

## YOUNG ATHLETES' PERCEPTIONS OF THE ROLE OF THEIR MOTHERS IN THEIR SPORT CAREER

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to examine the role played by mothers in the development of their young sons and daughters. Participants were four Spanish young athletes competing at international level and their mothers. The athletes were interviewed and the interviews were analysed following the guidelines of the Grounded Theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This approach revealed how participants perceived the role played by their mothers in their athlete career. According to these perceptions, athletes considered that their mothers' role was heavily centred on their unconditional support. This unconditional support was later itemized into a series of additional aspects. Our results concerning the factors with an impact on the development of sports excellence are coincidental with those of other authors. Sadly, there is very little literature on the issue and, consequently, our findings are difficult to check against other surveys. Our results, nevertheless, reveal the enormous influence the mother's role has on the development of talented athlete children.

**Key Words:** Social support; Sports Excellence; Family, Talent, Grounded Theory

### RESUMEN

El objetivo de este estudio fue determinar el papel jugado por las madres en el desarrollo sus hijos e hijas deportistas. Los participantes en el estudio fueron cuatro jóvenes deportistas españoles que competían en un nivel internacional y sus madres. Los deportistas fueron entrevistados y las entrevistas analizadas siguiendo la metodología de la teoría anclada (Strauss y Corbin, 1998). Esta aproximación describió cómo los deportistas percibían el papel jugado por sus madres en su desarrollo deportivo. Los deportistas consideran que el rol central de sus madres es el apoyo incondicional que reciben. Este apoyo incondicional se disociaba en una serie de categorías. Los resultados referidos a los factores que tenían relevancia en el desarrollo de la excelencia deportiva coincidían con los dichos por otros autores. Sin embargo, la literatura en torno a esta temática es escasa y consecuentemente, nuestros descubrimientos son difícilmente contrastables. No obstante, nuestros resultados revelan la enorme influencia del papel de las madres en el desarrollo deportivo de los más jóvenes.

**Palabras Clave:** Apoyo social, Excelencia Deportiva, Familia, Talento, Teoría Anclada

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## INTRODUCTION

In the last decades sports psychology has researched the family's role in the athletic development of young sportspeople at different levels of expertise (Bloom, 1985; Camiré, Trudel and Forneris, 2009; Coakley, 2006; Coté, 1999; Dorsch, Smith, and McDonough, 2009). The trend-setting work of Bloom (1985) revealed that the family's role changed as the young person developed from the early stages to higher levels of sports excellence. Parents played different roles and behaved, participated and supported their children in different ways as the need arose (Lewko and Ewing, 1980).

Regardless of the children's athletic levels, researchers usually agree on the crucial role played by the families in their children's sports participation (Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes and Pennisi, 2008; Holt, Moylan, Spence, Lenk, Sehn and Ball, 2008; Morgan and Giacobbi, 2006; Rees and Hardy, 2000; Smoll, Cumming and Smith, 2011). This role is considered to be even more decisive in the development of highly talented children, whose successful sports careers are frequently explained in terms of the supportive assistance provided by their parents, and particularly, by their fathers (Coakley, 2006), who are seen as the fundamental mentors and advisers of their talented children.

The parents' role in their children's sports participation can vary dramatically. Parents can act as mentors, referees, managers or counselors. Whatever the role, a key factor is their commitment to their children's participation in sport. Nowadays the parents' commitment has become a key element in children's initiation into sport and their eventual career, since participation in sports almost always depends heavily on the money, time and energy invested by the parents (Chafetz and Kotarba, 1999; Coakley, 2006; Yaprak & Unlu, 2010).

A study carried out in Australia with 28 families revealed that the sports environment is one of the most prominent fathering contexts, although not the only one (Harrington, 2006). Sporting events have increasingly become occasions for the transmission of values too. Sadly, newspapers and TV frequently provide examples of unseemly behaviour in football stadiums, fights on playing fields, inappropriate language during sports competitions, etc. These deplorable acts are also extremely frequent in sports contexts where the parents want to take front stage in the sports event. This attitude is particularly worrying when we consider that they usually constitute a role model in their children's athletic development (Gould et al., 2008). The study conducted by Gould et al. (2008) with tennis players revealed a generally positive and supportive parental influence on their children's development. On the other hand, some parents were also seen as a negative influence as a result of their authoritarian behaviour and conflict-igniting proclivity during the sports events which their children took part in. Excessive parental commitment to their children's sports career

can certainly have undesirable effects too (Gould et al., 2008), but without parental commitment the development and progress of their children would not be possible (Gould, Jackson and Finch, 1993).

A number of studies have dealt with the influence exerted by families on the athletic development of very young children (Ericsson, Krampe and Tesch-Römer, 1993; Harrington, 2006; Holt and Dunn, 2004; Lauer, Gould, Roman y Pierce, 2010; Simonton, 2001). There is no one single factor that can claim to be responsible for the athletic development of children. Rather, this development must be interpreted as the result of a complex network of closely interacting, not yet clearly defined, favourable circumstances occurring in particular family environments.

The children of parents who have taken an active part in sports are more likely to participate in sports activities and are also more likely to reach high performance levels if their parents have also competed at a highly competitive level in the past. But there are also family factors entirely unrelated to sports which have a significant impact on the chances of children reaching a high performance level in sport. This is the case, for example, of the children from middle and high-class families (Yang, Telama and Laasko, 1996). Recent research has also suggested that children from two-father families are more likely to play sports (Rowley, 1992).

We can conclude that a structured family, with a comfortably off background and a highly supportive attitude towards their children's participation in sport has a significant impact on their children's athletic development. But, what about the role played by mothers? So far researchers have only dealt with the comprehensive concept of the family. Few studies on the subject distinguish between the different roles played by fathers and mothers. When the distinction is made, it is usually to highlight and stress the role played by the father. Mothers and fathers adopt different behavioural attitudes towards the athletic development of their children. Admittedly, they both tend to consider sports as a suitable environment for teaching children important values. Having said that, their relationships with their children are very different (Harrington, 2006). This study reveals that sports activities provide an excellent environment for the reinforcement of father-child relationships and mothers play a catalytic role in that reinforcement.

In his study Coakley (2006) noted that in the case of highly talented children it is the father who almost inevitably makes the decisions about training and competitions. The father does not usually take the child to training sessions, nor does he do any of the washing, but it is he who chooses the coach, the club or team for the child to train or play with. It is also the father who checks if the sports equipment is adequate or the strategies for the match, and if the child is successful it is also the father who is socially considered as a good father.

Up to now the mother's role in a child's athletic talent development has not been properly studied by sports researchers. Despite the small amount of research on the subject, mothers are currently gaining more and more social acknowledgment for a role which extends far beyond the mere logistic support for their children's sports activities. There is increasing evidence of the psychologically and emotionally relevant role played by mothers as those truly responsible for a complex network of psychological and social support essential for their children to attain sports excellence (Chafetz and Kotarba, 1999, Palomo, 2009). Most of the studies dealing with high-performance athletes do not distinguish between the mother and father's role (Coackley, 2006; Durán, 2003; Sánchez, 2002). The masculine tone ascribed to some sports is undeniable, to the point that male children are sometimes rebuked with expressions referring to females when they play or compete below their capabilities. Female children are also subject to this trend since their training and coaching frequently has a masculine approach (Coakley and Donelli, 1999).

However, not only do coaches, fathers and athletes adopt such typically masculine attitudes. Mothers themselves frequently adopt the traditional male mindset when they are involved in their children's sports activities. The studies conducted by Chafetz and Kobarta (1999) in the minor American baseball leagues revealed that the role of the mothers was to make the whole sports experience enjoyable for their children and husbands by preparing the food, clothing and transport for the young athlete and organizing supporters from among the child's contemporaries. On the other hand, fathers talk to the coaches, protest referees' decisions, explore opponents' virtues and weaknesses and provide their children with tactical or technical counselling. Other studies have also revealed how mothers sacrifice their own leisure or sports activity in order to make their children's sports participation enjoyable and to enable their husbands to have their corresponding leisure time too (Harrington, 2006). Family leisure time is seen as something that reinforces family interaction and cohesion. In our still male-dominated societies, it is the mothers who usually sacrifice their own leisure activities and give priority to the interests of others in detriment to their own. Female subordination to males also affects their leisure time activities.

This study aimed at analysing, by means of a qualitative method based on Grounded Theory, how young athletes perceived the role played by their mothers in their sports development. The publication in 1967 of *Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss opened up a whole new perspective for social research methods (Abela, García Nieto and Corbacho, 2007). Grounded Theory enables the researcher to construct and generate a theory out of previously collected raw data. In this approach researchers do not start their study with pre-conceived ideas, rather the theory emerges during the

survey process instead. This inductive approach allows the researcher to develop a theory which truly represents the human experience of the testees (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

## METHOD

### *Participants*

Four youth athletes (three males and one female) were selected to take part in the study. They were chosen to represent a variety of individual and team sports. Two athletes did individual sports (one male and one female) and two others did team sports (two males). There was only one athlete (either male or female) from each sport. The sports were swimming (male), badminton (female), football (male) and rugby (male). The average age of the participants was 19.25 years (SD= 1.71).

Participants were chosen by virtue of sampling based on one single criterion (Charmaz, 2008). With this sampling technique participants are chosen only if they comply with a series of requisites previously defined by the researchers. In our case, these requisites were the following: 1) to be 16 to 22 years old at the time of the interviews; 2) to have been chosen for the national team in junior categories on at least one occasion in the last three years; and 3) for team sports, to have played for one team at the highest national level in the last three years; and for individual sports, to have been a finalist in the Spanish championships for junior categories in the last three years.

Participants' selection was deliberately flexible enough to provide us with the most relevant data available. This exclusive feature of qualitative methodology, not found in quantity approaches, places priority on the quality as opposed to the quantity of the subjects on the assumption of flexible criteria and the possibility of change. To protect participants' identities, the interviews, transcripts and the discussion about them use pseudonyms. These are sort biographies of participants:

*O.* Was a 21 year-old female badminton player. She lives in a big city and began playing badminton when she was eight, with her uncle as her coach. She joined the Spanish national team at the age of 14. She now trains at a High Performance Sports Centre.

*D.* Was a 19 year-old male rugby player. He lives in a large city and began playing other sports but jumped at the chance to join a rugby team with some friends. Today he is a key player both in his team and in the national team, which he joined three years ago.

*I.* Was a 20 year-old male swimmer who lived in a provincial town. He began swimming at a very early age because his parents wanted him to. However, after a few months, he really began to enjoy it.

R. Was a highly promising 17 year-old male football player. He lives in a large city and nowadays he is a key player in his team and has been in the national team for the last five years. He has won international acclaim and awards.

### *Measures*

The first interview guide draft was analysed in a meeting with the other members of the research team. After two corrections, a definitive version was agreed upon. The interview questions were designed to find out the athletes' perception of their mothers' role in their athletic development. The first questions dealt with past experience and with their mothers' influence on them at that time. After examining the past, the subjects were presented with questions about factors and people who were vital to their development. Since this qualitative methodology accepts the possibility of departing from the interview guide, each interview was inevitably different, with questions defined by the course of the interview.

### *Procedure*

Interviews have long been a very useful method for collecting data for different kinds of qualitative research (Charmaz, 2008). An interview is basically a guided conversation (Lofland and Lofland, 1995). The depth of the interviews enables the researcher to explore a targeted issue (e. g., the mother's role) by means of a heuristic tool. All the participants were contacted by telephone. An appointment was made and all the participants agreed to take part in the study. Accordingly, they all filled in and signed the Informed Consent Form and a second form certifying that they complied with the necessary requisites. The face-to-face, individual interviews were audio-tape recorded and ranged in duration from 30 to 60 minutes.

In connection with data analysis, following the recommendations of Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Charmaz (2000), these are the stages involved in our data analysis, carried out according to the Grounded Theory (Kelly, 2003). The first interview with the athlete was audiotape recorded and transcribed verbatim. Remarks, comments and signals were added to the interview transcript by the research team. For quality control of the investigation (Guba and Lincoln, 2000) and with the aim of verifying the correct interpretation of the answers, the athlete was subsequently presented with the interview complete with all the remarks, comments and signals in a single document.

The first data analysis stage involved a line-by-line coding of the transcribed interview. In this inductive method, data are broken down and ascribed terms without previous conditions, using labels to identify them. Coding can be interpreted as a form of labelling technique (Abela, García-Nieto and Corbacho, 2007). Line-by-line coding emerges as an extremely useful tool in the analysis of the interviews

(Charmaz, 2008). The final goal is to find themes in the raw data with the aid of the notes provided by the athletes (Charmaz, 2000). The integration of the whole analytic procedure contributes to the development of the theory, because the labelling technique not only reduces dramatically the volume of data to be used, but also provides a shared language for all the researchers taking part in the study.

By means of the line-by-line coding the researcher generates a series of terms which are subsequently grouped together and associated to a given category, that is, to a more explanatory and abstract term called category (Abela, García-Nieto and Corbacho, 2007). The categories refer to the influence exerted on other terms. This coding procedure provided two meta - categories, under whose influence the categories emerged. This process took place at the same time but at different levels.

The second data analysis stage involved axial coding. This analysis procedure generates sub-categories providing more accurate information on when, where, why and how a phenomenon takes place (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Axial coding involves an intense heuristic analysis around a category (Abela, García-Nieto and Corbacho, 2007). Once the first interview was audiotape recorded, transcribed and analyzed, the procedure was applied. When should researchers put an end to the series of interviews? Interviews should no longer proceed when the analysis has reached the point of theoretical saturation. Theoretical saturation is reached when no new features, components or relationships emerge from the analysis (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). At that point the procedure yields no new raw data and consequently no new themes, which means that all the data already fits into one category or another. At that point the theory is fully developed (Kelly, 2003).

The development of the Grounded Theory is an inductive and deductive process (Charmaz, 2000). Previous knowledge of the mother's role in the athletic development of youth athletes and the knowledge gained through interviews and data analyses are both used to develop a conceptual framework and a genuine theory which accurately describes the true role played by the mothers of these champions. Previous knowledge is actually very useful in the labelling of the categories.

The conceptual framework is built from the very beginning, when raw data are still being analyzed and it develops as the themes emerge. This conceptual framework adopts the form of a Grounded Theory diagram showing not only the relationships and influences that exist between mother and child, but also how those relationships and influences develop throughout the individual's sports career.

#### *Issues of trustworthiness*

Our investigation applied the four criteria which a generated theory must comply with (Glaser and Straus, 1967):



1. *Data fitness*. This implies the connection of the data with the generated categories so that the data fit correctly into the categories (Glaser and Strauss, 2008)
2. *Workability of the theory*. Our purpose was to obtain a theory which could explain what happened in the past, what would happen in the future and, at the same time, could interpret what was happening at that moment (Trinidad, Carrero and Soriano, 2006).
3. *Relevance of the theory*. With this criterion our purpose was to guarantee that the theory could explain a considerable number of the actions and events occurring in the area under study (Corbin and Strauss, 2008).
4. *Criterion of modifiability*. The generation of the theory is a procedure that per se implies a modification process, with nothing untouchable or static. As Glaser (1978) puts it: the theory cannot be more correct than the ability or skill to use the data. Consequently, the categories obtained in the first instance continue to change as the research proceeds.

#### *Data Analysis*

To analyse the qualitative data we used the software program Atlas ti, v. 5.0. This software helps to arrange and categorize the data collected during the interviews, because it analyses the documents and codes systematically and builds relationships at different levels.

### RESULTS

A grounded theory emerged from our study. The grounded theory that emerged highlighted the perception that these four extremely talented athletes had of the role played by their mothers in their sports career.

The first perception of these youth athletes was Unconditional support. It is this category which underlies what the informants articulate to interpret the support they had received, support which was always on hand regardless of the hour of day, the reasons or the activities they were involved in. The following quote clearly reveals how this support was perceived: my mother's role?... Phew, it's everything...., she is always doing things for me..., she's always there when I need her. I couldn't begin to make a list of the things she does for me because she is always doing things for me. (R.)

Unconditional support becomes a comprehensive meta-category encompassing all the different kinds of support given by the mother. Since this unconditional support is independent of the activity involved, it extends far beyond the sports participation as such and becomes a 24-hour, 7 days-a-week availability on the part of the mother. This meta-category is divided into three field-related categories, in connec-



tion with either sport or non-sport areas. The role played by the mothers of the study participants can be defined by a network of economic, logistic and emotional categories, either directly involved with the sport activity or not.

All of our four athletes recognized the influential roles played by other family members. However, as can be seen in the following quote from one of the participants, they all tend to consider their mother's role as crucial for their athletic development: *My mother has been absolutely wonderful, one of the people who has helped me the most. Not with training and that, but with everything outside the world of badminton. (O)*. This theory revealed different kinds of related supports:

1. *Emotional support*

Emotional support was considered as a primary support, and was defined by four dimensions, or sub-categories which were coded in vivo in the first stage of the analysis. These concepts were: encouragement, support, motivation and concern. During the interviews all the interviewees used these terms more than once and, given their enormous significance, we decided to code them in vivo (coding in vivo involves literal labelling from the transcript). This category was expressed in the following sub-categories:

- *Encouragement*

The encouragement provided by mothers was described in terms of the expressions of encouragement used and the energy transmitted by their mothers to the athletes in all spheres of their lives, particularly in sports activities. The following quote of one of the study participants is a clear example of this: *When things didn't go well I was often in a bad mood and went to bed and she always came after me to cheer me up and... I don't know... I was fed up because I had lost or played badly or because of what my father had said and then my mother always came, well, it has been great... she's always been there to help me and encourage me (R.)*.

- *Support*

Support refers to terms such as protection or help when he or she turns to his or her mother for refuge, understanding and love at difficult moments. Mothers do indeed provide this kind of support when they see that their children are in low spirits and try to restore their confidence which is essential to continue with training and competitions. As one of the participants put it: *My mother? Well, you know, ... to come home worn out and there she was, you know, don't you? And then she cheers you up, because that's what she does. And to talk to her, because you can talk to her about everything under the sun. When you feel bad about something, it affects your swimming, because you can't stop thinking about it..., you don't want to think about your problems, but you can't help it, it's always there in your subconscious. Yes, my mother helps me a lot (I.)*

### ■ *Motivation*

The stimulus, the incentive, the push that all athletes need to continue with their daily training and competitions is one of the roles that the mothers of these four athletes took on. But more than just a stimulus to continue with the sports activities, this kind of motivation also had to do with the effect that the words of encouragement and the behaviour of the mothers had on their children's self-esteem. These mothers were not primarily concerned with having children who were champions or with outstanding results in their chosen sport. They encouraged their children to keep doing sport because they wanted their sports activity to be a source of pleasure and enrichment for them. All the athletes involved confirmed that for them doing sport was fun and that was what their mothers wanted: *To have someone who cheers you up..., who tells you that you are really good..., who has confidence in you., you say to yourself: well, hum, if she thinks so... I suppose I must have something even if I can't see it. (O.)*

### ■ *Concern*

The concern the mothers felt for their athlete children showed itself in the care and interest they devoted to their children both in their sports activity and in life in general. This concern directly correlated with the familiar maternal instinct (Brizendine, 2006). Athlete children had a clear perception of their mother's concern, which reinforced their self-confidence and strengthened their emotional stability essential for the development of their sports talent. As one of the athletes put it: *My mother is always worried and frightened when I play rugby. Every time I come back from a match she asks me: have you been hurt? are you all right?, have you been hurt? (D.)*

### 2. *Logistic support*

The categories, emotional support and logistic support, are related via the sub-categories they are made up of. Concern also involves, for example, accompanying the young athletes to competitions and training sessions. The secondary logistic support usually adopted the form of seeing to travel arrangements, cleaning and care of the sports equipment. Only a mother concerned about her athlete child gets involved in attending her child's training sessions and matches and organizes the sports equipment he/she needs and makes sure that it is correctly cared for.

### ■ *Trips*

This category also involves the help that an athlete receives at all times whether he/she is stressed or not. Mothers take charge of providing their athlete children with all they need to practice their sport, which makes progress easier. The following statement by one of the study participants about his *trips to matches and training* is illustrative of this fact: *... when I was little my mother took me everywhere (D.)*. This

category can also include the parents' trips accompanying their children to matches in addition to taking their children to their daily training sessions. Although the athletes said that their mother was not the only family member who took them to matches, they also said that their mother's presence on such occasions definitely reinforced the athletes' perception that their mothers cared about their sports activity and therefore increased their self-esteem.

■ *Cleaning*

As for *keeping things clean*, our study revealed that this is the mothers' domain. Athletes placed enormous importance on this issue and were perfectly aware that they could not engage in their sports activity clean clothes and equipment: *My mother washes my clothes, she always has everything ready for training sessions and matches (R.)*

■ *Material*

Finally, athletes also highlighted the extremely valuable role played by their mothers in keeping their *equipment* in good condition. The mother assumes full responsibility for the good condition of her athlete child's sports equipment. As these athletes say, their mother "*is always there to have everything ready*" (D). The help of mothers extends far beyond sports events as such.

These mothers were involved in their children's education and with their friends. The special requirements of athletes like the study participants, all of them involved in highly demanding sports activities, make them sometimes extremely vulnerable and in need of support of every kind. As one of the participants said: *My mother helps me in everything. If I'm tired and need something, she brings it to me. If I have a lot of homework, she gives me a hand, makes notes for me and helps me with all my projects. My mother have also, for example, paid for private classes to help me with my homework and save me time... I've always got everything packed and ready for training sessions and matches. (R.)*

Of course, the continuous trips to sporting events, the daily driving of children to and fro, and the sports equipment have an impact on the next category: economic support. We must keep in mind that the child's sports career inevitably sometimes involves a significant economic investment by the family with consequences on the family budget. The logistic support acts as a link between emotional support and economic support.

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### 3. *Economic support*

This tertiary category is perhaps the one to which our participant athletes give least importance. It is not that they do not acknowledge the financial efforts made by their parents to support their sports activity. It is rather that the athletes interpret this effort as shared equally by both parents, with their mother taking the same responsibility as their fathers. However, we must bear in mind that the families of our participant athletes were of an economically middle-high level and none of these athletes had ever come up against difficulties or limitations in their athletic careers. This category was expressed in the following sub-categories.

#### ■ *Material supply*

All athletes admitted that they had never gone without any sports equipment, however expensive. We can get a clear idea of the socioeconomic level of their families by the following statement made by one of these athletes: *Last summer I wanted to buy some expensive swimming trunks for the championships..., I didn't feel happy about asking my parents for them, they were really very expensive. I told my parents about it and they didn't say no. They never say no if they feel it's for my good. (I.)*

#### ■ *Economic effort*

The economic effort is the effort made by the families so that the athletes can train and compete in their sports. The effort was viewed as something acceptable and worthwhile by the families and the athletes said that neither their fathers nor their mothers had ever complained about it. Although families clearly had no serious difficulty in paying for the travelling and sports equipment, some families had to give up certain things in order to pay for the child's sports activity, as can be seen in the following statement by one of the participants: *A lot of money goes on me doing sports. But they have never complained. But they have made a lot of sacrifices for me. (O.)*

## DISCUSSION

Our main purpose was to find out the role played by mothers in the athletic development of their children as bright young hopes in sports by means of the Grounded Theory method. The emergent theory clearly revealed that mothers play a significant, differential and outstanding role in the eyes of their athlete children.

The results obtained in the theory that emerged from the research revealed that for these athletes what best described their mothers' role was unconditional support. This support took the form of help at all times, regardless of their actual sports performances. This fact clearly reveals a strong mother-child bond right from early childhood, a bond that is completely different from the one observed

between a father and his children (Kanters, Bocarro and Casper, 2010; Papalia and Wendkos, 1992).

The mother's unconditional support acts as a true umbrella metacategory covering a whole set of other supports, namely, emotional, logistic and economic support. Consequently, for a correct understanding of the mother's unconditional support we must treat it comprehensively, i. e., as the source of a complex network of emotional, logistic and economic interconnections. Previous research on the family's role had already revealed this complex network but failed to distinguish the father's role from that played by the mother (Gould et al., 2008; Holt and Dunn, 2004 or Morgan and Giacobbi, 2006).

Scientific literature has very few references to unconditional support as such. By contrast, other kinds of support have frequently been referred to. Emotional support is, for example, one of the sub-categories used by Gould et al. (2008). Coaches themselves regard the parents' emotional support as a key element in children becoming successful tennis players. This emotional support gives rise to compose and unruffled behaviour on the part of the children when their parents attend matches. In this respect, Harrington (2006) noted how sports activities shared by members of the family strengthened family ties. In a survey carried out in Australia, this writer revealed how leisure activities actually reinforce child-parent relationships and how much a network of healthy family relationships depends on the mother having free time to promote family leisure activities.

In addition to the emotional support, almost exclusively reserved to mothers, the athletes mentioned two other kinds of support provided by both mothers and fathers. In relation to logistic and economic support, the athletes themselves said that they were not exclusive to their mother. Their fathers, they said, also took part in driving them to and from the training sessions and matches, in buying equipment and in all the travelling costs.

The participant athletes were perfectly aware of the significant logistic and economic support provided by their mothers, but they also admitted that it was not exclusive to their mothers. The studies carried out by Holt and Dunn (2004) or Morgan and Giacobbi (2006) revealed how both logistic and economic support was part of the supporting social network necessary to become a successful player of football and of other sports (Yaprak and Unlu, 2010).

In short, the athletes to their mothers, the first two being the most important ones, ascribed four main roles. However, the most interesting finding of our research was the way in which these roles interact. The logistic and economic support provided by families during their highly-talented children's athletic career had already been noted but little information was available on the different roles played by fa-

thers on the one hand and mothers on the other. It is, consequently, hard to contrast our findings with any other previous research.

This gap in the scientific literature can to some extent be filled in with the abundant testimonies of sportspeople, either from their autobiographies or from chapters of biographies of famous athletes written by others which deal with the athlete's mother. In his book *Todos mis hermanos*, Manel Estiarte (2009) describes, for example, how the 1992 Olympic Games Final revolved around the presence of his mother there. His team lost the match and when the referee finally blew the whistle he had a terrible feeling of emptiness: *Minutes later, as I went towards them through the protection barriers, my heart went back to normal, filling that vacuum of exhaustion and lack of emotion, it began to beat again, and the closer I got the faster the beating became. I kissed my wife twice, kissed my father and finally, I hugged my mother who said to me (using the plural): you've done very well, you can be pleased with yourself. She had been saying that same sentence all through my life, whether I had played well or not, won or lost, snow, rain, or shine: she kissed me and said: you've done very well, you can be pleased with yourself. It made no difference to her that this was an Olympic final, I was her son, her little boy, and all she wanted was for me to be at peace with myself.* (pp. 60-61)

Sylvie Bernier, the springboard diving champion at the 1984 Olympic Games, told to Orlick and Partington (1986): *My parents have been an enormous influence on my sports career. My mother always puts a note in my suitcase when I go to a competition. One day I found a note in one of my shoes. It said: you are our champion whatever happens. Then it went on: bring me back some chocolates. I laughed and cried..., but she helped me see things from a different perspective.*

All these testimonies from great athletes reveal how their mothers behaved as true mental trainers or sports psychologists. Unlike many fathers, who act as if they were a second coach or argue with the real coach, pressurize their children or behave in an incorrect manner when their children are performing (Harrington, 2006, Holt and Dunn, 2004; Morgan and Giacobbi, 2006), the mother plays her role off-stage. She is not the main character, she stays in the background or backstage, but her role is as important as her husband's or more so. She is concerned primarily with providing a healthy emotional environment for her athlete child in which to enjoy his/her sports activities. If her son/daughter is happy then so is she (De Lench, 2006).

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