

# PARENTAL INFLUENCE ON TENNIS PLAYERS : CASE STUDIES

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this study is to better understand the failure of young gifted athletes and the influence the parents / child relationships has on it. Three case studies are developed in order to put them back in their context. Interviews were carried out with players / parents / coaches. The players were specifically chosen as they had not reached elite level, despite very promising results in the junior leagues. The content analysis points out some favorable roles played by parents and other rather negative ones. It appears that their influence is closely linked to numerous interacting factors (parental values, motivations, parents / child, parents / coach relationships...). The case studies also clearly stress the importance of the choices made during the child's training, how they are linked to parental values, as well as the possible consequences of negative father / athlete relationships. Practical applications of this study should be taken into account to favor athletes' career.

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## Introduction

In the process leading to a high level of sport practice, a number of elements come into play (physical, psychological or social factors, talent, etc.) Conversely, when a young gifted athlete slows down or stops in his / her development, it could be due to a number of elements. We shall here look into one of the social factors: the influence of parents. The aim of this study is to analyse what could be the role of parents on their child's failure in the field of sport.

Since the 1990's, literature has demonstrated how parental involvement is crucial to the child's practice. Depending on the roles and behaviors adopted, their influence on the young athlete's progress can be positive or negative. Studies bring out favourable parental behaviors such as support, encouragement, financial and functional investment, control of sport behavior (Boixadós, Valiente, Mimbreno, Torregrosa, and Cruz, 1998; Côté, 1999; Ewing, Hedstrom, and Wiesner, 2004; Gimeno, 2001).

For a more exhaustive description of parental behaviors in the field of sport, we can refer to the work of Hellstedt (1987). He defined different types of parents, according to their level of implication, on a continuum from "under-involved" to "over-involved". Both extremes are considered unfavourable to the child. "Underinvolved" referred to a relative lack of emotional, financial, or functional investment on the part of parents, such as few volunteer activities like car-spooling or other assistance with transportation, minimal interest in the comments made by the coach, little or no assistance in helping the athlete set realistic outcome and performance goals, for instance. "Overinvolved" parents get excessively involved in the athletic success of their children. They often have a need that is

satisfied through their children's participation. They are characterized by constant attendance at practice sessions (standing next to the coach, yelling), they emphasize winning, tend to set unrealistic goals, and often become angry and disapproving if their children do not perform well.

This categorization may be too simplistic when it comes to defining complex parents / child relationship. It hardly explains affective logic and the factor dynamics influencing the athlete. To make up for this gap, it is interesting to have a look at the results of developmental studies (e.g. Côté and Hay, 2002; Durand-Bush, Salmela, and Thompson, 2004). They provide a more global approach. They highlight different stages according to the athlete's age. Each step deals with the importance of sport in the child's life and their family's, as well as the role of parents toward the athlete. These development patterns are important landmarks, but give no clue to concrete parental help or behavior (Côté, 1999).

What we know of the influence of parents on athletes has also been reinforced through the study of how far the parents/child relationships influence the child's progress. Studies point to unfavourable parental behaviors (e.g. lack of support, ambitions set too high, critics or pressure brought on the child). They show their impact on variables such as the athlete's level of stress, ambition or self-confidence or how they can contribute to his giving up on practice (Ewing et al., 2004; Hellstedt, 1990). However, the results are too disparate and linked, throughout these studies, to specific sports, to elite level athletes, to the study of particular parental behaviors or of behaviors targeting a particular psychological characteristic.

In order to help parents act positively toward their child's development, one has to

understand and know what behaviors should be favored and which ones should be avoided. On the basis of present literature, one may wonder how far parents can influence the child's failure at sport. Considering the important factors on an athlete's career, what can be the negative impact of parents/child relationships? More precisely, what behaviors or moral values carried out by parents can act as a brake to an athlete's progress? It is necessary to know them better so as to prevent them.

Interviews must be carried out in order to help us answer those questions. Indeed, quantitative data are not enough to understand the complex reality of parents/child relationships (Côté, 1999; Durand-Bush et al., 2004; Moraes, Salmela, Rabelo, and Vianna, 2004). The scope of the questionnaires is too limited to convey what the families go through. They are more appropriate to analyse a precise point. They are no use in describing situations which are always unique. They don't help to see the athlete's characteristics in context, whereas it is necessary to understand the athlete's evolution. In addition to the interview of the player, it would be useful to interview the various protagonists in a career (« athletic triangle » by Smoll, 1993; Van Rossum, 1995). Data are more objective, relevant and reliable when testimonies can be crossed. Interviewing players, parents, and coaches will enable us to analyse the athlete's career and put the parents/child relationships back in their context.

Moreover, most studies are based on athletes in active life or on young people making fast progress. Thus it seems useful to interview athletes whose career is behind them. Retrospective interviews remain one of the main sources of information on the development of athletes in their sport (Côté, Ericsson, and Law, 2005). Players have the

benefit of hindsight so their analysis of their parents' behavior as they were progressing can be more objective. The consequences on the athlete's evolution, both in the field of sport and in personal life are also easier to point out.

Further comments on previous studies mention that there is little data about athletes who failed at sport. However, analyzing the itinerary of athletes who did not succeed should enable to distinguish specific parental characteristics (Van Rossum, 1995). Indeed, successful athletes unmistakably recall positive parental behaviors.

This article lays out three case studies. They should help to describe positive parental behaviors - which allowed athletes to play tennis and be good players when they were children - but also to include other negative ones. The aim is to understand what caused the failure, to see the parents/child relationships in their global context, and to analyze how far they could be linked to the failure of the young gifted tennis players on their way to success.

## Method

### Participants

Participants in the study included three French tennis players (two female aged 28 and 26, one male, aged 24), three parents (two mothers and a father), and three coaches (male). Further demographic information is provided in Table 1. Players were at least regional league champions (12 / 14 years old). To reach this level, athletes must put a lot of effort into daily physical and technical training and competition, and parents have to support them.

Now they can stand back and ponder on their own involvement and their parents' behavior. For each player, an interview was

made with one parent, as well as with the trainer they found the most helpful in their progress. All coaches are former tennis

players, have been coaching for over ten years, and have coached the player in question for at least three years.

Players	Age	Siblings	Level reached	Parent interviewed	Parent occupation	Age	Parent's sport
Léa	28	A brother, 31	Among the 3 best French 12/14 year-olds	M1	Housewife	52	Tennis players
Marc	24	A brother, 23	Regional champion 12/14	M2	Employee	49	Father basketball player
Julie	26	A sister, 27	Regional champion 12/14	F3	Teacher	54	Tennis player

Table 1. Demographic Information for tennis players.

### Instruments

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the researcher with previous tennis playing experience at national level competition. This was useful in developing relationships with the participants. An interview guide, made of open-ended questions, was created, based on questions and themes developed in previous studies (Côté, 1999; Gould, Diefenbach, and Moffett, 2001). Exploratory interviews with other players served as a training function for the researcher and allowed to review and finalize the interview guide, which was then adapted to coach and parent interviews. Guides made the acquisition of qualitative data easier while standardizing and minimizing the interviewer's role by asking the same kind of questions.

1. Interviews with athletes: start from the beginning of their practice (when, where, why, how... did he begin to play tennis) and

move chronologically forward. They describe their evolution. The questions asked induce them to think about, among other things, their parents' role, behaviors, motivations, values as they were improving.

2. Interviews with parents: they were invited to give their opinion on their child's career as well as their, and their spouse's, role and attitude, their own practice, involvement, level of ambition, motivations, values... all through the child's progress.

3. Interviews with the coaches: they were asked to give their opinion on the athlete, his / her progress, behavior and the role parents played throughout their child's career, so as to get an external view on the athlete / parents relationship.

These interviews offer different perspectives on a same case study, and provide a triangular source of data by comparing the players' views, as well as the parents and the coaches'.

## Procedures

The players were solicited by phone. They were informed of the characteristics of the study and it was emphasized that involvement in the study was voluntary. Appointments were made for interviews with the players, one of their parents and their coaches. The 30-minute to one hour-long interviews were conducted individually in a private room, in French, and were recorded. Each interviewee was assured of the absolute confidentiality of the talks.

## Data Analysis

Analyses of hierarchical theme content were carried out (Delforge, 2003), following Gould recommendations (e.g. Gould et al., 1996):

1. All tape-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and kept.

2. The three members of the investigative team, each of whom had a background in qualitative research methodology, listened to each tape interview, read and reread all transcripts.

3. Idiographic profiles of each participant's interview were independently developed.

4. Each investigator independently identified raw-data themes (most specific sources of information: quotes or paraphrased quotes that captured a distinct idea or major concept) that characterized each participant's responses.

5. Then we organized raw-data themes into meaningful categories, employing inductive procedure (to identify common themes or patterns of greater generality). Highest level themes, "general dimensions", represented common themes of greatest abstraction or generality. These were divided in sub-categories: "first order" and "second order" themes, in order to increase generality,

meaning that no links came out between these themes.

Lastly, as an additional checking of the inductive analysis, a deductive analysis was conducted.

At each step the three investigators met to discuss until consensus was reached.

## Results

Table 2 provides an overview of the main themes, along with a comparison of the findings reported by each of the three family-coach units (the athletes' names were changed to ensure the confidentiality of the interviews). Analysis revealed 10 main categories reflecting complex interactions between players, parents, and coaches associated with involvement in tennis.

## Discussion

In this section, Léa, Marc and Julie's experiences are discussed using the parents', players' and coaches' "voices" whenever possible, and relevant literature. Names and phrases in the cursive font correspond to main first order themes of hierarchical analyses.

### *Léa*

*General setting - Beginnings.* Léa and her parents started playing tennis at the same time. She soon enjoyed competition. Both her parents got involved materially (trips, financing), so she could take part in tournaments. They delegated tennis training to the teacher, which is favourable (Van Rossum, 1995; Wylleman and De Knop, 2001).

Their interest in tennis was a bit excessive, and even became the family's central element. Léa explained "At some point, we only spoke of tennis at home ! It was tennis at all times, it mattered a lot." There is no denying they have a great influence on Léa. C1 commented

Second-order themes	First-order themes	Léa			Marc			Julie		
		P1	M1	C1	P2	M2	C2	P3	F3	C3
Role of sport in the family	Family sport immersion	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
	Parents play tennis	+	+	+	-	-	-	+	+	+
	Interest in tennis	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
	Tennis as central element in the family	+	+	+	-	-	-	+	+	+
	Practice different sports	-	-	-	+	+	+	-	-	-
	Ignorance of high level tennis system	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	+	+
Parents' roles	Involved materially	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
	M's encouragements	+	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Availability	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
	Travelling assistance	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Parents' values	High / Oversized expectations of the F	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
	Importance of studies	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	-	-
	Distance taken with sport preeminence and the athlete level	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
	F could not stand defeat	-	-	-	+	+	+	+	-	+
Family atmosphere	F / M's conflicts because of tennis	+	+	-	-	+	-	+	+	+
	M act as a "buffer" between F / player	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	-	+
F / athlete relationships	Verbally violent	-	-	-	+	+	+	+	-	+
	Negative remarks / Critical / Reproach	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	+
	Demanding (results, play more) / Pushing	+	-	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
	Performance-related behavior	+	+	-	-	-	-	+	-	+
	Rewards / Punishments	+	+	-	-	-	-	+	-	-
	Projection / Transfert	+	-	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
	F not listening / Difficult dialogue / Conflicts / No space to express oneself (child)	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	-	+

F as a coach	Coaching physically	+	-	-	-	-	-	+	+	+
	Technical or tactical advices	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	+	+
Separation of C / parent's roles	Delegating tennis to C	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	-
	Collaboration, dialogue F / C	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	-
F disturbing behaviors during a match	Behavior demonstrations	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	+
	Emotional demonstrations	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
	Interventions	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	+
Emotional characteristics of the player	Lack of self-confidence	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
	Competitive anxiety (fear of disappointing parents, of losing...)	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
	Paralysing stress	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	+	+
	Not wanting (or preferring) parents to come and watch matches	+	-	-	+	+	+	+	-	-
	Hard to become independent	+	+	+	-	+	+	-	+	+
	Regrets	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
	Transfer of the player / F relationship onto the player / C relationship	+	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	+
	Importance of friendship	-	-	-	+	+	+	-	-	-
	Self-destruction / (internalized) ill-being	+	+	+	-	-	-	+	+	+
	Not reaching one's highest level	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Player's motivations	Love playing	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
	Ambitions	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-
	Tennis events	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	-
	Need to please ever-present F	+	+	-	-	-	-	+	+	+
<p>Note. + represents themes reported by participant during interview; - represents themes not reported by participant during interview; M Mother; F Father; C Coach; P Player</p>										

Table 2. Synthesis and comparison of results across family-coach themes.

“Her parents’ influence was essential. When she talks to me, it’s like her parents are talking”; “The family background clearly influenced decision-making at times.”

*Positive behavior of the mother.* Léa’s mother encouraged her daughter “I always encouraged her to continue and progress.” This approach is conducive to a favourable development of the young athlete (Durand-Bush et al., 2004; Gould et al., 2001).

*Negative behavior of the father.* Léa’s comments always focus on her father’s attitude, not her mother’s. He was constantly critical of her performances, blamed her, and always had a negative view on whatever was happening: M1 said “My husband was totally negative”; “He blamed her all the time.” The way he behaved with Léa was performance-related. He even had put up a system of reward / punishment linked to her scoring: “If I had lost, he sulked, I knew something was bothering him, it lasted two days”; “He turned that into a bargain: ‘If you do this, you’ll get money’.”

During the games, his attitude disturbed Léa: “I could see he was angry when I missed an easy ball”; “He had a nervous twitch, he moved about on his chair, and jumped high.”

The father’s excessive behavior is probably due to the fact that he projected his own oversized ambition and want of success on his daughter’s career. According to previous studies, this paternal behavior is unfavourable to a young athlete (Gould et al., 1996; Smoll, 1993). It can alter his / her athletic career (Tuffey et al., 1998) as well as his / her personal development in a negative way (Ewing et al., 2004).

*Léa’s emotional characteristics.* To compensate for her father’s attitude, Léa appreciated her relationship with coaches, throughout her career, thus possibly transferring the daughter / father relationship onto the player / coach relationship: “I really liked my second

coach, he was more like a ... second dad... than a coach...”

Because of her parents’ over-involvement in her activity and the way they overrated it, Léa definitely found it very hard to become independent. She left home at 14 to be part of the federal network (national sport-studies curriculum), but she suffered from that. She interiorized her ill-being until she had to be sent back home. M1 explained “She developed some sort of a psychological ailment, she coughed all the time. It finally turned out that it was nervous. She couldn’t get used to her new life, away from home. She came home and things improved.”

Perhaps linked to several paternal behaviors, Léa’s self-confidence is very low. But self-confidence is important to succeed in competitions (Bois, 2003)

*Concluding remarks.* Overall, two negative points stand out from this experience. First, Léa still finds it hard to be independent today (lives with her parents at 28): “I feel so good at home!” Secondly, she has a feeling of failure, she regrets the way she handled her tennis career: “I feel like I missed something because of the year when I was in the national league. After that, my career never took off.” C1 said “She has regrets, she feels like she didn’t go as far as she could...” Yet, Carr and his colleagues (Carr, Weigand, and Jones, 2000) showed how setting the goals of a young athlete is linked to the parents’ dreams and perceptions. They pass on their own beliefs. On the positive side, she loved playing, right from the start, and she is still motivated to take part in competitions. It is probably due to her need to please her ever-present father. Léa still has not come to terms with the parental role model. She says she has been unable to satisfy her father’s ambitions: “Obviously, he had other ambitions for me”; “He is very disappointed.”



In conclusion, this case study shows that Léa's parents have done everything to help her progress and play. But some of the father's behaviors could have hindered Léa and influenced her psychological development. If her parents had helped her to gradually be autonomous, she might have made better progress in the National team away from home.

### *Marc*

*General setting – Beginnings.* Marc started hitting a ball against a wall on his own when he was 3 or 4 and competition at 7. He also played basketball, like everyone else in his family. This family sport immersion was undoubtedly positive at an early stage (Gould et al., 2001), just as practising various sports before adolescence (Wylleman and De Knop, 2001). At the age of 12, he chose to practice tennis at a more intensive rate. Both Marc's parents showed interest in his activity, and got involved in it to his benefit.

*Importance of studies.* Both his parents gave much importance to studies. They didn't want to let him follow a sport-studies curriculum (integrate a tennis academy) when he turned 16. C2 commented "For them Marc could no longer succeed at school if he was getting so much involved in tennis", M2 said "Studies were much more important than tennis." To her, neglecting studies amounts to jeopardizing one's future, and she cannot accept it. But by "both doing tennis and school", Marc's progress was not as significant as students' who had decided to join a tennis academy. Because he did not feel on a par with others, he lowered his ambition and gradually lost his motivation. To Marc, his parents' pragmatism and the priority given to school over tennis hindered his progress. These parental values compare with the distance taken with sport pre-eminence

and the athlete's level. Some studies stressed how positive it was for parents to put the importance of tennis into perspective (Gould et al., 2001). But standpoints on the importance of school are virtually non-existent.

*Negative behavior of the father.* His father prompted Marc to play more, more seriously, and had high expectations: M2 reported "My husband would have liked him to reach a higher level." Marc's father projected himself on Marc's incipient career. Some fathers endeavour to fulfill their goals through their sons, who then become the "object" of their projected expectations. They become a means to make up for their own failure (athletic or otherwise) (Maillard, 1998). As it is, Marc's father could not stand failure. He accused his son of not meeting his ideal, of failing to be up to his expectations. M2 said "If Marc failed, it was his fault, he didn't do all he could, he didn't go high enough, he should have done more, he should have tried harder, etc."

Pushing a child to play, projecting oneself on his / her career, being over-ambitious are unfavourable parental behaviors that affect a young athlete (Boixadós et al., 1998; Ewing et al., 2004; Gimeno, 2001).

Moreover, interaction between father and son was completely negative. He would blame him and make negative comments after a game, criticize him, belittle him. M2 said "He criticized everything, he often moaned after games", Marc: "He kept moaning. Everything was always negative. He wouldn't say nice things to me." This attitude might have an unfavourable impact on a child's evolution (Gould et al, 1996).

During games, his behavior perturbed Marc (non verbal communication, Ewing et al., 2004). M2 remarked "He would react after each point. Whenever Marc made a mistake, he looked at his father's face." As a

result, Marc asked his father not to come and see him anymore, as soon as he was able to drive. This reaction may have been an attempt to distance himself from his father. For Maillard (1998), this strategy allows a son to acquire an identity of his own and to forge a masculine identity. For a teenager, a father's presence on a court can become unbearable. It reactivates an inner fight that the athlete tries to go beyond, the father being both an identification model and an obstacle to emancipation.

*Marc's emotional characteristics.* During the interview, Marc stresses the fact that his lack of self-confidence was a handicap in his tennis practice, and is still a disadvantage in everyday life. Literary references clearly show the negative impact of some parents' behavior on athletes' self-confidence (Weiss, 1990). Over-powering fathers that envy their son's talent are among the "absentee fathers" who generate "failed sons". Despite their physical presence, these depreciative fathers who do not back up their son's achievements prevent them from establishing their masculine identity. Lack of self-confidence is one of the consequences.

Marc was stressed during competition. His parents' behavior seemed to be linked to this competitive anxiety (Ewing et al., 2004). On the one hand, his mother worried about his professional future. On the other hand, his father's critical reactions after a game and his behavior during the game were perhaps equally harmful (Hellstedt, 1990) "I kept thinking about his abrupt remarks after games, you know. This kind of thing puts pressure on you"; "I could see him near the court, I was even more stressed."

Marc gives much importance to friendship in tennis. He developed his identity through his friends (Maillard, 1998). That makes up for the consequences of an "absentee father".

He found a real "welcoming structure", a second family, in sport.

*Concluding remarks.* There are regrets about Marc's progression. Marc thinks his slow progression was due to his lack of confidence. He wishes his father had been more appreciative, that would have helped him "rank higher". His mother's regrets are numerous. She wonders what Marc's level would have been if studies had not got so important and if her husband had been less negative toward his son. These regrets illustrate the importance of parental involvement in an athlete's career. M2 explains their limited knowledge of tennis made it difficult for them to decide what was best for Marc as he was progressing "We didn't know what to do, what to think. We needed help, objective advice."

### *Julie*

*General setting – Beginnings.* Her father got involved in her training. He also played, and chaired a club only 20 yards from home. The tennis environment at home as well as her father's passion for the sport favourably influenced her at an early stage. He was interested and took her to competitions, which is also positive (Boixadós et al., 1998; Hellstedt, 1987; Van Rossum, 1995).

*Negative behavior of the father.* He was too involved. He coached her and advised her. He pushed her to play more. He had great ambitions for her, and projected himself on her success. This is a typical identification of a father to his daughter, showing a confusion of the father / daughter state. The child is instrumentalized in the name of performance. The young athlete becomes a way to make up for an adult's underachievement. C3 said "On court... it was like he was playing"; F3 "A victory, what a great experience ! I got so excited"; "I felt so distressed when she was distressed."

Results were of great importance to the father. He did not put the importance of tennis in his life into perspective, and was very demanding: C3 said “He always wanted her to win”; “When they came to a tournament, the whole world was at stake”; Julie “He always wanted more. I could never satisfy myself with what I’d just achieved. I always had to do better.”

During games, he interfered, attracted attention, and kept fidgeting about. C3 commented “Even when there was a referee, he would create havoc”; Julie “I could see him walk back and forth alongside the court, showing his disappointment, going to great lengths to attract my attention and telling me what I was supposed to do.” Such an attitude disturbs athletes a lot.

Julie’s father was also verbally violent to her. He belittled her with his negative remarks, and could not stand defeat. C3 said “He was so critical, only seeing negative things”; Julie admits “At times, he would even insult me”; “Driving back home was a nightmare.”

In relevant literature, all these attitudes (projection, excessive ambition, over-investment, criticism, etc.) are thought unfavourable to a child’s personal and athletic development (Gimeno, 2001; Gould et al., 1996; Smoll, 1993 for instance).

Father and mother disagreed on the importance given to sport over school. It led to conflicts. The mother could not admit her husband’s attitude toward his daughter because of tennis. She acted as a “buffer” between her husband and her daughter.

**Julie’s emotional characteristics.** For C3, “This girl is her father’s victim... She is traumatized by him. He is the archetypal bad parent when it comes to tennis.” More precisely, the most damaging consequence in her tennis practice was paralyzing stress during

games. C3 said “She was tetanized... she couldn’t play anymore”, Julie “I was scared to death. I couldn’t play.” According to Julie, this competitive anxiety hampered her progress. She was tied to her father, to his reaction in case she failed: C3 explained “Her father put too much pressure on her. That’s where it all came from”, and Julie adds “I dreaded defeat and its consequences.”

Different studies show that athletes’ anxiety may be due to parents’ pressure, their over-involvement, their criticism, or even their projection on their child (Ewing et al., 2004; Gould et al., 1996). Julie’s father has all these defects. Moreover, he crafted Julie’s athletic project. She was afraid of not playing well, of disappointing her father. When she talks, Julie also tends to depreciate and accuse herself. Her lack of confidence probably originates from her father’s criticism and negative comments (Weiss, 1990).

Logically, it came to the point that Julie disliked playing matches (Ewing et al., 2004; Tuffey et al., 1998): “I suffered so much that competition had become a nightmare.” She played to please her father, essentially. “After each match I wanted to stop playing, but I kept playing. That was so important to him. I didn’t feel like displeasing him.” She does not play for her sake anymore, but to make her father project come true. Julie’s ill-being is intense at times, and can turn into self-destruction: “At some point, you become a wreck. Because you know it’s going to hurt him too, you want to hurt yourself...”

**Testimony of Julie and C3 differ from F3’s.** Julie’s father’s testimony is quite different from hers, in some respects: Julie mentioned after-game tensions due to her father’s moaning and criticism; F3 “I didn’t scold her often, because she was very critical of herself anyway”; she says he attracted her attention during games to give her advice and

she could not help seeing him gesticulate; he recalls her dependence: "She needed to see me on the court side."

These conflicting testimonies make it even more relevant to interview the three members of the athletic triangle. C3's opinion is an objective, distanced approach to the father / daughter relationship. His testimony is in keeping with Julie's. Therefore we could think that the father is unable to realize or openly admit the consequences of his behavior.

*Concluding remarks.* Even more so than the two previous examples, this case study shows a father that "*went too far*". Yet, this type of parental involvement is not unusual in the field of individual sports. The analysis shows the possible negative influence of some parental behaviors on an athlete's progress: on the child's attitude on the court (Julie cannot concentrate or finds ways to "destroy herself"), and on performance-related psychological variables (paralyzing competitive anxiety or lack of self-confidence). Julie's father's attitude is one important factor among others (physical, psychological, social), that have a link with a premature degradation of her tennis performances.

## Discussion

Collecting data about family environment and parents / child relationships is necessary to get a better knowledge of the parameters contributing to an athlete's success or failure. Indeed, even if a number of elements play their part in the progress of a young athlete, the key to success is that none of them must be ignored. The three case studies we analyzed have allowed to put back in their context the parents / child relationships. They bring to the fore some rather positive parental behaviors and others, rather negative

for the athlete, as far as their practice and psychological development are concerned.

In the three case studies, parents influenced their child's evolution through different, interacting variables (possibly sport-oriented family background, parental values, parents / child relationship...). Comparing the athlete / coach / parents points of view helped better understand each party's subjectivity. Julie's case is revealing. C3 testimony reinforces her views, and contradicts her father's. It is important to note, though, that coaches are not totally neutral: their affective implication as well as transfer phenomena that are quite common between teacher and pupil, influence their opinion.

As expected (Côté et al., 2005) thanks to the retrospective interviews, the emotional distancing made things easier for the participants, as well as the analysis of negative and positive influence of the families' implication on the athletes' progress. Moreover, the various family members expressed their views on parental actions and their impact on the athlete's subsequent progress, often stating regrets (M2).

The three courses highlight some decisive choices in the athletes' progress. At key moments in their evolution, they made penalizing choices in their career: they were unable to leave home to join a tennis academy, or favoured their studies. These choices were consistent with family values.

Parental unfavourable influence stands out in the three courses. This may have had an impact on the athletes' progress only, but it may also sometimes have altered their psychological development. Such was the case when parents went over the limit (verbal violence, depreciation, strictness, oversized ambition, in the case of F3). The sport experience can then alter the athlete's well-being in his / her present day life (lack of self-confidence, difficulties in becoming independent).

Fathers often get more involved (projection, ambitions, advice) than traditionally more moderate mothers (distance with the athlete's level, unconditional support, importance of school...) in the three courses discussed. To this day, this behavioral difference linked to the parent's sex has little been studied. Bois (2003) cannot give a clear answer. He stresses the fact that, more often than not, athletes use the term "parents" rather than the words "mother" or "father". Our interview guidelines helped avoid this pitfall. It is also noticeable that mothers are more willing to being interviewed than fathers, who are more involved. Maybe fathers refuse interviews to avoid questioning their behaviors or analyse the possible impact on their child. On the one side, it is a shame not to have their testimony as it is then difficult to know their motivations and perceptions of their relationship to their child. On the other side, the mother's testimony enables to get more objective data about the father's behaviors.

The analysis of the athletes' career also shows the narrow borderline between a positive behavior toward the child and one, slightly more accentuated, that becomes negative – for instance, motivating one's child *vs* pushing him / her (Gimeno, 2001; Hellstedt, 1990). Finding the right balance is a challenge for parents. They must show enough interest and drive their child places, motivate and guide him / her, but they should not go so far as to interfere in the coach's job or project themselves on their child's success. This is, in other words, finding the unsteady balance between encouragement conducive to success, and excessive or insufficient involvement ("optimal push" Tuffey, et al., 1998).

Showing interest in unsuccessful athletes is unusual. Some original themes were

brought to light ("buffer" between a parent and the athlete, father / mother conflicts due to tennis...) These themes seem to play a part in the failure (importance of school, procrastination over leaving the parents, verbal violence), even if one should remain cautious in that field: each parent / child relationship has its own dynamic, and so-called "unfavourable" parental attitudes are not always harmful: athletes respond differently, depending on their needs. A given father's behavior during a game may appear as an encouragement to the player, while it would be negative for someone else. Expected parental behavior cannot follow a definite rule. A mother remarked "Moaning may touch a child, but the bottom line is that each child is different. With our daughter, it missed its purpose" and a player added "Agassi's father insulted his son all day, and he was a great player. It depends on people's character, that's all. It simply didn't work on me." Some attitudes, however, like parental violence or omnipresence, are largely negative for the athlete.

To answer the problem put forward in this study, case studies have depicted some situations where parental behaviors haven't been ideal for their child's evolution. These parents supposedly played a part in their child's failure, among other factors. However, generalizing on such a topic is rather delicate as every parents / child relationship is unique and an athlete's failure depends on a dynamic of various factors. This study is limited by a small sample size which constraints the generalizability of the findings. We also have to take into account methodological boundaries that affect interviews and content analyses (Côté et al., 2005). Content analysis is a rather subjective approach. Respecting an interview guide and using a standardized method to analyse contents however

guarantees a minimum of reliability as to the data collected. The validity of retrospective studies is also put into question. The accuracy of collected information is objectionable because of the specificity of perception and memory, the influence of social and cultural environments on memory, the "inference and reconstruction" (Côté et al., 2005). Interpretation and generalization of collected data should therefore be dealt with cautiously. Cross-examining several testimonies or evoking precise moments in the time during interviews, as we did in this study, are a good way to limit conscious or unconscious distortions (Durand-Bush et al., 2004).

The results of this study call for additional analysis on the subject, notably by looking in depth into themes like the "buffer" part mothers seem to be playing, the consequences of both parents in league against their child, the difficulty for an athlete to become independent. That would possibly make it easier to understand the personal difficulties athletes are confronted with when their careers come to an end, especially their affective immaturity.

Results are, in part, probably due to the context of tennis. Studies on other sports would make it possible to compare parental influence, depending on the practice, collective or individual, for example (Moraes et al., 2004). Parental influence may be less in a

collective sport context, where peer mediatization allows for an easier personal identification.

American research (Gould et al., 2001) showed the importance of success factors that do not appear in our study, such as religious education. Intercultural studies should therefore be conducted to better appreciate cultural specificities and their impact on athletes' education, and take them into account in the training process (Moraes et al., 2004).

Finally, the practical application of this study should not be ignored. Interviews showed that some parents needed advice at key moments of their child's practice (M1, M2). They say their child's progress was hampered because they simply didn't know what choices they should have made, or how they should have behaved. Parents should be guided, by the coach or a sport psychologist, otherwise they will fall into traps. While they believe they are helping their child, they become abusive. Over-involved parents, who are a source of worry for coaches, are all too often held back so that coaches are left alone. It would probably be more advisable to let them be aware of the negative implications of their attitude, and so help them optimize their child's potential. Even if they are only one component in the career of an athlete, their influence mustn't be ignored.

*INFLUENCIA PARENTAL EN JUGADORES DE TENIS: ESTUDIOS DEL CASO*

PALABRAS CLAVE: Influencia, Padres, Fracaso deportivo, Estudios de caso.

RESUMEN: El objetivo de este estudio es comprender mejor el fracaso de jóvenes deportistas dotados y la influencia de las relaciones padres niños sobre este fracaso. Se describen tres casos para presentarlos en su contexto. Se han realizado entrevistas a los jugadores, los padres y entrenadores. El no haber logrado a alcanzar un nivel superior de práctica a pesar de comienzos muy prometedores en los jóvenes es la principal característica de los deportistas. El análisis de contenido ha puesto en evidencia actitudes positivas y negativas de los padres. La influencia de los padres se manifiesta en numerosos factores como sus valores o motivaciones, las relaciones padres / hijos o padres / entrenadores... Los estudios de caso ponen también de relieve la importancia de las opciones que se tienen que hacer y su vínculo con los valores parentales. Las implicaciones prácticas de este estudio deben tenerse en cuenta para favorecer las carreras deportivas de los deportistas jóvenes.

*INFLUÊNCIA PARENTAL EM JOGADORES DE TÊNIS: ESTUDOS DE CASO*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Influência, Pais, Fracasso desportivo, Estudos de caso.

Resumo: O objetivo deste estudo é compreender melhor o fracasso de jovens desportistas talentosos e a influência das relações Pais/filhos sobre este. Descrevem-se três casos de forma a serem apresentados no seu contexto. Realizaram-se entrevistas aos jogadores, aos Pais e a treinadores. Os atletas foram escolhidos em função de não terem conseguido alcançar um nível superior de prática apesar de inícios muito prometedores enquanto jovens. A análise de conteúdo colocou em evidência atitudes positivas e negativas dos Pais. A influência dos Pais está directamente relacionada com numerosos factores tais como os seus valores, as suas motivações, as relações Pais/filhos ou Pais /treinadores... Os estudos de caso põem também em relevo a importância das opções que se têm que fazer e o seu vínculo com os valores parentais. As implicações práticas deste estudo devem levar-se em consideração para favorecer as carreiras desportivas dos jovens desportistas.

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