In 2013, Andy Murray won Wimbledon; after a 77-year wait, there was once again a British Wimbledon Men’s Singles Champion. As Murray sealed his historic victory, the television cameras immediately panned to his supporters’ box looking to capture the reactions of his coach, trainers, and now wife. But, most importantly, they wanted to see Andy’s mother’s reaction. Known as “Tennis’s most famous mother,” (Brown, 2015), Judy Murray has been Andy’s most loyal and visible supporter throughout his professional career. She has been there when he has triumphed and when he has struggled, and her very visible reactions have been shared online and in print media around the world. However, when Andy won Wimbledon and ascended to the supporters’ box to embrace his team there was one person he almost forgot. Had it not been for the shouts of “What about your mum!” from the crowd, Andy might well have descended back to the court without acknowledging the enduring and critical support of his mother. In today’s society, when many athletes use trophy presentations as a platform from which they can thank their family for their never-ending support and parents are elevated to near celebrity status if their children succeed on the international stage, such a slip from Murray could not go unnoticed. Newspaper article after newspaper article gave space to Andy’s “near miss” (e.g., Curtis, 2013) and even a year after the event, as the build up to Murray’s title defense began, it was still being discussed (e.g., Malnick, 2014).

Such an intense focus on the interactions between one athlete and his mother are probably a little extreme. However, it does serve to highlight the substantial media attention that is being afforded to the role of the family within elite sport. In the scientific literature, the importance of the family in the development of talented athletes is also well recognized (Lauer, Gould, Roman, & Pierce, 2010a; Wuerth, Lee, & Alfermann, 2004). Family, and particularly parents, are explicitly included or discussed within all the major models of talent development used in sport (e.g., Bloom, 1985; Côté, Baker, & Abernethy, 2003; Gagné, 2000; Henricksen, Stambulova, & Roessler, 2010a, 2010b; Salmela, 1994) and researchers are continually seeking to extend our understanding of their influence (e.g., Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi, 2006, 2008; Lauer, Gould, Roman, & Pierce, 2010a, 2010b). To put it simply, we know that the “right” family environment, and particularly support from parents, can help talented athletes achieve at the elite level or at least reach their individual sporting potential. If the family support is “wrong” the negative consequences can be so great that talented athletes might burnout or drop out of sport before they have had the opportunity to succeed (e.g., Kay, 2000). Unfortunately,
knowing what is “right” and what is “wrong” and, more importantly, being able to act on this knowledge and provide the necessary support to facilitate talent development is anything but simple.

The purpose of this chapter is to unpack the role of the family in the development of talented athletes, focusing on how the family can support or detract from this process. When considering the role of the family in talent development, it is important to note that the majority of literature has focused upon parents’ influence rather than considering the influence of siblings or extended family (Horn & Horn, 2007; Partridge, Brustad, & Babkes Stellino, 2008). As such, the majority of this chapter will focus upon parents’ involvement. The chapter will start with an overview of the positive and negative influences of parents in sport. Next, a detailed examination of the role of the family throughout the process of athletic development will be provided and the consequences of supporting a talented athlete will be discussed. The chapter will then conclude with suggestions for future research for exploring the complexity of family influence within talent development.

Influence of family involvement on talent development

The development of sporting talent is a complex and dynamic process, which is greatly influenced by the environment in which a young athlete is situated (Abbott & Collins, 2004; Martindale, Collins, & Abraham, 2007). Simply having the necessary attributes to succeed in sport is insufficient. Rather, as Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whalen (1993) explained, talent development will only occur if the individual is located in an environment in which their talent is valued by society and also recognized and nurtured by parents, teachers, and coaches. The impact of the immediate environment, as well as the broader cultural and societal influences, on athletic development has received much support in recent years (e.g., Henriksen et al., 2010a, 2010b; Henriksen, Stambulova, & Roessler, 2011; Larsen, Alfermann, Henriksen, & Christensen, 2013). For example, the national value placed on a certain sport, the size of the city or town in which a child is born, the quality and availability of appropriate training and coaching, and the family resources available to invest in sport participation have all been shown to influence athletic development (Kay, 2000; MacNamara & Collins, 2012). In addition to having access to developmental opportunities, young athletes also need to have the necessary resources and capabilities to benefit from these opportunities (MacNamara, Button, & Collins, 2010a, 2010b). Family, and particularly parents, play an important role in facilitating children’s access to opportunities and also the development of resources required to optimize their involvement in talent development environments (Pankhurst & Collins, 2013).

Positive consequences of parental involvement

Over the last 30 years, elite athletes and coaches have consistently reinforced the importance of the family in talent development (e.g., Carlson, 1988; Côté, 1999; Kay, 2000; Wuerth et al., 2004). For example, Gould, Dieffenbach, and Moffett (2002) explored the psychological characteristics of US Olympic champions and the sources of influence on the development of these characteristics. A range of psychological characteristics, such as ability to cope with and control anxiety, competitiveness, a hard-work ethic, and optimism, were identified and the development of these characteristics was attributed to numerous influences. Family was seen to be particularly influential, with different family members affecting development in different ways. For example, siblings influenced development by providing support, direct and indirect teaching, and offering feedback and critique as well as teasing and sibling rivalry. Grandparents were seen
as important role models for active lifestyles and instilling positive and healthy values and attitudes. Parents’ influence ranged from providing encouragement and support, to understanding sport, empathizing with athletes, and creating a positive achievement environment.

Reinforcing the findings of Gould and colleagues (2002), another study of Olympic and World champions revealed that the supportive and nurturing roles of parents and siblings, particularly when facing setbacks, were very important in maintaining an elite status in sport (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002). Further, parents’ involvement and support has been attributed to the development of mental toughness among elite athletes (Connaughton, Wadey, Hanton, & Jones, 2008), and learning to perceive anxiety as facilitative instead of debilitative (Hanton & Jones, 1999). Parents have also been credited with, among other things, helping to foster intrinsic motivation, supporting the maintenance of self-confidence, developing positive attitudes towards sport including valuing effort and hard work, and enhancing athletes’ enjoyment of sport (see Holt & Knight, 2014 for details). Such characteristics have been identified as critical in the development and achievement of an elite status in sport (MacNamara et al., 2010a, 2010b). Through their provision of tangible (e.g., time and money) and informational support, parents also ensure athletes have access to the necessary training, coaching and competition opportunities, are able to manage sporting transitions, feel supported in their sporting endeavors, and maintain balance in their lives (Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999; Fredricks & Eccles, 2004; Gould et al., 2006, 2008; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005).

Negative consequences of parental involvement

However, although elite athletes frequently describe the positive influence their parents had on their development, some parents have been shown to have a negative or detrimental influence on athletic development (Gould et al., 2006, 2008; Lauer et al., 2010a, 2010b). For example, a survey of 250 US tennis coaches revealed that, although 58.6 percent of coaches thought parents had a positive influence on development, 35.9 percent of parents were perceived to hurt or hinder children’s tennis development (Gould et al., 2006). Such a detrimental influence is usually attributed to parental behaviors that result in athletes experiencing pressure (Gould et al., 2006, 2008). Such parental pressure can arise from an excessive emphasis on winning, holding unrealistic expectations for their child, withdrawing love, or using punitive behaviors (e.g., Gould et al., 2006, 2008; Lauer et al., 2010a, 2010b; Woolger, & Power, 2000). When athletes perceive high levels of parental pressure, it can result in athletes developing a fear of failure, high levels of pre-competitive anxiety and perceived stress, lower self-esteem and self-confidence and negatively influence perceptions of competence and intrinsic motivation (Holt & Knight, 2014). Parents can also negatively influence children’s sporting development by interfering in training, being too controlling, and taking sport too seriously (Gould et al., 2006, 2008; Lauer et al., 2010a, 2010b). Further, by encouraging excessive amounts of training and pressuring children to improve and win, children can experience overuse injuries or burnout (Gould, Wilson, Tuffey, & Lochbaum, 1993). Overall, such involvement from parents can lead to children dropping out of sport and not reaching their sporting potential (Harwood & Knight, 2015).

Influence of siblings

When considering the overall influence of siblings within the development of talented athletes, they again appear to have the potential to positively or negatively influence athletes (Harwood, Douglas, & Minniti, 2012; Horn & Horn, 2007). For example, in a number of studies, elite
athletes have credited their siblings with being role models to their involvement and effort and encouraging them to participate in sport (e.g., Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999). Further, some siblings provided support to athletes and celebrated their successes and achievements (Gould et al., 2002). However, due to the need to prioritize athletes’ training and competition and invest large amounts of finance into athletes’ participation, issues of sibling jealousy and rivalry could arise (Côté, 1999; Taylor & Collins, 2015). Such feelings might detract from athletes’ development as they are distracted or concerned about negative interactions with their siblings, but in some instances sibling rivalries further motivate athletes to succeed (Partridge et al., 2008; Harwood et al., 2012). Finally, older sibling’s sport participation can also be the “testbed” for young siblings, providing parents with an opportunity to develop an understanding of what is required and how to act in different situations (Knight, Dorsch, Osai, Haderlie, & Sellars, 2016; Knight & Holt, 2013). Thus, parents might be better positioned to support the talent development of their younger children.

Family influence throughout athletic development

As detailed earlier (cf. Chapters 10 and 11 in this Handbook), talent development is a process that is complex, messy, dynamic, and individual (Martindale, Collins, & Daubney, 2005). Similarly, the roles, involvement, and influence of the family in supporting athletes’ development are idiographic, changeable, and multi-faceted (Gould et al., 2008; Lauer et al., 2010a, 2010b; Wuerth et al., 2004). The previous section highlighted the overall positive and negative influence of parents and siblings on talent development. However, the specific ways in which the family influences athletic development shift as athlete’s progress through different stages of their career (e.g., Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999; Salmela, 1994; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Managing these changes over the course of their child’s development, and fulfilling the appropriate roles at the correct times appears particularly important in helping athletes reach their potential (Harwood & Knight, 2015).

Figure 13.1 Summary of social influences on, and subsequent family consequences of, developing talented athletes. The weight of the arrow provides an estimation of the degree of influence individuals have on the talented athlete as they develop and the subsequent influence their sporting involvement has on the family.
The first step in the process of talent development is children becoming involved in sport. During this initial stage (termed, among others, as the initiation or sampling stage; Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999; Salmela, 1994; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), parents are critical. If parents do not value involvement in sport, or do not have the financial means to provide sporting opportunities, the likelihood of children participating is low (Baxter-Jones & Maffulli, 2003; Tranckle & Cushion, 2006). It is important that parents value sport participation, not only because children depend upon their parents to sign them up to play different sports, transport them to training, and fund their participation (Baxter-Jones & Maffulli, 2003; Bloom, 1985, Côté, 1999; Salmela, 1994), but also because parents’ attitudes towards sport are often mirrored by children (Jodl, Michael, Malanchuk, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2001). Consequently, if parents do not value sport, it is unlikely children will be provided with opportunities to pursue sport or develop positive attitudes towards participation.

If parents do introduce their children to sport, they must then make a number of decisions that could subsequently enhance or reduce the potential for their children to excel in sport. One of the most important decisions parents are likely to make at the outset of their children’s sporting career pertains to what and how many sports their children will participate in (Harwood & Knight, 2015). It is common for parents to introduce their children to the same sports in which they participated (Carlson, 2011; Wuerth et al., 2004). Such a decision can be beneficial because parents will likely be better positioned to understand the system and thus, make more informed decisions regarding training and competition requirements (Knight et al., in press; Knight & Holt, 2014). Similarly, choosing to introduce younger children into the same sport as older siblings can be beneficial because older siblings will act as motivators to participation (Morgan & Giacobbi, 2006; Young & Pearce, 2011) and parents will have started to learn what is needed to help children succeed in these sports (Knight & Holt, 2013). However, introducing children to sports they previously participated in might lead to parents expecting more from their children or struggling to separate their and their child’s experience, which might lead to children dropping out (cf. Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2008).

Parents must also choose how many sports children participate in and the type of training/activities to prioritize (Harwood & Knight, 2015). Most literature points to the importance of children sampling a range of sports for a number of years to reduce the risks of injury or burnout that can arise from early specialization (Baker, 2003). Thus, parents providing opportunities for children to sample a range of sports in an enjoyable and playful manner is most likely to facilitate talent development (Harwood & Knight, 2015; Holt & Knight, 2014). However, parents’ decisions will be guided by those around them, particularly coaches and other parents, whose knowledge might vary in accuracy (Knight & Holt, 2013; Pankhurst, Collins, & MacNamara, 2013). Ultimately parents have to decide what information to use and what to discard when making the final decision regarding their children’s participation (Martindale et al., 2007).

Having made these decisions, parents must then provide tangible support to help their child participate and progress. This tangible support includes transporting children to different opportunities, purchasing equipment and clothing, paying for coaching, and in some instances coaching their child (Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). Parents also play an important role in sharing in their child’s excitement and enjoyment (Wuerth et al., 2004), initiating a love of sport (Martindale et al., 2005), and integrating sport within family life (Côté, 1999). Parents also foster important attitudes and behaviors regarding sport in young children (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004), such as appropriate responses to winning, good sportspersonship,
the importance of trying one’s hardest, and the development of a growth mindset (see Harwood et al., 2012; MacNamara et al., 2010b). Such behaviors and attitudes can be encouraged through parents demonstrating such attitudes themselves and the provision of feedback and support that reinforces these values to children (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004).

**Progressing in sport**

As child-athletes progress in sport (entering the middle years, Bloom, 1985; specializing stage, Côté, 1999; Developmental stage, Wylleman & Lavellee, 2004), the enduring attitude of their parents towards sport, and particularly the value they place on developing talent, will influence their commitment to their child’s sport and athletic development (Jodl et al., 2001). Parents display their commitment to, and support for, their child’s athletic endeavors by continuing to provide tangible support in the form of transport and funding (Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999; Kay, 2000; Lauer et al., 2010a, 2010b). Such tangible support is required to ensure child-athletes can access the necessary training and competitions to develop and have the right equipment and clothing (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005).

One important consideration for parents’ pertaining to their provision of tangible (and to a lesser extent emotional) support is how their children perceive such an investment (cf. Clarke, Harwood, & Cushion, 2016). The investment parents make in their children’s sport can necessitate changes to their own lifestyle, such as reducing working hours, limiting their social life, spending disproportionate amounts of time with different children, and limiting family holidays (Harwood & Knight, 2009a, 2009b; Kay, 2000; Morgan & Giacobbi, 2006). Such a commitment from parents can inadvertently result in parents’ pressuring children (or children perceiving pressure) to succeed so parents gain a return on their investment (Gould et al., 2006, 2008). If children feel such pressure it will likely have detrimental influences on their development. Additionally, the financial and time investment into one child over their siblings can result in jealousy or resentment within the family (Côté, 1999) and feelings of guilt for the parents (Harwood & Knight, 2009a, 2009b). Being aware of such potential issues and developing strategies to manage these concerns will facilitate a smoother development process (Harwood & Knight, 2015).

Parents also increase the emotional support they provide to their child-athlete during this stage (Côté et al., 2003). Such emotional support is particularly important in helping child-athletes maintain their motivation in the face of setbacks (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008; Gould et al., 2008; Lauer et al., 2010a). However, providing the appropriate types of emotional support to child-athletes is complex (cf. Knight, Boden, & Holt, 2010; Knight, Neely, & Holt, 2011). Recent studies have sought to unpack parental involvement to identify how parents can best support athletic development during early-mid adolescence (e.g., Holt et al., 2009; Knight & Holt, 2014; Knight et al., 2010, 2011). Findings from such research has pointed to the importance of considering not just the individual behaviors parents display or the practices they engage in, but also the broader emotional climate created by parents or the parenting style they adopt (Harwood & Knight, 2015; Knight & Holt, 2014). Further, the importance of parents and children having shared goals for involvement appears fundamental to ensuring the support provided to children is appreciated by, and beneficial for, athletes (Knight & Holt, 2014).

A key component within this stage of talent development is the relationship between parents and coaches (e.g., Côté, 1999; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). As described, parents are very important and highly engaged in their child-athlete’s sporting life during this stage (Harwood et al., 2012). But, coach involvement, feedback, and guidance are also increasingly important (Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999), and parents need to make space for the coach to do their job (Lauer
et al., 2010a, 2010b). Given the importance of the coach during this stage, the parents’ role in selecting an appropriate coach who can guide their child’s development (cf. Knight & Holt, 2013) and then maintaining an appropriate working relationship with this coach is vital to ensuring the child is receiving the best support and guidance (Harwood & Knight, 2015). If parents are unable to develop a positive relationship with their child’s coach it could result in a breakdown in the coach–athlete relationship and negatively impact the child’s development (Holt & Knight, 2014). Thus, by committing time and effort to the selection of the coach and the development of a positive working relationship, parents can ensure they maximize opportunities for their child to excel in sport.

**Excelling in sport**

Once athletes move into the final stage of development (Later years: Bloom 1985; Investment stage: Côté, 1999; Mastery stage: Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), the influence of the family changes again (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002; Morgan & Giacobbi, 2006). Parents continue to be important and impact athletes’ development through the provision of emotional and tangible support, but a reduction in direct parental involvement has been noted (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002; Morgan & Giacobbi, 2006; Salmela, 1994; Wuerth et al., 2004). Such a reduction in direct involvement may arise due to athletes moving away from home and/or because the coach’s leadership role further increases.

Nevertheless, parents still play an important role in helping athletes make decisions regarding the future, particularly relating to decisions about education or work (Christensen & Sørensen, 2009). For some athletes, decisions regarding full-time versus part-time school or moving to academies might have occurred during earlier stages of their career; however, the final stage of athletic development often coincides with the end of compulsory schooling (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) so decisions regarding the pursuit of a full-time sporting career or maintaining a dual career (either in a job or education) move to the forefront of athletes and parents’ minds (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Family support and guidance is important for helping athletes to make the decisions that will best suit their sporting and holistic development. Such support could take a variety of forms, ranging from providing guidance and sharing information, to understanding and supporting decisions (e.g., Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999; Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002).

Managing the transition into elite level or professional sport, which usually occurs during this stage, can also necessitate substantial emotional support from parents. Such a transition can be very difficult for athletes, with data indicating that only 15–35 percent of athletes successfully manage it (Oldenziel, Gagné, & Gulbin, 2003; Vanden Auweele, De Martelaer, Rzewniki, De Knop, & Wylleman, 2004). Parental and sibling support is likely a key environmental factor influencing the success of this transition, particularly if athletes are facing adversity or setbacks (Giacobbi & Morgan, 2006; Udry, Gould, Bridgers, & Tuffey, 1997).

**Impact on families of supporting talented athletes**

Supporting the development of talented athletes is not always an easy task (Knight & Holt, 2013). Recognizing the potential impacts of supporting talent athletes, and the need to ensure that families are supported in their attempts to help their children develop, researchers have recently begun to put their focus on the parents themselves (Holt & Knight, 2014). For example, Wiersma and Fifer (2008) identified that parents found providing emotional and instrumental support to their children particularly challenging. The provision of instrumental
support was challenging due to the consequences it had on general family life and parents’ ability to fulfill other parenting responsibilities (such as organizing dinner, helping with homework, and getting children to bed on time). Challenges associated with providing emotional support arose because parents were unsure of how to support their children in difficult situations, such as when children had been unsuccessful, if they were not as good as the other players on their team, or did not want to commit to a team for an entire season.

Further, Harwood and Knight (2009a, 2009b) surveyed 123 parents and completed interviews with a further 22 parents of tennis-playing children about the stressors they encountered when supporting their children’s involvement. Parents reported numerous stressors ranging from competitions, to sibling resentment and inequality of attention, to issues with the organization. Overall, the stressors were categorized into competition stressors (e.g., watching matches, logistical concerns), organizational stressors (e.g., financial concerns, time issues), and developmental stressors (e.g., tennis progression, academic concerns). Different stressors were more prevalent during different stages of athletic development.

The transitions associated with athletes’ development appear to be associated with particular challenges for parents (Clarke & Harwood, 2014; Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2009; Lally & Kerr, 2008). For example, Clarke and Harwood (2014) explored parents’ experiences of their children’s transition into elite football (soccer) academies in the UK. This transition had many positive consequences for parents, such as enhanced parental status due to their child’s success in gaining an academy place. However, negative implications for parents were also apparent, including frustration resulting from a decreased sense of agency, limited communication from coaches, and anticipatory fear of their child being cut. Concerns have also been raised by parents once their children leave elite sport (Lally & Kerr, 2008). Parents of former national/international-level gymnasts reported experiencing lingering doubts regarding the long-term impact of negative coach behaviours, their daughters’ gymnastics participation on their families, their daughters’ limited social interactions outside of gymnastics, and their daughters’ experiences of chronic pain. Unfortunately, despite the developing awareness of the consequences parents and families can encounter when supporting talented athletes, strategies to address or minimize such challenges are still limited (Harwood & Knight, 2015).

**Areas for future research**

There has been a rapid increase in research examining parental involvement in youth sport over the last decade (Holt & Knight, 2014). Such research is beginning to provide an understanding of the complex and intricate nature in which parents can positively and negatively influence the process of talent development. However, there are still many areas that warrant further investigation and application in practice (Taylor & Collins, 2015). With regards to parental involvement in talent development, there is a continuing need to better understand what support parents need in order to be able to help their elite athletes succeed (Knight & Holt, 2013) and how parents can support athletes as they navigate key transition points (Harwood & Knight, 2015). Further, continuing to develop our understanding of the challenges parents encounter and, most importantly, how they deal with these challenges, is of particular importance given the increasing demands parents face (Holt & Knight, 2014).

There is also a desperate need for research considering the influence of the extended family in talent development and particularly the influence of siblings (Horn & Horn, 2007; Taylor & Collins, 2015). Parents are heavily reliant upon their support network to be able to help their children develop (Knight & Holt, 2013), so enhancing our understanding of how the family unit works together to support talented athletes, and how such support can be maximized, is
vital to improve the development process. Such an understanding is particularly important when considering the varied structure of families in current society (Kay, 2000; Knight & Holt, 2013). The majority of research considering the family or parent influence in talent development has focused upon nuclear families. However, children may be part of single-parent families or stepfamilies, which, for some, could result in them moving between homes and parents. Further, some children might have no extended family and others might have large families. Exploring how these various family structures influence the talent development process and, most importantly, how these families work to support talented athletes, would provide much needed insight to help ensure all talented athletes, no matter what their family structure, are able to access the necessary support to reach their potential.

References


