In sport marketing and advertising literature, professional athletes have been studied as product endorsers, “well-known person used in advertising whose function is to sell product” (Shuart, 2007, p.128). However, the power of star athletes in today’s society is so strong that those stars began to be considered more than just the effective endorsers, but seen as human brand in their own right (Till, 2001). Thomson (2006) defined human brand as any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications effort. Human brands have established symbolic meaning within their name, face or other elements in a market beyond the individual characteristics. Although several studies (e.g., Till, 2001; Thomson, 2006) have suggested that individual athletes should be viewed as brands, development of effective branding strategies for the human brands is still infant stage. Therefore, further studies are needed to understand the nature of athlete brand and their consumers.

As many scholars have agreed that a brand is a promise for benefit (Berry, 2000; Clifton & Simmons, 2004; Raggio & Leone, 2007; Ward, Light & Goldstine, 1999), benefit is a key concept to define human brand. The athletes who can be considered as brands have to be able to provide consumers with the benefit in a consistent manner. Previous studies (e.g., Bauer, Sauer, & Exler, 2005, 2008; Keller, 1993) showed that the benefits are important factors to understand how the consumers create brand equity in their minds. Thus understanding consumers’ expected benefit from athlete brand is considered to be important task for brand managers.

The purpose of this study is to (a) explore consumers’ expected benefits from athlete brands and (b) propose a conceptual framework.

What benefits customers expect from an athlete brand? Keller (1993) defined the benefit as the personal value consumers attach to the product or service attributes. He classified benefit into (a) Functional Benefits that satisfy consumers problem-solving needs, (b) Symbolic Benefits that satisfy consumers’ desires for products that fulfill internally generated needs for self-enhancement, role position, group membership, and ego-identification, and (c) Experiential Benefits that satisfy consumers’ desires for products that provide sensory pleasure, variety and cognitive stimulation.

Based on the Keller’s classification, we identified eight (8) specific dimensions of benefit expected from athlete brand. In our proposed research model, Functional Benefit includes Knowledge and Value. Symbolic Benefits consists of Affiliation, Vicarious Achievement and Self-Concept. Experiential Benefit is comprised of Sexual Fantasy, Escape Fantasy and Entertainment. These specific factors included in our research model were identified in celebrity worship studies (McCUTCHEON, Lange, & Houran, 2002; Willis, 1972), team branding studies (GLADDEN & Funk, 2001, 2002) and brand relationship studies (Escalas & Bettman, 2009). Specific descriptions of each benefits dimension are following:

**Functional Benefit**

- Knowledge refers to practical understanding of a sport, skills, and rules which spectators can obtain from an athlete’s brand.

- Value refers to the perceived worthiness achieved by a specific player in the mind of the customer.

**Symbolic Benefit**

- Affiliation refers to the social relationship with family members or friends. By following same athlete with family members or friends fans or spectators can obtain close connection or sense of membership with them.
2010 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2010)

- Vicarious Achievement refers to the heightened sense of self-esteem (Funk, Mahony, & Ridinger, 2002). When their favorite athlete wins, the fans or spectators vicariously feel like they won and enhance their self-esteem (Branscombe & Wann, 1991).

- Self-Concept refers to mental and conceptual understanding of self. As consumers construct their self-concept by using a brand (Craken, 1989), athlete brand can be used to cultivate consumer's self-concept as well as expressing it to others (Escalas & Bettman, 2009).

Experiential Benefit

- Sexual Fantasy refers to the emotionally derived images created in the mind of the customer when thoughts of the athlete are triggered through some stimuli.

- Escape Fantasy refers to the manner in which the athlete provides a consumer with relief from day-to-day workloads and tribulations.

- Entertainment refers to the enjoyment and/or excitement that the athlete delivers to the consumer through his/her athletic performance.

Bauer, Sauer and Exler (2005) explained the relationship between brand attribute and customers’ benefit by applying the means-end chain model (Gutman, 1982). They suggested that product attributes are the means for consumers to obtain a desired benefit. In the unconscious level of a consumers’ mind, the product attributes are ideally linked to desirable benefits for the consumer. Based on their study, we understand an athlete’s brand image as a spectators’ perception about athlete brand attributes and benefits as a consumer’s personal expectation of what the athlete can do for them. Identifying benefits are important for understanding the consumers’ loyalty formation for an individual athlete brand (Arai, Ko, & Kang, 2009).

Our proposed model has both scientific and practical implications. Scientifically speaking, this model sheds light on the new concept of an individual athlete as a brand. The model extends the field of sport marketing and provides a for a fertile research stream that did not exist prior to this study. Additionally, this study serves as an extension to the brand management literature and serves to refine the established knowledge held within. Practically speaking, understanding the customer’s expected benefits are important to construct the individual athlete as an effective brand. Furthermore, this study will aid marketers and brand managers in understanding how best to represent individual athletes as their own distinct brand, while at the same time, catering to the evolving needs of today's sport consumers. In our presentation, we will discuss the value of the proposed model as well as the scientific and practical implications created by it.