



Must we Control Every Detail? Beliefs Among Parents of Elite Soccer Players

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Received: 22 July 2025 / Accepted: 2 November 2025
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Abstract

This study explores how parents cope with the adversities associated with their children's soccer development, in order to identify adaptive response patterns to help them provide better support. Participants comprised 11 fathers and 15 mothers ($N=26$) of student soccer players in the youth category of two first division soccer clubs. Four focus groups were conducted to identify the situations most frequently experienced as adverse. These were analysed using a deductive approach, employing the GABCDE framework integral to Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT). The results showed that, on the field, the most significant adversity was the risk or presence of injury. In this context, the most adaptive belief was: *"We try to do all that we can, but we don't have to be the perfect parent(s) to the perfect soccer player"*, associated with competencies such as emotional regulation, compassion, and assertive communication. Off the field, the most prominent adversity arose at the end of the season, when it was time to decide whether or not to stay on at the club. The most adaptive belief was: *"Sport forms part of their development, whether or not they go on to become professionals"*, reflecting higher tolerance of uncertainty, emotional acceptance and balanced support. These findings reveal adaptive REBT-based coping strategies for the family setting. Moreover, they offer greater understanding of the individual and collective nature of beliefs, and of the role of the family in providing a protective (or unsafe) environment in the context of elite sport. Future research should examine potential differences between mothers and fathers, evaluate the effectiveness of REBT-based interventions, and incorporate the athletes' perspectives to design more comprehensive and context-sensitive support programs for families.

Keywords REBT · Elite sport · Support · Family · Soccer · Mental health

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Published online: 16 May 2026

Springer

Introduction

The demands of competitive sport require a considerable level of commitment not only from athletes (Marques et al., 2022), but also from those closest to them, and especially from their families (Elliott & Drummond, 2017; Ramos-Agost et al., 2024). Parents, in particular, play a central role over the course of their children's athletic careers (Tessitore et al., 2021). In this regard, they often take on a high level of emotional, practical and organisational involvement to help their children achieve their goals and obtain other forms of recognition (Webb & Knight, 2023; Mateu et al., 2024).

A number of recent studies (e.g. Hobson et al., 2023; Milan et al., 2024) have demonstrated that parents of young athletes tend to adopt highly stringent attitudes regarding their own role and responsibility in achieving their children's sporting goals. In fact, there is evidence that some parents tend to adopt a demand-oriented approach, imposing efforts and changes to both personal and family routines in the pursuit of their children's goals (Brown et al., 2019).

Although parental involvement is usually well-intentioned, it can be deeply influenced by beliefs about the performance and success that they believe their children should accomplish (King et al., 2023; Tessitore et al., 2021). Within the framework of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT), developed by Ellis (1957), beliefs are not deemed to be neutral elements, but rather reflections of rational or irrational cognitions that shape the interpretation of events, as well as the emotional and behavioural responses that derive from them. Beliefs can include personal values, norms, and rules, and tend to reflect what a person thinks *should* happen, rather than what is objectively possible or realistic.

According to some of the applications of REBT to sport (Jordana et al., 2023a, b), there are two types of beliefs that condition a person's mental health and therefore, affect the activation of expectations and the adaptation to the circumstances and context. On one hand, we find irrational beliefs, which are rigid, extreme, absolute, and illogical; and when expectations are not met, this can lead to intense and dysfunctional emotions, such as anxiety or frustration, and prove to be maladaptive and unhealthy. For example, "demandingness" is an irrational belief (e.g. "my child must perform well"). In contrast, rational beliefs are flexible, they are not extreme, and they are logically supported. When expectations are not met, they help the person adopt a more functional, adaptive, and healthy perspective. In this case, "preference" is the alternative to "demandingness" and desires are prioritised over demands (e.g. "I would like my child to perform well but it is not an absolute necessity"). In this study, we consider that beliefs influence the way in which parents approach adversity in the context of elite sport.

Maladaptive beliefs have been identified as a key focus for therapeutic intervention in the field of sport, as they hinder the achievement of personal goals and have a negative effect on emotional well-being (Mansell, 2023). However, even though the influence of irrational beliefs on athletes has been widely documented (Jordana et al., 2023a, b), there is still limited data examining the management of this phenomenon in parents (King et al., 2024). The work of Jordana and Turner (2023), for example, showed that REBT can be effectively applied to athletes' beliefs and thus supports

better adaptation to adverse situations. However, no study has addressed this issue from the perspective of parents, who also face emotional, practical and relational challenges and perform a crucial role in the athletic development of their children (Knight et al., 2017).

To date, although some studies (e.g. Jordana & Turner, 2023; King et al., 2023; Turner, 2019) have explained the importance of studying the beliefs of athletes at the micro level (e.g. family members, coaches), the literature has so far only demonstrated that parents share certain perspectives, beliefs, and behaviours influenced by specific sociocultural factors in the sports context (Elliott & Drummond, 2013; King et al., 2023). This research goes one step further and considers the relevance of exploring whether parents' reactions to adverse circumstances are associated with: (a) by an adaptive response to the context of elite sport, aimed at facilitating their children's goals; or, on the contrary, (b) by the need to comply with maladaptive beliefs derived from the beliefs of perfectionism. Addressing this distinction is of crucial importance, given that it would help to explain the effort and dedication required by adaptive beliefs and the emotional exhaustion and ineffectiveness associated with the pursuit of idealised goals sustained by maladaptive beliefs (Tóth et al., 2022), with the aim of fostering adaptive beliefs to facilitate better support.

The objective of this study is to explore how parents deal with adversities associated with their children's soccer development, with the aim of identifying adaptive response patterns. Furthermore, the use of REBT as a therapeutic framework is proposed to help families restructure their expectations and rationalise their beliefs with the aim of facilitating healthier and more sustainable emotional support. In this sense, this study does not directly intervene but provides insights that may contribute to the long-term goal of strengthening the family unit as a protective environment to foster the healthy and holistic development of young soccer players.

Methodology

Design

This study is phenomenological and instrumental (Smith & Sparkes, 2016) in design. The analysis focused on the lived experiences of parents of male student-soccer players regarding their expectations while supporting their children to achieve their rigorous goals. Smith and Sparkes (2017) explained that this type of investigation observes how participants experience the world. Within this framework, we adopted a descriptive phenomenological orientation, aiming to provide a faithful account of parental experiences as expressed, without advancing interpretative claims. Focus groups were conducted with a sufficient number of participants to generate rich descriptions and to structure the phenomenon under study. This design is consistent with other descriptive investigations in sport psychology (e.g., Hodge et al., 2014; Ramos-Agost et al., 2024). Reflexivity was addressed through explicit acknowledgement of the researchers' professional backgrounds (clinical, health and sport psychology) and by employing memo writing and team discussions to examine potential biases and strengthen transparency.

Sampling was intentional and based on practical considerations. Following Pain and Harwood (2008), the group of student–soccer players’ parents was treated as a case study to obtain an overarching view of shared experiences and circumstances (Harwood et al., 2010).”

Participants and Selection Criteria

The participants were parents of male student soccer players aged between 16 and 18 who belong to the youth category of two first division Spanish soccer clubs. In total, 11 fathers and 15 mothers participated ($N=26$): seven fathers and nine mothers belonging to one club ($N=16$); and four fathers and six mothers belonging to another club ($N=10$). We highlight the difference between fathers and mothers because their level of influence and involvement tend to be different (Torregrossa et al., 2007).

The selection of the two clubs was facilitated by the first author’s collaboration with them as a sport psychologist and researcher, which enabled recruitment while maintaining participant confidentiality. The selection criteria were as follows: (a) being the parent of a male student soccer player on track to pursue a Dual Higher Career (i.e., combining higher education and professional sport; Ramos-Agost et al., 2024); and (b) that their child had been at the club for more than two years so that they could assess the support they needed and gain an understanding of the club culture. Participants were purposively sampled to select information-rich cases, and the sample size was considered sufficient to reach thematic saturation, following the approach of Patton (2002) and similar phenomenological studies (Smith & Sparkes, 2017; Ramos-Agost et al., 2024).

All participants shared similar contextual characteristics: their children were male athletes combining sport and education, and they belonged to first division clubs with comparable organizational structures. This description provides context and enhances the transferability of the findings while preserving confidentiality.

Participants were purposively sampled to select information-rich cases, and the sample size was considered sufficient to reach thematic saturation, consistent with the logic of qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2002). In line with recent systematic reviews (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022), we considered saturation to be achieved when no substantially new themes emerged across the four focus groups. This criterion was met, as the last group confirmed and deepened categories already identified. The decision to conduct four focus groups with a total of 26 participants thus provided adequate breadth and depth to explore the phenomenon while ensuring analytic rigor.

Method

This investigation forms part of the HeDuCa project (Promotion of Healthy Dual Career Pathways in Sport, 2018: RTI2018-095468-B-100) and has been approved by the Ethics Committee on Animal and Human Experimentation (CEEAH) of the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB, Barcelona, Spain) with reference number CEEAH 4996.

First, the coordinators of each soccer club in the division were contacted to select participants, and it was decided that four focus groups would be sufficient to gather

the necessary information: two groups of eight people from one club and two groups of five people from another ($N=26$). The selection of these two clubs and the recruitment of participants were facilitated by the Sport and Exercise Psychology Research Group (GEPE; UAB) within the HeDuCa project, which allowed access to relevant families while maintaining participant confidentiality.

Next, the interviewer, along with other colleagues from the GEPE research group, contacted the families via email to inform them about the research. Four WhatsApp groups were then set up to finalise the dates and carry out the focus groups. Each focus group was held on a different day. The four sessions lasted two hours and were conducted and recorded using the *zoom.us* platform. Finally, the focus groups were transcribed verbatim, and transcripts were carefully verified by the research team to ensure accuracy.

Focus Groups

This qualitative method was used so that each parent could share their perspective on different adverse circumstances that arose during their children's soccer careers. Deen et al. (2017) noted that this qualitative method facilitates the collection of the information essential to understanding the experiences of the participants.

The four focus groups were structured to balance the number of fathers and mothers as much as possible within each club while maintaining confidentiality, which allowed participants to freely share their perspectives without being influenced by an unbalanced group.

The four focus groups included semi-structured questions covering four main aspects: (a) the most common adverse situations, (b) how parents experience these adversities, (c) the difficulties they encounter, and (d) the resources needed to cope. While prompts were flexibly phrased to encourage discussion, the same sequence and thematic structure were followed in all four groups to ensure consistency and comparability. The aim was to identify the beliefs held by parents and the emotional, physiological, and behavioural consequences that these beliefs trigger.

Participants were informed about privacy measures, including the use of pseudonyms and the obligation not to share session content outside the group. This procedure safeguarded confidentiality while facilitating participation.

Analysis

Data analysis was conducted based on the transcripts from the focus groups, using a deductive content analysis approach (Ronkainen & Wiltshire, 2021). The primary objective was to identify recurring beliefs among the parents of young soccer players, applying the REBT framework as a theoretical tool to interpret these beliefs and their emotional, cognitive, and behavioural consequences. Although no intervention was conducted, the findings provide insights that could guide the development of future REBT-based psychoeducational interventions.

Although the analysis was primarily deductive, using the GABCDE framework of REBT (Ellis, 1957; Jordana & Turner, 2023), an initial open-coding process was conducted to identify unexpected themes and minimize theoretical imposition. The

themes were reviewed by the three authors to ensure rigor and consistency. Representative quotations were selected to capture both convergent and divergent perspectives, providing richness and comprehensiveness in the depiction of parental experiences.

The situations that arose repeatedly in all focus groups were selected for analysis and were recognised by participants as highly significant in terms of their emotional impact and the difficulty of managing them. These situations were accompanied by representative quotations—those most frequently expressed and validated by other parents—reinforcing the contextual richness and collective nature of the shared experiences.

The analysis was structured around the GABCDE framework of REBT (Ellis, 1957; Jordana & Turner, 2023), which enabled a systematic examination of:

- (A) The most common adverse situations detected on and off the field.
- (B) The beliefs triggered by those situations, understood as both individual and collective constructs (Ramos-Agost et al., 2025).
- (C) The emotional, cognitive, and behavioural consequences of those beliefs.

Conforming to the GABCDE frame, the analysis described how parents reported beliefs and the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural responses they associated with those beliefs. The primary author, a professional psychologist who specialises in REBT, provided a theoretical and clinical framework to complement the interpretation of the experiences reported. This framework was informed not only by REBT but also by the author's clinical expertise and principles from contextual and systemic approaches, including Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes et al., 2011). Such approaches are recognized for supporting both athletes and their support networks in practical contexts, for example during transitions or challenges similar to those explored in the focus groups (Scandle et al., 2025). This combined perspective enabled a nuanced understanding of parental beliefs, their coping strategies, and the potential of adaptive frameworks to guide future psychoeducational interventions."

The results were then organised into thematic tables that displayed the relationships between the adverse situations (A), the underlying beliefs (B) and their emotional, cognitive and behavioural consequences (C). This organisational structure made it possible to clearly identify the problems most frequently encountered in the families of young soccer players.

Given the qualitative, phenomenological design of this study, results are presented thematically, emphasising the richness and depth of parental experiences rather than numerical frequencies. Saturation across the four focus groups confirmed that all major themes were adequately explored (Patton, 2002; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

Furthermore, the discussion section will address cognitive strategies used by parents to either dispute or reinforce their beliefs (D), as well as the psychological competencies necessary to promote more effective and healthy beliefs (E). This part of the analysis is intended to guide future interventions aimed at fostering the development of adaptive coping styles among families, and thus facilitate effective support for both the athletic and academic careers of their children.

Results

Following a deductive content analysis, the data was organised and interpreted using the GABCDE framework integral to REBT (Ellis, 1957; Turner, 2023). This model enabled us to identify how the beliefs of parents influence their interpretation of various adverse situations associated with their children's soccer development.

The results revealed that maladaptive beliefs (B) were activated in specific situations (A) and triggered dysfunctional emotional, cognitive and behavioural responses (C) which hindered the achievement of personal goals (G). In contrast, when adaptive beliefs were held, more functional consequences were observed, aligned with healthy coping. In this context, the terms “adaptive” and “functional” were used to refer to responses that encourage better adaptation to circumstances, consistent with the parents' goals.

Adverse situations were classified into the following two main categories: (a) on the field: those directly related to the context of soccer training (e.g. training sessions, injuries, technical decisions); and (b) off the field: those related to club management, family dynamics, and academic and emotional factors that affect the experience of parental support (Jordana et al., 2023b; Ramos-Agost et al., 2025).

Table 1 displays the adverse situations on the field most frequently mentioned by parents. These include injuries and recovery processes, unexpected changes in training, and mental overload.

Table 2 lists adversities off the field such as decision-making at the end of the season and club contracts, day-to-day organisation, comparisons between siblings, emotional support during periods of low morale, and decisions associated with pursuing a Dual Career after secondary education.

The analysis using the GABCDE model allowed us to observe how certain beliefs tend to be shared among parents and thus become collective in nature (Ramos-Agost et al., 2025). Furthermore, it was found that the use of adaptive beliefs is linked to a greater ability to deal with the daily challenges of parental support in elite soccer. These findings reinforce the need for psychoeducational interventions that promote more flexible, realistic, and healthy cognitive and emotional strategies within the home environment.

Discussion

In this study, we have observed that the most common adversities perceived by parents who support the soccer careers of their children can be grouped into two broad categories: those that occur on the field and those that occur off the field. This separation has allowed us to broaden the scope of family psychological support (Harwood & Knight, 2015; Knight et al., 2017)—traditionally centred on athletic performance—towards a more comprehensive perspective suggested in studies such as that of Jordana et al. (2023).

The analysis conducted using the GABCDE framework added another level, identifying underlying beliefs as both individual and collective psychological constructs

Table 1 Adverse situations “on the field” as perceived by parents of young soccer players

Objective (G): to support their children in achieving their goals

Adverse situation (A)	Beliefs (B)	Consequences (C)		
		Emotional	Cognitive	Behavioural
Their child has an injury and they feel that they cannot do anything more for them	Maladaptive “We must know exactly how to respond”; “We must be in control of every detail.”	Anxiety, panic	Intolerance to frustration, concern about recovery	Withdrawal, aggression
	Adaptive “We try to do all that we can, but we don’t have to be the perfect parent(s) to the perfect soccer player.”	Annoyance, sense of sufficiency	Greater attention, favourable internal dialogue	Coping, assertiveness
There are last-minute changes to training	Maladaptive “We must make changes to our daily routine so that our children have everything they need to succeed.”	Frustration, nervousness	Extreme generalisations, intrusive thoughts	Physical efforts, complaints
	Adaptive “We would like to make some changes so that our children can succeed, but if they are too detrimental to us, we will consider other alternatives.”	Adaptive stress, calm	Non-judgmental recognition, nuanced language based on facts	More objective and compassionate communication
They have to manage training and competition commitments (i.e. serve as taxi drivers on a continuous basis)	Maladaptive “We must respond to all potential changes and needs on a daily basis”; “We must always look out for them.”	overwhelmed, disproportionate anxiety	Personal sense of responsibility, excessive concerns	Disproportionate dedication, irritability
	Adaptive “We can help them and adapt to the situation, without forgetting that they have other siblings and that we have our own lives.”	Stress, self-compassion	Attention and emotional differentiation	Proportional physical efforts
The young soccer players compare themselves with their teammates and rivals.	Maladaptive “We can see that they are struggling psychologically, and we are making huge financial and emotional efforts so that they do not give up or fail due to their mental state.”	Disproportionate stress and anxiety	Mind reading, awfulizing	Disproportionate decision making, irritability
	Adaptive “We can see that they are struggling psychologically, and if we don’t know how to support them, we can seek professional help.”	Anxiety, compassion	Common concerns	Self-compassion, willing to ask for help

(Ramos-Agost et al., 2025), which are associated with the mental health of parents (King et al., 2023) and the quality of support they provide to their children (G).

On the field, parents identified the following as the main sources of adversity: (a) sports injuries and recovery processes; (b) unexpected changes in training sessions

Table 2 Adverse situations “off the field” perceived by parents of young soccer players

Goal (G): to support their children in achieving their goals				
Adverse situation (A)	Beliefs (B)	Consequences (C)		
		Emotional	Cognitive	Behavioural
The end of the season is approaching and decisions are being made about whether or not to stay on at the club.	Maladaptive “We must urge them to give their all so that they can aspire to anything they desire and achieve their goals; otherwise, the time invested will have been a waste.”	Stress, internal pressure	Divine reward, all-or-nothing mindset	Irritability and excessive physical activity
	Adaptive “We can express how happy we would be to see them pursue everything they wish for, while showing them how much they will learn and mature along the way, even if they don’t ultimately reach their ideal goals.”	Trust in the process, resilience	Open mind, realism	Share expectations without pressure, compassionate actions
They have to organise and plan their daily schedule (e.g. studies, sports, transport, other extra-curricular activities).	Maladaptive “We have to keep an eye on everything.”	Emotional exhaustion, tension	Excessive worry, magnification	Hyper-vigilance, irritability
	Adaptive “We can keep an eye on them, but not necessarily in every area; they are capable of taking responsibility and acting independently.”	Adaptive stress, sense of liberation	Detachment, redirection of attention	Delegate, promote autonomy
There are comparisons between siblings.	Maladaptive “They compare themselves, they see themselves as second-rate, and this is unbearable as we have to make huge efforts to prove this is not the case.”	Helplessness, emotional exhaustion	Blame, illusion of change	Muscular tension, irritable communication
	Adaptive “Comparisons are to be expected; we can explain that they have different lifestyles and that they have to respect and support each other in the lives they lead.”	Active empathy, sense of balance	Normalisation, decreasing the power of thought	Respect and compassion

Table 2 (continued)

Goal (G): to support their children in achieving their goals				
Adverse situation (A)	Beliefs (B)	Consequences (C)		
		Emotional	Cognitive	Behavioural
Decisions have to be made about dual careers (i.e. combining higher education and professional sport).	Maladaptive “They have to study because they won’t make a living from soccer”; “At home we’ve told them that soccer does not count as a profession, a sporting career is too short.”	Lack of confidence, disappointment	Dismissal of the positive, minimisation	Emotional invalidation, pressure
	Adaptive “We can explain that they should study because a sporting career is short and because studying is good for their personal development”; “I want my child to be happy and pursue their dream of becoming a soccer player, regardless of whether they succeed or not.”	Interest, excitement	Adaptive support and assessment	Emotional validation, assertive communication

and schedules; (c) the mental overload on a regular basis associated with travel and organisation; and (d) the comparisons that their children make with both teammates and rivals. Maladaptive beliefs frequently reported by parents included “We must know exactly how to respond” and “We must be in control of every detail,” which triggered anxiety, concern, and behaviours such as withdrawal or aggression. In contrast, adaptive beliefs, such as “We try to do all that we can, but we don’t have to be the perfect parent(s) to the perfect soccer player,” were associated with more functional emotional, cognitive, and behavioural responses, including increased attention, favourable internal dialogue, and assertive coping strategies (King et al., 2023).

Similarly, situations off the field also included everyday adversities that have an impact on family life. The most common adverse situations were: (a) decision-making at the end of the season; (b) organising everyday life around studies, training and family; (c) comparisons between siblings; and (d) uncertainty regarding the dual career (i.e. combining soccer and higher education; Ramos-Agost et al., 2024). In these cases, maladaptive beliefs reflected fear of future failure (“if they don’t try hard, it will all have been a waste”), excessive control (“we have to keep an eye on everything”) or a diminished value of the sporting endeavour (“you can’t make a living from soccer”) generating emotional exhaustion, tension, and hypervigilance. Adaptive beliefs (“We can keep an eye on them, but not necessarily in every area; they are capable of acting independently”) promoted resilience, emotional validation, and assertive communication, facilitating better parental support. In this regard, they shared that learning is part of a process that must be trusted, that encouraging independence in their children is essential and that it is possible to offer support without imposing their will as parents. In addition, it was concluded that emotional validation and clear communication are key to sustaining emotional balance and fostering a protective environment.

The results suggest that maladaptive beliefs—based on rigid, absolutist, or irrational ideas—are associated with greater emotional distress for parents and may relate to both their emotional well-being and their ability to provide support. As suggested by previous studies on elite athletes (Dickson et al., 2019; Jordana & Turner, 2023), it is not the pursuit of excellence itself that is dysfunctional, but rather the demand for perfection as a non-negotiable obligation (e.g. “you must always perform”, “we can never fail”). During the focus groups, we identified (Poucher et al., 2020; Ronkainen & Wiltshire, 2021) psychological competencies related to these maladaptive beliefs that hinder the process of adaptation to adverse situations: cognitive rigidity, intolerance of uncertainty, external locus of control, intolerance of failure, disproportionate sense of responsibility, difficulty in planning, and particularly, a low capacity to accept a loss of control. These patterns may represent significant challenges to functional coping (Tóth et al., 2022), and underline the need for interventions aimed at facilitating a rationalisation of these beliefs.

In contrast, we also identified (Poucher et al., 2020; Ronkainen & Wiltshire, 2021) that some parents, when faced with similar situations, held adaptive beliefs based on more flexible and rational expectations, such as “we can do our best, even if not everything is under our control” or “we can support them without having all the answers.” Parents who verbalised these more adaptive beliefs tended to express greater tolerance of ambiguity, acknowledgement of errors, and acceptance of the process (“we can adapt, but without causing ourselves too much harm”). These beliefs were accompanied by a more self-compassionate and functional response, including the use of resources such as professional support and competencies such as acceptance, tolerance of uncertainty, a constructive internal dialogue, and more open and empathetic communication within the family. When present, these competencies not only enhance the well-being of parents, but also strengthen the emotional environment of young athletes, even in times of high pressure or uncertainty (Ramos-Agost et al., 2024).

Using REBT (Ellis, 1957; Turner, 2023), this study proposes a specific application of the GABCDE framework to intervene in the coping styles of parents. Faced with a hypothetical circumstance, such as an unexpected injury to their child (A), a parent holding the belief “this will ruin their career and ours” (B) can learn to restructure it towards a more rational perspective, such as “this is difficult, but it’s part of the process and we can adapt” (E), through a structured disputation process (D). This example is intended as an illustration of how the GABCDE framework can be applied in practice, rather than a verbatim quotation from participants.

Analysis of the results shows that some maladaptive beliefs were frequently reported by multiple parents, indicating a shared, collective dimension. Not all parents expressed the same patterns, highlighting variability across individuals while supporting the notion of social normalisation of certain beliefs (Ramos-Agost et al., 2025).

Maladaptive beliefs were associated with mechanisms such as cognitive rigidity, intolerance of uncertainty, external locus of control, intolerance of failure, disproportionate sense of responsibility, and difficulty in planning. Adaptive beliefs were linked to competencies that serve as both mechanisms and outcomes, including self-

compassion, tolerance of uncertainty, acceptance, constructive internal dialogue, and more open communication within the family.

The GABCDE model may offer a structured framework for engaging with parents' beliefs, potentially facilitating greater awareness of how these beliefs could shape their responses to various adversities encountered both on and off the field. From an applied perspective, REBT-based psychoeducation has been found to be a promising tool focused on developing skills such as cognitive flexibility, self-compassion, and tolerance of uncertainty. It has the aim of: (a) fostering more realistic, flexible, and emotionally sustainable beliefs (Mansell, 2023; Jordana et al., 2023a, b), (b) strengthening the coping skills of families in highly competitive environments, and (c) achieving healthier and more emotionally sustainable support.

Despite its important contribution, the study has some limitations. First, although the sample size was adequate for a qualitative phenomenological design, additional limitations include potential socio-economic homogeneity, researcher influence on interpretation, focus group dynamics, and seasonal factors. Nonetheless, this group aspect also reinforces the value of analysing beliefs as both individual and collective, an emerging construct of growing interest in the current literature (Ramos-Agost et al., 2025).

Future research should explore the differences between mothers and fathers in the establishment and manifestation of expectations (Torregrossa et al., 2007; Hernández et al., 2024), as well as their differential impact on coping. In addition, it would be valuable to design quantitative or mixed-method studies that specify measures such as irrational belief scales, parental well-being scores, and children's perceived support surveys, while also considering potential mediator and moderator variables including tolerance of uncertainty and self-compassion. Moreover, incorporating the perspective of soccer players themselves (Ramos-Agost et al., 2024) would enable the triangulation of family members' expectations and contribute to the design of more comprehensive and context-sensitive support programmes for families.

In summary, this study highlights the need to address not only the practical demands of elite sport, but also the psychological and emotional environment of the family unit, promoting coping strategies based on more adaptive, functional and healthy beliefs.

Conclusion

This study identified that parents of male student–soccer players experience adversities both on and off the field, with injuries and end-of-season decisions standing out as particularly challenging situations. The main finding is that parental beliefs, whether maladaptive or adaptive, strongly shape emotional and behavioural responses to these adversities. Theoretically, the study advances understanding by showing that such beliefs are not only individual constructs but also socially shared, collective phenomena that influence coping within families. Practically, the findings underscore the value of REBT-based psychoeducational interventions to promote more adaptive beliefs, enhance parental well-being, and foster emotionally sustainable family environments in elite sport contexts. The study's limitations—its qualitative, cross-sec-

tional design, limited sample size, and focus on two clubs—restrict the transferability of the findings, but they also open avenues for future research. Specifically, further studies should test the effectiveness of REBT-based interventions with larger and more diverse samples, include longitudinal or mixed-method designs, and explore potential differences between mothers' and fathers' expectations. In sum, addressing the psychological and emotional environment of the family unit is as essential as managing the practical demands of elite sport. Promoting adaptive, flexible, and functional beliefs can improve parental well-being and create a more protective environment for young athletes.

Author Contributions Conceptualization: N.R., A.J., & M.T.; Methodology: N.R.; Software: N.R.; Validation: N.R., A.J., & M.T.; Formal Analysis: N.R.; Investigation: N.R.; Resources: A.J. & M.T.; Data Management: N.R., A.J., & M.T.; Writing – Original Draft: N.R.; Writing – Review & Editing: A.J. & M.T.; Visualization: A.J. & M.T.; Supervision: A.J. & M.T.; Project Administration: A.J. & M.T. All authors have read and agree with the published version of the manuscript.

Funding Open Access Funding provided by Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. This work was supported by the R&D project HENAC Healthy Environments for High Sports Performance (PID2022-138242OB-I00) from the Ministry of Science and Innovation of the Spanish government.

Data Availability No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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