



GEOGRAPHIC-CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCES ON TALENT DEVELOPMENT AND PERFORMANCE

The Fastest Humans on Earth: Environmental Surroundings and Family Influences That Spark Talent Development in Olympic Speed Skaters

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This qualitative research study addressed this question: What influence did early environmental surroundings and family have on the talent development of a cohort of American speed skaters who each competed in four Olympic Games during the 1980s and 1990s? The skaters were Bonnie Blair, Dave Cruikshank, and Dan Jansen. Independent interviews with each skater uncovered rich and unique stories with common threads. Regarding environmental surroundings, all hailed from communities in the Midwest with a rich skating tradition, an oversized hockey rink or 400-m oval, a large skating club, and strong coaches and teammates. In addition, all gravitated to Milwaukee, a speed skating Mecca with ideal training facilities, where they crossed and joined paths. Regarding family, all were born into skating or athletic families and were raised by supportive and guiding parents who were involved but not pushy. Siblings also played an influential role for Blair and Jansen, who were the youngest behind long lines of brothers and sisters who were also talented skaters and who paved the way for their youngest siblings.

Keywords: athletic performance, early environment, expertise, family influence, parenting, sibling influence, speed skating, talent development

Speed skaters are fascinating to watch, with their fluid movements, bent-forward posture to minimize draft, and breakneck speed. They are considered the fastest humans on Earth who use neither gravity nor a mechanical device to aid their speed (Culley & Pascoe, 2009). Elite speed skaters reach velocities of more than 30 miles per hour, while skating on a “flat oval of ice where centrifugal forces continually work to throw the skater off the track” (Vickers, 2006, p. 102). To date, numerous studies have been conducted across several talent domains (e.g., Bloom, 1985; Campbell, Freeley, & O’Connor-Petruso, 2012; Ericsson, 2002; Witte, Kiewra, Kasson, & Perry, 2015), but no such study has been conducted on the talent development of Olympic speed skaters and, specifically, the environmental surroundings and family influences that ignite and foster their exceptional talent.

The present study addressed this deficit by investigating the environmental surroundings and family influences of three of America’s all-time great speed skaters: Bonnie Blair, Dave Cruikshank, and Dan Jansen, all of whom were contemporaries and Olympic teammates.

IS TALENT BORN OR MADE?

Many people believe that talent is born—divinely acquired and the realm of a select few (see Weisberg [1993] for a description and criticism of this viewpoint). A growing body of talent development literature (e.g., see Colvin, 2008; Coyle, 2009; Ericsson, Charness, Feltovich, & Hoffman, 2006; Ericsson & Pool, 2016) has shaken the view that talent can only be inherited or bestowed by God and is, instead, the result of environmental factors such as deliberate practice (Ericsson & Pool, 2016), family influence (Bloom, 1985; Witte et al., 2015), and the right environmental surroundings offering adequate facilities,

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outstanding coaches, and other talented colleagues (Gardner, 1993; Syed, 2010). In fact, the overriding conclusion from Bloom's (1985) seminal study of talent development was that talent is largely made rather than born. Bloom (1985) wrote:

What any person in the world can learn, almost all persons can learn if provided with the appropriate conditions of learning. ... The development of talent requires enormous motivation, much support from family, the best teachers and role models possible, much time, and a singleness of purpose and dedication. (p. 538)

The talent-is-made viewpoint is not without its critics. Psychologist Ellen Winner (1996), for example, argues that the talent-is-made evidence does not rule out innate ability also contributing to eventual talent. For example, she points out that the talented people Bloom (1985) studied did not start out as ordinary children but displayed signs of unusual ability prior to training. Psychologist Howard Gardner (1993) also believes that talent is a mix of biology and environment. Gardner (1993) contends that people are born with biological proclivities that allow them to become more talented in some domains, such as music, than in others, such as chess. According to Gardner (1993), Mozart could probably not have risen to the level of former world champion Bobby Fischer in chess, and Fischer probably could not have risen to Mozart's level in music.

PURPOSE OF THE PRESENT STUDY

In the end, the question of whether talent stems from ability and environment or from environment alone is a nonstarter. Either way, it is evident that environment plays an important role in talent development. From that perspective, the present study explored two of the often-cited talent influences: environmental surroundings and family as pertaining to speed skating. We investigated environmental surroundings because talent tends to cluster in certain environments conducive to talent development (Colvin, 2008; Gardner, 1993), and we knew from Internet biographies that Blair, Cruikshank, and Jansen all grew up in a common environment: the Midwest during the 1960s and 1970s. We investigated family influences because contemporary talent investigators (e.g., Ericsson, 1996; Kiewra & Witte, 2015; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2008; Witte et al., 2015) suggest that determining the role of family, and particularly parents, is critical and is the next frontier for talent development research. We next review literature on the importance of environmental surroundings and family influence in talent development.

Environmental Surroundings Influences

Psychologist Howard Gardner (1993) studied eight creative individuals and found that all lived in or gravitated to centers of excellence to hone their talents. Centers of excellence are places or facilities where top performers congregate to learn

from one another and from top teachers who have also congregated there. For example, Gardner (1993) reported that Martha Graham gravitated from California to New York because the latter was the hub for dance in the early 1900s and that writer T. S. Elliot gravitated from the United States to London at about the same time so that he could become part of the Bloomsbury Circle, a group of talented writers and other intellectuals who spurred talent development.

In more modern times, creative writers from the United States gravitated to New York City. Scholar and author Jane Piirto (2001) studied 160 contemporary creative writers who were raised all over the United States and found that many took up residence in New York City at some point, especially the most prominent writers. This likely happened because New York City is a center of writing excellence where most major literary agencies and publishing companies are housed.

Talent author Matthew Syed (2010) discovered that one small British road and immediate neighborhood produced more outstanding table tennis players in the 1980s than all other roads throughout England combined. This center of excellence, or talent hotbed, came about because of the influence of one charismatic schoolteacher who was an elite and avid table tennis player. He opened an after-school program in a dilapidated facility for neighborhood kids who all had facility keys and round-the-clock access. In a short time, this facility and coach created a long line of ping-pong excellence. Syed (2010) reports on several other talent hotbeds including the former Bolletieri Tennis Academy in Bradenton, Florida, where Bolletieri and other top coaches honed the skills of eventual tennis champions like Andre Agassi, Jim Courier, Maria Sharapova, and Martina Hingis who had gravitated to the academy for full-time tennis training.

Recent research reports by Kiewra and colleagues (Kiewra, O'Connor, McCrudden, & Liu, 2006; Kiewra & Witte, 2013) confirm that talented youth today often reside in or gravitate to centers of excellence. Several chess players lived in New York City, which was an environment ripe with chess history, elite players and coaches, strong chess clubs, chess-in-school programs, and frequent tournaments (Kiewra et al., 2006; Kiewra & Witte, 2013). The family of one Olympic figure skater moved 200 miles to Colorado Springs so that their son could train with an elite coach and other elite skaters. A music prodigy and his mother flew hundreds of miles each week to meet with an elite music teacher (Witte et al., 2015). Sometimes parents create centers of excellence at home for their talented children. Witte and colleagues (Witte et al., 2015), for example, found that talented chess players and baton twirlers' parents invited elite coaches to visit for extended periods to provide concentrated training for their children.

Family Influences

Beginning with the work of Bloom (1985), several researchers and authors have reported on the importance of family influence on children's talent development in sports and other

domains (e.g., Brustad, 1993; Côté, 1999; Davidson, Howe, Moore, & Sloboda, 1996; Harwood, Douglas, & Minniti, 2012; Hellstedt, 1987, 1995; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2008; Woolger & Power, 1993; Wu, 2008). Regarding parental influence, Kiewra and colleagues have most recently investigated the roles that parents play in children's talent development in domains such as chess (Kiewra et al., 2006; Kiewra & Witte, 2013) and baton twirling (Kiewra & Witte, 2015), as well as other domains such as spelling, music, volleyball, and writing (Witte et al., 2015). Their conclusions (see also Kiewra, 2014) are that parents play crucial roles in all aspects of their children's talent development.

First, parents often introduced children to their eventual talent domain at a young age (Witte et al., 2015). Sometimes this introduction occurred because a parent was already involved in the talent area as a performer or coach (see also Davidson et al., 1996). Other times, parents noticed a child's aptitude or interest and intentionally matched that to a talent domain. Either way, parents strived to offer a rich early environment that allowed the child to enjoy and become immersed in the talent area. For example, one parent was an avid chess player who played chess with his children. When the youngest child showed a strong interest in the game, the parent played chess with him frequently, provided chess lessons, and took the child to chess clubs and tournaments (Kiewra & Witte, 2013).

Second, once parents observed and fostered their child's promise, they arranged for appropriate coaching (Witte et al., 2015). Parents were often their child's first coach but sought more elite coaching when their child's talent exceeded parental knowledge. This meant that parents had to monitor the child's skill level, identify appropriate coaches, and work closely with coaches for the betterment of their children. One baton-twirling parent, for example, was a twirling instructor herself and her daughter's first coach (Kiewra & Witte, 2015). The parent, though, eventually sought more elite coaches to train her swiftly progressing daughter. The mother arranged for her daughter to work with three out-of-town coaches who each flew to their home in New York about four times a year to work with her daughter. The mother monitored lessons and later helped her daughter practice accordingly.

Third, along with elite coaching came added lessons, practices, and competitions for the child and many managerial duties and financial responsibilities for parents (Côté, 1999; Davidson et al., 1996; Witte et al., 2015). Managing all of this was like a second job for parents. They handled all managerial duties such as arranging and monitoring lessons, purchasing equipment and performance attire, scheduling competitions, arranging travel, and traveling extensively. Moreover, they often made family sacrifices to afford the tens of thousands of dollars cost. The parents, though, willingly took on these managerial responsibilities and financial costs. The parent of a young writer remarked:

It is a full-time job and sometimes more than full-time, and it can be hard. But the reason I keep doing it is that I don't just manage somebody. The person I manage is my daughter. We just don't see how anyone else could take on my role. (Witte et al., 2015, p. 91)

Fourth, parents also helped build children's psychological and motivational strength by modeling and expecting high achievement (Bloom, 1985; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1993; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2008; Sloboda & Howe, 1991; Witte et al., 2015). They created home environments carefully crafted to inspire and support high achievement. Although their children were for the most part self-motivated, parents sometimes supplied the kick needed to fuel desire or directed their children to back off and recharge their motivational batteries. Parents interviewed by Witte and colleagues (Witte et al., 2015, pp. 92–93) said the following:

- “We have a failure is not an option mentality.”
- “We have taught our kids from the time they were teeny that they can do anything they want to do. There's no limit to what they can accomplish if they are willing to work hard for it.”
- “It was just an expectation in our family that when you get to play an instrument, it's a privilege, and with that privilege comes the expectation that you must practice.”
- “I tell my child, I don't like you watching TV. When you watch TV, you're losing out on your dream.”

The research on the role of siblings in talent development is not as extensive as that on the role of parents, but it does suggest four possible sibling influences. The first is that talented children steal siblings' thunder, which creates sibling competition (Côté & Hay, 2002) for family resources and privileges that usually ends up favoring the talented child. In research by Bloom (1985), Côté (1999), and Kiewra and colleagues (2006), some parents reported allowing special privileges for the talented child and providing more time and resources to the talented child at the expense of siblings. One parent in the Bloom study said this about their talented child:

We did give him special privileges [the other kids did not get]. We didn't feel that he should have little chores around the house because it cut into his music time. When we realized he did have this talent, we let him have full reign of time and did not force him to do things that other children do. We realized he was special and should not be asked to wash the car. (Bloom, 1985, p. 484)

A parent in Kiewra and colleagues' (2006) study said:

We didn't pursue some of our other child's interests because a lot of time was spent on him [our talented chess child] and

chess. If we hadn't been doing chess activities, maybe we would have turned our focus and pursued more of [the other child's] activities. (p. 104)

The second possible sibling influence is family unity. That is, the talented child, parents, and siblings band together to experience and enjoy the talent domain. There is family cooperation, integration, and cohesiveness (Côté, 1999; Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993; Davidson et al., 1996; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2008). Bloom (1985) found that as a talented child's domain interest intensified, so did the family's interest and involvement. The family (including siblings) spent increasingly more time playing, practicing, and traveling to events to watch or participate. The entire family became so impassioned with the child's talent area that they soon saw themselves as tennis, music, or swimming families, as the following remarks reported by Bloom (1985, p. 462) reveal:

- "Most of our (family) vacations were tennis oriented."
- "The whole family revolved around the music."
- "Swimming was our way of life. All of our vacations and extra money went to swimming weekends—that was our recreation."

Parents in the study by Witte and colleagues (2015, p. 91) made similar family unity comments:

- "I got my daughter into spelling competitions for a selfish reason—it brought my daughter closer to the family. We took up spelling as a family."
- "Skating has brought us the greatest joy. It has made the family united. Skating competitions have allowed us to see the world, learn so much, and join together. Skating has helped make us what we are as a family."

The third possible sibling influence is footstep following wherein younger siblings follow older siblings into the same or related domains. There are famous examples of this in sports such as the Williams tennis sisters and the Manning quarterback brothers. Moreover, in classic developmental literature (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987), younger siblings tend to imitate older ones who, in turn, act as teachers for younger ones (Berndt & Bulleit, 1985). Several accounts of footstep following were reported for chess (Kiewra & Witte, 2013) and for baton twirling (Kiewra & Witte, 2015). In addition, Kiewra and Witte (in press) found that three of four talented Nebraska youth (one is an only child) followed in the footsteps of older siblings in swimming, rodeo, and softball domains.

The fourth possible family influence is trail blazing wherein the younger sibling does not follow in the footsteps of a talented older sibling but goes his/her own way to carve out an unoccupied niche. Sulloway (1996) believes a younger sibling might pursue a new interest to avoid competition with siblings and better compete for family resources.

PRESENT STUDY

Based on the surrounding environment and family influence findings reported here, the present study sought to examine these influences among a cohort of elite American speed skaters who were raised in the Midwest during the 1960s and 1970s—a period long removed from the modern times represented in studies conducted by Kiewra and colleagues (e.g., Kiewra & Witte, 2013, 2015; Witte et al., 2015) and reported throughout the introduction. Toward this end, our research questions were as follows:

- What influence did surrounding environment (e.g., location, clubs, rinks, coaches, and teammates) have on the talent development of a cohort of Olympic speed skaters?
- What influence did family (i.e., parents and siblings) have on the talent development of a cohort of Olympic speed skaters?

METHOD

Qualitative case analysis was used to investigate the talent development of Olympic speed skaters. 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-Römer, 1993; Witte et al., 2015), this study adopted an inductive approach to answering research questions (Creswell, 2003).

Participants

A purposeful sampling procedure was used to select three homogenous participants. All were American Olympic speed skaters between 1988 and 1998, born between 1964 and 1969, and raised in the Midwest region of the United States. The three speed skaters were: Bonnie Blair,¹ Dave Cruikshank, and Dan Jansen. A brief biography follows for each.

Bonnie Blair

Blair is a four-time Olympian, a five-time Olympic gold medalist, and a one-time Olympic bronze medalist who set four world records. Her first Olympic competition was in the 1984 Sarajevo Olympic Games, where she placed eighth in the 500-m race. Blair skated to American Olympic stardom in her second Olympic Games in Calgary in 1988, where she won her first gold medal. Her 500-m gold medal time in that Olympics set a new world record. Blair went on to win gold medals in both the 500-m and the 1,000-m races at the next two Olympic Games held in 1992 in Albertville and in 1994 in Lillehammer. Blair is married to Olympic speed skater Dave Cruikshank, who is also a participant in this study.

Dave Cruikshank

Cruikshank is also a four-time Olympian. He participated in the 1988 Calgary Games, the 1992 Albertville Games, the 1994 Lillehammer Games, and the 1998 Nagano Games, all in the 500-m race. Cruikshank never won an Olympic medal but he was a 1986 World Short Track team member at age 16, won the 1987 World Junior Champion 500-m event, won a gold medal at the 1998 U.S. Olympic Trials, was a 1989 World Cup Medalist in the 1,000-m event, and was a five-time national champion. Cruikshank is married to Olympic speed skater Bonnie Blair, who is also a participant in this study.

Dan Jansen

Jansen is a four-time Winter Olympian (1984, 1988, 1992, and 1994) and a one-time gold medalist (1994). Jansen, who by most accounts (Hilton, 2003) underachieved in Olympic competition because of several falls and the heartache of losing his sister to leukemia, was one of America's most highly decorated speed skaters. Jansen amassed 46 World Cup championships and set eight world records.

Data Collection

To capture participants' unique experiences becoming Olympic caliber speed skaters, unstructured, open-ended interviews (Stake, 2010) were conducted individually with each participant after each gave consent to be interviewed for this purpose. An interview protocol was used that included four main questions and subsequent prompts aimed at understanding the role that environmental surroundings and family played in talent development. Following are the four main interview questions:

- What factors led to you being an Olympic-caliber skater?
- What places have you lived and trained that helped you develop your talent?
- What people helped you develop your talent?
- How did your parents and siblings help you develop your talent?

Both investigators jointly conducted interviews remotely using Skype or telephone. Interviewers took a conversational approach to encourage participants to describe their experiences in their own words through stories and examples (Stake, 2010). Interviewers also took steps to ask questions in a neutral way and to listen well, allowing each participant to tell his or her story. Interviews were recorded using a handheld digital recorder and/or a Skype audio/video recorder, and all interviews were later transcribed by a transcription service for analysis. Interview times were as follows: Bonnie Blair, 122 min; Dave Cruikshank, 64 min; and Dan Jansen, 56 min.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the procedures of multiple case study design where the data are analyzed case by case through thematic analysis and later by cross-case analysis (Stake, 2010). Analysis began by reading through the transcripts and noting concepts and major points in each. We then notated each transcript segment using *in vivo* coding. No coding software was used. All codes were compiled and redundancies were eliminated. Codes were then collapsed into the following three themes: environmental surroundings influences, sibling influences, and parental influences. We then used these themes to tell the story of how environmental surroundings and family influenced Olympic speed skaters' talent development. Participants read our completed report and suggested minor changes or corrections that we incorporated in this article.

RESULTS

Findings are reported across participants in terms of the three major themes: (a) influence of environmental surroundings, (b) influence of siblings, and (c) influence of parents.

Influence of Environmental Surroundings

To participate in speed skating, two environmental conditions are necessary: cold weather to create and maintain skating ice and a skating oval. But, an oval such as that found in a standard hockey arena is too small. Olympic-sized speed skating ovals are 400 m long, much like most outdoor tracks for running, and have an inner radius of about 25 m and straightaways of about 112 m. An oval has two adjacent competition lanes (an inner and outer lane), each at least 4 m wide. Two skaters compete at one time and alternate lanes as they race to equate distances.

Examine the map in Figure 1, and you see the sites of four North American Olympic-caliber skating ovals in or near the United States at the time our three skaters trained and competed (and the year the ovals were first accessible): Milwaukee, Wisconsin (1967); Lake Placid, New York (1977); Butte, Montana (1987); and Calgary, Canada (1987). You also see where our three skating participants were raised. From this map, it is evident that there were few training and competition ovals, all of the ovals were in cold-weather cities, there was just one Olympic-caliber oval in North America in the 1960s and early 1970s when our participants were young, and all participants lived in proximity to that oval. That one oval near Milwaukee, Wisconsin, was the center of excellence that attracted and advanced all three of our participants to varying degrees. Much as other locations served as talent hotbeds for chess or table tennis, Milwaukee and its lone oval served as a cold-weather hotbed for many talented skaters, including our three study participants.



FIGURE 1. Map displaying North American Olympic-sized skating ovals during participants' youth and participants' hometowns.

Dan Jansen was born in West Allis, Wisconsin, a suburb of Milwaukee that was home to the only Olympic-sized skating oval in the United States until the 1980 Winter Olympics were held in Lake Placid, New York. The Milwaukee oval was a major destination for speed skating training, coaching, and competition for all ages, and it was located just 2 miles from Jansen's home. Jansen indicated that if skaters from around the United States were serious about speed skating, they eventually moved near to Milwaukee or visited frequently because they could find strong coaches and outstanding facilities.

Jansen credits Milwaukee's skating facilities as to why he started skating and, even more, why he became an elite level skater. Jansen said:

I grew up in West Allis, a suburb of Milwaukee that happened to be where the first 400-meter speed skating rink was in the country. It was the only one in the country until 1980 when they built the second one in Lake Placid. That was a huge part

of why I started skating, more so a bigger part of why I continued skating because ... it was right there; it was just two miles from my home.

Jansen also reported that the skating oval drew elite skaters from around the region and throughout the United States. He said:

People like Bonnie Blair and others I got to know from Minnesota, Illinois, and other neighboring states would come to Milwaukee. Some would stay at our house and even enroll in school there so that they could train at the oval with other top skaters. If you weren't from there, you came and trained there. If you were a serious speed skater, you just had to be there.

Jansen also credits his being a member of the West Allis Speed Skating Club and its coaches to his achieving speed skating success. The club was the largest skating club in the

United States and, therefore, attracted strong coaches. At first, the coaches were usually parents of skaters who volunteered to help organize and prepare the younger skaters who were usually between 4 and 8 years old. Although they were not typically elite-level coaches, Jansen said they were well suited to coach the younger ages and to prepare them for the next level. As skaters increased in skill level, so did the coaching. When Jansen eventually made the National Team at age 16, he had full access to one of America's top coaches, Peter Mueller, who was a 1976 Olympic speed skating gold medalist. Mueller trained Jansen and other top Americans in West Allis and in other places as the national team trained and competed at various speed skating venues throughout North America. Jansen commented on the importance of Mueller as a coach:

Mueller was a great motivator and made me believe that I could be great. We had mutual trust. He trusted my knowledge about my body and my thoughts on how hard I needed to train. I trusted his training methods and commitment to athletes.

Training with West Allis Speed Skating Club allowed Jansen to compete against other clubs in neighboring communities and states. It was during these competitions that Jansen met other serious and talented skaters from around the region and where he met Bonnie Blair. Their initial meetings as children led to their eventual friendship and to becoming training partners as they later trained for Olympic competition.

Although Bonnie Blair was born in Upstate New York, she and her family moved to Champaign, Illinois, when Blair was 3 years old. Champaign was home to one of the largest skating clubs in the United States: The Champaign Speed-Skating Club. It was also home to a large training rink. The oversized hockey rink at the University of Illinois was one of the largest hockey rinks in the United States at that time. This was where the Blair family discovered speed skating or perhaps speed skating discovered them. Two of Blair's older sisters were skating there one day and caught the eye of a local coach who told them they had talent and should be speed skaters. That single encounter started Blair's sisters and eventually Blair on a speed skating course.

The club and facility were instrumental to Blair's later successes in speed skating. Although Blair was doing short track, or pack skating, when she started out, she said it was an advantage for her to train on a larger track because she would eventually compete in the Olympics on a 400-m track. In addition to benefiting from the Champaign club's excellent facilities, Blair benefited from the club's strong coaching and talented competitors, both of which accelerated and focused her training. Eventually, though, Blair outgrew the Champaign club and sought better coaching and training partners. Blair said, "My early success eventually took me to the realization that I couldn't just live and train in Champaign anymore. Champaign was a stepping stone to something more." And, that something more was, in part, the Milwaukee speed skating oval.

Blair was linked to the Milwaukee oval and other speed skating venues even as a young competitor. She and other Champaign club competitors traveled nearly every weekend from November through March to other Midwest venues to compete. Blair said, "The hotbeds of speed skating were in the Midwest: Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan were the four states that usually had the biggest numbers in our sport." But it was particularly at the Milwaukee oval (about 3½ hr from her home) where Blair trained extensively as a blossoming skater and later when she made the national team. Blair said:

Milwaukee usually had ice by Thanksgiving time so that was where we would come and train. The track was outside then so we were skating in nature with wind, rain, snow, and sun, whatever faced us. Then in December of 1991, the Milwaukee facility was covered and the national team and I trained there even more.

Blair also benefited from the elite coaching and training opportunities available in the Milwaukee area. Two of those coaches were Dianne Holum and Peter Mueller. Blair said:

The best coaches were based in the Milwaukee area. Diane Holum lived in the Milwaukee area so there were times that I would go up there and live at my sister's house for an extended time to train daily with Diane and the other skaters who lived in the area. I lived in Milwaukee over extended periods of time because either Diane or Peter was there.

Dave Cruikshank grew up in Northbrook, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago that he described as "a wealthy north shore type of environment where there are a lot of driven parents and kids." Many of those competitive kids were linked to speed skating because of Northbrook's strong tradition in skating. Regarding that strong tradition, Cruikshank said,

The Northbrook area has produced an incredible history of speed skaters. We had a speed skating Olympian in every Olympics from 1952 until I retired in 1998, people like Diane Holum (one of Blair's coaches), Leah Poulos-Mueller (wife of Peter Mueller who coached both Jansen and Blair), and Anne Henning.

When Cruikshank was starting out in skating, the Northbrook Speed-Skating Club had around 300 members. Cruikshank said, "The club traveled across the country from Lake Placid, New York to Butte, Montana, but competed mostly in the Midwest in places like Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, and St. Louis," other cold-weather speed skating hot beds where Cruikshank tested his sprinting abilities against other top speed skaters before winning national competitions at age 11. The club also provided Cruikshank with solid coaching. One coach, Tom Healy, was particularly instrumental in helping Cruikshank develop. Healy was awarded the National Developmental Coach of the Year award in 1999, an award presented to a junior-level coach directly responsible for training athletes to reach elite levels.

In addition to the Northbrook club's large number of elite speed skaters and its strong coaches, the club had access to a large rink for practices and competitions that were essential for Cruikshank's early talent development. Parent volunteers and the Northbrook park district froze the interior of a 400-m bike velodrome to create a skating oval for club members. This facility provided club members with an excellent local speed skating facility for both training and elite competition. Members did not have to drive an hour to Milwaukee every day to train at the 400-m Olympic oval there. Cruikshank said:

The Northbrook rink was a large reason we had an Olympian on every Winter Olympic Team from 1952 to 1998 when I retired. The kids in the club didn't have to make the trip to Milwaukee as often and, therefore, didn't burn out while remaining competitive because they could skate outside all week.

Although Cruikshank's primary training ground was in Northbrook, he and other top competitors traveled often to Milwaukee for training sessions and competitions. Cruikshank said:

Milwaukee was the Mecca of speed skating. There is just an incredible history of speed skaters and coaches who came out of that area. It was also the biggest and best facility around. Every other day, skaters from Northbrook would drive about an hour to Milwaukee to practice.

It was in Milwaukee that Cruikshank first crossed paths with his future Olympic speed skating teammates and mentors. That group included Dan Jansen and Bonnie Blair. Cruikshank said:

When I won the junior world championship in 1987 that immediately put me onto the national team and allowed me to train with Dan Jansen and Bonnie Blair and all the other great American athletes who were going to the 1988 Olympics. That was huge because, at the time, I did not know what it took to be a top speed skater. Suddenly, I'm watching and learning from Dan and Bonnie who are perhaps going to win Olympic medals, they're favorites, they're serious, they're seasoned, and they're just coming into their primes. And, I'm like, "Wow, these people really know what they're doing." So, I just got into their draft. I studied what they did, how they trained, and how they lived. They were not just amazing skaters but great character people. They ate and slept well, managed time well, prepared well, were great with people and the media, and came from close families. That opportunity was incredibly influential for my career. And, it was one of the most fun times ever as a speed skater because I'm in there with two of the greatest speed skaters of all time.

Cruikshank also realized that his skating opportunity with Blair and Jansen was part of something bigger. Cruikshank said:

I was fortunate to be part of a golden age for American speed skating. There was a great lineage that began with Eric Heiden,

who won five gold medals in the 1980 Olympics, and was passed on to Bonnie Blair and Dan Jansen, who passed it onto me.

Influence of Siblings

Speed skating was a way of life for the entire Blair family, so it was no surprise that when Bonnie was born March 18, 1964, in Upstate New York, her siblings were at a speed skating competition. Bonnie was the youngest of six children, and all of her siblings were already accomplished speed skaters when Bonnie was born. The family's expectation was that Bonnie would be as well. Blair said, "When I was born, it wasn't a matter of when I was going to be a skater, it was how quickly could they get me on skates." Bonnie began skating at age 2 and was racing by age 4. Blair said:

They tell me they didn't have skates small enough for me back then, so they left my shoes on and just put my shoe, foot, the whole nine yards into the skate, and that's how I first started.

Bonnie had two brothers and three sisters and all but her oldest brother became a national or North American champion. Her siblings were also her first coaches. Blair said:

Because I was the youngest by quite a ways, I had a lot of coaches growing up. My brothers and sisters filled that spot of being a coach and watching over me and then later being there at the Olympic games and being very supportive in any way that they could.

Blair credits her competitive mindset to her siblings, who modeled a family drive to win at anything they could compete at. Blair said:

Our family just had a lot of competitive instincts. We always used to say about my sister, Mary, if we're going to play a card game, you might as well just let her win or you're going to stay up all night long until she eventually wins. For all the Blair kids, it was that competitiveness of wanting to be the best at whatever it was we were doing, whether it was playing cards or whether it was out on the ice.

Blair also singled out her brother, Rob, as a source of competitive inspiration who taught her that mind triumphs over matter. Rob had a brain tumor but epitomized how to take adversity in stride. Blair said:

I never heard my brother, Rob, say, "Why me?" To him the glass was always more half full than half empty. Rob would say, "Before I had this brain tumor, I could do 10,000 things, and now that I have this brain tumor, I can do 9,000 things." So, he taught me that it's about looking at the positives instead of the negatives and building upon those positives.

Jansen said that speed skating "chose him" because he was born into a speed skating family. Jansen said, "Speed skating

was just something the Jansen family did all winter. Winter would come and we would skate.” Jansen was born June 17, 1965, in West Allis, Wisconsin, a suburb of Milwaukee, and was the youngest of nine children. He believes that having so many older siblings who skated was crucial to how far he went in the sport of speed skating. Jansen was an athletic child who liked all sports and began skating at age 4. He said that he and his siblings were simply “given a pair of skates and off we went.” Weekends were spent traveling with family to speed skating meets, and for Jansen, “it was a fun thing to do with my entire family.” His five sisters and three brothers were all good speed skaters, and several skated at national and world levels.

Dan, Mike, and Jane were the three youngest Jansen siblings. Mike was 2 years older than Dan, and Jane was almost 5 years older. Mike was also a world-class skater and would eventually skate on two world teams with Dan. Jansen said that Mike was the biggest influence in helping him develop his skating talent. Jansen said:

I trained with Mike every day, and he was a world-class skater so it was great to have him by my side. At about age 16, I kind of passed Mike and suddenly it was me being the best and me becoming one of the best U.S. sprinters. And, now it was Mike struggling to make the U.S. Team, but never did he hold me back. Never was there a thought or word of resentment or jealousy. Instead, it was always encouragement. He believed in me and helped me believe in myself. He was the single biggest influence in my physical and mental growth as a skater.

Jansen’s sister, Jane, was another major influence in his skating success. It was Jane who first made Jansen believe that he could be a world-class skater. Jansen said:

I remember that when I was about 14, Jane said something that forever affected my beliefs about my own skating. She just said in conversation one day, in a matter-of-fact way, “When you win Worlds. . . .” At that time, I had no beliefs or even dreams that I could someday win Worlds, but Jane did. And that stuck with me and reminded me thereafter of what was possible.

Jane developed leukemia and passed away while Jansen was competing in the 1988 Winter Olympics in Calgary. He said that Jane was a huge source of “inspiration and motivation” to him. Although Jansen fell in both the 500-m and 1,000-m races and did not win a medal at the Calgary Olympics, he credited his Olympic victory in 1994 at the Lillehammer, Norway, Winter Olympics to the inspiration and memory of Jane.

Regarding the role his siblings played in making Jansen a talented and competitive skater, he said:

Other skaters never intimidated me because I was surrounded by talented and competitive skating siblings while growing up. I had to keep up with my brothers and sisters from a very young age, so I always believed I could skate as

well as they could and as well as others. That belief carried on throughout my skating career.

Cruikshank was born on January 11, 1969, in Northbrook, Illinois. Unlike the Blair and Jansen families, Cruikshank’s family was smaller and not a speed skating family. Cruikshank had just one older sister who was adopted and uninterested in speed skating. She was a talented musician and “completely opposite” from him. Nevertheless, she was a key part of his “support system” when he began to speed skate at age 7 and as his talents grew. Cruikshank said, “She encouraged me when I had a bad day at the rink; just finding the positives and telling me that it’s okay, you’ll have another day.”

Influence of Parents

Elite performers are sometimes raised by parents who were also elite performers in the same talent domain. Baseball star Ken Griffey Junior, for example, was the son of Ken Griffey, who was also a Major League baseball star. More often, however, talented children were born into families that already had interest in the eventual talent domain but were not elite performers themselves (Bloom, 1985; Kiewra & Witte, 2015). Such was the case in the present study for two of the three participants: Blair and Jansen. Both described their parents as recreational skaters who were passionate about skating and who made skating one of the most pervasive and important family activities. Cruikshank’s early experience, meanwhile, was different. His parents were not skaters. Cruikshank described his parents as athletic but people who knew nothing about skating. Instead, Cruikshank’s parents started him off in hockey but came to realize over time that they did not like the hockey culture. Cruikshank said:

My parents didn’t like the language or attitudes the hockey parents had. They said to me, “You really seem to love skating. Why don’t you try our famous Northbrook Speed-Skating Club? That’s where several Olympians skated.” This made sense because skating was the normal thing kids did there. And I just always loved to race, whether it was dirt bikes, or skateboards, or anything that I could try to beat someone at—that’s what I did. And I liked to go fast.

All participants described their parents as supportive and instrumental in their pursuit of speed skating talent but not overbearing or intimately involved. Blair credits her parents with allowing her and her siblings “to chase our dreams,” which helped her achieve the success necessary to become an Olympian. Her father was an engineer and her mother was a realtor. Both were supportive of her speed skating and provided the financial resources needed for the family to travel to her competitions when she was growing up. This included the cost for hotels, meals, club and rink fees, equipment, and more. Blair said:

Skating was something we did as a family. We traveled across Illinois and to Wisconsin, St. Louis, Michigan, and Minnesota. Those were the main places in the Midwest. We also traveled to Lake Placid in the New York area and to nationals in California.

Blair recognized the significant contributions her parents were making, saying that the family was “going somewhere every weekend and staying in a hotel.” Instead of vacations, the family went to skating meets. Blair said, “My parents never made me feel guilty for the sacrifices they were making on my behalf; in fact, they never really talked about it at all.”

Blair’s parents were not only financially generous in support of her speed skating but they also volunteered their time to support her and her speed skating club. Blair reported, for example, that her mom worked as a race judge and her dad as a race timer for all her local competitions. Blair said, “My father would be there with his stopwatch as a timer and very instrumental as he worked every competition. He was there for everything.”

Both of Blair’s parents encouraged and guided her as she developed speed skating talent but did so without pushing her and without interference as they stood in the background. For example, if it was extremely cold at a competition and Blair chose not to race, her parents never made her feel guilty that they had traveled far or spent a lot of money that would be wasted if she did not skate. Blair recalled one outdoor meet in Chicago where the wind chill had plummeted to 60 degrees below zero. She said:

My Dad had been standing outside on the finish line the entire meet while I stayed indoors in a warm-up room. He came in and asked me, “Well, aren’t you going to skate?” And, I’m like, “Well, Dad, it’s really cold out there. I don’t know.” And, he said, “Well, okay, you just stay in here.” He went back outside and finished timing and never mentioned my not skating again even though we had driven all the way to Chicago, spent the night in a hotel, and spent money for food. He never made me feel guilty for not wanting to race.

Blair said: “They never forced us kids into anything. It had to come from within me and from what I wanted to do. I knew they were there. They were encouraging, but they never forced anything.” Moreover, when Blair fell or was discouraged when she did not do as well as she had hoped, her parents always encouraged her. “There’ll always be another race; there is always next weekend,” they would say. Blair said that her parents’ positivity gave her the perspective she needed to “never look back, not get caught up in the here and now, and always look further down the road.” Blair recounted one short-track competition. It was her first World Games when she was 17. She said:

I fell a couple of times, taken down, which can happen in short-track. I remember just bawling afterwards. But, there is my Dad patting me on the back and saying, “It’s going to be okay.

You’ll have another competition to set things right.” He was just kind of matter-of-fact, not a real hugger. My Dad wasn’t like that. He was a man of very few words but when he said something, you listened to him, you took it all in. I can still hear my Dad as I entered the final lap of a race. He’d lean in over the boards, catch my eye, and simply say, “Now go!” And, that’s all he would say, “Now go!” Just those two words that told me it was time to make my move.

Blair also credits her father for giving her the vision that she could become an elite speed skater. It happened one day during high school when she stopped by her father’s office and met a new coworker. Blair said:

My Dad turned to his new coworker and said, “This is my daughter, Bonnie, and she’s going to be in the Olympics someday. She’s going to win an Olympic medal.” This startled me because my Dad was a man of few words and because I’m thinking, “Is he nuts? I’m not good enough for the Olympics. He’s just trying to brag.” But I never forgot my Dad telling this man that I would be an Olympian. And that stayed with me. His pipe dream became my pipe dream and somehow drove me to become an Olympian.

Jansen’s parents were hugely influential in his development as a skater and as a person. Jansen believes that his athletic ability stemmed from his father who was “a super athlete in his day.” Jansen’s father was an all-state football and basketball standout. But, most of all, Jansen attributed his Olympic-caliber success to how his parents raised their family. He reported that his parents were always supportive and never pushy. They wanted their children to do well but more important than winning was how their children handled themselves. Jansen’s parents expected Dan and his siblings to be respectful, demonstrate integrity, and “compete, win, and lose with dignity.” For example, before leaving competitions, Jansen’s father always asked him, “Did you go thank the officials?” These early experiences led Jansen later in his career to not only thank officials but to thank his competitors as well.

Although Jansen’s parents took a hands-off approach to Dan’s skating, that did not mean that they were not emotionally connected to his skating. Jansen recounted having to miss most of an entire season because he pulled a couple hamstrings and could not skate. Jansen said that his father “lived the daily hurt and frustration right along with me.” When bad times struck, Jansen’s mother taught him that “life happens and it’s not always easy, and whatever happens in life you have to adapt to it.” Her no-nonsense approach might not have been what Dan wanted to hear following a fall in competition or a serious injury, but it is what helped him get through his most difficult skating times. Jansen recounted one such episode after winning both the 500-m and 1,000-m World titles in Germany:

I was in my hotel getting ready for the awards banquet and accidentally shattered a glass with my ankle and cut two tendons. The doctor in a small local hospital looks at the

X-rays and says there is nothing he can do. So, he sends me to the next bigger town in an ambulance and my Mom is with me. I am distraught and I say to my Mom, "What am I going to do if this is it, the end of my career?" I wanted comfort. I wanted her to say that everything was going to be okay and that I would return to championship form. But, my Mom is the realist and she said, "I can't tell you that your ankle is going to be okay, but I can tell you that you are going to be okay, no matter what." This is what my parents did for me. They helped make me a great skater but an even better person.

Jansen's father, a police officer, and his mother, a nurse, completely supported Jansen's skating even though the family raised nine children and did not have much discretionary income. What extra money they had, though, was spent on speed skating and traveling to skating meets. "They had no money," Jansen said, "but somehow they found a way to pay for all the skating and even sending my brother and me to Europe several times to compete." Jansen's parents did hold occasional fundraisers to support his skating. Jansen said, "They did some fundraisers. These were little picnics, and they invited a lot of family and friends and everyone would give \$20, or who knows what, and raise a couple thousand dollars, and off we went." Jansen also said:

My parents had to work hard to support us. My dad would come home from work at midnight and go down to the basement and sharpen six pairs of skates so we could be ready in the morning, and then get up in the morning and drive us to the rink or to another town or wherever the next meet was.

Both of Jansen's parents also volunteered extensively with the West Allis Speed Skating Club, in which Dan was a member. Jansen's father was a timer at Dan's skating competitions and would "stand out in the brutal cold for hours with no breaks along with the other timers."

Although Cruikshank's parents "knew nothing about speed skating," both were former athletes. But, it was parent modeling, involvement, and financial support that were most significant in the development of Cruikshank's early skating talent. Cruikshank described his father, an independent businessman and insurance salesman, as being highly driven, organized, strategic, and detail oriented—characteristics passed along to Dave both as a competitor and as a business entrepreneur today. Cruikshank said, "Because I saw my parents do it, I learned how to dedicate myself toward a rigorous work ethic." His father's time-consuming job, though, kept him from helping much with Cruikshank's skating club. His mother, though, was a frequent volunteer. Cruikshank said:

At one point, my mother served on the skating club board and was club president. She helped flood our outdoor ice rink, helped put pads onto the ice for short track practice, and did a lot of volunteer work for our club including bake sales.

Cruikshank's mother was also Dave's primary manager and motivator. She arranged his skating activities and traveled with him around the region for weekend meets while his father and sister often remained back home. His mother had a competitive background and understood competition, so she was also instrumental in shifting Cruikshank's mindset from negative to positive after a skating defeat. Cruikshank said:

My mom seemed to always spin a positive out of the situation. I could have fallen four races in a row and it was like, "Oh well, that's okay, I mean, you were in there for three quarters of the race. You showed yourself that you could be good."

Cruikshank remarked that he never heard his mother say anything "in a negative capacity," and he attributes much of his development as an elite level athlete to her positive encouragement.

When it came to financing Cruikshank's skating, his parents financed everything. Cruikshank said that his parents had strong financial resources and "willingly paid for everything: ice time, club fees, uniforms, coaching, meet entry fees, travel, and more." Cruikshank's father was also instrumental in getting Dave a scholarship from his company that paid for private coaching.

DISCUSSION

Olympic speed skaters Bonnie Blair, Dan Jansen, and Dave Cruikshank were clearly products of influential environmental surroundings and families. Regarding environmental surroundings, all three Olympians were raised in northern parts of the Midwest, where there was cold weather, frozen ponds and lakes for skating, and a strong speed skating culture. As all three participants attested, skating is what people did there.

More specifically, all three speed skaters were raised in communities that housed an oversized hockey rink or a 400-m skating oval. Blair was raised in Champaign, Illinois, where the University of Illinois had an oversized hockey rink. Cruikshank was raised in Northbrook, Illinois, where the interior of a 400-m biking velodrome was filled with water they froze each winter for skating. Jansen was raised in West Allis, Wisconsin, just outside Milwaukee, where the famed Olympic-caliber Milwaukee oval was just 2 miles from his home. These locations were beneficial because such large skating ovals were rare and because all three Olympic skaters had immediate and sustained Olympic-sized training facilities ideal for practicing their eventual Olympic events.

All three skaters also belonged to influential skating clubs associated with their hometown skating ovals. These large-sized clubs offered strong coaching for young competitors, powerful and dedicated training partners, and weekly competition as they either hosted regional meets or traveled to regional meets throughout the Midwest.

Perhaps the biggest environmental surroundings influence for all three skaters was the Milwaukee skating oval—the only Olympic-sized skating oval in the United States at the time. In the film *Field of Dreams*, about an Iowa farmer's dream to build a baseball field in the middle of his cornfield, he hears a voice urging him, "If you build it, he will come." And come he did and many others: both legendary players and baseball fans. Such was the case for the Milwaukee oval as well; elite coaches and speed skaters gravitated there, including Blair, Jansen, and Cruikshank. Milwaukee was the single cold-weather hotbed where elite skaters came to pursue and realize Olympic dreams.

As children, all of the participants trained and competed there. Blair often traveled the 3½ hr from her home or lived nearby for short periods with family, Cruikshank traveled there a few times a week from his home an hour away, and Jansen lived just 2 miles from the Milwaukee oval, making it his home track. Later all three trained there extensively as members of the U.S. national team. Regarding the Milwaukee influence, Cruikshank said, "Milwaukee was the Mecca of speed skating." Jansen said, "If you weren't from there, you came and trained there. If you were a serious speed skater, you just had to be there."

Milwaukee was also the place where our three participants crossed paths as children and joined paths as Olympic training teammates. Jansen said, "People like Bonnie Blair ... would come to Milwaukee. Some would stay at our house and even enroll in school there so they could train at the oval with other top skaters." Cruikshank was the youngest of the three participants, and he especially benefited from his link to Blair and Jansen when training in Milwaukee. He said,

I'm watching and learning from Dan and Bonnie who are perhaps going to win Olympic medals, they're favorites, they're serious, they're seasoned, and they're just coming into their primes. ... So, I just got into their draft. ... That opportunity was incredibly influential for my career.

In summary, these environmental surroundings findings mirror those from past environmental accounts and studies (e.g., Gardner, 1993; Kiewra et al., 2006; Kiewra & Witte, 2013; Piirto, 2001; Syed, 2010). Speed skating talent, much like dance, musical, writing, chess, or ping-pong talent, was sparked and fostered by centers of excellence containing adequate facilities, strong coaches, and a talent-seeking cohort.

The talent development influence of families—siblings and parents—was also examined and confirmed in the present study. Regarding sibling influence, each of the three skaters was the youngest sibling. This commonality is linked with other research suggesting that elite athletes tend to be later born (Hopwood, Baker, MacMahon, & Farrow, 2012) and that the youngest child is a favored child who is usually the object of great parental pressure to achieve (Albert, 1980; 1994).

Two of our three speed skating participants benefited greatly from being the youngest sibling (Cruikshank had one older sister who was supportive but not otherwise influential). Both Blair

and Jansen were the youngest children in large families. Blair had five older siblings, and Jansen had eight. Based on the sibling dynamic prospects put forth in the introduction (Côté & Hay, 2002), neither Blair nor Jansen had their thunder stolen by older siblings, as is sometimes the case (Bloom, 1985; Kiewra et al., 2006). Rather, both experienced sibling and family unity as all of the Blair and Jansen children and parents were skaters and found skating an enjoyable family pastime. The present family unity finding fits with previous findings (Côté, 1999) indicating that elite athletes are most likely to emerge from cooperative family structures where older siblings model a strong work ethic for younger siblings and help younger ones develop talent. The present findings also fit with research showing that older sibling sports involvement is twice as likely for elite athletes than nonelite athletes because involved older siblings serve a socializing role as they introduce younger siblings to the domain and help them navigate it (Hopwood et al., 2012).

Perhaps most evident and conducive to talent development was that Blair and Jansen followed in their older siblings' speed skating paths. This path is consistent with Côté and Hay's (2002) footstep-following sibling dynamic. Some of Blair's and Jansen's older siblings were nationally acclaimed speed skaters. Moreover, their older siblings did not just model speed skating excellence; they directly aided their youngest siblings by providing expert coaching and elite training partners. The older siblings also helped Blair and Jansen develop a competitive spirit and confidence. Blair recounted how competitive her siblings were, to the point where one of her sisters would never relent, even in a card game. Jansen recounted how he was never intimidated by other skaters because keeping up with his skating brothers and sisters was the hardest thing he could have ever done, and it gave him confidence when racing others. These footstep-following findings are consistent with recent research by Kiewra and Witte (in press) where six of seven highly talented Nebraska youth followed an older sibling into a talent domain. The only exception was an only child.

Finally, both Blair and Jansen found competitive inspiration in their siblings. Blair's brother, Rob, had a brain tumor but only looked at what was positive about his malady. Jansen's sister, Jane, fought valiantly before succumbing to leukemia and provided the inspiration for Jansen's long awaited Olympic win. As reported by Olszewski-Kubilius (2008), family tension or trauma (such as family dysfunction, instability due to poverty, or loss of a parent or sibling) is a hallmark characteristic of talented individuals who consequently develop an ability to cope with challenge (see also Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1993; Piirto, 2001; VanTassel-Baska, Johnson, & Boyce, 1996). Jane was also the first person to tell Jansen that he would be a world champion long before the thought had crossed his mind. That inspiring possibility heightened Jansen's expectations and drove his training.

Regarding parent influence, a few conclusions can be drawn. First, none of the parents were elite skaters themselves. Such was also the case in the Kiewra and Witte studies (Kiewra &

Witte, 2013, 2015, in press; Witte et al., 2015) where just one of the approximately 30 talented people studied had a parent who was ever equal or better in that same talent domain. On occasion, a talented child had parents who participated in the same or similar domain (Witte et al., 2015). This was particularly true for elite baton twirlers whose mothers were often twirlers in their youth and twirling coaches as adults. Looking forward, it will be interesting to follow the emerging talents of Bonnie Blair and Dave Cruikshank's two children who are presently competing in ice hockey and speed skating.

Second, the parents of these Olympic speed skaters were recreational skaters and skating enthusiast themselves (in the cases of Blair and Jansen) or had athletic backgrounds (in the case of Cruikshank's and Jansen's parents). It is certainly common for talented children to be raised in homes that already appreciate the talent domain and participate in it recreationally (e.g., Bloom, 1985; Witte et al., 2015). Jansen said that speed skating "chose him" because he was born into a speed skating family.

Third, parents were supportive of and involved in their children's speed skating. For example, they arranged travel and accompanied their children around the region to weekly meets, maintained equipment, and financed all skating endeavors including travel expenses, club costs, and meet fees. Parents also pitched in and supported their children's local skating club by serving as club officers, parent volunteers, and meet timers. Despite these efforts, parents mostly took a laid-back approach to their children's skating. All of the skaters interviewed said that their parents were never pushy and largely remained in the background. Blair said, "They never forced us kids into anything. It had to come from within me and from what I wanted to do."

This hands-off approach fits with Hellstedt's (1987) "moderately involved" parent classification, which was identified as best. According to Hellstedt (1987), there are three types of parent involvement: (a) underinvolved, where parents display a lack of emotional, financial, and functional investment; (b) moderately involved, where parents display firm parental direction but with enough flexibility to allow the child to make decisions; and (c) overinvolved, where parents are involved excessively in all aspects of their child's talent development and usually in negative ways such as arguing with coaches, yelling during competitions, and constantly asking the child to try harder. The skaters' moderate parent involvement is, however, in sharp contrast with the involvement of parents of talented children today (Witte et al., 2015). Witte and colleagues (2015) reported that modern parents go to amazing lengths helping their children develop talent. For example, they relocated to seek better training conditions for their child, flew hundreds of miles weekly with their child so the child could take lessons from an elite-level instructor, took on second and third jobs and remortgaged the home to finance talent development, and built a great room onto their home to provide an indoor space for baton twirling practice. Unlike the parents classified as overinvolved (Hellstedt, 1987), however, those

investigated by Witte and colleagues (2015) did not display negative involvement.

As to why the speed skaters' parents maintained a softer approach than parents today, we offer a couple of simple theories. First, the 1960s and 1970s were perhaps a simpler time when families and children were not as involved in the get-ahead arms race. Back then, children's lives were less regimented, and they often just went out to play rather than join structured activities and take lessons like children today (Louv, 2008). Second, in research with modern-day parents (Witte et al., 2015), parents were asked directly about their current support and involvement. They simply had to recount what they were doing today or in the recent past. In the present study, though, it was the talented child who was interviewed and asked to recall parent involvement from about 40 years ago. This is problematic because they might not remember things accurately or because parents never shared with children the full extent of their commitment. Consider Jansen's response when asked how his parents of nine children afforded all of his travel and other expenses. He said, "I have no idea. I mean they had no money." Consider also what Blair said about her parents' sacrifices: "My parents never made me feel guilty for the sacrifices they were making on my behalf; in fact, they never really talked about it at all."

Finally, parents were influential in modeling and teaching their talented skating children valuable life lessons, something that has held true throughout more recent times (Witte et al., 2015). Cruikshank, for example, described his father as highly driven, organized, strategic, and detail oriented and said that these characteristics were passed along to him and were instrumental as a competitor and now as an entrepreneur. Blair credits her parents with teaching her "to chase her dreams" and to not give up because "there is always another race." Jansen reported that his parents taught him to "compete, win, and lose with dignity" and that even when skating deserts you, you are strong and will be okay.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion we draw about this trio of American speed skaters, who together made 12 Olympic teams and set many national and world records, is that their collective story was, at least in part, one of environmental surroundings and family. In terms of environmental surroundings, all hailed from the Midwest, a region with the right weather conditions to support skating. All hailed from communities with an oversized hockey rink or a full-sized skating oval that attracted large skating clubs, strong coaches, and inspiring competitors. And all gravitated to Milwaukee's skating oval, the center of excellence for American speed skating. Milwaukee offered the top skating venue, coaches, and competitors in America. It was there that the three skaters intersected, mutually trained, and inspired one another.

In terms of family, all were born into skating or athletic families. Parents were supportive and involved but never pushy. Instead, they provided a strong moral compass for their speed skating children and let them find their way. Perhaps most influential for Blair and Jansen was each being the youngest child in a long line of talented skating siblings who paved the way for their family's eventual Olympic star.

This study's reflective findings involving Olympic speed skaters born between 1964 and 1969 fit with modern findings that also reveal the influential roles that environmental surroundings (Kiewra et al., 2006; Kiewra & Witte, 2013), parents (Witte et al., 2015), and siblings (Kiewra & Witte, in press) play in talent development. Our impression, though, is that environmental surroundings and siblings (for Blair and Jansen) were the most influential factors for the speed skaters, whereas parents are the most influential factor today. Modern talent-rearing parents seem more involved than those from decades past and find ways to compensate for inadequate surroundings or minimal family history in the talent domain. Validating this impression will require the telling of both modern and reflective talent stories.

NOTE

1. Bonnie Blair's current name is Bonnie Blair Cruikshank.

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