

# How to Parent Baton Twirling Talent: Four Success Stories

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**Abstract:** This qualitative study addressed this research question: What roles do parents play in the development of talent? We studied the parents of four elite baton twirlers because twirling is an aesthetic sport dominated by girls who train and compete at young ages when parents are most involved. The study was guided by a theoretical talent-development framework that emphasized the early home environment, top-level coaching, deliberate practice over many years, and psychological health. Interviews uncovered rich and unique stories and revealed that twirlers' mothers served the vital roles expected. They provided a home environment conducive to twirling excellence, coached their daughters and enlisted other elite coaches, monitored practice, ensured psychological health, and managed all aspects of talent development.

**Keywords:**

Talent Development, Parents' Roles, Baton Twirling Expertise

## Introduction

We stand in awe of talent and its outgrowth: a Beethoven symphony, a Rembrandt painting, a Shakespearean sonnet, or a LeBron James drive to the basket. Investigations into how such talent develops began inconspicuously with Benjamin Bloom's (1985) book *Developing Talent in Young People*. Today, talent investigations and writings are in full bloom. Recently, several books exploring talent development have dotted popular book lists including Malcolm Gladwell's (2008) *Outliers*, Geoff Colvin's (2008) *Talent is Overrated*, and Matthew Syed's (2010) *Bounce*. Research and popular writings on talent development have focused primarily on four key components: an early home environment that jumpstarts and supports talent development, practice, mentoring, and psychological health (positive emotions and motivation). Simply put, budding stars access the road to talent development early, usually in their own homes (Bloom, 1985; Haymen, Polman, Taylor, Hemmings, & Borkoles, 2011; Kiewra, O'Connor, McCrudden, & Liu, 2006), practice arduously for 10 or more years (Ericsson, 2002; Ford, Ward, Hodges, & Williams, 2009; Helsen, Hodges, Van Winckel, & Starkes, 2000; Kjendilie, 2007; Schemacher, Mroz, Mueller, Schmid, & Ruecker, 2006; Ward, Hodges, Williams, & Starkes, 2007; Weissensteiner, Abernethy, Farrow, & Muller, 2008), study with top mentors and coaches who hone technique and cultivate style (Bloom, 1985; Kiewra, O'Connor, McCrudden, & Liu, 2006; Colvin, 2008), and are psychologically equipped to handle stress (Sloane, 1985) and channel high motivation, a rage to learn (Gulbin, Oldenzel, Weissensteiner, & Gagné, 2010; Winner, 2000). What contemporary talent experts have largely missed, however, is the vital role that parents also play in talent development. One of Bloom's initial conclusions was that it is never enough for a child to commit to a talent area; parents must do so as well. And, Anders Ericsson, the foremost authority on talent development, declared recently that parenting is the frontier of talent development research (see Colvin, 2008, p. 204).

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## Research on the Roles of Parents in Talent Development

Research confirms that parents are involved in their child's talent development (e.g., Baker, Horton, Robertson-Wilson & Wall, 2003; Chan, 2005; Campbell, Freeley, & O'Connor-Petruso, 2012; Phillipson, 2010). The nature and extent of that involvement, though, is not as well known. Bloom (1985) did the seminal work on parents' roles in talent development. He and his team conducted retrospective interviews of talented performers and their families in the fields of music, science, art, and athletics. They found that parents' roles shifted as the child progressed through three stages of talent development. In the early years, marked by the child's introduction to the talent area, parents took a leadership role by often introducing the child to the talent area, providing a supportive learning environment in the home, finding a formal teacher, and guiding the child's practice. Parents maintained a leadership role throughout the middle years, marked by the child's growth in technical skills. During this stage, parents found a more accomplished teacher and devoted more time and resources to the child's talent development. During the later years, marked by the child's movement from technician to artist, parents' involvement decreased as the performer assumed greater responsibility in talent development. Still, parents continued to support their child financially and especially emotionally as the child dealt with the psychological stress of high-level performance and competition (see also Sloane, 1985).

A smaller scale study was conducted by Côté (1999) who interviewed four tennis or rowing athletes and their parents and concluded that parents' talent development roles shift as the child progresses through three stages akin to those proposed by Bloom (1985). In the sampling years (ages 6-12), parents played a leadership role by providing their children with opportunities to sample a wide variety of sports. In the specializing years (ages 13-15), parents played a facilitative role by arranging for coaches, equipment, and training facilities, and by meeting the burdensome financial and time commitments for success. In the investment years (ages 16 and over), parents played an advisory and support role as the athlete took on greater responsibility for training and success. In particular, parents offered emotional guidance and support as the child dealt with the stress of high-level training and competition.

The research of Bloom (1985) and Côté (1999) demonstrated that parents provide the leadership, support, and advice their children need to enter into and succeed in a talent area. Both studies, though, have limitations that are overcome in the present study. First, both studies are retrospective. Bloom investigated talent development when study participants were young adults. Côté's participants were age 18. In neither case, were the interviewed parents able to report in real time on their roles during children's earlier talent development stages when parent involvement is highest. In the present study, parents were interviewed when their talented children were much younger (around age 11) and still in the early to middle stages proposed by Bloom and by Côté. Second, neither study provided rich case-by-case data as recommended by qualitative research methodologists (Creswell, 2003). The present study captured parents' detailed accounts in a case-by-case fashion. Last, neither study examined parental influence relative to a theoretical framework of talent development. In the present study, a three-prong model of parental influence guided investigations: home environment (parents provide an optimal home environment for an early start in the talent domain), talent development (parents arrange and monitor coaching and practice), and talent management (parents handle logistical matters and maintain the child's psychological health). This model was drawn from the research cited at the start of this introduction and confirmed in a recent study involving the parents of chess champions (Kiewra & Witte, 2013). That study, like the present one, also investigated parents' recent and present roles rather than rely on retrospective accounts and captured parents' stories in a rich case-by-case fashion.

The present study extended the work of Kiewra and Witte (2013), who examined the parents' role in chess talent development, to a previously ignored talent domain: baton twirling. Chess and baton twirling share similarities that make both ideal for talent development investigation. First, both involve individual as opposed to team competition. Sports with individual competition are well suited for studying talent development because selecting and judging top performers is naturally more objective than for team sports. Second, both chess and twirling have sanctioned governing bodies that sponsor national and world competitions. This means that talent development begins and is recognized early in these domains. Talent domains with early introduction and competition provide especially fertile grounds for investigating the parent's role. Of course, chess and twirling have differences that make the investigation of twirling talent development new and worthwhile. First, chess is an intellectual competition whereas twirling is an athletic competition. The present study, then, can determine if the theoretical framework that explained parents' roles in intellectual talent development (Kiewra & Witte, 2013) also explains their roles in athletic talent development. Second, chess is a sport dominated by males, whereas twirling is a sport dominated by females. The present study, then, can determine if parents' roles are the same for developing the talents of sons and daughters.

## **Method**

Although previous quantitative studies of talent development (e.g., Baker et al., 2003; Phillipson, 2010) reported types of family involvement, they do not reveal the lived case-by-case experience of that involvement. Further exploration is warranted to delve more deeply into parents' roles in the talent development phenomenon (Creswell, 2003; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). In keeping with the strong tradition of using qualitative research methods to investigate talent development and the lived experiences of talented individuals (e.g., Bloom, 1985; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993; Kiewra & Witte, 2013), this study adopted an inductive approach to answering research questions (Creswell, 2003).

## **Participants**

Most talent development research has focused on elite athletes in objective sports such as tennis, rowing, running, and swimming (e.g., Côté, 1999; Hurtel & Lacassagne, 2011; Baker et al., 2003). Talent development in aesthetic sports, with the possible exception of figure skating (Starkes, Deakin, Allard, Hodges, & Hayes, 1996), has gone largely unstudied. Baton twirling is an up and coming aesthetic competitive sport that combines elements of dance and gymnastics. Twirling is a unique field of talent development study because it is competitive but does not have the popularity of other aesthetic Olympic sports such as gymnastics and figure skating. Therefore athletes who participate in twirling might not enjoy the same degree of fame or societal support, but they still invest years of hard work to be successful. Furthermore, many twirlers achieve success at a young age making the parents' role in their talent development particularly salient.

Using qualitative research practices, we purposefully selected a small number of participants (Creswell, 2003). There is much to learn from the experiences of twirlers who have achieved a high level of success at a young age; therefore we sought a handful of twirlers with a record of twirling excellence. Four twirlers, all female, who had earned multiple world or national titles at the time of the interview, were identified as ideal candidates for this investigation. Because this study focused on the parents' role in developing their children's talent, the logical participants were the parents most closely involved with their daughters' talent development. In these four cases, the mother was the primary person responsible for guiding talent development. We contacted the four mothers, gave a brief description of the study, and invited them to participate. All

agreed. All the participants were married and had at least one other child in addition to the child who was the focus of this study.

### **Procedure**

In order to capture the participants' unique experiences developing highly talented twirlers, the first author conducted extensive interviews using an open-ended interview protocol (Stake, 2010) that began with this general question: "Describe the role/roles you (and your spouse) have played in the development of your child's talent." To assure depth of responses, Rubin and Rubin's (1995) guidelines for in-depth interviews were followed. That is, the open-ended question was followed by sub-questions intended to capture information about the three talent factors identified by Kiewra and Witte (2013): (1) Home Environment (including talent introduction), (2) Talent Development (including coaching and practice), and (3) Talent Management (including logistics and psychological health). Last, common probes (e.g., Can you tell me more about that?) were used throughout to gain a fuller understanding.

Because participants lived in different parts of the country, all interviews were conducted over the telephone. The interviewer took a conversational approach to encourage participants to describe their experiences in their own words through stories and examples (Stake, 2010). The interviewer also took steps to ask questions in a neutral way and to listen well, allowing each participant to tell her story. Each participant was interviewed individually, and each interview took approximately 75 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### **Data Analysis**

We began the data analysis procedure by reading through the transcripts and noting concepts and major points (Stake, 2010). We then notated each transcript segment with codes. In vivo codes were used whenever possible and no software was used in the coding process. We compiled all the codes and eliminated any redundancy. Codes were then collapsed into the following three themes (and subthemes): Home environment (the start and the home), talent development (practice and coaching), and talent management (logistical and psychological). We then used these themes to tell the stories of how parents contributed to the development of national- and world-class baton twirlers.

### **Lexi**

Lexi won her first national title at age 6; she presently holds 11 national or world titles.

#### **Home Environment**

The family lives in Maryland, and Lexi, age 11 at the time of this interview, is the middle child of three. Lexi was born into the talent area. Her mom, Juli, is a twirling coach. Juli says, "Lexi's been involved in twirling since she was born." Juli would try to leave two-year-old Lexi at home with a baby sitter when she would go to the gym to coach other twirlers. Lexi wouldn't allow it. Juli said, "Lexi refused to stay with the sitter. She would throw a fit. She desperately wanted to come with me to the gym and be with the twirlers. She had baton in her heart."

#### **Talent Development**

Lexi's mother, Juli, has engineered the perfect, can't miss environment for Lexi's development and success. Lexi benefits from having a mother who coaches and judges baton twirling, a nearby practice facility, and talented coaches and teammates.

Juli began twirling at age five, competing at age seven, and coaching at age 16. She is also a judge at local and national competitions, a position that gives her keen insight into

how competitions are won and lost. Juli is one of seven coaches at a local but elite dance and twirling facility that has been in operation for more than 50 years and has produced dozens of national and world champions in the last decade. This is where Lexi trains every day and has unlimited gym access. Lexi works there with two in-house coaches about four hours per week practicing skills and routines. Once a month, Lexi works with top national coaches who strive to clean up technical problems and perfect routines. Lexi also cross trains by doing weekly gymnastics training to increase body strength and flexibility. Of course, Juli also provides Lexi with coaching help. Juli said,

I practice with her. Often times I take her to the gym and help her work out. I find things she can work on. I'll say, 'Okay, well, that didn't look good, can you go back and try to do it this way?' After a competition, I help her identify what went wrong and how we can fix it for next time. I help her figure out what lesson can be learned here... But, more often, I act as parent and leave the coaching to her coaches.

### **Talent Management**

When asked what she does, besides coaching, to help her daughter succeed in twirling, Juli said, "There is so much that goes into it that is not twirling a stick... I feel like a parent's role is crucial in the development of a kid's talent. Kids can't do it without parent involvement."

Julie admits that raising a champion is not something she intended or was prepared to do. She said, "It's all trial and error. You don't really know what works and how it is all going to turn out. Are you doing the right thing? You don't ever really know." Julie also said that raising a champion is a long, slow process.

A lot of patience is needed. Developing talent at a high level takes much time and patience because nothing comes over night. You don't see big changes from month to month. And, as the child gets older, the changes are slighter and fewer. It's small steps, one to the next.

Juli recognizes that Lexi's twirling commitment, in turn, builds character. She said, "Lexi has learned many life skills along the way that have nothing to do with twirling a baton. She better understands team work, cooperation, and how to get a job done—skills that carry over to school and life."

Juli revealed what she does in particular to manage Lexi's twirling career and to guide her psychologically. In addition to shepherding Lexi to and from the gym where she does the bulk of her 15-30 hours of weekly practice, Juli arranges all aspects of Lexi's twirling activities including practices, lessons, and competitions. With respect to practices, Juli, for example, arranges for Lexi to vary the nature and intensity of practice so that practice time is optimized and so that Lexi remains fresh.

With respect to competitions, Julie makes travel arrangements for all local, regional, national, and international events—sometimes three a month—and travels with Lexi to all events. Meanwhile, Lexi's dad plays the same role with Lexi's brother, who plays football, scheduling travel and accompanying him to football-related events.

Developing a world-class twirler comes at a high financial price so Juli does all she can to make Lexi's endeavor affordable. Juli's work as a coach helps offset the costs of Lexi's coaching. And, Juli's work as a judge at events where Lexi competes helps offset travel and registration costs. The pair also "buddy-up" with other families to share travel and hotel costs. Together, Juli and Lexi also do a lot of fundraising through a local nonprofit group. Last year, they raised \$5,000 that went toward Lexi's twirling expenses, including costumes. Lexi needs at least three costumes a year and each costs about \$400 plus the cost of countless rhinestones, which Juli buys wholesale and in bulk to save money.

Juli also plays a prominent role in guiding Lexi psychologically, both in terms of motivation and emotion. In terms of motivation, Juli cautions that motivation must stem

from the child, not the parent. She said,

Parents need to look at what the child's desire is. (Matching training to that desire) can be a beautiful thing. But, if parents are making a child do something that they want the child to do, then it can be ugly.

Juli contends that she steers Lexi's motivation by helping her set goals and manage time and by keeping twirling in perspective. Juli said, "We start off each year by asking, 'What are the goals and how are we going to get there?' I make sure that Lexi plays an active part in this process." Juli also stresses good time management practices. She helps Lexi plan her day's activities so that she has ample time for both schoolwork and baton training. Juli helps keep twirling in perspective by keeping it fun and by taking breaks. Juli said, "You can't just come in a gym and practice every day, you have to put fun into it too." Juli keeps it fun by arranging for Lexi to occasionally practice with a college marching band or by turning a Halloween practice into a mummy race or into a variation of *Fear Factor* where a dropped baton results in eating a yucky treat. In addition to alternating hard and easy workouts and employing cross training to keep Lexi fresh and motivated, Juli also integrates long rest periods into the yearly training regime. She said,

You can't go hard 12 months of the year. There needs to be mental and physical breaks. After nationals, we take off the whole month of August. We go to the beach, do other stuff, we just walk away from twirling. That mental break is so important if you want to keep kids doing this long term.

Juli contends that her most important role is emotional support. She said,

My chief role is being her number one fan regardless of whether she does a great job or a bad job. If it's a bad job, I tell her it's okay, it was just one bad job, you're not a robot, you're not going to be perfect every time, we'll get it fixed for next time.

Juli also counsels Lexi to take risks and not play it safe. She stresses that mistakes provide opportunities for improvement and for character building. Speaking of character, Juli was probably never more proud of Lexi than after a second place finish. When Lexi came off the floor, Juli said, "I know you really wanted to win but I thought you did a great job." Lexi responded, "I really wanted to win, but I'm really excited for Julian (who placed first). She's never won anything before."

## **Kelcie**

Kelcie has won multiple national titles and has also captured New York's Miss Majorette title several years running. Kelcie's specialty is Three-Baton. As the name implies, competitors juggle and twirl three batons simultaneously.

### **Home Environment**

Kelcie, age 11 at the time of this interview, was born into the talent area. Her mother, Maura, was a twirler as a youngster and is now a professional twirling coach and national-level judge. Kelcie's introduction to twirling followed that of her brother who is two years older. Maura said,

When Kelcie saw what he was doing, she just picked it up too and really excelled at it. When Kelcie was around two years old, she marched in a local parade, twirling her baton... After that, as Kelcie got a little older, she got a bit more klutzy. I thought, oh my, she's never going to be able to continue doing this. I was worried. But, she loved it and she just kept going. She was kind of a late bloomer in terms of hitting her stride.

Maura is not surprised that Kelcie followed her and her son's lead into twirling. She said, "Twirling seems to me like a family thing. It's very rare that I (as a coach) ever get a student who doesn't have twirling in their family."

## **Talent Development**

Kelcie's mother, Maura, has built an ideal environment for success that includes an early start, elite and specialized coaches, and an intense practice regime. Maura began coaching Kelcie when she was two but eventually turned over the primary coaching reigns to others. Kelcie works privately with three elite out-of-town coaches, each of whom flies to New York about four times a year to work with Kelcie on a specialized routine for a few days at a time. A coach from Tennessee helps choreograph and perfect Kelcie's free-style routines, while coaches from Texas and Ohio focus on her solo routines and other events.

Kelcie practices about 20 hours per week. She rarely practices with other competitors, though, because the strong twirlers she used to practice with at her local training facility have graduated and moved on to college. Maura is Kelcie's daily training partner. Maura instructs on mechanics and models technique but primarily monitors Kelcie's practice. She said,

I can't just be an observer, I have to constantly correct her. Maybe it's a minor hand or foot position that needs fixing. Kelcie can't see it because twirlers, unlike dancers, can't be looking in a mirror as they are performing.

Sometimes supplying feedback causes problems. Maura said,

When I'm correcting her, I'm not praising her, and all she hears is the negative, and she gets very hurt. So, I try to prepare her. I tell her in advance that as she is doing her routine, I am going to feed her information meant to point out her mistakes so that we can correct them.

Maura feels the stress of practice sessions too. She said,

There are times that I get frustrated too. I have to leave. I go get my husband and tell him you have to go deal with her. He has a very positive relationship with Kelcie and loves to watch her twirl. He always stresses the importance of practice, and he brings a nice balance to (my more intensive approach to training and competition).

Finally, Maura continues to study twirling so that she can best help Kelcie develop. She said,

I don't twirl now as much as I did as a kid, but I keep up my education by taking judging and coaching classes. I also read a lot of books on the psychology of coaching and things like that.

## **Talent Management**

Maura and her husband fulfill other managerial roles necessary for Kelcie's talent development and success. One role involves making sure that Kelcie has adequate training space. Maura told this revealing story about the lengths the family goes to in order to support Kelcie's talent development.

Sometimes finding space for Kelcie to practice is a nightmare. Where we live, it's hard to get gym space. If you're not playing basketball, soccer, or lacrosse, you're not getting in a gym, especially if you're a twirler. One Saturday during winter, the day before a competition, we were driving around trying to find some place for her to practice, even offering to pay, and the schools and gyms were like, 'no, go away.' I was very frustrated, so I came home, took out the phonebook and started calling indoor tennis facilities seeing if I could rent a tennis court. I rented a court for \$70 for an hour so she could practice her routines... After that incident, my husband drew up plans to add a great room to the back of our house so that Kelcie would always have a place to practice. And, that's just what we did. We built a room with a 25-foot ceiling. The room is big enough and high enough so that she can do her solo without breaking anything. It's a huge relief.

Most years, the family spends at least \$10,000 annually to cover Kelcie's twirling costs, which include coaching, costumes, and travel to national competitions. The family takes steps to regulate and offset costs. For example, they limit Kelcie's competitions, and

Maura often works as a paid judge at competitions she and Kelcie attend. When Kelcie was younger, Maura saved money by purchasing used or new outfits and decorating them. Now that Kelcie is older and competing at top levels, the family purchases several finished costumes a year that “cost more than my wedding dress,” Maura said.

Maura travels with Kelcie to twirling competitions while her husband travels with their son to lacrosse events. Twice a year, though, they switch roles even though Kelcie’s father has trouble “handling the hair challenge” according to Maura.

Maura also guides Kelcie psychologically by regulating emotions and boosting motivation. Maura believes that Kelcie struggles with her emotions. She said, “Kelcie sometimes thinks too much about her performances before she competes and psyches herself out. Kelcie can also be thrown by new competition surroundings.” Maura said,

Kelcie will look up at the ceiling (in the competition room) and say that she can’t do her routine in here. I tell her that she’ll be fine and to practice her high tosses, but it’s already too late. She’s already psyched herself out.

In response to all this, Maura took Kelcie to California where they participated in a seminar conducted by a sports psychologist that covered how to remain upbeat and perform under pressure. Maura reported, “The seminar went over Kelcie’s head a bit, but it made me a better coach.”

Maura admits that she too gets really nervous at competitions. She said,

I actually missed her performance one time because I had to run into the bathroom and throw up. But I didn’t tell her. So when she comes off the floor and asks what I thought, I tell her, ‘you were wonderful, you were great.’ When I performed, I never got nervous like that, but I get nervous now because I really can’t control the outcome.

Maura also reported that some of Kelcie’s poor performances stemmed from lacking motivation. To help with motivation, Maura helps Kelcie set goals and determine the steps necessary for getting there. For example, Kelcie was preparing for a competition at Walt Disney World where she was entered in four events. Two months before the competition, she wanted to add a fifth event that she had never even practiced—Three Baton, the most difficult event of all. Maura thought this was a ridiculous request because Kelcie had trouble twirling just two batons, but she told Kelcie she would allow it if Kelcie could learn to juggle three batons for a minute. Maura said,

Well, about a week and a half later, she came back to me and said, ‘Mom, get your stopwatch out and watch this.’ She juggled three batons for more than a minute. I was dumbfounded. I put a routine together for her and she went on the floor and won first place the first time she ever performed in Three-Baton. When she puts her mind to something now, there is no stopping her.

## **Trina**

Trina has won numerous national titles. In 2011, for example, she captured three age-group titles and four Grand Champion titles (for competitors spanning several age groups). She won her first national event at age six. When she was nine, she became the youngest to win a Grand National title. She was also the youngest competitor among 18 U.S. athletes participating in the 2012 world championships.

### **Home Environment**

Trina was born into the talent area. Her mother, Kathy, competed in twirling competitions as a child and now coaches twirling. Trina was formally introduced to the sport when she tagged along with her mom to a sleep-away baton camp one summer when Trina was four years old. Kathy was attending the camp to build her own twirling and coaching skills. It



was there that Trina started playing with the baton, copying others, and attaining interest. Trina's newfound interest did not wane, and Kathy noticed that Trina had talent. That same year, Kathy added Trina to the local twirling team that she coached.

Trina lives in Queens, New York with her mom, dad, and older brother and is age 9 at the time of the interview. Trina's mom, Kathy, has a small part-time job, does some baton coaching at a local club, but is mostly a stay-at-home mom. Trina's brother is two years older, and he just recently caught the twirling bug. Trina's father, Kathy said, is supportive. "He goes to a few competitions but he's usually spending time with our son. He knows some of the twirling tricks and he does encourage Trina to practice, but for the most part he stays back, stays neutral."

Kathy reported that she tries to instill balance in Trina's home life. Kathy said, "I try to let her be a kid, try not pressure her too much, and try to make sure that she does not burn out from doing too much. In the end, it's only twirling."

### **Talent Development**

Kathy has created an ideal environment for developing Trina's talent. After Trina became interested in twirling, Kathy enrolled Trina in the local twirling facility where Kathy coached twirling. Trina was just four but she worked with older competitors who became her training partners and role models. It was not long, though, before Trina surpassed many of them in skill level and Kathy realized that Trina needed more seasoned coaching, even though securing an elite coach would involve considerable travel, a greater commitment by Trina, and family sacrifices with respect to time and money. After much deliberation, Kathy chose a coach whom many consider the best in New York and one of the best nationally. The coach lives more than an hour away and charges \$75 an hour for private instruction.

Kathy drives Trina to her weekly two-hour lessons with her coach but does not stay for the lessons. She said,

I'd love to be there for the lessons. I love watching Trina twirl. I just adore it. But, it's really in Trina's best interest that I not be there. It's important that I step back and let the coach handle things. That's why I hired an elite coach.

Kathy understands that the best way to help Trina with the stress and pressure of the sport is by being her mom instead of her coach. Still, it is difficult for Kathy to completely turn the reigns over to Trina's coach or not be involved. Kathy, for example, observes and video-records the tail end of lessons so that she can view the recordings with Trina during the week to help guide practices. Kathy also records Trina's competitions, analyzes the recorded routines, and passes her analysis on to Trina's coach. Kathy also communicates regularly with the coach about Trina's progress and routines. Kathy said,

I could be sitting at a hockey game and thinking about Trina. So I text the coach and say things like, 'this is what I think needs to be fixed.' Or I could be sitting in the stands watching Trina and her coach warming-up at a competition and notice something wrong and text the coach and say, 'Tell Trina to fix her toe point, please, please.' But, I let her do it. And, we communicate back and forth. She texts me and says things like, 'what do you think, should we throw this trick in?' We work like a team.

Trina practices about 15-20 hours per week, and Kathy helps direct and monitor practice. Kathy works with Trina and a team of other strong competitors at the local facility a couple hours a week. Kathy also brings Trina to the facility at times she is coaching other students so that Trina has a good place to practice. When Kathy works with Trina she is constantly on the lookout for things to correct. She said, "I probably drive Trina crazy with the 'fix this, fix that, watch your freehand, point your toes up' comments. But, all the moms in the twirling world do that." Kathy is aware that her involvement is sometimes stressful for Trina. She said, "Sometimes we honestly disagree and sometimes Trina gets

frustrated, so I need to know when to say when.”

### **Talent Management**

Kathy serves other management roles that extend beyond coaching and practice. When asked how much of her time is wrapped up in Trina’s twirling, Kathy said, “Fifty percent or more. All the planning takes a lot of time.” Kathy schedules lessons and makes all the competition arrangements from completing and submitting entry forms to booking hotels and flights. She travels with Trina to all competitions. She also sketches costume ideas and works with a seamstress to actualize those ideas. Kathy finishes the costumes by gluing hundreds of rhinestones on them one by one. She also cares for the batons by replacing loose ends, repainting them, and making sure they are transported without damage. And then, there is the hair, which is always a big deal at competitions and has to be just right. Kathy fixes Trina’s hair as part of the pre-competition routine. She said, “If we can get the hair done without her whining ‘you’re hurting me,’ then I know we are on our way to a good and positive start.”

Kathy and her husband must also finance the approximately \$10,000 yearly twirling costs. Kathy said that the cost is a burden that makes things “really tight financially.” She said, “The family sacrifices a lot due to the money spent on this. We’re not rich. We don’t get a family vacation. Our only trips are to places like Daytona or Savannah where Trina competes.” Kathy’s coaching job helps finance Trina’s twirling. Kathy said, “All the money I make coaching goes straight toward Trina’s coaching.” Kathy does what she can to defray costs. For example, she limits Trina’s lessons to once a week, saves money by buying the material for costumes and later decorating them, shops around for travel deals, chooses train or auto transportation over the airlines when possible, and shares hotel rooms and costs with Trina’s teammates.

Kathy also guides Trina psychologically, both in terms of motivation and emotion. Kathy reported that Trina is mostly “driven on her own” and that she has well-defined goals such as making the world team (which she did in 2012). Still, there are times when Kathy provides a push. She said, “There are right times to press.” When competitions are far on the horizon, Kathy’s approach is more relaxed. She might say, “Okay, I like that you’re trying new tricks. Oh, you’re starting to get that. That looks fantastic.” Closer to a competition, though, she said, “the tone changes.” She pushes Trina to practice more and to perfect the little things in her routines.

Kathy strives to keep Trina’s emotions positive. When Trina was younger, she was scared before competitions. Kathy would try to relax her by telling her to just do what she’s practiced and by promising that they’ll go someplace fun after the competition. As Trina became more seasoned, anxiety dropped but she sometimes cried when she didn’t win. Kathy handled this by offering a lot of positive feedback and by telling Trina where she can improve. Kathy also handled Trina’s disappointment by telling her that judging is not always objective and is outside her control. Kathy said,

Twirling is not a sport where it’s easy to keep score like in baseball or hockey. It’s subjective. You can have three judges and they might all place competitors in a different order. Who judges you is just the luck of the draw. You can’t control that. You just have to go out there and do your best.

Meanwhile, Kathy works to control her own emotions. She said,

I sit in the stands during competitions and I’m intense. I try to keep calm for Trina but it is stressful for me. By the end of competitions, I have a headache and I’ve barely eaten. I try, but my stomach is in knots. I’m nervous for her.

## **Savannah**

Savannah has won more than a dozen national or world titles. Some of her most outstanding accomplishments include: Two world titles in 2006, two more in 2009, and three more in 2012. Savannah was also Miss Majorette of America in 2011 and a Grand National Champion the past four years.

### **Home Environment**

Unlike most elite twirlers, Savannah did not learn twirling from her mother, Sammie. Sammie never twirled, but Sammie's mother did. Sammie said, "My mother was a majorette and made majorette costumes, but never did I think that my daughter would become a twirler." Sammie recalled that Savannah discovered twirling when she was three years old. She had taken Savannah to a ballet class where the teacher spent some time at the end introducing the children to the baton. Sammie said that Savannah was drawn to the baton because it was "sparkly and shiny." Sammie described that introduction: "She loved having the baton in her hand and wanted to take it home with her, and she threw fits because she had to leave it there." Savannah's fascination with the baton continued and the teacher noticed that Savannah had a natural aptitude. She was already working the baton between her fingers before she was four. When Savannah was four, Sammie enrolled her in a separate class for twirling. That same year, Sammie explored dance and twirling competitions. She said,

My husband and I visited some dance contests but we weren't thrilled with them. We did enjoy visiting with people at the baton competitions, which were more low-keyed. So by age four Savannah was competing in baton. It was all very basic and fun, but we never looked back and it's just been one thing after another ever since.

Savannah, age 13 at the time of this interview, is the middle child between baseball-playing brothers who are guided by their father who runs a baseball training facility in the Kansas City area near where the family lives. Sammie does not work outside the home. She is the family homemaker and volunteers at her children's parochial school. The family maintains a simple life in the country, enjoys the outdoors, and spends little time watching television.

### **Talent Development**

Sammie has engineered a strong environment for developing Savannah's twirling talent. At the core of this environment are the coaches who train Savannah. Sammie first arranged for Savannah to work with a local coach who trained her for nine years. When Savannah needed more advanced coaching, Sammie arranged for Savannah to work with two, elite out-of-town coaches on a regular basis. One is in Ohio and one is in Georgia. About once every six weeks, Sammie and Savannah fly to one of those destinations for a weekend of training. Sammie said,

Both coaches are phenomenal in their areas of expertise. The Ohio coach is an older woman with a wealth of experience who coaches a lot of top kids on the east coast. She has really developed the mental side of twirling for Savannah. The Georgia coach is young and is the featured twirler for the University of Georgia. She is a Grand National collegiate champion and world champion who specializes in two- and three-baton.

Sammie has also arranged other training opportunities for Savannah. Savannah works with a twirling cleanup coach, who lives a few hours north, at least twice a month. A cleanup coach helps iron out technical problems. To perfect her twirling routines, Savannah also takes weekly tumbling and ballet classes. Sammie reported that twirling routines require tumbling and dancing skills. She said, "A baton twirler is really a gymnast and dancer with a 27-inch stick twirling above her head."

Sammie is also instrumental in arranging and monitoring Savannah's 15-20 hours of weekly practice. Much of Sammie's practice is done at home. She practices outside on the deck or patio in good weather and in the living room in bad weather. Sammie said, "We have a cathedral height ceiling in our living room and for many years this has been the twirling area. Savannah just comes in and moves all the furniture back and twirls between two ceiling fans." When the weather is cold and more practice space is needed, Sammie drives Savannah to a local college gym where the family has a membership.

Sammie enjoys watching Savannah train. She sits on the sideline and watches when Savannah practices in the gym and peeks in from time to time when Savannah practices at home. Sammie said,

Now that she has gotten older, I try to give her more space, but my eyes are always there... And, Savannah keeps me involved. She'll call me in and ask me to watch. She'll say, 'Am I doing this right?'

Sammie also monitors lessons in order to help Savannah get the most from her practice time. She said,

I sit in on all lessons because I know nothing about twirling and I want to be sure that our practice time is well spent. I write notes on paper and film the lesson as well. That way, if there is any question about (how to practice later), Savannah can go right to the notes or to the recording and know what to do.

### **Talent Management**

Sammie plans Savannah's lesson and competition schedules, makes all the travel arrangements, and travels with her. She monitors Savannah's practices and makes sure she eats healthy meals to maintain fitness. Sammie also strives to build a local culture for baton twirling. Toward that end, she said that she arranges for Savannah to do "tons of exhibitions." Sammie said,

My philosophy is to get Savannah out in front of people in order to keep the baton sport in people's minds. If there is one little girl watching a parade who sees Savannah twirl and says, 'Mom, I want to try that,' then that keeps the sport alive.

Sammie insists that her contribution to Savannah's success is just one part of a team effort. Sammie said,

It takes all of us. It takes strong coaches. It takes my husband helping Savannah approach twirling like a competitive sport. It takes a seamstress that adores making her costumes. It takes Grandma picking us up at the airport. It takes our oldest son driving her to and from lessons and picking up a costume. It takes all of us. It really does.

Sammie said that the financial costs for Savannah's twirling are substantial and that "a lot of kids fall out of twirling because it is such an expense and burden for families." Sammie strives to reduce costs. She said, "I'm a penny pincher, a budget person. I pinch pennies like no other."

Sammie also helps guide Savannah psychologically—both in terms of motivation and emotion. Sammie reported that there is not much she needs to do to motivate Savannah because Savannah is "self motivated and very driven." Sammie said, "I think that Savannah controls her own success. One portion is parents, one portion is coaches, but the majority of it is her own love of twirling, her drive, and self motivation." Sammie reported that Savannah is not interested in the accolades but in the process of improvement. Sammie said, "Savannah has a storeroom out in the barn filled with trophies. She is not interested in them. All she wants from the competitions are the score sheets (so she can pinpoint her deficits and improve them)." Still, Sammie helps motivate Savannah by working with her to set twirling goals. Sammie also helps motivate and keep Savannah emotionally calm by keeping twirling fun and relaxed. Sammie said,

Once we get to a competition, we follow a normal and relaxed routine. Our philosophy is to have a fun day. There is nothing that can be done that day to change the outcome. I tell her, 'you have already learned, practiced, and worked hard. There is no need to worry now because the job is already done. Just do your routine and whatever happens, happens.'

Finally, Sammie reported that it is important that she maintain a calm presence at competitions. She said,

When we go to a contest, that's Savannah's time. She has already prepared herself and there is no need for me fretting. I'll ask her if she needs anything, a hairpin, or bottle of water. Otherwise, my job is to sit there and be supportive. My job is done. This is the fun part.

## **Discussion**

Although the four twirlers and the roles their parents played were unique, their stories share many commonalities that fit with the theoretical framework proposed here and by Kiewra and Witte (2013). That is, parents were instrumental in all aspects of their child's talent development. They (a) provided an optimal environment for early training, (b) arranged and monitored coaching and practice, (c) handled logistical matters, and (d) maintained the child's psychological health. Here, we extract those commonalities and draw a profile of a talented twirler (we call TT) and the roles parents play in developing that talent.

TT is highly accomplished. She has won numerous national and world titles. TT's introduction to twirling began as a child. She was born into the talent area. Her mother twirled as a child and remained involved as a coach and judge. Twirling runs in the family. Not only does TT's mother twirl, but also other family members such as grandmothers, and siblings—even brothers.

TT is from a two-parent home where mom works as a twirling coach or as a homemaker. Mom oversees all aspects of TT's twirling development, while Dad focuses his efforts on TT's brother who pursues another sports-related talent area. The family's home is located near a training facility where TT begins formal instruction as a child.

In time, local training is insufficient for TT who has progressed beyond coaches and peers. Consequently, TT's mother arranges for TT to work with elite national coaches who sometimes live far away. TT and her mother fly across country for periodic lessons or arrange for coaches to fly to their hometown. Mom remains a participant in the coach-student relationship. She offers opinions and records training sessions for later evaluation. Mom also arranges other training opportunities for TT such as cleanup sessions with secondary coaches and cross training in dance and gymnastics. TT's mother also directs and monitors TT's 15-20 hours of weekly practice that is carried out at local training facilities or at home in the backyard or indoors in a room with a high ceiling. TT's parents actually built such a room for that purpose.

TT's mother relentlessly handles all managerial duties pertaining to training and competition. This entails things like hiring coaches, arranging lessons, scheduling competitions, and making travel arrangements. TT's mother also travels with her to monthly competitions around the United States and occasionally overseas. The yearly cost for competitive twirling is approximately \$10,000 per year. This cost is a financial burden for the family so TT's mother does all she can to cut expenses. For example, her own coaching and judging salary goes to financing TT's twirling. In addition, TT's mother arranges fund-raising opportunities, limits lessons and competitions, finds cheaper alternatives to purchasing new costumes, and seeks travel discounts. The family sacrifices family vacations or sometimes makes twirling competitions their vacation destinations.

Finally, TT's mother helps ensure that TT is psychologically prepared for competition. Although TT is self-motivated, her mother boosts motivation by helping TT set goals, offering praise, arranging rejuvenating training breaks, but also by pushing more as competition nears. TT and her mother even flew across country to attend a motivation seminar. TT's mother also keeps TT on an even emotional keel by being her number one fan, emphasizing improvement over outcome, and keeping twirling fun.

Overall, TT's mother devotes much of her life to TT's development and success. At the start, she had no idea that she or her daughter would take this path, and she had no roadmap or compass to direct her. Along the way, she figured things out as she went and did whatever was needed including life changing things like flying across country for lessons or building a room for twirling. Now, well along the path, TT's mother remains in awe of her daughter's talent and convinced that all the effort was worthwhile.

In conclusion, the present study offered in-depth understanding of parents' talent development roles in the early and middle years (Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999) for the previously uninvestigated sport of baton twirling. When present findings are considered relative to previous findings for chess (Kiewra & Witte, 2013), we see that parents fulfill the same roles whether the talent area involves intellectual competition (as in chess) or athletic competition (as in baton twirling). Moreover, we see that mothers (of twirlers) fulfill these roles as doggedly and as effectively as fathers (of chess players). And, in the end, we see that behind every great young performer is a parent fully committed to doing whatever is necessary to ensure growth and success.

## Note

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