Chapter 4: Case Studies & Media Stories

Pregnancy and Parenting Can Be Compatible with Athletics Participation at All Levels

Paula Infante is a field hockey player. She has endured the rigors of two-a-day workouts and marched to the field each day with the goal of being her best self. Twice she led the University of Maryland to NCAA Division I titles and twice she was rewarded with the Honda Award, given to the nation’s top collegiate athlete in her sport. Infante is also a mother who became pregnant in high school. Some would say that her achievement in the game is miraculous considering her situation. Others might say that her pregnancy actually enabled her athletic achievements.

When a woman becomes pregnant, many coaches and athletes assume that her life as a competitive athlete is over. Plain and simple, this is a myth. Unlike a knee injury, pregnancy is normal and healthy for the female body. Although pregnancy may require temporary accommodations, there is no evidence that post-partum women are not capable of returning to and even improving upon their athletic form. It is helpful to equate pregnancy with temporary disabilities when considering legal protections and discrimination, since men do not experience pregnancy, but it is an unhelpful comparison when the comparison limits athletic aspirations. In fact, most athletes who are mothers report pregnancy as a positive event physically, adding to their strength and stamina.1
The myth that women's reproductive systems are an athletic handicap is one that we've heard, and disproved, a number of times throughout history. In the Victorian era, women were warned against riding bicycles for fear of infertility. At the 1928 Olympic Games, several women collapsed in exhaustion while vying for the gold in the 800-meters, leading Olympic decision-makers to bar women from long distance running events. They cited “overexertion” as a danger to supposedly “fragile” women. It wasn’t until 1968 that the marathon was open to women in the Olympics.

While there were female athletes who were mothers before Title IX, they – along with elite women athletes generally – were very rare. Olympic Hall of Fame member Fanny Blankers-Koen, “The Flying Housewife,” won four gold medals in the 1948 Olympics when she was the mother of two children. Australian tennis great Margaret Court won three of the four Grand Slam events in 1973, the year after having her first child. Now, after Title IX, with millions of girls and women participating in sports, their sheer numbers make the earlier misperceptions about women's bodies almost laughable.

Opening the doors for women to participate in athletics has greatly changed basic assumptions about women's bodies' abilities to achieve athletically. One such change is the understanding of the age at which women peak physiologically. In 1960, the average female U.S. Olympian was 16 years of age. As opportunities for women athletes expanded to include college, their continued athletic success began to challenge the link between youth and peak athletic performance. In 2008, the average female U.S. Olympian was 26.5 years of age, and 22 of those athletes were over the age of 35 years. Similarly, the idea that women athletes who receive proper prenatal care and emotional support can continue to progress with their athletic careers, is a change in mindset partially attributed to Title IX. As the average age of the elite female athletes has increased, it is probably not surprising that a significant number of them have also combined their athletic careers with pregnancy, childbirth and parenting. On the 2008 Olympic Team, 20 team members were mothers, with at least two giving birth within a year of their Olympics performances. They come from all types of athletic disciplines, from sprinters and endurance athletes, from weight lifters to gymnasts, from individual to team athletes, including those participating in contact sports.

Hundreds of the world's top female athletes have excelled in their sport on the Olympic and professional level following childbirth. There are more than 30 mothers in the WNBA, and 28 mothers on the LPGA Tour. Houston Comets star Sheryl Swoopes has been named Most Valuable Player of the WNBA a record three times since the birth of her son 10 years ago. Her WNBA counterparts Lisa Leslie and Tina Thompson, also mothers, won gold medals in Beijing. Pam Stuart Fontaine won a gold medal on the U.S. Women's Wheelchair Basketball Team at the 1988 Paralympics held in Seoul, Korea. She had her son in 1992 and went on to win a bronze medal in the 1996 Paralympics in Atlanta.

U.S. Soccer team legends Carla Overbeck and Joy Fawcett, members of the famous 1999 World Cup Champion soccer team, have five children between them. They proved it was possible to be the best in the world while parenting. Following their example, when their former teammates Kate Markgraf and Christie Rampone won gold for the U.S. women's soccer team in Beijing, they both ran to the stands to grab their kids. Leah O'Brien Amico, one of three mothers on the U.S. softball team gave birth to a son between her second and third gold medals at the 2000 Olympics in Sydney and the 2004 Olympic Games. It could be said that the success of several of the U.S.
Similarly in individual sports, Liz McColgan came back from having her year-long maternity break in 1989 to win the 10,000 meters at the 1991 World Championships in Tokyo. The next year, in 1992, she won the World Half-Marathon in Newcastle while setting a new world record, the Tokyo Marathon, and a fifth place at the 1992 Olympics. After giving birth to Hayley in 1990 and Cori in 1994, Julie Inkster’s professional golfing career blossomed: She has won 18 of her 31 tournaments and she has won more than $8-million of her $11-million-plus in career earnings.

Lindsey Davenport turned professional at 14 years of age. At 20, she took home the gold at the 1996 Atlanta Summer Olympics, before going on to win the U.S. Open, Wimbledon, and the Australian Open. After giving birth at age 32 to her son, Jagger, she is winning on the professional circuit again. Champion athletes like Melanie Roach, an Olympic weightlifter and mother of three, are living proof of the potential for women to reach new heights athletically after childbirth.

Pregnancy and Collegiate Athletes

Athletics directors, coaches and student-athletes at the collegiate level may fear that pregnancy and parenting may jeopardize the athletics careers and academic progress of women. However, like the Olympians and professional athletes described above, many intercollegiate student-athletes have successfully met the challenges of pregnancy and parenting while earning their undergraduate degrees. Kylie Galloway, a basketball standout at the University of Hawaii, discovered she was pregnant the day before a separate ankle injury sidelined her. After utilizing the additional year provided by the NCAA bylaws for graduation, she has successfully returned to her team. University of Southern California’s Brynn Cameron successfully returned to her basketball team after sitting out the 2006-07 season while pregnant with a son, fathered by Heisman Trophy winner, Matt Leinhart. Stephanie Mahle Davis, Wright State University soccer player, discovered she was pregnant after completing her freshman year. She received support from her institution, and after giving birth she returned to compete successfully. And Marquette’s basketball player Efueko Osagie-Landry underwent a rigorous off-season workout to return to playing shape after giving birth to her daughter, Moriah.

Supportive Coaches Are Key

Coaches can play a pivotal role in helping their athletes deal with pregnancy and parenting. Efueko Osagie-Landry credits being able to parent her daughter Moriah with the support from her coach and team. “They are really helpful. (Marquette coach) Terri Mitchell allows me to take her on trips and practices, and she’s very involved with the team. We’re like a big family.” Courtney Jacobs, a track student-athlete at the University of Kansas, was frightened about the prospect of losing her scholarship and her ability to continue with her education if she had a child. She was afraid to tell her coach, Stanley Redwine, and she continued to train. When he saw her vomiting during practice, he pulled her aside. “Courtney, I’m not stupid.” He met with her in his office the next day and helped her negotiate through each decision. “I just think you support your athletes,” Coach Redwine said. “It’s doing what’s right. It comes down to moral issues. I was just trying to do what I believe in.”

For female student-athletes who have children in high school, finding the right school and securing a college scholarship can be a challenging feat in the face of stereotypical notions of the pregnant student-athlete’s priorities. Soccer standout Tina Frimpong gave birth in high school. She found a supportive coach and played for the University of Washington for four years after having a child, and now plays for the U.S. National Team. Paula Caten gave birth to her daughter at age 17 while

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still in high school. After two years at community college, she found a supportive team and is now a 4.0 student at the University of Kansas and has been a starter for two appearances in the NCAA volleyball tournament. These are a few of many women who, with support from coaches and family, have proved the doubters wrong, continuing on in their athletic career after having a child.

Arkansas State basketball coach Susie Gardner says of her star center, Danielle Allen, “Every day I’m more amazed at what she’s done and how she’s handled this whole situation. She is just an inspiration. Amazingly, she took a semester off and she’s still going to graduate on time. I don’t have enough adjectives to describe how proud of her I am.” The former U.S. women’s soccer coach Tony DiCicco has said this about the mothers on his team, “Having a child puts a balance in your life. Probably because soccer is so much easier than raising an infant. Just the physical demands can make soccer seem like a breeze. Motherhood is a tremendous responsibility, and they have both shouldered them both so well.” Also, some coaches recognize the additional benefits of being a parent, “I’m happy, I train better and I race better,” marathoner Paula Radcliffe has said. “And the fact that I’ve got a little angel in my life makes me run better.”

Getting Back in the Game

Being a competitive female athlete demands a strong drive and goal-orientation. Those qualities are not lost in pregnancy, and, given the right encouragement and support, tend to fuel a remarkably quick return to sports for top-level athletes. Connie Neal returned to practice at the University of Louisville just 26 days after giving birth to her daughter, and returned to competition just 9 days after her return. Nichole Tolley, a senior member of the 2007 Brigham Young University women’s swim team, was back in the pool only a month after having her daughter. When Danielle Allen, a basketball player at Arkansas State became pregnant, she continued to train, including lunges the day before the baby was born, returning to the team less than three months after giving birth.

Carla Overbeck and Joy Fawcett, both starters when on the national soccer team, worked out throughout their pregnancies and were determined to return to their elite playing level. Because it was Fawcett’s second pregnancy, Overbeck had the luxury of having another teammate who had successfully returned to sports. Overbeck ran until she was 7 1/2 months pregnant, then switched to a Stairmaster. She lifted weights until the day her water broke. She said the only thing she cut back on was sprinting. “After the birth, I did nothing for two weeks, then I had a goal — to get back on that field with the team [for a match a month later with Germany]. I knew I could play at that level seven weeks after the birth that I would be able to do it.” She went on to play with even greater successes until after the 2000 Olympics in Sydney when she retired.

Women who return to sports after the birth of a child aren’t mere accessories, but often come back with a new energy and strength. Aretha Thurmond finished sixth among all female discus throwers at the U.S. Outdoor Track & Field Championships, just 18 days after giving birth. In November 2007, Paula Radcliffe won the New York City Marathon in two hours 23 minutes and nine seconds, less than 10 months after having a baby. She reportedly ran the day before she gave birth to her daughter, Isla. And 12 days after Isla’s birth, she started running again. Xian Dongmei from China defended her Athens Olympic gold medal in the Women’s Judo 52kg weight class at the Beijing Olympics, just 10 months after giving birth.
These quick comebacks may not be typical for women generally, and return to sport will be affected by different variables, including delivery method such as a vaginal birth or one by Cesarean section. However, clearly athletes, by virtue of their physical resiliency and their mental determination, possess the potential to return and excel at sport after childbirth and while parenting.

Sonia O’Sullivan, a middle-distance runner, won an Olympic silver medal for Ireland when her daughter was just a year old. “Obviously, in fitness terms, being pregnant was new territory for me. I wanted to be as fit as possible without taking any risks. I certainly did not want to stop training completely as the risk of injury is much higher when you start again from nothing. During the pregnancy, I had possibly even gained in terms of endurance as it’s a bit like running in altitude. When Ciara was born, I wanted to prove I could come back to the same level. In the beginning, it was the great unknown – I had a different body and couldn’t compare my training situation to other previous experiences but Ciara’s needs took my mind off any negativity and actually things were made easier by the fact that I got stronger at every session.”

While many women are convinced that pregnancy and childbirth means a reduction in athleticism, women athletes report increased dedication to return to sport, as well as improvements in stamina and overall strength. Dara Torres swam her best time in the 50m freestyle at the 2008 Olympic Games just two years after giving birth and 24 years after her first Olympic team in 1984. Her famous abs are a testament to the power of a women’s body to recover from pregnancy. Marathoner Paula Radcliffe has said that she felt having given birth has improved her endurance and her recovery. She said, “I think your body is just a little bit stronger after pregnancy.”

Male Student-Athletes and Parenting

Although women are the only sex making physical adaptations for pregnancy and childbirth, they certainly aren’t the only ones affected by pregnancy. Male student-athletes are also taking an active role in parenting while participating in collegiate athletics. Like female student-athletes, they wear their love for their child with pride, without sugar-coating how difficult it is to juggle athletics, academics and parenting. Paul Williams, a linebacker at Texas Tech, was not sure how he could fit a baby into his already packed schedule, particularly since his wife worked 12 hour shifts as a nurse. But her pregnancy slowed their social life to board games and television, and “Super Daddy mode” took over when their son was born. He is now an active part of Ashton’s everyday life. Arizona linebacker Spencer Larsen planned his course schedule so that he could take just one class over the summer to spend time with his wife, Ann, and their new baby.

Luke Mehring, a former UCLA soccer player, decided against taking a job after college graduation to parent his son, Mason, while Becky Mehring completes her degree and collegiate volleyball career at UCLA. Jeremy Larson, a wrestler at Oregon State ranked 17th nationally in his weight class, takes an active role in parenting his son, Benjamin. “Sometimes I stop and say, ‘Hey, this is pretty crazy’ but most of the time I stay pretty busy and just keep after things.” Talib Aqib, a football All-American cornerback and Orange Bowl MVP at the University of Kansas, has adjusted to life since his daughter was born June 22,
2007. He and his partner, Courtney Jacobs, a KU student-athlete on the track team, report a grueling schedule of practice, school, homework, childcare. Spouses Marcus Landry, a forward on Wisconsin’s basketball team, and Efueko Osagie-Landry, a starter for Marquette’s basketball team, are the parents of a daughter, Moriah. “It’s complicated, but it’s doable because I have a lot of support and help from my teammates, my family here in Milwaukee and my husband as well. It’s a lot of balancing and discipline in order to get it done.” Sherron Collins, a basketball guard at the University of Kansas, travels to Chicago every other weekend in the spring and summer. His partner and child visit Collins regularly. Collins talks with her on the phone every day, and even though his son can only say, “Da-da” Collins still talks with him. All these student-athletes readily acknowledge that parenting is a daunting undertaking, particularly when combined with collegiate athletics and full-time academics. Some have opted to drop out of college or their athletic teams, but for those determined and disciplined enough to meet the challenges, they are grateful for the opportunities. Some have opted to drop out of college or their athletic teams, but for those determined and disciplined enough to meet the challenges, they are grateful for the opportunities. Bernard Jackson, quarterback of the University of Colorado’s football team and father to a toddler with health problems, has continued to perform well. His coach, Dan Hawkins, has been supportive. “It’s extremely difficult. We have a few other guys that are parents as well. You know, shoot, it’s hard enough to juggle football and school, then you’ve got to juggle parenthood in there,” he said. Bernard, “It’s become very humbling for myself,” he said. “I don’t do the things that most college students would do. It’s matured me a lot. I enjoy every minute of it. I wouldn’t ask for any other situation. This is my life.”

Conclusion

“Shoot, Mom, shoot!” yells an energetic three-year old in the bleachers. Despite the play at hand and her focus on the game, Shante Williams hears that little voice. Some place in the back of her mind, she knows that that voice is the real sound of winning. In 2005, Williams took a medical redshirt from Florida State University, after learning that she was pregnant with her son. Despite her yearning to make it all work, she, like so many women in the same position, couldn’t help but feel self-doubt, wondering if she could truly make a comeback after she was born. Williams is back on the court, contributing daily to her Division I basketball team. When she, or her coach, hears her son cheer, undoubtedly, their sense of what is possible takes new shape.

Pregnancy and children have long had a place in athletics, even when the two spheres have been uncomfortable acknowledging each other. It is time to treat the issue humanely. A student-athlete should have a full range of choices, including abortion or having the child, and withdrawing from or staying on the team. The NCAA encourages athletics departments to adopt the Model Pregnancy and Parenting Policies in order to combat potential misperceptions that may limit educational opportunities, may needlessly isolate young people, and may cause serious health risks. Establishing a supportive environment for pregnant and parenting student-athletes is an essential first step toward ensuring the overall health of the student-athlete and the athletics department.
Additional Sources

Mark Willis, “Go for the Glory,” Wright State University website, Fall, 1996. Available at: http://www.wright.edu/news_events/community/fall96/athletes.html


Susan Meyers, “In a league of her own: Nurse coaches colleges on fair university policy for pregnant athletes.” Nursing Spectrum, October 2006 Midwest Issue. Available at: http://community.nursingspectrum.com/MagazineArticles/article.cfm?aid=23955


Greg Auman, “For pregnant athletes, a unique circumstance,” St. Petersburg Times, February 24, 2008. Available at: http://www.sptimes.com/2008/02/24/Sports/For_pregnant_athletes.shtml (Brynn Cameron’s father is USC quarterback and Heisman trophy winner Matt Leinart, who is now playing for the National Football League’s Arizona Cardinals.)


Footnotes

1. Surprisingly, at one time there was a short-lived myth that pregnancy actually enhanced performance much like banned performance-enhancing drugs. In 1983, Ingrid Kristiansen won the Houston Marathon, just five months after she gave birth to her first child. Two years later she broke the world record in the marathon in London. That led to the false hypotheses that pregnancy is good for elite runners because of the physiologic changes, including enhanced blood volume, increased cardiac output, stroke volume and expanded tidal volume, changes that mimic blood doping. See, e.g., Karen Springen, “How Dara Torres Does it,” Newsweek, July 7, 2008. Available at: http://www.newsweek.com/id/144947/page/2 (Discussion with Carl Foster, professor of exercise and sports science at the University of Wisconsin at La Crosse and past president of the American College of Sports Medicine, about aging athletes like Torres); Gina Kolata, “Training Through Pregnancy to Be Marathon’s Fastest Mom,” New York Times, Nov. 3rd, 2007. http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/03/sports/othersports/03run.html

2. USA Today Over 35: Kristin Armstrong, 35, cycling, Libby Callahan, 56, shooting, Gao Jun, 39, table tennis, Deana Kastor, 35, marathon, Lisa Leslie, 36, basketball, Magdalena Lewy Boulet, 35, marathon, Brenda Shim, 46, shooting, Shaha Tazima, 39, modern pentathlon, Christine Thibaut, 35, cycling, Dara Torres, 41, swimming.

3. Division I – 14.2.1.3 Pregnancy Exception. A member institution may approve a one-year extension of the five-year period of eligibility for a female student-athlete for reasons of pregnancy.

Division II and Division III – 14.2.2.2 Pregnancy Exception. A member institution may approve a two-semester or three-quarter extension of this 10-semester/15-quarter period of eligibility for a female student-athlete for reasons of pregnancy.