Mothers in Elite Sport: Caring, Competitive and Capable

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Anecdotal evidence suggests that motherhood often signals the "end" of involvement in elite sports as athletes. An increasing trend, however, is for mothers to pursue sporting careers as athletes, which is in contrast to the situation 10 years ago (Cameron, 1996; Pedersen, 2001; S.M. Thompson, 1990). Despite this trend, mothers' voices are generally silent in the sports literature. Studies have considered the constraints surrounding mothers and physical activity (Bialeschki & Michener, 1994; Brown, Brown, Miller, & Hansen, 2001; Currie, 2004; Miller & Brown, 2005), and the concept of an ethic of care (i.e., mothers putting their children before themselves and family and/or work commitments) (Henderson, 1991; Miller & Brown, 2005). Thompson (1990) argued that mothers were involved in sports to facilitate others' participation, particularly family members, which often comes at the expense of their own sporting time. She went further to suggest that in Australia and New Zealand "the institution of sport exploits the services of women for its maintenance and reproduction" (p.135). The traditional place of mothers has been within the private sphere of the home doing things for other people (e.g., children and husband) at the expense of involvement in sport.

There has been one published study on mothers in elite sport by Pedersen's (2001) on mothers who competed at a national or international level in athletics in Denmark. Pedersen argued that elite sports mothers were no longer the exception, but instead needed to be recognized as a social phenomenon particularly in individual sports. Her research challenged the accepted norm that mothers could not compete physically and psychologically at the international level. The mothers regarded sports as a form of self-expression and valued this time they had to themselves by doing what they loved and excelled at.

The purpose of this research was to build on Pedersen's work and explore the experiences of mothers in elite sports representing New Zealand and to identify how they attained and remained competitive at the elite level, overcoming the constraints associated with motherhood and the ethic of care within the public realm of elite sports. Eight participants (seven from team sports and one an individual sport) were interviewed and using a symbolic interactionist approach the individual experiences of the athletes were explored. The interviews were transcribed and coded using a qualitative data analysis package HyperRESEARCH. The codes were then combined into themes. The findings suggest that elite sport experiences can be considered from both individual and societal perspectives, therefore bridging some of the apparent divides between the personal/contextual, the micro/macro and agency/structure (Dixon & Bruening, 2005; Samdahl & Jekubovich, 1997; Wearing, 1998).

The participants highlighted how being involved in elite sports was vital to their self-identity, had positive impacts on their family and peers, and challenged existing sporting structures and dominant gender ideologies in society by making conscious choices for continued involvement in elite sport as mothers. This research has shown that mothers remain involved in elite sports in New Zealand, and they have demonstrated that a strong sport identity combined with strong support networks makes constraints to participation in elite levels of sports negotiable and ultimately surmountable. Realizing the choice of being a mother and an elite athlete is not easy, but by emphasizing the mutual benefits of motherhood and elite sports participation, potential constraints such as guilt, organizational resistance, and societal disapproval can be negotiated. However, it is acknowledged that not all mothers have access to strong support networks or the financial means to pay for child care. Therefore, it is important for National Sports Organisations to develop policies and practices that will encourage mothers to adapt and remain in elite sports. This research has given mothers in elite sports leadership a voice, and provides support for facilitating mothers' access to sports at all levels in order to benefit women, children, families, athletes, teams and sports organizations.

References: