures, expectations, and changing social dynamics may  
596 exacerbate feelings of distress and disappointment. It is therefore important that parents not  
597 only learn about these potentially difficult aspects of being a TI youth athlete, but  
598 demonstrate their understanding of their child’s experience. Such understanding can be  
599 gained through a variety of means. For example, parents can seek greater understanding of  
600 their child’s sport through developing relationships with coaches and seeking information  
601 from them, spending time watching the sport, and speaking with other parents (Holt &  
602 Knight, 2014). Sports organizations can further facilitate understanding by providing  
603 literature for parents about the sport, the potential challenges and issues that children may  
604 encounter (Harwood & Knight, 2015), and also if possible providing opportunities for parents  
605 to speak with or hear from current or retired athletes who can provide pertinent insight.

606 Beyond this and perhaps most importantly, parents should make time to frequently engage in  
607 conversation with their child to learn about their experience and their desires for their  
608 parent's involvement (Holt & Knight, 2014).

609         TI athletes also struggled to negotiate their future pathways between study and sport.  
610 On the one hand, they recognised that the football dream is 'alive' but on the other, they  
611 understood the improbability of reaching the AFL (elite level) and simultaneously the value  
612 of secondary and higher education. In previous studies, it was parents who have been worried  
613 about knowing if they were making the right decisions about school and sport for their child  
614 (Harwood & Knight, 2009a, 2009b). However, the current study shows that TI youth athletes  
615 are sharing this concern and in some instances, taking this out of the hands of the parents and  
616 making the decision themselves. Having TI youth athletes make a decision may not be  
617 optimal if, as the current findings suggest, they believe that they must choose either an  
618 academic or sporting pathway rather than attempt to balance both commitments. Ryba,  
619 Stambulova, Ronkainen, Bundgaard, and Selänne (2015) note that dual career athletes  
620 experience higher employability, reduced stress, a positive socialisation effect and positive  
621 effects on athletes' self-regulation. So while balancing academic and training demands can be  
622 stressful for parents and youth athletes (Harwood & Knight, 2009a, 2009b; Hayward et al.,  
623 2016), there are indeed numerous benefits associated with maintaining a dual career.  
624 Consequently, TI youth athletes involved in team sports may benefit from additional support  
625 as questions surrounding future pathways may gain momentum as athletes move into  
626 specialized programs. This has implications for parents who could be forgiven for assuming  
627 that their child wants to pursue an elite sporting pathway simply because they have been  
628 identified as talented. In this way, a possible lesson for parents is to align their involvement in  
629 a way that ably provides support for both sporting and academic futures, which are largely  
630 undecided, and in many cases, unclear, for TI youth athletes. This can include more balance

631 in the way that parents encourage (or discourage) pathway directions, or listening to TI youth  
632 athletes over a sustained period of time to learn about how they are negotiating this decision.  
633 Such advice may inadvertently help parents who are unsure how to support TI youth athletes'  
634 ambitions and whom are also encountering stressors related to their child's future in sport and  
635 academic study (Harwood & Knight, 2009a, 2009b).

636         The other key finding was that improvement was perceived by TI youth athletes as the  
637 most important driving force at this point of their developing careers. Although enjoying the  
638 sport remained important, the athletes found purpose from improvement in performance. This  
639 appears consistent with other studies which have found that competency and recognition are  
640 important sources of sport enjoyment for older youth athletes (McCarthy, Jones, & Clark-  
641 Carter, 2008). Critically, this perspective provides a useful blueprint for parents of TI athletes  
642 to reinforce current parenting practices, or reposition their involvement. For instance,  
643 conveying encouraging remarks and comments may be insufficient in the eyes of TI youth  
644 athletes who are seeking more specific forms of feedback to aid their improvement. While  
645 delivering critical comments and advice is a contentious aspect of parental involvement in  
646 youth sport (Elliott & Drummond, 2015, 2016), in TI and elite youth sport settings, this may  
647 be more appropriate depending on the child's preference. This is consistent with the work by  
648 Knight and Holt (2014) who suggest that parents and children must have shared goals so that  
649 parents can appropriately tailor their feedback to these goals. In the present study, TI athletes  
650 remained steadfast on the importance of 'enjoying football', but now view enjoyment as  
651 synonymous with continued improvement in performance rather than strictly notions such as  
652 'playing for fun' and playing with friends. This is a fundamental lesson for parents who are  
653 seeking to be supportive and encouraging influences. Subsequently, giving feedback such as  
654 'playing for fun' may not be optimal if the focus for TI youth athletes is on improvement.

655 In summary, there are a number of important lessons for parents of TI youth athletes  
656 involved in Australian football. Although youth sport is often characterized by parents  
657 attending games and fulfilling voluntary roles as means of support (Bean, Jeffery-Tosoni,  
658 Baker, & Fraser-Thomas, 2016), parents can enhance their support by understanding that TI  
659 youth athletes (a) experience difficulties navigating changes in social relationships and  
660 heightened expectations to perform at a consistently high standard, (b) are attempting (but  
661 often, struggling) to decide if they should focus on school or sport at this stage of their  
662 development, and (c) play Australian football for continual self-improvement rather than  
663 playing only for enjoyment. Although the following examples are not exhaustive, parents of  
664 TI youth athletes can use this information to appropriately tailor their involvement in  
665 Australian football. For instance:

- 666 • By understanding that TI youth athletes find it hard to deal with changing social  
667 relationships and performance expectations, parents can rearticulate the strategies and  
668 types of advice they provide to best support their child's development. This may  
669 include how parents communicate constructive feedback when their child performs  
670 poorly, sensitive to the external pressure and expectations that they are already  
671 dealing with.
- 672 • Parents can invest more time in dialogue with their child to understand their changing  
673 perspectives toward sport, school and potentially a dual career. An understanding in  
674 this regard may help parents develop more appropriate methods for encouraging  
675 future pathways in and beyond sport. Importantly, parental guidance may be vitally  
676 important given that the TI youth athletes in this study were attempting to make  
677 decisions about their future, which may not necessarily be optimal.
- 678 • Parents can help TI youth athletes to understand and revise their goals as they  
679 transition into more specialized programs. This can then benefit parents who have the

680 capacity to change goals over time based on their child's developmental outcomes in  
681 sport (Dorsch, Smith, Wilson, & McDonough, 2015).

682 • Parents can 'sharpen' the nature of the feedback that appropriately match the goals of  
683 TI youth athletes who are concerned with improvement rather than idealistic notions  
684 of 'fun' and participation. This may help parents enhance their influence in pre- and  
685 post-game conversations which comprise vitally important sources of parental  
686 support.

### 687 **Applied implications for youth sport**

688 Although the focus of this paper is rooted in understanding the experiences of being a  
689 TI youth athlete to generate advice and information to enhance parental support, there are  
690 also some applied implications that can be drawn from the findings to support parents support  
691 youth. The following recommendations are intended for practitioners to assist parents  
692 improve their involvement in TI youth sport settings like Australian football.

693 1. Organizations involved in providing families opportunities to take up TI and elite  
694 sport programs could develop, trial, and make available resources and programs  
695 designed to enhance parental communication in relation to listening, questioning,  
696 and negotiation. This would appear especially important at a time where TI youth  
697 athletes are struggling to make decisions about their future and may benefit from  
698 adult support to determine their future pathway.

699 2. Coaches involved in TI youth sport settings could informally interview athletes  
700 and their parents before and during their involvement in a designated sport  
701 program to learn more about youth athletes difficulties beyond the sporting  
702 domain. Such an approach may not only assist parents and coaches learn about  
703 less visible stressors (i.e. jealous peers at school), it may help revise pedagogical  
704 and support strategies to better meet the emotional needs of the athlete.

705 3. Educators involved in school-based settings could work closely with parents and  
706 coaches of TI youth athletes in an effort to support youth who are likely to  
707 experience changes in their social networks as they become further immersed in  
708 specialized sport programs. Educators may be able to provide further feedback  
709 and advice to parents in relation to peer interactions at school and the degree to  
710 which friendships change as TI youth athletes progress further along the talent  
711 development pathway.

### 712 **Limitations and future directions**

713 This study is not without limitations. The all-male cohort of the study does not  
714 necessarily reflect the experiences and attitudes of all TI youth athletes. Although the cohort  
715 were suitable to address the research questions of the study, there remains a need to examine  
716 these issues from a variety of other perspectives. For example, there is great potential to  
717 examine similar issues using a gendered theoretical lens with exclusively female TI youth  
718 athletes. Similarly, there are opportunities to examine the experiences of being TI at different  
719 ages. Those who specialize in sport at a much younger age may encounter different  
720 difficulties which would provide useful information for parents. Another limitation is that  
721 focus groups as a data collection method can be difficult to facilitate. It is plausible that some  
722 participants were unable to contribute to the extent they would have preferred given the large  
723 size of the focus groups (up to 10 participants in some focus groups). Despite being  
724 facilitated by a researcher experienced with using focus groups, and despite the rich and  
725 dynamic interplay captured in the results, focus groups can invite dominant voices to saturate  
726 discussions. Although every effort was made to draw out the views of all participants in a  
727 supportive manner, the voices of all participants are not evidenced in the findings.

728 Another challenge encountered was dealing with facilitator fatigue because of  
729 scheduling six focus groups over three days, and with large focus group sizes. Facilitator

730 fatigue may have influenced the tone and ‘energy’ projected to the participants. This may  
731 have affected their ability to create a climate where all participants felt comfortable and  
732 supported, especially for focus groups scheduled last. Notwithstanding the benefits of using  
733 focus groups, it is important acknowledge their own limitations within the broader study  
734 design. Future research in this regard should not be discouraged from using focus groups in  
735 youth sport research, but should undertake the necessary training and preparation prior to  
736 facilitation. Finally, it is important to discuss Australian football as a unique setting from  
737 which to draw recommendations. Australian football is not universally regarded an  
738 international sport so it is important to temper how the recommendations and lessons for  
739 parents are interpreted universally. That said, the richness of the data offers readers an  
740 opportunity to make sense of the findings in relation to their own sporting situations, in which  
741 case the recommendations can offer a form of resonance for practitioners and researchers in  
742 the field.

### 743 **Conclusion**

744 In summary, the paper provides parents, coaches, and educators a key information  
745 cautionary tale about supporting young TI athletes and the conflicting issues that are at play  
746 with respect to sports and their lives. The findings not only provide an insight into the  
747 experiences of being a TI youth athlete in Australian football, they also provide a basis from  
748 which lessons for parents can be teased out. The data provide evidence that this is a time in  
749 these young athletes’ lives that is both exciting and yet tumultuous in terms of decision  
750 making with respect to their futures; they are dealing with changes to sources of social  
751 support and how they understand sport enjoyment. These athletes are also cautious about the  
752 future and impending careers beyond sport. In many ways this appears to be a very mature  
753 approach. However, it is worthy of further discussion as to whether these young athletes have  
754 the skills and abilities to make such important decisions that may impact their lives into



755 adulthood. The findings provide a number of practical and reinforcing implications for sport  
756 parents and practitioners involved in talent development programs in Australian football and  
757 potentially other specialized sport programs more broadly. Although coaches and sport  
758 educators may also benefit from the lessons outlined in this paper, parents should continue to  
759 invest time and energy seeking to understand youth sport to optimize their current  
760 involvement.

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