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Doctorate 2008

## *Understanding and Coping Among Adolescent Athletes*

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### **Project Summary**

**Research Objectives:** Participation in youth sport is associated with a variety of positive developmental outcomes among adolescents, however studies of recreational and competitive youth sport contexts have revealed stressors which include not having fun, an overemphasis on winning, conflicts with coaches or opponents, or parental pressures to succeed (Anshel & Delaney, 2001; Goyen & Anshel, 1998; Sirard, Pfeiffer, & Pate, 2006). Researchers speculate that failing to cope with these stressors may lead to burnout and eventually sport withdrawal (Petlichkoff, 1992; Smith, 1986). Thus, by understanding how youth deal with potential stressors, coping may play an important role in improving athletes' experiences in sport and maintaining sport participation rates.

**Conclusions:** Results from study 1 suggest that the development of coping among adolescent athletes is malleable and is influenced by the athlete's social network and prior coping experiences. Social networks including athletes' parents, coaches, and teammates should be developed by focusing on communication and positive social interactions. By developing social networks and coping skills, youth may maintain sport participation throughout adolescence.

Results from study 2 suggest that learning to cope was an experiential process for adolescent athletes, implying that athletes must gain personal experience in dealing with stressors in order to learn how to cope. Athletes learned about coping by being exposed to multiple situations in their sport and by reflecting on their stressors and coping efforts. Parents and coaches helped athletes learn to cope by creating a trusting environment which facilitated the learning process, and by using specific strategies for assisting athletes in learning about coping. Strategies included questioning and reminding, sharing experiences, providing perspective, and dosing stress experiences to help athletes learn to cope. Parents also initiated informal conversations about coping, while coaches used direct instruction and created opportunities to learn about coping

The results of this research have been published in peer-reviewed journals:

- Tamminen, K. A., & Holt, N. L. (in press). A grounded theory of adolescent athletes' learning to cope and the role of parents and coaches. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*. doi: 10.1016/j.psychsport.2011.07.006
- Tamminen, K.A., & Holt, N. L. (2010). A meta-study of qualitative research examining stressor appraisals and coping among adolescents in sport. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 28, 1563-1580. doi: 10.1080/02640414.2010.512642

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### **Research Methods**

**Study 1:** The purpose of this study was to create an integrated conceptual perspective and to establish 'what is known' about youth sport stress and coping. A qualitative meta-study was conducted of youth sport coping

research from 1970-2009. Twelve sport psychology journals were manually searched and six online databases were searched electronically. Weekly automatic database searches were also conducted. Based on inclusion criteria, 17 articles and 3 dissertations were retained. Analyses produced the following themes: contextual and dynamic stressor appraisals, dynamic coping efforts, development of coping, and social networks as assets and liabilities.

Study 2: The purpose of this study was to develop a grounded theory of adolescent athletes' process of learning to cope and the role of parents and coaches within this process. The key research question was "how do coaches and parents influence the development of coping in sport?" Interviews were conducted with 17 athletes (8 females, 9 males, *M* age = 15.6 years) 10 parents (8 mothers, 2 fathers), and 7 male coaches. Interviews were analysed using grounded theory methodology (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Analyses produced the main category of learning about coping, as well as three categories concerning the role of parents and coaches: creating context, strategies for assistance, and balancing acts. Learning about coping was an experiential process for adolescent athletes, suggesting that athletes must gain personal experience in dealing with stressors in order to learn how to cope.

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## Research Results

1. Athletes' social networks are complex and intricately tied to the appraisal of stressors and the ways in which they cope with stressors. Parents and coaches may serve as assets to helping athletes learn to cope with stressors in sport, however they may also be liabilities in learning about coping (i.e., athletes may perceive parents and coaches as stressors and not as sources of support). Positive interactions with coaches and parents may improve or facilitate athletes' coping.
2. Most previous studies have concluded with applied implications that involve helping adolescent athletes build a repertoire of coping resources and/or selecting the coping strategies that are 'tried and true.' The current research *also* highlights the importance of delivering interventions that focus on athletes' social networks which were found to be both assets and liabilities. Thus, interventions that also target coaches, parents, and even team/peer interactions may be useful for improving adolescents' coping in sport. This issue does not appear to have been widely considered in the literature to date.
3. Learning about coping occurred through an experiential process where athletes needed direct exposure to stressors to try out coping strategies (see Figure 1). This was facilitated by exposure to different situations, and by having appropriate social support networks in place to assist athletes' coping. Thus, being exposed to various situations in sport with supportive parents and coaches surrounding the athlete may contribute to the development of coping strategies. The current research confirms the idea that athletes benefit from instruction.
4. Regarding coping; however these findings emphasize the importance of providing athletes with opportunities to try out coping strategies in competitive situations.
5. Parents and coaches reported that they attempted to create a context for learning about coping by listening and by monitoring their own reactions when discussing stressors with their child. The context created by parents appeared to influence the extent to which athletes sought assistance from their parents when facing stressors. Family contexts appear to influence the development of adaptive and maladaptive coping among adolescents (Grant et al., 2006; Kliwer, et al., 1996; Lafferty & Dorrell, 2006), and researchers have suggested that coping intervention programs need to address parenting and communication within family environments (e.g., Blount, Davis, Powers, & Roberts, 1991); the current findings support this proposition.

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### **Policy Implications**

Exposure to multiple experiences in sport should be supported by information and education regarding the importance of social support in athletes' coping. Parents and coaches should not be left out of interventions, since they are integral parts of athletes' social networks. Education should be provided to parents and coaches regarding stressors and coping among athletes including information regarding potential stressors for athletes, ways of coping with stressors, and adaptive and maladaptive ways of coping. There should be an emphasis on improving communication between athletes and their coaches and parents, with an emphasis on positive social interactions to facilitate the development of coping. Sharing experiences, questioning and reminding athletes about possible ways of coping, providing perspective, and providing opportunities to learn about coping all appear to be practical ways to help athletes learn to cope with stressors in sport. By helping athletes learn to cope adaptively with stressors in sport, they may improve the quality of their sport experiences, thereby reducing burnout and withdrawal. These suggestions are relevant for the Canadian Sport for Life goal of enhanced sport participation and improving the quality of sport for young athletes.

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### **Next Steps**

Athletes' perceptions of stressors and use of coping strategies changes with development (Reeves, et al., 2009), and parents and coaches may help athletes learn to cope in qualitatively different ways across stages of development (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2009). Future research may investigate the ways in which parents and coaches contribute to athletes' learning to cope at different developmental stages. Understanding how parents and coaches help athletes learn to cope at different stages may help to develop developmentally appropriate interventions for parents, coaches, and athletes.

While it is important for athletes to experience potentially stressful situations to develop new coping abilities, parents and coaches must also determine the relative ability of the athlete to cope with stressors. Parents and coaches may adjust their protective practices as athletes develop a repertoire of coping skills. This represents an interesting area of study regarding parent-athlete relationships and the ways in which parents negotiate risks involved in allowing their child to engage in potentially stressful competitive contexts. The question is 'how do parents negotiate their child's involvement in competitive sport?' Future research may include the examination of parental and coach socialization or modeling of coping responses in sport.

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### **Key Stakeholders and Benefits**

There appears to be scope for education programs to be distributed through the Coaching Association of Canada, and also through national sport governing bodies to direct information at parents of young athletes.

- Coaching Association of Canada (enhancing supportive coaching environments)
- Sport Canada (encouraging multiple sport experiences for young athletes)
- National & Provincial Sport Organizations
- Academic & coach education programs
- Parents of athletes

Figure 1. A grounded theory of adolescent athletes' learning about coping and the role of parents and coaches.

