Fundraising for charity has become a critical component of a number of large-scale participatory sport events. However, charities, and the individuals who support these organisations through charity sport event participation, are faced with a number of challenges in attracting donations (Barton & Hall, 2011). For instance, charities aligned with sport events face competition from high impact crowdfunding initiatives such as GoFundMe (Rojc, 2017), and this has contributed, in part, to decreases in dollars raised by some of the larger fundraising events such as the American Cancer Society’s Relay for Life and the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure (Lindsay, 2015; Panepento, 2015). An additional factor contributing to the challenges in securing financial donations is the notion that fundraising is being viewed increasingly critically and skeptically. This is evidenced by a survey of office workers inquiring about what annoyed them most about co-workers revealing that ‘e-mails seeking personal sponsorship’ (i.e., donations) was ranked as the fourth most annoying practice (Rigby, 2011). Accordingly, charity sport event participants may grow reluctant to ask for donations from their peer network. The current research examines the challenges faced by charity sport event participants in soliciting donations, and the effort made to overcome these challenges.

Specifically, the following research questions are advanced:

Research Question 1: What challenges do charity sport event participants face while soliciting donations from their network?

Research Question 2: How do charity sport event participants overcome the challenges they are faced with while soliciting donations from their network?

Constraint negotiation provided the framework to address these two research questions. The potential challenges that charity sport event participants experience while fundraising are positioned as constraints (e.g., Alexandris & Carroll, 1997) in the current research. Constraints have been described in the sport and leisure research as factors that individuals must overcome in order for participation to take place (Jackson & Rucks, 1995). Constraints can be categorised as intrapersonal, interpersonal, or structural (Crawford, Jackson, & Godbey, 1991). In order for an individual to overcome constraints and participate in an activity, he/she must negotiate the constraint (Jackson, Crawford, & Godbey, 1993). The current research conceptualises fundraising through charity sport events as the activity, potential challenges faced by participants in fundraising as constraints, and the strategies for overcoming these challenges as constraint negotiation.

Triathlon Pink serves as the research context. Triathlon Pink is an all-female triathlon series which raises funds for the National Breast Cancer Foundation (NBCF). The series takes place in seven cities across Australia with each event attracting approximately 750 participants. The event series has been in place since 2007 and has thus far raised over $1.89 million for the NBCF. A portion of all participant’s registration fees goes towards the NBCF, and all participants are further encouraged to fundraise beyond this payment.

Twenty-nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with Triathlon Pink participants. Interviewees ranged in age from 26 – 65. An email invitation was sent to all Triathlon Pink participants by the event management team wherein individuals expressed their willingness to take part in the research via reply email. From there, interviews were scheduled to take place over the phone. The interviews lasted between 12 and 30 minutes, and each interview was audio recorded. All interviewees received a $50 grocery voucher for their participation.

An interview guide informed by constraint negotiation was used to organise the discussion. Example questions from the interview guide include: ‘Can you provide examples of challenges you have confronted while fundraising for the National Breast Cancer Foundation as part of your participation in Triathlon Pink?’ and ‘Please describe the
strategies you employ to fundraise for the National Breast Cancer Foundation as part of Triathlon Pink?" The transcriptions generated from the audio recordings are being analysed thematically in six phases: (1) getting familiar with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Preliminary results reveal a number of fundraising challenges were experienced by Triathlon Pink participants. First, interviewees described an apprehension towards asking friends, family and co-workers for money. This was described as particularly salient given the current economic climate and an understanding that discretionary income could be limited among peers. Second, participants referred to the vast array of worthy causes that represented competition to their own fundraising efforts. The interviewees outlined how they were cognisant that their request for donations was likely one of many requests their prospective donors received, and each person relates to, or connects, with a charitable cause differently. Third, the interviewees expressed frustration with potential donors who gave an indication that they were interested in giving, or intended to give, a donation, but subsequently did not take action on this pledge.

To overcome these challenges a number of strategies were described by the interviewees. First, to confront apprehension towards asking members of their personal and professional networks for a financial contribution, social media was embraced. Interviewees portrayed social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram as mechanisms that could be used to communicate to others that they were seeking donations, without having to explicitly ask. The fact that these social media tools allowed the participant to avoid having to ask a potential donor face-to-face was also highlighted as a way to negotiate the participant’s apprehension towards asking others for money. To address competition in the form of other charities and/or other requests that potential donors were receiving, interviewees revealed that storytelling and personalising their own relationship with the NBCF allowed them to differentiate from other charities and requests. Again, social media was highlighted as an important tool as text, images, and video within different platforms were used to share stories. To address the challenge of potential donors expressing interest or intention to give without following through, Triathlon Pink participants detailed how they had to craft a strategy to deal with these individuals. For nearly all interviewees who outlined this challenge, setting a limit on the number of times they would follow up informed their approach, and interviewees repeatedly mentioned how they were constantly working to avoid harassing and/or annoying those they approached for donations.

The current research represents an ongoing examination of the challenges faced by charity sport event participants in soliciting donations as part of their event participation. Through preliminary analysis, three constraints to seeking donations have been identified: fundraiser apprehension towards asking donors for money; competition among charities, events, and causes; and donors expressing interest in supporting, but not following through. These can be categorised as intrapersonal, structural and interpersonal constraints, respectively (Crawford, 1991). Meanwhile, three negotiation strategies for overcoming these constraints have been uncovered: employing social media to avoid explicitly asking; storytelling and personalisation to differentiate the cause and event; and devising strategy to avoid harassing and annoying potential donors. These strategies allowed Triathlon participants to negotiate the constrained and continue their fundraising efforts (Jackson et al., 1993). These results can be applied to inform strategy for charity sport event managers. Managers can devise alternate mechanisms for participants to solicit donations that do not involve explicitly asking. Providing participants with resources to organise fundraising initiatives via raffles, trivia nights or movie screenings represent opportunities to assist participants in addressing this apprehension. It is hoped that future research is conducted on the fundraising challenges facing charity sport event participants, which can include data collection from current and past donors to these events.