Inter-organizational relationships have been identified as critical to sport for development (SFD) organizations who rely on external partners to enhance their capacity across several broad areas (e.g., financial capacity and infrastructure capacity) (Svensson, Hancock, & Hums, 2017). In particular, SFD organizations that typically cannot rely on membership fees common among community sport organizations (Doherty, Misener, & Cuskelly, 2014; Misener & Doherty, 2009), depend on partners for funding to deliver SFD initiatives in international (Svensson & Hambrick, 2016) and domestic settings (Svensson et al., 2017). According to Welty Peachey and his colleagues, “partnerships are the lifeblood of [SFD] organizations, and are undertaken for multiple reasons, such as to secure funding, for assistance in program design, delivery, and implementation, and for monitor[ing] and evaluation” (in press, p. 2). Consequently, the ability to find, develop, and manage partnerships is critical for SFD organizations.

Yet despite emerging scholarly consensus regarding the importance of partnerships for SFD (Lindsey & Banda, 2011; Svensson et al., 2017; Welty Peachey et al., 2017; Welty Peachey & Cohen, 2016), researchers indicate many such partnerships are characterized by resource dependency and power imbalances (Darnell, 2012; Hayhurst & Frisby, 2010). As a result, SFD scholars have offered strategies for SFD practitioners who must necessarily manage one-sided partnerships. Notably, SFD scholars suggest developing formal procedures (e.g., memorandums of understanding) (Svensson & Hambrick, 2016), building trust (Hayhurst & Frisby, 2010), involving partners in the design and delivery of programs (Burnett, 2009), and treating partnerships as business relationships (Welty Peachey et al., in press).

Building on these studies, and with ambitions to improve SFD organizations ability to find, develop, and manage unbalanced partnerships, the purpose of this study is to uncover and explore perceptions of partnership formation and management from the perspective of SFD donors (including granting agencies, and private donors). Guided by Welty Peachey et al. (in press), and utilizing a semi-structured interview methodology (Patton, 2015), this study answers the following research questions: (1) what are the necessary conditions (e.g., competition, skepticism, unequal power) for successful partnerships between SFD organizations and donors? and (2) what strategies (e.g., demonstrating benefits, focusing on mission and goals, treating partnerships as business relationships) contribute to successful partnerships between SFD organizations and donors?

Participants for this study were identified as part of a larger project at one SFD organization that offers local/domestic SFD programs in a major North American city. As part of their ongoing reporting requirements to a particular donor, representatives from the SFD organization asked that we explore donor perspectives regarding what they describe as “successful partnerships”. Once consent was obtained from the donor organizations, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key representatives who were knowledgeable about the partnership. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, and a priori coding followed Welty Peachey et al.’s (in press) challenges and strategies for SFD partnerships. Open coding following Patton (2015) was also utilized to identify new themes within the transcripts. Representatives from the SFD organization with knowledge of, and responsibilities to manage each partnership were also interviewed for this project. A priori coding following Welty Peachey et al. (in press) and open coding following Patton (2015) was also utilized with these transcripts.

The findings are presented as a case study story of “successful partnerships” from the perspective of SFD donors. As part of the larger research project, these findings are meant to improve the ability of one specific SFD organization to achieve its goals. However, though results from this project are not meant to be generalizable, they may provide insights to SFD organizations (and nonprofits) who rely on partnerships to achieve their organizational goals. Findings from this study extend SFD partnership literature, and capacity for SFD literature that suggests partnerships (as relationship/network capacity) are critical to SFD organizations.