Sponsorships play a vital role in elite level sport (Hallman et al., 2015; Stewart et al., 2018), including support for individual athletes. However, sponsorships may bring forth the best and worst in athletes. An example is Eugenie Bouchard, a Canadian tennis player who reached the pinnacle of her sport (2014 Wimbledon finals, WTA ranking of 5th) only to drop from that level shortly afterwards (2016 WTA ranking 46th, 2018 ranking 194), which some attribute to her heavy focus on sponsorship commitments (CBC Sports, June 30 2015). Despite the potential for this phenomenon, there appears to be no related research. In contrast, there is a wealth of knowledge regarding the impact of elite athlete sponsorship from the sponsors’ perspective (e.g., Farrell et al., 2000; McCarville et al., 1994; Yoon & Shin, 2017). To begin to address this gap, the purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of sponsorship on elite athletes. The study was framed by social exchange theory (Homans, 1958; Thibault & Kelley, 1959), which argues that any relationship involves the exchange of resources between two or more parties, with the relationship’s effectiveness and survival dependent on the perceived benefits and costs of that exchange. Benefits must be perceived to meet or outweigh costs for the relationship to begin and for it to continue. The benefits and costs may be tangible and intangible (Stevens, 1993).

We investigated the case of a 2016 Olympic bronze medalist. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the athlete, his former coach, and his agent/manager. The athlete was engaged with a number of sponsors who were a part of his elite sports journey. The coach supervised his program until September 2017, and the agent continues to be responsible for establishing and managing his sponsorships. The inclusion of all three parties provided comprehensive insight into the perceived benefits and costs of sponsorship for the athlete. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and returned for member checking. Following Patton (2015), we engaged in coding independently and then collaboratively, categorizing the data by tangible and intangible costs and benefits, and then by emergent themes within these categories.

The findings revealed expected tangible benefits in the form of financial and in-kind support that allowed the athlete to continue participating at the highest level. Intangible benefits included improved interpersonal skills, from expected attendance and speaking at a variety of sponsor events. Tangible and intangible costs were connected, in terms of the time commitment of sponsor events and commercial shoots, and the physical and mental toll those took because of time engaged and time away from training. Overall, there was perceived to be a net benefit that outweighed the costs associated with sponsors’ demands, and the athlete continued to avail himself of the support provided. The study helped the athlete and his team to have a clearer picture of his sponsorship environment, with implications for capitalizing on potential benefits and managing costs. Limitations of the study and directions for further research that builds on this inaugural work will be presented.