

THE U.S. WOMEN'S YOUTH NATIONAL TEAMS PROGRAM

FINDING THE NEXT MIA HAMM AND ALEX MORGAN

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Introduction

"If she can do it, why can't I?" is a question author Daniel Coyle asks in his book *The Talent Code: Greatness Isn't Born. It's Grown. Here's How*. In the book Coyle explores talent and the variables associated with developing and creating it. The question serves as the opening to a section of the book titled "Ignition" devoted to what motivates or inspires an individual to commit to an activity and pursue it to achieve greatness.

With regard to this ignition, Coyle (2009) wrote, "it is not an innate talent or gene but rather a small, ephemeral, yet powerful idea, a vision of their ideal future selves, a vision that orientated, energized and accelerated progress, and that originated in the outside world. Something in their family, their homes, their teachers, the set of images and people they encountered in their short lives that sparked an intense and nearly unconscious response that manifested itself in an idea (p. 106)." This ignition leads to a commitment by the athlete to deep practice under a master coach and that mix of variables increases the chances for greatness to be achieved.

This is the first of a series of articles that examines the characteristics, traits, experiences and developmental pathways of United States Women's National Soccer Team players. In a sense, we attempt to identify ignition triggers for those who have reached the national team level. Of the hundreds of thousands of girls who play soccer, only a small percentage will achieve national team status (again, the question "If she can do it, why can't I?"). As important as the research is to the U.S. Soccer Federation, it is equally as (if not more) important to those who are most involved in the development of future national team players: the parents of players as well as coaches in U.S. Soccer's three zones of player development in understanding the ignition process and the role in recognizing and developing it.

The majority of data was collected through an email sent to 396 subjects who participated in at least one U.S. Women's National Team camp during 2011-12. Subjects were participants in U14 to U23 National Team training camps, ranging in ages from 13 to 23. There was a return rate of 65% for the survey.

The survey attempts to answer two questions: 1) Who should we be inviting to national camp? And 2) What leads us to believe she can be a senior national team player one day?

In an attempt to answer these questions, researchers developed a profile of those youth national team camp invitees in an attempt to understand who they are and identify potential ignition points: their environment (and people who may have influenced and supported them); their experiences (both on and off the field) that were most beneficial in their soccer development; where they were developed; their psychological profile and physical capabilities; what their aspirations and hopes are for soccer and when did these aspirations begin.

The decision to embark on this study was based on the need to be evidence-based when identifying players and creating future player pathways for the Youth National Team programs. The combination of Robinson's interactions with national level coaches from multiple sports while leading an international coaching education program for the past five years and conducting a comparative analysis study of the top nine countries competing with the United States in women's soccer, and Heinrichs' 25 years of experience in

international soccer and work with the United States Olympic Committee, illustrated that some countries and sports were more systematic and scientific in talent identification approaches. It was also evident that talent in a given sport was not the only variable being considered.

A men's national team basketball coach from a country with a small population and limited financial resources who has had international success said their sport needs to be efficient, deliberate and scientific in identifying talent because they cannot afford to waste time, energy and money on an athlete who may never make a contribution to the national team. Thus, there is a great deal of predictive testing done at younger ages to determine the players who have the potential to be national caliber. Those players are brought together to train and to have access to top coaches on a regular basis. As this coach said, "The United States can afford to mess up. We can't afford to do that; we have to be more targeted and specific in our approach."

One country's national team program's had parents complete a survey assessing parenting style. In the parents' minds that style was an important variable in predicting an athlete's level of effort; ability to be self-motivated and disciplined; ability to handle pressure; mental strength; and dealing with criticism in a competitive environment.

Another example had several competing countries encouraging females to play soccer against males into their late teenage years, discouraging competition at an early age and focusing on skill development. In one country, when teams compete in league play, seeding is established so teams are constantly playing competitive games. In another instance, rosters are changed in the middle of the season to retain focus on player development rather than anointing a winning team.

Can you imagine this in the U.S.? Why not? It would certainly help recalibrate parents' focus. It would be a remarkable leadership decision, leading us to create better learning, developmental and enjoyable environments for our players.

In addition to these international perspectives, there are cautionary tales of the player who had all the soccer and physical skills to be a national team player but chose either not to pursue the endeavor or never made the commitment. This player may have had access to the best coaches, played and trained with the best players at the best facilities in the best camps and tournaments and may have had the best off-the-field training, but in the end there was never an ignition to achieve greatness.

Research studies have been conducted in the realm of sports as well as other areas (such as academics and arts) that examined variables such as family status, birth order, birthday, parenting styles and socio-economic class as being predictors for either success or failure. All of these may be potential triggers for ignition. This study examined the degree to which ignition triggers exist with female soccer players who have been identified as youth national level players.

Outside of physical testing conducted in the camp, Robinson never set foot on a field, attended a training session or met the participants in person. His focus was on variables beyond the field that could be igniters or predictors of achieving elite level women's soccer player status. What trends emerged

were worthy of note, discussion and sharing with the soccer community, because talent identification and development is a shared responsibility across the U.S. soccer community.

This article focuses on the influences on the national team player in terms of family and birth order, educational environment, involvement and influence of the parent and their participation in sport and soccer and their soccer development experience. Subsequent articles will focus on understanding the significance of relative age effect and physical characteristics in the player evaluation process, and the geographic profile of youth national team players and recommendations by U.S. Soccer to elite players, the club and the parent, as it is a shared responsibility for the U.S. to stay at the top of international women's soccer.

The Profile of a U.S. Women's National Team Player

The Family: Situation, Birth Order, Parents' Education and Occupation

A majority of national team pool players come from the traditional two-parent family setting. Eighty-four percent of respondents claim to live with both parents; that is significantly higher than the national average of 63%. Of the 16% not living with both parents, 72% of them live with their mother. This is slightly below the national average of 79%. From this, we can summarize our elite players are well supported by their family structure, which is critical as players depend on their inner circle throughout their careers. Ironically, the more elite a player becomes, the more dependent she is on the support around her to achieve her goals. We should also note that our soccer community could do a better job of being more inclusive and supportive of those players without a two-parent household.

Birth Order

In terms of family, 95% of national team pool players have a sibling. The 5% of only children in the program is well below the national average (cited as being between 20% and 25%). Of those in the program who have siblings, 20% of them are the oldest child while 74% of them have an older sibling.

Table 1: Family Status

Topic	N	Percent
Only child	14	5
Oldest	53	20
Have Older	193	75

In examining the relationship to those older siblings, the average age difference between the national pool player and her next oldest sibling is 3.08 years (in other words, our elite players are "playing up" at home, with their older sisters and brothers challenging them along the way). It should be noted that despite anecdotal evidence, there was no significant evidence in this survey to suggest that an older brother is training elite players more than an older sister. In fact, the gender of the older sibling was insignificant, while the age gap and mutual interest in sports seems to be the predictor of success.

Table 2: Age in Relation to Older and Young Siblings

Sibling	N Sibling 1	Percent Sibling 1	N Sibling 2	Percent Sibling 2	N Sibling 3	Percent Sibling 3
Older Sibling	164	67	38	51	25	60
Younger Sibling	81	33	36	49	17	40
Average Age Difference for Older Sibling	3.08		6.22		8.27	

Table 3: Sibling by Gender

Gender	Sibling 1	Sibling 2	Sibling 3	Sibling 4	Sibling 5	Sibling 6	Total
Male	77	36	13	10	3	0	139
Female	85	38	21	3	3	1	151
% Female	52%	51%	62%	23%	50%	0	52%

These findings are consistent with the analysis presented by Coyle in *The Talent Code*. Soccer playing ability is not a gift, but rather "a confluence of factors that go beyond genes and that are directly related to intense, subconscious reactions to motivational signals that provide the energy to practice deeply." In his study of parent loss, Eisenstadt (1989) referred to primal cues as springboards of immense compensatory energy that can alter a child's relationship to the world, redefine his or her identity and energize and orient the mind to address the dangers and possibilities of life. In the case of birth order, the desire to practice deeply by the younger sibling is in response to the primal cue of "you're behind!" It appears 74% of our national team players struggled, fought, competed and endured "fits of failure" on a consistent basis at home. The very training against their 3.08 years older sister or brother prepared them for success in our elite women's soccer environment. This is perhaps the strongest argument ever made for the need to encourage our elite players to "play up." When many parents are delaying the start of kindergarten for their children (in an effort to better prepare them socially and academically), the opposite is necessary to prepare athletes for the challenges at the next elite level. Not coincidentally, both Mia Hamm and Alex Morgan were younger siblings playing with older siblings at home as well as "playing up" against much older players throughout their competitive careers. Additionally, players years ago reported "playing up" against their brothers, where today's youth national team players are reporting "playing up" at home with sisters and brothers.

A large majority of older siblings not only played sports but soccer specifically. Seventy-six percent of the closest oldest siblings played sports, with 73% of them playing soccer. Eighty-six percent of the second oldest sibling played sports with 69% playing soccer, while 79% of the third oldest siblings played sports and 76% played soccer. In many cases, the subjects not only had role models within the family but became more committed based on the response to that primal cue.

Table 4: Sibling By Sport

Soccer	Sibling 1	Sibling 2	Sibling 3	Sibling 4	Sibling 5	Sibling 6	Total
Soccer	118	51	26	12	6	1	214
No	43	23	8	1	0	0	75
% soccer	73%	69%	76%	92%	100	100	74%

Table 5: Siblings By Other Sports

Sports	Sibling 1	Sibling 2	Sibling 3	Sibling 4	Sibling 5	Sibling 6	Total
Other Sports	122	62	27	11	5	1	228
No	39	10	7	2	1	0	59
% other	76%	86%	79%	85%	83%	1	79%

It may be argued that 74% of national team pool players responded to the primal cue that they were behind. These findings remind all of us that “playing up” (and the inherent struggles) actually leads young players to challenge themselves, enjoy those challenges and face adversity. In fact, players learn how to deal with small failures and rise again while competing with an older sibling. This is precisely what our elite players are confronted with as they ascend through our youth national team program. A player who cannot cope with failure on a daily basis will struggle to succeed at the youth national team level. Players who cope with failure, love the battle and thrive on the challenges not only survive, but thrive in the youth national team program.

The Parents: Identity, Style and Involvement

The role of the parent in the nurturing of a future national team player is worthy of examination. We examine who they are in terms of education and career but also in terms of their past experiences in soccer and sports and to what degree and how involved they are in their child’s soccer-playing life.

Overall the parents of national team players have attained a higher level of education. Eighty-nine percent of the mothers of those who completed the survey have a post-secondary education experience (which is 15% higher than the U.S. average of 74%). Ninety-four percent of fathers have a post-secondary education experience (31% greater than the U.S. average of 62.8%). In order of highest percentage, mothers’ occupations were business (30%), education (15%), health care (15%) and homemaker (8%). The most common categories for fathers’ occupations were business (44%), science (11%), and health care (7%).

In summary, a national team player comes from the traditional family setting and is in a multiple-child family. Parents are educated and have primarily white collar/professional careers. This reported education level and career stability creates an avenue for the vast majority of our pool players to experience and enjoy extracurricular activities such as playing soccer. That stated, we should ask ourselves how we can better support players without traditional family support.

The Role of the Parent

The word that best describes both the mother and father of a national team players’ soccer development is “supportive.” That is a very broad term. It is not known how that support was provided and how the parents perform in other aspects of parenting, but it is clear that parents created the opportunity for their child to excel in this activity. For mothers, 72% never volunteered as a coach and 98% were never a paid coach for the club, but the majority of the mothers volunteered within the organization (63%) and attended games and practices.

Table 6: Mother’s Involvement in Soccer Development

Question	Always	Most of the time	Sometimes	Never	Responses
Volunteer Coached my Youth Teams	6%	5%	17%	72%	277
Trained Me Individually	1%	3%	17%	79%	277
Was a Paid Coach of My Club Team	0%	1%	1%	98%	276
Was an Officer in my Club	4%	2%	5%	89%	276
Was a Volunteer in my Club	19%	15%	28%	37%	278
Attended All My Games	53%	36%	8%	3%	274
Attended Home Games	70%	22%	6%	2%	279
Attended Practices	14%	17%	42%	26%	275
Traveled to Tournaments	40%	35%	20%	6%	278
Was Not Involved in my Soccer	3%	3%	7%	87%	265

Fathers were more active as volunteer coaches with 50% having coached at least some of the time and 56% training their daughter individually, but only 9% were ever a paid coach for the club on which their daughter played. Eleven percent of the fathers served as an officer or board member in the club and 52% of the fathers volunteered with the club at least some of the time.

Table 7: Fathers Involvement in Soccer Development

Question	Always	Most of the time	Sometimes	Never	Responses
Volunteer Coached my Youth Teams	20%	11%	19%	50%	274
Trained Me Individually	17%	7%	31%	44%	275
Was a Paid Coach of My Club Team	3%	3%	3%	91%	275
Was an Officer in my Club	2%	4%	6%	89%	274
Was a Volunteer in my Club	12%	8%	31%	48%	274
Attended All my Games	47%	37%	13%	4%	272
Attended Home Games	61%	28%	9%	3%	275
Attended Practices	15%	19%	42%	24%	274
Traveled to Tournaments	36%	34%	22%	8%	275
Was Not Involved in My Soccer	3%	3%	8%	85%	265

Although no direct questions were asked of either the players or the parents with regards to parenting styles, the findings were consistent with the research in parenting style. Baumrind (1971, 1989) and Maccoby and Martin (1983) both reported that parenting styles consist of two dimensions. The first is “demandingness,” which refers to the extent parents show control, maturity demands and supervision in their parenting. “Responsiveness,” on the other hand, refers to the extent to which parents show affective warmth, acceptance and involvement with their children. Based on these two dimensions, four classifications of parenting have been described by Maccoby and Martin (1983) and Baumrind, (1991).

Authoritative parents are both demanding and responsive. This means that they are controlling but not restrictive. *Authoritarian* parents are controlling and not responsive, while *permissive* parents are not controlling but are responsive. *Neglectful* parents are neither controlling nor responsive. Aunola, Stattin and Nurmi (2000) reported that parenting styles play an important role in the development of adolescents’ achievement strategies. In particular, parenting emphasizing child disclosure, trust and engagement (on one hand) and parental control and monitoring (on the other hand) appear to provide a basis for the development of adaptive achievement strategies. In contrast, family relations characterized by an overall un-involvement, a lack of parental trust, engagement and control, appear to lead to the use of maladaptive achievement strategies. However, a parenting style that is demanding and unresponsive was found to be associated with the child deploying maladaptive strategies, particularly passive behavior and a lack of use of self-enhancing attributions (Diener and Dweck, 1978).

Aunola et al. (2000) reported adolescents from authoritative families seemed to apply the most adaptive, task-oriented strategies in achievement situations. Typical situations were low levels of failure expectations, task-irrelevant behavior and passivity. Moreover, they reported a frequent use of self-enhancing attributions. They hold themselves personally accountable for their successes and their failures, rising to the occasion in competitive situations. Those from authoritarian families tend toward more task-irrelevant behavior, passivity and feel they lack the competence to solve problems.

Glaskow et al. (1997) reported that neglectful parenting was related to adolescents’ internal attributions for failure and external attributions for success. Parents who do not provide encouragement, parental involvement or support foster young people’s doubts about their own competence and expose them to the use of task-avoidant strategies and negative causal attributions. Although a survey was not administered, only 3% of the participants parents who were not involved at all in their soccer development.

U.S. professional player developers have long known the most powerful and profound influencers in a player’s personal development are parents and family support. If parents provide the appropriate amount of support, encouragement, and resources (along with the appropriate triangulated support to the coach(es) in their player’s lives), together they make a great team of experts in developing the player.

The Parents' Soccer and Sport Experience:

Overall, the parents of national team players were and are athletes. Participants were asked to list the sports each parent played and the highest level at which they played. Seventy-nine percent of the mothers and 91% of the fathers played sports either at the youth, high school, college or professional level. The mothers' most popular sports were track and field, basketball, and softball. At the youth level gymnastics was a popular selection; in college, mothers selected basketball, track and field, and volleyball. Fathers' most popular sports were American football, basketball and baseball (these were also the most played in college).

Table 8: Mother's Participation in Sport

Sport	Youth	High School	College	Professional	Responses
Basketball	44%	46%	10%	0%	133
Softball	52%	43%	6%	0%	122
Swimming	58%	39%	3%	0%	72
Track and Field	36%	56%	8%	0%	156
Gymnastics	59%	37%	4%	0%	68
Tennis	62%	30%	8%	0%	60
Field Hockey	19%	59%	22%	0%	27
Volleyball	38%	49%	13%	0%	93
Lacrosse	11%	56%	33%	0%	9
Other	39%	40%	20%	1%	95

Because parents were athletes, the players may have genetically inherited some of the athletic gifts and physical traits. It is interesting to note that many fathers played American football and basketball and many mothers played basketball. To play those sports at a higher level (high school and college), in most cases the athletes were taller and stronger. This is consistent with the size of the players within the national team pool as we will discuss in the article on relative age effect and physical characteristics.

Table 9: Father's Participation in Sport

Question	Youth	High School	College	Professional	Responses
Basketball	44%	46%	8%	2%	252
Baseball	50%	41%	8%	1%	240
Wrestling	39%	51%	10%	0%	67
Swimming	66%	28%	7%	0%	29
Track and Field	37%	53%	9%	1%	115
American Football	38%	46%	14%	1%	254
Tennis	50%	41%	9%	0%	44
Ice Hockey	44%	34%	22%	0%	41
Other	33%	35%	24%	7%	54

The high levels of sport and soccer participation may also have contributed to a sport culture in a household. It may be the case that the family talked about sports around the dinner table, attended games together and children watched their parents play the games. The family can be one of the strongest influences on lifestyle choices of an individual.

Of national team players surveyed, 16% of the mothers, and 29% of the fathers played soccer. The high school level was noted the most for mothers (39%) followed by the youth (36%) and college levels (20%). The high school level also had the highest percentage of fathers (37%), but was followed by college (27%), youth (23%) and professional (10%). Fathers tended to play at a higher level than mothers. This may be attributed to the fact that opportunities for women to play varsity soccer at the high school and college levels was not a given until the late 1980s and early 1990s depending upon which part of the country they lived.

Unlike most American sports, soccer is still a relatively young sport in our culture. While the current generation of youth national team players is perhaps the first group whose parents actually played, we can speculate as future generations of players have children, their children will also be exposed to soccer within the family and we will be well on our way to developing a truly American soccer culture in the United States.

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