The purpose of this exploratory qualitative exploratory study was to understand the experiences of Canada’s high performance athletes who have benefitted from Own the Podium (OTP)-recommended funding and support leading up to an Olympic or Paralympic Games. OTP, a nonprofit agency, is responsible for determining the overall investment strategy for high performance sport in Canada through recommendations to support national sport organizations (NSOs) with the aim to improve Canadian performances at the Olympic and Paralympic Games. OTP represented a new long-term strategy by multiple stakeholders involved in Canadian sport in order to ensure favourable podium results at the Vancouver 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games. OTP has since been adopted to cover subsequent Summer and Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games. The experiences of Canada’s high performance athletes who have benefitted from OTP-recommended funding and support have not been the object of previous studies.

Humphreys, Johnson, Mason, and Whitehead (2011) have contributed to high performance sport research through an examination of the support felt by Canadians in regards to OTP. The study consisted of nationally representative surveys, which focused on the value of medal success at the 2010 Vancouver Olympic Winter Games. Leading up to the 2010 Winter Games, 59% of Canadian respondents felt that it was crucial for Canadian athletes to succeed any other country in total gold medals. Following the Games, those supporting the importance of winning the most gold medals increased to 69% (Humphreys et al., 2011). Similar results were obtained from a Canada-wide survey (HarrisDecima, 2012). Results from these studies demonstrated the importance and value that OTP brought to Canadians in general as OTP financially supported athletes and their performances at the Games. OTP, as a high performance strategy however, was heavily criticized as being too focused on medal results as the only measure of success and as adding pressure on athletes to reach the podium at the Olympic and Paralympic Games (cf. Donnelly, 2010a, 2010b; Starkman, 2011).

For this study, data were collected through in-depth interviews with 11 Canadian high performance athletes (i.e., single-sport Summer/Winter Olympians and Paralympians and recently retired athletes). This type of research is referred to as a basic qualitative study. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the purpose of basic qualitative research “is to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences” (p. 24). The goal of this research was to develop a descriptive understanding of what it was like to be a targeted athlete benefitting from OTP-recommended funding and support. Basic qualitative research was best suited for this study given the desire to express the voices of the athletes as they pertain to the phenomenon under study. Analysis of the data resulted in 12 overarching themes: resources, pressure, missing gap, results, targeting, stress, expectations, boost in confidence, OTP relationship, OTP name, pre/post OTP, and lost funding.

Overall, results from this exploratory research indicated that athletes generally had a favourable perception regarding OTP-recommended funding and support. Athletes shared how there was a noticeable difference between their Olympic or Paralympic experiences prior to, and following, the implementation of OTP in terms of the resources being made available to them via their NSO. Participants noted how appreciative they were to receive an increase in financial support which ultimately led to greater access to resources while training and competing for Canada. Athletes described their experiences related to receiving this increase in support. For example, many athletes shared how they were given the opportunity to access the Integrated Support Team (IST) more frequently (e.g., biomechanists, nutritionists, sport psychologists, physiologists). The majority of athletes discussed how the increased funding provided their NSO with more frequent training camps abroad leading up to an Olympic or Paralympic Games. A few athletes discussed how they felt that OTP and Canada as a nation demonstrated great faith in their ability as athletes to perform and reach the podium at international competitions. This faith provided the athletes with a boost in self confidence leading up to a major event or competition. Athletes also discussed the pressures
associated with being an OTP targeted athlete. Most athletes shared that the majority of pressure they experienced during their career was internal in nature, that is, it was pressure they put on themselves to perform as high performance athletes. All athletes indicated that they believed that OTP-recommended funding and support had a direct positive impact on their performance and results at some point during their career. For some, the increase in support allowed them to delay their retirement from sport in order to continue competing in future Olympic or Paralympic Games. Even with the increase in support, there were still some noticeable downsides experienced by athletes who benefited from OTP funding and support. A few athletes described the differences in treatment of OTP-supported athletes and athletes who did not receive OTP support. (e.g., access to equipment, training camps). Athletes who were previously targeted by OTP and subsequently lost OTP-recommended funding and support discussed feelings of vulnerability and explained the challenges experienced as a result of losing their OTP targeted status (e.g., feeling insecure, being an outsider, having limited access to resources).

Findings from this study demonstrated that several athletes were concerned with their own financial situation while training and competing for Canada. Many athletes indicated feeling frustrated with their lack of financial gains as the IST experts and professionals around them had salaries because of their involvement with athletes’ training yet the athletes were not receiving salaries for their time while training. Although the funding and support helped to reduce costs associated with training expenses, it still left several athletes dealing with stressful personal financial concerns as they did not have time to work while being a full-time high performance athlete representing Canada. Implications for this research are discussed in terms of recommendations for OTP as well as recommendations for future research. Fundamentally, athletes’ voices and their experiences are important when decisions are made about the types of support and resources needed for them to achieve success in international sport competitions.