National sport organizations or sports federations are largely responsible for the provision and implementation of elite athlete development programs and pathways at a national level (Sotiriadou & Shilbury, 2009). However, in many sports, such as triathlon, football, tennis, and golf, there are athletes who follow pathways outside the federation structure. These athletes may choose to train in third party organizations such as private for-profit companies, private academies or clubs (Brouwers, Sotiriadou, & De Bosscher, 2015; Phillips & Newland, 2014). The efforts of various sport organizations to build the breadth and depth of a national pool of athletes is aimed at delivering more medal winners and sustained elite success. Even though previous studies acknowledge the importance of NSOs collaborating with clubs for athlete development purposes (e.g., Bayle & Robinson, 2007; Truyens, De Bosscher, Heyndels, & Westerbeek, 2014), there are no studies that address the complexities of such collaborations or how these relationships are formed and managed. This study used Flanders (the Dutch speaking part of Belgium) as a research context to examine how the relationships between clubs and the tennis federation in Flanders facilitate elite tennis player development. This examination offers a significant insight to understanding the positioning of different sport organizations in the system, the dynamics in relationships that create harmony, and the potential risks for tensions for inter-organizational relationships that may pose a threat to sustained elite success.

Inter-organizational relationships (IORs) offer a useful framework for understanding how various sport organizations work jointly to plan and implement specific programs that would allow them to accomplish similar or common goals and objectives (Alexander, Thibault, & Frisby, 2008; Oliver, 1990). IORs are also referred to as collaborations, partnerships or linkages and reflect interactions between two, or more, organizations that engage in accessing and exchanging tangible (e.g., facilities, financial resources, and technologies), and intangible (e.g., expertise and knowledge) resources (Babiak, 2003). Some studies have examined the formation of IORs (e.g., Babiak, 2007; Kouwenhoven, 1993; Oliver, 1990), and others have focused on the management, or processes within IORs (e.g., Babiak & Thibault, 2009; Misener & Doherty, 2013). This study explores both the formation and management of IORs between a tennis federation and clubs. The examination of both aspects of IORs offers a wider view on the dynamics and interactions between sport organizations on elite player development.

Due to its commercialized nature and the strong presence of the involvement of the private sector (i.e., clubs and private academies) in elite player development (e.g., Brouwers et al., 2015; MacCurdy, 2008), tennis was selected as a sport that offers an interesting case for the examination of club-federation IORs. Two types of organizations were selected for this study: the Flemish tennis federation (as the coordinating and funded organization involved with elite player development) and seven tennis clubs that are actively involved in elite player development. Qualitative methods, including document analysis and semi-structured interviews were used. First, publicly available documents and strategic plans of the participating sport organizations were collected and reviewed. Second, representatives (n = 7) from seven tennis clubs and the Flemish tennis federation (n = 7) participated in semi-structured interviews. The interview transcripts (273 single spaced pages) and the files from the document analysis (45 single spaced pages) were saved in NVivo which was used to manage and organize data. An interplay of inductive and deductive reasoning guided data analysis and coding. Deductive reasoning was used because a conceptual framework of IOR formation and management guided the coding of the data (Hennink et al., 2011). New themes were inductively added to the coding framework when new elements recurred in several interviews or when refinement was needed.

The results showed that the federation and the clubs engaged in IORs to achieve efficiency (i.e., more efficient elite player development) and reciprocity (i.e., work towards common goals of elite athlete development). IORs helped the federation to gain legitimacy (i.e., enhance its reputation and image as center of expertise) and asymmetry (i.e., power and control over clubs), and clubs to develop stability (i.e., secure resources). Several joint player development
programs formed the basis of IOR management. Formal control mechanisms, such as objectives and strategies, the allocation of roles and responsibilities, and reporting and authority facilitated the management of IORs. In addition, informal control mechanisms, such as personal contacts, trust and communication, engagement and commitment further strengthen IOR management. The results showed that the transition of talented players from the club to the elite sport school of the federation can be a source of tension for well-resourced clubs that feel capable of developing players after the age of 12. These tensions relate to trust issues between clubs and the federation caused by a lack of clear, open and direct communication about player transitions.

IORs are a useful framework to examine the way sport organizations combine their strengths and pool their resources for elite player development. Joint player development programs represent a strategy that enhances a harmonious relationship and helps improve the quality of elite player development. In these programs, club coaches remain responsible for the development of talented players, while the federation provides guidance, feedback and consultancy to the club coaches and players can attend additional collective training sessions at the federation training center. Clear divisions of roles and responsibilities within the joint programs, and a reporting schedule can be a useful formal control mechanism in the management of IORs. It is also recommended that clubs and federations build trust through clear communication about the development and programs of the players.

Moreover, the findings of this study add understanding to the positioning of different sport organizations (i.e., clubs and the tennis federation) in the elite sport system and situations that cause tensions between organizations. For example, the federation’s elite sport school aims to centralize the most talented players after the age of 12 in the federation center. However, clubs, from their perspective, receive no recognition for developing talented players who meet the selection criteria to train at the elite sport school and subsequently leave their club. Hence, the otherwise harmonious IORs (e.g., joint player development programs for players under the age of 12), became strained as tensions emerged when clubs felt undermined due to the loss of their best players. In response, a rewards system (e.g., subsidies, equipment, or training support) that further enables clubs to continue and enhance their capacity to deliver player development outcomes may be an essential strategy to manage IORs tensions and encourage clubs continue enabling elite player development. These results advance knowledge that helps develop IORs in a more strategic way to improve elite development processes and sustain long term athlete success, as well as ensure sustained club commitment to player development.