

3 The Daily Grind

Being a Parent of a Competitive Junior Tennis Player

Camilla J. Knight and Chris G. Harwood

Introduction

Throughout a child's sporting life, many individuals impact upon their engagement and experience (Wylleman & Rosier, 2016). However, it is parents who usually have the most enduring impact (Knight, Berrow, & Harwood, 2017). For instance, research has shown that when children first start to participate in sport, it is parents who identify the opportunities, pay for sessions, and act as the taxi service taking children to and from training. As children progress, parents usually continue to fund engagement while also increasingly committing time and emotional energy to competitions and training. Subsequently, even as children head towards adulthood, parents continue to remain a crucial source of emotional and tangible support (Côté, 1999; Fredricks & Eccles, 2004; Harwood & Knight, 2015). However, fulfilling these roles, and providing this support to their children, is not always easy for parents. In fact, an ever-growing body of literature points to an extensive range of challenges and stressors that parents may encounter while attempting to facilitate their child's sporting involvement (Burgess, Knight, & Mellalieu, 2016; Harwood, Drew, & Knight, 2010; Harwood & Knight, 2009a, 2009b; Harwood et al., 2019; Hayward, Knight, & Mellalieu, 2017; Leinhart, Nicaise, Knight, & Guillet-Descas, 2020). These, in turn, can impact both the quality of children's sporting experiences and the lives of parents (Knight et al., 2017), as will become apparent throughout the current chapter.

The story that unfolds in this chapter is based upon two studies (Harwood & Knight, 2009a, 2009b) that I (Camilla) had the great pleasure of conducting for my undergraduate dissertation in 2005/2006, supervised by Chris. As a neophyte researcher and former competitive tennis player, I was excited to have the opportunity to engage with the parents of tennis players to learn about their experiences, particularly the stressors they encountered in supporting their children's tennis. I knew my own story, and thought I had an idea of what it had been like for my parents, but I wanted to know if it had been similar for others. In approaching these

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studies, I hoped to collect some interesting data to give a voice to parents, something that was generally missing from the sport psychology literature at the time. I had an idea of the types of things parents might mention, such as time, travel, the commitment required, and finance (e.g., Baxter-Jones et al., 2003; Kirk et al., 1997a, 1997b, Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). But I wasn't prepared for the emotion they would share.

In study 1, the parents of 123 tennis players completed an extensive open-ended survey (Harwood & Knight, 2009a) and subsequently through study 2, a further 22 parents took part in face-to-face interviews (Harwood & Knight, 2009b) focused on understanding the stressors associated with parenting junior tennis players. As soon as we started to receive the completed surveys, I realised we had stumbled across a topic that really needed exploring. Parents' frustration, anger, worry, concern, and disappointment leaked from the pages; their sense of hopelessness, helplessness, and being overwhelmed shone through every interview. Streams of information were shared, with parents writing up the sides of the survey, on blank pages, and even attaching additional sheets to ensure they could fully share their experiences. Capital letters, multiple underlining of words, and exclamation marks adorned the survey pages, while tears, exhausted laughter, head shaking, and periods of quiet reflection punctuated the interviews. I left each interview exhausted, desperate to call my parents to apologise for what they must have gone through supporting me as a junior player.

I transcribed the surveys and the interviews and fully immersed myself in the data. I read and re-read the information that had been shared over and over again. I dreamt about the data, I knew the narratives by heart, I could quote the data verbatim. I was completely and utterly living in these stories and all the emotion that was embedded within them. Then, in line with the analysis approach I was adopting, I began to break the experiences apart to code the data. I started to unpack each and every point that the parents had shared and categorise them into groups and under headings. The stories became more distant, the emotion began to diminish, but my codes and eventually general dimensions began to develop. A succinct illustration of the core ideas shared by the parents was identified and key quotes that could provide emotive insight into the parents' experiences were selected. The two papers were published and, we hope, communicated valuable and important information regarding the experiences of tennis parents. Certainly, they helped to push forward our own thinking regarding parenting children in sport and remain a resource utilised by the Lawn Tennis Association, who funded the research.

On reflection, however, in producing these traditional scientific-style papers, a lot of the raw emotion that was evident in parents' writing and conversations was removed. Instead, the parents' experiences were

considered as data that could be neatly categorised and presented. Much of what drew us into the data was diminished and, the question has to be asked, did we appropriately or fully represent what the parents had shared? Did we really give them a voice as we had hoped? Developing this creative nonfiction (CNF) story has enabled us to revisit the data and the papers, to consider them as a whole and to re-present the experiences that were shared with us. To maximise the opportunities to incorporate the emotion and reflection we felt in the original data, we have chosen to present a monologue from the perspective of one mother. Her conversations and thoughts are provided throughout, with her very personal, internal dialogue reflected through the use of italics.

Before progressing to the story, it is important to recognise that this CNF provides another interpretation of the original information and that it was impossible for us to consider our original two papers in isolation, given that we have both continued to conduct research in this area for a further 15 years. Thus, this re-presentation, while drawing heavily upon these initial two studies, is also informed by our ever-growing understanding of this extremely complex topic. Moreover, it is influenced by our own reflections and experiences as tennis players, which we both were when the studies were first conducted, and also parents, something which is more recent for both of us.

My Life in a Day as a Tennis Parent

The Organisational Challenge

Beep, Beep, Beep...BEEP, BEEP, BEEP...BEEEEEP, BEEEEEP, BEEEEEP...*alright, alright, alright, I'm up, I'm UP! How dare I ever contemplate a lazy Saturday morning!*

Reaching out to try and turn off the alarm, I smack my arm on the bedside unit and instantly feel it throbbing as another bruise adds to those from the previous mornings, *another great start to the day!* I can find the phone but where's the button to turn off this incessant noise that rudely awoke me from my slumber and only break I have from thinking about tennis?

Why can't I EVER find the button on this stupid stupid phone!

This stupid phone that I couldn't function without, that drives my life – quite literally! Directing me thousands of miles around the country, keeping track of our hugely complicated schedule, totalling up our never-ending expenses, those eye-watering expenses, *oh what I could do with that money if it wasn't all spent on tennis....*

Oh! don't start thinking about that so early in the morning, it's not even light out yet, and oh, GREAT! It's raining again, that's going to make for a fun drive. At least the tournament's indoors today, that's something I suppose....

Ah peace, finally, it's off!

I DREAD to think how bad the bags are today, maybe I'll just avoid all mirrors, if I don't know how tired I look maybe I won't feel it...?!

It's been a helluva week between county training, regional training, and individual lessons, the added bonus of multiple physio trips, late nights with school projects, and not to mention her brother's football match and school play. But it will be worth it; they say she needs it, they tell me she needs it; she needs the time on court, she needs the tournaments, she's not match fit because of the time off with her injury. Her coaches told me we need to get her playing some matches. I need to give her the opportunities, I don't want to be the reason she doesn't succeed, my tiredness isn't important, she HAS to come first, her tennis HAS to come first, she needs your support... *And right now, she needs you to GET OUT OF BED!!*

Ok, I'm back on my wheel, the world is turning again, we're back at it! Breakfast is done, well it is if you can call half a slice of barely touched toast and some orange juice breakfast. We sat in silence as Miri picked at her toast, as we always do on match days. I do NOT want to be responsible for saying the wrong thing and being blamed for a loss. Even Theo stays out the way; he knows not to mess up on match days. He's learnt his place, in the background, not causing a fuss, not asking for too much and just watching as his sister consumes more and more of my time and energy as she, *we(?)*, *I(?)*, *who knows at this stage*, try to help Miri, achieve her, *it is her's right?* dream, that ever so lofty dream of playing at Wimbledon.

Bags are packed and the car, our ever faithful, petrol guzzling estate, the favoured car of tennis parents around the country, is loaded. I fight the urge to ask Miri if she's remembered everything. She's 13 now and I just have to trust her. I can't keep reminding her to check her racquets and shoes, if she's forgotten something she'll just have to live with the consequences. She really does need to start taking some responsibility for herself, *I won't let myself be one of those parents trudging along behind her carrying her water bottle as she approaches adulthood.*

Miri's taken up her usual position, slumped in the back seat, headphones in, some crap game no doubt being playing on her phone. Her opponent's probably reading through her game plan and setting goals, having consumed a nutritious and energy filled bowl of porridge with

dried fruit. But I won't mention that. I won't remind her what her coach said she should do on the way to matches, or what the sport psych suggested to help with her anxiety. I won't try and encourage her or make her feel more positive about the upcoming match. I learnt long ago that Miri does what Miri wants on match days. I'll do anything to keep the peace and minimise the inevitable post-match fall-out if she loses.

I turn on the engine and the car jumps into action, warm air blowing, windscreen wipers going, and some gentle classical music playing from the radio to help calm my nerves. It is nerves that I'm feeling, right...right?

What is the feeling? That nagging feeling like I've forgotten something. I've fed the cat, the oven is off, the door is locked, Dan is away at his corporate retreat (lucky him!), my laptop is packed, with my backlog of emails downloaded waiting for a response... what have I forgotten? Ah, it can't be that important, I'll just sort it when we get back, we're only away for a night thank goodness!

Oh Shit! Theo! I forgot Theo.

That poor kid, not again, how have I done it again?! HOW HAVE I DONE IT AGAIN?! Useless, just useless. Quick quick, turn around, maybe he won't have noticed we left...

Who am I kidding? Of course, he noticed we left; I left, with Miri, for the weekend, and I forgot him. He's at the door waiting. Yes, we were only down the road but that doesn't matter, I forgot him, and he knows it. The disappointment on his face as he once again realises that he's an afterthought to Miri's tennis breaks my heart. I'll have to make it up to him next week, Dan will HAVE to take Miri to one of her lessons, no matter how busy he is with work. I've got to fix this. *This can be fixed right? He's not going to hate me forever?*

Now we're running late, we need to get going!

"Hurry Theo!"

"Get in the car!"

"What were you doing? Why didn't you come out when we were leaving?!"

Oh great, good parenting! Now you're snapping at him when it's your fault we're running late. You forgot him! You were so focused on Miri that you forgot your own son! Don't make this even worse by blaming him. You're useless, not him.

Theo's been unceremoniously dumped with his friend and the usual pleasantries have been exchanged:

"Yes, we're off to a tournament with Miri *again*"

“Yes, it’s only a few hours away, which is a nice change”

“No, we won’t be going on holiday this year as Miri has nationals”

“Yes, we’re very excited to see what Miri might achieve”

“Yes, we’re very grateful that you are looking after Theo *again* and of course we’d love to reciprocate and have Ethan over one evening soon (*blatant lie*).”

“No, we won’t be too late back tomorrow (*another blatant lie*).”

“Thank-you again”

“Oh, and Theo, here’s some money for food and activities, be polite, don’t get into trouble, and see you tomorrow.”

We need to find some other friends to use for childcare, we’re starting to push our luck with Ethan’s family. Who haven’t we used recently? If only my family were closer or more available. I can’t wait until Theo is old enough to be left on his own... it will make all of this so much easier when I can just leave him at home alone...

Back on the road; fortunately, traffic is light and we sail through the usual hotspots for accidents and traffic jams. Despite my concerns about being late, we arrive at the venue, as usual, with plenty of time to spare. It’s a nice club today, thankfully.....*Not a freezing air bubble over Tarmac courts in sight, what a relief!* I’m always grateful when we’re at a nice club, like this one, with plenty of space and chairs that are comfortable enough to sit on for 12 hours or so, big screen TVs showing various football matches that might distract some of the more sport-focused parents, and a kitchen serving food that is almost passable as healthy. *Good job since you didn’t have time to make any lunch today!* A nice club can make even the worse of match days that little bit more bearable.

Dealing with Competition

Miri has gone off to sign in with the tournament referee and I’ve plonked myself and my laptop down at the nearest table, ready to try and get on with some work. Miri, as you might have guessed, likes to be left alone at this point and I like to avoid certain, *let’s be honest, most*, other parents! Work is a perfect excuse. I put my headphones in, put my head down, and try to concentrate on the work I was meant to have completed days ago for my boss. But I’m distracted, I keep looking around waiting for Miri to return. Who is she playing I wonder? *It doesn’t matter who she’s playing, it’s about getting back on court and gaining some match practice after the injury, remember, it doesn’t matter who she’s playing.*

Uh oh, look at that face. She’s clearly got a bad draw. Deep breath, stay positive, don’t get drawn into discussions about the opponent, help her stay focused on herself. Stay calm, stay calm, just stay calm!

“Ok Miri?”

“I’ve got her again, mum! I can’t believe it, how have I got her again? It’s not fair mum, we’ve come all this way and I’m playing her again. It’s a fix, I swear it’s a fix, just because she’s their favourite, it’s not fair. I don’t want to play her again.”

Oh Crap, Oh Crappy Crappy Crap. This is not going to be fun, not the Jones.’ I cannot deal with this kid, or her parents....Dammit, why did they enter this tournament? I thought they’d be going to the Grade 2. Why are they in a Grade 3? This was meant to be a nice ease back in for Miri, now we’ve got to deal with them! Stay Calm, take a deep breath and just STAY CALM!

“You’re playing Iris I take it?”

“Uh huh”

“Ok, well, you did well against her last time, you know what you need to do to play well, and remember, you’re just coming back from your injury so there’s no pressure.”

“Pressure! Of course there’s pressure! (*Oh no, I said the wrong thing! Why did I say so much?!*) Everyone will be looking, everyone will be watching, everyone expects me to win, but she cheats and she hacks and I hate it. And everyone will be watching. The coaches will know, they will know when I lose, they know I can’t beat her. I’ll just get angry when she cheats. She cheats mum! She always cheats! And she doesn’t play good tennis, she just lobs the ball up in the air! How am I meant to play well against that? How can I play good tennis against her? We might as well go home now. What’s the point? They all love her but she’s rubbish. She just wins by playing rubbish tennis and they all think it’s amazing!”

What to say, what to say, what to say? She’s spiralling, her anxiety is going to get the better of her. What do I focus on? Do I tell her she doesn’t cheat, when she clearly does (and her parents know and even encourage it)? Do I tell her it doesn’t matter, when it clearly matters to her? Do I tell her just to enjoy it, when nothing about this match is going to be enjoyable for either of us? What do I say? Help me, someone help me!!! WHAT DO I SAY????

“I’m sorry Miri, I was hoping Iris would be at the Grade 2”

“Well she’s not is she, she’s here and I’m playing her”

And it’s clearly my fault....Strike one

“It’s a tough draw Miri, I’m sorry. But remember, you haven’t played a match for a good few months, so no one is expecting anything.”

“Oh, so you think I’m going to lose?”

...Strike 2

“No, of course not. That’s not what I said. I just think it’s important to remember that you haven’t been able to play a lot recently and that we’ve just come here to try and get some match practice. Try and focus on your own game and the things you’ve been working on this week with Tim.”

“Tim’s useless, all he wants me to do is practice my serve but my serve is fine, it’s my backhand I need to work on, I can’t hit any backhands in, I might as well just aim for the back fence every time...”

Strike 3 and I give up. I can’t win here. Nothing’s going to be right, she’s already lost before she’s gone on. Another wasted Saturday. Oh, I’m so glad we came! It’s not like I might want to do anything else with my day like, sleep, tidy up, relax, catch up with work, see some friends, spend time with Dan, remind Theo that he is valued and loved as a child....

I better shift to neutral ground.

“Ok Miri, would you like a drink before you go on?”

I’d like a drink, a very very big drink...but it’s only 8 am, the bar’s not open yet and even if it were I’m not sure the other parents would think much of me drinking at 8 am. Well actually they might if they knew which parents I now had to go and watch with....but coffee it will have to be. There better be coffee...

MIRABEL RICHARDS AND IRIS JONES, MIRABEL RICHARDS AND IRIS JONES, PLEASE REPORT TO THE REFEREE’S DESK READY FOR PLAY

Oh, here we go, not even time to get a coffee and she’s called to play. At least that means we’re starting on time, that’s something I guess!

“Good luck Miri, have fun”

“WHAT?”

Oh not fun, she hates it when you say have fun.

“Good luck Miri, play well”

Good correction, smooth, that’s better.

“I’ll play as well as I can against this hacker, make sure you watch out for her cheating”

Oh good, she’s in a perfect frame of mind for this match! At least she’s gone on now, nothing I can do about what’s about to happen. I wish I didn’t have to watch, but she’ll be looking for me. Time to get my game face on. Just please Iris, please please please, I’m begging you, don’t cheat, play decent tennis, don’t mess Miri about. I CANNOT deal with another disappointment, I NEVER say the right thing and the anger, oh the anger is just too much to manage.

I take a deep breath, plaster a smile onto my face, and look around, frantically trying to locate one of the parents I like. I need someone to talk to, someone to help me calm down and to distract me while Miri and Iris warm-up. I spot Mr Lewis, newspaper in one hand, coffee in the other, looking, as always, like he hasn't got a care in the world. *Oh, if only!* I give him an enthusiastic wave and rapidly start to walk towards him, hoping to avoid anything more than a polite acknowledgement of other parents I pass on the way.

I like Mr Lewis. He's like me; he keeps himself to himself and tries to steer clear of the politics. We often laugh about being the outcasts of the tennis world; our daughters aren't good enough for us to be invited into the "funded players" clique, but they take it too seriously for us to be part of the "tennis is just a fun past time and way to have holidays" group. We live in a strange sort of purgatory; we've committed too much and for too long to just give it all up, to pull the support that would signal the end of our daughters' dreams. We're not brave enough, or perhaps honest enough, to tell them they haven't quite got what it takes to reach the heady heights of professional tennis, *or maybe we're just hanging onto the hope that maybe, just maybe, they are....* But we are such a long way from this just being fun. It's all consuming; mentally, physically, financially. We live, breath, and eat tennis and yes, we can see our daughters' gaining a whole lot of benefits from playing, but is it worth the stress it causes us? *No, it's absolutely not...who am I even trying to kid that the benefits might outweigh this continual mental torture?*

"Mr Lewis, Rhys! Hello! How are you?"

"Jaime, how lovely to see you. I am well, thank-you. How are you? How's Miri's shoulder?"

"We are fine thanks. Miri's shoulder seems to be, fingers crossed, doing ok. She's been back training for a couple of weeks, so we'll see how it holds up today. How's Jane? Is she playing already?"

"Jane's doing really well thanks, she's had a couple of good runs recently, finally beat Amy, did you hear? Bit of a shock for all of us, but great for her to finally have that monkey off her back!"

"Oh! That's great news, I'm so pleased for her, I bet she was delighted. Fingers crossed for something similar for us today, Miri's just gone on against Iris"

"Oh..."

"Yep..."

"Are her..."

"Yes, planted themselves behind the court already, of course, got to have the best view in the house!"

"Of course, of course!"

"Could have done without it today if I'm honest"

"Oh, I bet! Could do without that draw any day. You want to stay down here with me, out the way?"

"I wish I could, but Miri will be expecting to see me. In fact, I better head back towards the court, don't want her panicking before the match has even started."

"Ok, well, let me go and get you a coffee at least!"

"Oh, that would be amazing, thank-you so much. A small black Americano would be fabulous...a shot of whiskey too if you can find one, you know, to calm the nerves!"

"Hahahah, I'll see what I can do!"

I glance across at Miri's court, I see them at the net, spinning the racquet to decide who'll serve first. *Come on Miri, have a good game, come on. I know you can do it, I know you can, just stay calm, play your game, don't get sucked into the cheating and the hacking, stick to what you know. And whatever you do, do not look at her parents....*

0-3 already. It's only been 8 minutes and Miri's already lost her serve twice, thrown her racquet, smacked her leg, and threatened to call the referee over a bad line call. So, it's going about as well as I expected! I know the other parents are looking, I can feel their eyes burning into my head; judging Miri's poor behaviour, questioning my parenting. *If only they knew! This is good compared to what she used to be like! I've tried everything; stopping competitions, focusing on enjoyment, working with a sport psych. She's just passionate and wants it all to be perfect. She hasn't worked out how to control all the emotions that rage through her yet. She'll get there in the end, I know she will... well, she better get there in the end!*

2-3, she's broken back. *Thank goodness for that, she's on the scoreboard!* She's calming down and starting to find her groove. She even seems to have remembered her between points routine. *Breathe, I can breathe, at least for a minute.*

2-5. Well, that didn't last long! Two bad line calls, a lucky winner and any semblance of control is gone. I won't be surprised if she gets a code violation soon, if she carries on like this. *It's really not her fault though, Iris' line calls are terrible, and she was doing so well before that, trying so hard to keep calm and keep fighting. Should I do something? Find the referee? I know I'm not meant to get involved, it's meant to be down to Miri to sort but she's only 13 and this is already ridiculous...I can't just stand by and watch this match get ripped away from Miri because of cheating... Where is that useless referee anyway? Surely he should be here, next to the court, they all know Iris cheats. If he just stood here, by the court, Iris might not do it and then maybe, just maybe, we could all have an enjoyable match.*

2-6, first set is over. It was a disastrous last game; one return hitting the back netting, another straight into the bottom of the net, a shanked backhand wide, and an easy forehand long. Iris is elated, beaming as she

heads towards the net to get ready for the next set. As usual, her parents are celebrating like she just won Wimbledon, clapping and cheering, any attempts to respect tennis etiquette well and truly out the window.

Oh, my poor Miri, it hasn't even been a close set, it really doesn't warrant all this commotion! It's ok, Miri. It doesn't matter, it's ok. You can still do this, you can, I believe in you, I'll always believe in you. Just find a way, you can find a way...I know you can.

I can feel Miri searching for me, searching for some reassurance. I wish there was something I could do, anything at all... It's just like watching her sit a maths exam and put all the wrong answers in! I wish I could swoop on court and give her a big hug, tell her it's all ok, that she doesn't have to keep playing, that I love her no matter what happens, that tennis isn't all that important. I wish I could send someone else on to replace her or give her the answers. *I wish, I wasn't here. I wish I wasn't watching. I wish...I just wish she wasn't playing Iris.* But, there's nothing I can do. My little girl is out there, all on her own, with nowhere to hide; every mistake exposed, every emotion visible for all to see. All I can do is stand here, a smile on my face, clapping her good shots, and sending her positive vibes. All I can do is hope. Hope she can find her game, hope she can stay calm, hope she manages to smile at least once during this match.

The second set has started better. A great first game for Miri, two aces and a backhand winner. She's not giving up! She's come out ready to fight! I am so proud of her! *Here we go Miri, here we go, you got this!!!*

Yes Miri, what a game! That'll show her, all that celebrating at the end of the set! What a game, what a game!! 2-0, you're on a roll, well done my darling girl!

3-0 and Miri's cruising! I don't know how she's done it, but she's completely turned it around. She's gained control, she's walking with purpose, with intent. She's striding around the court, questioning Iris' calls, taking control of the points. She's just amazing. I am so, so, so impressed by her. Go Miri.

4-1. Ok. She's got one back, but it's just one. Miri's still leading and, most importantly, she's still looking confident. She's still taking the ball on, seeking to dominate the games. Most importantly, she's still got her racquet in her hand rather than smashed across the floor.

Yes! 6-1. What a set! What a wonderful set to watch. Well Done, Miri!

Stay calm, stay in control. Smile but nothing more. Do not distract Miri, do not let on how you are feeling. Do not give Mr and Mrs Jones any sort

of satisfaction, they mustn't know that you are excited Miri has won a set. And I mustn't take satisfaction in the fact the smile has been wiped off their faces... ok, take only a little satisfaction that the smile has been wiped off their faces.

Here we go then. One set all, the deciding set ahead. Deep breath, big smile. Focus!

1-0

1-1

2-1

2-2

3-2

3-3

Come on Miri, just keep holding your serve! Just breath, deep breath, just breath.

Double fault, love fifteen.

Deep breath, doesn't matter, it's just one point.

Fifteen all, lovely forehand down the line. Well Done, Miri!

Thirty, fifteen. Sneaky dropshot off the defensive.

Forty, Fifteen...no, what. Thirty all, it's not thirty all. Miri, don't fall for it, don't fall for it. Stand your ground, it's forty fifteen, you know it's forty fifteen. Come on Iris, not now, not now! Oh, this is unbelievable, it's clearly forty fifteen, Miri's won three points this game, it's game point. It's not thirty all. Come on ref, come on, intervene, please intervene...where are you Ref? What's the point of you if you don't intervene now?

Thirty all (WHAT?!)

30-40.

Game.

3-4.

Oh Miri, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry it's happened again. Please don't give up, please don't let her get to you. Don't let her win. You can still do this, I know you can still do this.

3-5.

3-6.

Game.

Set.

Match.

It's all over.

It's all over. Take a breath Miri, take a breath. Don't get upset, please don't get upset. Hold it together, just hold it together until we're in the car.

Don't let them see you upset, don't be upset. Miri it's just a game, oh my darling girl, it's just a game. Please, please, please, smile, shake hands, hold it together. Just hold it together.

Quick, to the car. Head down, jacket on, get to the car. We avoid all the looks, all the words of sympathy. We just focus on getting to the car. We can both breathe again once we get to the car.

I yank open the door, the door to our faithful car, that's seen us through every win and every loss, every disappointment and success. Our faithful car, Miri's sanctuary, her peace, her place.

Miri's shoulder sink, her head drops, her hands raise and the shaking starts. The heart wrenching shoulder shakes are accompanied by silent sobs. I sit in silence, just as I started the day. I don't know what to say.

Why don't I ever know what to say? What can you say? I've just seen my daughter get destroyed in front of me. She tried so hard, she did so well. She came back and she fought. She lost but I don't care that she lost. I wouldn't care if she never won another tennis match again. She's just so sad. My darling girl is devastated, and I can't fix it. I don't have the words to make her feel better right now. I know it's just one tennis match, I know it's just a game, but it's so much more than that for her. It's her everything. Right now, in this moment, it's her everything, and her everything just fell apart and I just stood on the balcony and watched.

Fears for the Future

So that's it, then, another ride on the emotional rollercoaster complete, and another one to look forward to later today – the consolation draw (although it's no consolation to Miri)! There were some highs; the joy of watching Miri fight and chase down every ball, seeing her break out into a smile as she hit that backhand winner to close out the second set, and the relief that her injury held up. But these highs pale in comparison to the lows; seeing Miri once again destroyed at the end of a match, seeing her unsuccessfully fight against bad line calls and changes to the score, watching her try with every ounce of her being to hold it together before, once more, sitting in silence as tears streamed down her face while all I could do was wait for the pain and disappointment to subside.

Her pain or my pain? I hurt so much for her. Am I failing her? I'm her mum, I should protect her from disappointment and upset, take away tears and sadness but instead I merrily sign her up for it. I facilitate this pain, I pay for it, I take her to it, I put other things, important things, on hold so that she can experience it. I do everything to help her with her tennis but am I really just setting her up for heartbreak? Heartbreak that I then can't fix. I don't have the words to make her feel better. I don't have the means

to comfort her or help her see perspective. I simply exist, helpless, hopeless, useless.

“Why do we do it?” I ask Dan when I call him to give him the update. “Why do we put ourselves through it?” “Why do we put Miri through it?” “Why don’t we just stop?” We could have holidays, and family time. Miri could see her friends. Theo could have some attention. I could finally catch up on work. Dan and I could, do I dare even think it, spend some time together. We could relax. We could breathe. We could smile.

So why don’t we just stop? How could I? We’re trapped, by the game, by the system, by Miri’s desire. This has been our life for the last seven years. Training and tournaments; ratings and rankings. We’ve searched for the best coaches, equipment, and competitions. We’ve read books and magazines and watched videos. We’ve observed others and talked to parents (those we like anyway!). We’ve made mistake after mistake after mistake, but we’re learning. We’re getting better. We’re figuring it out. We’re trying. We’re doing the best we can. And that’s all we can do for Miri. That’s all I can expect from her....and it’s all I can expect from us...right...

But have we done enough? Are we doing enough? Is it enough? Have we learnt enough? Have we made the right decisions? Did we go wrong long ago or are we on the right path? Is there a right path? Is there even a path? Are the decisions we make now helping Miri for the long-term or screwing her up completely? Oh, how would I know?!

Ok, it’s time to stop that now. This isn’t the time for reflection, for worrying about what’s been and what’s to come. Now it’s time to pull it together. It’s time to move on. Miri has to move on, you have to move on. There’s another match ahead.

There’s always another match. Another tournament. Another day.

Reflective Questions

- 1 How does this creative nonfiction fit with your or your parents’ experiences of youth sport?
- 2 Based on this story, how would you now describe the experience of youth sport parents?
- 3 Could the experience parents have within youth sports, such as tennis, influence how they engage with their children? How?
- 4 What changes within youth sport might help to make the experience of parents more positive or enjoyable?

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