A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF THE EXPERIENCES OF
MOTHER-ATHLETES TRAINING FOR AND COMPETING IN
THE OLYMPIC GAMES

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ABSTRACT

A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF THE EXPERIENCES OF MOTHER-ATHLETES TRAINING FOR AND COMPETING IN THE OLYMPIC GAMES

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The purpose of this qualitative study was to provide a rich description of the experiences of mothering athletes training for and competing in the Olympic Games. Specifically, the study explored the post-partum return to training and competition, the integration of mothering and training responsibilities, the emotional and social experience of being a mother-athlete, and the Olympic experience. A purposive sample of eight athletes was utilized. All participants had competed in either the 2004 Summer or 2006 Winter Olympic Games and was mother to at least one child under the age of six at the time of their Olympic participation. Participants represented six different sports and two North American countries. In-depth interviews were conducted with the participants from September 2007 to April 2008. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed, yielding eight major themes and 26 sub-themes. The themes that emerged included: (1) becoming a mother-athlete, (2) the initial return to training, (3) the effects of motherhood on training and competing, (4) the effects of the elite sport career on motherhood and the family, (5) social support, (6) organizational support, (7) the Olympic experience, and (8) advice and recommendations.
In general, participants reported that their children and families enhanced their lives, both in and out of sport. They felt that motherhood gave their lives more balance and gave them a healthier perspective on their sport participation. For most, this resulted in increased enjoyment of sport, less pressure to perform, and in turn, enhanced performance. Participants faced struggles as well. They reported lack of time and energy as barriers to training (especially in the first year of motherhood), and found traveling with children to be logistically and financially difficult. The athletes in this study reported high levels of support, both physical and emotional, from their husbands/partners and immediate families. Within the athletic community, the participants found support from coaches, yet reported varying levels of support from athletic peers and sport organizations. Overall, the athletes reported positive Olympic experiences, with two discussing disappointing experiences. Recommendations for researchers and sport professionals based on the interviews are also discussed.
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For J.P.

The impetus and inspiration for this work.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

At the 1948 Olympic Summer Games held in London, Fanny Blankers-Koen became the first Dutch athlete to win Olympic gold, easily beating her competition in the 100 meter event. She then went on to win three more Olympic track titles, setting the record at the time for the most gold medals won by any athlete in a single Olympic Games (Bijkerk, 2004). Nicknamed “The Flying Housewife” by the press, Blankers-Koen raised eyebrows as another “first:’” the first mother, having given birth to her first child in 1941 and her second in 1946, to compete in the Olympic Games and win (Allred, 2000). Alexandra Powe Allred, herself a mother and Olympian, describes in her book *Entering the Mother Zone*:

She was 30 years old, already the mother of two daughters, and three months pregnant at the time of the Games. Blankers-Koen would amuse many as she would stroll her baby carriage into the track with babies napping inside, but when she placed herself on the mark, people weren’t laughing for long. (2000, p. 139)

Although Blankers-Koen was often criticized for not staying home to care for her children, she continued competing and breaking records, and at the age of 81 was named the greatest woman athlete of the century by the International Amateur Athletics Federation (Arriaga, 2000).

Since Blankers-Koen, numerous mothers have competed in Olympic Games in a variety of sports. Currently, the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) website identifies 18 U.S. Olympians from the 2004 Summer and 2006 Winter Games as mothers. While the number of mothering athletes may seem relatively small, about 4.5% of U.S.
women Olympians, two trends within sport predict that this may increase. One is the increase in athletic participation by women in general, a result of increasing athletic opportunities for girls and women and a cultural shift toward more encouragement and support for female athletes. Secondly, technological advances in sports medicine and training methods are allowing athletes longer careers (Allred, 2000; Pendersen, 2001). As Pendersen noted, “a considerable number of top athletes continue competing well into their late twenties and within some sports even into their mid- to late thirties” (p. 263). The obvious result is more women competing into and throughout their childbearing years. Still, research on the experiences of elite female athletes with children is scarce, and while mother-athletes are popular subjects of human interest stories in Olympic media coverage, no empirical research has investigated the unique experiences of mothers training for and competing in the Olympic Games.

It is often said that having a baby changes everything. Pregnancy and new motherhood mark a profound transition in a woman’s life, bringing about physical, emotional, and lifestyle changes. For the elite athlete, who invests copious amounts of time and energy in her sport career, the transition to motherhood will no doubt have a great effect on her athletic training and performance.

The physical changes that accompany pregnancy and childbirth pose a significant challenge to athletes, as training must be scaled back or altered during pregnancy to accommodate symptoms such as fatigue and nausea and changes in the mother’s weight, size, and shape, as well as to safeguard the health of the developing fetus (Beilock, Felt, & Pivarnik, 2001). The post-partum period usually requires some rest and a slow return to physical activity as the mother’s body recovers from childbirth and the mother adjusts
to the intense demands of caring for a new baby. For a highly committed athlete, this period of lessened involvement may be quite frustrating, and physical changes, such as weight gain and loss of fitness, can be difficult to cope with. Insight into these challenges can be gained from the research into athletes recovering from injury, as they too must take time off from training to heal and then gradually work to rehabilitate the injured area and regain pre-injury levels of fitness and skill. With these physical challenges come psychological ones as well, as injured athletes report feeling frustrated, depressed, and anxious, especially about their ability to successfully return to high level performance, throughout the rehabilitation process (Quakenbush & Crossman, 1994; Tracey, 2003; Udry, Gould, Bridges, & Beck, 1997). In addition, because elite athletes often sacrifice other activities and pursuits because of the investment of time, money, and energy required of their sport participation, absence from sport can also mean isolation from a primary source of social support, as well as the loss of a key aspect of identity (Tracey, 2003; Udry, Gould, Bridges, & Beck, 1997; Udry, Gould, Bridges, & Tuffey, 1997).

Unlike athletes recovering from injury, however, pregnant athletes and new mothers returning to sport must contend with cultural assumptions about pregnancy, motherhood, and sport that often serve to discourage athletic participation. The world of organized competitive sport has historically been considered a masculine domain, and the argument for restricting women’s involvement in sport was based largely on the misconception that physical exertion would damage a women’s reproductive capability (Wamsley & Pfister, 2005). While recent research has shown that physical activity has many positive effects on pregnancy and that even high level athletic training poses few risks for pregnant athletes, women still receive mixed messages about exercise during
and after pregnancy (Foley, 1998; Schnirring, 2002). As a result, pregnant athletes often find the exercise advice they receive to be contradictory and confusing, and some find that their coaches and even physicians are unsure of proper training guidelines (Allred, 2000; Appleby, 2004; Foley, 1998). This, coupled with the subtle and not-so-subtle cultural pressures to conform to the image of the docile, delicate mommy-to-be, can lead pregnant athletes to question the viability of their athletic careers.

Further, athletes returning to training after pregnancy and childbirth must regain their fitness and skill levels while also adjusting to an entirely new lifestyle as a mother. New mothers, be they athletes or not, often experience motherhood as a profound, transformative experience (McMahon, 1995). Researchers of the transition to parenthood note that this period is complex, diverse, and multifaceted - a combination of both positive and negative experiences - as new parents adjust to their changing roles, responsibilities, and time demands (Feeney, Hohaus, Noller, & Alexander, 2001; Glade, Bean, & Vera, 2005; Woollett & Parr, 1997).

The challenges do not stop once a woman has recovered from childbirth and regained her pre-pregnancy levels of fitness. Training for Olympic competition involves considerable amounts of time and energy, as does caring for an infant and pre-school child, and mother-athletes must learn to integrate these two spheres of life on both a practical and emotional level. Newborns require intensive, round-the-clock care that quickly leads to fatigue and lack of energy, the most common problem named by new parents in general, and the most common barrier to training cited by new mother-athletes (Beilock et al., 2001; Feeney et al., 2001). Furthermore, training must be organized in a way that accommodates these new family responsibilities, taking into account the baby’s
feeding and sleeping schedule and child care arrangements (Allred, 2000; Appleby, 2004; Beilock et al., 2001). For elite level athletes, considerable time may also be spent traveling to and from training camps and competitions, and mothering athletes must decide whether to travel with their children or be separated from them, neither of which is an easy option (Allred, 2000; Scranton, 2006). Studies of the competitive experiences of elite athletes have found that hectic schedules and poor travel arrangements contribute a significant amount of stress to competition (Fletcher & Hanton, 2003; Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medbery, & Peterson, 1999; Greenleaf, Gould, & Deiffenbach, 2001). Adding the care of a small child can make these logistics even more challenging.

Mothering athletes also feel pressure to conform to two seemingly opposite ideals – those of mother and athlete. The cultural ideal of the good mother is based on traditionally feminine qualities, such as emotional sensitivity, compassion, caring for others, and a selfless devotion to other’s needs (Burstyn, 1999; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Hays, 1996). In contrast, the ideal athlete is a masculine image: competitive, aggressive, reckless, unemotional, and seeking individual distinction (Hughes & Coakley, 2001; Sage, 1998; Shakib & Dunbar, 2002). In her book *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, Sharon Hays (1996) describes a similar paradox for women in the workplace, and explores the difficulty of reconciling conflicting value systems, as well as meeting opposing demands for time and personal investment. In many cases, women end up feeling inadequate in both areas (Hays, 1996; McMahon, 1995). When Karen Appleby (2004) studied the effect of pregnancy and motherhood on the identity development of elite distance runners, she found that although they were able to successfully integrate both roles, and generally felt confident
in their performance both as mothers and athletes, they were also keenly aware of the views of the dominant culture; one participant described her return to competition as a “cultural landmine to negotiate” (p. 59).

This “cultural landmine” can not only undermine confidence and self efficacy, but it can also affect the social and organizational support that an athlete receives. Sport sociologists note that those in position to shape women’s sporting experiences (e.g., administrators of sport organizations and governing bodies, event organizers, coaches, etc.) are predominantly male, and that athletic events and spaces are organized around men’s needs and values, resulting in little understanding or accommodation of the needs of women athletes (Atchison, 2003; Cole, 1994; Dworkin & Messner, 2002; Hall, 1996; Puing, 2001). One notable exception is the Child Development Center provided by the Ladies’ Professional Golf Association. Not only does the Center provide free child care for golfers at each tournament, allowing mothers to travel with their children, but it is also sensitive to the needs of the children, paying careful attention to provide consistency in staff, physical characteristics of the room, and the daily schedule, as well as age-appropriate educational activities (Scranton, 2006; Steptoe, 1990). This kind of sensitivity to mother-athletes’ needs, however, is more the exception that the rule. Pendersen (2001), who studied elite athlete mothers in Denmark, noted that all of her participants were athletes of individual sports; she found no mothers among Denmark’s national-level team sports. She postulates that mothers require flexibility in their athletic responsibilities (e.g., training and competition times and locations) that team organizations do not provide.
It is important to note that while mothering athletes face many challenges to continuing their sport careers, they also find that parenthood enhances their lives, both in and out of sport. In general, research into the transition to first time parenthood shows that while the arrival of a new baby initially causes upheaval in the lives of the parents, families tend to adjust well and most report a return to prior levels of satisfaction or better within the first year (Demo & Cox, 2000; Feeney, Hohaus, Noller, & Alexander, 2001; Wollett & Parr, 1997). In fact, in a study of the transition to parenthood, Feeney et al. (2001) found that all parents studied reported that they enjoyed parenting and found joy in their babies’ mere existence. Athletes report that having children has given them a more balanced life and healthier perspective of their sport participation, which eases pressure and often leads to enhanced performance (Allred, 2000; Appleby, 2004; Foley, 1998; Kimura, 2006; Pendersen, 2001). Even when performance does decline, mother-athletes report enjoying their participation and are able to keep a positive outlook. One athlete Pendersen interviewed remarked, “I am more balanced now. After having my baby, I don’t mind failing at World Cups, because when I come home, my daughter is the same as always and she is happy to see me anyway” (p. 265).

Mother-athletes also describe enjoying the everyday aspects of training, as they find challenge of working back to top fitness levels after pregnancy exciting and view their training as a time when, amidst the never ending duties of caring for their families, they can focus only on themselves (Allred 2000; Appleby, 2004). Finally, mother-athletes have described feeling that they are better mothers because of their sport participation. They express pride in their athletic accomplishments and feel that they are providing their
children with a positive, healthy role model, as well as an appreciation for sport and physical activity (Allred, 2000; Appleby, 2004).

Much attention has been paid to the Olympic Games in the sport psychology and sociology literature, due to the unmatched size, scope, and international participation of the event. For many athletes, the Olympic Games represent the ultimate goal – the culmination of an entire career and a once in a lifetime opportunity (Haberl & Peterson, 2006). The Olympics are also considered global cultural events and, as such, have the potential for affecting social change. The International Olympic Committee has made it a priority to use its influence and the elite status of the Olympic Games to actively support women’s sport, and indeed, the Games have served to promote and legitimize women’s sport participation (Chase, 1992; Kulka, 1993; Theberge, 2002). This may be especially true for women athletes in the United States, as the Olympics are unique in that they offer near parity in participation and media coverage (Eastman & Billings, 1999; IOC, 2006).

Sport psychology research into the Olympic experience has focused predominantly on factors affecting performance, and while family relationships have been found to be sources of both support and stress for Olympic athletes, none of these studies have explored the experiences of athletes with small children (see Gould et al., 1999; Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, & Chung, 2002; Greenleaf et al., 2001). Instead, research reflects the effects of parents, siblings, and extended family members, with limited mention of spouses, on Olympic performance, generally framing family responsibilities as distractions that should be limited. Further, these studies do not differentiate between needs and concerns expressed by female athletes and those expressed by male athletes, which may be important when discussing family issues and
responsibilities, as men and women tend to experience their roles within the family in very different ways. Therefore, interventions recommended to help athletes cope with family issues may not necessarily reflect the needs of mothering athletes.

Problem Statement

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of Olympic athletes who were, at the time of Olympic competition, mothers of pre-school children, and includes three areas of focus: the return to elite-level training post-partum, the integration of mothering and training responsibilities, and the Olympic experience itself. The first goal of this research is to describe not only the physical challenges of returning to training and competition after pregnancy, but also the emotional aspects of this time of transition. A second goal of this research is to explore how athletes with pre-school children integrate the roles of responsibilities of motherhood and elite-level training and competing, on both a practical and emotional level, with a special eye toward the manner in which the culture in general and the athletic world specifically support (or do not support) this integration. The final goal of this study is to describe the Olympic Games from the point of view of the mother-athlete, focusing not only on performance aspects, but on the total experience of being a part of the Games.

Research Questions

The specific research questions to be addressed are as follows:

1. How do female Olympic athletes experience the physical and emotional aspects of returning to elite-level athletic training after pregnancy and childbirth?
2. How do female Olympic athletes with infants/pre-school children cope with the practical aspects of caring for their children while engaging in elite-level training and competition?

3. How do female Olympic athletes with infants/pre-school children experience, emotionally and socially, caring for their children while engaging in elite-level training and competition?

4. How does motherhood impact sport performance at the Olympic Games?

5. How does motherhood impact the experience of the Olympic Games?

Significance of the Study

Feminist sport scholars recognize that research into and understanding of the experiences of female athletes is vital to encouraging women’s sport participation and promoting equity in athletic opportunities. Pregnancy and motherhood are uniquely female experiences, and although fathers are beginning to take more active roles in parenting, child care is still considered to be the primary responsibility of mothers in Western culture. As family responsibilities have the potential to restrict women’s involvement in sport, equal participation and opportunity cannot be achieved unless the experiences of mother-athletes are understood and attempts are made to resolve the limitations that mothering may place on a woman’s athletic career.

The experiences of elite level athletes with pregnancy, the return to high level training, and Olympic competition have received little attention in the sport literature, yet understanding the joys and challenges of combining motherhood and elite sport will be increasingly important as the number of mother-athletes increases. Sport psychologists are often called upon to assist athletes with personal issues and life transitions as well as
sport performance, so it is imperative that the field be sensitive to the needs of athletes who either have children or are contemplating pregnancy and parenthood. Sport psychology researchers and practitioners can also act as advocates for the athletes whom they serve, and bringing greater attention to the needs of mother-athletes has the potential to increase cultural and organizational support for mothers as they continue in their athletic careers. In addition, by focusing on the experiences of successful mothering athletes at such a high profile event as the Olympic Games, it is hoped that this study will challenge traditional cultural assumptions about motherhood and sport, and provide female athletes with positive, successful role models.

Delimitations

The study was delimited in the follow ways:

1. Participants consisted of female athletes who participated in either the 2004 Summer or 2006 Winter Olympic Games and who had given birth to or adopted a child within the six years prior to their Olympic participation.

2. Participants were limited to those who could speak (and therefore be interviewed in) English.

3. Only Olympic athletes were chosen for the study. Therefore, the results may not generalize to the experiences of mother-athletes who compete at recreational or national levels. Results also may not reflect the experiences of mother-athletes who trained with the goal of competing at the Olympic Games but were not selected for the Olympic team.

4. Only the experiences of Olympic mothers were addressed. The experiences of father-athletes at the Olympic Games were not explored; therefore, results may not generalize to all parent-athletes.
5. Only athletes who chose to continue their athletic career after having children were included. The experiences of mothers who ended their athletic careers were not explored.

Limitations

The following circumstances may have limited the study:

1. The study was based on self-report data that are retrospective in nature. It was therefore dependent on the willingness of the participants to be open and honest about their experiences as well as how accurately the participants could reconstruct their experiences.

2. In an effort to include as many participants as possible from a small subject pool, participants represented a variety of sports. Variability in the results between participants may be due to the unique sub-cultures of the different sports.

3. The ethnic and cultural diversity of participants was dependent on who agreed to participate. The targeted sample consisted of women from North America and all of the participants identified themselves as White/European. In addition, all participants identified themselves as either married to or in a committed relationship with the fathers of their children.

4. Due to the geographic locations of the participants, interviews were conducted over the phone. This may have impacted the quality of the interviews and data collected, as Shur (2002) notes that dialogue tends to be more natural and open when interviewing in person.
5. As with any qualitative study, the researcher frames, filters, and interprets the data, and therefore, researcher bias is inevitable. Several steps were taken, however to illuminate and control for such bias.

Definitions

The following definitions have been adopted for this study:

**Emphasized Femininity**: A socially constructed view of the ideal woman, which incorporates traditional feminine qualities, such as submission and subordination, dependence, physical frailty, compassion, caring and concern for others, emotionality, and heterosexuality (see Burstyn, 1999; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

**Feminism**: “A struggle to end sexist oppression” (hooks, 2000, p. 26).

**Hegemonic Masculinity**: A socially constructed view of the ideal man, which incorporates traditionally masculine traits, such as dominance and aggression, independence, competitiveness, courage, physical strength, emotional repression, and heterosexuality (see Burstyn, 1999; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

**Intensive mothering**: a set of ideals, norms, and practices that currently defines appropriate child rearing in the United States. It designates the mother as the primary caretaker and requires that copious amounts of time, money, and physical and emotional energy be dedicated to child rearing (see Douglas & Michaels, 2005; Hays, 1996). It is mothering that is “child centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive” (Hays, 1996, p. 8).

**Olympic athlete**: Any athlete who has participated in the Olympic Games.

**Pre-school child**: A child who has not yet reached the age at which he/she is enrolled in school (usually under five years old).
Social construction: The process by which meanings (including what is considered “knowledge” and “truth”) are derived and negotiated through social exchanges. As meanings are defined, they are also shaped or constructed by those definitions (see Bohan, 1997; Gergen, 1985).
In a 2001 paper exploring elite mothering athletes, Inge Kryger Pendersen described the elite sports mother as an unintelligible social phenomenon. She writes,

In the contexts of medicine, history, and the sociology of sport, elite sports mothers can be seen as deviations that are not readily explained. Presuppositions in the research of sportswomen, including this study, were governed by certain rational ideas or conceptions of the regular order of the nature of athletic career in which ‘elite sports mothers’ are seen as unlikely. Rather, in the context of elite sports career, women who are mothers can be seen as deviants by reason of being women, by reason of their motherhood, and above all, by reason of their success. (p. 261)

Pendersen argues that while popular media treat elite athletes who are mothers as unique individuals and exceptions, the growing number of elite athlete mothers constitutes a social phenomenon. Further, the mere existence of mothering athletes is not enough to render the phenomenon intelligible, or easily understood, due to what she calls “rational ideas or conceptions” about the nature of sport. These “rational ideas” are based on the social construction of sport, the meanings/definitions we give to the concepts of “sport,” “athlete,” and “elite athlete,” and what is considered “normal” or “natural” in the course of an athletic career. It is important to note, however, that it is not only the social construction of sport that lends the elite mothering athlete unintelligible, but also the ways in which the culture defines and constructs women in general and motherhood specifically. It is the interface between cultural assumptions about sport and mothering, as well as the normative practices of each that make the elite sports mother “unlikely.” In order to fully understand the phenomenon and experiences of elite mothering athletes, one must understand the social backdrop against which mothering athletes are rendered
deviant or unusual and deconstruct the meanings of sport and motherhood and the ways
in which they intersect (or do not).

The Social Construction of Gender, Sport, and Motherhood

The social constructionist movement views knowledge about the social world not
as an objective reality that is able to be observed or discovered, but as actively created or
constructed by the observer, and influenced by social and historical context. According to
the constructionist model, there is no objective truth that exists separate from us, but
instead, what we consider “knowledge” or “truth” is constructed through our
interpretation and description (Bohan, 1997; Davis & Gergen, 1997; Gergen, 1985; Sage,
1998). In addition, knowledge and meanings are not constructed by a single individual,
but are derived and negotiated through social exchanges (Gergen, 1985). As Bohan
(1997) writes, “knowledge is a product of social interchange; what we call knowledge is
simply what we agree to call truth. In the process of thus agreeing to the reality of a
phenomenon, we construct precisely that reality” (p. 38). Following this reasoning,
because meanings are created, they are also multiple, fluid and dynamic, and dependant
on context (Gergen & Davis, 1997). Meanings are sustained through social institutions
(political, religious, and educational institutions) and cultural practices (art, music, and
sport), but can also be resisted, challenged and changed; indeed, the social
constructionists invite us to question assumptions and meanings that appear to be
“natural,” “commonsense,” and “taken for granted” (Gavey, 1997; Gergen, 1985; Sage,
1998).

Many feminists in sociology and psychology have discussed the social
construction of gender, questioning the categorization of genders as distinct, binary and
opposite, and the assumption that there are inherent masculine and feminine ways of being (Bohan, 1997; Davis & Gergen, 1997; Gergen, 1985). According to the social constructionist view, gender is not something that resides within an individual, or a set of traits that an individual possesses, but is created through social interactions and expectations. Further, gender is something that is “performed;” rather than being either masculine or feminine, one behaves in a masculine or feminine manner (Bohan, 1997). While there are multiple and dynamic gendered ways of being, the dominant culture upholds the “hegemonic masculinity – emphasized femininity” binary as the ideal (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

The term “hegemonic masculinity” has been used throughout the social science literature to refer to the most acceptable and socially supported manner of being masculine (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The term is based on hegemonic theory, which asserts that social stratification (and dominance of privileged groups) is maintained through the subtle influence that those in power exert on social institutions and cultural practices. Through this influence, privileged groups shape cultural values and norms in a way that renders the current social order (and thus their own privilege and domination) as natural, normal, and/or deserved (Hall, 1996; Sage, 1998). When applied to gender relations, patriarchy is maintained by emphasizing the “natural” differences between men and women and valuing masculine ways of being over those considered to be feminine, thereby naturalizing and justifying gender inequality. Hegemonic masculinity, then, embodies traditionally masculine traits, such as dominance and aggression, independence, competitiveness, courage, physical strength, emotional repression, and heterosexuality (Burstyn, 1999; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Gerschick & Miller,
1997; Hall, 1996; Shakib & Dunbar, 2002). In contrast, emphasized femininity is the polar opposite, embodying traditional feminine qualities, such as submission and subordination, dependence, physical frailty, compassion, caring and concern for others, emotionality, and (as with masculinity) heterosexuality (Burstyn, 1999; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Hall, 1996). It is important to note, however, that hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity may not represent the actual experience of any man or woman. Rather, they are held up as ideals and as normative (meaning that all other experiences are compared to and measured against it) ways of being (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

The male sport star has often been held up as a model or ideal representation of hegemonic masculinity, and organized sport has been deconstructed in the sport sociology literature as an important agent of gender role socialization (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Hall, 1996; McKay, Messner, & Sabo, 2000; Sage, 1998). A good or ideal athlete is generally a masculine athlete. For example, according to Sage (1998), organized sport emphasizes and values competitiveness, domination, aggression, individualism, obedience to authority, and discipline. Similarly, in a discussion of sport in the media, Shakib and Dunbar (2002) describe sport as glorifying toughness, aggression, recklessness, playing through pain and injury, and emphasizing male heterosexuality, while also placing women in a subordinate, objectified role through the positioning of women as sexual rewards. Hughes and Coakley (2001) express similar values in their discussion of the “sport ethic,” defined as “the set of criteria for defining what it means to be a real athlete” (p. 362). The sport ethic demands sacrifice for the sport or team and a subordination of other needs and interests, striving for individual distinction, risk taking,
courage, composure (keeping emotions in check), and a refusal to accept limitations. In short, sport and athleticism are constructed in the image of hegemonic masculinity, and this image becomes the normative against which all sport experiences and athletes are compared and measured. As such, women’s sports and female athletes are marginalized and devalued for being feminine, or when they do display these “true” athletic traits, are criticized for being inappropriately masculine (Hall, 1996; Sage, 1998; Shakib & Dunbar, 2002).

In a similar manner, motherhood is constructed in feminine terms, as the epitome of womanhood. Motherhood is considered to be natural and instinctual for women, something that both drives and fulfills them. Women’s biological reproductive capacity has been the basis for the construction of the female body as frail, weak, and inferior to that of the male. The construct of what it means to be a “good” mother, though somewhat dynamic, not only emphasizes “natural” feminine traits, but the behaviors ascribed to good mothering require them.

The meaning of motherhood is currently dominated in the United States by the concept of “intensive mothering” (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Fox, 2001; Hays, 1996). In her book, The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood, Sharon Hays (1996) writes that the ideology of intensive mothering revolves around three main concepts. First, children require the care of one person, a primary caretaker, and the mother is no doubt “the best person for the job” (p. 8). With a nod toward feminism, current discourse assumes that women are choosing the role of primary carter, although this choice is then deemed a fulfillment of natural desire. As Douglas and Michaels (2004) write,
Central to the new momism, in fact, is the feminist insistence that women have choices, that they are active agents in control of their own destiny, that they have autonomy. But here’s where the distortion of feminism occurs. The only truly enlightened choice to make as a woman, the one that proves, first, that you are a “real” woman, and second, that you are a decent, worthy one, is to become a “mom.” (p. 5)

Implicit in these assumptions is the hegemonic distinction between the masculine and feminine, as women (caring, emotional, self-sacrificing) are assumed to be the better care givers, and to be instinctually driven toward motherhood.

Secondly, a good mother anticipates her child’s needs and spends her time, energy, and financial resources meeting them. In the doctrine of “intensive mothering,” the mother is expected to put her own needs aside and focus solely on those of the child. Interestingly, this discourse also assumes that while a mother’s love and emotional connection to her child are instinctual, the actual practice of mothering may not be, so a litany of experts is available to educate the mother on child development and proper child rearing techniques (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Hays, 1996; McMahon, 1995). While this might seem to contradict the ethos of the maternal instinct, it also serves to reinforce the subordinate position of women by implying that maternal instinct is not enough; good mothers must also be educated (by predominantly male experts) on how to be good mothers. Fox (2001) adds that in order for a woman to do intensive mothering, she is dependant upon her partner for support – to do all of the things that she cannot while she attends to the baby (e.g., provide financially, do housework, and help occasionally with the childcare). Because of this dependence, the good mother also attends to her partner’s needs; after all, in order for him to provide financially and help out around the house, he
must be happy and healthy. Intensive mothering, therefore, subsumes the mother’s needs below not only the child’s but the partner’s as well.

Finally, according to Hays (1996) the ideology of intensive mothering is based on the view of children as innocent and pure, with a value that cannot be compared to anything else. This idea has two main implications. One is that because children are considered innocent and primarily good, and the mother is the primary influence, the mother becomes both all-powerful and all-responsible for the development of the child. When a child experiences difficulties or exhibits problematic behavior, responsibility falls to the mother, and other elements, such as peers, poverty, neighborhood characteristics, cultural factors, and even the child’s own agency are largely ignored (Ambert, 2001). Because of this, despite very public discussions of good and bad parenting practice, motherhood is a very private, individual accomplishment. Second, the fragility and value attributed to children re-emphasizes the idea that nothing else could be (or should be) more important to the mother than her children’s wellbeing.

In sum, as with the construct of the athlete, motherhood is constructed around hegemonic notions of femininity and masculinity, emphasizing the “natural” feminine qualities (both biological and psychological) that make women best suited for child care. Here, the ideal mother is sensitive and caring, and subordinates her needs to those of her family. Her reproductive capacity makes her physically inferior, and she is dependant on her husband for support and on male experts for guidance. She takes on this role freely and is naturally fulfilled by it, and any difficulties that she (or her child) may have are her responsibility and hers alone. It is important to remember that the social construction of motherhood has class and racial undertones as well. Hays (1991) writes that that the
construction of the ideal mother is based on the values and practices of white, middle-class Western families and, as noted earlier, while it may not actually represent any lived experience, it is held up as the ideal.

These current ideas of what makes a “real” athlete and a “good” mother are not recent constructs, but are steeped in history and have developed in conjunction with changes in gender relations, economics, the family, and the nature of organized sport. Both have been reproduced, resisted, and deconstructed by feminist theorists and activists throughout this history, and the meanings of motherhood and sport have developed and changed both because of the feminist movement and in reaction to it. In addition, feminists have had a kind of love-hate relationship with both motherhood and sport, albeit for different reasons. Motherhood has been seen as a source of women’s power and oppression, both women’s strength and weakness (Buck, 2005; McMahon, 1995). The challenge for feminists, writes McMahon (1995), is in “valuing women’s social capacity to care and/or biological capacity to give birth, while resisting having theses capacities considered definitive or ‘essential’ or best in what it is to be a woman” (p.10).

Similarly, feminist sport scholars have viewed women’s sport participation as a source of power and resistance to hegemonic concepts of masculinity and femininity, as well as an arena that reproduces these hegemonic notions and requires women to adopt (rather than challenge) masculine values such as aggression, competitiveness, and self-promotion (Hall, 1996).

The following section provides a brief outline of historical influences on the construction of motherhood and sport, with special attention to how the feminist movement has helped to shape and challenge these constructions. Hall (1996) has written
about the importance of situating studies of women in sport in historical context in order to better understand contemporary issues. Understanding the historical roots of the social constructions of motherhood and sport is important in challenging these constructions. By doing so, it is possible to take away the “natural” and “common sense” aspects and instead see these cultural beliefs as a part of a greater social, political, and economic context.

*Motherhood and Organized Sport: Historical Perspectives*

The historical construction of the “good” mother

In her book, *The Myth of Motherhood: An Historical View of the Maternal Instinct*, Elisabeth Badinter (1980/1981) traces the origins of the current construction of motherhood in North America and Western Europe to the late eighteenth century, when a convergence of Enlightenment philosophy and the rise of industrialization and capitalism gradually transformed the meaning of the family and the value of children. Prior to this time, the family was seen as an economic unit, and infants and young children (who required intensive care and were not able to share in the family’s work) were viewed more as burdens on the family than assets. Work was done by families or small groups, children participated in the work of the family as soon as they were old enough, and there was little distinction between the home and the workplace (Harrison, 1986). Men had the moral imperative to rule the home and provide discipline and moral supervision over their wives and children – mothers may have cared for their children, but had no more authority within the family than the children themselves (Hays, 1996).

As industrialization advanced through the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the public world of work and the private world of home and family became
separate and distinct, drawing fathers away from the home and centralizing mothers in the work of the home and child rearing (Crittenden, 2001; Hays, 1996; Silverstein, 1991). In addition, the burgeoning capitalist economy required different skills of its workers and allowed for upward mobility; instead of taking part in the work of the family (e.g., the family farm or trade), children had the best chance of advancing if they were well educated, independent thinkers (Crittenden, 2001; Hays, 1996). This combination of the importance of education and the absence of fathers shifted the focus within the family to mothers, increasing both their workload and their importance. Fathers became responsible for the economic contribution to the family, while mothers became responsible for the social, moral, and intellectual development of the children. The public work/private family dichotomy also transformed the meaning of the home. While the home had previously been the site of work for the whole family, by the mid 1800’s it became for men a refuge from work and a site of leisure (Crittenden, 2001; Hays, 1996). While capitalist enterprise was based on competition, individual gain, and hard work, the home and family (and the wife and mother) provided a loving, caring, peaceful sanctuary in which children were nurtured and husbands/fathers could rest and recharge (Harrison, 1986; Hays, 1996).

The late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries also saw decreases in birth rates among white middle and upper class women, and high infant mortality rates among those families with the means to have infants cared for by wet nurses (an upper class European practice which actually resulted in very poor infant care) (Badinter, 1980/1981; McMahon, 1995; Silverstein, 1991). The fear of a shrinking white middle and upper class, coupled with high immigration rates and higher birth rates among immigrants,
resulted in increased concern for (White) fertility, childbirth, and infant care. The medical community began taking childbirth and pediatric care seriously and encouraged middle and upper-class women to carefully attend to their infants. Further, religious leaders encouraged parents to regard their infants and young children as innocent and precious and stressed the moral obligation to care for the family, and politicians enacted laws to restrict the activities of women (in an effort to protect fertility) and young children (to protect them from the world of work and ensure primary education) (Badinter, 1980/1981; Crittenden, 2001; Hays, 1996; McMahon, 1995; Silverstein, 1991). In these ways, mothers and children were afforded special status that both protected them within the home and restricted their activities outside of it.

Herein lay the central paradox of motherhood for the burgeoning feminist movement. Many nineteenth century women embraced the growing importance of motherhood because it gave them a sense of authority within their homes – they saw elevating the status of mothers as a road to equality (Badinter, 1980/1981). The need for early childhood education and socialization provided the rationale for educating girls and women and enabled recognition of women’s intellectual capacity (Badinter, 1980/1981; Buck, 2005; Crittenden, 2001; McMahon, 1995). In addition, because of mothers’ elevated status as moral authority, their desire for political power became permissible, as shown in women’s early political action that revolved around issues of family, care, and/or morality (e.g., temperance, the antislavery movement, labor reform) (Buck, 2005; Hays, 1996). First wave feminists in the United States built on their increased power and status within the home to push for legal and political equality.
The sword, however, was double-edged. The division between the public world of work and the private world of the home was drawn strictly along gender lines, and the relegation of women to the domestic sphere served to limit their participation in the public sphere. On a philosophical level, McMahon (1995) argues that by valorizing motherhood, women were constructed in terms of caring and in relation with others, not as individuals, and therefore excluded from the “inalienable” individual rights and freedoms that dominated American philosophical/political thought. In a culture that prided itself on being built on the ethos of freedom and equality, the ideology of the self-sacrificing mother, whose work is a labor of love and a natural, moral calling, served to keep women from benefiting from these democratic ideals (Buck, 2005; Crittenden, 2001). As Crittenden writes:

How could societies founded on the principles of universal human rights deny those rights to women? The ingenious solution to this challenge to patriarchal domination was to cede to women the exalted task of nurturing the new free men. Rather than seeking their own personal gratification, women were urged to find fulfillment in the all-important task of creating the citizens of the new republic. (p. 48)

As mentioned earlier, the relatively new attention paid to fertility, pregnancy, and childbirth also became grounds for restricting women’s involvement in public life. Physical activity was discouraged and employment outside of the home was restricted based on the conceptualization of a woman’s body as fragile and weak and her fertility as needing special protection. Childbirth, which had been solely a female experience, was “medicalized” as a problematic condition that needed special (male) medical attention (Cahill, 2001). While some medical advances were helpful to women, this movement discredited midwifery and women’s own knowledge about their bodies, labor, and
childbirth, and placed this uniquely female experience under the control and surveillance of the male medical establishment.

Ironically, as motherhood was increasingly valorized, it was at the same time economically devalued. As the cash economy grew, work for wages became the focus of economists and the principal economic unit shifted from the household or family to the individual. As such, a woman who did the work of running her own household and raising her own children was not considered to be gainfully employed - instead she was an economic dependant of her husband’s, with no right to his wages or property (Crittenden, 2001). Early first wave feminists challenged this notion, and in the mid 1800’s pressed for the recognition of the economic value of women’s work and legal right to joint marital property. While nineteenth century feminists were successful in securing women’s rights to property owned before marriage and to their own wages, opposition to joint marital property was so fierce that it was dropped from the feminist agenda (Crittenden, 2001). The ideology of the self-sacrificing yet fulfilled mother prevailed – motherhood was its own reward, and the good mother did not expect (or, it seems, deserve) compensation. In the late nineteenth century, feminists began to turn away from identification with the devalued role of wife and mother and instead focused on legal equality, most notably women’s suffrage. To these feminists, equality for women could only be obtained by greater participation in the public sphere - marriage and motherhood became oppressive institutions that needed to be escaped (or at least dramatically changed) if women were to achieve equality with men.

The second wave of feminism of the 1960’s and 70’s maintained the focus of the first wave, that of increasing women’s presence in the public worlds of work and politics,
and fought most notably for equality in education and employment (McMahon, 1995). In fact, Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, which challenged the myth of the happy, fulfilled housewife, is often cited as the impetus of the second wave of feminism in the United States. While critics of second wave feminism label the movement as anti-motherhood and/or anti-family, in reality, many of the issues feminists raised, such as the need for child care, family leave policies, flexible work schedules, decent wages for women (whose financial contribution to the family was increasingly important), protection from family violence, and recognition of the value of women’s work, were aimed at easing the work of motherhood and providing real social and economic support for families (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). These feminists envisioned a family structure in which public and private work could be equally valued and equally divided between men and women, and a society in which the rearing of children would be viewed as a community effort (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Wolf, 2003).

Second wave feminists also focused on issues of reproductive freedom and lobbied for the availability of contraception and abortion. In addition, a natural childbirth movement emerged, which attempted to re-value the knowledge and practice of midwives and questioned the necessity of “routine” medical interventions; this movement treats pregnancy and childbirth as natural and healthy, not as a medical problem in need of treatment (Cahill, 2001; Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Wolf, 2003). Second wave feminism offers an alternative discourse on both the social construction and practice of motherhood, and yet, as Hays (1996) notes, the ideology of intensive mothering has persisted. Contemporary feminists point to a present day resurgence in intensive mothering and increasing romantic construction of motherhood as a reaction to women’s
advances in the workforce and a backlash against the feminist movement (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Faludi, 1991).

*The historical construction of sport and the athlete*

Interestingly, the social and economic forces that began reshaping the family in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries also served to shape the world of organized sport. The separation of work life and home life increased the leisure time of men and children by relieving them of many of their household duties (as it was no longer appropriate for young children to be expected to work, and older children and men performed their work away from the home, at work or at school) and through labor and education laws restricting their working hours (Sage, 1998; Toohey & Veal, 2000). Secondly, the increased involvement of women in public and political life, the romanticized view of the home as feminine and soft, and the decline in male authority over the family led to what Michael Messner (1988) calls “a turn-of-the-century crisis of masculinity” (p. 200). In reaction, a “cult of manliness” (Sage, 1998, p. 65) arose within the culture that celebrated physicality, toughness, and warfare, and served to reaffirm male dominance and socialize boys (whose care and education was increasingly provided by women) into appropriately masculine men (Messner, 1988; Sage, 1998). The British tradition of organized competitive sport in boarding schools, developed as a means of teaching “masculine” traits such as teamwork, leadership, aggression, and toughness, gained popularity in Europe and the United States during this time of masculine uncertainty (Messner, 1988; Toohey & Veal, 2000; Wamsley & Pfister, 2005). Messner (1988) notes that “sport was a male-created homosocial cultural sphere that provided men with psychological separation
from the perceived feminization of society while also providing dramatic symbolic proof of the ‘natural superiority’ of men over women” (p. 200).

The discourse on motherhood influenced women’s participation in sport by offering both a rationale for women to engage in sport and exercise and a basis for restricting involvement. As with education, exercise was seen as a way to improve women’s abilities as mothers (Puig, 2001). Women’s physical activity, however, was rigidly controlled due to prevailing views of women as weak and fragile. Not only was physical over-exertion presumed dangerous to a woman’s physical and emotional well-being, but it also put her at risk for reproductive damage (Wamsley & Pfister, 2005). In essence, moderate exercise made healthy mothers, but too much exercise ruined them. Women’s sport organizations at the time also remained separate from men’s, de-emphasizing competition and instead focusing on enjoyment and camaraderie. While men’s sporting events were public displays of physical prowess and domination, women were encouraged to exercise in private or participate in non-competitive “play days” (Puig, 2001). Thus, women’s sport developed in a way that reinforced the ideology of motherhood and reproduced gender differences.

The crisis of masculinity was also one of the driving forces behind the organization of the modern Olympic Games at the end of the nineteenth century. The writings of Barron Pierre de Coubertin, known as the founder of the modern Olympics, reflected the gender ideology of the day, as he viewed sport as an important means of teaching and developing masculine traits, and found women’s participation in athletic competition to be offensive (Chase, 1992; Wamsley & Pfister, 2005). To Coubertin, a woman’s role was to encourage her sons to excel and to offer her admiration as reward to
the winners; as such he vehemently opposed the inclusion of female athletes in the Games (Chase, 1992; Kluka, 1993; Wamsley & Pfister, 2005).

Despite the cultural and organizational resistance to women’s competitive sport, a feminist athletic movement was emerging. Coubertin was successful in excluding women from the first modern Olympics in 1896, but women began participating in “appropriate” sports, such as tennis, archery, swimming, and gymnastics in subsequent games. This was largely due to the laissez-faire attitude of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), which, at the time, allowed local organizing committees to set the program of events at each Olympic Games (Toohey & Veal, 2000). In 1920, after a failed bid for the inclusion of women in Olympic track and field events, the Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale was organized and began staging its own Women’s Olympics, later named the Women’s World Games after the IOC objected to their use of the word “Olympics” (Toohey & Veal, 2000; Wamsley & Pfister, 2005). Over the next decade the popularity of the Women’s World Games was difficult for the IOC to ignore, and more women’s events were included into the Olympic program. Wamsley & Pfister (2005) note that this was not due to greater support of women’s athletics, but an effort to absorb a rival event. They write, “Male sport leaders accommodated the challenges of athletic feminists because, ultimately, it was better to control and reshape women’s sport in acceptable terms than to permit it to develop as a rival institution” (p. 122).

This highlights one of the major controversies within the feminist sport movement. Some preferred to keep women’s sports separate from men’s, so that women could determine the direction that women’s sport would take. Some of these feminists rejected the idea of organized competition as well, preferring to focus on an ethic of
cooperation and enjoyment (Toohey & Veal, 2000). Others in the movement sought
equality with men within mainstream (i.e. male) sporting structures as a means to develop
and legitimize women’s sport. While this discussion is still going on today within
feminist sport circles, the second road, that of equality, not difference, was taken with
regard to organized sport, including the Olympic Games. The price of inclusion,
however, was control – the IOC and the individual sport federations, whose
administrations were entirely male (and still are overwhelmingly so), would shape the
parameters of women’s participation in the Games.

The second wave of feminism brought “a torrent of female sports participation”
(Messner, 1988, p. 202) in the United States due to the changing cultural norms regarding
athletics and the increased opportunity brought on by the passage of Title IX (Messner,
1988; Sage, 1998). The feminist athletic movement challenged sport as a purely
masculine domain, as well as the physical frailty and inferiority of women and
conceptualization of women as docile (i.e. not aggressive) and uncompetitive. Another
historical factor served to increase the participation of women in sport, especially at the
Olympic Games: Nationalism. From the 1950s through the late 80s, sport was one of the
battlefronts of the Cold War. The accumulation of Olympic medals, especially gold, took
on special nationalistic significance in competition between East and West; Olympic
success was used by both sides to assert that either communism or capitalism was
superior (Sage, 1998; Wamsley & Pfister, 2005). While Western countries were
concerned with the masculinizing effects of sport, Eastern bloc countries trained women
alongside men and were active in petitioning the IOC to expand Olympic opportunities.
for female athletes in an effort to increase their medal count (Chase, 1992; Wamsley & Pfister, 2005).

While the reasons behind this trend to include more women in athletics may be dubious, the Cold War medals race did serve to increase women’s participation in the Games and equalize the training and development of female athletes. Since then, the IOC has been actively seeking to increase and improve women’s participation in the Olympics, both as athletes and administrators. In 1980, the IOC Executive Board discussed the participation of women in the games and began taking steps to increase opportunities and support for women within the Olympic movement (Chase, 1998). In 1995, the IOC established the Women and Sport Working Group to advise the Board on issues affecting women’s participation and since then several policies aiming to support women’s participation have been enacted (Toohey & Veal, 2000). Despite the advances of women in sport, it is important to note that, as with motherhood, the masculine discourse surrounding sport and athletes remains, and may have strengthened in response to the feminist movement. As Messner (1988) points out:

> Sports in the postwar era have become increasingly important to males precisely because they link men to a more patriarchal past…symbolic representations of the male body as a symbol of strength, virility, and power have become increasingly important in popular culture as actual inequalities between the sexes are contested in all arenas of public life (Mishkind et al., 1986). (p. 201-202)

*Motherhood and sport: intersecting constructs*

If sport is constructed as the epitome of masculinity, and motherhood as the epitome of femininity, especially in that sex and gender differences are based on reproductive differences, then the incompatibility of sport and motherhood becomes
obvious. A spirit of competitiveness, aggression, risk taking, and emphasis on individual accomplishment and rewards does not mesh well with the nurturing, careful, other-focused ideal of motherhood. Interestingly, the athlete ideal and the mother ideal do have some similarities. Both ideals are self-sacrificing. They each require total commitment of time and energy (both physical and psychological), with the athlete or mother sacrificing other interests/activities in order to serve those of the team or child. Sports teams and organizations are often described as families, acknowledging not only this ethic of self-sacrifice but also strong, supportive bonds between players (this also reproduces a patriarchal structure of family with a (male) coach as the head of the family and all others in subordinate positions).

In line with self-sacrifice, both ideals require a surveillance and discipline of the body. Foucault has written about the use of technology to survey and control the bodies of both athletes and pregnant women (Hall, 1996). Both athletes and expectant mothers are encouraged to follow strict exercise and nutrition guidelines, one with the goal of producing peak athletic performance, the other with the goal of producing a healthy baby. In fact, many of the athletes that Allred (2000) interviewed described themselves as having “trained” for childbirth the same way they had trained for competition. Athletes and mothers are also expected to stoically endure physical pain and discomfort, viewing it as a “normal” part of the process. These similarities in the constructions of athletes and mothers do not, however, necessarily lead to the conclusion that mothers would make good athletes or vice versa because they cannot overshadow the “natural” distinction of sport as aggressive and masculine and motherhood as nurturing and feminine. In addition,
the all-or-nothing emphases in both constructions render the two mutually exclusive – one simply cannot be 100% committed to two different pursuits.

It is important to remember, however, that both sport and motherhood provide women with opportunities to resist these hegemonic discourses. Indeed, the mere existence of elite level mothering athletes provides an alternative discourse to both the construction of the athlete and of motherhood.

The mother-athletes in Allred’s book (2000) and Appleby’s study (2004) resisted the self-sacrificing ethic of care by discussing the importance of having time and space away from the family in order to care for themselves. This sentiment is also found in studies of middle class mothers returning to work who describe their work as personally satisfying and something that they do for themselves (Millward, 2006; Woollett & Parr, 1997). As Hays (1996) noted, this idea has been incorporated into the construction of the “good” mother by emphasizing that happy moms make happy children. Further, mothering athletes have expressed pride in being positive role models for their children, especially their daughters. Mothering athletes also resist the construction of the über-dedicated and competitive athlete by scaling back training time and developing a different (more performance-based, less outcome-based) perspective on competition (Appleby, 2004; Pendersen, 2001).

Mother-athletes have resisted the male-centered spaces and organization of sport by making their parenthood visible and unapologetic (e.g., bringing children to training and competition sites), and negotiating childcare and maternity leave policies into athletic contracts. For example, the women of USA Soccer and the WNBA successfully negotiated the inclusion of maternity leave and funding for child care into their contracts.
(Allred, 2000). Some men have challenged this as well. NFL player David Williams created controversy in 1993 when he chose to miss a game in order to be present at the birth of his first child stating, “I love football…but my family comes first” (in Lapchick, 1996, p. 114). (This declaration was not without criticism – Williams was still fined for missing the game). In short, while the current constructions of “athlete” and “mother” render the elite mothering athlete as “unintelligible” (Penderson, 2001), they are also important sites for active resistance. Hall (1996) calls for feminist sport research and theory that focuses on “sport as a site for relations of domination and subordination (gender, race, class, sexuality, and other forms) and on how sport serves as a site of resistance and transformation” (p. 31). To do so most accurately represents women’s lived experiences of both being constrained by cultural ideals, and resisting and changing them.

**The Feminist Critique: Research in Family and Sport**

This study is informed by feminist theory, the most basic tenet of which is the focus on women and women’s experiences. The feminist critique of traditional social science research is that women’s experiences have been ignored or marginalized either through omission (i.e., researchers do not study women’s experiences at all) or by framing or interpreting women’s experiences through the lens of the dominant (patriarchal) culture. Kitzinger (2004) argues that “men define reality on their own terms, to legitimate their experience, their own version of events, while women’s experience, not fitting the male model, is trivialized, denied, or distorted” (p. 125, emphasis in original).
These biases have been noted in both the research of the transition to motherhood, and of women’s experiences in sport. In the introduction to their study of the transition to first time parenthood, Woollett and Parr (1997) state that “although there is increasing recognition of women's views in pregnancy and childbirth … medical and psychological accounts of the post-partum still largely ignore or marginalize the perspectives and experiences of women themselves” (¶ 2). They emphasize that while attention has recently been paid to post-partum depression, little research has investigated the range of diverse, complex, and sometimes contradictory emotions that women experience as they become mothers. Feminist sport psychologists have also noted a deficiency in research focusing on the experiences of women athletes, citing the focus on gender differences (which most often serve to find women deficient) and gender roles/identities, rather than on women’s actual lived experiences (Bredemeier, 2001; Gill, 2001; Hall, 1996). One goal of feminist research, then, is to bring women’s experiences to the forefront by asking questions based on women’s lives and presenting women’s interpretations as valid, while challenging the assumptions of “truth” based on men’s experience (Hall, 1996; Kitzinger, 2004). In designing and interpreting this research, I hope to challenge some of the assumptions that have shaped family and sport research and present a picture of motherhood and athletics that more closely represents the experiences of the participants.

*Motherhood and sport in psychological research*

The first half of the twentieth century saw an increase in attention to child development and education, and the predominant ideology of motherhood is reflected in the research and recommendations of the psychological community. Freudian psychoanalytic theory focused on early childhood experience as the foundation for
personality development, with special attention to the mother-child relationship (Demo & Cox, 2000; Silverstein, 1991). This was expanded upon by Bowlby, Ainsworth, and Mahler through their theories of attachment and research with infants and children and their mothers (Silverstein, 1991). In addition, motherhood defined normal development for women. These assumptions of the natural desirability of motherhood and the primacy of the mother-child dyad would dominate family research in the twentieth century and shape the questions researchers asked, and as a consequence, both reflect and reinforce the dominant motherhood discourse (Demo & Cox, 2000; Silverstein, 1991). For example, in her critique of child care research, Silverstein (1991) argues that Bowlby’s maternal deprivation hypothesis, developed through work with institutionalized children, was applied to children from stable families who were cared for in day care and prompted research into how child care may interrupt the mother-child bonding and attachment process.

Further, research on employment and child care has focused almost exclusively on the effect of maternal (and not paternal) employment, relating maternal employment to deficits in the mother-infant relationship, maternal physical and emotional well-being, and the marital relationship. She writes that “the focus on the mother as the causal factor in child development persists,” adding that “given the nature of the research questions that have been asked, the research on maternal employment can more accurately be described as a search for negative findings for other-than-mother care” (p. 1028). This line of research has also reinforced a largely false dichotomy between mothers at home and mothers at work by making a rigid distinction between the two and asking research questions that compare and contrast them. This debate ignores the experiences of women
who work part-time, women who “cycle” their employment status (e.g., stay home for a short time when children are young and gradually increase their involvement in the workforce as children mature), and even the role of fathers (Boyd, 2005; Silverstein, 1991).

Ambert (2001) argues that family research focuses almost exclusively on the effect that parents have on their children, while largely ignoring the effect that children have on the lives of their parents. She notes that parents, especially mothers, are expected to focus on their children and are not encouraged to consider their own experiences or development important – certainly not as or more important than their children’s. This expectation is reflected in the unidirectional nature of research questions asked in the psychological literature and may be responsible for the relative lack of research into motherhood noted by McMahon (1995) and Woollett and Parr (1997).

Research on female athletes in the field of sport psychology has also been steeped in traditional constructions of women and sport. In her book *Feminism and Sporting Bodies*, M. Ann Hall (1996) describes how two of the major directions of research on women and sport - trying to explain female athletes’ interest in sport from a biological, socialization, or psychological standpoint, and exploring the psychological and social effect of athletic participation on female athletes (including an obsession with the “masculinizing” effects of sport and the difficulty of role conflict within the female athlete) – are grounded in hegemonic constructions. The underlying assumptions in the research are that it is unnatural for women to be interested in sport, and that sport participation can have negative effects on women’s development. These directions both reflect and reproduce cultural assumptions about women and sport and do not accurately
reflect the actual experiences of women. For example, research has shown that while female athletes are aware of cultural beliefs about femininity and athleticism, they personally experience little or no role conflict and do not believe that being an athlete makes them less feminine (Hall, 1996; Messner, 1988).

In sum, feminist researchers have criticized much of the research into both motherhood and sport as having foundations in traditional cultural assumptions about women, motherhood, and sport. Generating research questions based on these assumptions serves to produce a body of research that not only reinforces these assumptions, but perhaps more importantly, fails to accurately reflect the lived experiences of women. In this study, it was important for me to focus on the experiences of athletic women as they transitioned into motherhood and returned to competition, and how they themselves interpreted these experiences; in essence, to “give voice” to a neglected and uniquely female experience. In addition, the analysis of the data will take on a relational perspective, defined by Hall (1996) as analyses “which begin with the assumption that sporting practices are historically produced, socially constructed, and culturally defined to serve the interests and needs of powerful groups in society” (p. 11). Therefore, the stories will be told, but also placed in an historical and social context, with an eye toward analyzing the ways in which the participants’ athletic careers may be restrained and/or supported by the dominant culture, the subculture of sport, and the structure of organized competition.

Focus on the individual and the fallacy of choice

Feminist psychologists have also criticized the field for its focus on individual behavior, thought, and feeling, as if the individual exists in a vacuum (Butler, 1985; Gill,
Even within family systems theory, which takes into account the interactions between family members, feminists note that the family system is theorized as an independent unit, with early family theories ignoring the effects of social, economic, and political forces on the family (Featherstone, 1996). Gill (2001) notes that sport psychology has generally followed the lead of mainstream psychology in its research and practice that focuses on the individual, and feminist sport psychologists have called for research and practice that takes into account social and historical context as well. One of the main critiques of the focus on the individual within psychology and sport studies is that it locates the source of distress, difficulty, difference, etc. within the individual (Butler, 1985; Hall, 1996). Feminists argue that this individual bias tends to blame women for their subordinate status and places the responsibility for change on women rather than analyzing the sexist elements of the culture and demanding social and political change (Bohan, 1997; Butler, 1985; Hall, 1996). This bias can be seen in the discourses on motherhood (especially with regard to mothers, paid work, and child care) and women in sport.

Motherhood, as previously discussed, has been conceptualized in the United States as an individual, private responsibility, and difficulties are often viewed as personal failures (Woollett & Parr, 1997). Family researchers and feminist scholars have pointed to a public disinvestment in children and families in the past three decades that has transferred more and more of the cost and responsibility of raising and educating children to individual families (Demo & Cox, 2000; Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Wolf, 2003). The conceptualization of motherhood as an individual accomplishment is both the rationalization for and the result of this disinvestment. Douglas and Michaels (2004)
write, “the discourse of individualism…suggested that feminism and sisterhood were irrelevant and that the government did not have to give women’s needs high priority – or any priority at all” (p. 234). They go on to say that “the rejection of any communal, collective ethos around the care and education of children leaves mothers one alternative: individual effort and vigilance…” (p. 308). This is especially influential in the work/family discourse.

When women experience conflict between work and family responsibilities, it is seen as a “private problem of organizing and scheduling” (McMahon, 1995, p. 206), not as a problem inherent in the organization of the workplace or failure on the part of social and government institutions to support working parents and their families (Boyd, 2005; Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Silverstein, 1991; Wolf, 2003). Silverstein (1991) notes that the cultural myth of the “supermom” reinforces this by providing an image of the successful working mother defined by “personal competence, rather than as a role embedded within a network of social arrangements requiring public support” (p. 1029). Another popular image in the current working mother discourse (and antithesis to the supermom) is that of the mother who voluntarily opts out of the workforce in favor of full-time motherhood (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Williams, Manvell, & Bornstein, 2006). The dominating theme in the opt-out storyline is that women are choosing to leave the workforce because of a biological pull toward motherhood and a personal failure to adequately fulfill both roles as worker and mother, while ignoring workplace conditions, such as inadequate family leave policies, difficulty finding/affording child care, inflexible work hours, and discrimination, that serve to push mothers out of the workforce (Williams, Manvell, & Bornstein, 2006). In essence, inability to live up to the
“supermom” ideal is seen as a personal failure, and leaving a workforce that refuses to meet mothers’ needs is seen as a personal, individual choice.

These themes are also prevalent in the discourse surrounding women in sport, which tends to couch women’s lower participation rates, performance, and career success (as athletes as well as coaches/administrators) as a function of interest, individual ability, or personal preference. Hall (1996) notes that early research into women and sport was “dominated by psychological rather then sociological analyses of women’s place in sport” (p. 5), and ascribed gender differences to individual differences or preferences. Susan Birrell (1988) argued that “by subtly assuming that the problem behind women’s low involvement lay within, [research on women and sport] tended to blame women for their own lack of participation” (p. 467, as cited in Hall, 1996, p. 6). While challenged in social research, this attitude is still prevalent in popular culture today. In her book, *Women Who Make the World Worse*, O’Beirne (2006) criticizes the use of Title IX to ensure equal opportunity in high school and collegiate sports by attributing unequal participation of men and women to “women’s natural inclination to be less interested in sports” (p. 95) and men’s “greater, natural interest in sports” (p. 97). In this argument, unequal social, institutional, and financial support for women’s and men’s sport, and the unequal opportunities that result, are not factors – women’s lack of participation is considered a free (and natural) individual choice. Hall (1996) furthers this discussion by adding that it is not only blatant discrimination that accounts for women’s unequal participation in the world of sport, but expectations within the sport culture. She notes that the general problem that women have integrating into mainstream sporting institutions is that “women’s experience, behavior, personality, or values in sport are seen
as ‘deficient,’ and women are asked time and time again to change and fit into male-defined, male-dominated systems” (p. 79). Such is true in both the world of work and the world of sport.

Although written about mothers in the workforce, the following quote can easily describe women (and mothers) in the world of sport as well:

The argument that women are opting out typically rests on the assumption that motherhood involves “a mother’s choice,” not discrimination. Yet choice and discrimination are not mutually exclusive. People who experience discrimination must still make choices within the reality of their lives, but a choice made by someone stuck between a rock and a hard place cannot be considered a free choice, or a choice based solely on the desires of the chooser, with no regard to the context within which that choice is made. (Williams et al., 2006, p. 47)

The ramifications of the fallacy of choice are profound: when the individual is the cause of her own disadvantage, there is no reason for the organization (or culture, or public policy, etc.) to change.

The elite athlete mother no doubt faces resistance on both fronts – from a sport culture/organization based on male experiences and needs in general, and that may not recognize or accommodate children and parenthood specifically. In conceptualizing this study, I reflected on the number and variety of choices that mothering athletes must make with regard to their children’s care and their own training and competing, beginning with the decision of whether (and when) to have a child, and whether or not to return to high-level competition. Since the participants are all mothers and Olympians, they have all obviously “opted in” to both motherhood and elite sport, and with apparent success. The challenge I face is how to present these stories in a way that does not valorize or romanticize these athletes as “supermoms” or present their successes as “proof” that the
challenges mothering athletes face are easily overcome by the right kind of athlete, but also does not ignore their exceptional hard work and determination.

One of the challenges for feminist researchers is to acknowledge both individual agency and environmental constraints and supports that shape women’s experiences. In analyzing the sport and cultural context, I do not want to present the participants as victims of cultural expectations; in other words, if mothers do sacrifice a part of their athletic careers for their children (or vice versa), I do not want to present them merely as having internalized the ideology of intensive mothering (or of elite sport). On the other hand, I do not want to ignore how cultural and organizational factors may influence the participants’ parenting and training decisions. Hopefully, these pitfalls can be avoided by resisting what Boyd (2005) refers to as a simplistic analysis that relies on false dichotomies such as work/home, good mother/bad mother, male role/female role, resistance/compliance, motherhood as natural and fulfilling/motherhood as oppressing. Instead, I hope to be able to present the participants’ stories as complex and multifaceted, and acknowledge the interpretations that they make for themselves, while still keeping dominant discourses in mind. In addition, it is important to recognize that although the participants are able to make their own choices about their parenting and athletic careers, these choices may be limited by the culture in general and the athletic organization specifically. Finally, it is also vital to acknowledge that these women are not only affected by the social and cultural milieu (either resisting or complying) but also have a profound effect on it, and by their choices they have changed (or can change) cultural expectations and organizational practices.
One of the biggest theoretical challenges I have met when reviewing the literature is whether to fit elite sport training and competition into the category of work or leisure, and how to conceptualize the concept of “balance” of the overlapping roles and responsibilities. The conclusion that I came to is that it is impossible to accurately represent the experiences of mothering athletes within these concepts, as the definitions of and divisions between work, leisure, and family are based on the male experience of each that does not necessarily fit the nature of women’s lives.

The elite level athlete is often described as having a “career,” yet traditionally, work and career have been defined by economics – “work” is equated with paid work (Crittenden, 2001). While professional sports are big business in the United States, few Olympic athletes earn a living solely on their competitive accomplishments, and surveys of Olympic and elite athletes cite finances as a major stressor (Fletcher & Hanton, 2003; Greenleaf, Gould, & Dieffenbach, 2001; Woodman & Hardy, 2001). For women athletes, the opportunity for a professional sport career is even less likely. Yet many women do describe their sport participation as careers, and equate their return to training with a working mother’s return to the workforce. Olympic cross-country skier Milaine Theriault remarked, “What really pushed me to come back to this is I know there are women who have had children and are going back to work and that’s what I was doing really – skiing is my job and I was going back to work” (in Kimura, 2006, ¶ 26). They acknowledge a strong athletic identity and use the term “career” as a reflection of the importance that sport holds in their lives, yet the economic discrepancy is important.
In discussions of women’s return to work after childbirth, there is often a
differentiation between those who work because it is necessary financially for the family,
and those who chose to return to work. The former is more likely to fit into the “good”
mother category, because the assumption is made that she would rather be caring for her
children full time but cannot afford to, while the latter is more often criticized for her
selfishness at putting her own needs for accomplishment ahead of her children’s needs
(Douglas & Michaels, 2004; McMahon, 1995). In addition, a mother’s return to paid
work is often mediated by the amount of money she can earn in relation to the cost of
child care. Feminist scholars note that in the familial return to work negotiation, child
care costs are often deducted form the mother’s potential salary (not viewed as a family
expense) and the amount that remains determines whether or not it is “worth it” for the
mother to work outside the home (Crittenden, 2001, Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Wolf,
2003). In short, a working mother can “justify” her return to work if the economic need
or gain is high enough.

For the mother who wishes to return to elite training, this may have important
ramifications, especially if she does not earn money from her sport participation, and/or if
participation costs more than it creates. These mothers cannot justify the time spent in
training with financial rewards and are breaking the ethic of care by taking not only their
time away from their children, but financial resources as well. Olympic bobsledder
Alexandra Powe Allred (2000) relates a story about the “early days” of women’s
bobsledding, when she and her fellow athletes financed their own training, equipment,
and travel. The financial stress impacted her relationship with her husband, and she
writes about the difficulty she had convincing her husband and others of the importance
of her athletic career, that the sacrifices of time and money were worthwhile. Johns and Farrow (1996), who compared the sport experiences of a mother-athlete and a father-athlete, found that the mothering athlete in their study received little support from friends who believed that the stress of combining her family responsibilities and athletic career was “unnecessarily self inflicted” (p. 90). They write:

As far as her friends were concerned, a woman electing to engage in an unpaid, time consuming sports career was asking for trouble. In their view, such ambitions contravened what they perceived to be a “natural” law. They believed that when women utilize their discretionary time to improve skills which are not directly related to household and maternity responsibilities, they are breaking such a law. (pp. 90-91)

In these examples, the athletes cannot justify their return to sport in the same manner that a working mother may be able to justify her return to work with financial need (or at least gain). This may put a different kind of cultural pressure on mothering athletes that may not be captured in the return to work research.

The conceptualization of “work” as paid work done outside of the home leads to another theoretical difficulty in the framing of the elite mothering athlete’s experience. Much of the work-family and leisure literature rely on a concept that work, leisure, and family are distinct and separate, and that individuals devise ways of “balancing” them, which does not accurately represent women’s experience. First, if work is defined as paid work outside of the home, then women who are stay at home wives and mothers do not work, and all of their time can be considered leisure time. In her book *The Price of Motherhood*, Ann Crittenden (2001) chronicles the “disappearance” of women’s work during the industrial revolution as a consequence of the economy shifting from family-centered businesses and farms to a wage economy that separated work and home.
Economists measuring productivity focused on wage earners, and household work was considered to be of little economic value, an attitude that still prevails. In fact, Crittenden sites a 1995 economics textbook that lists household activities such as cooking, housekeeping, and child education under “Leisure Time” (p.77). When Bialeschki and Michner (1994) asked women how they defined leisure, the answer was quite different. Women in their study defined leisure as time to focus on the self, free of responsibility to others. In this case, household and familial responsibilities were considered “work,” and the women described the virtual absence of leisure time during the period when their children were dependent – a very different story.

Within this framework, however, even looking at work and leisure as separate entities is problematic. Hall (1996) notes:

> As every woman who is a full time housewife and/or mother can tell us, there is little distinction between being at work and not being at work in the home. Once it is recognized that housework and child care are work, and that being responsible for the lives of other human beings means that one is always at work in some sense, then distinctions between work and non work are simply not appropriate….It would be difficult to imagine how to make work and leisure observable. (p. 73)

However defined, it is apparent that the worlds of work, leisure, and family are intricately combined in women’s lives, and discussing them is terms of “balance,” as if they are separate, itself denies this reality. I began to wonder, is the mother/athlete who runs with her baby in a jogging stroller engaging in training or child care? If she is training, is her sport participation work or leisure? Is being with her baby work or leisure? What about the professional soccer player whose daughter chases balls and plays on the field during practice? Is she working, playing, or caring for her child? In this context, trying to distinguish between and separate out how the mothering athlete’s time is “balanced” does
not accurately capture the experience. Instead, I believe it is more representative to ask how these various roles and responsibilities are integrated and combined.

In conclusion, when studying the transition to motherhood within an elite sports context, it is imperative to understand the cultural meanings given to both motherhood and sport, and the social and historical contexts within which these meanings evolved (and continue to evolve). These social constructions have the ability to shape experience by influencing the beliefs and expectations of individuals, and by affecting the amount of support provided by social/cultural institutions and organizations. The section aimed to outline the major social and historical influences on the social construction of motherhood and sport, and discuss how these cultural assumptions influence the discourse surrounding mother-athletes and the research into both mothering and sporting women’s experiences. The next section focuses on contemporary research into motherhood and sport.

Pregnancy and the Post-Partum Return to Training

Few studies have focused exclusively on the experiences of new mothers as they negotiated their return to elite level training and competition. Those that have describe and the emotional transformation of self into mother (and of “couple” into “parents”), the physical challenges women face of training through pregnancy and childbirth, and the practical issues of fitting training and competing into new daily routines that revolve around child care. While some studied the return to elite-level competition, none have focused on mothering athletes’ experiences of the Olympic Games, itself a very unique and challenging event. The few studies of mothering athletes will be discussed here,
supplemented by research into injury rehabilitation, the transition to parenthood, return to work after pregnancy, and the stresses of Olympic level training and competition.

Pregnancy: Managing Training and Taking Time Off

While it is becoming more acceptable for pregnant athletes to continue training throughout pregnancy, training will inevitably be limited as the pregnancy progresses and the physical changes of pregnancy (e.g., fatigue, weight gain, change in the center of gravity, stress on the cardiovascular system, etc.) become more pronounced. Hausenblas and Downs (2005) found that pregnant women (not necessarily athletes) decreased their leisure-time exercise behavior from pre-pregnancy, with continual decreases at each trimester, and that few women in their third trimester met the general health recommendations of exercising most days of the week. Beilock, Feltz, and Pivarnik (2001) studied the training of competitive athletes during and post pregnancy and found that while the majority of the athletes remained active and trained throughout their pregnancies, they did decrease training intensity as pregnancy progressed. These athletes cited physical factors such as fatigue, lack of energy, weight gain, abdominal discomfort and back pain as barriers to training during pregnancy, as well as psychosocial factors, such as worry about the baby, negative peer support, and lack of information about training.

In addition to the limitations that accompany pregnancy, time must be taken away from training in order to recover from childbirth, especially if the mother has a surgical birth. Like any motivated athlete who must take time away from her sport, pregnant athletes report feeling frustrated by the physical limitations of pregnancy and worried
about returning to pre-pregnancy fitness levels and performance (Allred, 2000; Appleby, 2004). One runner interviewed by Appleby (2004) stated:

You get kind of depressed about it and you’re like ‘oh I can’t run.’ I remember with [name of son] and my first pregnancy…I think world championships were around that time and I was in really good shape and I got pregnant. It was so disheartening to me. Because running was just like everything and you associate your identity with it and I was so depressed about being pregnant…. (p.57)

Similarly, Olympic race walker Michelle Rohl saw her performance decline early in her pregnancy and feared that she would never be able to get back into shape, stating, “it’s only depressing to run the same workouts, with the same people week in and week out, watching yourself get slower and slower as more people begin to blow by you at each workout” (in Allred, 2000, p.198). The runners in Appleby’s 2004 study also remarked that it was sometimes difficult to see their bodies changing, to feel that they had no control over these changes, and to feel overweight and/or unfit for the first time in their lives.

These concerns are similar to those expressed by athletes who have been injured and are forced to take time away from training to heal and rehabilitate. Sport psychology research into injured athletes has found that in addition to the pain and physical limitations of injury, athletes are plagued by a variety of negative emotions upon being injured, including self pity and depression, and express a great deal of anxiety about their prognosis for recovery, the loss of training time and fitness, and the potential for losing a place on the team (Quackenbush & Crossman, 1994; Tracey, 2003; Udry, Gould, Bridges, & Beck, 1997).
Slowing down or taking time off from training can also affect the amount of social support an athlete receives. For those who have made a considerable investment in their athletic careers, there is little time for socializing outside of the sport environment and therefore teammates, training partners, and coaches often make up an athlete’s primary social support system. Pregnancy and the subsequent reduced involvement in training and competition can weaken these social ties, as has been found with athletes recovering from injury. Injured elite level skiers interviewed by Udry, Gould, Bridges, and Beck (1997) and in a follow-up study by Udry, Gould, Bridges, and Tuffey (1997) reported feeling not only lonely and isolated when they left their training center after being injured, but some also felt rejected by their coach and expendable – unimportant if they were not able to perform. Similarly, in a study of injured collegiate athletes, Tracey (2003) found that while the athletes maintained social ties to their teammates, the inability to fully participate led to feelings of alienation and disenfranchisement. In addition, these athletes did not seek support from coaches as they feared that discussing their injuries with the coach might result in a loss of playing time or being labeled “damaged goods” (p. 287).

Unlike injured athletes, however, pregnant athletes must contend with cultural myths and assumptions about pregnancy and motherhood that can exacerbate their sense of isolation. Appleby (2004) found that some runners reported a sense of being “written off” by their running peers when they became pregnant, and one runner recounted a story in which a (childless) competitor was quoted in the media saying that a mother could never make the Olympic team. This sense of isolation and fear of being excluded or forgotten is also recognized in the research on pregnancy and the return to work. Lyness,
Thompson, Francesco, and Judiesch (1999) note that pregnant women are less valued in the workforce due to assumptions that they are no longer committed to their jobs and may not return to work after taking maternity leave. As a result, pregnant women in the workforce report feeling as if they gradually become invisible as their pregnancies progress, citing that they are left out of meetings, given less challenging projects, and are questioned about their commitment to returning to work after having the child (Lyness et al., 1999; Milward, 2006). The belief that mothers will be physically unable to return to competition and/or not motivated or committed enough to the sport to succeed may affect how they are treated by teammates and coaches and what kind of support they receive (or do not receive) upon their return.

Pregnant athletes also face very limited information regarding the safety of training, which can affect their confidence as well as their training habits. While there is much literature documenting the many benefits of physical activity and exercise for women, few research studies have focused on the specific benefits of physical activity for women during and after pregnancy and childbirth, and even fewer still on the effects of continued high intensity training among pregnant female athletes (Allred, 2000; Appleby, 2004; Densmore, 1997; Schnirring, 2002). The information about pregnancy and physical activity that is presented to women is generally cautionary. As discussed earlier, historically a woman’s reproductive capacity (or perhaps, reproductive duty) was cited as a legitimate reason to exclude women from sport and exercise. It was believed that physical overexertion would damage a woman’s delicate reproductive organs and therefore was not only a danger to her, but to her fertility and family (Wamsley & Pfister, 2005). Through the twentieth century, as more and more women participated in sport and
exercise with no adverse reproductive effects, the fear that sport participation would ruin the reproductive abilities of women has been largely rejected by the medical community.

Still, the idea that sport and exercise may be dangerous to the pregnant woman and the developing fetus persists. In the early 1990’s, conventional wisdom (as reflected in the guidelines suggested by the National Collegiate Athletic Association and the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology) held that while low-level or sub-maximal exercise could be safely tolerated by pregnant women, any sport/exercise that required sustained effort (according to the ACOG, more than 30 minutes) or maximal effort (a heart rate over 140 beats per minute) should be avoided due to the possibility of harm to the mother or baby (Cole, 1994; Densmore, 1997; Foley, 1998). These guidelines, however, did not reflect the abilities or needs of highly trained athletes, many of whom ignored them when they became pregnant and continued to train at high intensities (Foley, 1998). In the mid-nineties, the ACOG revised its guidelines for pre- and post-natal exercise to reflect the growing number of athletic women for whom “30 minutes is barely a warm up” (Densmore, 1997, p. 52). While sedentary women were encouraged to stick to the old guidelines, the ACOG acknowledged that athletic, fit pregnant women could exercise intensely and for longer periods of time, so long as they listened to their bodies and exercised within a range that felt comfortable for them, being careful not exhaust themselves (Densmore, 1997).

Most recently, in 2002 the ACOG revised its recommendations again, and for the first time acknowledged the benefits of exercise during pregnancy and encouraged all women, active or sedentary (except those with specific medical conditions that contraindicate exercise), to follow the same recommendations for non-pregnant adults.
and exercise moderately most, if not all, days of the week throughout pregnancy (Kelly, 2005; Schnirring, 2002). In addition, the new guidelines for active women and competitive athletes are more flexible, dropping the recommended target heart rate and instead listing symptoms that indicate that a woman should stop exercising or lower intensity, while emphasizing that pregnant athletes should be closely monitored by their physicians (Schnirring, 2002).

As new research becomes available and recommendations are revised, it is no wonder that coaches, athletes, and even physicians are often confused about what is safe, and pregnant athletes remain somewhat frustrated by unclear and/or conservative guidelines (Allred, 2000; Appleby, 2004; Beilock et al., 2001). Of importance to athletes, however, is that evidence suggests that exercising throughout pregnancy and maintaining at least moderate fitness levels can make the return to training following childbirth quicker and easier (Allred, 2000; Foley, 1998). In addition, research into the return to sport after both injury and pregnancy points to the importance of the athlete's sense of self efficacy in facilitating a successful recovery and return (Beilock et al., 2001; Gutkind, 2004; Hagger, Chatzisarantis, Griffin, & Thatcher, 2005; Podlong & Eklund, 2005). The injury literature illustrates that the information the athlete receives about the injury, the prognosis for recovery, and the rehabilitation process has a profound effect on the athlete’s mood, outlook, and self efficacy (Bone & Fry, 2006; Robbins & Rosenfeld, 2002; Tracey, 2003; Udry, Gould, Bridges, & Tuffey, 1997). In light of this, the lack of research, accurate information, and/or support, especially from coaches and physicians, may impact a pregnant athlete's self efficacy and her ability to train safely and without unnecessary worry.
Pregnancy and childbirth bring about a myriad of physical and lifestyle changes that will no doubt affect an athlete’s ability to train and perform at an elite level. It is essential to remember, however, that athletes are not merely bodies, and that new mother athletes are not just off the injured list, back in performance mode once the physical rehabilitation is complete. Becoming a parent marks a profound life transition that can produce changes in identity, values, priorities, and relationships, and while this transition is almost universal, the experience is enormously varied, diverse, and complex (Feeney, Hohaus, Noller, & Alexander, 2001; Glade, Bean & Vera, 2005; Woollett & Parr, 1997). Research into the transition to first time parenthood has found that the period from first contemplating having a child through the first year of parenthood to be a time of “disequilibrium and reorganization” (Glade et al., 2005, p.321), as parents struggle to adjust to personal changes such as roles (both within and outside of the family), self-perception, self efficacy, and values, as well as practical ones, like employment, economic status, and time.

While much of the literature has focused on stressors or clinical issues, such as post-partum depression, it is important to note that the transition into parenthood is complex, multifaceted, and sometimes contradictory. Demo and Cox (2000) note that “although early writing on the transition to parenthood focused on the ‘crisis’ of parenthood for young couples, recent longitudinal studies have focused on understanding the variability in couples’ adjustment to parenthood” (p. 877). For example, in a study of first time parents in the U.K., Woollett and Parr (1997) found a diversity of experiences, even within a relatively homogeneous sample; some finding the postnatal adjust period to
be positive and easier than expected, while others found it to be very stressful. Many of the participants offered contradictory accounts of the experience, expressing both positive and negative feelings and experiences. This sentiment is evident throughout Naomi Wolf’s book detailing her own transition into motherhood, and she writes, “new motherhood can seem at once a total joy and a devastating experience of sliding downward” (p. 8).

In general, research has shown that the birth of the first child results in an initial disruption of the family, and declines in mood and in satisfaction with the marital relationship, but that most families report a gradual improvement and return to pre parenthood levels of satisfaction or better within the first year. (Demo & Cox, 2000; Harwood, McLean, & Durkin, 2007; Feeney et al., 2001; Wollett & Par, 1997). Despite the initial upheaval that a new baby can cause, in general, most families adjust well to new parenthood, and both men and women are positive about parenthood (Demo & Cox, 2000; Feeney et al, 2001; Feldman, Sussman, & Zigler, 2004; Woollett & Parr, 1997).

The majority of the women in Woollett and Parr’s study (1997) reported that adjusting to motherhood was easier than they had expected it to be, that they felt confident and were coping well, and almost all said that they enjoyed their babies. Similarly, the new mothers interviewed by Harwood et al. (2007) reported feeling pleasantly surprised by how much they enjoyed parenting. Finally, in a study of the transition to parenthood, Feeney et al. (2001) found that all parents expressed joy with their babies, and noted that while the parents in their study could point to specific aspects of parenting that they enjoyed, such as interacting with the baby, watching him/her reach developmental milestones, and successfully caring for the baby (e.g., being able to soothe the baby
quickly, satisfying needs), the majority reported their enjoyment in more general terms – that they found joy in “just [the baby’s] whole being” or “just his existence” (p. 101).

Despite the generally positive experiences associated with new parenthood, the transition can be a struggle as well. As noted earlier, the majority of research in to psychological difficulty during this time has focused on post-partum depression, and while the importance of such research should not be undervalued, it is also important to remember that the transition to parenthood can be difficult even in the absence of pathology. The intensive, round-the-clock care that an infant requires leads to fatigue and exhaustion, which can exacerbate feelings of depression and anxiety (Feeney et al., 2001; Glade et al., 2005; Wolf, 2003). In fact, lack of sleep is the most common problem discussed by new parents (Feeney et al., 2001). As one mother described, “it’s being constantly tired. Just permanently. I mean, you know, you just never catch up” (in Feeney et al., 2001, p. 91). This exhaustion also affects women’s ability to recover physically from childbirth, especially for those who had had surgical births (Wolf, 2003; Woollett & Parr, 1997). One mother interviewed by Woollett and Parr (1997) who had had a C-section noted, “…I was in a lot of pain for five weeks and that made caring for a newborn very hard. I think I would have been less depressed if I could have recovered from the Caesarean properly, rested for a few weeks first” (¶ 37).

New parents can also feel a sense of awkwardness with their babies and of being overwhelmed by the new responsibility of taking care of a newborn, remarking that they are often unsure of what to do and are anxious about making mistakes (Feeney et al., 2001; Woollett & Parr, 1997). Parents report anxiety and frustration when they have difficulty soothing their infants or when they experience problems with feeding or
sleeping. In addition, many women report feeling somewhat disconnected from their babies at first, and become anxious about bonding with their infants (Feeney et al., 2001; Woollett & Parr, 1997; Wolf, 2003). These fears are gradually assuaged as parents get to know their babies and gain experience caring for them. New parents refer to caring for their infants as a learning experience (Woollett & Parr, 1997) and comment that parenthood involves a “very steep learning curve” (Feeney et al., 2001, p. 93). In the beginning, however, this can lead to decreases in confidence and self esteem (Glade et al., 2005).

When women have negative experiences with new motherhood, even the “normal” difficulties such as fatigue and anxiety, distress can be compounded by unrealistic expectations that motherhood should be easy and/or natural. For example, Woollett and Parr (1997) and Feeney et al. (2001) both found that women described bonding with their babies to be a long, drawn-out process, not the instant attachment they had expected, and therefore wondered if there was something wrong. Similarly, some women in both studies had difficulty with breastfeeding, and felt discouraged that it did not come naturally. Contemporary sociologists point to the social construction of motherhood as natural and effortless, reinforced through popular media and parenting books and classes, as providing little in the way of adequately preparing women for the reality of new motherhood (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Wolf, 2003; Woollett & Parr, 1997). As Wolf points out, “our culture…operates under the misconception that the woman who has just given birth will automatically know how to be a mother and will naturally have enough left in her, after the crucible of birth, to give her all without replenishment” (p.221). When the reality does not live up to the expectations, women
have a more difficult time adjusting and tend to blame themselves for the difficulties they experience (Harwood et al., 2007; Wolf, 2003; Woollett & Parr, 1997). Thus, confidence and self esteem can suffer, as women are culturally encouraged “to treat any problems they experience as mothers as individual pathology rather than as resulting from the contradictory and overwhelming nature of caring for a small baby” (Woollett & Parr, 1997, ¶ 88).

**The Comeback: Returning to Training Post-partum**

In her interviews with mother-athletes, Allred (2000) notes that “almost all agreed that coming back from childbirth was harder than they had thought it would be” (p. 100), and several athletes in her book described feeling depressed and frustrated as they returned to training with fitness levels well below what they were used to. The runners in Appleby’s study (2004) described returning to training post partum as “starting from scratch” (p.82), and reported feeling slow, having to relearn their technique, and feeling disappointed and frustrated with their initial post-partum physical ability (or perceived lack there of). Drawing from her own experience as a mother training for the Olympic bobsledding team, Allred (2000) writes, “perhaps the only downside to being mother-athletes is that we are used to having bodies that respond quickly, easily. For us, the now-delayed progress of physical fitness is frustrating” (p. 106). Part of this frustration stems from the lack of accurate information noted earlier, as well as the lack of role models. Many new mothers return to training without any clear idea of what to expect, which makes it difficult to set realistic goals and to plan comeback strategies (Allred, 2000; Appleby, 2004). Marathon runner Joy Smith stated:
I anticipated having my baby and getting back on the road a week later - but I didn't. I did nothing for four weeks. I didn't have the desire to go out. I realized I had to start over from ground zero, with walking and running...I probably shouldn't have set such an aggressive goal [of competing eight months after giving birth]. But I hadn't expected to have lost so much in such a short period of time. I didn't really think that I'd be starting over. And reality struck..... You really do have to go through that time of reconditioning and reawakening. I found it very difficult. (in Foley, 1998, ¶ 22, 23)

After having her first child in 2000, WUSA Soccer player Danielle Fotopoulous found herself on the bench at the beginning of the 2001 season. As a founding member of the professional league and member of the 1999 national team, this proved to be extremely frustrating and she remarked in an interview, “Nobody likes being a sub. But you do what you can to be on the team and play” (in Falcone-Rupp, 2001, p. 19). (She then went on to become one of the highest scorers of the season).

Again, these frustrations are similar to those expressed by injured athletes, who, upon return to training, report feeling as though they are playing catch up and struggle to regain pre-injury levels of fitness and technical skill quickly (Podlong & Eklund, 2005; Tracey, 2003). In fact, Wiese-Bjornstal et al. (1998) note that high level athletes are an especially impatient group when it comes to recovery and rehabilitation. Injured athletes also often compare themselves to their non-injured peers, and this negative social comparison can heighten anxiety about performance as they ease back into training (Tracey, 2003). Finally, injured athletes can feel as if they have to prove themselves to their teams and coaches as they come back, and as mentioned earlier, worry that their injury will have a lasting effect on their evaluation (Udry, Gould, Bridges, & Tuffey 1997; Tracey, 2003).
Women returning to the workplace after having a child report similar feelings, as they feel that they must prove to their peers and superiors that they remain committed to their jobs and re-establish their value as employees; some express feeling as though they are starting over from scratch as well (Millward, 2006). What is unique to mothers returning to work is they are attempting to prove their commitment to work while at the same time learning to negotiate workplace boundaries in order to meet their new family responsibilities and priorities (Feldman et al., 2004; Millward, 2006). This challenge can lead new mothers to feel lacking on both ends - feeling guilty about not being able to commit fully to work or to parenting (McMahon, 1995; Millward, 2006).

While pregnancy and the post-partum return to training offer significant challenges to athletes, it is important to remember that competitive athletes are a resilient group, and despite frustrations, generally enjoy the athletic comeback. These women are able to frame the difficulties of recovery/return to sport as a positive challenge and opportunity to learn about themselves, both as athletes and individuals (Allred, 2000; Appleby, 2004). Mothering athletes stated that pregnancy and new motherhood forced them to take time off from training and ease back in, which allowed them to heal injuries and avoid overtraining (Allred, 2000; Appleby, 2004; Foley, 1998). Runner Trina Painter noted,

The time off allowed me to mentally, physically and emotionally get rested up and ready to go again…The Olympic Trials year [1996] was really stressful, and my body just kind of needed a break all around. It allowed me to heal up any nagging injuries and get ready to compete again.” (in Foley, 1998, ¶ 16)

Athletes also discuss enjoying the challenge of working back from pregnancy, and described feeling physically stronger and mentally tougher after having children
One runner stated, “I loved getting back in shape. It was a fun challenge…” (in Appleby, 2004, p.76), another was “pleasantly surprised” by her post-partum performance (p. 77), and still another said that “both times [after having children] I felt like I came back stronger when I actually started training and feeling stronger and mentally tougher after going through childbirth” (p. 77). Swimmer Anna Pettis Scott described herself as more mature, smarter about training, and mentally tougher after having her son (Foley, 1998). Further, preparing for pregnancy and childbirth gave some athletes an increased knowledge about their bodies, including proper nutrition and alternative training methods, which they were then able to bring into their post-partum athletic training (Allred, 2000).

This has been found to be significant in the injury literature as well, which has shown that when looking back on their recovery and return to sport, athletes describe their experiences with injury as more positive than negative (Quackenbush & Crossman, 1994; Tracey, 2003; Udry, Gould, Bridges, & Beck 1997; Wiese-Bjornstal, Smith, Shaffer, & Morrey, 1998). Athletes report using the rehabilitation process to challenge themselves and many see this time as an opportunity to overcome adversity, learn about themselves, learn more about their bodies, physical conditioning, and sport technique, and to rest and develop interests outside of sport (Quackenbush & Crossman, 1994; Tracey, 2003; Udry, Gould, Bridges, & Beck, 1997). Injured athletes are often able to look back at their comebacks with pride and report feeling stronger (both physically and mentally), more mature and patient, confident that they can overcome obstacles, and possessing a new perspective – with increased motivation and a greater appreciation for

Social Support and the Return to Training

The importance of having social support during pregnancy, the transition to parenthood, and the return to sport cannot be understated, as social support has been found to be a crucial factor in mediating these life and career transitions. As would be expected, research into the transition to parenthood and mothers employed outside of the home show that a positive marital relationship and support of the father, both emotionally and physically (in taking on household and parenting responsibilities), lead to less maternal depression and stress, a more positive adjustment to parenthood for both parents, and a more positive adjustment back to work (Demo & Cox, 2000; Feeney et al., 2001; Feldman et al., 2004; Glade et al., 2005; Lyness et al., 1999; Ozer, 1995; Silverstein, 1991). In fact, Feldman et al. (2004) cite the father’s emotional and physical support of his wife as the most important influence on her adjustment back to work. Extended family support is important as well, as new parents often rely on family members for emotional support and practical help, such as assistance with child care and household responsibilities as pregnancy progresses and while the new parents are adjusting to life with a baby (Feeney et al., 2004).

Similarly, social support has been found to be extremely important in the rehabilitation of injured athletes (Gutkind, 2004; Tracey, 2003; Udry, Gould, Bridges, & Beck 1997; Udry, Gould, Bridges, & Tuffey 1997). Injured athletes rely heavily on family and friends for support and encouragement through the emotional ups and downs of rehabilitation as well as some of the practical issues such as housing, transportation,
help with daily activities (for those who are physically disabled by their injuries), keeping
track of appointments, and finances (Udry, Gould, Bridges, and Tuffey, 1997). As
mentioned earlier, injured athletes often feel isolated from the social network of the sport
organization, thus family and close friends outside of sport are important sources of both
emotional and physical support. Family and friends outside of the sport environment can
help the athlete maintain a positive and balanced perspective as well.

Pregnant and mothering athletes also express the importance of seeking support
from other athletes with children. As mentioned earlier, advice for pregnant athletes can
be confusing and contradictory, so pregnant athletes often look to those who have “been
there” for advice. For example, professional and Olympic soccer players Carla Overbeck
and Joy Fawcett served as role models for Danielle Fotopoulos, convincing her that it
was possible to continue her athletic career after having children (Falcone-Rupp, 2001).
Fotopoulos noted, “If I ever had a question about anything, I could call them. I was
always asking them, ‘how long can I run?’ and they’d tell me, ‘You can keep going – just
listen to your body’” (in Falcone-Rupp, 2001, p. 19). Appleby (2004) found that the
runners she interviewed who knew and/or trained with other mothers felt inspired and
supported by them, and emphasized the importance of these social networks.

The importance of real-life role models and finding support in similarly-situated
individuals is reinforced in other research as well. New parents are able to find great
support in other new parents, and utilize each other to formulate realistic expectations of
parenthood, as well as for emotional support, advice, and affirmation of experiences
(Feeney et al., 2001; Glade et al., 2005). Glade et al. suggest that this gives parents
realistic social comparisons, and they found that new parents who had support from other
first-time parents exhibited less maternal depression, better marital relationships, better
sensitivity to their babies, and rated themselves as more confident in their parenting
skills. Pregnant working women and mothers returning to work also seek out role models
within their places of employment for advice and validation; doing so helps returning
mothers to feel included and eases their reintegration into the organization (Millward, 2006).
Similarly, athletes who are recovering from injury find support and
encouragement from other injured athletes, as well as those who have had successful
recoveries from injury. Those who had already recovered from injuries were utilized as
role models and sources of information and reassurance, as knowing what to expect was
important in coping with anxiety and the uncertainty of recovery, while athletes who
were injured and in rehab together motivated and pushed each other to succeed (Tracey,

As important as the support of other similarly-situated athletes is, many
pregnant/mothering athletes find these role models difficult to find. Throughout Allred’s
book (2000), athletes discuss the difficulty of training and competing through their
pregnancies and after having children in absence of positive role models, accurate
information, and realistic expectations. Without role models, some put off having
children altogether until their athletic careers were over, while others assumed that
pregnancy would end their sports involvement. Those who returned to sport after their
pregnancies often reported feeling alone. Some of the runners in Appleby’s 2004 study
also discussed how difficult it was to train after pregnancy and to have a realistic idea of
what to expect when they did not know any other training mothers. One runner
explained:
I was one of the first people in my peer group to have a baby in the running community so the guys and the girls, a lot of them just really didn’t even know what that meant. And it wasn’t lack of support but they just had no concept of what it meant to bring a baby to a race or what I meant that I needed to go home on Saturday immediately following the race instead of staying around and partying and enjoying the experience. (p. 102)

Clearly, there is a need for realistic role models for mother-athletes, and for mother-athletes to tell their stories and share information. As Allred (2000) put it:

…we need a club for mother-athletes, a means of communication between us….We need answers to all those questions that run through our minds. When is the best time for me to get pregnant? Can I still work out?... And later, who will watch the baby while I’m training or competing? Is this good for the baby? Am I a good mother? Why am I doing this? (p.9-10)

In light of this, one goal of this research is provide a forum for these discussions, as well as successful role models for other athletes combining motherhood and sport.

The Integration: Training, Competing, and the Work of Motherhood

The intense training schedules of elite athletes are notoriously time consuming, and training camps, team try-outs, and competition schedules can take athletes away from home for weeks or even months at a time. Returning to such an intense schedule while caring for an infant or pre-school child poses remarkable challenges for mothering athletes. On the practical end, research shows that mothers name the lack of time, energy, and adequate child care as primary barriers to continued sport participation after having children (Beilock et al., 2001). Elite athletes who successfully continue their careers find themselves altering their training patterns in order to accommodate their new, amazingly time-consuming responsibilities as mothers, and often find traveling and competing a logistical nightmare (Appleby, 2004; Allred, 2000; Beilock et al. 2001; Johns & Farrow, 1996).
On a daily basis, a new mother must organize her training schedule around the baby’s feeding and sleeping routine, while also taking into account what childcare is available. Olympic bobsledder Alexandra Powe Allred notes:

Unlike my teammates (only one of whom was also a mother), I had to consider so many factors to be able to get any training done: the babies’ moods, baby-sitting (if possible), feeding time, nap time, dinnertime, bedtime. …I was always making up for what seemed like lost ground, and, mostly, I was trying to stay sane. (Allred, 2000 p.3-4)

One athlete in Appleby’s 2004 study of elite track athletes described running only when her baby was sleeping and her husband was home, usually early in the morning or in the evening, just before dark. Another bought a treadmill so that she could run at home while her child napped. Olympic swimmer Angel Marino swam for two hours at a time (instead of her usual five or six hour workout) in order to fit her training into her son’s three hour feeding schedule, while Olympic soccer team member Joy Fawcett would tote her daughter along to practices where her 21 “Aunts” would take turns playing with her (Allred, 2000). Similarly, “Jane,” a world-ranked badminton player profiled by Johns and Farrow (1996) either brought her young son to her training site or found alternate care for him:

Graham was instilled in a baby carrying seat and taken everywhere Jane went. In the gym, he was put at the side of the court when she played or skipped, and on weekends, she dropped him off at her mom’s before she went to the club. (p. 90)

Traveling and competing pose similar challenges to the mothering athlete. Studies of elite athletes reveal that hectic competition schedules and poorly planned travel arrangements are major sources of stress, especially at the Olympic Games (Fletcher & Hanton, 2003; Gould et al., 1999; Greenleaf et al., 2001). In fact, Haberl and Peterson
(2006) call the Olympics “the most logistically challenging event in sports, forcing athletes and coaches to engage in an unaccustomed level of planning to be functional, much less successful” (p. 28). Adding a baby only makes the logistics more challenging. Joy Fawcett was preparing for a trip to Beijing during the 1994 World Cup tour when her baby was only three weeks old, and was overwhelmed with the task of traveling with an infant:

When she packed up all the baby formula and food, diapers, portable crib, stroller, high chair, car seat, clothing, and toys, and looked at the pile in the middle of her living room, she tearfully realized that she was only kidding herself. (Allred, 2003, p. 144)

One runner, who was also a coach, described a meet in the following way:

You know I was coaching meets with [my daughter] in my backpack for six hours...back and forth, back and forth at an indoor meet. Put the baby down for a nap, come back and run my own race, qualify for nationals. You know all in one Saturday. (in Appleby, 2004, p. 102)

Another runner described having her child care plans thrown off because of a last-minute change in the competition schedule (Appleby, 2004). Canadian Olympic curler Glennys Bakker competed in the Olympic trials when her daughter was four months old and reportedly nursed her baby at the rink in between matches, while Allred brought her breast pump to competitions and training camps in order to express her milk while she was away from her daughter (Allred, 2000; Kimura, 2006).

Despite the struggles that mothering athletes experience juggling family and training, many find that their training and competing improves after having children. Mothering athletes discuss that because of the time constraints they feel, they become much more focused and efficient in their training (Allred, 2000; Appleby, 2004; Pendersen, 2001). These women must train for quality rather than quantity. Pendersen
(2001) also notes that because mothering athletes must adjust their training, yet have few role models and little guidance, they are more willing to scrutinize and question “traditional” training regimens and experiment with new things, often devising more effective training methods. Others find that they are more relaxed and flexible with their training. Where before children missing a training session would seem unthinkable, the unpredictable nature of parenting requires a more “roll with the punches” attitude. As distance runner Trina Painter explained,

Running is still a very serious and important part of my life, and I’m going to do the best that I can, but instead of freaking out that I didn’t get a run in, I just go with the flow. The other day I was trying to do two runs, and I couldn’t because Hannah [her one year old daughter] got sick, and I had to take her to the doctor. Some things are more important right now. (in Foley, 1998, ¶ 15)

A mother-athlete’s ability to successfully integrate her parenting and athletic responsibilities also hinges on the willingness and ability of athletic organizations to recognize and support her needs. This includes physical considerations, such as safe, child-friendly spaces and convenient access to child care, as well as a supportive culture. As has been often sited, the ability to find quality, affordable child care is crucial to a mother’s successful return to work, as well as to her well-being (Barrow, 1999; Crittenden, 2001; Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Feldman et al., 1999). Further, studies show that mothers who work in organizations that offer longer maternity leave, more flexible work schedules, positive managerial support, and who do not experience negative consequences for utilizing family benefits (indicating a supportive organizational culture) experience less depression and stress and have more positive adjustments back to work (Feldman et al., 2004; Lyness et al., 1999).
In general, sport and leisure spaces tend to be organized and dominated by men, with little consideration for the necessity of child-friendly spaces and childcare facilities (Aitchison, 2003; Cole, 1994; Puing, 2001). While the participation of women as athletes has increased, women hold very few positions in coaching and administration at all levels of sport, and therefore have little voice in the direction of their sports’ development; feminist scholars point out that because women in administrative positions are scarce, the unique needs of women are often overlooked (Hall, 1996; Sage, 1996; Rintalta & Bishop, 1997). While the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has been taking steps toward gender equity, women currently make up approximately 13% of the IOC membership, and hold only one seat on the Executive Board (International Olympic Committee). Even within women’s sporting organizations, the majority of organizational leadership and coaching positions are held by men, which feminist critics argue has resulted in an emphasis on men’s needs and values (Dworkin & Messner, 2002). This leaves little understanding for the needs of women in sport and allows for little accommodation of families within training and competition facilities.

This is an area, however, where mother-athletes are shaping the nature of sport and stimulating organizational changes. Many fitness facilities now include drop in babysitting for little or no extra cost, and those that are part of larger community centers, like YMCAs and JCCs, offer early childhood education and youth athletic programs. While these gyms are not sport-specific training centers, they do offer a space for training and general conditioning that recognizes the importance of on-site child care for families. Some professional organizations are offering support to mother-athletes as well. For example, the Ladies’ Professional Golf Association (LPGA) provides childcare for
players at all tournaments, allowing players to bring their children on the tour with them, and in 1999, the U.S. Soccer Federation budgeted $50,000 for child care services for its female players and offered paid maternity leave (Allred, 2000; Caparez, 2000; Steptoe, 1990). Still, such accommodations for athletes are more the exception than the rule. The LPGA is a high profile organization, which began its child care service in part through a sponsorship deal with the KinderCare child care corporation (sponsorship for the Child Development Center is currently provided by Smucker’s). Aside from a few athletic stars and a surge of publicity every four years, many Olympic sports are not as commercially popular and their governing bodies struggle financially. Child care may seem like a luxury that they simply cannot afford.

Still, it is imperative to consider the manner in which the daily work of child care and other family responsibilities affect women’s participation in competitive sport. Many mothering athletes were acutely aware that juggling child care and training and competition schedules impacted their training in a way that did not affect their male counterparts. Sheryl Swoopes, a three time Olympic basketball player commented, “No one asks the guys [who is taking care of their kids when they are on the road] because they figure they have a wife at home to do it” (in Allred, 2000, p.151). Johns and Farrow (1996) compared the family and sport experiences of a male and female elite athlete, finding a marked difference in how each combined family and sport obligations. “Greg” enjoyed the full support of his family and friends, and even though his wife was working full time to support the family financially while he focused on his athletic career, it was she who arranged for their son to attend day care. “Jane” on the other hand, did not have full time child care (even though the family was rather affluent) and, as mentioned
earlier, trained with her son on the sidelines. Similarly, Olympic race walker Michelle Rohl took her children with her when she trained because her husband, also an elite race walker (though not an Olympian), found caring for their children while training to be “too much of a distraction” (Allred, 2000, p. 153). In short, while most mothering athletes find their husbands and families supportive, the ultimate responsibility for the care of the children falls disproportionally to the mother. Therefore, the mother-athletes must carefully arrange training and competing around the needs of their children, while father-athletes are usually relieved of their familial responsibilities.

This parallels research into the adjustment to parenthood and the post-partum return to work outside of the world of sport. Researchers note that before the birth of a first child, most couples divide household labor in a generally egalitarian manner, but once the baby arrives, the division of labor falls along traditional gender lines, with the majority of child care and housework being done by the mother. This gendered division of labor continues even when both parents work outside the home (Feldman et al., 2004; Fox, 2001; Glade et al., 2005; Hays, 1996; Woolett & Parr, 1997). Initially, infant care can be very mother-centered, especially when a mother is breastfeeding and therefore must remain physically close and available to the infant (McMahon, 1995). In addition, it is far more common and accepted for women to take extended maternity leave from work than for men take paternity leave from their jobs, a result of both cultural and organizational factors (McMahon, 1995; Hays, 1996.) This initial establishment of mother as primary caretaker of the infant tends to remain intact, even as children become more independent and when/if the mother returns to work outside of the home.
Feminist scholars also point to the assumption that a woman’s time in general is more flexible or able to be manipulated than a man’s. In a study of working mothers in Sweden, Elvin-Nowak and Thompson (2001) found that mothers tended to adjust their work schedules to meet the needs of the children, while father’s work schedules were considered rigid. They write,

Many studies have focused on women’s balancing act in everyday life, where the goal is to avoid conflicts between family members as well as to organize life in the best possible way for the child. These studies show that women’s activities and time…can be manipulated according to the needs and desires of other family members….The father’s activities and time seem to be understood as less negotiable than the mother’s. (p. 421-422)

Wolf (2003) agrees, stating that when families strive for “balance” in their lives, “that ‘balance’ is usually structured around a bottom line that the woman’s life is the source of flexibility and the man’s job cannot be touched” (p. 263). Similar findings have been reported in the leisure literature, which describes mothers’ leisure time and activities as subordinate to the needs of the family. Bialeschki (2001) writes,

The demands of dependant children…are the responsibility of females rather than males. The effect of this role expectation on women’s leisure is that women become more involved in the family domain and increasingly bound to children’s activities; their male counterparts tend to continue to pursue their individual leisure pursuits outside the confines of parental role… (p. 67)

Since these practical issues of coordinating training, travel, and competition schedules with child care responsibilities are unique to female athletes, women will not enjoy equal participation in elite athletics until they can be resolved. It is therefore one goal of this research to bring these issues to the forefront of our conversations about sport, organizations, and sport spaces. In addition, I intend to explore exactly what kind of assistance and support mothering athletes are looking for from both their informal
sport communities and formal organizations, in order to give voice to and share their concerns and suggestions.

The Olympic Experience

*The Importance of the Olympic Games*

Beginning in the 1980s and continuing today, there has been a call for the International Olympic Committee to actively support and encourage women’s participation in sport and in the Olympic movement by funding education and training for women athletes, coaches, and administrators, including more women in policy decisions, mentoring women, and using its influence to promote women’s sport through media and public relations (Chase, 1992; Kulka, 1993; Rintala & Bischoff, 1997). While many argue that more needs to be done in order to ensure equal participation by women in the Olympic Movement, especially in leadership positions within the IOC, National Olympic Committees, and International Sports Federations, the Olympic Games is one of the few places in the United States where women’s athletic participation is close to reaching parity with men’s. The IOC has adopted a number of initiatives aimed at increasing women’s representation at the Olympic Games with some success, as there have been steady increases in women’s participation. Most recently, women’s events made up 44.9% of the 2004 Summer Olympics program (with women competing in the same number of team sports as men), and women made up 40.7% of athletes. Statistics of the actual number of women participating in 2006 Winter Olympics are not yet available, however, 40 of the 84 events on the program, almost half, were women’s events (including 3 mixed events) (IOC, 2006).
Media coverage of women’s and men’s athletics in the United States is also more equitable in both quantity and quality during the Olympic Games. Eastman and Billings (1999) reported that 44%, 49%, and 40% of prime time Olympic coverage was devoted to women’s events in 1994, 1996, and 1998, respectively. While Olympic coverage still tends to follow gender stereotypes (devoting more coverage to traditionally feminine or aesthetic sports), given that outside of the Olympic Games coverage of women’s sporting events is almost non-existent, these percentages are quite noteworthy. In addition, while maintaining many reservations about the media’s framing of women athletes, researches have found qualitative improvements in Olympic coverage as well. In their analysis of coverage of the 1994, 1996, and 1998 Olympics, Eastman and Billings commented that “overall, there appeared to be a widespread effort to couch women’s achievements in the same language that would be used for men, and to attribute winning and losing to the same criteria” (p. 164). Similarly, Higgs, Weiller, and Martin (2003) reported that in 1996, “narrative analysis revealed a solid focus on the athleticism of the female athlete...” (p. 64). The importance of positive media coverage of women’s athletic events in general, and women’s Olympic participation in particular, cannot be undervalued. As Eastman and Billings note, “televising women athletes has the potential for drastically altering the perception of women in all forms of society” (p.145-146).

Inclusion of women’s sport in the Olympic Games, and the publicity that the Olympics generates, have had positive effects in the participation of girls and women in sport at all levels. One recent example is that of women’s ice hockey, which enjoyed intense public interest and support in the build up to its first appearance at the Olympic Games in 1998. While studying women’s ice hockey during this time period, Theberge...
(2002) found, “The impact of Olympic status on women’s hockey has been profound…players and coaches frequently remarked on the legitimacy that Olympic status conferred on their sport and on them as participants” (p. 295). Eastman and Billings (1999) argue that “what happens at the Olympic level may be ammunition in the push toward gender equity in American college sports under Title IX and may help in the push to form professional leagues for women athletes” (p. 145). Indeed, coinciding with women’s ice hockey’s Olympic status was the expansion of university hockey programs for women in North America, and the development of elite-level (though not professional) leagues for women (Theberge, 2002).

Given that the Olympic Games has the ability to focus attention and bestow “legitimacy” on its sports and events, and is such a powerful international symbol of athletic achievement, one goal of this research is to challenge the hegemonic definitions of “mother” and “athlete” (and the notion that the two do not mix) by telling the stories of mothering Olympians and drawing attention to their experiences. In addition, the Olympic Movement has a unique opportunity, and perhaps responsibility, to create a sporting space and event that values women’s experiences and encourages their participation. By investigating the experiences of mothering athletes at the Olympics it is hoped that organizations like the IOC, National Olympic Committees, and International Sport Federations will better understand the athletes that they serve and be in a better position to offer support and mentoring to women athletes who wish to combine their athletic careers and families.
Sport Psychology Research into Olympic Performance

The Olympic Games are considered by many in the sporting world as the premier sporting event. It is unmatched in size and scope, and is considered not only an athletic competition, but a global cultural event as well (Haberl & Peterson, 2006). For the Olympic athlete, the Games are often the culmination of his or her sport career, and as Haberl and Peterson note, “for some it is truly a once in a lifetime chance” (p. 29). It is no wonder, then, that optimizing Olympic performance has been a topic of much interest within the sport psychology community. Sport psychologists have researched both positive and negative factors affecting athlete performance (for example, Gould et al., 1999; Greenleaf et al., 2001; Orlick & Partington, 1988; Woodman & Hardy, 2001), factors affecting coaching effectiveness at the Olympics (Gould et al., 2002), and the provision of sport psychology services to Olympic athletes and at the Olympic Games (Haberl & Peterson, 2006; Sullivan & Nashman, 1998).

While helpful in understanding important determinants of Olympic performance, these studies tended to be rather broad and failed to examine many performance factors in detail, especially factors involving families. They focused on performance factors such as mental and physical preparation, coach and teammate interaction, and organizational stressors such as team selection, finances, and travel/housing arrangements. Family and relationship issues were noted in all studies as both positive and negative factors, yet few discussed what “family issues” actually included. Of importance to the present study is that previous research focused on the effect of parents (and to a lesser extent, spouses) on the athlete’s performance, and none included factors involving the athlete’s children. While this is understandable given the small sample sizes utilized and the small number
of parent-athletes at the Games, it leaves the experiences of mothering athletes out of the research literature.

While positive family support was emphasized as an important factor in successful performance, research into Olympic performance factors tends to focus on the negative effects of family involvement, including increased pressure from family members to perform well, being distracted by family members’ needs during the Games (e.g., getting tickets, spending time with family, answering questions), and increased interest from extended family (Gould et al., 1999; Gould et al., 2002; Greenleaf et al., 2001; Haberl & Peterson, 2006). Gould et al. (1999) noted that teams who were more successful had developed plans for educating family members about the demands of the Olympic Games and how to best to support the athlete. In addition, these teams positioned support staff as “buffers” between athletes and their families, keeping families informed of progress and changes, securing tickets, and answering questions so as not to distract the athlete. While these interventions were successful and no doubt helped the athletes remain relaxed and focused, they may not be appropriate for mother-athletes at the Games.

The conceptualization of family members as distractions may or may not be relevant to mothers who are competing. It is important to note that previous studies focused on how parents affected their children’s performance, and the way a young adult athlete feels about the presence of his/her parents may differ from the way a mother-athlete feels about her child’s presence. On one hand, as mentioned earlier, traveling and training with young children in tow can be very stressful, and parent-athletes may be distracted by coordinating extra travel, housing, and child care when they are at the
Games. One the other hand, despite the difficulties, anecdotes suggest that many mother-athletes enjoy having their children with them, and find that their children provide them with inspiration and motivation. Olympic racewalker Michelle Rohl discussed the joy she felt having her children at the 1996 Olympic Games with her, commenting, “Hearing a chorus of ‘Go Mommy!’ is the greatest inspiration any athlete can ask for as she competes in the race of her life” (in Allred, 2000, p. 203). Mothering athletes also discuss finding special meaning in being able to share such an important moment in their lives with their children. When curler Glennys Bakker’s team won the Canadian Olympic trials in 2005, she brought her then-infant daughter up on the podium with her, stating, “For me it was fitting because she’s been there right from the beginning and she’s been through this whole process…” (in Kimura, 2006, ¶ 19).

In addition, mothering athletes often report that having children helps them to keep a more balanced perspective, resulting in more enjoyment and less anxiety when competing (Allred, 2000; Appleby, 2004; Kimura, 2006). This cannot be undervalued as athletes report that maintaining a healthy perspective on competition and balancing work and fun was essential to performing well at the Olympics (Gould et al., 1999; Gould et al., 2002; Greenleaf et al., 2001). In a broad sense, motherhood gives serious athletes a new and meaningful aspect of identity that helps to balance the intense and sometimes exclusive focus on athletics and eases the pressure that comes from an unbalanced life (Allred, 2000; Appleby, 2004). At the competition site, children serve as a reminder of that perspective, and interacting with a young child oblivious to the magnitude of the Games can bring welcome relief from the Olympic pressure-cooker (Allred, 2000; Kimura, 2006; Haberl & Peterson, 2006). It may be that optimal support for mothers at
the Games would include assistance with family responsibilities and child care, but not necessarily separation from children and family. Further research into the experiences of mothers at the Games is necessary in order to flesh out these needs and preferences.

In conclusion, pregnancy, childbirth, and parenthood have profound effects on elite athletes and their sport careers. While physically and emotionally challenging, motherhood can also result in improved performance, renewed motivation and commitment, and a new sense of enjoyment and perspective both in and out of sport. Pregnancy at the post-natal return to training is similar to the rehabilitation of sport injury, in that the pregnant/new mother athletes must take some time away from training and then work back to previous levels of fitness and skill. They also may face some of the same psychosocial challenges such as isolation from teammates and other sources of support, decreases in confidence and self efficacy, and anxiety and depression. The application of the injury literature to pregnant/new mother athletes is somewhat limited, however, as pregnancy can be planned for, and is often anticipated with great joy. Further, the return from injury does not adequately address the profound life changes that new parenthood brings about. Research on the transition to parenthood and return to work after pregnancy and childbirth is helpful in understanding the challenges of navigating this life transition and of integrating work and family responsibilities, as well as cultural and organizational biases that often compound these challenges. What is lacking here, however, is the analysis of the demands of elite level athletics and the specific cultural and organizational characteristics of sport. By investigating the experiences of mother-athletes at the Olympic Games, it is hoped that this study will illuminate such issues and
equip sport psychologists, coaches, and support staff with the knowledge to support and encourage mothers in elite level sport.
The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of female Olympic athletes who were, at the time of their Olympic participation, the mothers of children under the age of six. It focuses on three areas: the post-partum return to training, the integration of mothering and training responsibilities, and the Olympic experience.

Research Design

In a discussion of women in the Olympic movement, Darlene Kluka (1993) argues that women’s participation in sport is predicated on two key factors:

(1) the meaning of being a woman as interpreted in the beliefs, customs, practices, and attitudes prevailing in any culture at any time; and (2) each woman’s personal needs and abilities as she interprets them in relation to roles she accepts within the culture in which she lives. (p. 199)

Kluka asserts that in order to understand women’s experiences in sport, it is essential to explore the interaction between the woman and social world in which she lives, acknowledging the importance of the both the individual and the social context.

Qualitative research shares this concern and attempts to understand the social world from the point of view of the individual, while emphasizing the influence of social context – both how it is constructed and experienced by the individual and how it affects the individual. Qualitative research is primarily concerned with discovery and description, and finds value in the rich description of everyday life (Cobb & Hagemaster, 1987; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In his 1998 article Possibilities for Qualitative Research in Sport Psychology, William B. Strean encourages sport psychology researchers to utilize qualitative research methods to answer a variety of research questions, most
notably to gain a deeper understanding of exceptional athletes and to describe the context within which sport and physical activity occur and how those contexts may encourage or restrain participation. This study attempts to meet such goals by exploring the experiences of mothering athletes as they trained for and participated in Olympic competition, paying special attention to how culture (both of sport specifically and Western culture in general) may have impacted these women’s participation. Because this is a unique experience that has received relatively little scholarly attention, the current study is designed to be descriptive and exploratory and, therefore, a qualitative methodology was employed.

Feminist researchers often frame one primary goal of research as “giving a voice” to women’s experiences. The qualitative interview is designed to do so in a relatively straightforward way. As Rubin and Rubin (1995) point out, “the purpose of qualitative interviewing is to hear and understand what the interviewees think and give them a public voice” (p. 19). The present study is primarily concerned with how mothering athletes negotiate the transition into motherhood and return to Olympic-level competition and how they interpret the experience. As previously noted in the literature on the transition to parenthood, the return to training following injury, the return to work following childbirth, and the experiences of high level training and competition, these experiences are no doubt very diverse and complex, and qualitative interviewing is designed “to capture some of the richness and complexity of the subject matter” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 76). Further, as the focus is on athletes who have already undergone this transition, the accounts of this experience were retrospective in nature. For these reasons, the interview method was chosen.
Participants

The study participants are women athletes who competed in either the 2004 Summer or 2006 Winter Olympic Games, and who had given birth to or adopted a child within the six years prior to the Games. Limiting the participants to those whose children were born six years prior to competition was done in order to capture the experience of training and competing while caring for a very young and dependent child. Originally, the study was to focus on only those who had given birth, as one goal was to explore the experience of returning to elite training after pregnancy and childbirth. That criterion was expanded to include one participant who had adopted an infant. This participant became a primary caretaker of the child shortly after his birth and officially adopted him when he was three months old, and therefore even though she had not undergone the physical experience of pregnancy and childbirth, after speaking with her I felt that her experience of motherhood and of integrating motherhood and elite sport was fitting enough to warrant inclusion.

Potential participants were identified through a search of websites offering biographical information about Olympic athletes (e.g., NBC’s official website for the winter Olympics, the USOC official site) and media reports of the Games. The biographies of women athletes were read and those who were identified as having children were noted. The search focused on organizations that maintained websites in English. Overall, 27 women from four countries in 18 sports were identified as mothers, and 16 met all criteria for inclusion. Attempts were made to contact 15 women and eight agreed to participate in the study. None of the women responded with a refusal to
participate; however, the potential participants who did not participate in the study did not respond to my inquiries at all.

Participant portraits will not be presented here as the potential to identify the participants would be great given that there have been few mother-athletes in Olympic competition and some are well known in their respective sports and to the general public. Instead, a general description of the participants will be given.

The participants of this study ranged in age from 27 to 48 years old, with an average age of 33.5 and a standard deviation of 6.12. All participants identified themselves as White/European and either married to or in a committed relationship with the father of their children. Seven of the participants were the birth mothers of their children, while one participant was the adoptive mother of her child. For seven participants, the child she had prior to the 2004/2006 Olympic Games was her first; one participant had two children at the time of her Olympic participation. The ages of the children at the time of Olympic competition ranged from .5 years to 5.83 years, with an average age of 3.43 years and a standard deviation of 1.55. Since the 2004/2006 Olympics, five of the participants have had additional children. Two of the participants are currently training with the goal of participating in the 2010 Olympic games.

The number of years that the participants have spent training and competing in their respective sports ranged from 10 to 23, with an average of 16.125 (SD = 4.19) years of sport participation. They represented six different sports and two countries, the United States and Canada. Four were athletes of team sports, while four were athletes of individual sports. Three of the athletes competed in the 2004 Summer Games, and five competed in the 2006 Winter Games. For four participants, 2004/2006 was their first
Olympic Games, for three, it was their third time at the Games, and one participant was competing at the Games for the fourth time. Five of the participants earned medals at the 2004/2006 Olympic Games.

Procedure

Upon IRB approval, potential study participants were contacted and asked to participate. Potential participants were all initially contacted via email, either directly (in the cases where they had their own websites and had made their contact information public), through representatives from their sports’ national governing bodies or agencies, or through coaches or sport psychology consultants. Those who agreed were informed of the purposes of the study and the potential uses of the data collected. They were each sent an electronic copy of the general consent form and consent to audio tape, copies of which can be found in Appendices A and B, respectively. Participants were asked to fax or mail the signed forms to the student researcher. The content of the consent forms was discussed with each participant at the beginning of each interview in order to ensure that she fully understood the purpose of the study and her rights as a research participant. Since the interviews were conducted over the phone, consent to record the telephone conversation was obtained verbally before starting the recording device and participants were informed when recording had begun and ended.

Because the pool of potential participants is relatively small, and the information discussed is personal, there is always the possibility that a participant may be identified. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning each participant a pseudonym and by omitting or changing identifying information (e.g., names, locations, specific sports/events, awards won). For example, when a participant discussed the specifics of a
competitive event, “competition” or “event” was substituted for the name of the sport, “playing field” or “venue” was used to describe the location, and “training” or “competing” was used in lieu of any term that might identify any sport-specific activity. These measures were discussed with each participant and only one expressed concern about confidentiality; she was reassured when told that any references to her specific sport would be omitted. Participants were also given the opportunity to review the interview transcripts, to correct any misrepresentations, ask for potentially identifying information to be taken out, or withdraw their data completely. No participant asked for any changes to be made.

Data Collection

Study participants participated in an interview with the researcher. Prior to the interview, each participant was asked to fill out a questionnaire, designed to provide demographic information about the participant and her Olympic participation. A copy of this questionnaire can be found in Appendix C. All of the interviews were conducted over the phone as participants were spread over a large geographic area. The interviews ranged from 40 to 90 minutes. The semi-structured or general interview guide approach as outlined by Patton (1990) was utilized. In this approach, a list of subjects or questions is developed as a framework for the interview. This loose structure provides focus for the interview and ensures that pertinent information is discussed, yet also allows flexibility within the framework to discuss or further explore subjects as they arise (Patton, 1990). The interview began by asking each participant about her decisions to have a baby and to return to her athletic career. The interview next addressed the initial return to training following pregnancy and childbirth, and the integration of motherhood and elite level
training. (For the adoptive parent in this study, the questions pertaining to pregnancy and childbirth were omitted, and instead she was asked about her adjustment to the arrival of her infant son.) The interview then focused on the experience of competing in the Olympic Games and concluded by asking each participant what advice she might give to other athletes who are engaged in (or contemplating) the process of combining motherhood and elite athletics. A copy of the interview guide can be found in Appendix D.

While the main source of data collection was in-depth interviews, other sources of data were reviewed as well. Because the Olympic Games are high profile events, media accounts of the competition and interviews with some of the participants were available. Several newspaper, magazine, and web-page articles/interviews were reviewed, and two archived television interviews were available for viewing on the internet as well. Three of the participants maintain their own websites, and one had kept a “blog” during the Olympic Games, which was available through her website. One participant had a biography published. These media sources offered a wealth of background information about the participants and helped me to tailor some of the interview questions to each particular participant. Further, many of the media stories focused on the participants’ families, so they provided additional insight into the process of combining motherhood and elite sport, as well as the reactions of their family members, coaches, and athlete peers. These media resources also prompted me to ask some participants how they felt about being presented in the media as mothers.
Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the method of grounded theory analysis as outlined by Charmaz (2002, 2005) while also being informed and guided by the literature and my own knowledge of competitive athletics and motherhood. In general, grounded theory analysis does not attempt to fit data into an established theory, but rather allows theory to emerge from the data. As described by Glaser and Strauss (1967), “grounded theory is derived from data and illustrated by characteristic examples of data” (p.5), and they note that grounded theory is especially useful when investigating topics that have received little scholarly attention. As stated earlier, little attention has been paid to the experiences of mothering elite athletes in the research literature, and the representation of mothering athletes in the popular media has been criticized as sentimental, oversimplified, or as supporting hegemonic ideas of women, mothers, and sport (Eastman & Billings, 1999; Hall, 1996; Jamieson, 1998). It is my intention to describe this transition and integration of motherhood and athletics in a way that more accurately represents the diverse and complex experiences of these women. In addition, feminist researchers emphasize the importance of research as praxis – that research should produce useful knowledge and aim to promote social change (Bredemeier, 2001; Hall, 1996; Whaley, 2001). Dey (2004) suggests that grounding theory in the data produces a theory more representative of and therefore more relevant to the “practical world,” thereby orienting theory toward praxis (pp. 82-83).

Charmaz describes her approach to grounded theory as building upon “a symbolic interactionist theoretical perspective with constructivist methods” (2002, p. 678). She writes, “the constructivist approach places priority on the phenomena of study and sees
both data and analysis as created from the shared experiences of researcher and participants and the researcher’s relationships with participants” (2002, p. 677). Rather than assume that a grounded theory is to be “discovered” through careful examination of data that are objective facts, constructionist grounded theory views data and its analysis as constructions that are influenced by the researcher, the researched, and the social and historical context in which the research takes place. Emphasis is placed not so much on gathering “facts,” but on exploring meanings, situations, assumptions, and the participants’ experiences. In addition, data analysis is an ongoing process, which informs and drives further data collection and further analysis (Charmaz, 2002).

Charmaz also notes that careful attention must be paid to the role of the researcher in constructing and defining the data and analysis, requiring ongoing reflexivity and questioning of assumptions by the researcher (more on reflexivity in the trustworthiness section). While the participants’ stories were the basis of the analysis, several assumptions based on the literature, as well as my personal experience, were used to guide the data collection and analysis. These assumptions underlie the questions in the interview guide, and the themes of the interview questions will form the basis of a preliminary coding scheme. Themes that were addressed when discussing training include: making the decisions to have a child and to return to competition, the physical aspects of returning to training post-partum, the emotional transition to motherhood, organizing training and childcare and social and organizational support. When discussing the Olympic experience, the themes addressed included: childcare arrangements and their impact, the personal meaning of being a mother at the Olympic Games, and again, social and organizational support.
Six of the interviews were transcribed verbatim by the principal researcher and two were transcribed via a professional transcription service. Once the transcriptions were completed, each was read as the audiotape of the interview was played in order to check for accuracy and to decipher any difficult to hear moments. Transcripts were sent to each participant so that they could edit, clarify, or add information, and no participant asked for any changes to be made. Transcripts were then read and re-read to ensure familiarity with the data. Transcripts and documents were coded and analyzed as outlined by Patton (1990) and Charmaz (2002, 2005). Each participant’s data were analyzed and coded first as a case study. Cases were then cross-analyzed in order to find similarities and differences in experience (Patton, 1990).

Coding of data began with the process of initial or open coding, as described by Charmaz (2002). Initial coding is line-by-line coding of the transcript, field note, or document which “distills events and meanings without losing their essential properties” (Charmaz, 2002, p. 684). Initial codes describe what is going on in the data and serve as the preliminary organizing concepts. Initial coding is followed by selective (or focused) coding, during which the initial codes are studied carefully and sorted and synthesized into more general codes that “cut across multiple interviews and thus represent recurrent themes” (Charmaz, 2002, p. 686). These focused codes can then serve as the foundation for analytic categories.

As data were coded I began to engage in memo writing. Memo writing, as described by Charmaz (2002), is a form of focused free writing that helps researchers to “raise their codes to conceptual categories” by analyzing, defining, and comparing categories and analytic concepts (p. 687). Memo writing can also begin to link the data
and analysis to relevant literature and existing theory (Charmaz, 2002). These memos became the basis for the final presentation and were ordered (and re-ordered) and integrated to form the final analysis.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness measures have been discussed in the literature as the qualitative answer to quantitative “validity” and serve to lend credibility or legitimacy to qualitative data analysis and interpretation (Glesne, 1999; Sparkes, 1998). Several measures were taken, influenced by the goals of feminist research and grounded theory analysis, to enhance the trustworthiness of this study.

**Thick description and negative cases.** As mentioned earlier, the hallmark of feminist research is to give voice to women’s lived experiences. Credibility is brought to the data when the participants can see themselves in the research, and Whaley (2001) suggests that data should be analyzed “as if the participants were ‘gazing back’ reporting the results as much from the participant’s viewpoint as possible” (p. 426). In a discussion of the importance of the naming of experience, Kitzinger (2004) emphasizes the need to ground theory in the language that women use. To this end, this study offers a thick description of experience and generous use of direct quotes from the participants in order to allow the reader to enter their world. When choosing representative quotes, care was taken to include as much of the participant’s own words and ideas as possible. While this resulted in some lengthy quotations, I felt it was better to err on the side of long quotes rather than to paraphrase or edit and risk losing the participant’s meaning or intention. Rubin and Rubin (1995) write that the “richness of detail” and “vividness of the text” make the research feel real to the participants and allow readers to feel as if they have
entered the research environment (p. 91). In addition, thick description allows the reader to draw his or her own conclusions and interpretations (Patton, 1990).

A truly thick description of mothering athletes’ experiences would no doubt include varying and contradictory stories, reflecting the diversity of experience and contexts. Whaley (2001) writes that “there is no one ‘correct’ interpretation of the data. Rather, it is the responsibility of the researcher to explore different interpretations… and to explore these possibilities” (p. 421). Therefore, during the analytic process, I deliberately sought out contradictory stories, between and within participants, and used these contradictions to further inform the analysis. In addition, while all of these athletes were mothers, they were also participating in different sports, with different skill sets and governed by different organizations, and within two different countries. This led to some similarity in experience as well as some diversity. While the purpose of a grounded theory study is to tell a collective story, it is not to eliminate inconsistencies, but to attempt to understand and explain how and why they occur (Charmaz, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

**Member checking.** Feminist researchers acknowledge that women are the experts of their own lives, and attempt to conduct research in a way that recognizes this expertise and empowers the participants (Bredemeier, 2001; Hall, 1996; Kitzinger, 2004; Whaley, 2001). Bredemeier (2001) suggests that researchers check back with participants about their interpretation of their experiences as a way to reduce personal bias. To this end, as mentioned earlier, participants were given the opportunity to read over the transcripts of their interviews and clarify, correct, or add any information as they saw fit. In addition, I shared an outline and brief summary of the initial analysis of data with each participant
and elicited her thoughts on how accurately it represented her experience. None of the participants offered any changes to their transcripts or to the outline.

**Triangulation.** Triangulation involves the use of multiple sources or methods of data collection (Glesne, 1998). This is especially important when studying cultural phenomena, as the social world is constructed, reproduced, and resisted in multiple arenas (e.g., in the media, within organizations, by participants), and triangulation “recognizes the multiplicity and simultaneity of cultural frames of reference” (Atkinson & Delamont, 2005, p. 832). As mentioned above, sources of information in the form of document review (media accounts, previous interviews, biographical stories) were sought. By utilizing multiple sources, interview data could be corroborated, and additional insight can be obtained.

**Peer debriefing and external auditing.** Peer debriefing is a process by which the researcher’s work is reviewed by another researcher, who can then offer input and reflection on the research and the research process (Glesne, 1998). By discussing the research and analytical process, the researcher can test hypotheses and discuss emerging ideas and receive feedback and input from another person. In addition, the peer can offer ideas and interpretations, and alert the researcher to potential biases. The external audit described by Glesne (1998) and Sparkes (1998) is similar in that it allows for input from an external source, but in the audit, the peer researcher will examine the data collected and offer his/her own interpretation of the data. Emerging raw data themes can be discussed until the researchers come to a consensus, thus reaching what Sparkes (1998) describes as a form of triangulation among investigators. The research and analytical process was discussed within a dissertation writing group organized by the University’s
Writing Center. This group of five doctoral students, all working on their dissertations, met every two weeks during the time I was collecting and analyzing data and was a helpful sounding board as I attempted to organize the data into a cohesive whole. In addition, two peers with knowledge of sport psychology and qualitative research methods were asked to read the transcripts, discuss the research, and audit the data analysis.

Subjectivity and reflexivity. As noted earlier, constructivist grounded theory recognizes that researchers are not just collecting and analyzing data, but play a role in actively constructing it, and therefore must “remain reflexive during all phases of their research and writing” (Charmaz, 2002, p. 695). Feminist researchers pay special attention to reflexivity, the role of the researcher in the research (Hall, 1996; Whaley, 2001). Whaley (2001) notes that the researcher’s own experience is often the impetus of the research. Indeed, this is the case with the present study. My interest in the lives of mothering athletes began the summer I was married, as we planned on having children soon after. As I contemplated my shifting roles I wondered, “Is this going to be the end of my athletic adventures?” Coincidentally, around that same time I met a longtime friend of my husband’s, herself a professional athlete, and over the course of our conversation she (with little prompting) told me the story of how she returned to her athletic career after having her first child. This impressed on me two things: that motherhood was not the end of athletics, even high level training (and made me examine why I had wondered so in the first place), and that she felt compelled to share her story with me and assure me that I too would easily return to my own training.

While qualitative researchers fully support the notion of utilizing one’s own experience in the research process, they also acknowledge the danger of projecting one’s
own experiences, beliefs, and biases onto the data (Glesne, 1998; Hall, 1996; Sprague, 2005; Whaley, 2001). Whaley notes that “from a feminist perspective, bias is not something to be eliminated, but instead, acknowledged and discussed in terms of its relationship to the research findings” (p. 476). Conducting a bracketing interview (in which I answered the questions in the interview guide), keeping a reflexive journal throughout data collection and analysis, and crafting a bias statement serve complementary purposes. The purpose of the bracketing interview was to make me more aware of my own biases and feelings so that I may be able to recognize them when they emerged during the analytic process. By answering the interview questions myself, I was able to reflect on my own assumptions about the process of returning to athletic participation after having a child. Since I have never engaged in Olympic-level training or competition, questions were changed to reflect my adjustment to motherhood while returning to work and school. Performance questions were changed to reflect my return to athletic training prior to performing in a local ice show, and the experience of having my son with me at the event.

Glesne (1998) asserts that the researcher must not only be aware of potential biases, but also be able to monitor one’s own reactions throughout the research process. By keeping a journal as I conducted the study, I was able to increase my awareness of my own thoughts and emotions as I collected and interpreted the data, and monitor how my views may have affected the analysis.

Glesne (1998) also states that it is the responsibility of the researcher to inform readers of one’s subjectivity, so that they may know the researcher and the lens through which the research was viewed, and so that the research process gains transparency. This
concept is developed further by Sprague (2005), who emphasizes the importance of “making the researcher visible in the text” (p. 167). Sprague suggests that researchers describe their connection to the research - why they are interested in the topic and what stake the researcher may have in the research question - so as to “make the researcher’s standpoint and limitations thereof obvious” (p. 167). Knowing the researcher and how the researcher’s experience shapes the research can help the reader to better understand the study and the researcher’s own line of thinking in the analysis. Therefore, a bias statement outlining my interest in sport psychology and the research topic, and informed by the bracketing interview follows.

Bias Statement

My participation in the performing arts began when I was in fourth grade, when I signed up for a theater class with a friend of mine. I loved the instructors, the class, and being on stage, and began performing in the art school’s children’s productions. In the summer program I was able to add music and dance training as well. When I was about 12, I began ice skating and found in it a perfect combination of theater and athletics. As I became more involved in figure skating, I became less involved in the theater, until skating was my main focus. My interest in sport psychology began when I was a competitor, as I was very anxious at competitions and was looking for a way to improve my performances. I began reading books on sport psychology and applying some of the concepts to my own skating.

By my senior year in high school I decided to stop skating and focus more on my school work and college preparation. I had not intended to skate during college, but in my junior year I transferred to a school with a synchronized skating team and was able to
compete at the national level with the team. In addition, I began coaching at the rink, and was again immersed in the skating world. I was majoring in psychology and added a minor in coaching, which introduced me to the basics of exercise physiology and motor learning. The university also had a master’s program in sport psychology, and in my senior year I asked for permission to take the introductory graduate course in sport psychology, which solidified my interest in sport psychology as a field.

After graduating from college, I decided to take a year off and return to my performing “roots” as an ice show skater. Before I knew it, my “year off” extended to two years, and ultimately a five-year show career. While I loved skating and performing, and the whole show life, I was frustrated by the “politics,” low pay, and job insecurity. I decided it was time to get a “real job.” I entered a master’s program in counseling psychology and began working in social services, and then as a counselor in an eating disorders treatment center. While in my master’s program I began training in aerial arts (on aerial silks, hoop, and static trapeze), something I had become interested in while doing shows alongside various acrobats and performers. It filled my need for both artistic and athletic challenges.

After earning my master’s degree, I worked for a year in eating disorders treatment and briefly in community mental health, but began to feel a bit burned out by the intensity of such work. I decided again to return to my “roots” and entered the Sport Psychology doctoral program at Temple University. The summer before I began the program I got engaged, and a year later I was married. The transition from single life to being married left me full of questions. What would it mean to be a wife? What would happen to my independent self? The stereotypes that I had held of “traditional wives”
didn’t appeal to me at all, and I wondered where my place was. My husband and I had
discussed having children as soon as we could, mostly because of our ages (I was 31
when we were married, my husband was 43), and our only planning was to make sure
that I could finish my coursework before the baby arrived. We conceived more quickly
than I had expected, and by the fall of 2004 I was pregnant.

Again, questions filled my mind – I had a hard time imagining myself as
someone’s mother! How would our lives change? How would I change? Again, many of
the stereotyped models of mothers didn’t seem to fit – I felt too rebellious to be a Martha
Stewart-esque stay at home mom, but not ambitious enough to be a Type-A working
super-mom, either. I also became very impatient with the way in which exercise and
fitness are presented to pregnant women. As I searched for information about safe and
effective exercise during pregnancy I again became acutely aware of the obsession with
weight loss that our culture holds. Just about every magazine article or television segment
focused on losing the baby weight or getting your pre-pregnancy body back (as if it went
somewhere else?), with very little information about health and fitness or the positive
effects of exercise on pregnancy and childbirth. I remember being enraged by one *Today
Show* segment about “regaining your pre-pregnancy shape” which focused exclusively on
cosmetic surgery. My search for role models with whom I could identify led me to seek
out the stories of athletic pregnant women and mothers, and led me to this research topic.

As my pregnancy progressed, I began to feel the limitations of my expanding
body. I could no longer move with ease, I was almost constantly fatigued, and even
climbing stairs became a challenge. I was teaching aerobics up until my seventh month
and found myself demonstrating less and less. Despite the limitations, I was also excited
about the baby and amazed at what my body was capable of. The bigger I got, the more special I felt, and I was amused, especially late in my pregnancy, of the way my belly would move and ripple with the baby’s movements. I was also proud of myself for remaining as active as I was, and I hoped on some level that I was a positive role model for my female students.

Unfortunately the birth did not go as well as I had hoped, and I had to undergo an emergency C-section. While we were grateful for our son’s safe arrival, I found the recovery to be painful and difficult. I was completely unprepared for the physical discomfort as well as the length of time it took to feel somewhat normal again. I think that this was especially difficult because I had been so active and was used to being both physically fit and independent. Not only was I learning to care for a newborn, but I was also recovering from surgery as well. My parents came to stay with us for a month, which was a great help. Even so, I was amazed at how much time and energy such a little baby could take. When our son was two months old, the fall semester began. I was taking one final class, and began teaching one psychology class. I had thought that since I was used to taking three classes and teaching three classes my reduced schedule would be simple, but I soon found that organizing child care, study time, and prepping the class I was teaching to be more difficult than I anticipated. Even getting out of the house on time (a challenge for me anyway) was a project. When I had to be away from home, the baby was cared for by a patchwork of family and babysitters. When I worked at home, I had to be creative with my time – work could usually get done when the baby was sleeping, and sometimes I would study my flashcards while he nursed or set him in his playpen next to
my desk while I typed. I also learned to relax my standards a bit and decided that it was okay to get a B in Biomechanics, all things considered.

Between work and school and the baby, exercise fell by the wayside. The financial strain of having a new baby and living on a single income required us to cut expenses where we could, and our YMCA membership was one of the first things to go. While we owned some exercise equipment and videos, I found that finding time to exercise was difficult – in the first few months, if I ever had any “spare” time, I was usually too tired to exercise anyway. I did, however, do a lot of walking with the baby in the stroller – we visited all of the local parks (they’re free!) and even walked the mall in bad weather.

When my son was about 19 months old, I was asked to do an aerial fabric piece in the skating club’s annual ice show, so I decided to commit to training for the show. At my first practice I was stunned to learn how much fitness I had actually lost. I wondered if I would be able to regain my strength and endurance in time for the show. Finding the time and energy for workouts was also a challenge. I was lucky in that when I worked out at the rink, I could usually find a skater or parent to watch my son, but I still felt that I had to be quick and do only what was absolutely necessary. I also sometimes felt guilty for spending the time on something that was just a hobby, when I could have been spending more time on schoolwork or with my son. In the end, however, performing in the show was very satisfying. While my first workouts were discouraging, my strength and technique came back more quickly than I had expected. I felt proud of myself for getting back in shape, and I enjoyed performing and being a part of the skating community again.
My experience with pregnancy, motherhood, and returning to work and performing have shaped my expectations about my research topic, and these expectations have changed as I have adjusted to motherhood. I had not expected the demands on my time and energy to be as great as they are, and I expected that other mother-athletes would have difficulty carving out time for their training and having the energy and motivation to train during the first year of motherhood. Conversely, I expected my baby to be a distraction at my performance, and something that would worry me, but instead I found it to be fun to have him with me at the show. He climbed on me while I warmed up and stretched, and I had fun watching the other skaters with him. I may have been less focused on my performance, but I was also less nervous and enjoyed the experience more. I expected that mothers at the Olympics might have the same kind of response – that coordinating travel and child care would be stressful, but having their children around might be fun and comforting.

I found that having support, especially in regards to child care, was essential to being able to work or train. I found that while my family and friends were able to help a great deal, the transition may have been easier if there was more formal, institutional support. I could not find part-time infant day care (but when my son was a year and a half, I was able to find a flexible pre-school program) and was somewhat frustrated by having to cobble together a mix of family and neighborhood babysitters. I expected that individual-sport athletes, who may have more flexibility with their schedules, would have some of the same concerns, and that team-sport athletes would have a more difficult time with their schedules and child care needs. In addition, while family and friends were generally supportive, I also faced some subtle discouragement. When I became pregnant,
one person in the department surprised me by remarking doubtfully, “Well, I hope you’ll be able to finish your degree.” Because I continued to teach aerobics during my pregnancy, my mother advised me often not to exert myself (even as I recited all of the research data supporting exercise during pregnancy), and even admonished me for stretching too much as (only two months pregnant) I reached for a dish on a high kitchen shelf. When my husband and I decided to send our son to pre-school three days a week so that I could have more time at home to work on my schoolwork, my in-laws expressed some objection, suggesting that our son was too young for day care. I expected that mother-athletes will have had to contend with and resist similar expectations and negative social support.

Finally, I was surprised by how intense the love for my baby was (and is), and how sacrifices don’t really seem like sacrifices. I used to roll my eyes at such sentimental notions, only to find myself expressing them wholeheartedly, and found that motherhood led me to reorder my priorities – things like financial stability, health and safety (especially in light of aerial work), and spending time with my family took precedence over other things. I expected that even though elite athletes are highly committed to excellence in their sport, they would also negotiate and re-prioritize their needs and responsibilities and possibly find this new balance preferable to their former sport focus.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Presentation of Results

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of mother-athletes as they trained for and competed in the Olympic Games. More specifically, this study attempted to describe the post-partum return to training and competition, the integration of mothering and training responsibilities, the emotional and social aspects of combining motherhood with the elite athletic career, and the impact of motherhood on the experience of the Olympic Games and Olympic performance. Eight Olympians who had competed in either the 2004 Summer or the 2006 Winter Olympic Games participated in the study, and each was mother to a child under the age of six at the time of her Olympic participation (one participant was mother to two pre-school children). Each mother-athlete participated in an in-depth interview about her experiences as a mother and as an Olympic athlete, and from those interviews eight themes (with 26 sub themes) emerged. These themes included: (1) becoming a mother-athlete, (2) the initial return to training, (3) the effects of motherhood on training and competing, (4) the effects of the elite sport career on motherhood and the family, (5) social support, (6) organizational support, (7) the Olympic experience, and (8) advice and recommendations. A summary of themes and sub themes with brief raw data examples can be found in Table 1.
Table 1. Summary of Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub theme</th>
<th>Raw data examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On becoming a mother-athlete</td>
<td>Planning on motherhood</td>
<td>I decided, well I’ll take a year off from [sport], so … while I’m taking this year off, why don’t we have a kid? I didn’t make that decision – it was very unexpected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Planning on sport</td>
<td>All along I probably knew I was going to keep training I hadn’t satisfied my need of being an Olympian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The initial return to sport</td>
<td>Uncertainty</td>
<td>There really is no research…or any information I didn’t really know how quick I would come back</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Being out of shape</td>
<td>I’ve never been out of shape that long in my life Do I really remember how to compete?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feeling refreshed</td>
<td>It was like a newfound love again It helped me totally recover and be refreshed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The effects of motherhood on training and competing</td>
<td>Training: finding the time, juggling responsibilities</td>
<td>Just trying to go out and train when I had some time Often my workout would be done before my husband and son would even be out of bed I became a lot more efficient with my training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Traveling with families: financial and logistical challenges</td>
<td>There are no funds available [for families] It definitely makes things more challenging You find out ways to basically travel the country every two days and have a two-year-old with you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Training and traveling without families: being separated</td>
<td>It was very hard emotionally, but physically it was really what I needed We always thought is was better for [son] It was just too hard to be away from my family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Go mama go!” Joys of children on the road</td>
<td>Just to have the love and support of my family with me on the road made a huge difference [Son] really brought a lightheartedness to the team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A new perspective, a more balanced life</td>
<td>It put the [sport] thing in perspective…makes it a little less serious and more enjoyable [Sport] was not everything anymore in my life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The effects of elite sport on motherhood and the family</td>
<td>Creating the family story</td>
<td>We could all share in the whole experience [Without family there] it wouldn’t have been our story, it would have been Mommy’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Effects on children</td>
<td>She gets to experience a lot of things other kids don’t Her seeing me strive for something is important He’s such a well adjusted and amazing kid…and that’s just from all the exposure he’s had</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Effects on husbands/partners</td>
<td>My training would have priority of his He basically put his career on hold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Effect on the image of self as mother</td>
<td>Life doesn’t end with parenthood I’m proud of myself, I did it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1. Summary of Results (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub theme</th>
<th>Raw data examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social support</td>
<td>Spouse/partner support</td>
<td>My husband was just really encouraging He became “Mr. Mom” when I left and basically he did everything</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support from extended family</td>
<td>My parents opened their home and really helped The whole year before the Olympics [my mom] was basically a live-in nanny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support from friends and the community</td>
<td>[Friends] basically took him in as their own</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational support</td>
<td>Support from coaches</td>
<td>They understood I had a family and that family comes first [My coach was] the only one who was really positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support from teammates</td>
<td>I had a great training group It was kind of a divide with my teammates People look at children as germ carriers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support from sport organizations</td>
<td>Just to acknowledge that I did have a son They helped out a little bit as far as child care expenses It was a bit of a battle to try and convince them that I could come back They didn’t really know what to do with us The burden was on me - you’re the mom, you deal with it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Olympic experience</td>
<td>Olympic logistics</td>
<td>We weren’t allowed obviously to stay as a family at the Olympic Village, so we rented our own room I figured it would be more stressful for me taking him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive experiences</td>
<td>Priceless moments that I’ll remember forever It was an awesome experience Wow – I’m a Mom and I’m at the Olympics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sources of stress</td>
<td>My husband and son could not get access to the venue It was so crazy in the back scene To be at the Olympics injured I had no one to talk to who understood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olympic performance</td>
<td></td>
<td>It was very important to have my family there - I feel like I perform better On the field, [the game] was all I was thinking about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice and recommendations</td>
<td>Advice to mothers and athletes</td>
<td>Not to give up on dreams or goals…also, not to put off having kids either It takes a lot of support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recommendations for sport organizations</td>
<td>You’ve got to let people have access to their families Maybe they could have a special situation fund I don’t think we should be required to leave our families at home</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Theme #1: On Becoming a Mother-Athlete:

Planning to Have Children, Planning to Return to Sport

At the opening of each interview, participants were asked about how they (and their partners) decided to have a child at the time that they did, and how they came to the decision to return to elite level training and competing. Interestingly, only two of the women interviewed deliberately planned both their pregnancies and their return to sport. Of the rest, one planned her pregnancy but initially did not plan on returning to sport (she later changed her mind), and five did not plan on motherhood, and yet never considered retiring from sport.

Planning on motherhood

Of the eight participants, two of the Summer (2004) athletes (Diana and Claire) planned their pregnancies for the year after the 2000 Olympics so that they could have the maximum amount of time possible to recover from pregnancy and get back into shape for the next Olympic Games. While they realized that pregnancy could not be perfectly planned, they each had hoped to conceive following the 2000 Olympic year, and did. The decision to have a child at that point in their careers was not a straightforward one, however. Diana had competed in the 2000 Olympics and weighed waiting four more years to start her family against the possibility that she may not make the next Olympic team:

I was 25 years old and I was kind of torn between wanting to start a family, not wanting to wait until I was 29 to start a family, but yet still wanting to play [sport]...I knew that every single year wasn’t a guarantee for the USA team – every single year you have to re-try out, and so I knew that, I had seen other players and it could happen to me, that I could put my family on hold and not make the Olympic team and maybe would have regretted it.
Claire had a different experience, as she had not made the 2000 Olympic team and considered ending her athletic career and then starting her family. With the support of her husband, she decided she would try for the next Olympics, but would take a year off from training and competing, citing that it is not uncommon for athletes in her sport to take the post-Olympic season off to rest and regroup. She said,

I decided, well I’ll take a year off from [sport], I’m kind of burned out, so we said, while I’m taking this year off, why don’t we have a kid? It just worked out that way and it gave me more time to recover and to get in shape for 2004. So it worked out quite well.

One participant (Anne) loosely planned to begin her family after she married, but did not plan her pregnancy around her athletic schedule as she had already decided to end her athletic career. She recalled feeling satisfied with her athletic accomplishments and at the same time dissatisfied with her experience being a part of the national team, feeling as though she did not fit in with her peers or the athlete lifestyle. While she described her decision to end her sport career as “bittersweet,” she also felt it was time to “start off on a new life.” She noted, “It wasn’t really the fact that I had just gotten married that made me want to quit, but I’m sure that played into it at some level.” As of planning her family, she said:

We both wanted [children], and it wasn’t like we were real planned about it, saying, ok, now we’re going to quit [sport], and now we’re going to have babies…but we conceived [son] fourteen months after we were married…and we just started off thinking, well, we’ll just forge a new path in life.

Five of the eight participants did not make a deliberate decision to enter motherhood at the time that they did. Four women found themselves pregnant unexpectedly, and one became involved with a man who had an infant son from a
previous relationship, whom she then adopted. Four participants noted that they had not even been thinking about motherhood at the time. One participant, Heather, had a unique experience as she had not one, but two children, in the four years prior to her Olympic participation. Both pregnancies were unexpected, as she had struggled with infertility; she and her husband had just about given up when they learned they were expecting their first child. With her second pregnancy, she remembered, “kind of the same thing happened – I had had so many problems trying to get pregnant with [son] I just never, for whatever reason, it just never crossed my mind [that I’d get pregnant again].”

All of these participants noted that the timing of their children was less than ideal, but that after the initial surprise/adjustment, they were happy and excited about their children. As Erin stated, “I’m so blessed to have them in my life – I wouldn’t want it any other way.” Two of these athletes said that they would advise other athletes who were thinking about having children to plan the timing of their pregnancies so as to ensure enough time to rest and return to top form before competing again, but Beth added:

I can’t say I want to change anything…It probably would have been easier if I didn’t have [daughter] until after the Olympics, but (laughs) I can’t say that I didn’t enjoy having her around either…Basically, having a kid is probably one of the best things in my life.

Similarly, Faith noted that in retrospect, if she hadn’t become pregnant when she did, she may have delayed having children and possibly regretted it. She said,

I do know some athletes who are in their late thirties and they’re still training and they don’t have families. Some of them are married, but they don’t have kids…I am actually very glad that it turned out the way it did with us because I might have been one of those athletes that just kind of waited – oh, let me just do another year and then I’ll have one…so I’m so glad that God didn’t wait for me to be ready (laughs).
Planning on sport

During their pregnancies/adoption, all but one of the participants had definite plans to return to training after having their babies. Beth noted that it wasn’t really a decision she had to make – she was still playing her sport and just assumed she would continue. She stated, “I didn’t have any doubt that I could keep playing and that I wanted to keep playing.” Faith also said,

I don’t really recall the decision was like, “You know what? I’m going to keep going.” I think all along I probably knew that I was going to keep training and [competing] and pursuing it. So I don’t know if there’s actually a point where I was, like, not sure what I was going to do and then just decided to. I think it was almost, like I almost kind of always knew it.

Similarly, Claire remarked,

I knew I was going to return…I got myself a running stroller so I could be running with the baby when I returned. I just knew at that point, you know, it was not the end of my career, it was just going to be different when I returned.

When Heather found out she was pregnant for the second time, she also did not consider ending her athletic career. She described feeling as though going to the Olympics “was just destined to be.” She recalled:

It’s really hard to explain how I knew we were going to make it to Olympics first of all, and I knew everything was just going to work out so that that goal would be achieved…It was as if I knew, from the moment [the team] got together I knew we were going. And I’ve never had that feeling before, and I’ve never had it since, about anything. It was just, it was just destined to be I figured.

Gail, who kept active throughout her pregnancy, knew she wanted to come back, but had a more relaxed attitude about it. She said,

I knew I wanted to try to come back because nobody in [country] had done it, as a mom, especially in [our sport]…so I just, I knew I wanted to try
and come back. And my view was, if it works, it works, if it doesn’t, it
doesn’t. It was not like, I have to come back and it has to work.

When asked why they decided to return to elite level training after having their
children, the participants cited their passion for their respective sports, their unmet goals,
and their competitive natures. For example, Beth stated that her return to training was
based on “my love of [sport] and to keep playing the best, and to win another [Olympic
medal].” Diana said that she felt at the time, “I want to do both. I still want to play, but I
also want to be a mom and I don’t want to wait four more years,” and later added, “I was
25 and just the experience I had gained, I felt like, you know, I could still even be better
at 29.” Claire and Faith described how they had had a dream of competing in the
Olympics since childhood, and after missing the 2000 Games still felt the desire to pursue
this dream. Faith, who had missed the 2000 Olympic trials, said, “I did feel like I was still
improving when I had my first little one and that I would love the opportunity to keep
going and pursue, maybe making it, in the, in 2004.” Similarly, Claire said, “For me, I
wanted both – I hadn’t satisfied my need of being an Olympian so I kept going for it.” Of
her competitive nature, she added:

That competitive side has always been there with me – I mean I play card
games and I want to win, I gotta win – and so it was the same when I
would get out on the [playing field], you know, even after having a kid,
I’m not here to have fun. I want to win, I want to [compete] well.

Heather also discussed just missing the Olympic team at a past Olympic trial and thinking
at the time, “we’ll be back, there’s no doubt in my mind.”

As mentioned earlier, Anne had not intended to return to elite level training and
competition, but took her sport back up on a recreational level to regain her fitness after
her pregnancy, stating that after the physical limitations of pregnancy, “I was just
jonesin’ to go and I couldn’t wait.” When she entered a competition in her home town just for fun, “it was like all the old [competition] instinct came back and I [competed] my heart out and I won.” She later added that “it had uncorked all this emotion and passion for the sport,” and prompted her to reconsider her retirement.

**Theme #2: The Initial Return to Training and Competition**

As these mothers began their return to elite level training and competition, they reported a mixture of both positive and negative experiences. Some found the prospect of regaining their previous fitness levels to be a daunting task, while others enjoyed the rest that pregnancy allowed and returned to their training with renewed motivation and passion. The subthemes that emerged are: uncertainty about what to expect, being out of shape, and feeling refreshed.

**Uncertainty**

Five participants remarked that they were the first women in their respective sports to have had a child and return to elite level training and competition, and none of them knew personally or trained with another mother-athlete. In light of this, three participants (Beth, Claire, and Gail) discussed not knowing what to expect or even what to do when they returned to training, which they found frustrating. Beth and Gail pointed to a general lack of knowledge within sport science of the effects of pregnancy on the body and safe, effective recovery from pregnancy. Beth noted that even though her husband was a coach/trainer himself, “there really is no research on athletes, women athletes who have children and how long it takes to get back or any information about that, so it was kind of new to us.” She later added,
Okay, they say you can’t do anything hard for six weeks, but I mean, is that for an average person? Or is that for an athlete that’s been training for so many years? I mean they don’t really have information exactly – I know everybody’s different, but is the chemical or physiology the same? Does your body go back to what it was after a year? A month? …You’re really kind of on your own as far as that goes.

Similarly, Claire said, “I didn’t really know how quick I would come back. I didn’t really know, should I expect to be really good when I come back, or is it going to take a really long time?” Gail described her initial return to training as a guessing game. She said:

I was trying to find some research to know what to do when I was pregnant because I knew I wanted to try to come back, but I couldn’t find anything except I was wearing my heart rate monitor if I went out for a hike or a bike ride or something…Because I was the first one to do it in my sport and the doctors didn’t know what – like physiologically we didn’t know how I would be affected and so it was really just trying things.

Faith discussed not knowing what to expect when she returned to competition, but that it wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, as she was able to maintain a relaxed attitude and found herself to be pleasantly surprised.

I did my first [competition] on, when [daughter] was only four months old, and I kind of did it – it was just an opportunity to go to a nice warm place and they were going to pay for all of us to go so I was like, oh why not?...It was no stellar [event] for sure, but it was kind of fun just to be back in the scene…and then at six months I did my second [competition] and, you know, still not back 100%, but you could definitely tell that it was coming around, and by nine months I had the best [competition] I’ve ever had in my life, and I was very surprised by that. Because, I mean, I guess I didn’t really know how long it was going to take to get my fitness back.

Interestingly, Heather expected the return to training to be more difficult than it was. She attributed her easier than expected return to training to her positive attitude and “the power of mental thinking.” She explained:
I just focused 100% on exactly how the pregnancy was going to go – I had everything planned out, you know, it was going to be an easy birth, I was going to have the baby, I was going to be right back playing, and it all went according to plan…I thought it would be harder. But it was, I think, again, just the mindset – I was so focused on how this was all going to play out that it just really – and I had visualized it so far in advance, you know, what I was going to be facing, and I was just so prepared for it all that really there wasn’t a lot of surprises.

**Being out of shape**

Four of the participants (Beth, Claire, Faith, and Heather) stated that over the course of their elite careers, they had never been as out of shape as they were after their pregnancies. Heather said of being out of shape, “Oh God yeah, like you can’t even…you can’t even do a sit up – it was so shocking to me how you think you’re carrying around all this weight and you should still have muscle tone, but you have *nothing.*” Claire remarked that her initial return to training after pregnancy and childbirth was the most difficult thing she had ever done, and it even affected her motivation:

> I’ve never been out of shape that long in my life…my stomach was just hammered…any movement I did was a lot more difficult because I just didn’t have the ab strength. And it did – it took a long time for that to come back, and being that out of shape made it even harder to *want* to work out. Usually it’s – you know, work outs are hard but you make it through, but being that far out of shape, *everything* seemed difficult. You know, the warm up process was feeling like a workout…so it was a huge challenge at first.

Interestingly, she also noted that some of her sport-specific skills came back more quickly than she had expected, which was a pleasant surprise. Claire said that when she started competing again,

> I wasn’t really physically in shape, like I didn’t feel that I could run really quick or any of that kind of stuff, but [certain skills] were actually back to where I was before I got pregnant, so I was really surprised at how quickly that kind of stuff came back for me because a lot of that is just muscle memory, and it knew what it’s supposed to do.
Beth had a similar experience and said that while her initial return to training was “very frustrating,” it was not overwhelming. She recounted,

I hadn’t [trained] for, like, six months, and I had never been out of shape like that in my life (laughs), so it was very frustrating for a while and, you know, just sad. But it totally started coming back for me, and it wasn’t totally deterring or like “I can’t do this.”

Faith also discussed being out of shape after her pregnancy, but felt that this made her return to training more fun.

When I got the okay to go back and start exercising again I was pretty excited about it. And I realized how much I took for granted, you know, just being able to go out and run or going out and doing these things when I wasn’t able to do them. So I definitely enjoyed getting back into it.

In addition, Faith explained that as elite athlete, once you reach a high level of fitness, you stop seeing improvements, or the subsequent gains are very small. Working back after pregnancy, she was able to see big gains in her fitness and found that to be very satisfying.

I think it was rewarding in that, you know I think when you get to a certain level of fitness it’s very hard to see little improvements. And that was kind of the fun thing about coming back after getting pregnant, to just see those big improvements, like weekly, as you get back in shape…

Being out of shape physically was not the only challenge that these athletes faced when they returned to their sports. Two participants noted that because they had been away from competition, they struggled to regain their comfort with strategy and playing against opponents – things that could not be practiced without actually being in competition. While Diana did not feel that recovering her prior fitness was too difficult, she did note that game play was more difficult to recover:
I knew the weight room stuff would take care of itself because I was spending the time – that as long as I put in the effort I would see results, and I did, very quickly…On the field, that took a little more time, because just, you know, game experience. I had been really a year and half not having any games or, you know, truly live [opponents].

She noted that while her husband or a couple of teammates would practice with her, “it still wasn’t the same as being in the game.” Claire also discussed wondering if she was ready to compete when she first returned to competition. She remembers asking herself:

At first it was like, am I really ready to do this? Am I going to get hurt? A couple of fears, you know, because I had been out for a while - do I really remember how to [compete]? You do these things in practice anyway, but once you get to the competition you’re like, “shoot, do I really remember how to [strategize]?”

It is important to note that while the initial recovery from pregnancy and childbirth posed some challenges to these athletes, they were not insurmountable, and most felt that by the second year of training and competing, they were back to their pre-pregnancy performance levels, if not better.

*Feeling refreshed*

Two participants reported that taking a break from training and competing had a positive effect on their motivation and enjoyment of their sport. Anne, who had taken more time off than the rest, recalled:

Initially I felt like, I don’t have any expectation on me, I have no pressure, my family’s excited to be here, we’re out in the snow, we’re just having a great time, and I [competed] like a mad woman. I was almost invincible when I came back. It was unreal. And I just had *so much fun* - it was like, I cannot believe I’ve not [competed] so much in the last three years, I just *love this*. It was like a new found love again. And, so that was my first year back. It was unreal.
Faith discussed how, before her pregnancy, she would get “antsy” if she even had to take two weeks off from her training, and so her pregnancy forced her to a break from training that she otherwise would not have taken.

If anything it kind of gave me a mental break from training for a little while…you know there’s a time when I did nothing, and I – I’m pretty sure that if I had not had a baby I would not have had that much down time because I didn’t like to stop for too long. And I think that just having that extra rest for my body from the [training] really, really made a difference. It helped me totally recover and be refreshed and be able to get back into it, where I think the athletes that keep going and going and going – it’s much easier to get burned out.

**Theme #3: The Effects of Motherhood on the Elite Sport Career**

All participants were asked about how they combined and balanced their parenting responsibilities with the demands of high level training. Each mother-athlete had her own way of integrating these responsibilities and, to varying degrees, most employed a combination of scheduling their training around the care of their children, organizing training to be more efficient and therefore less time consuming, and relying on others for child care assistance. In all cases, participants described their new lives as a constant juggling act; Beth summed up her challenges as “just trying to juggle everything,” and Diana stated “it was a lot of juggling.” They often compared themselves to “typical” (childless) athletes when describing the extra stress and hassles they encountered. Erin remarked:

As an athlete you lead sort of a selfish existence. You have to worry about how much you eat, sleep, train, and all that stuff, and then all of a sudden you have to worry about a little body, and you don’t sleep as much or maybe get your routine down as much as you would, if you were on your own, so it certainly was a big adjustment.
Participants noted that while they may not have had as much time to devote to their training as they had before they had their children, they became more focused in their training and their training methods improved. This led four participants (Diana, Faith, Gail, and Heather) to state that they were in better shape after they had their children than before.

Participants also describe the logistical challenges of traveling with their families to training camps and competitive events. Because each was either the first mother in her sport or the only mother on her team at the time, organizing and funding family travel was often the sole responsibility of the mother-athlete. At times, the participants found it was easier to travel without their children, and while being separated from family was difficult, it was also sometimes necessary for optimal training and performance. Despite the challenges of traveling with children, several athletes noted that they really enjoyed having their children with them at events.

While each participant discussed how challenging it was to integrate her roles as mother and elite athlete, they also discussed numerous ways in which their lives and athletic careers were enhanced by their children. In addition, participants described gaining a healthier, more balanced perspective on their athletic careers, and found that being able to share their sport accomplishments with their families lessened the pressure associated with elite competition and increased their enjoyment of both training and competing. Erin summed her feelings up by saying,

I think actually having a child really gave me a lot of energy and enhanced, you know, everything I did, so when I was at the [training center] I really enjoyed being there, but then I also enjoyed coming home – there was something to come home to, so I think it’s been – it’s actually,
I think, probably made me a better athlete…I’ve had some of my best years with [son].

This theme was divided into the following sub themes: training: finding the time and juggling responsibilities, traveling with families: financial and logistical challenges, training and traveling without children, the joys of families and children on the road, and a new perspective and more balanced life.

*Training: find the time, juggling responsibilities*

One of the greatest challenges in returning to high level training after becoming a mother was in finding the time to meet all demands – child care, training, traveling, and for some, work or school. Gail remembers how, as a new mom, “I was just trying to go out to train when I had some time.” Time constraints led the athletes to cut back on their training or make other adjustments in their training regimens. Anne and Gail both commented on the fact that they were unable to put in the same kind of training hours as other athletes in their sports. Anne explained,

My training was a little bit limited by my life situation, shall we say. The best women in the world were training differently, seven to – oh I’d say 650-850 hours a year, and I was lucky to get over 400 (laugh). I think last year, I probably did, maybe I got 450 – that would be a miracle if I did!

Several athletes discussed how they had to become creative with their time in order to fit their training into their busy days. Some of the participants would bring their children with them as they trained, especially when the children were babies and somewhat portable. Anne accomplished some of her training with her son in her front-pack baby carrier, switching him to a back pack when he got older. Claire also took her son out training with her when she began to get back in shape, utilizing a jogging stroller. She said, “at first…it was just a matter of taking him with me and setting out.” Similarly,
Faith was able to take her daughter out in a jogging stroller or bike seat for her easier workouts, preferring to do her intense training by herself. Both Beth and Erin discussed bringing their children to their training sites, sometimes relying on other members of the sport community (e.g., other parents, teammates) to help keep an eye on their children while they trained. Training was also scheduled around mothering responsibilities, as described by Anne:

> Often my workout would be done before my husband and son would even be awake and out of bed. That was one of my favorite ways to do it, was to get out the door at like 6:15 in the morning and go for an hour and a half and come back at 7:45 and they’re just starting to wake up and get ready to get out of bed. Those were always special days because then I had it done and out of the way and I was totally, could be Mommy the rest of the day… I just had to fit training around my life, not life around my training.

Because they had less time to devote to their training, the participants became more efficient and focused during their workouts, as Erin explained, “Maximizing your time when you have it is something I really had to learn to do.” Several athletes found that the urgency of getting all of their training done in a short amount of time led them to focus on what would be most productive and subsequently improved their training and performance. Faith noted that because of her time constraints she did not have the luxury of flexibility in planning her training. She described:

> If anything I would just compact the workouts a little more instead of having the luxury of fuller days to get things done. I knew that, okay, I have to pick up my daughter here and take care of things at home. So it just kind of made you have to, made me have to be a little more structured with my schedule instead of having the luxury of, “Ah, let’s see, when should I get this bike ride in?” and “Oh, I’ll wait until it warms up a little bit”…It helps you budget time better because you know you only have so much time to do it and you just get it done.
Similarly, Claire described how her approach to training changed after having her son and also returning to work:

I became a lot more efficient with training. You know, I really enjoyed being at practice, and messing around with the other girls and stuff at practice, but I had to be a lot more focused – what was the plan to my training? It wasn’t just to be out there [training], it was, you know, I wanted to make the Olympic team, let’s get it done. I have to be back to work, I only have this much time, I’ve got to get home and be with my family…so I had to be a lot more organized with my time. I couldn’t just screw around and just hope that, oh hopefully this kind of thing will help me…but I had to think, okay, out of two choices, if I have this kind of a workout or this kind of a workout, which one is going to benefit me the most? So that’s the way I had to start thinking about things.

Diana and Heather both began training with personal trainers – something neither had done before – in an attempt to maximize the productivity of their workouts and regain their fitness levels as quickly as possible. Both felt that as a result they were in better shape than they were before their pregnancies. Diana explained:

I really think that’s what got me into shape, literally, in a month…I was so much stronger, and then by the time I was playing the next summer, I was probably in better shape than had ever been, because of how I was training. I wasn’t necessarily on my own at the gym working with my own program – I had someone in front of me, constantly challenging me, making our workouts longer and harder…I think being, after you having a baby, you know, your body changes a lot, I was a lot weaker for taking that time off…it was good to have somebody right there with me.

Similarly, Heather noted:

Probably the best thing that I did was I hired a personal trainer at my gym…and he knew what my goal was, so he really got me back in shape quickly and into really good shape – I think actually by the time I go to the trials I was probably in better shape than I would have been had I not had the baby.

Interestingly, Gail mentioned that not having as much time to devote to training was beneficial in that it protected her from overtraining and burnout. She said,
I think I was less able to go and over train. Like, you cannot do as much training as you used to do, with a child I think, especially a toddler. It just takes so much energy to train. Then you come back home, you have a child at home, you know, you have to be mom at home...So I - for sure my outlook on training was, you know, I don’t need to do that much. I can do a bit less and still be good.

She also noted that within a year she was “back in even better shape than before I had my son.”

While these athletes experienced improvements in their training and performance, five athletes also discussed how having children negatively impacted their training. Three athletes discussed how their busy lives left them little time to rest and relax. When asked what her return to training after having her baby was like, Gail replied, “I was just tired.” Erin discussed that as her family and her training became top priorities, she sacrificed social activities, and struggled, as many new parents do, to get enough sleep during the first year of motherhood. She said,

Your time and your priorities change, so I, the odd time I would maybe have gone out with friends to a movie or this or that, whereas all my time was spent competing and training and then with [my son and partner]...Certainly lack of sleep was a big thing, so I had to find ways to get enough rest.

Diana discussed how she would have to get up much earlier in the morning in order to get her family taken care of before heading to practice. She said that she would tease her teammates, telling them:

I would just laugh and talk to my teammates and say, okay – it’s so different when you’re a mom – you can just roll out of bed and come to [practice]. I have to get up and get the baby bathed and dressed and fed, and then get lunch ready and bring him to the babysitter, and then go to [practice]. And I was just like, just realize how lucky you guys are (laughs).
Three participants discussed how having their children indirectly led to injury and overtraining. Claire recounted an injury she sustained from doing too much too soon:

I was feeling really good and strong one day and I kept [training] harder and harder and my shoulder really wasn’t used to that kind of [training] and that much of it in one session, and so I kind of screwed my shoulder up.

Similarly, Gail sustained an injury that she believes stemmed from returning to training too quickly after giving birth to her daughter. Anne felt that when she came back to train with the national team she was overtraining, which she felt was a result of “being so new at the coach-athlete relationship with the women’s coach.” She explained that after taking a couple of years off, “they really didn’t know how much I could handle, and I didn’t hardly know either, and I got totally overtrained that year.” In addition, Anne felt that the added stress of traveling with her family may have contributed to a lingering sinus infection and subsequent decline in performance.

In addition to juggling their parenting and family responsibilities, the participants relied heavily on their husbands/partners, extended family, and child care providers to care for their children while they were training and competing. The support that they received will be discussed in the section on social support.

**Traveling with families: financial and logistical challenges**

While all participants traveled with their children at some time, the frequency of this varied considerably from family to family. For example, one participant was determined to always have her family with her and said, “there is no way I’m going to separate my motherhood from my career as an athlete. It’s going to be one in the same.” Conversely, one participant almost never traveled with her son. Other participants
traveled domestically with their children but not overseas, while still others chose carefully which events to bring their children to, weighing such factors as the length of the trip, the location, and how disruptive the trip might be to the child. Two participants, who had some flexibility with their competition schedules, were able to curtail their international travel so as to avoid being away from their families for extended periods of time.

Participants found that traveling with their families was expensive and the cost was sometimes prohibitive. They explained that while athletes’ expenses were paid for by their sport organizations, if they wanted to bring their children they were often responsible for the child’s expenses as well as those of another adult (usually the father or other family member) who was needed to care for the child while the mother was competing. Diana enjoyed traveling with her son, but remarked, “There were trips when I had to leave him because literally the money it was going to cost me,” and Anne stated that “there are no funds available to help those who do travel as a family, so we would end up footing the bill all the time.” Further, this added to the competitive stress that Anne felt, as earning money was tied to winning competitions. She said:

In my sport, we’re not making scads of money, so it’s like, for me to be able to fund our traveling as a family, I had to be a winning athlete…The more I won, the more money we would have to be able to go to the next place…We had really great sponsors, but literally I had to win, because that’s where the money is – it’s in the [competing].

As one can imagine, logistically, traveling with children (and another adult to provide child care) meant making more plans and packing for more people and situations. As Faith explained:
It made travel a little bit more stressful and takes a lot more time because I have to pack for her [daughter], and pack for me, and sometimes my husband…and then having to coordinate transportation, which by myself I could just take a shuttle or a bus, and because now you have your family you have to think about renting a car, and make sure all the accommodations are adequate and all those kinds of things, so yeah, it definitely makes things a little more challenging.

She also recalled joking with another athlete she met while traveling to a competition:

I remember when we got to the airport we went over to baggage claim and one of the other gals who [competes] with me was there and we were waiting for our luggage to come out. And I was like, “Oh that’s ours, and that’s ours, and that’s ours,” because we had to bring a pack-and-play and a car seat and, you know, all these things.

Once at the competition site, three participants explained, their mothering duties did not end. Although caring for a child while preparing to compete (or while competing) was hectic, the participants shared their stories with a sense of humor:

I remember my start back to [competing], I would be breastfeeding, and looking at my watch going, okay, I’ve got to start in 45 minutes, okay, breastfeed, alright, change a poopie diaper, okay, jump out of the car, go [check my equipment], okay baby’s hungry again, okay (laughs), like hilarious. (Anne)

I remember I was trying to nurse my daughter before the [event] started and one of the girls came by and she was like, “Oh my gosh! (laughs). You’re sitting there trying to nurse and you have a [competition] starting!” (Faith)

At the trials you have a [mid-game break] and you had approximately five – if it was a televised game you might have seven minutes during the [mid-game break], and because my daughter wasn’t taking a bottle I would make a mad dash to the washroom to try and breast feed so that she would last long enough to the end of the game…So not only was I trying to compete, I was also having to try and do this [in the middle of a game], and come dashing back…and immediately get back into your focus and try and play well. (Heather)

These added responsibilities were not necessarily negative, as Gail explained that at a competition,
It was great to have him [son] around for sure. I didn’t have much time to be stressed – let’s just say that – before an [event] (laughs). It’s good – it takes the stress away…you don’t have time to think about all these [competition worries].

The amount of support available from each sport organization, in terms of finances, organization, and encouragement, varied greatly from sport to sport. Organizational support will be discussed in more depth in Theme #6: Organizational Support, but a few examples of how organizations affected travel are highlighted here.

Some organizations prohibited the athletes from sharing accommodations or team vehicles with their families. For example, three participants reported that the Olympic Training Centers would not allow their children to stay on site with them during team training camps. This policy left the athletes with the burden of finding and paying for alternate lodging. Two participants chose to stay off-site with their families, and one stayed on-site while her family stayed with a local family. One participant found this especially frustrating as “there were people not even on the [national team] that joined us for the camp that were getting room and board and here I was paying $700 to stay [off site].” Diana told of how, at first, she was not allowed to ride on the team bus with her son, so when they landed in a city for a competition, she would have to rent a car and follow behind the team bus to their hotel and games. She remembered,

That got really hard – I mean, here I am in a city, I don’t know where I am, and I’m trying to – just so my son can be with me, we’re trying to drive around and find our way, and so it was really hard.

The policy changed in the middle of that season, which she said was a considerable relief, as she had originally been expected to drive behind the team bus on road trips (up to eight hours) as well.
Both Anne and Diana described feeling that they had to shoulder the burden of coordinating and funding their travel alone, and felt a considerable amount of stress.

Diana explained:

It started out not good, because the burden was just on me – you’re the mom, you deal with it, you find out ways – you find out ways to get your car, you find out ways to get your flights, you find out ways to, you know, basically travel the country every two days and have a two-year-old with you and a friend watching him.

Anne said of her experience:

I don’t think they knew what to do with us at first, and so we just – we always were making our own arrangements because they weren’t going to...I don’t know – I’m trying to say this a certain way – they weren’t going to make any exception for us, for one thing, they weren’t going to make it any easier or give us a price break or anything. Be it booking our own travel or getting our own vehicle.

Training and traveling without children: the effects of being separated

Participants did not always travel with their children. Diana, Erin, Faith, and Gail noted that the finances and logistics prevented them from traveling with their families as often as they would have liked, and felt that sometimes it was just easier to leave their children at home. For example, Gail discussed how she traveled to Europe without her son when he was six months old because she did not have anyone to travel with her. She explained, “I didn’t have a nanny and the grandparents, they don’t like traveling that far, so I left him with my husband and his parents, but that was tough.” Erin felt that traveling would be too disruptive to her son, and noted that when competing, it was difficult to find time to spend with him anyway. She said:

We always thought it was better for him [son] because when I was traveling, it’s so busy and you’re so preoccupied, that I don’t even have a lot of time to be able to spend with him, and then, you know, he’s in his
own environment…and he was happier to stay with Grandma and Grandpa at home than he was to be in some hotel room.

Four of the participants spent a significant amount of time living and training away from their families. Beth and Claire lived apart from their husbands and children for about a year, Erin for about eight months, and Faith for three months. For two participants, conflicts with jobs and school caused the separation (with one parent working in one city and the other attending school in a different city), while the others took opportunities to train in a different location (one in another state, one overseas). In all cases, the children lived with their fathers, who became the primary caregivers, along with considerable help from extended family members. While these separations were described as difficult, they were also necessary in order for the athletes to achieve their high level of performance. For example, Erin said that training overseas “was the hardest thing I had ever done with my son…but I felt I needed to do it at the time.” Similarly, Faith said:

It was very hard emotionally, but physically it was, I think, really what I needed, because I could just focus all of my energy on either training or recovering from training. So I think without that it would have been a lot – pretty hard for me to have made the Olympic team.

Claire discussed how the decision to live apart from her family was not based on her training needs, but ultimately benefitted her athletic performance. She explained:

I’m a very independent person, so I missed him [son], but during the week I had my me time, so I didn’t feel like I had the tugging of being a mom during the week, so I could spend the time I needed in training and not have to worry about, oh, I’m not spending enough time with my kid, because he wasn’t around anyway (laugh). So it worked out for me.
For Heather, the separation from her family during the Olympic Games led her to feel torn between her family and her commitment to her sport, and ultimately had a negative impact on her performance. She said:

I knew that in some respects I was a bit of a mess because of, you know, having had this baby and having to leave it behind, and you feel guilty for doing that, and it was, at the time you think well, it’s two months out of your life…and you’re so torn, because here you are at the pinnacle of your [sport] career, but you’re also at the pinnacle of being a mother, and being a new mother, and it just, the timing of it was just so tough that they both came at the same time because you can’t really – I mean you can’t say no to either one, or at least I couldn’t.

Ultimately, for two participants, the separations proved to be too difficult and not worth it. Erin was invited back to Europe to train the next year and she went, but returned home quickly. While she admitted that the training environment was not as good as it had been her first year, she noted, “ultimately my decision to come back was because it was just too hard to be away from my family and I didn’t want to continue that, by myself.” For Gail, the combination of being injured and being away from her family led her to decide to retire from sport after her third Olympics. She said of her last year competing:

I wouldn’t see him [son] for two weeks, then I saw him for two weeks, and I didn’t see him for another two weeks. But then, during the Olympics, I didn’t bring him at all so I was gone for a month. And that was really tough…that’s when I made the decision that I couldn’t do this anymore. [Interviewer: Oh, really?] Yeah, no – it was not worth it.

She later added, “For me to be at the Olympics injured, and not being able to [compete] at my full potential, and leaving my son for a month - it was just, ‘why did I do that?’”
Despite the logistical challenges of traveling with children, when asked what they might have done differently, participants said that they would have liked to have had their children with them more often, regretting only the circumstances that prevented them from doing so (e.g., organizational support, finances, timing). For example, Erin stated:

I think earlier on if I could have taken him on the road with me sometimes I would have liked to, but it just was so new for me, for the organization, for everybody, that it just seemed like the best thing to do was to leave him.

They discussed how having their children with them, especially at competitions, enhanced the experience and helped them to keep their sport in perspective. For example, Diana said, “I think when I look back at the times that I did have my son with me, I do have to say that there was nothing better than to be able to come to him [after a competition].”

Similarly, Anne explained:

Even though there were so many struggles, it was so rewarding because at the end of the day after a hard [event] I’d just go by my son who’s cheering for me, “Go Mama, go!” and my husband is photographing me… and it was such a collaborative effort, and, oh, just to have the love and support of my family with me on the road made a huge difference.

She would later add, “I had a whole lot of extra stress, but also a lot of extra joy too… I still had my life and my love with me everywhere I went. So it was special too. It was special.”

Finally, two participants discussed how having their children around had a positive impact on their teammates as well. Erin stated:

He [son] was sort of a comic relief for everybody when the pressure is sometimes so high and everybody’s so stressed out about making the team
and performing well, and a little three or four-year-old comes in and, you know, has got snot running down their nose and they’re doing something funny…I mean you realize it’s just a game and, you know, he doesn’t care if we win or lose, and who’s the best and who’s the worst – like, he doesn’t even think about that, and so I think it’s just that innocence that you have around the team that’s very healthy and helpful.

Diana said:

Having a child around the team really brought a lightheartedness to the team, I thought…I mean, he was just a joy to have around. When he would go up and try to give people hugs or sit on their laps, he just got people smiling and to me that was neat, I have to say, to see that even in this situation of all of us…traveling from place to place… [always striving] to play our best, he still could allow us just to remember what’s important.

Similarly, Beth discussed how she would have liked to have brought her daughter on the road more often, and said of having her child around the team, “I think it would have lightened the mood a lot of times, having a kid around. I think it would have helped out a lot.”

A new perspective, a more balanced life

All of the participants discussed the concept that their families gave them a new perspective on both their athletic careers and their lives in general, and in doing so, enhanced their enjoyment. Interestingly, several participants described elite athletes as “selfish.” For example, Gail said, “as an athlete, you, I’ll be honest, you’re a bit selfish, so once you have a child you cannot be selfish anymore,” and Anne noted, “a typical elite athlete, the focus is all about them – eat, sleep, [train], eat sleep, and [train].” Once they had their children, however, these athletes began to see the importance of life outside of athletics. Claire explained, “It’s not all about me anymore. Because you can still have that outlook a lot, even when it’s just you and your husband, you can still be me, me, me,
but now I had a kid…” and later would add that after having her son, “it wasn’t all about [sport] – I mean there was the rest of life as well.” Erin stated, “you learn to care about something outside of just [sport], of just what you’re doing, so that’s important, I think, for an athlete.” She would later add that having her son “taught me patience, it taught me perspective, it taught me to appreciate those little moments and not get caught up in just worrying about [sport, sport] all the time, so I think that’s very healthy.”

The athletes found that having more in their lives than training and competing took away some of the pressure to succeed and also helped them to persevere when faced with challenges. For example, Diana said:

I think for me it [being a mother] almost made me, I don’t know, more of a complete athlete in a sense. It gave me more balance, more perspective. Again, it was hard, but it wasn’t the end of the world if things didn’t go well, you know? Everything wasn’t so wrapped up in that because there were more important things…

Similarly, Faith said that not only did having a more balanced perspective allow her to enjoy her sport, she was able to relax at competitions and perform better:

I think the neat thing about having a baby, I mean it definitely made it more challenging…but one thing I think it really did to help me is just put the [sport] thing in perspective. Where I know a lot of people, and me probably before I had the baby, took it so seriously and it’s a big deal. And, you know, once I had her you realize that my [sport] is fun, but it’s really, it’s not that big of a deal, it’s something I enjoy doing. What’s really important is the family and kids, and I think with that attitude you don’t get as uptight and stressed about [competing] because you know…if you don’t have success, your family still loves you and you still have them and it just makes it, I think, a lot less pressure…makes it a little less serious and more enjoyable. Which I think in turn you’re more relaxed and you can actually do better.

Gail described how having her new perspective on her athletic career was especially helpful when she was struggling with an injury. She explained:
Before it was like, okay, I’ve got to – this is my job and I’ve got to do it well, right? As an [athlete]. And then once I had my son it’s like, you know what? Even if I have a bad day, it doesn’t matter (laughs). I have a great family and so, for sure, my outlook on the sport and life in general was really different. And I think, you know, that year leading up to the Olympics, it was really hard, but thankfully I had my son. Because it was not, [sport] was not everything anymore in my life.

Claire told of how her desire to set a good example for her son helped to motivate her to persevere in her training. She said that once she became a mother, she would ask herself,

How am I living my life, that my kid is going to watch and see? Is he going to want to be like me or is he not going to want to be like me, because of my actions? You know, I want to be able to follow through with what I am doing so that my son sees, you know, what you start you finish.

This motivation was especially important when, right before the Olympic Trials, she was faced with the loss of a close family member. She remembered:

I kind of wanted to give up…I was really sad, and I was like, you know, do I really want to do this? This is so freakin’ hard. And am I going to make the team or should I just quit now and move on with my life? And then I was like, you know what? I don’t want my son to see that I’ve given up on something that I’ve tried so hard [to achieve], because I had come up with this dream when I was twelve years old…So I want him to know, and my other one, even though he was born after the fact, that something you start and want to achieve, it’s not just going to be handed to you, you actually have to work hard for it.

Beth also drew motivation from her family, but in a different way. Realizing the sacrifices that she and her family were making so that she could pursue her athletic career forced her to examine her reasons for playing and pushed her to make sure that the sacrifices were worthwhile. She said:

It makes a difference as far as how much you care and how much you give everyday, and what you’re sacrificing. I mean, you’re sacrificing being away from your child sometimes, and, you know, your husband is sacrificing, taking care of the kids for you – you can’t not think about how much people are behind you and supporting you and helping you out, and
I mean, you’ve really got to think, do I want this? Because all of these people are sacrificing for you. I mean, this is something that I want, so if you have an off day, you’ve got to sit back and say, yeah, this is what I want, so you’ve just got to put your hard hat on and go back to work.

Theme # 4: The Effects of the Elite Sport Career on Motherhood and the Family

So far, the focus has been on how the participants’ athletic careers were affected by their families and their roles as mothers. It is important to remember, however, that each participant’s athletic career also had an impact on her role as a mother and on her family. Participants discussed the memories that were made while traveling with their families and how their children and husbands/partners were affected by their training and traveling. In addition, just as parenthood gave the participants a life away from athletics, so too was their sport involvement able to balance their identities as mothers. The sub themes within this theme include: creating the family story, effects on children, effects on husbands/partners, and the effect on the image of self as a mother.

Creating the Family Story

Participants discussed that traveling with their families created priceless memories and contributed to the creation of their family story, and interviews were often peppered with humorous anecdotes about training and traveling with children. For example, Faith told of how an incident at her first post-baby competition is now part of her family lore:

I think because I was nervous I couldn’t pump enough [breast milk] before, and my poor husband is trying to feed a hungry baby in the middle of my [event], and he tries to water down the milk and she gets really mad, and he will, well all of us will never forget that. He always tells my daughter – he’s like, “Oh, that’s when you got really, really mad for the first time” (laughs).
Faith also discussed her family’s experience at the Olympic Games and that even though her daughter does not remember much about being at the Games, she is able to show her all of their pictures and talk about the trip with her. Diana told of how her son, after spending many afternoons watching his mother from the stands, began referring to her by her full name, and in the long, drawn out style the sport announcers would use. She also discussed how he was potty trained by the team on the tour bus, and that some teammates tried to teach him to cheer for their main rivals.

More than one athlete told of an event where they brought their children either out onto the playing field or onto the awards podium, including their children in their victories. Erin, who once brought her son down from the stands to celebrate a win with her team said that before the Olympics her son asked, “Mom, if you win the gold medal can I come down on the [playing field] with you again?” Heather described the scene at the Olympic trials where she carried her daughter onto the podium to receive her medal:

My mom was standing there with [daughter] and she just pushed [daughter] into my arms, and immediately they grab you basically, because its all timed on television, and they grab you and say you gotta go back into the staging area…and you have no time. So I’ve got this baby in my arms with me so I’m thinking, you know what? [Daughter] has been with us through this whole thing, she can just come with me…and so I’m parading out with my team and I’m carrying [daughter] in my arms and we go up on the podium and they present our medals to us.

Anne related a story about how her family had seats for the Olympic Opening Ceremonies right by the tunnel where the athletes entered the stadium. She laughingly remembered the exchange she had with her husband when he called her cell phone to let her know where they were sitting:

And my husband is such a joker too, he’s like, “I’m going to throw [son] down to you and you can carry him in there with you!” And I’m like,
“Hello! Get arrested! You are not throwing him down to me!” And he’s like, “Come on, it’s a once in a lifetime thing!” And I’m like, “I'll kill you if you do that!” (laughs)

In addition, after the Games she and her family spent some time touring Europe together before returning home. Later in the interview, Anne summed up her feelings by saying,

It would not have been the same if I had done all of this, these years of [competing] without [son] and [husband], there’s just no way we would have maintained connectedness…It wouldn’t have been our story, it would have been Mommy’s.

Effects on children

Participants also felt that while their training and traveling could sometimes be disruptive to their children, they ultimately benefitted from the unique experiences they had as a result of their mothers’ athletic careers. For example, Anne said, “[Son] was great – I mean I don’t know if any kid could have put up with what we did during those years,” but later added, “He’s such a well adjusted and amazing kid, and I get comments all the time, ‘you’re son is so well adjusted and so good at interacting with adults,’ and it’s just all that exposure he had.” Beth also explained:

She gets to experience a lot of things that other kids don’t get to. I mean, I could bring her to the village; she could see the Olympic Village and stuff like that, and seeing another country and what that’s all about, and different food – so it was pretty cool to have her experience that and she remembers most of it.

In addition, the sport environment and their mothers’ training and traveling gave children the opportunity to cultivate relationships with other family members and caregivers outside of the family. Anne explained that she felt, “just to have a real solid hour to two hours each day when it’s father-son time was so important,” and Faith said:

I’ve kind of found that it’s a nice happy balance to have my daughter in daycare half time and have her home with me half time, because then she
gets, I get to spend a lot of time with her, but then she also gets to interact with other kids and just learn socialization skills.

Two participants also discussed how their children enjoyed interacting with their teammates. Beth discussed how her daughter enjoyed playing at her training site and said, “She loves going on trips or riding the bus or hanging out – she thought it was pretty cool. It was like having twenty new friends.” Similarly, Diana said, “It was really cute to see his relationships with all the teammates.”

Four participants mentioned that their sport involvement helped them to teach their children valuable lessons about hard work, perseverance, and an enjoyment of sport and physical activity. They felt that they were able to provide their children with a positive role model as well as parlay their struggles and triumphs into life lessons. For example, Beth discussed that while returning to her sport after having her daughter was a bit of a struggle, she was cognizant of being a role model for her daughter:

I think at first it’s like, oh man it’s really hard trying to get back in shape, and if I want to keep playing I’m going to miss out on things. But I think her seeing me strive for something is important to…it’s kind of like a role model – I mean she comes up there and she sees how hard I work.

Claire discussed how her performance at the Olympic Games was disappointing, but also that she felt that this could be an important lesson to share with her children. She explained:

Maybe it’s something later down the road I can tells my sons, you know, I got messed up on that experience, biggest [event] of my life…I finished it, but it wasn’t the outcome I wanted at all, but you know what? I went through with it, and I finished what I wanted. I did have a great experience when I was over there.

The children of two participants (Anne and Erin) are currently participating in their mothers’ respective sports, and Anne is a coach for her community’s youth sport
program. Anne said that she feels she is using her sport experience to give back to her children and community by teaching and mentoring young athletes and instilling in her children an appreciation for physical activity. She noted, “My family is a testament to still getting out. [Our second son] had been camping and backpacking I don’t know how many times before he was three months old.” Erin admitted that her sport involvement may have had both positive and negative effects on her son’s sport involvement. She said,

I bring him to the [training site], he comes to games, he likes watching games. Now he’s starting to [play] …so he asks to go [practice] a lot, and it’s fun to teach him your sport as well. [He’s playing], not organized sports, but he likes to go and have fun, and you know, I think he sees the joy in the game, or he’s curious about the game and wants to play…I don’t think he’ll be going to the [professional leagues] anytime soon, but he seems to really enjoy it.

Erin also added, however, “I think he sometimes associates [sport] with stress too, because Mom’s gone or Dad’s gone on the road, so sometimes it’s not the greatest association.”

The effect of elite sports on husbands/fathers

All of the participants relied heavily on their husbands/partners to care for their children while they were training and competing, and the support that they received will be discussed in the next theme. The participants expressed much gratitude for this support, but also discussed the ways their sport careers affected their husbands and relationships. One participant discussed how her and her husband’s athletic involvement helped them to stay connected during their busy lives as parents. Faith had met her husband through their sport involvement and discussed how, even though he did not compete at an elite level, they could put the baby in the jogging stroller or bike seat and exercise together. She said,
I think for us that was a lifesaver in that we got to still do things together, but all three of us. We could go on bike rides with the child or go on runs with the baby, and that just helped us to keep what we had in common and be able to spend the time together.

Four of the participants also discussed how their husbands had sacrificed their own career or sport aspirations, giving priority to their wives’ athletic careers. Beth discussed the sacrifices her husband made in order for her to pursue her athletic career, and said that his career is an important consideration when deciding whether or not she will continue to try for another Olympic team. In fact, she had encouraged her husband not to accompany her to the 2006 Games because of an important work commitment he had. She recalled:

My husband couldn’t come – I told him he should stay [because of a career opportunity], so I thought it was pretty important for him to stay home and do something like that. I mean I knew he wanted to come and that he loved me, but that was pretty important for him too.

Similarly, Anne discussed how her husband essentially put his own career on hold so that he could travel the competitive circuit with her and her son.

Heather’s husband was a competitive athlete himself, so when balancing a new family with two sport careers, something had to give. She stated:

My husband was just as competitive a [player] as I am, so trying to juggle two of us in it along with a family…basically he had to give up his season the year that I, the year that I went to the Olympics.

Heather later added that her sport commitment put considerable stress on her family. She explained:

It’s hard on family life – it becomes a real challenge. Like I know it was – there was time in our marriage when it was very difficult because there’s so much focus on one person and what that person needs to make it all happen that, you know, it becomes a real drain on the relationship…Because it takes so much passion from you and so much
commitment to be at the level that you can’t give to your family and I don’t know – it’s just really hard.

Faith reported that her husband was also a competitive athlete, but since he did not compete at an elite level, her training was always seen as more important. Now that she had accomplished her goal of competing in the Olympics (and had another baby), she feels it is time for her to support his athletic goals. She explained:

He’s always kind of just been on the amateur level and I’d say pretty much since I had [daughter] he’s done maybe a handful of [competitions] is all. Because it just seems like my training would kind of have priority over his when it was my job, and he never felt like he was in good enough shape to [compete]. But I think now I pretty much decided that after I had this little one, that it’s all him, he could do whatever he wants…and I’m hoping that he’s going to do some more [competing] this summer since I’m not going to do any this summer – Give him a chance to do it and maybe travel for some [competitions] for him for once.

The effect of sport on the image of self as mother

As mentioned earlier, every athlete interviewed except for two reported that she was the first woman in her sport to have a child and then return to elite level training, and all but one was the only mother on her team/training group during the four years leading up to the Olympic Games. Because of this, they felt that theirs was an unlikely and unusual experience. Several mentioned the cultural expectation that motherhood would lead them to give up their athletic pursuits, and that they were actively resisting this stereotype. Some faced this expectation overtly. For example, Diana recalled,

There was one person, a staff person at [sport organization] who just said to me, “Well, we’ll just see what happens. You never know, after you have a baby you just might not want to come back.” And I said, “I don’t think that’s going to happen, but alright, we’ll wait and see.”

She later added:
I think originally maybe a couple of people thought I might not have that same passion for it or it might not be number one, and yeah, it probably won’t be number one, but that doesn’t mean you can’t maintain that level of excellence.

Similarly, when Gail told her circle of athlete peers that she was pregnant, many of them assumed that her career was over.

I think most of my teammates were shocked, even maybe sad, because they knew - I think their first reaction was, “well, you’re done [in the sport].” That, you know, I was done with my career. It was hard actually because I knew in me that I wanted to try and come back, but a lot of people thought it was not possible really. They’re like, “What are you talking about? You’re done your career.”

In addition, Gail felt that she needed to convince her sport’s governing body that it was possible for her to return to the national team. She commented, “Most of the association, as soon as they heard I was pregnant, it was like my career was over.”

This expectation was not only expressed by those within the athletes’ immediate circle, but in one case, in a public forum, as one participant saw her decision to return to training after having her baby debated in print. After a magazine wrote a story about her, a letter from a reader was published, criticizing her for putting her own athletic goals ahead of her duty to care for her husband and child; this was then followed by a reply from the article’s author defending the mother-athlete. In her case, her private choices became fodder for public criticism and debate.

For others, this expectation was more covert, expressed as a general feeling that a woman would give up her own pursuits once she had a child. Anne noted, “Life doesn’t end with parenthood, which some people like to think it does…especially for mothers…but I felt I could still give the best to [son] and the best to my sport, as best I could.” Later she added, “You can bounce back after pregnancy. You don’t have to move
your body to this warped ‘Mommyland’ (laughs). You know, you can still have a lot if
fitness and a lot of fun.” Similarly, Diana stated, “Things don’t have to change and you
stop everything because you’re now a mom.”

Two of the participants noted that their ability to return to their sport and their
post-baby athletic accomplishments gave them a special sense of pride. For example,
Diana said:

I think it meant a lot for me to be able to go out and still accomplish my
dream, and still represent my country, and still play at an elite level, even
though I have a child at home…I was really proud to be able to still do
that.

Similarly, Gail said of making the Olympic team:

I was going in there thinking, wow, this is pretty cool – I’m a Mom and
I’m at the Olympics…and it was not easy to get there as a mom as
well…so I had a bit of pride going into it as well, you know, I’m proud of
myself, I did it. Because I didn’t know if I could do it…and I actually
achieved my goal…so that for sure – I was pretty proud of myself doing
that.

In addition, Gail discussed how returning to training had helped her in her transition to
motherhood by offering an outlet to get out of the house and do something for herself.
She said, “I think I might have had a bit of ‘the blues,’ they call it,” and that when she
began working her way back into training,

I felt good doing it because it got me out…So for me it was more of
getting out to get some air and just get away a little bit to have my own
time. So it kind of worked out very well for that.

While the participants saw themselves as resisting cultural expectations of
mothers, they were not immune to the belief that motherhood should be their top priority,
and at times struggled with defining their roles as mothers and athletes. For Anne, her
determination to always travel with her family was fueled by her spiritual belief that
having a family was a vocation and she could not compromise that. She explained that when she decided to return to her sport:

I said, okay, if we’re going to do this, I am not doing, it’s not Mommy the [athlete], bye you guys, have fun... There is just no way I’m going to separate my motherhood from my career as an athlete. It’s going to be one in the same... I was uncompromisingly like, my family is coming and I am staying with them. I’ve still got to be mother to my child, even though I’m on the [national team].

When Faith decided to move to another state for three months to step up her training before the Olympic trials, she struggled with the prospect of leaving her daughter behind. She said, “I feel pretty strongly that family is more important, and then when I was trying to make that decision I was like, okay, if my family is more important, why am I leaving my family to go train?”

Within the athletic world, the participants also saw themselves as trailblazers; they felt that they could be positive role models for other mothers and athletes and enjoyed being recognized as both mothers and athletes. Four noted that they hoped that their experiences would let other athletes know that combining elite athletics and motherhood was indeed possible. Heather described the positive reactions she got when the picture of her on the podium with her daughter was published:

I can’t tell you how many women I have heard from that have emailed me or called me or wrote me saying that they had tears in their eyes and how inspirational it was for them to see that... I’ve had – just from bringing my baby up on the podium with me, and through that I’ve had such a powerful reaction from all the women. It’s been really cool. So that part I – if I was the least bit motivating to women to have kids and to pursue sports I hope, I hope I was a positive influence.

Faith said that she has encouraged other women in her sport not to put off having children because of the fear that they will not be able to compete again and said, “I’ve encouraged
them that, you know, if you do want to have kids, don’t wait.” She also said that mothers should not “give up on dreams or goals they might have because of a child.” Gail made a similar point, explaining:

I was happy to tell my story because it’s possible, and because so many women postpone having children and I think with [my sport] you can’t, you’re at your peak basically end of twenties, really. And so you’re postponing being a mother for, you can postpone it for a long time where I think that it’s possible to come back and, you know, actually do very well.

Interestingly, Anne wondered if her experience would deter or inspire others. She noted, “I don’t know what people must think after seeing us do this whole thing. They probably think, ‘I would never do that with a family.’ Or they might think, ‘Oh – maybe I could do it with a family.’”

**Theme #5: Social Support**

All of the participants received a great deal of support from their families and communities, and they all noted that this support was essential to their athletic success. Family members, friends, and members of the community all provided support in both physical and emotional ways, by assisting with child care and traveling with the athletes, as well as offering encouragement and cheering the participants on. Participants expressed much appreciation for this support, and several said that they could not have accomplished what they did without the support of their families and friends. Some also acknowledged that this may not have been the best experience for their support system. As Heather noted,

You don’t realize until, you know, you get, you set goals like these what kind of demands you’re going to end up putting on your family and, you know, it’s – I think in a way it’s tougher for them than it is for you because they’re, they’re just the support people. They don’t get to experience some of the excitement that you do.
This theme is divided into three sub themes: spouse/partner support, support from extended family, and support from friends and community.

**Spouse/partner support**

All of the participants discussed the importance of the support they received from their husbands/partners. Each participant in this study described herself as either married to or in a committed relationship with the father of her child(ren), and they all relied heavily on their husbands/partners for support, both emotional and with the practical aspects of child care. As previously discussed, several participants talked about the sacrifices that their husbands made in order to make their Olympic dreams a reality, and noted that their successes were really family affairs.

Three participants discussed how the decision to return to their athletic careers was made with their husbands’ support and encouragement. Anne even described how she felt that initially her husband was more enthusiastic about her return to competitive sport than she was. She explained,

> My husband hadn’t seen me – I had three years off, and my career as a junior was pretty separated from his life…he didn’t realize quite the talent, I don’t think, and just what I had done with my [sport], so when he saw me do this [event], and I had a fourteen month old baby, and go and win…he is like, “Honey, you are talented, you have got to use this, there is no way you can not be a [competitive athlete]” and I was kind of like, “whoa, wait…I already know this whole scene.”

Claire contemplated retiring from her sport after failing to make the 2000 Olympic team, until her husband told her that he would support her in training for the next Olympics as well. Similarly, Faith discovered she was pregnant during the 2000 Olympic trial period, and missed the Sydney Games. She said, “After I had her [daughter], my husband was
just really encouraging to just keep going at it…So with my husband’s encouragement, I just got back into training for another four years.”

The husbands/partners of five participants were also involved in their respective sports, three as coaches and two as competitors, and they noted how sharing an understanding and appreciation of sport helped them to feel supported. As a coach and trainer of elite athletes, Beth’s husband was able to help her with the physical aspects of recovering from pregnancy and regaining her fitness, and Erin noted that because of her partner’s involvement in the sport, he was understanding and supportive of her when her training and competing took her away from the family. She said that when she had the opportunity to train and compete overseas, “he also understood why I went there and was very supportive.” Similarly, Gail stated that since her husband was a coach, “he knows how it works” and could be supportive of her training and traveling. As mentioned earlier, Faith and her husband had a special connection through their sport involvement, and while they sometimes trained together, he gave her training priority over his own as she made her bid for the Olympic team. His understanding of her sport and her goals was important when she decided to train in another state for three months before the Olympic trials. She said:

I was so torn about the decision because I – it was – you know, obviously leaving your tree-year-old is a hard decision to make…But my husband just was like, you know, this is a once in a lifetime opportunity to just do your best and do every possible thing you can to do your best. So he not only supported, but encouraged me to go ahead and do it.

Even the husbands who were not athletes or coaches themselves helped their wives with their training. Diana described how her husband would help her practice certain skills (although she did describe his attempts to play her sport as “kind of funny”),

and Anne enlisted her husband’s help, explaining how he would come out training with her with their son in the backpack, “and they would just shadow me. They’d follow me around or wait at an intersection and I’d go do intervals and pass them…or [husband would be] riding the bike along side me with the baby in the bike trailer behind.” As in Faith’s case, not only would this give her more training time, but also helped her to feel supported and connected to her family, as she noted, “it meant so much just to have them with me in my training.”

Fathers were the most often utilized providers of child care while mother-athletes were training and competing. In fact, two participants described their husband/partner as “Mr. Mom” (alluding to the 1983 film in which a father becomes a stay-at-home parent while his wife enters the paid workforce full time). Erin said, “[Partner] was so good with [son], he did a lot of the primary, you know, stuff, at the beginning because I was traveling a lot…I mean he became Mr. Mom when I left and basically he did everything.” Anne also described her husband as “Mr. Mom” and noted that because they both worked in their family’s business, they had the flexibility to schedule their work around child care and her training. She explained, “Often times when my husband would come home for lunch I’d be already dressed in my, be it my running clothes or whatever, and say, ‘Here’s your lunch, here’s [son’s] lunch – see ya in an hour!’” She noted that this alleviated any guilt she may have felt about not being with her son, because he was getting one-on-one time with his father:

[Husband] was Mr. Mom for sure, which was great, because just to have a real solid two hours each day when it’s father-son time was so important. And I didn’t feel like, you know, I was giving [son] the short end of the straw because I was ditching him at daycare or something so I could go do my thing. He was getting this wonderful, positive time with his Papa.
Three other participants discussed how the flexibility of their husband’s jobs allowed them to take on more fathering responsibilities. Claire said of her husband’s boss:

He had a lot of kids himself, so he understood what it was like to be able to help out the wife and watch the kids for a little while, so he understood that, you know, if you gotta go, you gotta go, and we can get the job done another time…it wasn’t ever a huge deal.

Similarly, Diana noted that her husband worked in sales and could work from home or schedule his sales calls around his child care duties, and when she could not travel with her son, she relied on her husband to care for him. Faith recalled that when she went back to work part-time, her husband began working from home so that they would not have to send their infant daughter to day care. Erin, whose partner coached other athletes in her sport, explained how their son was a fixture at their training site and workplace, often relying on other members of the sport community to help out:

He did a lot of early morning [training] sessions – I would already be at the [training center], so he would take [son] with him in a little basket, a carrier, to the [center], and the moms of the kids he was coaching would watch him during the early morning hours.

Fathers were also integral in providing care for their children when the mother-athletes traveled for training and competition. At times, fathers would travel with their wives and children, taking care of their children while their wives trained/competed. At other times, the children would stay home with their fathers while their mothers traveled. Anne describes how her husband and son “came with me everywhere. Every training camp, when I’d leave and go to [city] for a few weeks or all the [competitions] we went to, they came.” Faith discussed how her husband would travel with her to most of her
competitions, but that when he couldn’t come, she would go alone. She noted, “obviously I couldn’t take care of the little one during the [competition], so most of the [competitions] I tried to take him [husband] with me.” She also acknowledged that this may not have been the most fun for her husband. She said, “He hardly even gets to watch the [event], he’s too busy chasing my daughter, running all over the place – and she gets bored quick – and so I just remember it was pretty stressful for him to have her.” Erin said that she did not travel much with her son, but when she did, the baby was usually with his father, as she would be too busy with her team or preoccupied with the competition to spend a lot of time with him.

Claire explained that her competitions were usually held on the weekends, when her husband didn’t have to work, so she could easily leave her son at home with him, and Gail noted that her husband would stay home any time that she was away: “Me and my husband had made a pact, if you say, that if I’m gone, he has to be around with him.” In Heather’s case, she traveled with her youngest child while the older one stayed home with his father, which contributed to the family stress described earlier. She explained:

My husband really, he was basically a single parent with my son, because of course my mom and [daughter] and I were traveling, so it put a lot of demands on his time…and of course my husband works full time and he has long hours for his job, so, but you do what you have to do to make it work.

As discussed earlier, three of the participants lived and trained away from their families for a significant amount of time, and in all three cases, their children lived with their fathers, who became the primary caregivers. In addition to daily child care duties, keeping the family connected took a considerable amount of time, and the participants
noted the sacrifices that their husbands/partners made in order to make it work. As Beth described,

He’d [husband] drive up during the week or the end of the week or on weekends, and drive back, you know, two and a half hours, so that was pretty tough on him, driving back and forth, for a year, so I could finish up school.

Claire also discussed how the heavier burden fell to her husband as he juggled work, school, and child care while she was able to live the life of a “bachelorette” during the week, focusing on her work and training, seeing her family on weekends and breaks.

While all of the athletes interviewed were grateful for their husbands’ support, two of the participants discussed times when they did not feel supported. Claire described how her husband initially supported her return to elite sport, but then had a difficult time when she had to travel:

There was an occasional time with my husband where I didn’t feel he was being very supportive, because he had said from the very, very start, oh yeah, I totally support you in doing this, but then when it came down to the nitty-gritty a couple of times he would give me a guilt trip about traveling, and so we had a talk about that. That became the hard part – when it actually came time to do the supporting as far as me being away… but once I finally confronted him about it, he understood that what he was doing was making it harder for me, so he backed off.

Anne explained that as her husband sacrificed his career for hers, he became more invested in her results, and she felt increasing pressure to perform. She described:

My husband, he’s really good at applying a lot of pressure (laughs). Like, it was just so hard for him to understand, especially when my results started slipping, you know, why that was happening, and can’t you go faster?...they put a lot of pressure on, they have a lot of expectations, they’ve hung a ton on the line themselves, for your success.
Support from extended family

In addition to the support given by the participants’ spouses/partners, the athletes interviewed relied heavily on their extended families for support and help with child care. Most often, it was the couples’ own parents who did the most in terms of supporting and assisting the family. For example, when returning to training, Beth, Claire, Erin, and Gail relied on their parents and in-laws to help care for their babies. Beth said, “My family helped out a lot with [daughter]. We never put her in day care or anything, we don’t really like that, so she’d either be at my parents’ house or his parents’ house or she’d come with us.” Claire described how she scheduled her training around the availability of her son’s grandparents during the first four or five months, before she went back to work: “We lived next to my parents and my in-laws, so they would help me out when they were at home, so at those times I would schedule my practices to be in the later afternoons.” Similarly, Gail said that because her parents in-law lived in the same town, “when I went out training in the morning and the afternoon they were taking care of our son, so they were a great help.” She also added, “I don’t know, I think I could not have done it without them.” Erin discussed that her parents’ support was essential during the first year of her son’s life as he had been born prematurely and had some health issues, and his care required a lot of time of energy. In addition, she was spending a lot of time traveling for her sport, and her partner and son even spent some time living with her parents. She said, “My parents opened their home and really helped to raise him, and helped all of us for that first year, for sure.”

As the Olympic Games approached, several of the participants discussed how their training and competition schedules increased, and that they again leaned heavily on
their extended families for support. Faith described how her mother came to live with her family for most of the year before the Games:

A few years down the road when it got closer to the Olympics, she came out and stayed with us for a very extended period of time to help with [daughter] so that I could really pursue the training…she came out in the summer of 2003, so pretty much the whole year before the Olympics my mom was living with us, and she was basically a live in nanny…I actually went away for three months, the beginning of 2004, to train with a group, and she stayed here with my husband and helped out with the little one.

Erin noted that she was lucky in that her home town was also the headquarters for her national team, and so even during the hectic pre-Olympic year, she was never too far from her extended family. When she traveled for competitions, she found it easier to leave her son with her family. As discussed earlier, Claire spent the year before the Olympics living apart from her husband and son, a decision that was made in part because she had no extended family where she was working and training, and her husband was able to live with his mother while he worked and went to school. During that year, Claire’s mother-in-law was essential in helping her husband care for their son. In addition, Diana, Gail, and Heather were able to travel with their children by bringing their own parents along to help watch their children while they were competing. Heather described how having her mother with her was not only helpful in terms of caring for her children, but that her mother provided essential emotional support. She recalled:

She basically traveled with me for four years I guess with my first, first with [son], and then with [daughter], and so she was traveling with me to look after my kids, but she also knew kind of what I needed, like she was traveling as a mom too, looking after me, and she knew what I needed as her child.

Support from friends and community
In addition to utilizing family members for support, five participants discussed finding help within their circles of friends and in their communities. Three participants utilized friends or community members as child care providers when their needs extended beyond what their families could provide. In all three cases, the participants paid for their child care services, yet they discussed how they were more comfortable with hiring friends than utilizing a group day care facility, and found them to be more flexible and affordable than formal day care. Erin was able to hire a family friend as their nanny:

She [the nanny] was so important for us and we didn’t have to worry about day cares or child care – we had a built-in one and someone who we, a family friend, who we knew we could trust. So that was huge – we were so lucky. Especially in [our city], it’s difficult to find child care, the city is really growing…lots of waiting lists, and you know, I didn’t really want to put [son] in day care anyway, so it was nice that he could grow up at home.

Diana also hired a family whom she had gotten to know through her church to care for her son when she trained. She discussed how lucky she felt to have found a family who basically took [son] in as their own and he was like a part of their family while I was training, and so that gave me comfort…just being able to have that consistency of being loved, even when I left him.

Diana also noted that the family who cared for her son was more affordable and flexible than day care, and they even had a teenaged daughter who could occasionally travel with her. When Faith stepped up her training in preparation for the 2004 Olympic trials, she utilized a home-based child care provider near where she lived. This not only offered a family-like atmosphere, but also the flexibility she needed when she traveled.

In addition to helping with child care responsibilities, two athletes noted that their communities helped them financially by hosting fund raisers for their Olympic expenses. Anne discussed how her family was able to put on an event before the Olympics that
raised funds from the community, while Claire noted that a member of her church set up an account for her family’s Olympic expenses. She described how this was meaningful to her not only financially, but personally:

We had a guy from our area that had just started up his own thing in helping us getting some funding, which was really great. So it was a guy who worked with us in the church and he’s like, “Oh I set up this account and I got something in the paper for you,” and I was like, wow – we didn’t even ask you to do this…It was great to have that kind of support from the community – and you know we didn’t even ask them to do it – it was really nice of them.

_Theme #6: Organizational Support:_

_The Athletic Community and Sport Organizations_

While all of the participants reported positive support from their families and friends, the types and amounts of support experienced within the athletic community varied quite a bit. Participants noted that because they were each the first or only mother-athlete on their respective teams, their coaches, teammates, and/or sport associations were unfamiliar with the issues and needs of mother-athletes. For example, one athlete said that while her coach was very willing to accommodate her needs, she always had to tell him specifically what she needed. In general, coaches were reported to be the most supportive and flexible, while sport associations and governing bodies appeared to be the least likely to support a mother’s needs. The reaction of teammates was mixed in this sample; some welcomed children into the team, while others resented the presence of children. Because each participant represented a different sport or organization, these experiences were quite variable. Some found their athletic communities to be supportive and willing to make accommodations for them, while others found their communities to be resistant to changing policies or making exceptions for the mother-athletes and their
families. The support from the athletic community is discussed in three sub themes: support from coaches, support from teammates, and support from sport organizations.

**Support from coaches**

Coaches were important in offering emotional support, encouragement, and assisting the participants in balancing their parenting and sport responsibilities by being flexible with training and competition schedules. As previously discussed, Gail initially received some negative reaction from her teammates and sport organization when she revealed that she was pregnant, but said that the coach of the national team was very encouraging and “the only one who was really positive about the whole thing, that I could come back and do it.” In addition, Gail was able to have some flexibility and said that her coach would ask her what she wanted to do, “and some [training] camps, I didn’t want to go because it was too long to be away from home and he was fine with that…nothing was put on my shoulders.” Claire had a similar experience, saying:

> They [the coaches] understood that I had a family and that family comes first, and that I had a job, so they knew that, you know, I had a lot of things pulling at me and so they were always supportive. So if I had to miss a practice it wasn’t a big deal…and [they] said, “If you need help, ask us.” And so they never tried to give me a guilt trip over anything – some people could be like that, but they were never like that, they were always very supportive.

In addition, Claire helped to coach the college team that she trained with, and so the coaches would allow her to travel to competitions with the team as a coach and also compete for herself. This gave her more competitive experience without having to shoulder all of the travel costs.

Two of the athletes, Beth and Faith, who had not planned their pregnancies, reported feeling nervous or scared about telling their coaches, feeling that they would
disappoint their coaches by having to take time off from their sport. Beth explained that knowing she was pregnant and she would have to tell her coach was “pretty tough…I had to tell my coach at college that I wasn’t going to be playing for a year – two years technically if I made the Olympic team – so it was pretty stressful.” Similarly, Faith was afraid of disappointing her coach and avoided telling her, even though she was still training and competing when she discovered she was pregnant. She said:

I didn’t handle it very well. I was kind of – my coach at the time was going to come out and watch me [compete]…and I didn’t tell her…because I wasn’t sure how people would react…I was just afraid she’d get upset, because she had, you know, worked so hard with me and we put so much time in…I was like, “Oh, she’s going to be so upset with me!” …And then I thought maybe she’d be mad at me too, for wanting to [compete] when, knowing I was pregnant.

Both athletes, however, noted that while their coaches expressed concern for their health and well-being (as they were in the midst of their competitive seasons at the time they discovered they were pregnant), they reacted with support and encouragement. Beth said that her coaches were “very supportive. Just, you know, we’re here for you and worried about how I was feeling and how my health was, and just very supportive.”

Support from teammates

As with coaches, teammates were important providers of social support. Of those who were still involved in their sport at the time they became pregnant, all but one stated that their teammates were happy and excited for them. In a humorous moment, Diana chalked up her teammates’ excitement to “all of us being female and stuff.” Those who had not planned on motherhood reported that their teammates were “shocked” and “surprised,” (as they themselves were) and Erin noted, “They were happy for me – they
probably wouldn’t have seen me as a mom at the time either, so it was a big surprise for
everybody.” Beth said of her teammates,

They were all pretty impressed. Obviously none of them had kids, but I
think all of them kind of understood how hard it is to have a kid and come
back and keep playing – I think they were pretty impressed and surprised.

Faith was competing shortly after she found out she was pregnant, and another athlete
chided her for not pushing herself hard enough. Faith blurted out “but I’m pregnant!” at
which point the other athlete said, “Ooh!” and then told her slow down and take it easy.
In addition, when Faith lived and trained apart from her family for three months, she
credits her training group with easing the separation. She noted:

I had a great training group out in [state] – that helped it be really fun and
not miss the family quite as much as I would have had I just been out there
by myself or something. So with the support of teammates, it made it
doable.

Diana found a teammate of hers who lived nearby to train with, so as she came back after
her pregnancy, she had the support of a teammate and friend at daily workouts. Heather
also described her teammates as supportive, and appreciated that they did not come to her
with doubts about her ability to continue to play. She said:

My teammates, they were very supportive. They never once – I never once
heard them say, to me anyways, that maybe she shouldn’t come with us or
maybe she shouldn’t be playing because, you know, let’s face it, it could
drag our team chances down. And if they did talk about it they certainly
didn’t talk about it in my earshot, which I thought was very supportive.
But I could tell when I went out to [my first practice] in September, I
could see they were trying not to watch but they were watching just to see,
you know, how I was going to handle it and how my body, what kind of
shape my body was going to be in.
Gail found some of her teammates to be supportive, but also discussed negative reactions from her teammates when she became pregnant. As mentioned earlier, some of Gail’s teammates assumed that her career would be over once she had her child. She said:

It was kind of a divide with my teammates – half of them were like, “we should not have a mom on this team,” even though I was one of the best in the country. But I don’t think that they could take that I was a mom and could still be an elite athlete… and half of them were like, “Wow, you’re doing an – you’re a mom and you’re an elite athlete – that’s pretty cool.”

For those athletes in team sports, coaches and teammates became like a second family to them and their children. That their children were welcomed into the team and team spaces was important and meaningful for the participants. Diana described her coach as “like a dad to me,” and discussed how both the coaching staff and team were supportive of her bringing her son when they traveled. She described how her son “was potty trained on the bus,” and that it was meaningful to her to watch her son develop relationships with her coach and teammates. Erin had a similar experience and discussed how her teammates were not only emotionally supportive, but also played with her son when he came to the training site and occasionally babysat. Beth said that her daughter enjoyed being with the team, stating that for her daughter, “it was like having twenty new friends.”

Three of the participants, however, described situations in which their coaches and teammates were not supportive of them, specifically of traveling with their children. In these cases, the athletes attempted to balance their needs and those of their families with the needs and expectations of their teammates. These athletes (interestingly, all Winter Games competitors) pointed to the possibility that having a child around the team
would put the other athletes on the team at greater risk for illness. For example, Anne stated:

> It was difficult in the beginning because I think people rightly look at children as, like, germ carriers, and here we are, traveling as a team, trying to keep the team healthy, everyone’s preparing for an important event…It was challenging to always be kind of sensitive to what the other athletes are rightly expecting out of the team experience, and that would be to be healthy and get rest.

Beth discussed that while she felt her coaches and teammates were generally supportive, she would have liked to bring her daughter with her on more trips, but felt discouraged from doing so. She couldn’t point to anyone specifically telling her that she could not travel with her daughter, but she explained:

> I never really pushed it. They never – just because I don’t think they would have gone for it, they were just kind of against having her around. I mean with team stuff or when they [her family] came to a game or something, that was fine, but they didn’t really want her traveling with me and staying with us, or being with us at the hotel or whatever. I mean it’s hard to explain – I just didn’t want her around because they thought everyone was going to get sick or something…

Like Anne, Beth found that the coaching staff “thought kids were, like, germ carriers.”

Gail found that trying to care for her son while not offending her teammates was too stressful, and was part of the reason she did not bring her son to the Olympic Games. She explained that bringing her son to Europe for a couple of weeks

> Didn’t go well with some teammates…you know, young toddlers, they can get sick any time, so they [the team] were not happy that, that he was there. But I was trying to actually keep him – like I was not in their hotel rooms with him or anything – but we ate meals all together and I was trying to get him to eat before and just trying to – just struggled having my teammates being happy with the situation. There was an added stress on me, so finally I said, you know, I don’t think I’m going to do that again – I don’t want that stress.
Two participants discussed what it was like for them when they were training/traveling apart from their respective teams and therefore did not have daily interaction with coaches and teammates. Their experiences underscore the importance of the support of the athletic community, as these athletes felt that they were at a distinct disadvantage. For example, Claire discussed that in the first few months of motherhood:

I was working out by myself – I didn’t have teammates, I didn’t have coaches to watch me, so I was doing it all on my own, and that in itself was difficult as well, trying to do it by myself. Because I was used to training with the college team – even when I was out of college, I still trained with the team, so there was, you know, 30 or 40 athletes to joke around with at practice, or whine with at practice when things were going rough, whatever the case was, and now I was on my own, pushing a stroller – who am I going to complain to? My four-week-old? “Oh this sucks! Why am I doing this?” (laughs) What’s he going to do? He doesn’t care! (laughs)

Later, she would add:

I just was kind of hit and miss with my practices at the start, and I think a lot of that was because I didn’t have people to work out with. If I probably had a team I was supposed to be meeting every day, I probably would have gotten into it a little bit better.

Anne had a similar experience. She had decided not to move to the city where her national team was headquartered because her extended family, as well as her family’s business, was located in her home town. She explained:

I mostly trained solo, which is hard. It really wears on an athlete to come up with that much motivation to get yourself out the door every day, do what’s required, and communicate with a coach long distance…It’s so hard when you’re several hours away because I guess just the more monitoring you have, it seems, in theory, the more precise your training is, the better you are at each thing. You get better care, you see the team doctors, you have, you’re not just out on a limb…[and] it’s good to have the pressure of other athletes pushing you in sessions.
Finally, Heather discussed how she would have liked to talk about her motherhood experiences with her teammates, but felt that they would not have understood her experiences and questioned whether it would be appropriate to do so anyway. She explained:

My teammates were very supportive but they were totally not in the same place as I was. Like two of the girls – one was young and single, the other was married with no children, and the third one her kids were teenagers, so none of them could really relate to what I was going through. So I didn’t have anybody where I could, and same thing like the coach was a male, I really had nobody that I could talk to that could kind of be sympathetic to just how challenging it was dealing with the stress and your hormones just going nuts, and trying to always present a calm, competitive attitude and not just this mother that’s going nuts because, you know, you’re not sure about how your baby’s doing or let alone not sure where it is, or you know, breastfeeding issues. Nobody that I could talk to about any of that. And part of that was my choice because I didn’t want it to be a distraction to the team, I didn’t want the team to be all about the baby, the team had to be about getting to the Olympics, so if I had any issues, I didn’t talk about it because I didn’t want it to be a focus.

Support from sport organizations and governing bodies

Because the participants represented a variety of sports and no two participated in a sport governed by the same organization, each athlete described a different experience with her sport’s national governing body, and the amount and types of support received were quite variable. Some were satisfied with the amount of support they received, like Erin who said, “I think they do a good job for everybody’s family,” while others were not. Anne described the support she received in this way:

I guess the amount of support I would say was in the fact that they let us travel as a family…. The fact that they let us even be a family and be around the team as much as we did, I guess that was as much as they offered, and it made it possible, so I am grateful for that. They could have said, “No family at all whatsoever.”
Even within the same sport, organizational support changed over time, due largely to the experiences of the study participants. As mentioned earlier, five of the participants reported that they were the first in the sport to have a child and return to training and competition, and seven reported being the only mother of preschool children on her national team at the time of her Olympic experience. Because of this, the participants noted that their sport organizations did not really know what they needed or how to accommodate them. For example, Anne remarked, “The [national] team just let us do our thing, because they didn’t really know what to do with us,” and Gail said, “nobody had a clue, I think, what I needed as a parent.” In addition, with no real family policies in place, the sport organizations made accommodations and policy changes as they went along, often after requests from this study’s participants. Diana noted, “Things had changed a little bit the Olympic year and since I’ve retired – they’re way better now – I was the first person to go through it, so a lot of things, I didn’t have.”

Six of the athletes felt that they received some accommodation and/or flexibility from their sport associations, recognizing that they were mothers as well as athletes. As mentioned, Anne was able to stay in her hometown to train, even as the national team trained in another city, and was able to travel and stay with her family when the team competed. Diana discussed how, when she became pregnant, she talked to her sport organization about her plans to return and she felt that the following season and said, “they definitely were willing to give me a little leeway, like okay, we know what she’s capable of, we know she just had a baby, but we’re going to see when the time comes where she’s at.” Heather explained that her association was not very involved with the
team’s training until after the Olympic trials, so she did not have any reaction, positive or negative, from her sport association when she became pregnant. She did say, however,

Now, I give them a lot of credit because when we won the [national] trials I know they were all like “Eeeeh – we’ve got a team here who’s got [a baby].” …they gave a huge gasp when they knew what they were dealing with, with this team that had won.

Beth felt that her association made a more family-friendly competition schedule leading up to the Olympic Games, and that they were flexible about her attendance at team trainings. She said,

I think that they based their schedule on – we never asked them, but I think they kind of scheduled our schedule like that so that we could be home more, so that I could probably come home and see my family more. I think that they understood – the team leader had a kid, so I think he understood…I think they were very supportive of me going home to see my kid.

Faith, who was an individual athlete, said that in order to stay on the national team and receive funding, she was required to compete in a minimum number of events each year and maintain a certain ranking, but that she could choose which events she wanted to go to. This flexibility allowed her to choose events that were closer to home “or ones that were a little less expensive to get to, to bring the family.” Erin said that her association’s simple acknowledgement of her son made her feel supported. She explained:

Even just to acknowledge I have a son, for example, just a small thing like apparel, okay, well what would [son] like? Would he like a flag? Or things like that – just acknowledging that you do have a son. Asking, where is the family going to stay? Is there any special arrangement that you need? Car seats, things like that. So nothing major…but you know, it does help.

In contrast, Gail felt that, although her coach was flexible with her training and competing schedule and allowed her opt out of some training camps, the association was not so flexible. She noted, “I think he [the coach] had to deal with the association. They
were like, well, she’s part of the system, she should be doing everything everybody’s doing.” In addition, Gail felt pressure to return to training and competition more quickly than she would have liked, because she had been named to the national team and was receiving funding from the association. She said:

> It was a bit of a battle to try to convince them that I could come back and, you know, just give me time…they had given me funding, they said, well you have to start competing the next winter. So I had him [son] in August, so I had to actually be competing that winter, so I only took a month off really…it was like, well I have to come back. They’re supporting me and they’re still putting me on the national team, so I had to come back.

The most important type of support that the participants discussed needing from their sport association was in traveling with their families – both in terms of organization/planning and funding. As mentioned earlier, participants found traveling with their families to be very expensive. Three of the participants did receive some financial help from their sport organizations to assist with family travel and child care expenses. Gail said that a room would be provided for her son and her nanny as long as she asked for it in advance, and Beth said that during the Olympic year, often the busiest training and competing time for athletes, “they helped out a little bit as far as child care expenses or whatever it might be so she [daughter] could come with me sometimes.” Diana found that between the year she returned to her team after having her son and the Olympic Games, the help her association provided gradually increased. In addition, she was able to start a special fund through her organization to help families with child care and travel. This in itself, however, was somewhat of an uphill battle. She explained:

> We had approached [the sport organization] saying, hey, is there a way for maybe [the organization], if we found ways to get people to contribute, that there could be a fund…if my agent and I just went out and tried to find sponsorships, just so I could afford to take my son. And at first they
said no, there’s not a way…and then they said, okay, we found a way that we can have a child care fund…well, the burden kind of came on me, well if you can get people to contribute.

She later explained that now, with more mothers in her sport, the child care fund automatically receives a portion of the organization’s fund raising monies, rather than relying on specifically earmarked contributions. Erin also found that the amount of assistance her organization provided increased over time and with the addition of another mother-athlete to the team. Erin explained:

It’s changed now where, earlier, when I had my son, I was the only player on the team who had kids, and to think that [the national governing body] would, you know, pay for an extra hotel room for my nanny and [son] to travel, that wouldn’t have happened early on and now that’s changed…when I first started, I don’t think it was even on their minds, and they certainly weren’t supportive of that.

In addition to helping with travel and child care expenses, two participants mentioned that they were eligible to buy into a very affordable group health insurance plan through their sport organizations. This was a considerable help, as these athletes could maintain coverage for themselves and their families even when pregnancy took them away from competition.

Other participants did not find much financial support from their organizations. Anne stated that although she was “allowed” to travel with her family, her sport association expected her to reimburse them for any additional travel arrangements they made for her family. She explained:

They said yeah, your family can come and stay in the hotel, and yeah, your family can ride in the van, but I tell you there isn’t one charge they didn’t miss. I don’t care if there were five of us girls and it’s two girls to a room and obviously that leaves one of us that needs our own hotel room because there’s no one else to share with. You know, they would charge my family half of that hotel room, and if I had no family with me I would
have had that room to myself, and they would have paid for the whole thing.

Further, several athletes discussed that there was not a lot of funding available to athletes in their sport in general, so being reimbursed for additional travel and child care expenses seemed unlikely. Claire felt that since her sport organization governs many male and female athletes, and noted that there were quite a few fathers in her sport, it would be unrealistic to expect them to make accommodations for all of the athletes’ children. Diana was able to submit an expense report after her team’s competition tour, but was reluctant to submit the entire amount that she paid for her child care expenses and extra travel, indicating that she asked for, and received, reimbursement for “what I felt I could talk to them about,” about two-thirds of what she had actually spent.

As discussed earlier, some of the study participants found that coordinating travel for themselves and their families could be logistically challenging, and few obtained assistance in this area from their sport organizations. In fact, three discussed instances where the organization’s policies discouraged them from bringing their children. As mentioned earlier, the attitudes of the coaches and team members subtly discouraged some from traveling with their children, and the Olympic Training Center’s policies of not allowing non-athletes to stay on site inconvenienced some during training camps.

On a positive note, Heather’s association offered her assistance when planning Olympic travel, although she declined the offer and chose to leave her children at home. She said that this was kind of a mixed blessing:

They handled it very well, they didn’t come right out and say to me, “[name], you can’t take this baby to the Olympics” They stepped back and said “If that’s what you choose to do we’ll try and make it happen for you, but you’ve got to – you can make your own choice about what you want to
do with it.” Which I appreciated, but, well in some respects it made it a little harder because, you know, it’d be nice if somebody would just say, “It’s not possible,” because then you know what you’re dealing with.

Faith discussed a unique travel arrangement her organization made that suited her family well – that of organizing “home stays,” where the athletes would stay a local family. Faith said that often the family they stayed with would help them with their daughter so that she and her husband could enjoy the location and the competition together. She explained:

There are a few places where they would arrange home stays for us, and those would work out really well. A lot of times with the home stays there would be someone who could watch the child while my husband came and watched the [event]. So there were a few [competitions] I can recall where they actually put us with a family, and that made it so much easier to just be in a home. And like I said, a lot of times they were willing to just watch her for a little while, while we could do something, you know, he could go for a run with me or go watch the [competition] or something like that.

Those who perceived a lack of support from their sport organizations often said that because they were the first mothers in their respective sports, their sport organizations were not aware of what they needed or weren’t supportive of changes to existing policy. Anne felt that this reflected a general insensitivity to her needs as a parent:

I mean, I guess they expect athletes to just ditch their families…It just feels like everyone says by their actions, “Well, you should just be traveling by yourself and make it easier on us and you.” But, no one understands, what that would mean, how devastating that would be to a young family to be split up so much.

Interestingly, two athletes described their sports as “male dominated,” which accounted for a lack of knowledge or sensitivity toward mother-athletes’ needs. Gail remarked:

It’s a male dominated sport…as well as the association, so you know, a lot of the men are like, the mom should be at home, right? So there was a
couple of them on the board, and I tried not to let it bother me, but for sure I knew the thinking was there.

Faith suggested that at the Olympics, her association was so concerned with following all of the event regulations they lost sight of the individual needs of the athletes. She said:

I would have loved if I would have had more opportunities that I could have spent with family, but they wouldn’t let it because, I think they were just getting, the leaders may have been getting so caught up in making sure they’re following all the security rules and they’re being extra careful and that they don’t really take the time to realize that we’re people, and we have emotional needs as well as our training needs.

Three participants also suggested that with an event the size and scope of the Olympic Games, it would be unrealistic to think that the families of all athletes could be accommodated. For example, Erin said, “The Olympic Games – their job is, it’s about the athletes, it’s not about accommodating athletes’ families and kids, so I think that’s more left to the sport organizations that should be doing that.”

Theme # 7: The Olympic Experience

The Olympic Games was a memorable experience for all of the participants, and they all discussed the pride and the excitement they felt being a part of the Games. Three of the participants noted that this Olympic experience was the realization of a childhood dream, and they were excited just to have been selected for their respective teams. For three of the participants, the 2004 or 2006 Olympic Games was their first (and only) Olympic experience, for three this past Games was their third, and one was in her forth Olympics. Participants were asked whether or not they brought their children to the Games and how child care was coordinated, either at home or at the Games. Four of the participants brought their children, while four did not, and in either case, husbands/partners and extended family members assisted in caring for children while the
participants trained and competed. Participants reported predominantly positive experiences while at the Games, but also some major stressors, some family related, some not. In general, participants felt that motherhood enhanced both sport performance and the overall experience of being at the Games, yet for two athletes, the separation from their families combined with other stressors led to difficult and disappointing experiences. This theme is divided into four sub themes: Olympic logistics, positive experiences, sources of stress, and Olympic performance.

Olympic Logistics

Four of the participants (three Winter and one Summer) chose to bring their children with them to the Olympic Games. For three of these families, the decision was an easy one – they had not considered traveling to the Olympics without their children. Interestingly, one multiple Olympian responded, “that’s just the way it has always been…it’s sort of a family event.” Faith and her husband debated whether or not to bring their daughter, citing concerns about security and safety, but ultimately decided to bring her. She noted:

Just the scare of, how safe is it going to be in Athens? And it’s like I don’t want to subject my daughter to any danger or anything, but my husband was like, “Oh, we’ve got to bring her with us,” and so we did. And I’m very glad we did.

All of the athletes except for Anne arrived at the Games ahead of their families in order to train and adjust to the environment; families usually followed once the competition began. Anne was the only athlete who elected to travel to the Games with her family and stay with them throughout the entire Olympics. Because she did not stay with the rest of the team in the athlete village, Anne and her husband were responsible for
finding their own lodging and transportation. She found this to be a considerable source of stress as well as a financial burden. She explained:

We weren’t allowed obviously to stay as a family at the Olympic Village…so we ended up renting our own, just a little room in a 300 year old house across from the venue, and these were expenses that none of the other athletes had, but it cost us $7,000…We also had to rent our own vehicle so we had transportation because I had no access to the team transportation. When they’re twenty minutes away, and they have a team meeting, well, I have to be able to get up to it. And, so we had to rent a van for another several thousand dollars for the time.

Anne also felt that by not staying in the Village, she missed out on some of the excitement of being on the Olympic team. She said:

At the Olympics it was hard because I did miss out on some things, being that the team was twenty minutes away. They would have little impromptu meetings – oh, the girls are getting together in such-and-such’s room – and you know, just kind of the whole team spirit, the team building – I couldn’t just run up there every time something was happening.

In addition, Anne and her husband helped her extended family and friends to find lodging as well, and coordinating everyone’s travel proved to be a monumental task.

Beth and Erin chose to stay in the Olympic Village, while Faith utilized housing provided by her sport organization (although Beth and Faith acknowledged that this was not really a choice – their teams were expected to stay together). In these cases, the children traveled to the Games and stayed with their fathers and/or grandparents, and the individual families were responsible for organizing their own travel and lodging. For Faith this proved challenging as well, as she did not know where she was staying until she got to Athens. Luckily, her family was able to find housing nearby. She said:

That was the other kind of hard thing about it - we [the athletes] had to stay in a certain house they got for us. We weren’t allowed to have any family come over to the house. We weren’t even allowed, we didn’t even know where the house was until we got there, so we couldn’t, you know,
try and find places for family that were nearby. But it was amazing because it just happened to work that my husband found a place on-line...where he and my mom and daughter and a couple of friends were going to stay, and it turned out being like maybe five blocks away from where our house was.

It is important to note that Beth and Erin reported feeling satisfied with the travel and lodging of their families during the Olympic Games. Erin explained that her family traveled to Torino in order to catch the final games of the competition, and her son, her partner, and her parents and siblings were able to stay together in a bed and breakfast. Beth’s husband was unable to travel to the Games with her due to work commitments, so her daughter traveled with a contingent of family members, from her mother and sister-in-law (and her family) to Beth’s own parents. Beth also noted that even though she was separated from her family, she enjoyed staying in the Olympic Village, stating, “I always like staying in the Village – it’s cool, the food’s awesome, and you know, it’s part of the experience.” Unlike Anne, Beth and Erin left the family travel and child care arrangements up to the extended family members.

Four of the participants (two Summer and two Winter) elected not to travel to the Olympic Games with their children. Gail reported that her family could not afford the travel and accommodations necessary for her husband and son to travel to the Olympics, as well as the added stress that she would have felt. She explained:

I think it would have been really cool to have him [son] – I would have liked him and my husband come, but money wise, we could not afford it, especially for accommodation – they’re just so expensive....And I would have had to organize a nanny, a place for her and my son – it would have been too complicated.

She also discussed the importance of staying focused on the competition, stating that she thought, “I know I’m going to miss him, but I need to go there and be focused on the
competition…and especially being injured I needed to take care of myself as well, to be well prepared.” Claire weighed such factors as the cost of the trip, her ability to focus on the competition, the stress her husband might feel traveling with their son. She said:

For one, I wasn’t going to be there to be able to help out because I was staying in the Athletes’ Village, I didn’t want to have to kind of deal with anything else while I was there, just be able to compete. My husband was with a tour group, and they had provided hotels and tours and stuff like that for them to go on. And it was a nine hour time change, and I didn’t think for one he would want to deal with that, or pay to have my son go over – you know, we didn’t have that much money – and then…by the time my son would have adjusted to the time change, the nine hours, they would have been coming home.

Diana also felt that having her son at the Olympics would have been more stressful, and cited concerns over safety and the feeling that she would not be able to spend much time with him anyway. She said:

I figured it would be more stressful for me taking him only because then I would feel – I would be worried about him and I couldn’t do anything if something had happened…and I didn’t get to spend much time with my husband, and so because of that, I thought it would be more stressful, not to being able to spend time or see my son, even though he’s there.

Heather was able to talk to a mother-athlete in her sport who had competed at a previous Olympics. The advice she gave Heather helped her to make the decision:

She said it just would have been a nightmare to bring the baby over there, so I ended up choosing not to bring [daughter] and yeah it really would have been a total distraction and, a worry, you know, because she wouldn’t have even been allowed into the Athletes Village for one thing for security, so they would have had to find outside accommodations for her and my mom probably would have come over and for me, just the logistics for me to get back and forth, like transportation at the time was just, I don’t know if it’s like that all the time in Italy, but it was terrible during the Olympics.
She later commented that she was glad she and her husband had made that decision, as she came into contact with a mother-athlete from another country who had brought her child and said that it had been very stressful. Heather explained:

> When I talked to her she said she hadn’t seen her baby in about three days because they were staying at the Village and she said it was just a nightmare trying to get together because of the transportation and the security, and so I kind of went, oh I’m glad I didn’t go that route.

These athletes were able to stay connected to their children through frequent phone calls home, and for Claire and Diana, the separation was not unbearable. Claire explained that being away for the Olympic Games “was kind of challenging,” but added, “Well, you know, honestly it wasn’t a whole lot different...because we’d already been away from each other the whole year, except for the weekends, so it probably wasn’t as big a deal as for some, especially some moms.” Diana felt that even though she was away from her son, “I kind of said in my head, okay this is four weeks, this is it, when I go home I’m going home to be with him and I won’t be leaving him any time soon.”

Heather and Gail, however, found the separation to be very difficult. As discussed earlier, the combination of injury and separation from her family was detrimental to Gail. Heather found that the separation from her daughter was difficult because she was so young and the trip to the Olympics forced her stop breastfeeding earlier than she would have liked to. She said:

> You get on the plane and wonder, well geez, is she even going to take a bottle? How are they going to feed her? You’re totally stressed about that, you get over there, you’re dealing with losing your milk, your hormones are, you know, constantly changing because of that, and you have nobody that you could talk to about it, really, because they’re so focused, you kind of go onto survival mode because it’s so overwhelming over there, you just focus on what you need to do to play well. ... So yeah, it was a bit of
a nightmare actually, which is a disappointment, because it was exciting as well, don’t get me wrong, but there definitely was a negative side to it.

Whether the athletes brought their children with them to the Games, or the children stayed home, husbands/partners and extended family were essential supports. For Anne, Beth, Erin, and Faith who did bring their children, husbands/partners and extended family members were primarily responsible for caring for the child while the participant was training and competing. This allowed the participants to enjoy the Games with their families, while also giving them the ability to focus on their training and performance, knowing that their children were well taken care of. While it was difficult for Heather to leave her children, she appreciated her mother’s willingness to take them for the month. She said:

My mom just stepped right up to the plate for all of this and um, I couldn’t have done it without her help obviously, but she offered to take to take both kids so that my husband could come over to the Olympics as support for me, and she got to deal with getting [daughter] onto the bottle and all that fun stuff.

Claire and Diana also did not bring their children, so their husbands stayed home with the children while the participants were training and then joined them as the competition got under way, leaving their children in the care of grandparents. For Gail, who did not travel to the Olympics with her family, knowing that her husband was home with their son gave her peace of mind as she trained and competed and, as mentioned previously, allowed her to focus fully on preparing for the Games.

*Personal satisfaction and priceless memories: Positive experiences*

The athletes interviewed for this study discussed their Olympic experiences in predominantly positive terms. Two participants, Claire and Faith, emphasized how the
Olympic Games had been a dream of theirs since childhood, and they were especially excited to be there, realizing that dream. Claire said that although she was disappointed with her performance, “I did have a great experience while I was over there. I had a fun time.” She told of how she was able to tour with her team and do some sightseeing, and acknowledged that being in Athens was special in itself, remarking, “It was an awesome experience to be able to say, you know, I went back to where it all began in Athens, in Greece. So I will always have that.” Beth, who had been to previous Olympic Games, described her experience as “pretty cool,” noting that “you get to experience that country and that culture, and the crowds are pretty awesome and the village of course is always fun and interesting, meeting other players and other athletes.” For Diana, another multiple Olympian, the 2004 Games were to be her last, and she went in with the goal of enjoying every moment, saying:

I had a great time…loved being with my teammates, loved experiencing that, knowing it was probably going to be my last one, you know, had some ups and downs in terms of personal play, but my team played so well that I was – that’s really always most important. Compared to my other two Olympics, this was one of my better experiences…I knew what it was like at the Olympics, I wanted to enjoy my last experience, you know, as much as I could.

The athletes interviewed discussed various ways in which motherhood and their families enhanced the Olympic experience. As discussed earlier, several reported an enhanced feeling of pride in that they had accomplished their goals of being selected for their respected Olympic teams, especially in light of some of the extra responsibilities and challenges that came with having a young child. Additionally, several stated that the more balanced perspective that they gained from their roles as mothers eased the pressure to perform and enhanced both their performance and the overall experience.
Those mother-athletes who brought their children and families to the Olympic Games discussed the special meaning that having their families with them brought to the Olympic experience. For example, Faith stated that having her family with her “just made it much more enjoyable that we could all share in the whole experience. Because, you know, it really wasn’t me that got myself here by myself. It was because of them that I’m even here.” Claire described the considerable financial sacrifices that some of her family members made in order to be present and support her at the games, and how much that meant to her:

They were all very supportive. As many of them that could, they went over to the Olympics, to support me that way. And that was not cheap – my family does not have the finances to be able to do that…and it was really good to have all that family support as well.

Erin also acknowledged how important her family support was to her, and that having them there at the Games was especially helpful as she felt that they could see first hand what she was going through and better understand what she needed:

You enjoy it together, and you – I find that they’ve experienced it for themselves, so it leaves me – I don’t have to explain it. They understand what you go through. You know, [partner] is very understanding before an Olympic Games that, you know, I may be stressed or preoccupied, and being there and seeing me go through the process, they understand why and they’re very patient I think – probably more patient than they need to be at times.

Beth said that being able to see her daughter at the Olympics “definitely lit up my day every day,” and Erin said of having her family with her at the Games, “it’s reassuring for me and just kind of gives you that extra boost.” Anne discussed the personal meaning of having her family with her at the opening ceremonies, and then again at the end of her final day of competition:
[At the opening ceremonies] I was literally right below my family with that whole entire Olympic Stadium full of fans screaming and yelling and there was my family and it just made me cry and I was just so excited...it’s like so, such a thrill, just to have them there and hear them screaming. And to end my last Olympic [event]...[with] this big hug and kiss from, you know, husband and son, right at the end of my Olympic [competition] – it’s just priceless moments like that that I would not have gotten if we hadn’t put ourselves through some of what we did.

Anne also described an occasion in which her husband’s support was discussed in the media and the special meaning it had for her:

One of my favorites was the spouses of Olympians were told to write a love letter to their spouse for Valentine’s Day and in was in USA Today, so that was neat. They got a hold of [husband] and he wrote a love letter to me and it came out in USA Today and it was about the sacrifices, you know, he made for me, and a lot of those little things I’ll remember forever.

Two participants noted that their sport organizations were helpful in acknowledging their family members, which eased their family responsibilities and enhanced their enjoyment. Erin described how her association planned family dinners and activities and helped family members to obtain tickets to events, which not only helped the families feel included, but freed the athletes from worrying about them. She noted, “Their philosophy is to take care of the details and our job is to go out and perform...and so it’s easy to do that when you know everything is being taken care of.” Beth described a hospitality center for the families of Olympic athletes provided by a corporate sponsor that provided meals and a place for athletes to visit with their families. She felt that not only did this provide a space for her to see her family, but gave her peace of mind, knowing that her family had a place to go to relax and eat.

The participants who did not have their children with them mentioned that even while they were not directly sharing the Olympic Games with their children, their status
as mothers had an impact on the experience. As mentioned earlier, Diana felt that motherhood gave her a healthier perspective on her sport, and she said that while she was competing, “I think I was able to just know that hey, this [the Olympics] is a huge, huge time, and this is so exciting, but this is just one piece of the puzzle, you know?” Diana did express, however, that she missed being able to spend time with her son after competing, something that she found comforting, especially if she was having an off day. She explained:

I’d gotten used to coming off the field and being able to be with him and be like, okay, it’s a game, it’s a game, you know, it’s a reminder that I’m doing this right now, I enjoy it, I love what I’m doing, I wouldn’t change it, but ultimately, if I have a good or bad game, I come off and I’m a mom, and that’s more important… I missed being able to go to him, and, you know, just see his smile afterwards and stuff.

Claire could not think of a specific way motherhood affected her time at the Olympics, but said, “I think a lot of it was just my outlook on life and how I approach it. Not necessarily really how I competed…a lot of it was just how I look at life – it’s not about me anymore.” Also discussed earlier was Diana’s and Gail’s special sense of pride over being a mother at the Olympics; as Gail said, “I was going in there thinking wow, this is pretty cool, you know, I’m a Mom and I’m at the Olympics.” There was one exception, however. Heather, who had a difficult time at the Olympics, felt that being a mother had a negative impact on her experience. She explained:

Definitely I wouldn’t not have one for the other, but if it could have been different timing – the Olympics would have been such an awesome experience if I hadn’t been dealing with the whole motherhood issue. It would have been a whole lot better than what it was. That made it very challenging, but, I mean, I certainly wouldn’t have not wanted [daughter].
Several mother-athletes caught the attention of the media and were the subjects of newspaper articles and television segments about mothers at the Olympics. These athletes enjoyed and welcomed the attention, as they felt their hard work and determination was being recognized, and that they could be role models for other mothers and athletes. For example, Anne said:

Well, it was pretty special when they [the media] would recognize that I was making huge sacrifices to be there, as was my family…and I thought it also helped to expose the media to the struggles I was facing as a parent athlete. I always feel kind of like it had been the unheard voice, unsung hero.

Similarly, Heather enjoyed the attention as well as the positive response she got from the public. She explained:

My little athlete profile that they ran during the Olympics - they said they got the biggest response from that one clip and it was because I talked about being a new mom, and how challenging it was to also be at this level of my [sport]. And they had a shot of four us on the couch doing our little bedtime story, and they said the response was just - that was the biggest response they got on all their profiles and I think it was because of the, you know, family thing that people were buying into – or wanting to hear about, you know?

Faith said that media attention on her and her family was “another opportunity for others to see, it’s like, wow – these people have a real life. There actually is more to them than training all day.” In addition, she said that it was fun for her family to share in the media attention and be included in interviews. Two participants discussed drawing inspiration from other high profile mother-athletes and hoped to be able to do the same to future generations of athletes. As Diana said, “that was my goal- saying I do want to have a kid and I do want to play. I’ve see other athletes do it, that inspires me - I want to be able to do it, and inspire others too,” and Gail noted, “I was happy to tell my story because it’s
Sources of stress

While the Olympic Games were generally positive experiences for the participants, several discussed Olympic-sized stressors as well. Four athletes, Anne, Faith, Claire, and Heather discussed organizational policies and “red tape” that were sources of stress. For Anne and Faith, these stressors were directly related to how their families were accommodated (or not) at the Games. Faith discussed how her sport’s organization did not include families in any activities and did not allow anyone not directly involved with the Olympic team (e.g., athletes, coaches, officials) to visit their team housing. While she understood the need to limit access to the organization’s house in order to ensure the safety of the athletes and staff, she also said:

I think there’s things we could have done that wouldn’t have been a security issue, like maybe having a dinner a couple of nights before where all the family and coaches were invited to, where you would have a chance to just spend time with them and be with them and enjoy the experience with them. And I don’t feel that – you know, we didn’t have really those opportunities.

She was also dissatisfied with some of the Olympic policies that prevented families from having easier access to the athletes. She discussed how she was unable to connect with her family after her event, which, looking back was a disappointment. She explained:

After the [event]...they whisked me away to do drug testing, and they whisked me away because I had to go up to Athens to do something, and I did not even get to see my family until nine o’clock at night after that, you know, that night after the Games. But I have no pictures of myself with the medal with my friends and family, because they just wouldn’t let you connect...And looking back I was so upset that I didn’t get to see my family right after...because I mean, yeah, the whole thing is an experience with your family and I felt like it was kind of just me here and they’re all
just on the outside watching, and it’s like, I wanted them to be more a part of it.

Anne, whose family traveled the competitive circuit with her extensively, stated that in terms of family-friendliness, the Olympic Games “was absolutely the worst.” She described how she struggled when her family could not get accreditation to enter the competition venue with her:

We were staying literally a stone’s throw away – my husband could have probably spit to the venue, we were so close, and yet my husband and son could not get access to the venue…we could not get any accreditation. They had to take the bus clear down into the next town and walk in up through the venue – it was really hard. And at the end of the [event], instead of just exiting out the gate behind the bleachers like the athletes got to, they’d have to walk, it was like a mile and a half through the snow, back down with all the fans, wait for the bus with ten thousand other people and come back around – they wouldn’t get to the house until like an hour and a half after me. I mean I was - there were a couple of times at the Olympics when I was absolutely in tears - I was like, this could not be any harder, I am so stressed out. I mean if someone could just say, “okay, this family can enter through this gate right here” – but nobody makes concessions for families.

While both women could appreciate the need for security, they felt that it would not be unreasonable for some exceptions to be made for immediate family members so as to allow athletes more connection with their families.

While Heather did not bring her children to the Games with her, she would have liked to have had more time with her husband and found that the logistics (e.g., lodging and transportation) prohibited this. Not only was it frustrating for her not to have the support she felt she needed, but she was unprepared for these difficulties:

Part of it was my misconception, because nobody really, I guess, explained to us, and maybe because nobody really knew what we were getting ourselves into, I was very naive in thinking here my husband and I were going to Italy without kids, you know, almost kind of like this was going to be a second honeymoon kind of thing, I was so excited about
having some time away with him and it was anything but the case, which was a total frustration, and if I had known from the get-go that that was the way it was going to be, I could have handled that much better.

Heather went on to explain that her association provided apartments for the Olympic teams, but their friends and families had to stay in the next town over. With unreliable transportation, she found that connecting with her husband was difficult. She said, “the person that I want next to me – I’m discovering through all this stress and what not – is I want my husband there, and he’s not able to be there.”

Heather and Faith also mentioned that because their teams stayed near their respective venues and not in the Athletes’ Village, they felt that they missed out on some of the Olympic experiences. Faith recalled that her team did not go to the Opening Ceremonies because they did not feel it was prudent to be in Athens for that long before their event. She said, “I don’t really feel like I had the full Olympic experience. And I think part of that was a necessity to do well… [but] I don’t feel like I got the full experience of it all.” Similarly, Heather noted:

Well again, I’m sounding negative I’m sure, because it was disappointing, because I thought here we’re, as an athlete you’re eligible to go to any of the Olympic events, you’re eligible to go to any of the concerts, and I mean just to see Italy, … I thought, well we’re going to get to see some things, you know, see some of the country and what-not, well that just totally wasn’t the case. The fact that we didn’t stay at the Athletes’ Village meant that we didn’t get to see any of the events there, we didn’t get see any of the concerts, any of the whole – we didn’t get to meet all the other athletes and kind of get that whole team, village atmosphere, feeling.

Claire named organizational issues as a stressor in the games, but in her case, it had nothing to do with her family. She discussed the inconsistency of the officiating and the effect it had on her mental preparation:
It's the officials in the background that nobody ever saw except for the athletes themselves, that would check you in – you had to go through a couple different check-in processes...and there would be the girl right next to you would have food in her bag, but then they wouldn’t let you take food in, but they would let her take in food because it was a different official that checked hers...It was so crazy in the back scene, what they would allow, what they wouldn’t allow, fighting back there, trying to get someone who could speak English...So you have all these things tearing at you before you ever even got out there to compete. You try to let it go, but sometimes it's just irritating you so much and you’re so ticked off.

Anne found that having her friends and family at the Games was both a source of support and a source of stress. While she appreciated the fact that her extended family and friends made the effort to travel to the Games, she and her husband also made travel arrangements for all of them, which she described as “a ton of work and that just added to the stresses too.” Also, because Anne stayed off-site with her husband and son (instead of staying in the Athletes’ Village) she would have family and friends visit her and ask for favors, which could be disruptive. She described her mixed feelings:

It was more like us taking care of them...Like, people were stopping by like, “Oh, can I get that pass to go to the USA House so I can go out for free food and go see Bode Miller on the couch for a while?”...It was great because it was such great support, but the same time it wasn’t support in the way of easing anything for us – it was a lot – way more of a, you know, headache. And my mom would stop over and then we’d be making lunch for my mom and my sister, and my mom brought a friend, and my sister brought a friend, and so. But it was great. Yeah, I definitely had great representation.

Anne also noted that she and her husband were maintaining a website with an Olympic blog, and she was also fielding numerous press events. While she found the constant barrage of emails and interviews stressful, she also felt that it was important for her to share her story and allow her supporters to be able to feel a part of the Olympic experience. She explained:
I want everyone to be able to get on my blog and read everything and see things...so that was the most exhausting part. If I could have just eat, sleep, and [competed], and played Mom, that would have been ideal (laugh)...but just the emails, the interviews, the phone interviews, I must have done, every day during the Olympics I had at least an hour long interview on the phone. And I could have just said no, I don’t want to do that, no, I don’t have the time to do that, but I didn’t because it was just so important to me.

She felt a responsibility to share her story with others not just as a mother, but as an elite athlete in general and explained:

It’d be selfish if we had experienced all this and just hold it all in...I know what I was inspired most by when I was a young athlete was seeing the Olympics and hearing from Olympians, and people who, not only Olympians, but people who reached the pinnacle of their sport. If you don’t see the passion from them and you don’t inspire the next generation then it’s just a shame.

Finally, Gail discussed how her injury was a source of stress at the Olympics, and that her time at the Olympics was not as rewarding as she was struggled with both the injury as well as the separation from her family. As mentioned earlier, ultimately the stress of this Olympic experience prompted her to retire from her sport. She said,

I don’t think I retired for the right reason...for me to be at the Olympics injured and not being able to race at my full potential and leaving my son for a month – it was just, “why did I do that?”

Olympic Performance

In general, this particular group of athletes enjoyed successful Olympic performances. In Olympic competition, three of the participants met or exceeded their performance goals. Two participants had mixed experiences; one said that her personal play was not her best, but her team played exceptionally well and met its performance goals, while another had the opposite experience – she felt that her personal play was the best she could have done, but the team did not meet its goals (even so, her team still came
home with a medal, and she noted “as far as we ended up it was probably the worst…but, I mean, you can’t be disappointed with a medal”). Three participants reported disappointing Olympic performances (although it must be noted that one of these athletes still earned a medal). Five of the athletes interviewed took home Olympic medals.

For Beth and Erin, a delicate balance of spending time with their families and having time away from their families enabled them to enjoy the experience and family support, while also giving them time and space to focus on the competition. They discussed how having their children with them at the Olympics helped them to feel more relaxed and alleviated any worries that they had about their children, but because the children were being cared for by other family members, they were also able to focus on performing well. Beth said,

> It was good to know that she [daughter] was there and was having fun, and you’re always going to worry about your kid whether they’re in Italy or they’re at home or whatever, you’re always going to worry about them, you know, if they’re safe. But I knew she was in good hands and it was good to know that I could see her.

She later added, however, that it was important for her to spend some time away from her family:

> The Olympics is totally different – you’re there for one thing and that’s to bring home the gold medal or whatever you’re competing in, you should be focusing on that. I mean yes, you know, I maybe saw them a couple of times during the tournaments, during the Olympics when we were playing, and that’s fine, because we should be only thinking about the [event], and I think I can not see them for, like, five days, you know, and focus on what we’re there – what we’ve trained for all year…I mean I know I had a kid, but I was also part of the team and you’ve got to be a part of the team and be like everybody else, and we’ve go to focus on the game.

Similarly, Erin said that the support of her family enhanced her performance:
It was very important to have my family there. I feel like I perform better, especially, you know, being that when you’re away so much it’s nice to be able to see them and to have [son] there and bring him in the dressing room or just spend a little bit of time with them. It’s sort of reassuring, you know they’re okay, you’re not worried, and you know, then I could just focus on performing.

Erin noted that for some athletes, family members could be a distraction, but hers knew how to optimally support her at the Olympics, which positively affected her performance. She explained:

My family’s very good at – they just, they know how to handle that situation. So they keep their distance and yet they’re there and they’re supportive if you need them, so they’re very professional in their own way about handling it. And they have fun on their own, and come to watch the [competition], and so it was very easy.

Both of these athletes were indeed satisfied with their Olympic performances.

Faith exceeded her performance goals at the Olympic Games and credited her peak Olympic performance to having her family nearby. She explained:

I think that [having family close] was pretty key in my performance in that I got to, the night before the [event] I got to walk up there and we watched a movie together – kind of what I normally do before a [competition]. We just hang out and relax. And while everyone else was back at the [sport association’s] house probably getting stressed out, I was relaxing with my family. So I think that, I think that really made a difference and helped me just to be more relaxed on [competition] day too.

Claire and Diana, whose children stayed home during the Games, found that while they missed their children, they were able to focus on performing, and as mentioned earlier, felt that having their children with them might have been distracting. Diana felt that even though she was away from her son, “I missed him [son], but again, when I was on the field, that’s all I was thinking about. Yes, off the field I missed him, but I was okay.” Diana’s team met their performance goals and she enjoyed a positive
experience and outcome. Claire, on the other hand, was not happy with her Olympic performance, but she felt that organizational issues, coupled with a mistake early in the competition, affected her mental game and overall performance.

As discussed in an earlier section, Anne and Gail found that their sport performance declined for reasons indirectly related motherhood. Anne found traveling with her family to be stressful, yet she attributed this stress more to the lack of organizational accommodations than to the presence of her family, as exemplified in the following exchange:

Anne: There is no, never any special circumstances…You know, there’s no room [to accommodate families], it’s so ridiculous. The politics about killed me.
Interviewer: Do you think that that affected how you performed at the Olympics?
Anne: I absolutely do. I was very stressed out.

Anne felt that this added stress contributed to a lingering illness she suffered in the pre-Olympic season; this resulted in her feeling not as prepared for Olympic competition as she would have liked. In spite of this, however, Anne did have some good performance outcomes. In her Olympic blog, she discussed her performances in positive terms, and while she was not in medal contention, she posted several personal and team bests. Gail, on the other hand, struggled with an injury that she felt may have been linked to returning to training too soon after giving birth, and had to readjust her performance goals. She explained:

Leading up to the injury, my training – I was back in even better shape than I was before I had my son, so my expectations were even to have better results than [my previous Olympics]. And so, of course when the injury happened it was like, well, I need to work with this. So really, I was going into [competition], but I had no idea [what to expect].
Ultimately, Gail found her performance and the overall Olympic experience to be disappointing.

As discussed earlier, Heather found the separation from her children to be extremely difficult, and also felt that the hormonal changes she experienced from having to stop breastfeeding may have contributed to her feeling like “this mother that’s going nuts.” In the following exchange, she described her goals and her evaluation of her performance:

_Heather:_ I don’t think that I had a specific [goal] for myself – normally I would have, but I just knew that I was dealing with so much other stuff, basically – and this maybe sounds odd to hear someone say this, when they actually get to the Olympics you’d think that their goals would be so high and so focused and so set, but basically I just wanted to get through it… So my goal when I got over there was to try and obviously play the best that I could, but it really, all that meant was just trying to keep my head in the game and just trying to be there for my teammates and just trying to get through it.

_Interviewer:_ Do you feel like you were able to do that? Did you feel your performance was…

_Heather:_ Was the best it could be? No, not by any means, no. Like I said I – there was just so much to deal with… so no, I don’t think I played nearly as well as I could of.

Interestingly, while Heather felt her performance was not as good as it could have been, her team was able to earn a medal, yet even this did not lift her spirits. The fact that it was not gold resulted in much criticism from the media, which she said “is disappointing because I’m just doing the best I can and it’s hard to get critiqued like that… but that’s [country] again, that’s [country] – they’re disappointed because we [didn’t win gold].”

Like Gail, Heather found the Olympic experience to be disappointing.
Theme #8: Advice and Recommendations

Each participant was asked about what kind of advice they would give to other mothers and athletes who were contemplating motherhood, and if there were any ways that they felt the athletic community and/or event organizers could have better supported them as mother-athletes. Participants were also asked if, looking back on their preparation for the Olympic Games, they would have done anything differently. This gave a bit more insight into what they felt others might want to do differently and what they felt needed to be changed in the world of elite athletics. The advice offered to other women revolved around three central issues: keeping an open mind about one’s ability to mother and train, allowing enough time to recover form pregnancy and return to training, and seeking out as much support as possible. Recommendations for sport organizations focused on practical issues such as funding, travel, and allowing/encouraging athletes to remain in contact with their families while training and competing, and providing on-site support. Interestingly, the athletes differed in their opinions of how involved or accommodating sport organizations and event organizers could be or should be with regard to athletes’ families. This theme is discussed in two sub themes: advice to mothers and athletes, and recommendations for sport organizations.

Advice to other mothers, athletes, and mother-athletes

In general, the participants were very encouraging when it came to women athletes having children and returning to competition. While they discussed the challenges that they faced, they all also discussed the joys of having their children and that these joys were worth the sacrifices. For example, Anne said, “I would say step out
and do it, and make a change in sport…do it, try it, and embrace the challenge because the rewards are huge.” Diana agreed, saying,

I would say, you know, it’s challenging. Again, you have to do a lot more balancing, a lot more juggling than you’ve ever had to do, but it’s so worth it if you really feel like you want to go in that direction…if you have the support then absolutely it’s so worth it – it’s so worth it to go and still be able to accomplish what you’re capable of.

Athletes also discussed the ideas that women should neither put off having children because of their sport involvement, nor should they relinquish their sport careers because they want to have children. As Faith said:

I would definitely say to not let the thought of having children – not think, “Oh gosh, once I have children I’m not going to be able to do anything.” Because really, it’s kind of what you make of it. If you want to stick with a certain lifestyle you can do it…So I would encourage them to not give up on dreams or, you know, goals they might have because of a child. And not to, also not to put off having children because, “Oh I still want to do this and this and this before we have kids.” Because, you know there’s – oh, to me there’s nothing better in your life then your children, and I think it’s something you wish that everyone could experience.

Several participants also offered practical advice about training and getting back into shape after pregnancy and child birth. Both Beth and Gail, who had not planned their pregnancies, discussed the importance of planning pregnancy/childbirth around one’s sport season, if possible. Gail said that this was important not only to allow for the maximum time to rest and recover, but also to give oneself time to spend with the new baby. Because she returned to the competitive circuit within a few months after having her son, she said:

I really missed that period, because I was trying to train and also I have a little infant with me. So it would have been nice to have more time with him at home. And then you’re ready to actually – you’re not starting tired.
Beth and Gail also acknowledged that it is important to remain flexible with training post-partum and not to get discouraged or think that you must do everything that other athletes in your sport are doing. Beth explained:

What I learned is that after you have a kid you can’t go all out because it really doesn’t make a difference until your body is ready to – until it’s ready. I mean, I could’ve – I lifted all summer and I lifted as hard as I could and wouldn’t get any stronger, then at a certain point, my body just let go, let go of the extra weight, let go and finally I could put some extra weight on the bar – it was just, my body, you know, was still getting back after having kids.

Similarly, Gail said:

At the beginning I was trying to do what the team was doing, and that was not right. I think I could have done a bit less but concentrate more on intensity and not do all that volume, because that’s what gets you tired, and as a parent you’re already tired…[So] plan from the beginning, okay I’m going to cut my volume but I’m going to train more specifically, intensity wise…You know, maybe its better to do more volume, but we have to face the fact that as a parent you can’t.

Erin also noted that it is important for women to consider how they are going to train and juggle all of their responsibilities before they actually have a child, so as to have a plan in place when the baby arrives. She said:

I think you have to think about all aspects of your – if you still want to be a competitive athlete – how will I get the rest I need? Get the training I need? What will my set up be? And cover off everything before you have kids, because once it happens, its kind of chaos for a while.

Finally, all participants wanted other women to know that they should not expect to be able to do everything on their own, and emphasized the importance of cultivating a strong support system. This is exemplified by the following collection of quotes:

To think that you would be able to manage it on your own, or if you don’t have a husband or a partner that’s able to help you with – it’s going to be very difficult. So I think you need to have that support system around you. (Erin)
You just have to have a good support system, otherwise it – it becomes a nightmare…you’ve got have that support in place first before you even, I think, decide to have a family, otherwise it will just destroy family life. (Heather)

Make sure you have a good supporting group of people to help you, come rain or shine, and more than one person, because it’s a lot of work. If you’re going to be gone a lot, oh geez, especially if you have support right in the home, from the spouse, that’s the biggest thing. (Claire)

To do more things you might need to rely on a little bit of support, but that’s not really a bad thing. (Faith)

The first year I didn’t think I needed somebody, but I think to have a good nanny for part of the year would be, it’s important. (Gail)

It takes a lot of support, again, like I said, I could not have done it without my family as well as some friends who really helped me out a ton. (Diana)

Surround yourself with people who share your vision and your dream for what you want to do and the sky’s the limit really, when you have that support. (Anne)

Two participants also advised that athletes who would like to return to training after having children should contact their sport’s governing bodies and inquire about any help that may be available to them. Erin noted, “Talk to your sport organization and say, you know, inquire about, is there any support for day care? Is there anything that I could tap into that would help me out? That’s very important.” Anne added that this is also important to do so that the governing body understands what the athlete is capable of. She explained:

Be in close communication with the governing body of your sport and try to really ascertain what’s available for you to function within the sport as a family, and know what you’re getting into – know if you can do this and maintain the amount of family unity that you desire to have. You just don’t want to get in over your head and have them, have the governing body or whomever, your coaches, expecting more of you than you’re able to give.
Recommendations for sport organizations

Throughout the interviews, several athletes discussed the changes that they felt needed to be made within their sports as well as changes that had been made as a result of their own participation after having children. Three of the participants pointed to the potential for longevity in their respective sports, arguing that sport organizations are going to have to make more accommodations for families as women extend their athletic careers. For example, Anne said:

There is so much longevity in this sport. There’s people competing at the Olympics at eighteen, and [an Olympic medalist] who just retired at 41...so I mean look at the longevity in that - she’s been in the sport over twenty years on the [competitive circuit], and what are you, what are we supposed to ask these young women to do? Not have families? I mean if they really want to be represented by the best, and by the best I mean the best not only in [competitive] results, but in maturity and representation and that whole ball of wax, well then you’re quite certainly going to get parent athletes.

As discussed earlier, both Faith and Gail acknowledged that women athletes often postpone having children because of the perception that their athletic careers would end, and that this may not be in the athlete’s best interests, pointing to the difficulty some older women have with conception as well as the emotional and performance benefits that come with having more balance in one’s life. They, and others, argued that women should not have to choose between sport and motherhood, and changes were needed in both organizational attitudes and practices in order to eliminate this perception of mutual exclusivity, as well as cultivate healthy, well-rounded athletes.

Heather and Faith also discussed the importance of sport organizations treating their athletes as whole people in general. For example, Faith commented that she at times
felt her coaches and association “don’t really take the time to realize that we’re people, and we have emotional needs as well as our training needs.” Heather agreed, saying:

I find in sports it’s all focused around the sport and there’s really no support for the outside arena, kind of, for your family life, for the other issues that are just as important. Because if you don’t address those issues, those issues can walk onto the [playing field] with you or onto whatever playing field that you play on. You come as a package…But it was all just focused on sport and performance and medaling, and everything else, well you just dealt with it on your own as best you could. And I think that needs to be – that definitely needs to be changed.

Several athletes also discussed changes that have already been made in their sport organizations as a result of their experiences and as more mother-athletes have joined their respective sports. For example, Diana and Erin both noted that their respective sport associations are now helping to fund the travel and child care expenses of mother-athletes on their national teams. Diana said that now the association includes families in their competition travel arrangements, and that a portion of the team’s fund raising efforts automatically goes to the mothers on the team for child care expenses. In addition, her association has relaxed rules regarding families traveling and staying with the team, and even provides room and board for children at the Olympic Training Center. Similarly, Erin said that although she did not feel that she needed financial help from her organization, it is now helping to fund the travel and child care of another mother and her family on the team. Gail discussed how she has seen a change in the attitude of her sport’s organization and that they are more aware of the needs of mother-athletes. She explained:

It’s interesting because now, one of my former teammates now, she just had a child and is coming back, and so now they have a bit of a – they know where to go with that a little bit more…I think they’re more open now…[and] because she saw me struggle through it, she totally took a
long time off…and as well, seeing with my history the coach was, “Okay, you need to see a doctor and check your ligaments and make sure everything’s coming back.” They were more aware and the doctors we work with were way more aware about what to look for.

Diana said that she hopes this trend continues, “because my thing is, people shouldn’t have to be out [after having a child].” Anne stated that as she has not been involved in her sport at an elite level since the Olympics, she is not sure if any changes will be or have been made as a result of her experience. She did feel, however that it was a learning experience for the organization and echoed Diana’s hope that changes will be made. She said:

The [national team] through it all learned a lot, I’m sure, and I don’t know if things will really change or how quickly they will change, as far as accommodating families, but to think we make it this hard on the best athletes in the nation, be it married or parent athletes – it’s just frustrating to me, because I don’t think we should be required to leave our families at home.

When asked what they thought sport organizations and competitive event organizers could do to assist or better accommodate parent-athletes, the “wish lists” of four participants (Anne, Claire, Diana, and Gail) included financial and/or child care assistance. Anne felt that if an athlete was not taking advantage of the travel and lodging provided by the team (because she was staying off-site with her family), or not allowed to stay with the team (as was the case with the Olympic Training Center), then perhaps the team could have a “special situation fund” that could help her finance alternate accommodations. Claire suggested that because the Olympic Games are such an expensive event to go to, organizers could somehow discount travel and accommodations for immediate families. She said:
If there was some way – which I know it’s a lot of money, because there are a lot of dads, more so than moms – but to be able to actually have some way of discounting or finding some way of making it cheaper for the families to be able to come – the actual immediate families, not necessarily the mom and dad, but the husband or wife and the children or child.

Gail said that it would have been a big help if her sport association could provide child care when traveling, and noted that she saw athletes in her sport from other countries whose associations did so. She remarked:

I see other countries where many women on the team have kids and they actually have nannies taking care of the kids. They’re hired by the association and take care of the kids, and it’s almost like day care really. That’s what they do, and it’s so much easier for them… [So] if they had a system set up with people that could take care of the kids…that would be a good help.

Diana also discussed the financial burden that she carried when traveling with her son, but as mentioned earlier, this is one area where her sport organization has already made changes.

Two participants (Anne and Faith) felt that sport organizations and event organizers should allow athletes to have more and easier access to their families. Faith emphasized this, saying:

I just think having a family with you is what helps you do your best. And it's one of my – an input for these next Games is you’ve go to let people have access to their families and their coaches because that’s what they need for that security and that support.

She went on to suggest giving each athlete a special family pass that would allow an immediate family to be closer to the athletes at their events. She explained:

You know the way they’re so strict about keeping the playing field away from where the spectators are – and I know some of it’s safety. You can’t have, you know, mobs of people in contact with the athletes, but I think they need to maybe give some family a little bit more leeway, in where
they could go and who they could see…And that’s maybe something the
Olympics maybe could do is just give family members a little more access
to the athletes. You know, I wouldn’t see it being too hard if every athlete
gets one pass for one person that can actually come where they are that
day, before the [event]. Or maybe have a special place to sit which is
much closer where they can actually interact with you, because I know
that would have meant a lot to me, and I’m sure a lot of the others too.

As discussed earlier, Anne found the difficulty her family had accessing the event venue
extremely stressful, and also suggested that event organizers could make exceptions for
immediate family to move through the Olympic venues with the athletes.

Heather discussed how she would have liked to have been able to qualify for the
Olympics sooner, as she felt that she would have been able to plan more effectively for
the Games. In addition, she felt that she would have liked to have been able to get support
from other parents, as to what to expect and how to cope with family issues, and just for
someone to talk to. When asked what coaches or sport organization could do to better
support parents she suggested:

To find somebody who has been through it I think, because you can’t
appreciate – it’s like being a mom for the first time and trying to – like a
person who doesn’t have a child, trying – they just don’t have the same –
what is the word I’m looking for – um, they just don’t know what it’s like
– until you’ve have your own child and the demands, physically and
mentally and emotionally, you have no idea what it’s all about until
you’ve gone through it…Or to have somebody that has been through it or
just has young children …that could tell you, well this is what you’re
going to be facing and this is what to expect and here’s some advice and
how to deal with it all.

Interestingly, when asked what the Olympic organizers could do to make the
Games more family-friendly, four participants questioned whether this was really an
appropriate or realistic expectation. Claire argued that that the Olympics was such a large
event, and that her sport organization sent a large delegate of athletes, and therefore
accommodating or providing funding for all families involved would be very expensive. She noted, “that’s a lot to be able to fork out, so I don’t know what kind of a solution there is for something like that, on such a large scale with [our sport].” In contrast, Gail said that since she was the only mother on her national team, she could not expect them to make special accommodations just for her. She said that while she would have liked her association to help her with child care, “I was the only one with a child, right? They’re not going to start doing that.” Erin argued that taking care of athletes’ families really wasn’t the responsibility of the IOC, although she did feel that individual sport organizations could do so. She explained:

The Olympic Games – their job is, it’s about the athletes. It’s not about accommodating the athletes’ families or kids, so I think that’s more left to the sport organizations that should be doing that…It’s so big, especially the summer Olympics – I mean I don’t know how they could possibly worry about everybody’s kids and their families. I think that that’s something they don’t – that’s not their job to focus on, the Olympic Committee. I mean, their job is to put on a great Olympics and focus on the athletes.

Beth made a similar statement, emphasizing that at the Olympic Games the focus is, and should be, on the athletes and on performing one’s best. While she discussed enjoying having her daughter with her at trainings and other events, she felt that the Olympic Games was a special situation that required total focus on the athlete and performance. She commented, “The Olympics is totally different – you’re there for one thing and that’s to bring home the gold medal or whatever you’re competing in, you should be focusing on that.”
Summary of Results

The purpose of this study was to provide a rich description of the experiences of female athletes with young children as they trained for and competed in the Olympic Games. The research questions focused on four main areas: the return to elite-level training and competing after becoming a mother, the practical aspects of combining mothering responsibilities and high level training and competing, the social and emotional experience of combining motherhood with elite athletics, and the effect of motherhood on the Olympic experience.

The return to training

The women interviewed reported mixed experiences and emotions when returning to training after giving birth or adopting their children, yet for these participants, the outcomes were predominantly positive. Physically, almost all found themselves out of shape after pregnancy and childbirth, and this was a new and very different experience for them. In addition, several of the participants found new motherhood to be physically exhausting, and named feeling tired or not getting enough rest as impediments to training. Two participants noted that they feel out of shape physically and also felt “rusty” in terms of the mental aspects of their respective sports – not only did they have to work to regain their physical fitness, but they needed to work on team play and competition strategy as well.

New motherhood and the return to training brought on a variety of emotions as well. While all of the participants expressed happiness and excitement about their pregnancies, five of them had not planned on motherhood and therefore were surprised and concerned about the impact it would have on their athletic careers, which for some
led to anxiety about when and how to tell family members, coaches and teammates. This anxiety diminished as family and coaches reaffirmed their support and as the women adjusted to the idea of becoming mothers.

Several participants found their return to training to be difficult and frustrating at first, and this frustration was compounded by their lack of knowledge of what to expect, as well as the lack of information available to them about the best ways to train through and recover from pregnancy. For one, this led to a decrease in her motivation as well, as she struggled through early workouts. In contrast, two athletes reported that they felt refreshed after taking time away from their sports, and that they were able to return to training with renewed motivation and passion; regaining their fitness was experienced as a fun challenge. Despite the challenges they encountered, the athletes in this study were determined to return to elite competition, and while they struggled at times, none seriously questioned whether it was possible. All participants reported that within a year, they were back to previous levels of fitness and performance or better, and they expressed feeling a special sense of accomplishment and pride for doing so. In addition, two participants also noted specific ways that returning to training had a positive role during their transition to motherhood. One described experiencing “the blues” and said that training helped her cope with these feelings by getting out and having some time for herself, while another mentioned that it was fun for her to be back in the sport environment, in her “pre-baby” life.

*Integrating motherhood and the elite sport career: practical aspects*

The mother-athletes interviewed discussed a variety of ways that they coped with the demands of motherhood and elite level training and competition. They noted that the
demands on their time and energy of both motherhood and their athletic careers were great and often conflicting, and to compensate, they became creative in their time management and their training techniques. These athletes discussed training with their babies (either carrying them in a front or backpack or bike trailer, or bringing them along to the training site), or scheduling their training around their babies’/families’ schedules, by training early in the morning or when another family member was available to care for the children. In addition, the athletes re-evaluated their training methods and made adjustments in their training so as to increase efficiency and/or reduce volume in favor of intensity. Some made sacrifices in other areas, and socialized or worked less on order to train.

The mother-athletes in this study made generous use of alternate child care, relying heavily on their spouses/partners and extended families to care for their children while they were training. This support from family members proved to be essential in the integration of motherhood and sport, especially when the athletes’ sport commitments took them away from their families. In fact, the athletes in this study acknowledged that they could not have continued in their sport careers without this support. All but two participants also utilized professional child care services (either nannies or day cares) so as to balance their mothering and athletic responsibilities. The extent to which the participants brought their children with them when they traveled for training or competition varied, and the decisions about whether or not to travel with children were made carefully, weighing such factors as finances, length of trip, location, availability of child care, and potential disruption to the child. Again, these mothers relied heavily on
husbands/partners and family members to either travel with them and their children, or to stay home with the children while the mothers traveled.

When integrating their mothering and athletic responsibilities, the participants also sought assistance from their teams and their sport organizations, although the amount of organizational support they received varied from sport to sport. Organizational support received by some athletes included flexible training and competition schedules, financial assistance, and providing travel, accommodations, and family activities when traveling to competitions. Several athletes, however, discussed how their sport organizations did not offer much support, and that some organizational policies made it more difficult to balance motherhood and sport. For example, three participants said that their organizations would at times not allow their children to travel or stay with the team, forcing them to find and pay for alternative travel and housing, and four discussed how their respective sport organizations offered little or no financial help to ease the burden of traveling with a family or paying for child care while the mother was training and competing. The amount of organizational support also varied within organizations over time, as the study participants asked for, and received, increasing support as time went on. Two participants mentioned that their respective organizations are more aware of the needs of parent-athletes and willing to provide financial and child care assistance and are more flexible with their travel policies, while one stated that her sport is generally more aware and open to supporting mothers.

*Integrating motherhood and the elite sport career: Emotional and social aspects*

Combining motherhood with an elite sport career was overall very satisfying for this study’s participants, and they felt that both motherhood and sport had positive
impacts on their lives. They reported feeling that motherhood enhanced their athletic careers by providing a healthier, more balanced perspective on life in general and on sport specifically, which led them to enjoy training more, and when competing, they felt more relaxed and less pressure to perform. This was especially evident when children were present at the training or competition site, as participants noted that children provided them (and teammates) with a bit of “comic relief,” reassurance, and a reminder of life outside of sport. Participants also discussed how their children enhanced their motivation and determination, as they wanted to be positive role models for their children and wanted to ensure that the sacrifices they and their families made were worthwhile.

Balancing motherhood and elite sport was also quite stressful, and the participants sometimes felt overwhelmed with the many responsibilities of mothering, training, and competing, be it the stress of training and traveling with their children, or the angst of leaving them behind. For most, the positives outweighed the negatives, and they asserted that the rewards were well worth the struggles. One participant, however, chose to retire from her sport because being away from her family as much as she had proved to be too difficult.

The mothers in this study enjoyed a tremendous amount of social support as they continued in their athletic careers and expressed appreciation for this support, as well as an acknowledgment that their athletic successes were not theirs alone, but truly a result of the family’s concerted effort. While they recognized that their families made sacrifices in order to support their athletic careers, they also felt that their sport experiences enhanced their families and relationships. The mother-athletes interviewed expressed feeling that their involvement in sport benefitted their children and families by creating unique and
meaningful experiences and memories, and giving them a means through which to teach life lessons about hard work and dedication, as well as an appreciation of sport and physical activity.

Within the athletic community, the athletes in this study reported varying levels of social and organizational support. All participants found their coaches to be supportive of their return to elite training, while the reaction from teammates was, for some, mixed. Three participants also felt that their mothering responsibilities limited the time they could spend with teammates and therefore affected their sense of connection to the team and at times led them to feel different from the “typical” athlete. Ultimately, participants saw themselves as positive role models for their teammates and felt that their experiences had a positive effect on their teams and organizations, through sharing their positive parenting experiences, showing others that it is possible to be both a mother and an athlete, and by affecting changes in organizational attitudes and practices. Finally, participants were acutely aware of expectation of the broader culture that combining motherhood and elite sport was impossible or undesirable, and they felt that they were actively resisting this. While they still at times struggled to define themselves as mothers and as athletes, they expressed pride in themselves for being able to combine the two spheres.

*The Olympic Experience and Olympic Performance*

In general, the athletes interviewed reported positive experiences at the Olympic Games. Four of the participants elected to bring their children with them to the Games, looking at the Games as a family event and relying on husbands/partners and extended family to care for the children while they were training and competing. Only one
participant chose to travel and stay with her husband and son throughout the Games – the rest stayed in the Olympic Village or other team housing while their families stayed off site. Four of the participants did not bring their children, due to the cost of travel and Olympic lodging, the feeling that having their children with them overseas would be more stressful than leaving them at home, and the disruption that the child might feel traveling overseas and across several time zones.

In terms of the overall experience of being at the Olympic Games, participants reported both positive and stressful moments. All found the Olympics to be exciting and felt a sense of pride in representing their countries and being a part of such a prestigious event. For some, it was the realization of a childhood dream, for others, it a chance to experience another Olympics in a different country and with a new team. Family played a role in enhancing this experience in general by providing the athletes with a more balanced perspective and sense of extra pride in and appreciation for their accomplishments, as well as providing emotional support. The athletes who brought their children with them also discussed the special meaning that sharing the Games with their families held for them, and the memories that they created as a family.

The Olympic Games were not without stressors, however, and the athletes interviewed discussed negative experiences as well, both related and unrelated to their families. The participant whose child was the youngest at the time of the Olympics (six months old) reported the most difficult Olympic experiences. Three athletes reported difficulty with organizational policies that excluded family members or made it difficult for them to have contact with their families, and one participant felt that while her extended family was supportive, they also were a source of distraction. Stressors
discussed that were not related to family included not being adequately prepared for Olympic logistics and distractions, pressure to win, inconsistent officiating, multiple media inquiries and events, performance mistakes, and coping with injury.

When looking at performance outcomes, this group of athletes was particularly successful, with six earning medals and/or having personal best performances. Three of these athletes discussed specific ways in which their children and families had positive effects on their performances, by helping them to relax before an event and by giving them “and extra boost.” Several of them could also point to general positive effects of motherhood, like the more balanced perspective and emotional support discussed earlier, that positively impacted performance. Interestingly, one medal winner was also disappointed with her performance, and felt that the stress of leaving her children coupled with Olympic stressors contributed to her perceived poor performance. Two athletes were unhappy with their performances and outcomes, one due to officiating and performance mistakes, the other due to the development of an injury a few months before the Games that disrupted her preparation.

Discussion

**Question #1: How do female Olympic athletes experience the physical and emotional aspects of returning to elite-level athletic training after pregnancy and childbirth?**

The first goal of this study was to describe the experience of athletes returning to elite level training and competition after becoming a mother. The athletes in this study described both positive and negative experiences as they made this transition. All of the participants who experienced pregnancy and childbirth remained active during their pregnancies (though to varying degrees), but reduced their activity, and none described
themselves as “training” past the first three months of pregnancy, consistent with previous research on the physical activity of athletes during pregnancy (Beilock et al., 2001). In addition, all of the athletes interviewed reported very little physical activity (and no intentional training) within the first month after giving birth as they cared for their newborns and adjusted to motherhood. For most, this was the longest period of time that they had not been in training since they began their sport involvement (which for most, was in childhood), and resulted in a new and unusual perceived lack of fitness.

Several found the physical challenges to be difficult and frustrating, consistent with other studies and writings on athletes returning to training after pregnancy (Allred, 2000; Appleby, 2004; Beilock et al., 2001; Hausenblas & Downs, 2005), and athletes coping with injury and rehabilitation (Podlong & Ecklund, 2005; Tracey, 2003; Wiese-Bjornstal et al., 1998; Udry, Gould, Bridges, & Beck, 1997). Interestingly, two athletes noted that they were not only out of shape physically, but also mentally. Because they spent an entire season away from competition, they had to readjust to playing against competitors and “remember” how to appropriately strategize during competitive situations. This has important implications for coaches and sport psychology practitioners, as the return to training is not just about regaining physical fitness levels, but also regaining comfort with team play and game/competition strategy.

Several of the women discussed the lack of research and information available to them regarding the process of returning to training post-partum, which left them at a loss for what to do or what to expect, and this gap in the research literature has been noted by others in the field (Allred, 2000; Appleby, 2004; Densmore, 1997; Schnirring, 2002). Two athletes described injuries they sustained as a result of returning to training too soon
or increasing the intensity of training too quickly. This dearth of information is further emphasized here as the athletes in this study had been involved in elite athletics for some time before they became pregnant; four of them had already been to two or more Olympic Games, and all of them had competed internationally. Presumably, these athletes had access to the best-trained coaches and trainers and the most up-to-date training technology available, and even they could not find accurate information or training guidelines. Further, Appleby (2004) found that realistic goal setting was a key factor in how satisfied and successful elite runners were when returning to training postpartum and the injury literature emphasizes the importance of accurate information and realistic expectations to rehabilitation outcomes (Bone & Fry, 2006; Robbins & Rosenfeld, 2002; Tracey, 2003; Udry, Gould, Bridges, & Tuffey, 1997). This highlights the importance of research into physical activity during and after pregnancy and how the post-partum body responds to physical activity and training, as well as the education of coaches and trainers in the physical changes that accompany pregnancy and childbirth.

The athletes in this study reported some positive experiences as well. Two athletes felt that the time they spent away from training helped them to rest physically and mentally, and they were able to return to training with renewed passion, energy, and motivation. One athlete noted that she had felt burned out and when she became pregnant had no intention of returning to training. Another participant discussed how she was reluctant to take any breaks while training and, in retrospect, was glad that pregnancy forced her to rest. This, again, is consistent with research and anecdotal writings on pregnancy and athletes (Allred, 2000; Appleby, 2004; Foley, 1998), as well as research on the psychological responses to injury (Quackenbush & Crossman, 1994; Tracey, 2003;
Udry, Gould, Bridges, & Beck, 1997). This is important to consider as several of the athletes in this study referred to assumptions or expectations held by others in the athletic community that pregnancy would mean the end of their athletic careers. In addition, the idea that an athlete would take a break from training and competing is inconsistent with the dominant cultural ideal of the elite athlete. Acknowledging that taking time away from sport can have a positive effect on training and performance may cultivate a more accepting attitude in the sport community and ease any anxiety a pregnant athlete may have about slowing down or interrupting her training.

Another noteworthy result found in the current analysis is the high level of motivation and commitment to sport that the athletes expressed. While Beilock et al. (2001) found that lack of motivation was named as a significant barrier to the post-partum return to training, this did not seem to be an issue in the current sample. All of the athletes except for one were committed to continuing their sport involvement as they transitioned into motherhood, and most did not even remember actually making that decision – they just always knew or assumed that they would continue training and competing (and the exception had left sport for reasons other than family). Of course, as this study focused on athletes who had successfully achieved their goals of competing in the Olympics (many of them medaling) a high level of motivation would be expected in this sample. In addition, more than half of the study participants entered motherhood unexpectedly, and none of these participants had considered taking time away from their sports or retiring before their pregnancies/adoption. This may have been a factor in their ability to sustain their motivation to train and compete through their transition to motherhood.
Still, it is significant in light of the cultural assumptions about femininity and motherhood, which define women as non-competitive and nurturing, and assumes that mothers would (and should) subordinate their needs to those of their children and families. Naomi Wolf (2003) furthers this by discussing the assumption that motherhood would also change a woman such profound ways as to render her uninterested in previous goals. Several of the participants mentioned an awareness of these expectations and felt that they were actively resisting them, and one even felt motivated to prove that it was possible to come back to her sport after pregnancy. When asked why they wanted to continue their athletic careers, the participants discussed their drive to achieve their goals, their competitive natures, and passion for sport. Similarly, in an interview with Runner’s World magazine, marathon runner Paula Radcliffe asserted that after having a child, “You still have the same love of running…I had a baby, I didn’t have a personality transplant” (in Gorney, 2008). Despite this recognition of cultural expectations and acknowledgement that it would be difficult (or at least, “different”), none of the athletes in this study felt that combining motherhood and sport was impossible.

All of the athletes interviewed felt that they were supported in their decision to continue with their athletic careers by their husband/partners, families, and their coaches. Several discussed the role their husbands/partners played in encouraging them to continue, and the decisions to have a baby (for those who planned their pregnancies) and to resume/continue training at an elite level were made as a couple. This was most likely an essential factor in the success of these athletes, as the support of the father has been found to be an important determinant in the adjustment to motherhood and the return of mothers to employment (Demo & Cox, 2000; Feeney et al., 2001; Feldman et al., 2004;
Glade et al., 2005; Lyness et al., 1999; Ozer, 1995; Silverstein, 1991). In addition, these athletes felt positive support from their coaches, which is an encouraging result, given that athletes who have sustained season-ending injuries (and therefore must take a break from training and competition) often report feel rejected or “written off” by their coaches (Udry, Gould, Bridges, & Beck, 1997; Udry, Gould, Bridges, & Tuffey, 1997). Similarly, pregnant women in the workforce report feeling devalued, that their commitment to the job is questioned, and that they gradually become invisible as their pregnancies progress (Lyness et al., 1999; Milward, 2006). One athlete, however, did report these feelings of being rejected and “written off,” not by her coach, but by some of her teammates and officials within her sport organization, whom she said expressed a belief that her athletic career was over. Aside from this case, the athletes in this study felt positive support and encouragement from their teammates and athletic peers through their pregnancies and return to sport.

Two athletes did, however, report anxiety over discussing their pregnancies with their coaches. Interestingly, neither of these athletes had planned their pregnancies, and they may have been internalizing the negative cultural view of unintended pregnancy. Douglas and Michaels (2004) point to the social construction of the “good” mother as one who plans her pregnancy “with the precision of a moon landing,” while those who become pregnant unexpectedly are viewed as irresponsible or “not thinking” (p. 192). This may have been especially salient for one participant who was not married at the time she became pregnant. Add together the cultural assumption that pregnancy and motherhood would end one’s athletic career and the negative connotations that are associated with unintended pregnancy, and it is no surprise that these two athletes felt
that they might have disappointed their coaches and were worried about how others might react to their pregnancies. In their cases, however, as with the other participants, coaches were supportive and willing to work with them as they returned to training, and ultimately they had successful comebacks. It is also important to remember that, despite the negative connotation associated with unplanned pregnancy, researchers who focus on family planning and pregnancy outcomes assert that “unintended” is not synonymous with “unwanted,” and that the majority of women who experience unintended pregnancies adjust well to motherhood (Fischer, Stanford, Jameson, & DeWitt, 1999; Moos, Petersen, Meadows, Melvin, & Spitz, 1997). This was the case in the present study, as those who entered motherhood unexpectedly discussed it in such terms as “the best thing that ever happened to me,” “I wouldn’t have it any other way,” “I’m glad it happened the way it did,” and “there’s nothing better in your life than your children.”

Planning was, however, something that participants thought was important when offering advice to other athletes. Those who did not plan on motherhood felt that timing a pregnancy to occur at the beginning of the Olympic cycle (as two participants did), would be ideal, as this would allow the athlete the most time to rest, spend time with the new baby, and get back in shape. In addition, participants advised that athletes discuss their needs and intentions with family members and sport personnel (e.g., coaching staff, association officials) so as to have support systems and training plans in place before the chaos of early motherhood. Finally, when returning to training, the participants in this study advised that new mothers be patient, not be discouraged, and allow themselves flexibility in training. Here, they reject the idea that mother-athletes must do everything their peers or teammates are doing, and instead focus on what feels best to them. This is a
departure from the somewhat patriarchal nature of elite sport, in which the athlete is encouraged to follow the lead of “experts.” Further, as Wiese-Bjornstal et al. (1998) and Allred (2000) noted, athletes who return to training after taking time off, be it because of injury of pregnancy, can be impatient and perceive their progress to be slow. The athletes here offer reassurance that while it may be frustrating, and as one participant said, you might have to just wait for your body to be “ready,” top physical condition does return. Three participants emphasized this, saying that they were in better shape after they had their children than they were before.

Question #2: How do female Olympic athletes with infants/pre-school children cope with the practical aspects of caring for their children while engaging in elite-level training and competition?

All of the participants discussed the challenges of “juggling” the numerous tasks of child care and the demands of elite level training and competing, and named lack of time and energy as top challenges. This is consistent with research on the mothers’ return to exercise and competitive sport (Beilock et al., 2001). In order to meet these challenges, the athletes in this study employed a variety of coping strategies, including bringing their children with them while training (e.g., training with a jogging stroller, bringing the baby to the training/competition site), using their time creatively (e.g., training in the morning while the family was sleeping or during their husbands’ lunch break), adjusting their training methods to make training more efficient and therefore less time consuming, and scaling back on their competitions or international travel. These athletes also made sacrifices in other areas of their lives, scaling back social activities and work, in order to meet the demands of training and motherhood.
As with the athletes written about by Allred (2000), Appleby (2004), and Pendersen (2001), the athletes in the present study were willing to question traditional training techniques, scale back on the volume of their training, and opt out of training camps or competitions that required extensive travel. That the women felt empowered to do so is significant, as it resists the dominant representation of the ideal elite athlete as all-consuming with sport and the aforementioned culture of elite sport that assumes the “experts” (e.g., coaches, trainers, sport scientists, officials) know what is best for the athlete. Indeed, several found their new training techniques to be superior to their pre-baby routines. It is also significant that all of the athletes in the current study except for one found their coaches and association officials to be accommodating and supportive of the athletes, even when they missed practices or training camps. Some pointed to the fact that their coaches (both male and female) had children of their own and therefore were understanding of their need for flexibility. It may also be that the athletes interviewed here were still performing at the top of their respective sports, as indicated by their Olympic success. It is possible that coaches and officials may not have been so flexible if the athletes had not been performing well. In addition, that the athletes were highly skilled may have given them more “bargaining power” as they negotiated their training conditions and schedules. One athlete discussed how she made it clear from the beginning that her return to sport was going to be uncompromisingly on her terms, and her coach accepted that. In any case, that support staff was willing to be supportive of and make exceptions for the mothers they trained is a positive sign.

Traveling with children was also a financial and logistical challenge for several of the athletes in this study and, as a result, the amount of travel that athletes did with their
families varied quite a bit, some traveling extensively with their children, some hardly at all. These decisions were based on practical issues, like the location, length of the trip, cost, and child care options, as well as personal ones, such as the athletes’ desire to have her children with her, whether or not she felt that she could still maintain proper focus on the event, and how she perceived support from her team/coach. Several found making travel arrangements (flights, rental cars, hotels) and packing the various child care necessities (pack-and-plays, strollers, car seats) to be difficult, and they also noted that another adult had to travel with them so as to care for the child while the mother was training or competing, increasing organizational and financial demands. To compound this, they often felt as though they were carrying this burden alone, as sport organizations did not offer much support. One athlete felt that the message sent to her was, “You’re the mom, you figure it out.” This feeling of singular responsibility that the participants felt is consistent with the dominant construction of motherhood that holds the mother primarily responsible for organizing child care, and echoes the “hands off” attitude toward child care that is found in the workplace (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Hays, 1996; Silverstein, 1991). This is, however, an arena in which some athletes reported improvements, as some of the sport organizations have increased financial and logistical help for athletes with children.

Interestingly, the athletes interviewed here differed in their opinions regarding the extent to which organizations should accommodate families either financially or organizationally. Some felt that this kind of support is essential in order to allow mothers full participation in elite sport. They also felt that it is in the athletic community’s best interest, as it would ensure that the best athletes would have the opportunity to represent
their sports in competition, and encourage athletes to live balanced lives. Others, however, believed that the focus of sport organizations and event organizers should be on the athletes and the competition, and that they are not (or should not be) responsible for accommodating families as well. Further, these athletes pointed to the reality of limited resources, and felt that funding families would be a considerable financial strain, if not impossible. These athletes may have been internalizing the abovementioned expectation that as mothers they should be singularly responsible for the care of their children, and thus conceptualized child care as an extra burden that sport organizations should not be expected to shoulder. In addition, sport sociologists have acknowledged that while sport organizations and governing bodies are perceived to function for the benefit of the athletes, most athletes feel relatively powerless within them (David, 2005; Sage, 1998). These two factors together may have led some participants to be reluctant in advocating for their needs. For example, one participant in this study discussed wanting to bring her daughter on more trips, but she felt that the team wouldn’t have gone for it and so she “didn’t really push it,” while another stated that since she was the only athlete on the national team with a child, she couldn’t expect the organizations to make exceptions for her.

From a feminist perspective, however, the needs of the mother-athletes are, though different from the traditional (i.e., male and/or childless) athlete, valid. Supporting those needs should not be seen as a special accommodation, but as necessary, and this will be increasingly important as more mothers engage in elite level competition. Already, the United States’ national women’s teams in soccer and softball have multiple players with children, as do professional sports such as golf and basketball, and study
participants pointed to the potential for career longevity in other sports as well. Despite limited resources, sport organizations may be forced to consider more support for families in order to keep their rosters filled with their top performers.

Finally, in order to accomplish the task of raising children while training and competing, the mothers in this study relied heavily on alternate child care. All of the athletes reported that their children were cared for by someone other than themselves in some capacity. Only two participants reported utilizing a day care facility for child care; the rest relied on husband/partners, extended family, and friends (often a combination of all three). This is interesting for a number of reasons. For one, while several of the participants pointed to reduced cost and flexible scheduling that informal (e.g., family, friends) child care afforded, as well as difficulty finding professional child care, they also expressed negative views of day care. For example, one participant stated that she felt good that she was not “ditching” her child at day care, another said that she that she did not want to put her son in day care and was glad her son could “grow up at home” under the care of a family friend “who we knew we could trust,” while another, who left her son in the care of a family she knew through her church, felt assured that he was being treated like one of their family and had “the consistency of being loved” while she was training.

Several feminist writers have discussed the lack of high quality, affordable child care in the United States and criticized the public disinvestment in such, and Douglas and Michaels (2004) have written extensively on the media’s role of framing day care as an inadequate and even dangerous alternative to stay-at-home motherhood. Further, Silverstein (1991) has asserted that child development research has reproduced these ideas by focusing on the detrimental effects of day care, stating, “The research on
maternal employment can more accurately be described as a search for negative findings for other-than-mother care” (p. 1028). This, they contend, serves to constrain women’s activities outside the home by instilling guilt and anxiety in women who consider day care (or any care other than their own) and reinforcing the hegemonic “good mother” (i.e., stay-at-home mother) ideal. While it is important to recognize the practical reasons for choosing informal child care (e.g., cost, flexibility, availability), it appears that some of the participants have, at least in part, internalized these negative assumptions about day care. This did not serve to constrain their athletic participation, as evidenced by the availability of family and community support and their successful return to Olympic competition; however, it may be a limiting factor for others. Research into the experiences of mother-athletes who failed to meet their athletic goals would be helpful in determining whether difficulty with child care (either the availability of child care or a personal discomfort with day care) serves to limit or constrain sport participation.

A second point of interest lies in the reliance on the fathers of the children in this study for child care. The athletes interviewed described the sacrifices that their husbands/partners made in time and career advancement in order to support their wives’/partners’ athletic careers. Two of the participants referred to their husband/partner as “Mr. Mom,” and several fathers took on the role of primary caregiver when the mother trained and traveled, some for extended periods of time. This family construction is in direct opposition to the traditional parenting roles of men and women and contradicts the majority of research and writings about mothers in sport, leisure, and the workforce, which generally support the perpetuation of traditionally gendered divisions of family labor as well as the expectation that mothers schedule their non-parenting commitments
around their children and families, while fathers are not expected to do so (Allred, 2000; Bialeschki, 2001; Elvin-Nowak & Thompson, 2001; Feldman et al., 2004; Fox, 2001; Glade et al., 2005; Hays, 1996; Wolfe, 2003; Woolett & Parr, 1997).

The mothers in the present study, along with the fathers, were able to resist the cultural constructions of the family and organize their families and family roles in such a way as to put priority on the women’s goals; this was no doubt a great contribution to their success. This family arrangement is more the exception than the rule, but while there are still stigmas attached to both working mothers and stay-at-home fathers, studies have shown an increase in the amount of time that fathers spend with their children as well as an increase in the number of stay-at-home fathers, and a gradual shift towards social acceptance of nontraditional parenting (Rochlen, McKelly, Suizzo, & Scaringi, 2008). Again, this is an encouraging finding, as it illustrates flexibility in parenting roles as well as a belief among the participants’ families that, in contrast to the athletes studied by Johns and Farrows (1996), the women’s athletic participation was an important and legitimate use of family resources.

One participant did, however, discuss a time when her marriage was strained, as she perceived that the focus on her athletic career led to an imbalance in the relationship. She was the only participant in this study whose husband was also a high-level competitive athlete, and he gave up his participation the season she made her bid for the Olympics. In addition, she was the only participant to have more than one child at the time of her Olympic participation. The stress of balancing two jobs, two high-level athletic careers, and two children, along with the interruption of one partner’s sport career, may have made it more difficult for her and her husband to negotiate family
responsibilities and roles than for the other participants. Further research into two-athlete couples and their families may be useful in understanding the particular dynamics of these relationships.

*Question # 3: How do female Olympic athletes with infants/pre-school children experience, emotionally and socially, caring for their children while engaging in elite-level training and competition?*

The previous research question addressed the practical and logistical issues that the participants negotiated as they integrated their roles as mothers and as athletes. Essentially, it addressed the “how” of the process. This question attempts to address the meaning and the impact of the experience, by exploring how the participants felt about the process and the impact that motherhood and sport had on them and their relationships. As they negotiated and integrated their roles and identities as mothers and athletes, the participants were able to resist some of the cultural expectations traditionally associated with each role and define themselves in a way that supported both their commitment to motherhood as well as their commitment to sport. This was sometimes a struggle, however, as they were very aware of the expectations that the culture in general and the cultures of their respective sports had for them as they attempted to meet all of their family and athletic responsibilities.

In general, the participants framed their mothering and athletic experiences in predominantly positive terms. While acknowledging the logistical stressors discussed earlier, the participants discussed numerous ways in which their lives and their sport experiences were enhanced by their children. They felt that motherhood gave them more balance in their lives and put their sport careers in perspective. Interestingly, all of the
participants made some reference to elite athletes thinking of nothing but themselves and their sport, and five used the term “selfish” to describe the typical elite athlete. 

Motherhood, they said, forced them out of this singular focus, which helped them to gain “balance” in their lives and enjoy their sport more. They felt less pressure to succeed, as they no longer defined themselves solely as an athlete, and several acknowledged that when they were struggling with performance they took comfort in their families. For some, this new perspective led to a more relaxed attitude in competition and enhanced performance. This is consistent with Appleby’s findings in her 2004 study of elite distance runners with children, who also reported better perspective and decreased pressure to perform, and improved quality of life overall.

The participants’ sport careers also impacted their family lives and their roles as mothers, and while they discussed ways in which their athletic involvement put stress on their families, they also described their family relationships in predominantly positive terms. The mothers in this study enjoyed sharing their sport experiences with their children and families, and many shared humorous anecdotes about their children at competitions or training sites, interactions with teammates, and their children’s reactions to their accomplishments. These stories became woven into the history of the family, and the sport experience became more than a career, but a site for creating family memories, drawing the family together. These stories also illustrate the bidirectional interaction of the athlete and mother roles, as having children present enhanced the athletes’ enjoyment of their sports, and sharing sport experiences enhanced the mothers’ connection to their children.
The mothers in this study also discussed the effect that their careers had on their children, and again, while they acknowledged stressors, like separation or travel disrupting the child’s routine, they framed their children’s experiences as mostly positive. Several athletes said that their children were able to experience things that most kids don’t get to, such as traveling to different countries and seeing the Olympic Village. Two participants noted that because Mom was not the only caregiver, their children were able to form close relationships with their fathers and other family members. Several athletes also discussed the ways in which they felt they were providing their children with positive role models and teaching them valuable life lessons about hard work and dedication. For example, one athlete described a moment when she considered not going to the Olympic Trials, but reconsidered because she didn’t want her son to see her give up on her dream, while another hoped that when her daughter came to her training site, she would learn the value of hard work and dedication (again, we see the bidirectional interaction, as the desire to be a positive role model also enhanced the athletes’ motivation and helped them to persevere through difficult times).

As the women in this study integrated their roles and responsibilities as mothers and as athletes, they at times reproduced and at times resisted dominant constructions of motherhood and elite athletics. All of the participants at some time discussed the primary importance of their families. Some stated this outright, remarking that they believe family comes first, or as Anne stated, motherhood was a vocation she chose and her children would always come first. Others were somewhat indirect, saying that motherhood taught them what was “really important,” or gave their lives more meaning than anything had before. While this is consistent with the dominant construction of the “good” mother as
one who puts her family before anything else (see Hays, 1996), these women also resist the idea that motherhood is *all* they can or should do. Several participants made statements reflecting this resistance, such as “life doesn’t end with parenthood,” and “things don’t have to change and you stop everything because you’re now a mom.” To them, mothering was still the most important thing, but it was definitely not the only thing. Here, they were able to resist the assumption that motherhood and sport were mutually exclusive, and while they gave priority to motherhood, they also placed high importance on their athletic careers.

In a similar fashion, the participants were able to resist the construction of the elite athlete and the “sport ethic” (as described by Hughes and Coakley, 2001) which requires a “real athlete” to subordinate all other interests and needs to the athletic career and cultivate a singular focus on sport performance. Instead, the mothers in this study emphasized that motherhood gave them balance, put sport in perspective, and allowed them to appreciate life outside of sport, and all participants made some reference to sport not being the most important thing in their lives after motherhood. This is not to say, however, that sport was no longer important; to the contrary, this was, as mentioned earlier and as evidenced by their Olympic success, an extremely motivated group of athletes. As Diana commented, “It [sport] probably won’t be number one, but that doesn’t mean you can’t maintain that level of excellence.” Here as well, they were able to resist the notion that elite athletes must be single minded in their pursuit of the Olympic dream, that they must “eat, sleep, and train, eat, sleep, and train” in order to be successful. In fact, several stated that having this balance gave them better focus in training, increased
their motivation, made them “healthier,” “more complete,” athletes, and even improved their training and performance.

This does not mean, however, that they were without conflict. At times the participants discussed struggling with their choices and wondering if they were doing the right thing. They acknowledged both the cultural ideals associated with motherhood as well as the real sacrifices that they and their families were making in order to pursue their athletic goals. Several mentioned that they felt they had missed out on important events in their children’s lives or would have liked to have spent more time with their children, and they also acknowledged that their husbands/partners were sacrificing their careers and goals in order to support their Olympic goals. In addition, for some, priorities did shift during the Olympic trials and the Olympic Games, as the demands of sport took priority over mothering. For example, when Faith decided to train in another state in the lead up to the trials, she questioned her own decision, asking herself why she would leave her family if she believed family was more important than sport. Others described struggling with the separation from their children during the Olympic Games.

These participants were able to reconcile the dissonance they felt when favoring sport over motherhood with the support of their families and by viewing the Olympic Games as a special situation which required a temporary re-ordering of priorities. As mentioned earlier, husbands/partners were essential in providing physical support (e.g., child care), and they were also important providers of emotional support. Several athletes discussed making decisions about their sport participation with their husbands/partners and that the support and encouragement of their husbands and families was critical in not only making their focus on sport logistically possible, but helping them to feel
comfortable with their choices. In Faith’s case mentioned above, her husband encouraged her to go and justified her training away from home by framing it as a once in a lifetime opportunity. As discussed earlier, knowing the children were spending time with their fathers, extended family, or close friends helped to lessen any guilt the mothers felt about taking time to train. In addition, several participants discussed the significance of the Olympic Games and noted that while reducing the time they spent with their children (or being separated from them altogether) while preparing for and competing in the Olympics was difficult, it was also temporary, and the magnitude of the Olympic Games warranted such a shift in priorities. As one participant said of motherhood and the Olympics, “you can’t say no to either.”

Some of the participants also felt conflicted when they resisted the singular focus of the “sport ethic” and prioritized motherhood over their sport. For example, Beth stated that even though she was a mother, she was still a part of the team and needed to do what the team was doing, and Gail remarked that she felt she needed to return to competition right away because the sport association had named her to the national team. Although the participants enjoyed traveling with their children, three discussed feeling as if their families were at times intrusions, and attempted to balance their needs with those of their teammates. This appeared to be an easier conflict to manage, possibly because of the support of the greater culture in putting their families first, but it also was one that was exacerbated by the sport milieu. Several described situations in which their commitment to the sport was questioned, teammates or officials were unhappy with the presence of their children, and/or they felt that the needs of their families were ignored by sport associations or events organizers. Fortunately, all of the participants felt positive support
from their coaches and at least some of their teammates, and they drew on this support when managing sport-family conflicts; Gail in particular described her coach as a buffer between her and the association. In addition, several mothers in this study used their influence to advocate for their needs and work for organizational changes. By asking for assistance with funding or organizing child care and family travel, these athletes brought family issues out of the private realm and suggested that family support was a legitimate responsibility of sport organizations. This again shows their resistance to the dominant construction of the ideal athlete as well as to the male dominated sport structure.

Framing the mother-athletes in this study as resisting hegemonic ideas about motherhood and sport is significant as much of the feminist writing about mother-athletes has revolved around the idea of the “female apologetic” as described by Felshin (1974) and more recently by Krane (2001). The female apologetic describes the practice of female athletes emphasizing the traditionally feminine aspects of their lives (e.g., a feminine or “heterosexy” appearance, heterosexual relationships, etc.) in order to “apologize” for their athletic participation and ensure others that even though they are accomplished athletes, they are still “real” or feminine women. Sport sociologists have pointed to marriage and motherhood as one way that female athletes display appropriate femininity (see for example, Jamieson, 2001). The athletes in the present study, however, do not view the visibility of their motherhood as a reproduction of hegemonic ideas of gender or emphasized femininity. Instead, they view it a resistance to the traditional constructions of both motherhood and sport.

By bringing their children with them to trainings and competitions, the participants made their motherhood visible and linked their identities as mothers to their
identities as athletes in a public way. In fact, several described situations in which they brought their children out onto the playing field after a game or carried them onto the award podium. In doing so, they felt as if they were challenging restrictive cultural views of motherhood (e.g., that life ends with motherhood) and of athletes (e.g., sport is male-dominated, there is nothing more to athletes than training). In addition, by bringing children into training and competition spaces and advocating for their needs as mothers (e.g., asking for funding or accommodations for their families), the mother-athletes challenged the conceptualization of sport spaces as masculine as well as the male-centered sport organizations. From this perspective, it appears that these women were unapologetic of their roles as mothers and brought their children and their needs to the forefront of the athletic world.

Several of the study participants caught the attention of the media as well, and their stories of combining motherhood and sport were often the focus of print articles and television interviews. When asked how they felt about the media discussing their families, participants responded positively, saying that they were happy to tell their stories because they hoped to (again) publicly challenge dominant assumptions about motherhood and sport, provide women with positive role models, and inspire mothers to “not give up on their goals and dreams.” Anne in particular mentioned that mothers are often ignored – the “unsung heroes” – and that she felt that the media were appreciating her hard work and dedication. This is a noteworthy finding, as media are often criticized in the feminist sport literature for focusing on the family status of women athletes instead of their athletic accomplishments in an effort to trivialize their athleticism and frame women athletes as “feminine” and heterosexual (Higgs, Weiller, & Martin, 2003). While
this may still be the intention of some media stories, it is important not to ignore the manner in which this focus on motherhood is experienced by the athletes themselves, and the very real potential for such stories to, as hoped by the participants, affect social change.

*Question #4: How does motherhood impact sport performance at the Olympic Games?*

The majority of the athletes interviewed discussed the ways in which motherhood positively affected their Olympic performance, while one athlete felt that the stress of separation from her children had a negative effect on her performance. Three discussed specific ways in which having their children with them at the Games and spending time with their families helped them to remain relaxed and kept the importance of Olympic competition in perspective. For example, one athlete who exceeded her performance goals attributed her peak performance to spending the night before her event relaxing with her family, while another felt that spending time with her son and bringing him into the dressing room at times helped to ease the pressure felt by her and her teammates. Other athletes felt that motherhood had given them, in a general sense, a positive attitude and a more relaxed perspective on competition and a sense of “extra pride.” One athlete described it as feeling “more at peace” at the Games compared to her previous Olympics. These positive feelings should not be undervalued, as previous research into Olympic performance has shown that athletes report that family support, keeping the Games in perspective, maintaining a positive attitude, and balancing their focus on the competition with fun are important factors in Olympic success (Gould et al., 1999; Greenleaf et al., 2001).
Interestingly, the presence of family has been discussed as both a source of support and a stressor (see Gould et al., 1999; Greenleaf et al., 2001; Haberl & Peterson, 2006). Gould et al. (1999) discussed a strategy utilized by a successful Olympic team that placed support staff as a “buffer” between the athletes and family members. These staff members kept family members updated on the athletes, answered questions, and assisted them with needs (such as schedules and tickets) and insulated the athletes from family distractions. Two of the athletes interviewed here, however, expressed wanting more time with their families, not less, and were unhappy with policies and logistics (such as housing and accreditation issues) that separated them from their immediate families. They even expressed a desire to be able to interact with their husbands and children at the competition site, as they felt that having that direct, on-site support was helpful. It is important to remember, however, that several athletes made a distinction between immediate family (e.g., the husband and child) and other family members and friends. In one case, especially, immediate family were essential to her, but interactions with her extended family and friends were very stressful.

Keeping this in mind, and as suggested by the participants, sport organizations and support staff may want to revisit the policies that are intended to insulate athletes from families and look at how their athletes might be better served by allowing easier access to immediate family. This is something that should be considered on an individual basis, as one participant expressed her feeling that while she enjoyed seeing her family during the Games, when her team was engaged in the final games of the competition she preferred to focus all of her attention on the game. Gould et al. (1999) and Greenleaf et al. (2001) both discuss the development of “family plans” in which family members are
educated about what to expect at the Games and how to best support athletes, and athletes plan what kinds of interactions they would like to have with their families and how they will cope with family demands. This process would no doubt be helpful to parent athletes, and it is essential that coaches and sport organizations be open to and supportive of the needs of individual athletes.

It is also noteworthy that the majority of participants in this study appeared to be able to separate their roles as mothers and as athletes in a way that allowed them to focus optimally on their events. For example, one athlete whose child did not travel to the Games with her, said that the month-long separation was difficult and she missed her son, yet when she was on the field, “that was all I was thinking about.” Two athletes, both of whom had high performance expectations, discussed keeping a balance between family time and team time, and said that during the training period they saw their children a lot, but during the final games of the competition they cut down on family time in order to focus on performance. The ability to balance enjoyment with focus on performance and the ability to block out distraction during competition has been documented in the Olympic performance literature as extremely important to successful outcomes (see Gould et al., 1999; Greenleaf et al., 2001), yet this may be difficult for some mother-athletes as the roles of mother and athlete have the potential to be all-consuming. Researchers and practitioners may want to explore these skills further with parent athletes in order to learn how successful athletes are able to psychologically separate these spheres and to help new parent-athletes develop these skills.

Four of the participants reported stressors that negatively affected their performance. Some of these stressors were not directly family or motherhood related and
included issues with travel and transportation logistics, officiating, performance mistakes, and pressure to win. These stressors are not uncommon to Olympic athletes and are consistent with previous research into Olympic performance (Fletcher & Hanton, 2003; Gould et al., 1999; Greenleaf et al., 2001; Woodman & Hardy, 2001). Three athletes also reported family-related stressors. One felt that the financial and logistical stress of traveling with her young family and the “politics” involved (e.g., dealing with her organization, balancing her needs with those of her teammates, obtaining proper credentials for her husband and child) negatively affected her ability to adequately prepare for the Games as well as her Olympic performance. Another sustained an injury that she believed was caused by returning to training too soon after having her baby, and one reported struggling quite a bit with the separation from her children while at the Olympic Games. It is important to remember, however, that in these cases, it was not necessarily the athlete’s status as a mother that negatively impacted her performance, but the inability of the athletic environment to adequately support her. In other words, the stress caused by “politics” and “red tape” could have been eased with more organizational support and family-friendly policies, while the injury may have been prevented (or perhaps better treated) by an educated and aware training staff and less pressure from the sport organization to return to competition quickly. In addition, assistance with travel logistics and flexibility with housing that allows families to stay together may have made traveling with children possible.

Finally, the discussion of Olympic performance would not be complete without acknowledging the success of this particular sample of athletes. Of the eight women interviewed, five won medals in their events and one who did not medal posted several
team and personal bests. Three of these athletes had earned medals in previous Olympic Games before they became mothers as well. It is possible that the athletes in this study were able to have such successful post-baby comebacks because they were already at the top of their respective sports and therefore highly skilled and highly motivated. It is also possible that the successful athletes were more willing to participate in the study and share their stories. Nevertheless, the outcome success of this sample provides evidence contrary to the belief that motherhood would end an athlete’s competitive career. Instead, these athletes have shown that, despite the struggles, mothers can be very successful athletes.

Question #5: How does motherhood impact the experience of the Olympic Games?

The final research question posed focused on how motherhood impacted the overall experience of competing at the Olympic Games. Leaders in the field of sport psychology have advocated a holistic or human development paradigm (for example, see Vealey, 1988), yet research into the Olympic Games has focused predominantly on factors that contribute to performance and performance outcomes. Exploring the overall experience of the Olympic Games is important for a number of reasons. First, as discussed, the “off-the-field” experiences at the Olympics have the potential to affect performance; therefore, maximizing enjoyment and reducing stressors at the Games is essential for optimal performance. It is important to remember, however, that from a holistic standpoint, performance, while obviously important in competitive sports, is only one piece of the puzzle. The women in this study drew considerable satisfaction from their Olympic participation, not just when they were competing, but in the experiences of being with teammates, staying in the Athletes’ Village, taking part in the various
ceremonies, experiencing and traveling through the host country, and just being at the Games. The importance of the overall experience cannot be undervalued, as Gould et al. (1999) suggest that the manner in which the experience is framed can affect the athlete’s life satisfaction and future participation.

The athletes discussed their Olympic participation in predominantly positive terms, and again, all felt that the experience, as with performance, was enhanced by their families and by their status as mothers. They found that being a mother at the Games was a source of pride and gave them a special sense of accomplishment. As one participant said, “I was like, wow – I’m a Mom and I’m at the Olympics.” This was especially salient for those who discussed struggles they faced when returning to their sport. They found the ability to reach their athletic goals while also meeting their family responsibilities to be an impressive accomplishment. The new perspective and relaxed attitude that the athletes discussed in relation to their performance also carried over into their overall experience. As discussed earlier, one participant struggled quite a bit with the separation from her family and reported that while being at the Olympic Games was exciting, it was also a disappointment. She discussed how she felt that she had unrealistic expectations about what the experience was going to be like and that she could have coped better if she had been better prepared for what to expect while at the Games. Indeed, in studies of factors affecting Olympic performance, Gould et al. (1999) and Greenleaf et al. (2001) found that talking to previous Olympians and/or the presence of teammates with prior Olympic experience helped first-time Olympians to know what to expect and had a positive impact on their experiences.
Each participant was faced with deciding whether or not her child should travel to the Games, and each family made different decisions about who would go and who would stay home. In either case, it is important to remember that this decision was a personal one, and based on each athlete’s comfort level with traveling with her child, and there does not seem to be one “correct” decision. However, event organizers and sport associations should also keep in mind that providing assistance to athletes and their families to ease the financial and logistical strain of traveling to events like the Olympic Games may enable more families to travel together. Two of the athletes who did not bring their children noted that they felt financial or child care assistance would have been helpful.

Those athletes who chose not to bring their children cited logistical factors such as the cost of the trip, finding lodging, child care, and the impact of international travel on the child. Interestingly, the Summer Games athletes also mentioned security issues, and one athlete’s decision not to bring her son was influenced in part by safety concerns. This may have been in part because of the larger size and scope of the Summer Games as well as the international political climate of the time (the escalation of the Iraq War and Athens being the first Summer Olympics to be held post-9/11). They all made some reference to the idea that while they would have liked to have brought their children, they felt that having them at the Games would have been more stressful than leaving them at home. The decision not to bring her child to the Games had a negative impact on the overall experience of two athletes. Gail was struggling with an injury at the Games and felt that because she was unable to perform at her peak, being at the Olympics was not worth the separation from her family, and Heather felt that her worries about her children
and the physiological effects of abruptly ending breastfeeding intensified the other stressors she felt at the Games. For the other two athletes who did not bring their children, that Olympic experience was still very satisfying. Diana discussed how she was able to enjoy being with her teammates and soak up her last Olympic experience, while Claire discussed her excitement as an athlete participating in the Olympic Games in Greece “where it all began.”

The athletes who chose to bring their children with them discussed the importance of feeling the support of their families, and some looked at sharing the Games with their families as a way of showing their appreciation for the support they had given. For example, Faith said that she felt it was important for her husband and daughter to be a part of the Games because they had helped her to achieve this goal, while another felt that sharing the experience brought her family closer together. Several participants also shared anecdotes and memories created at the Games with their children; experiencing the Olympic Games together became an important part of their “family story.” Anne especially discussed the special meaning of having her family at the Opening Ceremonies and then greeting her in the venue at the end of her last event, and two other athletes discussed bringing their children onto the podium or playing field after a win, naming these experiences as “priceless.”

There were some interesting differences, however, in how each mother negotiated her roles at the Olympics. Anne and Faith both discussed the importance of their families and stressed that the Olympics were a family event – they wanted to spend as much time as possible with their husbands and children and were unhappy with policies that kept them separated. In contrast, Beth and Erin seemed to frame the Olympics as a job and
limited their time with family, especially during the final phases of competition. Erin discussed how it was helpful that her family knew when to keep their distance, while Beth said that during the competition she had to be a part of the team and focus only on the event. These differences may have been a result of the expectations that the athletes had – Both Beth and Erin were considered medal contenders going in, while Anne and Faith were not. In addition, Anne and Faith were athletes of individual sports, while Beth and Erin were in team events. The high expectations and responsibility to their respective teams may have resulted in a more business-like view of the games for Beth and Erin, and therefore their role as athletes took precedence during the competitive phase of the Olympic experience, and each took comfort in knowing that her child was having fun with other family members. In any case, it is important for coaches, sport psychology consultants, and support staff to understand that each mother-athlete will negotiate her roles as mother and athlete in a slightly different way, and be open to providing the appropriate support.

As discussed earlier, regardless of performance outcome, all participants had constructed a positive view of their Olympic experience (although some more so than others), and for the three athletes who were disappointed with their performances, their family status helped them to reframe the experience in a more positive way. For example, Claire stated that even though she felt her performance was poor, she could use the experience to teach her children the importance of perseverance and “that something you start and want to achieve, it’s not just going to be handed to you, you actually have to work hard for it.” She also discussed how she had a great time at the Games outside of the competition as she was able to travel and take in the sights. As discussed earlier, Gail
expressed mixed feelings about her experience, but she did note that she felt especially proud of herself for being able to return to her sport after having her baby and reach her goal of competing in the Games. While Heather described her Olympic experience as disappointing, and even said that afterward “you feel like you’ve been to war and back,” she also noted that it was exciting for her to be at the Olympics and that she felt special sense of pride in the overwhelming reaction to her story from women around her country; she remarked that she hoped she had been a positive role model for other mothers and families.

**Implications for Researchers**

The focus of the present study is on the experiences of mother-athletes as they trained for and competed in the Olympic Games. This is a relatively rare, though emerging, phenomenon, and while popular media has explored the experiences of mothering athletes, few research studies have done so. The parameters of this study were set so as to focus on the integration of motherhood and elite level training and the specific challenges that present themselves as a woman is transitioning into motherhood and when children are of pre-school age and therefore very dependent on their parents for care. Indeed, those participants who are still training noted that as their children have gotten older (especially those who are in school now), their lives have become considerably less hectic and the ability to schedule training around the school day is relatively easy. Because of these delimitations, however, the pool of potential participants was very small, and several factors made accessing these select participants quite challenging.

For one, elite athletes, especially Olympians, are contacted often for interviews and speaking engagements by a variety of media personnel, writers, organizations, and
researchers, and they must make decisions about how many and to whom to respond to. Agents and media liaisons in sport governing bodies yielded the best contacts, but a few were not able or willing to pass along my interview request. This is understandable, however, as part of their jobs is to filter requests and protect their clients, and without prior knowledge of the investigator, my request may not have been seen as credible enough to warrant attention. It may be most helpful to cultivate networks within sport organizations and/or gain the support of an organization (such as the USOC) first, in order to increase credibility and trust. Second, it must be understood that elite athletes and mothers of young children are very busy people, and finding the time to respond to emails, fill out paperwork, and participate in an interview can be difficult. Because data were collected in the fall and winter of 2007/2008, several of the potential participants were preparing for the upcoming 2008 Games and none of these athletes responded. Future researchers should carefully consider the timing of their study and perhaps prepare to collect data in the months following an important event, as athletes may have more time and energy to participate.

On a positive note, those who agreed to participate were eager to share their experiences and very open about both their struggles and triumphs. They were also very encouraging about the research topic, as many lamented the lack of research and information available to them as they underwent the process of integrating motherhood and athletics. At the close of one interview, one participant said that she wished she had been able to read a study like this one before she had her baby, while another expressed feeling as if her needs had been ignored within the athletic community and so she was glad to talk about them. In addition, one participant remarked that she felt it was difficult
to find someone to talk to who truly understood what she was going through, and that advice from other mother-athletes - those who had been there - would have been much appreciated. Several also discussed that they drew inspiration from the media stories of other mother-athletes and sought out such models, even while acknowledging that they were difficult to find. Researchers should therefore not be discouraged from exploring this topic further, as there appears to be a desire to both tell and hear these stories.

There are a few other unique circumstances that researchers should be aware of when exploring the lives of mothering or parenting athletes. Interviews were often interrupted by the needs of children: one baby needed to be fed in the middle of an interview, the children of two participants began asking them questions during our conversations, and one mother was playing with her children while talking with me. These interactions should not be seen as distractions or disruptions; rather, they are a part of life with children and should not only be expected, but appreciated. They may also be useful sources of data, as Kitzinger (2004) recognizes in her discussion of feminist researchers’ explorations of women’s everyday interactions.

I also found that several of the athletes were unprepared to be asked what they felt their sport organizations or event organizers could do to better support them. In a critical examination of sport organizations, Paulo David (2005) explains that while organizations may claim to be athlete-centered, athletes are usually at the bottom of the power hierarchy and are often reluctant to criticize their organizations or advocate for themselves. Researchers should be aware of this and be very sensitive to building trust and ensuring/maintaining confidentiality if athletes are critical of their organizations. Further, feminist scholars of the work-family relationship have discussed the cultural
assumption that child care is an individual and private task, excusing organizations and communities from any responsibility to assist parents (Boyd, 2005; Douglas & Michaels, 2004; McMahon, 1995; Silverstein, 1991; Wolf, 2003). In light of this, it is understandable that when asked what they felt they needed from their organizations as a parent, several athletes had not considered that sport organizations could or should accommodate them as mothers, and first responded by saying they didn’t know or “I’ll have to think about that.” Researchers should not shy away from these questions, however, as eliciting the opinions of athletes about sport and event organizations and offering time and an opportunity for athletes to reflect on their own needs has the potential to empower the athletes as well as inform meaningful change within the structures of competitive sport.

Finally, it is my belief that researchers should be aware of the potential uses of their research and act as advocates for their participants during and after the research process. It is my sincere hope that the acknowledgement of the struggles of the mother-athletes in this study does not discourage women from pursuing their athletic goals, but instead inspires them to do so, by offering positive role models, practical advice, and a community of support. I also hope that the exploration of these challenges and successes is not interpreted as an endorsement of the status quo – either by viewing the challenges as inevitable or based on the individual choices of (and therefore as the individual responsibility of) each participant, or by viewing the successes of this extraordinary group of women as “proof” that mothering and elite level training and competition can be accomplished in the present sport system easily by the “right” kind of athlete. Instead, I hope that sport governing bodies and support staff can use the results of this investigation
to inform change and promote family friendly policies within organizations and at competitive events, and view these changes not as “special accommodations” but as necessary - part of an inclusive athletic culture. Finally, I hope that this study, and investigations like this one, does not diminish the choices of those mothers who do not wish to continue their competitive sport participation – the last thing I want to do is add “Olympic Athlete” to the growing list of grand expectations we hold for new mothers. Instead, I believe that in order for women to make truly free choices about how to define their lives, all choices must be seen as legitimate - equally acknowledged and equally supported.

Implications for Practitioners

The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of elite athletes as they combined high-level training and competition with motherhood. It is hoped that their experiences and insights can inform others within the athletic community about the joys and challenges of such an endeavor and, through this, can help sport psychology consultants, coaches, sport governing bodies, and related support staff to better support mother-athletes. Based on the experiences of these eight women, along with their own suggestions, I propose the following recommendations:

Recommendations for Sport Psychologists and Consultants

Sport psychologists and sport psychology consultants are in a unique position to assist mother athletes through the transition to motherhood and return to sport. Pregnancy and new motherhood is a time of profound transition as women take on new roles and identities. They may experience feelings of great joy, while at the same time mourn the loss of the old self. It is important that consultants be sensitive to the variety of often
contradictory emotions that may present, and assist these athletes in constructing positive “mother” and “athlete” identities. It is also important to remember that the experience of this transition is very diverse, and each athlete will have a different conceptualization of these identities. Sport psychologists/consultants should be open to these differences, but also aware that it can be helpful to assist mother-athletes in challenging cultural assumptions about the natures of motherhood and sport that may restrict these identities.

Since social support (both physical and emotional) is so important to new mothers and athletes, sport psychologists/consultants can assist mother-athletes in cultivating these support systems. As the participants suggested, this should ideally be done before the baby arrives, so that support is organized and in place before the chaos and sleep deprivation of infant care begins. Mother-athletes may also benefit from assistance in communicating and asserting their needs, both within their families and within the sport community. In addition, sport psychologists/consultants must be aware of the effect that the inclusion of a new mother-athlete might have on her teammates and the team’s dynamics. As found in the present study, many teammates were supportive of the inclusion of children in team activities and team travel, but some were not. Teammates may want to discuss their feelings about and reactions to the return of a mother-athlete, and open communication among teammates should be encouraged so as to ensure that the needs of all athletes are adequately met.

In terms of the physical recovery and reintegration into sport, sport psychologists/consultants can help mother-athletes set realistic goals about progress and performance. Motivation and confidence should also be monitored, as frustration may easily set in if an athlete feels she is “starting over from scratch.” Mother-athletes may
benefit from exploring negative self talk or self doubt, as well framing their mothering skills (such as patience, time management), and life balance as long-term assets to their sport performance in the face of short-term obstacles (such as loss of fitness, fatigue). As mother-athletes are often out of competition while pregnant and recovering from childbirth, they may need a “refresher course” in the mental game of competition. A review of game strategies and fine-tuning of pre-performance routines may be especially helpful. In addition, while sport psychology research into elite competition generally frames families as distracting, it is important to note that several athletes in this study reported enjoying having their children present prior to competition. The practice of “insulating” athletes from family members (at least immediate family) during important events should be carefully reconsidered.

Although only one participant in this study mentioned experiencing the “baby blues,” it is important for sport psychologists/consultants working with new mothers to understand post-partum depression and recognize its symptoms, with the awareness that mothers are at risk throughout the first year of motherhood (Wolf, 2003). Wolf (2003) suggests that new mothers may be reluctant to discuss these feelings, as there is a cultural taboo against mothers admitting negative feelings about motherhood. Therefore, sport psychologists/consultants should be prepared to broach this subject with sensitivity if they sense a client might be at risk, and make the appropriate referrals when necessary.

Finally, while the athletes’ stories presented here are of successful returns to elite training and competition, it is also important to remember that a new mother may not want to return to training, and may see motherhood as a time to transition out of sport.
These women may benefit from assistance transitioning out of sport and developing a “lifetime participation” approach to physical activity.

**Recommendations for coaches, trainers, and support staff**

As found in this and other studies (for example, Appleby’s 2004 study of elite runners with children), the support of coaches is very important to mother-athletes as they return to training. Coaches, trainers, and medical staff should have an understanding of the physical changes that accompany pregnancy and childbirth so as to appropriately monitor an athlete’s training and health during and after pregnancy. As with sport psychologists/consultants, coaches can assist mother-athletes with realistic goal setting and assessment of progress. Pregnant athletes and new mothers can also be encouraged to be flexible with workouts and try out new training techniques.

Emotional support and encouragement from coaching and support staff is also important, as some of the women in this study reported feeling anxious about their coaches’ reaction to their pregnancies, and all expressed appreciation for the positive relationships they had with their coaches. While coaches must also be aware of the effect of the integration of a mother on the team’s dynamics, a supportive coach can set the stage for a supportive team culture. In addition, as was the case with one participant here, a coach can act as an advocate for an athlete if the sport association is unsupportive. Finally, as with sport psychologists/consultants, coaching and medical staff should be aware of the symptoms of post-partum depression so that at risk athletes can be identified and treated.
Recommendations for sport governing bodies and event organizers

The athletes in this study named several things that they felt their governing bodies could do to better support mother-athletes. While it is understood that resources are limited, sport organizations should consider assisting parent athletes with the cost of traveling with children and child care providers. Because mother-athletes are a relatively new phenomenon, sport organizations that are new to mothers’ involvement would benefit from exploring the parent support and child care policies of organizations that have them in place. For example, the Ladies’ Professional Golf Association provides a mobile day care facility at each event, and USA Soccer has adopted a maternity leave policy and provides child care assistance to mothers on the national team (Caparez, 2000; Steptoe, 1990). This may involve looking to the governing bodies of several different sports or the practices of sport organizations in other countries. This sharing of ideas between organizations can help develop new and innovative support systems for athletes’ families. During a multi-sport event such as the Olympics, sport organizations may be able to pool resources and provide family activities or child care assistance to parent-athletes from multiple sports.

Sport organizations and event organizers may wish to consider creating more flexible rules and policies concerning an athlete’s child’s access to training centers or competition venues. While the security and comfort of all athletes must be taken into consideration, as the athletes in this study suggest, some easing of restrictions may be possible so that families can travel together and parents can interact with their children at events if they wish to. Support for the non-athlete spouse/partner or caregiver may be helpful as well, as several athletes mentioned that team dinners, family activities, and
family hospitality spaces helped ease the responsibilities of their husbands/partners and made them feel more a part of the event.

Finally, sport organizations can promote the education of athletes, coaches, and support staff about the issues facing mother-athletes. This could easily be done in an organization such as the USOC, by offering seminars and trainings to national team staff and/or posting relevant information and resources on their website. In the current study, none of the athletes knew personally or trained with other mothers, and one participant in particular described feeling as though she had no one to talk to who could truly understand her situation and wished that she could have connected with other mother-athletes. Providing a forum for mother-athletes to connect with each other (such as a social networking website or listserv) may be helpful in providing practical information, social support, and mentors to mother-athletes who may be training in different sports or geographical locations.
CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the experiences of elite female athletes with small children as they trained for and competed in the Olympic Games. Topics that were explored included the post-partum return to training and competition, the manner by which mother-athletes integrated their training and mothering responsibilities, the emotional and social experience of combining motherhood and elite athletics, and the Olympic experience (including the overall experience as well as performance). Eight former Olympians participated in in-depth interviews. All of the participants had competed in either the 2004 Summer or 2006 Winter Olympic Games and were mother to a child under the age of six at the time of their Olympic participation. They represented six different sports and two countries, and the average length of sport involvement was 16.125 years. Two participants are currently continuing their training with an eye toward the next Olympic Games.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed yielding eight themes and providing much insight into the integration of motherhood and elite athletics. Interestingly, only two of the participants planned on becoming a mother-athlete. Of the remaining participants, one had retired from sport without plans to return (she later changed her mind), and five were surprised by motherhood. When returning to training and competition, participants reported that they were uncertain of what to expect and found their physical limitations to be frustrating. The challenges of returning to top
condition were not insurmountable; some even found the challenges to be fun, and several found the time spent away from sport to be refreshing. As they integrated their mothering and athletic responsibilities, the athletes interviewed found that they had to be creative with their time and training techniques, and several described themselves as more focused and efficient. Within a year, most were in better shape than they had been before having their children, yet two sustained injuries from doing too much too soon.

The participants in this study traveled with their children to varying degrees. Traveling as a family was challenging financially and logistically and some reported that they received little assistance from their sport organizations, sometimes feeling discouraged from bringing their children with them. Despite these challenges, having children on the road enhanced the mother-athletes’ enjoyment of their sport and decreased performance pressures. The participants reported mixed emotions when they traveled without their children, noting that it was difficult to be away from their families, but also that they were able to focus better on their sport. In general, participants found that motherhood had a positive effect on their lives and their athletic careers, and discussed how motherhood gave them a more balanced life and a healthier perspective on sport.

The athletic career also had a predominantly positive effect on the participants’ families. They felt that their sport experiences enhanced family life by providing opportunities for families to spend time together, and they discussed many fond memories they created while training and competing with their children in tow. In addition, they described themselves as positive role models for their children and felt they were teaching valuable lessons about hard work and dedication, and an appreciation of
sport and physical activity. Sport also enhanced the participants’ self concept, as they reported an extra sense of pride in their athletic accomplishments and felt that they were actively resisting restrictive expectations of mothers.

All of the participants reported that their husbands/partners were essential in their successful return to sport, and they provided both physical (e.g., child care, travel) and emotional support. Some participants did report, however, that this put stress on their husbands/partners, as they often set aside their own athletic or career goals in order to support their wives’ athletic pursuits. Participants also found support in their extended families and communities, as many relied on their own parents and family friends for child care assistance and encouragement.

Support within the athletic community was somewhat variable, as no two athletes participated in a sport governed by the same organization. All found their coaches to be very supportive; coaches were flexible with training and competition schedules and encouraging as well. Teammates provided some participants with support, while others reacted negatively to the inclusion of children and families in the sport environment. Likewise, some athletes felt supported by their sport governing bodies, while others felt that they were not supported as mothers. Positive support included flexibility with schedules, additional funding, travel arrangements for family, family functions, and the simple acknowledgment of the child. Those who did not feel supported discussed policies that discouraged families from traveling together, no financial or logistical assistance, rigid training/competition schedules, and negative attitudes toward or a lack of understanding of mother-athletes.
Participants described their Olympic experiences in predominantly positive terms, although three reported disappointing experiences. In general, positive experiences included traveling through the host country, the excitement of being at the Olympics, and pride in accomplishing goals, while stressors included logistics (e.g., travel, lodging, accreditation), inconsistent officiating, pressure to win, injury, and media demands. Four of the participants chose to bring their children with them to the Games, and found that having their children near enhanced the experience and helped them to relax and enjoy the Games. These athletes also reported some stressors associated with the logistics of traveling and trying to spend time with their families. Four participants elected to leave their children at home with family members, as they felt that traveling with their children would have been too stressful for themselves and their children. Two of these athletes reported that while they missed their children, they enjoyed the Olympics and were able to focus fully on their performances, while two reported that the separation was very difficult and negatively impacted their experiences. In general, the participants in this study had very successful Olympic outcomes, as five earned Olympic medals and one who did not medal reported several personal and team bests.

Advice for athletes, sport support staff, and sport organizations were presented based on the data analysis and the recommendations of the participants themselves. The participants were encouraging of women combining motherhood and sport and several commented that although it was challenging, it was also well worth the effort. Advice for mothers revolved around three main themes: planning enough time to rest, remaining flexible with training plans and expectations, and cultivating a strong support system, within both the family and the athletic community. Several participants suggested that
sport organizations could do more to support mother-athletes, by providing financial and logistical assistance to those traveling with their families, allowing athletes to spend time with their families at competitive events, and being more flexible with travel and training policies. Participants also emphasized that they felt mothers should not be expected to leave their families in order to pursue elite level sport, and noted that because if the potential longevity available in many sports and the increasing number of mothers returning to sport, organizations will be forced to consider accommodations for parents. Further, as several participants discussed a lack of knowledge about the return to training post-partum and a lack of understanding of the needs of mother-athletes, it was recommended that sport support staff and organizations make this understanding a priority.

Conclusions

Based on the data obtained from the eight mother-athletes interviewed, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. The participants in this study found the physical recovery from pregnancy and childbirth and return to elite level sport to be challenging, yet not overwhelmingly so. While they acknowledged feeling very out of shape physically, they also were able to regain and even improve on their pre-pregnancy fitness levels within the first year post-partum.

2. As expected, the emotional response to returning to training post-partum was diverse, both between and within participants. Several felt frustrated and found the return to be difficult, while others felt rested and refreshed, and found the return to training to be easier than expected.
3. Integrating the responsibilities of motherhood and the elite athletic career was challenging, and the study participants noted that time, energy, and the availability of child care were potential barriers to sport participation. They were able to cope successfully by being flexible with their training and competition schedules, improving the efficiency and focus of their training, and sharing child care responsibilities with spouses, extended family, and professional child care providers.

4. While traveling with families was financially and logistically challenging, the participants reported enjoying having their children with them at trainings and competitions and felt that the presence of their children enhanced their sport experience and performance.

5. In general, participants felt that motherhood enhanced their sport experience by giving them a more balanced life and a healthier perspective on sport. Similarly, sport enhanced their experience of motherhood by giving them a sense of pride in their accomplishments, a site for family connections, and an opportunity to teach important life lessons to their children.

6. Social support networks were essential in the success of the study participants. Spouses/partners, extended family, and friends all provided important physical and emotional support to the participants.

7. Support for the athletes in this study from the athletic community varied. Coaches were named as the most supportive, while support from teammates and athlete peers was mixed. Sport organizations and governing bodies appeared to have little knowledge or understanding of the needs of mother-athletes.
8. The effect of motherhood on the Olympic performance was predominantly positive, as participants noted that the presence of family as well as the general sense of life balance helped them to relax and perform well. However, for some, the stresses of traveling with children, being separated from children, and of post-partum injury negatively impacted performance.

9. As with performance, the perspective provided by motherhood enhanced the Olympic experience, and the participants reported enjoying sharing the Games with their children and families. For some, however, the stresses of family separation had a negative impact on the overall experience as well.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. One obstacle that several athletes discussed was the lack of information regarding safe and effective exercise during and after pregnancy, especially for elite athletes. Therefore, research into the physical changes that accompany pregnancy and childbirth, effects of exercise on the pregnant and post-partum body, and proper training techniques are warranted.

2. Due to the small sample size of this study, results may not generalize to all mother athletes. Indeed, while several of the participants in this study reported shared experiences, there were also quite a few differences, and therefore this study should be replicated utilizing a larger sample.

3. The current sample included athletes in five different sports, and the sport organization and team culture was found to have an impact on their experiences. Therefore, further investigation into the experiences of mothers in a variety of sports would be helpful. In addition, an exploration of various sport organizations’ family
policies (or lack thereof) would provide useful information for mother-athletes, as well as coaches and support staff.

4. While an effort was made to include athletes of diverse backgrounds, all of the participants in this study identified themselves as White/European. Future investigations should include a more diverse sample in order to investigate how cultural differences may impact the mother-athlete experience.

5. All of the participants in this study identified themselves as married to or in a committed relationship with the father of their children and found that the father was an important source of both physical and emotional support. Investigation into the experiences of single/divorced/widowed mothers may yield differing results and should be considered.

6. All of the participants in this study resided in and represented either the United States or Canada. Investigation into the experiences of mother-athletes in various countries is recommended to explore the differences in cultural views of motherhood and sport as well as the cultures and practices within differing sport systems.

7. The cultural landscape is constantly and rapidly changing, especially with regard to motherhood and women’s athletics; indeed, several of the athletes in the current study discussed changes that were made within their own sport organizations as a result of their experiences. Therefore, this study should be replicated following future Olympic Games to ascertain changes being made (or not being made) within sport and event organizations.

8. This study focused on mother-athletes who were successful in attaining their goals of competing at the Olympic Games; therefore, it can be assumed that while they
experienced challenges, none of these challenges were insurmountable. An investigation into the experiences of mother-athletes who did not reach their athletic goals would be helpful in illuminating challenges that may constrain mother-athletes’ sport participation.

9. This study focused on mothers engaged in elite-level training and competition, yet there are many more women who participate in recreational competitive sports and non-competitive regular exercise. Research into the factors that support or constrain women’s exercise behavior is recommended as well.

10. The traditional gendered division of family labor assumes that the mother will take on the majority of child care duties, and therefore it is easy to assume that a man’s athletic career will not be affected by fatherhood. These assumptions about family structure and parenting roles are being challenged and the cultural construction of fatherhood is changing as well, as it is expected/accepted for fathers to take a more active role in parenting. It may therefore be helpful to study the effect of fatherhood on men’s athletic careers and the ways in which family responsibilities may support or constrain men’s athletic participation.

11. Finally, sometimes the best way to support an athlete (or caregiver) is to support the supporters. Therefore, organizational support for parent-athletes would benefit from being informed by the experiences of the non-athlete parent, and research into the experiences of non-athlete spouses/partners would be helpful.
REFERENCES


http://www.caaws.ca/olympics/2006/profiles/hockey_moms.cfm


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APPENDIX A
INFORMED CONSENT
Informed Consent

Title: A Qualitative Exploration of the Experiences of Mother-Athletes Training for and Competing in the Olympic Games
Principal Researcher: Heidi Vollstadt Freeman, phone number: 302-559-7211
Department of Kinesiology, Temple University

We are currently conducting a study examining the experiences of Olympic athletes who, at the time of their Olympic participation, were mothers of pre-school children. More specifically, we are interested in understanding what it was like for you to return to training after pregnancy and childbirth, how you were able to integrate your roles and responsibilities as a parent and an athlete, and what your Olympic experience was like. To help us gain further insight into this experience, we will ask you to participate in an interview that will take approximately 60-90 minutes.

None of the procedures used should expose you to any physical and/or emotional risk or discomfort. Should you ever become uncomfortable, you may stop the interview at any time.

The data you provide will be recorded anonymously and your participation and anything you say during the interview will be held in confidence. The final write up of the study may contain direct quotes from your interview, but no information that can identify you as a participant will be included. All data collected will be filed in a locked cabinet in the principal investigator’s home office. After five years, all data will be destroyed.

We welcome questions about the study at any time. You may call me at 302-559-7211 or e-mail me at heidivf@verizon.net. Additional questions may be directed to my advisor, Dr. Michael Sachs, Department of Kinesiology, at 215-204-8718 or msachs@temple.edu.

Your participation is on a voluntary basis, and you may refuse to participate or withdraw your data at any time without negative consequence.

Questions about your rights as a research participant can be directed to Mr. Richard Throm, Office of the Vice Provost for Research, Institutional Review Board, Temple University, 3400 N. Broad Street, Philadelphia, PA, phone, 215-707-8757.

Signing your name below indicates that you have read and understand the contents of this consent form and that you agree to take part in this study.

____________________________________  ________________
Participant’s signature      Date

____________________________________  ________________
Researcher’s signature     Date
APPENDIX B
PERMISSION TO AUDIOTAPE
Permission to Audiotape

Researchers’ Names: Heidi V. Freeman, MA/ Michael Sachs, PhD
Department: Kinesiology
Project Title: A Qualitative Exploration of the Experiences of Mother-Athletes Training for and Competing in the Olympic Games

Participant name: ___________________________  # ________
Date:______

I give Heidi V. Freeman permission to audiotape me. This audiotape will be used for research purposes only. This audiotape will be used as a part of a research project at Temple University. I have already given written consent for my participation in this research project. At no time will my name be used.

WHEN WILL I BE AUDIOTAPED?

I agree to be audiotaped during the time period: September 2007 to May 2008.

HOW LONG WILL THE TAPES BE USED?

I give my permission for these tapes to be used from: September 2007 to May 2008. Tapes will be stored for three (3) years after completion of the study.

WHAT IF I CHANGE MY MIND?

I understand that I can withdraw my permission at any time. Upon my request, the audiotape(s) will no longer be used. This will not affect my care or relationship with Temple University in any way.

OTHER

I understand that I will not be paid for being audiotaped or for the use of the audiotapes.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

If I want more information about the audiotape(s), or if I have questions or concerns at any time, I can contact:

Heidi V. Freeman
Kinesiology Department
Temple University
Pearson Hall
Philadelphia, PA 19122
Cell phone #: 302-559-7211
Permission to Audiotape, page 2 of 2
Project Title: A Qualitative Exploration of the Experiences of Mother-Athletes Training for and Competing in the Olympic Games

This form will be placed in my records and a copy will be kept by the person(s) named above. A copy will be given to me.

Please print

Participant’s Name: ______________________________________________

Date: ____________________

Address:________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________

Phone: _____________________________

____________________________________      ____________________
Participant’s signature      Date

____________________________________      ____________________
Researcher’s signature        Date
APPENDIX C:
DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE
Demographic Questionnaire

Name: ________________________________ Date of Birth: ______

Telephone Number: _______________ Email address: ______________________

City/state of residence:_____________________________________

Occupation: ___________________________________________________________

Children:

Name son or daughter? month/year of birth:

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Partner status:

Single_____ Married _____ Committed partnership_____

Divorced _____ Widowed _____

Race/Ethnicity:

Black/African American _____ White/European _____

Native American _____ Asian/Pacific Islander _____

Hispanic _____ Other___________________

Sport background:

Sport: _________________________ Number of years training/competing: ____

Olympics you participated in: Summer _____ Winter _____

Year(s): __________________________________________________

Country you represented: ____________________________
APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW GUIDE
Interview Guide
(Semi-structured)

First, I’d like to talk to you about how you came to be a mother and athlete.
  - How did you decide to have your child(ren) when you did?
  - How did you make the decision to return to training after you had him/her/them?
    When/how did you decide to train for the (2004/2006) Olympics?
  - How did others react to these decisions?
    - Family?
    - Friends?
    - Other athletes?
    - Coach/sport organization?

Tell me about your initial return to training after you had your baby. What was your “comeback” like?
  - What was it like physically?
  - What was it like emotionally?
  - What were your expectations?
    - Were they realistic? Did anything surprise you?
    - Did others hold expectations of you? What were they like?
  - Did your feelings about your identity as an athlete change? How so?
  - Where did you find support?

Tell me about your training as you prepared for the (2004/2006) Olympics.
  - What was a typical training day like?
    - How was it different from training before you had children?
    - How did you coordinate your child’s care while you were training?
      - How did you feel about these arrangements?
  - Did you experience any barriers to training?
    - If yes: How did you overcome them?
    - If no: why do you think this was so?
  - Did you experience any improvements in your training as a result of having a baby? What were they?
  - Where did you find support?
    - Family?
    - Friends?
    - Other athletes?
    - Coach/sport organization?
  - Was there any kind of support that you wanted or wished you had, but did not receive? What might that have been?

Tell me about your experience at the (2004 or 2006) Olympic Games.
  - How was this Olympics different from Olympics (if applicable) or international competitions that you participated in before having your child(ren)?
    - What were your expectations?
- Did anything surprise you?
- Did you bring your child(ren) with you to the Games?
  - How did you come to that decision?
  - If no:
    - How did you coordinate his/her/their care while you were away?
    - What was it like for you to be away from him/her/them?
    - Do you think having your child(ren) stay (home / with ____ ) affected your performance? How so?
    - Do you think having your child(ren) stay (home / with ____ ) affected your overall experience at the Olympics? In what way?
  - If yes:
    - How did you coordinate his/her/their travel?
    - How did you coordinate his/her/their care while you were training and competing?
    - Do you think having your child(ren) with you affected your performance? How so?
    - Do you think having your child(ren) with you affected your overall experience at the Olympics? In what way?
- Other than what we have already discussed, are there any other ways that you think being a mother affected:
  - Your performance?
  - The overall experience?
  - The meaning you gave to being at the Olympics?
- Do you feel that your sport’s organization and team leaders/support staff were sensitive to your needs as a parent?
  - If yes: What kind of support did you receive?
  - If no: What kind of support would you have liked to have received?
- Do you feel that the Olympic organizers were sensitive to your needs as a parent?
  - If yes: What kind of support did you receive?
  - If no: What kind of support would you have liked to have received?

Looking back at your training and competing since your child(ren) was/were born, is there anything that you would have done differently?

What advice would you give to other mother-athletes or athletes who are thinking about having children?

Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your experiences?