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“Is it realistic?”: The experiences of elite female athletes considering parenthood

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The gender inequities experienced by pregnant and parenting elite athletes have been documented by the media and in sport research. However, the experiences of elite female athletes considering parenthood are underrepresented. Various sporting bodies, including the International Olympic Committee, have called for more research in this often-overlooked group. Such research is necessary for the development of evidence-informed policies and practices to support athletes during pre-conception, pregnancy, and while parenting. The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of elite female athletes considering parenthood. Participants included 10 North American elite female athletes (ages 29-36 years) who are considering parenthood in the next five years. Nine of the ten athletes had previously competed at one or more Olympic Games. Using a qualitative description study design, participants engaged in one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using a process of content analysis. Participant experiences of considering parenthood are represented by five main themes: (a) Calls for essential mandates and leadership; the lack of National-level sport policies and practices supporting pregnant and parenting athletes was described as a major barrier to becoming mother-athletes, (b) “How do you support yourself?”; concerns regarding limited financial and social support for athlete-parents were expressed, (c) Concern about body changes; physiological and psychological changes that result from pregnancy were noted as a concern, (d) Age inequities; participants described barriers experienced from societal notions that as athletes reach a certain age they will (or should) leave sport to become mothers, and (e) Being proactive about reproductive health; participants identified the need for early and comprehensive education about reproductive health. Grounded in the experiences of elite athletes, these findings provide necessary evidence to inform the development of sport policies and practices that support gender equity and participation of girls and women across all levels of sport.

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