

## EXPERIENCES OF FAMILIES WITH A HIGH-ACHIEVER CHILD IN SPORT: CASE STUDIES

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### ABSTRACT

*The family, not only the coach, plays a major role in the pursuit of children to reach the highest level in sport. Yet, it is mainly the high achiever, and sometimes the coach, who get recognition for success in this regard. This study explored the experiences of families with high-achieving adolescent athletes aspiring to compete in the Olympics. The participants consisted of three purposively selected South African families. In-depth phenomenological interviews were conducted. Data were analysed by means of thematic coding. Four themes were identified: a child who is an achiever in sport affects the whole family; acceptance of the trying circumstances of being a high achiever in sport made it easier for the achiever child to cope; as siblings grow older, they try to find their own niche in the family; and coaches become as important to children as their own parents. A cross-validation report of the three case studies and a discussion of findings in the literature give insight into an understanding of the everyday lives of high achievers in sport.*

**Key words:** Sport family; Family life; High achiever in sport; Acknowledgement of parents; Parenting sport stars.

### INTRODUCTION

Sport has become a major international focus as it transcends language, social, cultural, religious, financial and political barriers. When the World Cup fever hit South Africans in 2010, it was all about the players and coaches. The same happens when one watches the winners' podium in other major sporting events. Nevertheless, Bert le Clos, father of Olympian, Chad le Clos, changed this at the London Olympics in 2012. His emotional words about his son's victory over Olympic champion, Michael Phelps: "unbelievable ... unbelievable!", instantly made him a worldwide celebrity (Balding, 2012).

Ekern and Cooper (2013), Siekanska (2013), McCarthy (2014) and the Palo Alto Medical Foundation (2014), report that parents and coaches have the most influence on athletes. Sam Ramsamy (2003), president of the South African National Olympic Committee at the time, said that the support of the family often goes unnoticed. The sporting ambitions of one or more of the children often dominate the life of the entire family (Grisogono, 1991). Some parents even make it their life mission to help develop their children's sporting talent.

The research of Siekanska (2013) emphasise the importance of parental support in their children's sport involvement. However, few authors have attempted to study the dynamics of the family, or how it is affected by the participation of the child. Investigations into home influence have provided only limited information on how families create, sustain and communicate their own realities when one of the family members is committed to high-level performance. An Internet discussion on coaching middle-distance runners (Coaching middle distance runners: Psychology, 2014), confirmed that much has been written and said about the roles of coaches and their responsibilities concerning these runners, but that little is mentioned about the role of parents and the rest of the family.

Côtè and Hay (2002, cited in Delforge & Le Scanff, 2006), highlight the developmental age stages of young athletes and how they affect the lives of the families and athletes, as well as the role of parents in the sport of their children. Delforge and Le Scanff (2006) point out constructive parental behaviours, while others, such as Nielsen (2010), Stroebel (2010) and Siekanska (2013), highlight undesirable parental behaviour, ranging from under- to over-involvement in the sport of their children.

This article reports qualitative research that addressed the following question: *what are the experiences of families with adolescent high achievers in sport?* The focus was on adolescent high achievers in track and field, as the findings of De Vos *et al.* (2011) suggest possible applicability to other sport codes.

## METHODOLOGY

The research design was qualitative, exploratory, descriptive and contextual in nature, within an interpretive paradigm. The interpretive paradigm views the nature of reality as socially constructed and created by the persons involved in the situations (De Vos *et al.*, 2011). Experiences of people create knowledge and are subjective in nature. A case-study approach (Yin, 2009; Polit & Beck, 2012) was followed, which is the intensive study of a single unit. In this research, a family was viewed as the unit under investigation. Phenomenological in-depth interviews, as recommended by Creswell (2013), were conducted with purposively selected participants to obtain an overview of their interpretation of their experiences.

### Participants

In this study, 3 families with adolescent high achievers in sport were involved. During the interviews, the participants provided detailed descriptions of their experiences. Due to the extensive information gained from interviews, the many observations and the writing of field notes, the sample size in qualitative research is usually restricted (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Based on the recommendations of Brink *et al.* (2012), the researchers of the current study attempted to reach data saturation of information about the experiences of families with a sport achiever, rather than using a large sample.

A purposive sampling method was used. According to Ritchie and Lewis (2003), this refers to sample units that are chosen because they have particular experiences and knowledge that will enable researchers to obtain a detailed understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. In the case of this research, the sport code selected was track and field athletics.

The inclusion criteria required that athletes were to be between 13 and 18 years of age, who were able to express themselves in Afrikaans or English. The final criterion was one of the following: possible future Olympians; ranked among the top-50 in the world; was an African champion; was a South African champion; or ranked among the top-3 in South Africa. The final sample consisted of 3 adolescents (2 from track and 1 from field events), their parents and their siblings.

### **Data collection**

In-depth interviews, as recommended by Glaser and Strauss (2009, cited in Gray, 2009), were conducted with purposively selected families who were willing to share their experiences. Interviews were conducted in the same manner with each family. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with the entire family, consisting of the parents, the high-achiever child and his or her siblings. Additional interviews were then conducted with the parents alone, and thereafter with the high achiever and his or her parents.

The interviews provided an opportunity for a detailed investigation of each person's personal perspective. Understanding of the personal context within which the research phenomenon is located is imperative. The interviews were audiotaped with a signed consent from the participants. The researcher visited the families repeatedly during the research period. Each interview lasted at least an hour. Data saturation was reached when statements made in previous interviews were repeated. In other words, interviewing was terminated when very little new information emerged.

The interviews were guided by the following central request: "Please tell me how you experience being part of a family with a high achiever in sport". Since expressing their feelings and issues related to the high achiever was an unusual experience, the researcher deliberately used empathy, intuition, patience and wisdom, as recommended by LoBiondo-Wood and Haber (2010). One of the researchers in the current study, experienced in family counselling and interviewing techniques, conducted the interviews.

### **Analysis of data**

Tesch's method of thematic coding (Creswell, 2013) was used to analyse the transcribed interviews. The following steps were followed: read through each individual transcription to get a picture of the whole; jot down, in the margin, ideas and thoughts of the responses of a particular interview as they come to mind; repeat the process with all transcribed interviews; list and cluster similar topics together in columns; convert topics into codes and themes. Once consensus was reached on the themes, member checking with all 3 families was done. Verbatim quotes from the interviews to illustrate the various lived experiences are presented as part of the findings.

The data were analysed further in a cross-validation to create one voice (Yin, 2009; Thomas, 2011). Cross-validation is the process of comparing the findings of different case studies. The phenomenon, a family with a high achiever in sport, was viewed from different perspectives in order to enhance the understanding thereof. After analysing the data, the research findings were compared with that in the literature (Creswell, 2012) to identify similarities and differences, as well as the uniqueness of the research findings.

The trustworthy model of Guba (De Vos *et al.*, 2011) was used adhering to the 4 aspects proposed by Merriam (2009), namely truth-value, applicability, consistency and neutrality. Truth-value is obtained from the detection of human experiences as participants live and perceive them. The verbatim quotes of participants substantiate this. Member checking, as recommended by Niewenhuis and Smit (2012), was done by reading parts of the interview data to the relevant participants. Credibility was established when participants recognised the research findings as their own experiences. Audiotaped interviews, therefore, presented more reliable evidence than would hastily written field notes during the interviews. A protocol for analysis of the data was sent to an independent coder who was familiar with conducting qualitative data analysis. The interviewer and the experienced independent coder reached consensus with regard to the findings.

### Ethical considerations

The Ethics Committee of University of Johannesburg granted ethical clearance (reference number 03/06/03). The parents gave informed written consent and the minors gave written assent. They were informed that they could withdraw their participation at any time and that all information would be anonymous and confidential. The researcher conducting the interviews explained that after personal disclosures during interviews, a counsellor would be available to provide emotional support should such a need arise.

### RESULTS

Table 1 provides an outline of the sample and the interviews that were conducted. In 2 families, there were only 2 children, both adolescents. In the third family, the age difference between the first 2 of 3 children, who were both adolescents, was 3 years. There was also a toddler in the third family who did not participate in the interviews. One couple (husband and wife), as well as one other father-coach, were involved in the sport training of their own child. Two of the fathers coached their own children. According to Côté *et al.* (2005), any type of interview conducted with athletes concerning their experiences needs to consider not only what the researchers want to know, but also what the athletes are able to report accurately.

TABLE 1. SAMPLE AND INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED

Family	Sample	Interviews conducted
<i>Family 1</i>		
Parents	F <sub>1</sub> & M <sub>1</sub>	1. F <sub>1</sub> , M <sub>1</sub> , A <sub>1</sub> & S <sub>1</sub>
Children	A <sub>1</sub> [High achiever, elder sister]; S <sub>1</sub> [Younger sister]	2. F <sub>1</sub> & M <sub>1</sub>
		3. F <sub>1</sub> , M <sub>1</sub> & A <sub>1</sub>
<i>Family 2</i>		
Parents	F <sub>2</sub> & M <sub>2</sub>	1. F <sub>2</sub> , M <sub>2</sub> , A <sub>2</sub> & S <sub>2</sub>
Children	A <sub>2</sub> [High achiever, elder brother]; S <sub>2</sub> [Younger sister]	2. F <sub>2</sub> & M <sub>2</sub>
		3. F <sub>2</sub> , M <sub>2</sub> & A <sub>2</sub>
<i>Family 3</i>		
Parents	F <sub>3</sub> & M <sub>3</sub>	1. F <sub>3</sub> , M <sub>3</sub> , A <sub>3</sub> & S <sub>3</sub>
Children	A <sub>3</sub> [High achiever, elder sister]; S <sub>3</sub> [Younger sister]	2. F <sub>3</sub> & M <sub>3</sub>
	T <sub>3</sub> [Toddler not included in the interviews]	3. F <sub>3</sub> , M <sub>3</sub> & A <sub>3</sub>

F = Father    M = Mother;    High Achiever = A;    S = Sister;    T = Toddler

The findings from the interviews will now be discussed, with participants quoted verbatim. A literature control was used to corroborate the quotations. The most important categories will be discussed as part of each theme.

### Family 1

#### ***When one of the children in a family is a high achiever in sport, the whole family is affected***

There were 3 sub-themes, namely (1) the dramatic changes in lifestyle from the time when the parents were young, in terms of their perception of time, social life, illnesses and injuries; (2) the sacrifices that families of high achievers have to make; and (3) the advantages that benefit the whole family through the achiever.

A high achiever in sport affected the whole family. The parents in this family hold forth that their children have more opportunities in sport than they had, as they grew up in the era of Apartheid during which international sport participation was boycotted.

*...because of isolation, we could not compete overseas, it was not meant for us. (F<sub>1</sub>)*

The high achiever did not view her family as a normal family. If she had to participate in athletic meetings, the whole family had to go to bed early.

*When it comes to big athletic meetings, we all have to go to bed early, must be very quiet so that Ousus (nickname of older sister who was the high achiever) can rest. When it is cold, nobody can go out, because Ousus might catch a cold. Everybody eats what Ousus eats, because she has to perform (F<sub>1</sub>).*

The mother found it impossible to take a weekend or day off to be just by herself.

*So yes, to find a weekend or a day to take off, or whatever for you are almost impossible (M<sub>1</sub>).*

Their marriage was also challenged, because of having a high achiever in the family. The parents did not have enough time to spend on their marriage.

#### ***Acceptance of the trying circumstances of being a high achiever in sport made it easier for him or her to cope***

The high achiever accepted her circumstances.

*I really love my sister; I don't want her to feel bad because I'm getting so much and I want to be a good example to her (A<sub>1</sub>).*

She did not participate in sleepovers.

*I never get to go to mass sleepovers, half way through the movies; my parents fetch me if it is late. I'm never allowed to travel by bus. I also need lots of friends; otherwise I'll die (A<sub>1</sub>).*

***As younger siblings ('the other child') grow older, they try to find their own niche in the family***

As the younger sister grew older, she tried to find her own niche in the family. She knew that her parents loved her, but understood that her high achiever sister needed all the support of her parents.

*I know my mom and dad love me. It's just that she has this big talent. She needs all their help (S<sub>1</sub>).*

Before participating in the study, the high achiever never realised how her younger sister viewed her achievements.

*I never realised how my sister looked at things. This was the first time our family talked like this. Yes, we talked a lot about athletics and goals, but not like this (A<sub>1</sub>).*

It was only during the interviews that the family expressed their experiences of having a high achiever in their family. Previously they only discussed athletics and goals that the high achiever should reach.

***Coaches become just as important to the high achiever children as their own parents do***

The high achiever viewed her coach as a second mother, "She is like a second mother to me". (A<sub>1</sub>)

**Family 2**

***When one of the children in a family is a high achiever in sport, the whole family is affected***

The same 3 sub-themes identified in Family 1 were also identified in Family 2, namely (1) the dramatic changes in lifestyle from the time when the parents were young, in terms of their perception of time, social life, illnesses and injuries; (2) the sacrifices that families of high achievers had to make; and (3) the advantages that benefit the whole family through the achiever.

The family spoke about the effect the high achiever had on the family. The parents voiced that they could not compete overseas as a result of growing up in the Apartheid boycott years.

*...because of isolation, we could not compete overseas, it was not meant for us. (F<sub>2</sub>)*

Nowadays children have more opportunities to compete in sport.

The high achiever also did not view his family as normal with the phrase "...if we were a normal family" (A<sub>2</sub>). One of his parents also said: "... you try and let them lead a normal child's life" (F<sub>2</sub>). A<sub>2</sub> focused on the future. He wanted to participate in the Olympic Games and break the Olympic record.

*I want to win the Olympic Games in 2012. I am going to break the Olympic record.* (A<sub>2</sub>)

The parents expressed that sport also occupied their time during the week:

*During the week, we are busy with sport. When we get home we are tired and don't want other people around you. Sundays we go to church, but although it would be nice if someone invited us to lunch, no one ever does. So, Sundays we also spend alone. We only have three or four real friends.* (M<sub>2</sub>)

When it came to 'health and injuries', the father went into denial by saying:

*...definitely don't think it will happen. There is no way. When the money runs out at the end of the month, I'll go and buy vitamins for the children before I buy a beer.* (F<sub>2</sub>)

The parents admitted that their marriage was challenged since they did not have time to spend in each other's company. They expressed the importance of teamwork in their family; the parents needed to support each other:

*So if my Mum finds it difficult, my Dad's right there. They're used to working as a team.* (A<sub>2</sub>)

***Acceptance of the trying circumstances of being a high achiever in sport made it easier for him or her to cope***

The high achiever had many friends who were also athletes.

*I have many friends; they are also runners, but they can't come to my house and ride horse, the parents are scared they might get hurt and then can't run.* (A<sub>2</sub>)

The high achiever did not regard schoolwork as a priority:

*I'm already getting 75/80%, but I miss a lot of schoolwork due to competitions. My teachers do not always understand. Academics are last on my list of priorities.* (A<sub>2</sub>)

***As younger siblings ('the other child') grow older, they try to find their own niche in the family***

The high achiever's younger sister said:

*When I was younger, it used to bug me when my brother (the high achiever) didn't want to come and watch me, but now I understand why, he was always training or competing. So, it doesn't bug me anymore. I love him. It will be lonely without him when he leaves for America to run.* (S<sub>2</sub>)

***Coaches become just as important to high achiever children as their own parents do***

The father decided to coach his own high achiever son: The high achiever son did not want to disappoint his father by not achieving in sport:

*I told my child when I wear this cap, I'm Dad, when I wear that cap, I'm coach.*  
(F<sub>2</sub>)

*The worst thing for me is to disappoint my Dad in my sport.* (A<sub>2</sub>)

### **Family 3**

***When one of the children in a family is a high achiever in sport, the whole family is affected***

Two of the sub-themes identified in Family 1 and Family 2 were also identified in Family 3, namely (1) the dramatic changes in lifestyle from the time when the parents were young, in terms of their perception of time, social life, illnesses and injuries; and (2) the sacrifices that families of high achievers had to make.

The mother reminisced:

*When I was 19, I was almost married. That's what you did in those days. My child is getting out into a big wide world, wider than we are used to.* (M<sub>3</sub>)

The mother expressed that the family did not have real friends and that other people criticised them a lot. Their peers did not really accept these parents, since the parents did not have time for socialising:

*They do not really accept you. They regard you as too important for them, that you are stuck-up when you do not want to visit them. They criticise you a lot.* (M<sub>3</sub>)

Other people perceived these parents not wanting to socialise with other people. The father found it tough to support the high achiever daughter financially:

*...but also the visits to doctors, physiotherapists, chiropractors and homeopaths. Within three months, the medical aid funds meant for a year can be easily depleted.*  
(F<sub>3</sub>)

The mother expressed that she and her husband had no time to spend together, which was quite challenging for their marriage:

*There is no time for us ... the last few years our marriage was not good.* (M<sub>3</sub>)

***Acceptance of the trying circumstances of being a high achiever in sport made it easier for him or her to cope***

The high achiever daughter planned to study business management in the future, but her current focus was on her sport achievement, "But not now". (A<sub>3</sub>)

***As the younger siblings ('the other child') grow older, they try to find their own niche in the family***

The high achiever's younger adolescent sister realised that her high achiever sister's participation in sport also benefited her:



*So I don't mind so much anymore that my sister is getting so much attention. I get to travel with her sometimes. (S<sub>3</sub>)*

***Coaches become just as important to high achiever children as their own parents do***

To find the right coach was very difficult. However, the parents did find the right coach for their high achiever daughter.

*Very difficult. Not that they are too few, they might just not suit your child. (F<sub>3</sub>)  
Our coach is like a father to us. He is very committed. He makes us part of his life.  
(A<sub>3</sub>)*

## DISCUSSION

The three families repeated four themes regarding their experiences of having high achiever children in sport, namely (1) when one of the children in a family is a high achiever in sport, the whole family is affected; (2) acceptance of the trying circumstances of being a high achiever in sport made it easier for the achievers to cope; (3) as younger siblings grow older they try to find their own niche in the family; and (4) coaches become just as important to high achiever children as their own parents.

*1. When one of the children in a family is a high achiever in sport, the whole family is affected.*

The lifestyles and experiences of the high achievers differed greatly from those of their parents when they were young. The mother from Family 3 stated that she was almost married at 19, since that was what you did in those days. Her child was stepping out into a big, wide world that is more inclusive than what they, as parents, were accustomed to. The parents of all three families were of the opinion that their children had more opportunities than they had when growing up in the Apartheid era, due to sport boycotts against South Africa.

The era in which the children of today are growing up, as well as the functioning of the families in this era, differs significantly from the society of 20 and more years ago. What parents remember as daily news, their children perceive as ancient history, because so much has changed (Elmore, 2001). The words 'apartheid' and 'isolation' are foreign to them. The Apartheid regime barred people of colour from participation. At present, the quota/targets in South African sport focus on developing black sport men and women (SABC Sports News, 2014).

The high achiever children of all three families thought that their families were not normal since they focused so much on the high achievers and their sport. Grisgono (1991) and Siekanska (2013) agree that the demands of a sport can be detrimental to normal family life. Children, who participate in competitive sport, and especially high achievers, are very time-conscious. This refers to present time management of daily activities, but also to future directedness. According to Ben-Baruch *et al.* (1991) and Poggenpoel and Myburgh (2002), time is inseparably associated with achievement and success. For the high achievers, time is also clearly directed to the future, as mentioned by A<sub>2</sub> who said that he wanted to win the Olympic Games in 2012. In fact, he intended to break the Olympic record.

Although people always surrounded the interviewed families, their social lives were also greatly affected. M<sub>1</sub>, F<sub>2</sub> and M<sub>2</sub> described how their high achiever children's sport kept them busy during the week. They lived isolated lives with very few or no friends. Social isolation can be serious. Goleman (1997) ascribes it to the sense that you have no one to share private feelings or with whom you have any close contact. All six parents were also criticised for their focus on their high achiever children's sport and for not making time for other people. Concerning health and injuries, F<sub>2</sub> did not think that his high achiever son would ever suffer from injuries. Nonetheless, dealing with injuries and failures is actually one of the true challenges of participating in sport (Rotella & Bunker, 1987). According to Smoll and Smith (2012), the responsibility to recognise and manage sport-related injuries often falls on the parents and they should be knowledgeable about their nature and treatment.

The second sub-theme was about the sacrifices that high achievers' families had to make and how it affected each family member. Family members mentioned how it affected their diet and rest, finances, travelling, teamwork, marriages and own dreams. F<sub>1</sub> explained that before big athletic meetings, the whole family had to go to bed early and be very quiet so that the high achiever could rest. Nobody in the family could go out in cold weather because the high achiever might catch a cold. Everybody in the family ate what the high achiever ate because she had to perform well. This was quite significant. In 'normal families', the children go to bed early when the parents say so. In families with a high achiever, the parents go to bed early because the children's lifestyle demands it. Brown (2001) warns that if the athletes stop participating in athletics because of any reason, it is imperative that both parents and athletes have developed an identity that is not dependant on athletic achievement.

The families also had to make financial sacrifices. A number of the parents expressed that they find it hard to support their high achiever children financially. F<sub>2</sub> stated that if they would run out of money at the end of a month, he would buy vitamins for the children before buying a beer. F<sub>3</sub> indicated that trips to various competitions, as well as visits to doctors, physiotherapists, chiropractors and homeopaths, depleted a year's medical aid funds very quickly. Parents and coaches should, therefore, consider the cost realistically, whether they can afford it or not, before deciding that the athlete is going to become a sport star (Brown, 2001). Côté (1999), however, found that, somehow, families find the required financial resources by sacrificing their own needs and wants.

Travelling poses another big challenge, since South African adolescents cannot have a driver's licence, and the public transport in South Africa is poor. Travelling to training sessions, competitions, racing from one city to another and trying to accommodate each child's schedule proved to be a mission. The mothers especially seem to be sacrificing their own dreams and desires to support their high achiever children. Coakley and Donnelly (1999:119) note that someone once wrote, "If a mother's place is at home, why am I always in the car?" M<sub>1</sub> stated that it was almost impossible for her to take a weekend or a day off.

All the sacrifices that the parents had to make seemed to have taken a toll on their marriages. For some couples, youth sport become a deceptive blessing by way of which they avoid dealing with marital discord, since their life focus becomes their child in the athletic arena (Smoll & Smith, 2012). M<sub>1</sub> and M<sub>3</sub> expressed that they had no time to spend on their marriages, which challenged their marital relationships. High achievers, like any other

teenager, are affected by the impaired marital relationships of their parents. Divorce, separation or on-going parental conflict undermines the security of an adolescent's love (Narramore & Lewis, 1990). In all three families, teamwork seemed to be the keyword. A<sub>2</sub> explained that when his mother found the focus on his sport challenging, his father would be there to support her. Malina (1994) points out that top performance demands planning and a consistent self-organisation that children cannot manage by themselves. The high achiever should have a developmental team leader who monitors the athlete's developmental needs on a daily basis. It could be a parent, coach or friend (Saviano, 2000 cited in Brown, 2001).

Nevertheless, sport at this high level also brought many advantages not only to the high achievers, but also to their families. S<sub>3</sub> said that she no longer minded that her high achiever sister received all the attention, as she got to travel with her to far-away exciting places, appearing in the media and receiving sponsorships. It is not unusual for an entire family to relocate to take advantage of better training and lifestyle opportunities (Sloane, 1985 cited in Dosit, 2006).

## *2. Acceptance of the trying circumstances of being a high achiever in sport made it easier for him or her to cope.*

It was evident throughout the present study that the parents' support played a crucial role in all three families. One thing that talented people tend to share is an enriched home life with enthusiastic and appreciative parents (Lansdown & Walker, 1992).

All three high achievers indicated that they cared about their siblings ('the other child') and did not want them to suffer because of their achievements. A<sub>1</sub> expressed that she really loved her sister and did not want her to feel bad because she (the high achiever older sister), received so much of everything. She wanted to be a good example to her younger sister. However, sometimes there were power struggles between spouses, siblings and high achievers and parents. This is in line with description of Dinkmeyer and McKay (1982), regarding the effect of power struggles in families.

Apart from the many advantages and rewards, high achievers also pay a high price with regard to friends and schoolwork. They have a very limited social life. During the week, they go to school and they train every afternoon. They have limited time for homework. Then they are off to bed. They do not visit anybody during the week and nobody visits them. If there are no competitions the next day, the parents tend to be more lenient on Friday nights. It is, however, important for a high achiever to develop social relationships outside of the athletic group. Sport should not be the only leisure activity (Grupe, 1979 cited in Malina, 1984).

Although parents emphasised both school and sport achievements, schoolwork took second place. A<sub>2</sub> mentioned that he achieved 75% to 80%, but that he missed a lot of schoolwork due to competitions, and that his teachers did not always understand. Schoolwork was last on his list of priorities. Athletes should try to balance their schoolwork and sport (Grupe, 1979 cited in Malina, 1984). Intellectual and cognitive development should not be permanently impaired by top-level sport, since it is very important for their future. The three high achievers in the study realised that they needed a career for life after athletics. One wanted to become an

electrical engineer, one a sport psychologist and the other wanted to study business management, but only after she had completed her sport career.

*3. As younger siblings ('the other child') grow older, they try to find their own niche in the family.*

It was difficult to find specific data other than general remarks on possible rivalry in the existing literature. 'The other child' in the family prominently experienced feelings of initial rejection, jealousy and resentment, which made the parents feel very guilty. However, as the other children grew older, feelings of acceptance started emerging. S<sub>1</sub> said that she knew that her mother and father loved her. She understood that her older high achiever sister was very talented and needed all her parents' assistance.

All the children in all three families seemed to love each other a lot, but they have not communicated these deep feelings or dealt with them as yet. A<sub>1</sub> confirmed this when she said that she never realised how her sister ('the other child') looked at things. It was the first time that their family shared their experiences so openly. They often talked about athletics and goals, but not about their feelings and experiences. The statement of A<sub>1</sub> confirmed the need for in-depth research into how individual family members experience this complex phenomenon, because of the diversity of family contexts and the needs of individuals in the family. This is in line with Côté (1999), who previously highlighted this need for research about experiences of families with children who are high achievers in sport.

*4. Coaches become just as important to high achiever children as their own parents do.*

Two of the fathers coached their own children. The other father had to find the right coach. F<sub>3</sub> stated that it was very difficult to find the right coach for his high achiever oldest daughter since a possible coach might just not suit his high achiever child. A<sub>3</sub> said that her coach was like a father to her. He was very committed and made his athletes part of his life. A<sub>1</sub> said that her female coach for one of her disciplines was like a second mother to her (A<sub>3</sub>). The interrelationship between the coach and the child, the coach and the parent, and the parent and the child are important components for successful sporting experiences, since the child is part of his or her family, not that of the coach.

Significant in this study was that where the fathers were the coaches, the athletes saw the father and coach as one. The fathers, however, could separate their roles. While the influence of a coach can be great (Grisogono, 1991), it is magnified if the coach also happens to be a child's parent. F<sub>2</sub> told his child when he wore one cap he was Dad and when he wore another he was coach. This, however, did not make sense to A<sub>2</sub>, who said that the worst thing for him would be to disappoint his father in his sport.

Smoll (1993, cited in Brown, 2001) emphasises that there has to be an understanding between the parent and the child that parenting behaviour and coaching behaviour will be different, and the parent-coach must understand the child's perspective on the situation. The parents in all three families adapted to a new lifestyle that centred on the activities of the high achiever, often placing their own needs and those of the other family members last. The focus shifted from a family system where parents plan, structure and manage family life and activities, to a

family where the needs and challenges of the adolescent high achiever takes centre stage. This is in line with the research findings of Siekanska (2013). The other family members thus moved to the periphery. Where the father was also the coach, he became part of the centre, yet still not the centre.

Sacks *et al.* (2006) refer to this finding as the 'athletic family' as opposed to the 'family with an athlete', in the same manner as distinguishing an 'alcoholic family' as opposed to a 'family with an alcoholic'. In the first scenario, the concept of family influence is incorporated in a reality in which the athlete is the centre of the system and his or her goals become the system's goals. In the latter scenario, the family may nurture the sportsperson and have some level of influence, but the athlete acts more or less as an independent agent.

## CONCLUSIONS AND PRACTICAL APPLICATION

The aim of this article was to explore and describe the experiences of families with a high achiever child in sport. The data were too extensive to report on in one article. Therefore, particular evidence of the findings was presented in an attempt to evade the loss of meaning and compromising the aim of the study. Previous studies mostly reported on the supporting role of the parents in young children's involvement in sport. Few authors attempted to study the complete family dynamics. The research revealed, among other phenomena, that a high achiever in sport determines the family's experiences.

The study showed that families with high achiever children are sport-involved families trying to live a balanced life. Their children tend to be more focussed, disciplined and future-directed than most other adolescents and even some adults. Not only the children, but also the parents, need social support systems. Although the families are constantly talking to each other, their interpersonal relationships and communication skills need to be developed further. In addition, the findings showed a great deal of caring, concern, moral support and positive expectations for the future. Siekanska (2013) showed that the participation of adolescents in sport develop certain positive aspects of their being, if their parents care about them. The current study confirmed this finding. Even 'the other children', who did not always find their niche in sport, were able to cope with the environment in which they lived.

It is clear from the results that the focus of the parents is on the high achiever child, while the other siblings tend to be left behind. The marital relationship of the parents is also challenged. These families should master the skills of mindfulness and practise mindfulness in their everyday life. The skills of mindfulness include awareness, perception of experiences in a non-judgemental way and not labelling experiences, living in the present moment and accepting that they can choose how to respond to behaviour, as well as being open to possibilities and seeing their own experiences as an opportunity to learn and grow (Tull, 2009; Duke Health Organisation, 2010).

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