

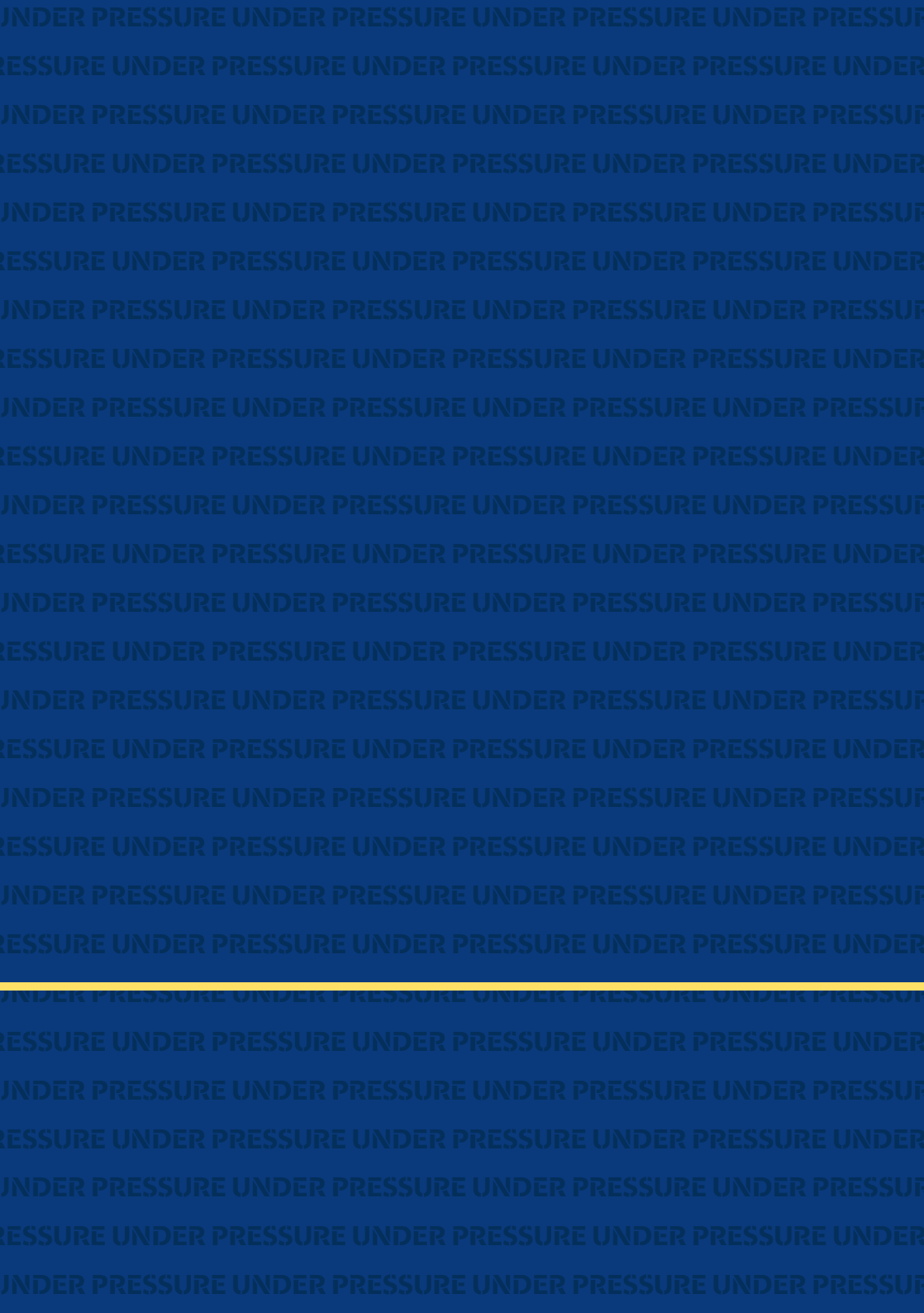
UNDER

PRESSURE



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INTRODUCTION

The importance of sport for young people is undeniable. It promotes physical well-being, supports psychosocial development, and teaches respect for rules and socialisation. However, with its natural inclination towards competition, the sporting environment can sometimes become a fertile ground for practices and expectations that put undue pressure on young athletes. This phenomenon, well documented but often underestimated in its long-term implications, deserves in-depth exploration to understand better how it impacts youth retention or abandonment of sport.

According to Eurobarometer 2022 data, more than half of young Europeans regularly participate in sporting activities. However, this positive data hides a more complex and sometimes problematic reality: many young people approaching adulthood reduce their commitment

or abandon sport completely. This phenomenon, known as Youth Sports Dropout, affects approximately half of adolescent athletes who begin participating in sports at a young age. This abandonment is often attributed to the loss of enthusiasm and interest. Still, at the heart of the problem, deeper and more complex dynamics are linked to psychological pressure and unrealistic expectations.

The culture of "success at all costs," which permeates many aspects of contemporary society, finds one of its greatest expressions in sport. This philosophy can transform a healthy, educational activity into a stressful and oppressive arena, where the end result overshadows the process and enjoyment of the game. The pressure to win and to be the best can come both from within the sporting world, through coaches and teammates, and from outside, through the expectations of parents and society.

Our study aims to analyse the link between the pressure of coaches and families on young athletes and the consequent impact on their psychological well-being and their decision to continue playing sports. Through the analysis of recent data, psychological theories and case studies, we will attempt to outline harmful and beneficial practices, thus providing an overview that can guide coaches, parents and policymakers in promoting a balanced approach to sport and sustainability.

This document is divided into chapters that explore various dimensions of the issue: sporting perfectionism and associated risks, the characteristics of coaches who promote a healthy environment, and the importance of a realistic approach to athletes' abilities and achievements. The objective is to offer a deep understanding of the dynamics at play and suggest strategies for positive change that can guarantee young athletes an enriching sporting experience, free from excessive pressure and capable of enhancing the true spirit of sport.

With this work, we intend to contribute to the debate on how the sporting context can be reformed to support not only the athletic but also the personal development of young people, promoting a vision of sport as a source of health, joy and personal growth, rather than just as an arena of relentless competition. Ultimately, the goal is to help young athletes rediscover the pleasure of sport, the joy of playing and the satisfaction of personal and team growth, far from the shadows of unattainable expectations and unsustainable pressures.

CHAPTER 1

SPORTS PERFECTIONISM AND RISKS FOR YOUTH

Statistical context: youth engagement in sport.

The importance of sport in promoting young people's physical and psychological development is widely recognised. According to Eurobarometer 2022 data, 54% of young Europeans regularly play a sport. However, as young people approach adulthood, a critical stage in their development, many abandon the sport or continue to play it half-heartedly. This phenomenon, known as Youth Sports Dropout, affects approximately half of young athletes. The central question is: why does this abandonment happen? The answers are multiple and complex, but one of the main causes is the pressure resulting from sporting perfectionism, a topic that deserves in-depth analysis.

Pressure and perfectionism: the culture of "result at all costs".

The culture of "results at all costs" is pervasive in youth sports. Coaches, parents, and often athletes are influenced by the belief that athletic success is the ultimate measure of an athlete's worth. This approach can lead to excessive pressure, which in turn can turn sport from a fun and healthy activity into a source of stress and anxiety.

Sports perfectionism manifests itself in various ways. Athletes may feel obligated to reach unrealistically high standards, whether imposed by themselves or external figures. This pressure can come from many sources: coaches who demand technical and tactical perfection, parents who see sports as a means to personal and social success, and a sports culture that celebrates only winners. As a result, failure is perceived not as an opportunity for growth but as a catastrophe that undermines the athlete's personal value.

Psychological impacts: the harmful effects of perfectionism.

Sports perfectionism can have devastating effects on the psychological well-being of young athletes. Here are some of the most common consequences:

Performance anxiety: the constant pressure to perform at your best can lead to high levels of anxiety. Athletes may develop intense and persistent worries about their performance, fearing judgment from others and fear of failure.

Fear of failure: the fear of being unable to meet expectations can become paralysing. Athletes may avoid participating in competitions or training for fear of failure, thus limiting their opportunities for improvement and growth.

Low self-esteem: when personal value is linked exclusively to sporting results, negative performances can lead to decreased self-esteem. Athletes can develop negative self-perceptions, which can negatively affect their confidence and motivation.

Maladaptive behaviours: the pressure to achieve high standards can push athletes to resort to dangerous practices, such as using performance-enhancing drugs, to improve their performance. This can have serious consequences for their physical and mental health.

Burnout: excessive pressure can lead to physical and mental exhaustion. Athletes can feel overwhelmed, tired, and disillusioned with sport, ultimately leading them to quit the sport.

Research contribution: academic insights.

Numerous studies have examined the phenomenon of sporting perfectionism and its effects on young athletes. This research offers valuable insights into better understanding the dynamics at play and suggests effective interventions.

Fredricks & Eccles (2004): these researchers explored the role of parents in their children's sports socialisation. They found that conditional support can be particularly harmful when the young person's value is linked to their sporting successes. This type of support creates an environment where young people feel they always have to prove their worth through achievement, thus increasing pressure and anxiety.

Appleton & Curran (2016): this study highlighted how parental involvement declines as athletes age as young people seek more independence. However, this shift of responsibility to peer groups and coaches makes their role in providing positive support and managing pressure even more crucial.

Gucciardi, Mahoney, Jalleh, Donovan e Parkes (2012): these researchers analysed the importance of feedback and support from coaches. They concluded that coaches who can provide specific and constructive feedback can

help athletes improve their performance and develop a resilient mindset.

Dunn et al. (2016): this study examined the concept of perfectionism and how it impacts athletes' behaviour. The authors found that perfectionistic athletes tend to set unrealistic standards and fear the consequences of failure, living in a constant state of stress and anxiety.

Costa (2022): this recent study delved into the maladaptive characteristics associated with sports perfectionism, including performance anxiety, fear of failure, risk of using performance-enhancing substances, fear of social evaluation, reduced optimism, concern for body image, less drive, greater anger, low self-esteem, and frustration with psychological needs.

Recommendations to mitigate the risks of perfectionism.

In light of the evidence presented, it is clear that sporting perfectionism represents a significant threat to the well-being of young athletes. Here are some strategies coaches, parents and sports organisations can adopt to mitigate these risks:

Promote the pleasure of sport: emphasize fun and passion for the game rather than focusing solely on

results. Create an environment where young athletes can explore and improve without fearing judgment.

Set realistic expectations: help athletes set achievable and realistic goals. Expectations should be based on self-improvement and effort rather than final results.

Provide constructive feedback: coaches should offer specific, improvement-oriented feedback without personal criticism. Feedback should focus on progress and improvement areas, encouraging a growth mindset.

Educate parents: parents should be aware of their impact on their children's motivation and well-being. Encourage parents to support their children regardless of sporting results and to promote a positive attitude towards sport.

Create a supportive environment: coaches should work to create an environment where athletes feel supported and valued. This includes promoting team cohesion and mutual support among teammates.

Encourage autonomy: give athletes the opportunity to make decisions and actively participate in the training process. This can increase their intrinsic motivation and reduce performance-related anxiety.

Sports perfectionism represents a significant challenge for young athletes, but its negative effects can be

mitigated with a conscious and supportive approach. Coaches, parents and sports organisations have a crucial role in promoting an environment that enhances athletes' well-being, personal growth, and athletic achievement. By adopting practices emphasising enjoyment, improvement and support, we can help young people develop a healthy and rewarding relationship with sport, setting the stage for a lifetime of physical activity and wellbeing.

CHAPTER 2: GREAT COACHES AND THE STEPS TO FOLLOW

Role of the coach: shaping the sporting experience.

The role of coaches in youth sports goes beyond teaching technical and tactical skills. Coaches can significantly influence their athletes' personal growth and psychological well-being. They can be a source of inspiration, confidence and motivation, or they can contribute to a stressful and negative environment that leads to the abandonment of sport. Their ability to create a positive sporting environment is crucial for the balanced development of young athletes. Coaches must be aware of their impact, adopting practices that promote the overall well-being of athletes, both on and off the playing field.

Teaching styles: variations and impacts.

Coaches can adopt different teaching styles, each with different implications for athlete motivation and anxiety. Here is a detailed description of the main styles:

Authoritarian

Description: the authoritarian coach controls decisions and activities, imposing strict rules and expectations. Athletes must follow instructions without the possibility of discussion or personal input.

Impacts: this style can ensure discipline and quick results, but it often limits athletes' creativity and can increase performance anxiety. Athletes can feel oppressed and deprived of the opportunity to express their ideas, leading to a decrease in intrinsic motivation and the risk of burnout.

Informative

Description: the informative coach provides detailed, rational explanations of techniques and tactics, helping athletes understand the “why” of their actions.

Impacts: this approach can improve athletes' knowledge of the game and technical competence. However, if not balanced, it can overload athletes with excessive information, increasing their stress and reducing spontaneity in the game.

Participatory

Description: the participatory coach encourages athletes to take part in decisions regarding their training and game strategies. This style promotes dialogue and collaboration.

Impacts: promotes autonomy and personal responsibility, increasing athletes' intrinsic motivation. Athletes who feel they have a say are generally more engaged and satisfied and show lower performance anxiety levels.

Social

Description: social coaching aims to create a positive and supportive climate, encouraging teamwork and mutual respect between athletes.

Impacts: this style builds a cohesive team environment, reducing stress and improving the overall well-being of athletes. Athletes who feel supported by their teammates and coach are likelier to enjoy the sporting experience and develop positive social connections.

Driven

Description: the guided coach provides individualised support, working closely with each athlete to help them achieve their personal goals.

Impacts: this approach can motivate athletes, offer personalised attention, and help build self-confidence. However, it requires a significant commitment from the coach to be effective.

Feedback and support: key elements for growth.

The feedback and support coaches provide play a crucial role in the development of athletes. Effective feedback must be specific, constructive and timely. It should focus on observable behaviours and offer practical suggestions for improvement. Here are some key principles:

Specificity: feedback should be clear and detailed. For example, instead of saying, "You need to improve your shot," a coach might say, "Your shooting angle is good, but try focusing on your foot placement to give yourself a more stable base."

Oriented towards improvement: feedback should highlight strengths and areas for improvement, providing concrete suggestions on progressing. An example would be, "You did a great job maintaining your defensive position, but try working on your sprint speed to improve your responsiveness."

Separate from personal evaluations: it is important that feedback is focused on performance and not on the

athlete's personal attributes. Instead of saying, "You're too slow," a coach should say, "Work on your reaction speed to improve your response time on the field."

Studies and analyses: links between teaching styles and performance anxiety.

Scientific research offers numerous insights into how different teaching styles can influence athletes' performance anxiety and motivation. A significant study was conducted by the University of Barcelona, which examined the effects of coaches' teaching styles on a sample of young athletes between 9 and 18 years old, practising different sports such as football, basketball, handball, tennis and synchronised swimming.

The study used several rating scales, including the Coach Behavior Control Scale and the Behavioral Regulation in Sport Questionnaire (BRSQ), to measure sport motivation and the SAS-2 scale to measure sport anxiety. The results showed that:

Participatory style: athletes trained with a participatory style reported lower performance anxiety levels and greater sports satisfaction. This style promotes athletes' active participation, reducing external pressures and increasing their autonomy and intrinsic motivation.

Authoritarian style: athletes subjected to authoritarian training showed higher levels of performance anxiety and lower sports satisfaction. This style focuses on control and rigid discipline, which can exacerbate fear of failure and limit athletes' autonomy.

Social style: athletes who perceived a supportive and cohesive environment demonstrated greater emotional resilience and less performance anxiety. This style promotes psychological well-being, strengthening athletes' sense of belonging and security.

Research suggests that coaches adopting inclusive and supportive teaching styles improve their athletes' sporting performance and contribute to their emotional and psychological development. A coach who can explain and justify his decisions, encourage participation, and provide adequate information creates an environment where athletes can thrive while minimising excessive pressure.

Recommendations for coaches.

In light of the evidence presented, it is clear that coaches must adopt strategies and approaches that foster a positive and motivating sporting environment. Here are some practical recommendations:

Adopt a participatory style: involving athletes in decisions regarding their training and game strategies can increase their motivation and reduce anxiety. Athletes who feel they have a say are more engaged and satisfied.

Provide constructive and specific feedback: feedback should focus on specific aspects of performance and offer concrete suggestions for improvement. This helps athletes better understand their strengths and weaknesses and work on them effectively.

Promote a supportive environment: creating a positive and supportive climate within the team is essential to the well-being of athletes. Coaches should encourage teamwork and mutual respect, building a strong sense of community.

Balance individual and team attention: coaches should provide individualised support, considering each athlete's personal needs and goals while maintaining an overall view of the team.

Educate yourself and your parents: coaches should be trained in best practices for psychological and emotional support for athletes and work with parents to ensure they understand the importance of balanced, non-pressuring support.

The role of coaches in youth sports is critical in shaping the sporting experience of young athletes. By adopting appropriate teaching styles and providing constructive feedback, coaches can create a positive sporting environment that promotes psychological well-being and improved performance. The research highlights the importance of a balanced approach that enhances personal growth and sporting results, promoting a healthy and rewarding relationship with sport.

CHAPTER 3

WE ARE NOT ALL CHAMPIONS

Expectations and realism: the importance of realistic expectations and the educational value of sport.

In the world of youth sports, it is essential that coaches, parents, and athletes themselves maintain realistic expectations. The exclusive emphasis on winning can distort the perception of sport, making it appear as a battlefield where only winners are valued. This approach can lead to disappointment and dropouts, especially when young athletes realise that not everyone can be a champion.

It is crucial to recognize and celebrate the different ways sports can enrich young people's lives. Sport is a means to achieve victory and a powerful educational tool that teaches values such as discipline, resilience, teamwork and emotional management. Participating in a sport

should be seen as an opportunity to develop personal and social skills, regardless of reaching the podium.

Management of disappointments: strategies for dealing with defeats and frustrations.

Defeats are an integral part of sports and life. Teaching young athletes to manage disappointment is critical to their emotional development and ability to persevere in the face of difficulty. Here are some effective strategies to help athletes deal with defeats and frustrations:

Accept defeats as part of the process: it is important for coaches and parents to explain to athletes that defeats are inevitable and part of the growth process. Defeats provide valuable opportunities to learn and improve.

Reflect on mistakes: after a defeat, it is useful to encourage athletes to reflect on what went wrong and what could be improved. This process of self-reflection helps develop a growth mindset, where mistakes are seen as lessons rather than definitive failures.

Maintain a balanced perspective: coaches and parents should help athletes maintain a balanced perspective, emphasising that one defeat does not define their worth as people or as athletes. It is important to recognise the efforts and progress made, regardless of the result.

Focus on long-term goals: instead of focusing solely on immediate results, athletes should be encouraged to consider long-term goals and their ongoing development. This approach reduces pressure on individual performance and promotes a long-term view of success.

Emotional Support: offering emotional support during times of disappointment is crucial. A hug, words of encouragement, and the empathetic presence of coaches and parents can make a big difference in how a young athlete deals with a defeat.

Importance of family support: the crucial role of parents.

Parents play a fundamental role in their children's sporting socialisation. Parental involvement can significantly influence young people's sports experience from early childhood through adolescence. Initially, parents introduce their children to sports, encourage them to participate, and often serve as role models of active, healthy behaviour.

As time passes, parental involvement tends to change. Parents are often directly involved during childhood, participating in training and competitions. However, as young athletes grow, they wish to develop greater independence, seeking to establish their identity and

autonomy in sports. This step is crucial and requires parents to adapt their role, offering support without being intrusive.

A study by Fredricks and Eccles (2004) demonstrated that parents play a crucial role in early sports socialisation, but their involvement must evolve as the young athlete ages. It is essential that parents learn to balance support and autonomy, allowing their children to explore and develop their own skills and interests.

Implications for parenting in sport: positive support against excessive pressure.

Positive parental support is crucial to counteract the negative effects of excessive pressure and encourage healthy and rewarding sports participation. Studies show that young athletes who receive balanced support from parents are more likely to develop intrinsic motivation, enjoy sports and persist in sports activities in the long term.

Here are some key practices for parents:

Promote enjoyment and passion for sport: parents should encourage their children to see sport as an enjoyable and rewarding activity. The focus should be on

fun, learning and self-improvement rather than just winning.

Avoid unrealistic expectations: parents' expectations should be realistic and based on their children's abilities and interests rather than their personal ambitions. Athletes should be encouraged to set goals that are achievable and meaningful to them.

Provide emotional support: parents need to be a source of emotional support, offering encouragement and comfort in both times of success and difficulty. This helps young athletes feel confident and valued regardless of their sporting results.

Recognise commitment and effort: it is important to praise the commitment and effort of young athletes rather than focusing solely on results. This approach promotes a growth mindset and encourages athletes to persevere and improve.

Educate yourself about the impact of pressure: parents should be aware of the negative effects of excessive pressure and work to avoid passing on their ambitions to their children. Understanding the importance of emotional and psychological well-being in sports development is essential to providing balanced support.

A study by Appleton & Curran (2016) highlighted how positive parental involvement can mitigate the negative effects of sporting perfectionism. Young athletes who perceive parental support tend to develop greater resilience and maintain a positive attitude towards sports despite difficulties. Not all young athletes will become champions, and this is perfectly normal. Youth sports' importance lies in its educational value and the personal development it can offer, regardless of competitive results. Coaches and parents must work together to create a sporting environment that promotes well-being, learning, and enjoyment while reducing the pressure to succeed at all costs.

Through realistic expectations, appropriate management of disappointments and positive family support, we can help young athletes develop a healthy and rewarding relationship with sport. In this way, sports can become a source of joy, personal growth and long-term well-being, preparing young people to face life's challenges with confidence and resilience.

CONCLUSIONS

In this work, we have explored the various dynamics of the pressure exerted on young athletes and how it influences their sporting experience. In previous chapters, we have analysed several crucial aspects contributing to youth sports dropout and proposed strategies to mitigate the associated risks.

In Chapter 1, we discussed the concept of sports perfectionism and the risks it poses for young athletes. The "achievement at all costs" culture can lead to excessive pressure, causing performance anxiety, fear of failure and maladaptive behaviours. Studies such as those by Fredricks & Eccles and Dunn et al. highlighted the importance of supporting athletes with realistic expectations and constructive feedback.

Chapter 2 examined the crucial role of coaches in shaping young people's sporting experiences. We explored teaching styles, from authoritative to participatory methods, and how each influences athletes' motivation and anxiety. Research from the University of Barcelona has shown that an inclusive and supportive teaching style reduces performance anxiety and improves athletes' well-being.

In Chapter 3, we discussed the importance of maintaining realistic expectations and the educational value of sports beyond winning. We examined strategies to help athletes manage defeats and frustrations, highlighting the fundamental role of parents in providing positive and balanced support. Studies such as those by Appleton & Curran have shown that positive parental involvement can mitigate the negative effects of excessive pressure.

It is essential that coaches, parents and sports organisations work together to create a sports culture that values the personal development and well-being of athletes beyond results. Here are some practical recommendations:

Promote a positive environment: coaches should adopt teaching styles that encourage active participation, autonomy, and mutual support among athletes.

Provide constructive feedback: feedback should be specific, improvement-oriented, and separate from personal evaluations, helping athletes develop a growth mindset.

Educate parents: parents should know their impact on their children's motivation and well-being and learn to balance support with autonomy.

Value the process: sport should be seen as an opportunity to develop personal and social skills rather than a means to achieve victory exclusively.

Future perspectives.

Despite progress, there is still much to explore and improve in youth sports education. Here are some areas of future research:

Longitudinal studies: long-term research could help better understand the effects of pressure and perfectionism on young athletes over the years.

Educational interventions: develop and test training programs for coaches and parents that promote supportive practices and reduce pressure on athletes.

Diversity and inclusion: exploring how the different experiences of young athletes from different socio-cultural backgrounds influence their response to sporting pressure.

Support technologies: use advanced technologies to monitor and support athletes' psychological and physical well-being, providing useful data to improve training practices.

In conclusion, the future of youth sports depends on our ability to create environments that promote the performance, overall well-being, and personal development of athletes. Through increased awareness, education, and research, we can contribute to an enriching and sustainable sporting experience for all young athletes.