

# The Role of Interorganizational Relationships on Elite Athlete Development Processes

**Popi Sotiriadou**  
Griffith University

**Jessie Brouwers**  
Tennis Vlaanderen

**Veerle De Bosscher**  
Vrije Universiteit Brussel

**Graham Cuskelly**  
Griffith University

Previous studies acknowledge the importance of sporting organizations' developing partnerships with clubs for athlete development purposes. However, there are no studies that address the way partnerships influence athlete progression and pathways. This study explores interorganizational relationships (IORs) between a tennis federation and tennis clubs in their efforts to improve player development processes. Document analysis and semistructured interviews with representatives from clubs and the Flemish federation were used. The findings show that the federation and the clubs engaged in IORs to achieve reciprocity and efficiency. The federation anticipated gaining legitimacy and asymmetry, and clubs expected to develop stability. Formal and informal control mechanisms facilitated IOR management. The conceptual model discussed in this study shows the types of IOR motives, management, and control mechanisms that drive and influence the attraction, retention/transition, and nurturing processes of athlete development.

**Keywords:** elite sport, managing and evaluating elite athlete development, interorganizational relationships, sport clubs, sport organizations, athlete development processes, development of sport

There are many sport organizations involved with the development and success of elite athletes, including national government agencies for sport; Olympic committees; regional/state (RSOs/SSOs) and national sporting organizations (NSOs); or federations, clubs, and private sector organizations (e.g., Phillips & Newland, 2014; Sotiriadou, 2009). Sotiriadou and Shilbury (2009) indicated that RSOs (or SSOs) and NSOs (also referred to as sports federations or national sports governing bodies) are largely responsible for the provision and implementation of elite athlete development programs and pathways at a regional and national level, respectively. However, in many sports, such as triathlon, football (soccer), tennis, and golf, there are athletes who find and follow pathways outside the RSO–NSO 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, 2015a, 2015b; Liebenau, 2010; Newland & Kellett, 2012).

Sport clubs increasingly vary in their operations, contribution to sport development, and approach to developing sport (e.g., Wicker & Breuer, 2011). Most clubs' mission is to provide fun, safe, supportive, accessible opportunities for grassroots participation (Sotiriadou, Quick, & Shilbury, 2006). Nevertheless, there are some clubs that offer well-developed, highly competitive programs and support systems that advance an elite development agenda (e.g., Smith & Shilbury, 2004). Hence, clubs can play a significant role in talent development (Brouwers et al., 2015a, 2015b; Liebenau, 2010; Stenling & Fahlén, 2014), which represents the foundation of the sport performance pyramid. In many countries, high sport performance funding is directed to national bodies with little or no funding filtered through to the club level (Sotiriadou, 2009). Therefore, in their efforts to offer strong pathways to talented athletes, clubs are pressured to develop partnerships with a variety of sporting and nonsports organizations (Bloyce, Smith, Mead, & Morris, 2008). Partnerships with sport organizations allow clubs to offer opportunities to talented athletes to develop (Bloyce et al., 2008). However, various studies highlight how little is known about the nature of their relationship (Bloyce et al., 2008; Sotiriadou, 2009), the links between clubs and sport organizations, and the

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Popi Sotiriadou and Graham Cuskelly are with the Department of Tourism, Sport and Hotel Management, Griffith University, Gold Coast, QLD, Australia. Veerle De Bosscher is with the Department of Sport Policy and Management, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Brussels, Belgium. Jessie Brouwers is with the Department of Club Development, Tennis Vlaanderen, Brussels, Belgium. Address author correspondence to Popi Sotiriadou at [p.sotiriadou@griffith.edu.au](mailto:p.sotiriadou@griffith.edu.au).

potential influence of such partnerships to sport development processes (Mackintosh, 2011). Furthermore, these relationships unfold in different ways depending on the country-specific sport system and structures. Consequently, the relationship between clubs and sport organizations needs to be explored for various reasons.

First, a well-supported club structure can provide a wide range of opportunities and services at a variety of junior (youth) and senior age groups. These opportunities allow movement in and out of the sport system without losing resources or participants (Martindale, Collins, & Daubney, 2005). Second, research on nonprofit organizations shows that it is important to create and nurture relationships to strengthen the clubs and enhance the services they provide (Frisby, Thibault, & Kikulis, 2004). The stronger clubs are more competitive when applying for government grants (Sotiriadou & Wicker, 2013) and more attractive to corporate and private funding sources. Last, understanding the relationship between clubs and RSOs or NSOs is important in successfully sustaining the clubs' motivation and interest in elite athlete development and in maintaining their contribution to elite development pathways.

Interorganizational relationships (IORs) are a useful heuristic from which to understand organizational practices and how and why 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). This study examines IORs between a regional tennis organization (Tennis Vlaanderen; also referred to as "the federation" in this article) and tennis clubs in Flanders (i.e., the northern, Dutch-speaking region of Belgium; Taks & Kesenne, 2000) and contributes to ongoing discussions on why and how IORs may influence elite athlete development processes. These are dyadic IORs that focus on the interactions between two types of organizations as opposed to interactions between the clubs themselves, or the relationships of the regional tennis organization with other partners in the broader network (such as the Olympic Committee or the national sports administration; Babiak, 2003). The following research question guided this study: How do IORs between the federation and clubs influence elite player development processes?

## Conceptual Framework

This study draws on the concept of *elite athlete development processes*. Sotiriadou and Shilbury (2009) defined elite athlete development as a field that

requires the contribution of various interested groups in an array of specifically designed strategies and programs targeted to those athletes that compete at international level . . . with the potential to create and regenerate involvement from governments, sponsors, participants, spectators, sports supporters and athletes themselves. (p. 146)

This definition denotes how athlete development is a multifaceted field that requires the involvement and collaboration of a range of stakeholders. Furthermore, the word *contribution* in the definition has a significant meaning as it lends itself to various stakeholders' consolidating their efforts to achieve a common goal. In defining the field of sport development, Green (2005) and Sotiriadou, Shilbury, and Quick (2008) argued that elite athlete development is a *process* that addresses athlete entrance, retention, and advancement (Green, 2005) or what Sotiriadou et al. (2008) termed as the "attraction, retention/transition and nurturing" (ARTN) framework. This study is positioned within the realm of sport development to highlight the centrality of IORs within the sport development processes.

There are numerous types of IORs, including partnerships, linkages, or outsourcing services that allow two, or more, organizations to engage in accessing and exchanging tangible (e.g., facilities, financial resources, and technologies) and intangible (e.g., expertise and knowledge) resources (Babiak, 2003; Barnes, Cousens, & MacLean, 2007). These relationships involve "the sharing of power, work, support and/or information with others for the achievement of joint goals or mutual benefits" (Kernaghan, 1993, p. 61). The need to work through and develop partnerships to derive common sport development goals is stressed in Bloyce et al. (2008) and more recently in Mackintosh (2011). However, the application of IORs to the context of high-performance sport and elite athlete development processes is limited. Babiak (2003, 2007, 2009) and Babiak and Thibault (2008, 2009) offer the few existing studies that have examined IORs between a Canadian Sport Centre and its partners including NSOs, Sport Canada, Canadian Olympic Committee, Coaching Association of Canada, private commercial organizations, and other Canadian Sport Centres. These studies examined how a collaborative approach through the establishment of IORs between various partners served as a strategy to offer comprehensive support and resources for elite athletes and coaches, particularly in times of reduced government funding for elite sport.

## Interorganizational Relationships

The literature describes three stages in the evolution and implementation of IORs (Alexander et al., 2008; Babiak, 2003; Parent & Harvey, 2009). The initial *formation* stage refers to the determinants, motives, and antecedents to enter a relationship (Babiak, 2007; Oliver, 1990; Parent & Harvey, 2009). The subsequent *management*, or processes, stage reflects the large amount of managerial factors and challenges of the management of a relationship (Babiak & Thibault, 2008, 2009; Frisby et al., 2004; Misener & Doherty, 2013; Parent & Harvey, 2009). Finally, the *evaluation* stage refers to the outcomes and effectiveness of the relationships, as well as the deliverables accrued through the relationship, including products, services, or communications between

organizations (Babiak, 2009; Misener & Doherty, 2013, 2014; Parent & Harvey, 2009).

## Formation of IORs

According to Oliver (1990), there are key causes, or determinants, that prompt or motivate organizations to form relationships. These determinants include (a) *necessity* (meet necessary legal or regulatory requirements), (b) *asymmetry* (exercise power or control over another organization or its resources), (c) *reciprocity* (pursue common or mutually beneficial goals or interests through cooperation, collaboration, and coordination), (d) *efficiency* (improve internal input/output ratio), (e) *stability* (adaptive response to environmental uncertainty), and (f) *legitimacy* (comply with norms, rules, beliefs, or expectations).

These determinants have been useful in informing sport management studies and elite sport. Specifically, Babiak (2007) examined IOR formation among a Canadian Sport Centre and its partners (e.g., NSOs, Canadian Olympic Committee, corporate partners, and other Canadian Sport Centres). The results showed not only that each partner had different motives for entering a partnership but also had multiple motives to do so. Babiak (2007) concluded that the presence of IOR determinants is often based on resource scarcity and dependence on external sources for funding, as well as institutional forces, power, and control. In addition to the determinants found in mainstream literature (e.g., asymmetry, necessity, efficiency, and stability), *individual-level factors* (i.e., personal values and beliefs, previous history, prior experiences, and personal interactions of key individuals of partner organizations) emerged as a new construct that played an important role in IOR formation within the context of sport organizations (Babiak, 2007). In another study, Alexander et al. (2008) explored a joint initiative between a nonprofit provincial tennis organization and a public sector recreation department that aimed to increase tennis participation. The study showed that necessity, reciprocity, and improved efficiencies motivated the tennis organization to enter the joint initiative, whereas the sport and recreation department sought to offer a more legitimate program to the community. The study concluded that even though motives can differ, conflicts or power struggles can be avoided when partners explain their positions clearly to one another and clarify the values underlying these motives.

Overall, existing studies resonate within the Canadian sport system and reflect the Canadian context. An exception to this represents Parent and Harvey's (2009) study on community-based sport IORs, which integrated North American and European literature to develop a partnership model. In that study, Parent and Harvey (2009) proposed slightly different antecedents to previous studies as essential to the success of a partnership. These antecedents included the project's *purpose* (partnership goals), *environment* (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the general and task environment),

the *nature* of the partner organizations (profit, nonprofit, public), the partners' *motives* (degree of reciprocity of the partners), and their *complementarity and fit* (strategic and cultural fit). Parent and Harvey (2009) argued that partnership *planning* (i.e., actual partnership type, creation of roles and responsibilities, and the development of policy and partnership norms and guidelines) was an essential antecedent.

## Management of IORs

Research on IOR management of sport organizations suggests that there are many factors that can contribute to quality IORs and a successful collaboration. These factors include resource and information sharing, objectives and strategies, communication, trust, commitment, consistency, dependability, balance, mutuality, coordination, engagement, authority, responsibility, autonomy, monitoring and reporting, personal contact, relationship management competencies, operational competencies, and relational competencies (e.g., Alexander et al., 2008; Babiak & Thibault, 2008; Lucidarme et al., 2014; Misener & Doherty, 2013, 2014; Parent & Harvey, 2009).

The advent of several IOR management factors led to studies differentiating them based on formal controls and informal (social) processes. *Formal* controls include, for example, outlining objectives and strategies, delineating roles and responsibilities, and developing guidelines and reports (Babiak & Thibault, 2008; Frisby et al., 2004; Huxham & Vangen, 1996). *Informal* (social) processes may include mutual trust, communication, commitment, and engagement (Babiak & Thibault, 2008; Child & Faulkner, 1998; Misener & Doherty, 2013, 2014; Willem & Lucidarme, 2014). Babiak and Thibault (2008) found that informal control processes play a more important role than formal control mechanisms in IOR management in the Canadian sport system. Moreover, they found that IORs are often loosely structured and formal control mechanisms were not extensively used as they appeared to have a negative impact on trust.

The complexity of IOR management is evident in studies that highlight managerial challenges, inadequate managerial processes, and strategic challenges of IORs (Babiak & Thibault, 2009; Frisby et al., 2004). *Managerial challenges* may encompass poor governance; the lack of formalized written rules, policies, guidelines, and planning; the obscurity of roles, responsibilities, and reporting channels; issues with regard to partnerships across sectors; and the lack of human resources to accomplish the duties necessary to sustain IORs (Babiak & Thibault, 2008; Frisby et al., 2004). Even though sport organizations seemingly collaborate, they sometimes compete on different levels for resources, such as money, coaches, and athletes (Babiak & Thibault, 2009). MacLean, Cousens, and Barnes (2011), for instance, found that sport clubs did not organize joint training camps with other clubs out of fear that rival clubs could "steal" or "poach" the best athletes to develop a more competitive team. In their study, Babiak and Thibault (2009) noted the presence

of competition between different sport organizations to protect their government funding. This rivalry, or competition, can result in tensions and can be a source of frustration between partners.

## Evaluation of IORs

The final process of a partnership is evaluation, a step often overlooked in practice (Parent & Harvey, 2009). Nevertheless, partnership evaluation studies provide insights on key points to consider and available types of evaluation (Babiak, 2009; Misener & Doherty, 2013, 2014; Parent & Harvey, 2009). According to Parent and Harvey's (2009) partnership model, these evaluations include (a) ongoing evaluation of results, (b) evaluation of the short-term effects of programs or other initiatives, (c) evaluation of long-term outcomes/objectives, (d) immediate feedback during an activity, and (e) a summative evaluation at the end of the project. For instance, Babiak (2003) found that outcomes of IORs in the Canadian sports system included resource acquisition, international sporting success of athletes, visibility, increases in the range and coordination of services offered to coaches and athletes, and the creation of social capital. The levels of partners' satisfaction and the degree to which the objectives have been achieved are essential in determining the final evaluation of a partnership (Parent & Harvey, 2009).

A key point in studies on IORs is that the processes of formation, management, and evaluation are interrelated (Alexander et al., 2008; Misener & Doherty, 2013). Misener and Doherty (2013), for instance, noted that the deliverables that sport partners received from IORs were closely aligned to the reasons for forming relationships. Alexander et al. (2008) found that sport partners entered IORs based on motives to improve efficiencies in time and resources, then strived to manage IORs to improve efficiencies, and identified improved efficiencies as a desired outcome. Hence, the formation, management, and evaluation processes can be interwoven.

Overall, the literature suggests the existence of various sport management IOR studies (e.g., Bloyce et al., 2008; Mackintosh, 2011; Parent & Harvey, 2009). However, the majority of research is not centered on partnerships within the elite sports context or talent development processes in particular. Babiak and Thibault's (2008, 2009) framework is used in this study of IORs between tennis clubs and the tennis federation in Flanders to examine the influence of these partnerships on elite athlete development. There are two reasons for drawing upon this framework. First, Babiak and Thibault (2008, 2009) conceptualized their framework in the specific context of elite sport partnerships rather than partnerships at community-level sport. Second, Babiak and Thibault's work was particularly applicable to the research aims of this study and focuses on the "challenges" evident within the elite sport space (e.g., concurrent competition and cooperation of sport organizations on different levels for resources; support and resources for elite athletes and

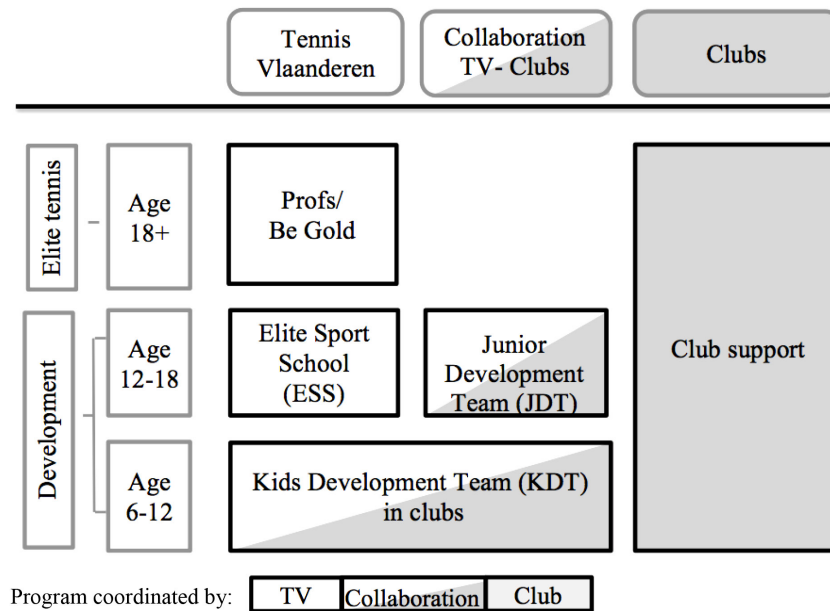
coaches; power relationships between organizations at different levels in the sport system). These features of their framework allowed us to explore and examine elite sports development partnership in a new sport system and country. For these reasons, Babiak and Thibault's (2008, 2009) framework is used to analyze the findings of this study and to help gain deeper insights into the collected data.

## The Elite Tennis System in Flanders

In some countries club interactions with national bodies might be minimal or even inexistent. For example, in Canada and Australia, there are provincial or state sporting organizations that interact with the clubs and, thus, overtake the NSO–club interaction. In smaller countries (e.g., the Netherlands), where regional or provincial sporting organizations are nonexistent (or have very low power), clubs interact directly with the federations. This system dates back to the late 1960s when the three regions of Belgium (Flanders, Wallonia, and the German community) were granted cultural autonomy (Taks & Kesenne, 2000). Each region has its own regulations, laws, sports priorities, and sporting organizations (De Bosscher, 2007). Tennis Vlaanderen (i.e., the federation) is the federation for tennis in Flanders, which sets strategic goals for tennis in Flanders and organizes tennis activities and competitions for players. Belgium has a national tennis organization (i.e., the Royal Belgian Tennis Federation), which is responsible only for the legal representation of Belgium (all three regions) at the International Tennis Federation and has no existing sport administration (De Bosscher, 2007). Each of the three "regional" tennis federations in Belgium carry out all tennis administration related activities, including elite player development, autonomously. Consequently, in Belgium, the tennis federations are in charge of the tasks and activities that are normally a responsibility of an NSO (Winand, Zintz, Bayle, & Robinson, 2010). The elite tennis system in Flanders (as Figure 1 illustrates) includes various stakeholders (i.e., tennis clubs and the federation), athlete development phases (scouting, development, and elite tennis), and relevant programs (e.g., Kids Development Team [KDT], Junior Development Team [JDT], and the Elite Sport School [ESS]). Figure 1 indicates which programs are provided by the federation, Tennis Vlaanderen (white), clubs (gray), or are based on the collaboration between clubs and the federation (half white, half gray).

The federation selects the most talented players between 6 and 12 years of age to participate at the KDT, a player development program that is jointly operated with the clubs. Then, the players between the ages of 12 and 18 years who wish to pursue a professional tennis career could take one of the three directions available. The federation decides and chooses the most talented players to train full-time at a secondary school, the ESS, which the federation has especially designed for tennis players. The centralized support services of the ESS are located in one





**Figure 1** — Elite tennis structure, Flanders. TV = Tennis Vlaanderen.

elite training center. Within this center, selected players train under the guidance of the federation coaches and attend and reside in a boarding school. For players who miss out on the ESS selection criteria, or choose to train at their local club, the federation offers the JDT program. This program enables players to receive some additional support from the federation while they train at their club. The remaining pool of players can follow a development pathway in their clubs. They have the option to remain and train with their club throughout their development stage. After the age of 18, the federation provides a professional support framework (i.e., the Profs/Be Gold program) for players who meet the selection criteria and are on track to reach a senior top 100 world ranking. Players not selected can choose to finance their own support team and train with a private coach or with a local tennis club.

Overall, the federation offers both a centralized (i.e., ESS) and a decentralized (i.e., KDT and JDT) approach to tennis player development that allows the federation to collaborate with clubs in joint programs. In conclusion, the context of player development in Flanders suggests that dyadic IORs exist between the federation and the clubs through existing joint programs (e.g., KDT and JDT) that aim to facilitate elite player development. This study examines the ways relationships between the clubs and the federation influence elite player development processes.

## Method

To allow for quality, depth, and richness of data in this exploratory study, a qualitative research approach including document analysis and semistructured interviews

was used. Ethics approval was obtained from the host university to conduct this research (HSL/31/11/HREC).

## Selection of IOR Partners

Two types of organizations were selected for this study: the Flemish tennis federation, as the government-funded and coordinating organization for elite player development, and seven tennis clubs that were actively involved in elite player development through player development programs. The joint programs between the club and the federation are only available to clubs with KDT and/or JDT players. Clubs that do not have any players in any of these programs do not engage in player development. Other clubs may have one or two players in each program or only one of the programs available. In selecting clubs for this study, the research team decided that the strongest representation of players in both of the joint programs (i.e., using the number of their combined KDT and JDT players) would be indicative of the clubs that had the stronger engagement with player development processes and would offer deeper insights into the phenomenon under investigation. Furthermore, suggestions from the federation informed the research team and contributed in the final selection of clubs that engage in elite athlete development.

At the time of data collection during 2014, there were 32 clubs that had at least one KDT player (72 KDT players in total). Of these 32 clubs, only 18 had at least one or more JDT players (19 JDT players in total). To enable the research team to explore IORs in all available joint programs, the club head coaches of the 18 clubs with the most players in both programs were contacted, and 7 clubs agreed to participate in the study.

## Data Collection

The study design incorporated two sources of data collection: (a) documents from the participating organizations and (b) semistructured interviews with club and federation representatives. Using different types of data (i.e., documents and interviews) offered evidence on various dimensions of the same phenomenon and facilitated data-source triangulation (Yin, 1994) and an accurate description of the IORs.

**Documents.** First, publicly available information about the participating organizations, such as websites, strategic plans, promotional materials, and annual reports, was collected and reviewed. Table 1 is an overview of the documents that were used in this study. In total, 360 pages of documents, complemented by webpages of all organizations, were analyzed. A Microsoft Word document was created for each organization where all the details of any type of club–federation interaction were recorded. Using the research question and scope of the study as a guide, these documents were reviewed for details on existing or future relationships between the clubs and the federation. For example, the federation’s strategic plan included an analysis of organizational strengths, weaknesses, and goals. One of these goals was “viewing our existing means and know-how (strength), and viewing the limited possibilities of clubs and coaches for elite player development (weakness), the federation will assure its involvement with the development of all talented and elite players (goal)” (Tennis Vlaanderen, 2013b, p. 4). The result of this process generated 45 single-spaced pages of data, which were analyzed manually using *directed* content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). During this

type of analysis initial coding starts with a theory or relevant research findings and then, during data analysis, the researchers immerse themselves in the data and allow themes to emerge from the data (Hashemnezhad, 2015). These documents, analyzed before the interview transcripts, helped complement the researchers’ knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under investigation and informed the interview guide.

**Semistructured interviews.** Second, representatives ( $n = 7$ ) from seven tennis clubs and the Flemish tennis federation ( $n = 7$ ) participated in semistructured interviews. Using purposive sampling (Patton, 2002), the representatives (hereinafter referred to as interviewees) were chosen based on their role and expertise on elite player development (Table 1).

A semistructured interview guide that consisted of two parts was used to collect data. The first part included questions on organizational capacities to develop elite players. This information was necessary to understand organizational capacity to develop elite players and identify in what areas and in what ways clubs may need the federation’s input and vice versa. Topics such as availability and condition of training programs, facilities, coaching, and financial support were explored. Moreover, the interviewees were asked to reflect on problems they may have encountered with regard to elite player development. For example, questions included “To what extent can the club/federation develop elite players?” or “Which programs are offered to develop elite players?” The second part of the interview included questions on the IORs between clubs and the federation as they related to player development. Specifically, the interviewees were asked about their motives for engaging in IORs, the ways

**Table 1** Organizational Representatives Interviewed and Documents Analyzed

Organization	Representative interviewed	Documents/document sources
Tennis federation	Director, elite tennis <sup>a</sup>	Website
	Coordinator, elite tennis <sup>a</sup>	Annual report 2013 (Tennis Vlaanderen, 2013a, 212 pages)
	Head coach, Men’s Team <sup>a</sup>	Strategic plan 2009–2012 (Tennis Vlaanderen, 2009, 75 pages)
	Head coach, Women’s Team <sup>a</sup>	Strategic plan 2013–2016 (Tennis Vlaanderen, 2013b, 73 pages)
	Coordinator, Kids Development Team <sup>a</sup>	—
	CEO <sup>a</sup>	—
	President <sup>a</sup>	—
Tennis clubs		
Club 1	Head coach (Club 1)	Website
Club 2	Head coach (Club 2)	Website
Club 3	Head coach (Club 3)	Website
Club 4	Head coach (Club 4)	Website
Club 5	Head coach (Club 5)	Website
Club 6	Academy director <sup>b</sup> (Club 6)	Website
Club 7	Academy director (Club 7)	Website

<sup>a</sup>In accordance with ethics clearance, the interviewees from the tennis federation were randomly numbered (TV 1 to TV 7) to protect their identity.

<sup>b</sup>Academy directors are the equivalent to head coaches in larger clubs/academies.

their relationship takes place, and elite athlete development–related outcomes. This included questions such as “What motivates you/your organization to cooperate with the federation/clubs?” “How would you describe the relationship with the federation/clubs?” “How is the relationship managed?” “Is cooperation with the federation/clubs important for player development, and why?” Moreover, interviewees were encouraged to discuss challenges, tensions, and benefits or outcomes of their relationships. The length of the interviews varied from 50 min to 2 hr. The data collected from the clubs and the federation representatives were adequate to reach saturation of themes, which is the point when new categories or variations on existing categories cease to emerge from new data (Soulliere, Britt, & Maines, 2001). Following Sotiriadou and Shilbury’s (2010) recommendation, when information became repetitive and added little if anything to the existing categories or codes, the research team knew it was time to cease collecting data or analyzing the category that had reached saturation.

## Data Analysis

All the interviews were conducted in Dutch. The second named author researcher, who performed the translation, is bilingual. As such, the three-step process of translating, editing, and proofreading is reliable for creating a translation that is true to the original document. Therefore, the research team did not resort to back-translation services. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim, resulting in 273 pages of single-spaced transcripts. Interview transcripts and the Word documents that resulted from the collected documents were saved in NVivo. NVivo research software was used to organize and code the data (Sotiriadou, Brouwers, & Le, 2014). Data analysis was performed using both (a) a priori concepts informed by the literature on IORs and (b) critically informed reflections on the emerging issues encountered in forming, managing, and evaluating relationships between the clubs and the federation. All the data were carefully read and coded, and each concept was reviewed and discussed among the authors. Two of the authors performed the coding, and the results of the data analysis and emerging concepts were reviewed, compared, and discussed among all authors. Once the research team agreed on the concepts, revisions were made as necessary and the codes were tightened up to the point that maximizes mutual exclusivity and exhaustiveness (Weber, 1990). This process allowed the research team to (a) code the same text in the same way, (b) make valid inferences from the text, and (c) safeguard the reliability and consistency of the classification/coding procedure (Weber, 1990). Next, relationships between the concepts were examined to identify higher order categories. This resulted in three higher order categories for IOR formation including (a) common determinants for the clubs and the federation, (b) federation-specific determinants, and (c) club-specific determinants. For IOR management, the two higher order categories that emerged were (a) formal

and (b) informal control mechanisms. The higher order categories for IOR outcomes and evaluation were (a) elite player development, (b) coach development, and (c) club management/development. The most comprehensive quotations were used to illustrate the findings in the results section. In accordance with ethics clearance, the interviewees from the tennis federation were randomly numbered (TV 1 to TV 7) to protect their identity.

## Results on IOR Formation

The emerging themes show that the federation and the clubs had some common determinants that motivated them to form IORs (i.e., individual-level factors, reciprocity, and efficiency). At the same time, there were also a number of organization-specific motivators for IOR formation (i.e., legitimacy and asymmetry for the federation and stability and necessity for the clubs; see Figure 2).

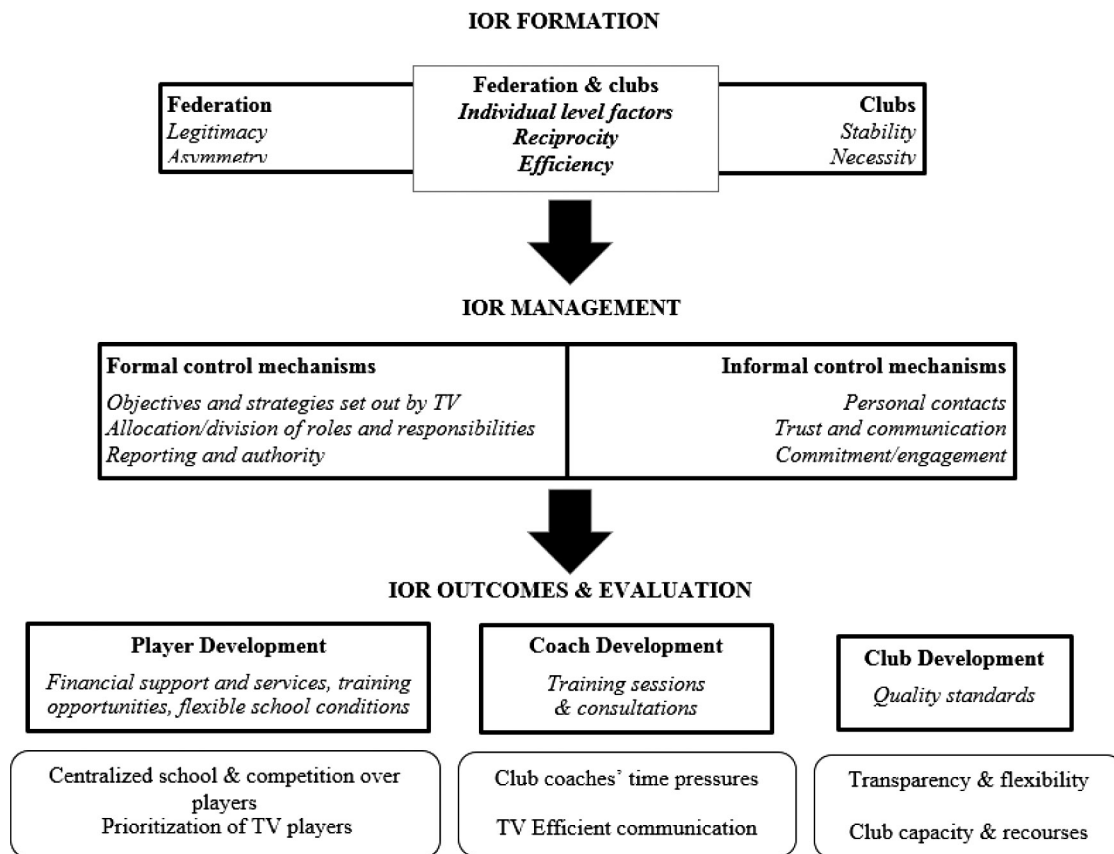
### Common Determinants for the Clubs and the Federation

*Individual-level factors*, such as personal contacts or network of contacts, emerged as important in partnership formation. For example, four club head coaches had contacts within the federation, where they had worked previously. Some of the federation interviewees worked as coaches in the private sector (i.e., clubs), where they created personal values and beliefs that motivated IOR formation between the clubs and the federation. TV 7, for instance, indicated, “I come from a club background myself, maybe that is why I believe so strongly in cooperation with clubs.”

The clubs and the federation formed IORs for *reciprocity* and *efficiency*. *Reciprocity* was a main motive for IOR formation as the federation and clubs had player development as a common goal. As such, club–federation partnerships benefit both entities. The following quote from TV 3 illustrates the mutually beneficial relationship and how the federation was open to the idea of cooperation: “We are open to cooperate with clubs that have an elite sport mentality. They make us stronger and we make them stronger. We need to support cooperation and make sure it grows. It will make us all stronger.” This reciprocity allowed the federation and clubs to combine their competencies to develop talented players:

If there are things that they [clubs] do better, then it would be perfect to let them organize those things. The big strength of the federation is that we are subsidized. What we offer here [federation center] to the players costs lots of money in the clubs. So we need to cooperate, let the clubs do what they do well, and we play our role, that works. (TV 5)

*Efficiency* was also apparent as the federation and clubs expressed the common desire to increase the efficiency of elite player development. However, the two types of organizations expressed efficiency motives



**Figure 2** — Formation, management and evaluation of elite athlete interorganizational relationships (IORs). TV = Tennis Vlaanderen.

in different ways. The federation felt the need to intervene with player development at the club level because some of the clubs lacked the capacity to provide quality development programs, or training and coaching. For example, the federation's policy plan mentioned that "viewing the restricted elite sport possibilities of many clubs and coaches, we will ascertain that we are involved with the development of all talented and elite players" (Tennis Vlaanderen, 2013b, p. 4). Specific goals in the federation's plan included "having an open cooperation with the clubs in which the players are central," "optimize the club-TV relationship," and "work together with club coaches as partners in elite sport" (Tennis Vlaanderen, 2013b, p. 4). The open cooperation of the federation with the clubs was operationalized through joint player development programs (such as KDT) that helped strengthen the expertise and skills of club coaches: "With the start of the KDT, the federation gave more responsibility to the clubs and their qualified coaches. The project aims to increase support for talented players at club level through increasing support and assistance for the club coaches" (Tennis Vlaanderen, 2009, p. 56).

At more advanced levels of player development, the federation was of the opinion that clubs struggled to

provide the necessary support for elite player development. One federation representative indicated,

Clubs can offer good support until players are 12 or 14 years old, but the last step of elite player development is too difficult for them. So, we let the clubs do what they do well and then we offer a leading and coordinating role for additional support. (TV 5)

Clubs mentioned the need for (a) group training sessions for players, (b) coaching expertise, and (c) financial assistance. Clubs maintained that collaborating with the federation allowed club players to attend group training sessions where a large number of the best players of the country train together. This was beneficial, as many clubs did not have a sufficient number of talented players of the same age group to train together. The federation invited club coaches to attend group training sessions allowing them to compare and assess players' progress and exchange information with federation coaches. In addition, clubs indicated that cooperation with the federation coaches was useful as the federation has more expertise with the development of top 100 players: "I have never been a top 100 player, but I find it important that if you support an elite player that you involve someone who has



reached that level himself and [federation coach] has that experience and gives feedback” (Club 7).

### Federation-Specific Determinants

Determinants of partnership formation that were evident for the federation only included *legitimacy* and *asymmetry*. Legitimacy motives were founded on the federation’s desire to enhance its reputation and image as a center of expertise. The federation captured these legitimacy considerations as follows:

In 2008 we made the choice to go down a different path. Back then I had the feeling that we [federation] were acting too much as a club between the other clubs. I mean that we were too busy with developing players that we had in our center, and we overlooked the clubs, other good coaches, and academies that also have the ability to develop elite players. So we took a different philosophy or vision. We said the federation actually needs to be an overarching organization that oversees everything that has to do with elite tennis in Flanders. It is our responsibility to help out the club coaches or academies, so we need to intervene where the club coaches have limitations. (TV 4)

Strategic plans and annual reports further emphasized the federation’s desire to profile itself as center of expertise with a leading role in elite player development: “The federation will strive to create an elite sport climate of which each player wants to be part of. [. . .] The federation will assure that KDT serves all club coaches to improve the development of talented players” (Tennis Vlaanderen, 2013a, p. 12).

Asymmetry, in the form of power and control, emerged as an IOR motive for the federation. TV 5 mentioned, “Ideally we have a coordinating or leading role and the clubs work complementary.” The federation controlled which players were supported, the types of support offered, and the conditions under which players could train at the federation center. Club 7 mentioned how the federation provided assurances that it is always involved with the development of players who perform well:

If a child performs well, the federation is involved. If the child does not develop well, it decreases support and slowly support fades. [. . .] The good players that we have in our club automatically qualify for federation support through their good results at tournaments. So, they receive sufficient support from the federation; each player according to his needs be it financial or know-how.

The two strategies that allowed the federation to control the clubs included the “Youth Fund” and the “flexible status” of talented players. Through the Youth Fund, “an incentive fund that stimulates clubs to offer organized and structured player development” (TV 4), the federation awarded quality labels and subsidies to clubs

that meet certain criteria (Tennis Vlaanderen, 2013a). TV 4 explained that “one of the criteria for which the clubs receive points, and thus money, is the number of club players that participate in the club tests for talent identification.” The federation also played an important role in granting a flexible status to talented players that allowed them to be absent from school to train or participate at international tournaments. The federation had the power to award a flexible status to players and in return required that players meet certain criteria and attend training sessions at the federation.

### Club-Specific Determinants

In addition to efficiency and reciprocity, *stability* and *necessity* emerged as important and club-specific determinants for IOR formation. Collaboration with the federation offered clubs stability as the development of talented players in a club environment is expensive for both the club and the players/parents. Club 5, for instance, explained that “tennis will always remain very expensive for players who are not selected to train in the ESS. You really need parents with a good income to pay for the children’s tennis development.” Clubs were interested in forming IORs with the federation to obtain access to resources including subsidies, international competition support, and player development support. As mentioned earlier, clubs were eligible to receive subsidies if they met certain criteria: “Through the Youth Fund we [clubs] can get subsidies from the federation based on a point system where we get extra points to have KDT players, so we get a bit more subsidies” (Club 3). In addition to direct financial support, the federation could lower the cost for club players to participate at international competitions through providing the opportunity to travel with the federation players and coaches. The excerpt below offers an example comparing the two scenarios:

If a player can join the federation player group and coach [i.e., join the federation players and coaches in participating in international competitions], he needs to pay Euro[s] 25 per day, everything included. If a club player wants to travel privately, he needs to multiply that by 10 if you look at the total cost, covering the coaches’ expenses for flights and accommodation, their time, and so forth. (Club 5)

Necessity emerged as another motive for clubs to enter into IORs with the federation as clubs had to comply with various regulations and meet certain federation requirements. For example, club coaches were required to cooperate with the federation if they wanted their players to obtain a flexible status and funding. As TV 1 explained, “Funding for players with a flexible status is based on how well the club coach cooperates with the federation. Did he attend the coaching education sessions and consultancy sessions? Did he fill out the player reports?” In addition, clubs had to meet certain criteria to receive recognition through quality labels (e.g., youth

friendly club, youth friendly club with recognized kids tennis school, or youth friendly club with recognized kids and elite tennis school). These criteria included, for example, the organization of talent selection tests and competitions, club player performances in competitions, or coach education levels of club coaches (Tennis Vlaanderen, 2013a). Club 1 indicated that “obtaining quality labels is important for the image of the club and it facilitates the attraction of players and also sponsors.”

## Results on IOR Management

This section presents the formal and informal control mechanisms that played a critical role in the management of IORs between the clubs and the federation.

### Formal Control Mechanisms

As Figure 2 shows (in italics), formal control mechanisms are used to manage objectives and strategies and division of roles and responsibilities, as well as the process of reporting and authority. The results showed that the federation has set out clear *objectives and strategies* that facilitated the cooperation with the clubs. For example, to increase success in developing elite players, the federation’s key objective was to be an “open house” that shares support, expertise, and resources with clubs:

The federation states in the policy plan that it wants to be an “open house” and I think we [federation] succeed in this more and more. Everybody is welcome here. Players can use our facilities and expertise. [...] I really see the added value of our center, especially for players who train in a club or academy, because here they can train with other good players. (TV 4)

To operationalize its open house objective, the federation organized and coordinated various player development programs (e.g., KDT for players ages 6 to 12 and JDT for players ages 12 to 18) that the clubs delivered. These programs emphasized the sharing of resources (e.g., subsidized group training sessions at the federation center with federation coaches, training camps, and travel support to participate at international competitions with federation coaches) and information (e.g., consultation sessions for club coaches). As Club 2 explained, “Club coaches play a very important role in the technical development of KDT players so it is the task of the federation to educate its coaches in technical coaching aspects. The consultation sessions are very important for that.”

At the age of 12, the best KDT players are selected to transition into a full-time program at the ESS (see Figure 1), the training center of the federation. The ESS operates in isolation from the clubs and does not involve their cooperation. Club 4 noted that player support is organized and centralized at the ESS: “Financially it is difficult to support elite players at club level whereas at the ESS

everything is organized; tennis training, physio[therapist], strength and conditioning training and travel.” In addition, Club 5 mentioned that “the organization with school is much easier as ESS players only need to go to school 18 hours per week. Here [club], players need to go to school full-time minus six hours, that is a lot more difficult.”

Player development programs, at different development stages, required *different types of support* (cooperation) from the federation. Club 7 illustrated this as follows:

For player X who is in the ATP top 200, the federation provides financial support and a coach to travel a couple weeks a year with the player and provides feedback to me [club coach]. For a U14 player the club coach reports to the federation coach so that federation coaches can monitor the player’s progress. That is important because I am not specialized in U14 development, I don’t know what the player needs to be capable of at the age of 13, 14, [...]. The federation coaches know that very well because they have expertise and can compare with other players. The information exchange about player progress is very important.

The results showed a clear division and *allocation of roles and responsibilities* in the IORs between the federation and club coaches. Club 5 stated that clubs “design the programs for the JDT players in dialogue with the federation because the federation provide guidelines on what the training should contain for players of each age and we try to take that into account.” Another example of clear management of roles related to the federation coaches’ versus the club coaches’ roles. While the federation coaches focused on group training sessions where tactics, match situations, and rallying skills with players of the same level were most important, club coaches were responsible for the technical development of the KDT players at club level. In addition, the federation provided feedback on the player’s technique via the club coach:

Feedback on technical progress of the [KDT/JDT] player always goes via the club coach as he has the final responsibility for the player. So, we don’t make major technical changes to a players’ technique, but we contact the club coach to discuss this. Because, in our opinion, we need to make the club coaches better. (TV 2)

There was evidence that, in return for its support, the federation required that club coaches report on the progress of KDT and JDT players (*reporting and authority*). Club 7 noted that “from the moment that a player receives help from the federation, the club coaches are accountable to the federation based on training schedules, training content and so on.” The management of the reporting system demonstrated the federation’s authority over the club coaches and KDT/JDT players. For example, TV 7 noted, “The club coaches fill out a document with the training schedule of the KDT players. We [federation]

provide guidelines for the weekly and yearly training programs. So in a way we control the clubs.” In addition, based on its jurisdiction, the federation had the authority to decide which players were selected for the programs and received support for international competitions. Club 5 noted that “federation coaches decide which players are selected for the KDT, JDT and ESS programs. We [club] can give our opinion, but the final decision is made by the federation.”

### Informal Control Mechanisms

The informal control mechanisms that emerged were personal contacts, trust and communication, commitment, and engagement. *Personal contacts*, including having a family member or friend who works at the federation, appeared to facilitate the management of IORs. Club 1, for instance, noted, “My son coaches some male players at the federation center so he knows the training programs and completion schedules of the federation players. So we [club] are up-to-date with that.” Moreover, Club 1 continued, “The high performance director of the federation is a good friend of mine and [name of federation coach] has played in our club, so I know a lot of people at the federation which makes contact easy.” Similarly, Club 7 noted that his sister was one of the head coaches in the federation and he was good friends with another head coach. These personal contacts “encourage the cooperation. So automatically, we have a good communication with the federation.” TV 4 explained that “elite tennis is a small world so we [federation] are all closely related [to club coaches].”

It was evident that *trust* was an important informal control mechanism in the management of IORs. The data showed that trust could not be enforced but needed to grow over time. TV 2, for instance, maintained that “they [clubs] need to believe in what we [federation] do, trust us. They should not feel this as if we take their players away. I think that is based on trust.” Clear, open, and direct *communication* between the federation and the club coaches emerged as essential to establish trust. Even though the federation maintained that it “has good contact with the club coaches and shows the respect that they [club coaches] deserve for developing good players” (TV 2), some clubs expressed their concerns regarding their trust toward the federation as follows:

The federation asked one of our players directly to transition to the ESS, without asking me. I learned later about her invitation. The federation really invited her behind my back. We won’t keep players here [club] when we don’t have the capacity to train them, but sometimes the federation takes our players away when we still have the capacity to coach them. That is very frustrating. (Club 4)

Another important attribute of IOR management was the *commitment* to (and in particular club coaches’ *engagement* with) the federation and the federation’s initiatives. Clubs noted that they “need to make time

for it (consultancy sessions)” (Club 2). However, TV 7 explained that some “club coaches don’t make time for consultation sessions because if they have to give up four hours of coaching at their club to attend a consultation session, they lose 150 Euros. They think about their own income.” In response to the issue, TV 4 explained,

We send email invitations and call them to motivate them. Now we have criteria that club coaches need to meet to be a “KDT-coach”: a certain coaching education level, attend consultancy sessions, communicate and report. Otherwise they don’t receive recognition as [a] KDT coach. It is a pity that we have to force it like that.

Federation interviewees further indicated that IOR management required their commitment. However, clubs expressed that the federation prioritized its players (*internal priorities*). For instance, Club 4 argued, “The federation is too much focused on its own players. I doubt if the federation knows what is going on in each club.” From a federation point of view, TV 4 indicated that “I don’t think we could cooperate more with the clubs at the moment. We also have our job, our players here, so we need to make sure we get our work done here first.” Also, TV 7 stated that if the federation was to dedicate more time to club players, it would need more personnel.

## Results on IOR Outcomes and Evaluation

This section presents the findings on IOR outcomes and overall evaluation as well as emerging tensions in evaluating organizational partnerships and initiatives or joint programs.

### Elite Player Development

The overall outcome of the club–federation partnership with respect to player development is captured by TV 3 as follows: “The better we [the federation] cooperate with clubs and coaches, the better for elite player development in Flanders.” The joint player programs resulted in improved athlete development outcomes. Specifically, the clubs indicated that the cooperation with the federation helped achieve better quality player development as follows:

KDT works really well for us and the players. Players really benefit from being part of KDT as they have more opportunities to play with better players and get expert coaching at the federation. The mentality, attitude and training atmosphere it [federation] creates through the KDT really helps to coach and educate the players more professionally. (Club 3)

The interviewees also agreed on the beneficial outcomes of the ESS to player development, including financial support, training partners, centralized support



services, and flexible school conditions. Club 2 outlined the benefits of the ESS as follows:

For [name of player], the choice was very clear. “Go to the Elite Sport School because we can no longer help you here, we don’t have training partners and there is no budget from the parents for private coaching.”

Even though it was generally accepted that the ESS program was a logical continuation for the best players to further develop, some clubs (in particular the clubs that had the resources to retain and develop players beyond the age of 12) were skeptical about “letting their best players go.” It appeared that the centralized services of the ESS were a *source of tension* over the best players for well-resourced clubs capable of developing athletes further, as they perceived the existence of ESS as a way of “handing over” their best players to the federation without receiving any formal recognition for their contribution to player development. Club 6 noted that “unconsciously, there is some competition with the federation. If we see that our best players systematically go to the ESS, then I am almost better off to make them just not good enough so that they are not selected.” In their evaluations, four clubs expressed their frustration with the outcomes of the ESS. For example, Club 6 indicated,

The federation needs to lay out the strategy, but not at the expense of what goes well in the clubs. For example, [name of player] in our club meets the criteria to train at the ESS. But where did she “deserve” these criteria? Here [club]. And who gets the reward? That player . . . she is in very good hands here too and we have facilities to train her further. If all talented club players are invited to train at the ESS, then what’s in it for the clubs? Clubs invest time in the better players and when push comes to shove players leave. Clubs do not receive much recognition. So who bears the brunt of having a good player development system in the club? That is actually the clubs themselves. The federation really needs to watch out that it does not obstruct the clubs who can offer equal quality development to players.

All clubs agreed that since the start of the joint programs (KDT and JDT), “the federation opened up itself and lets players develop predominantly in clubs with club coaches, whilst investing more in coaching the club coach to assure quality training” (Club 1). However, the clubs felt that the federation *prioritizes their own players*, and some clubs expressed the opinion that the federation should be more supportive of club players:

The federation acts like a club that operates next to the other clubs, and that it does not really act like a federation. The federation should take care of all players, also if they chose to train in a club. Even though the federation is opening-up now and tries to cooperate more with clubs, it still doesn’t. (Club 4)

Indeed, in their overall evaluation of partnership outcomes, the clubs expressed their hopes with respect to what Club 3 captured best: “I hope that the federation will support more players in the clubs, especially when they go travel for competitions. And hopefully, they will let the players longer in their clubs to develop” (Club 3).

## Coach Development

Clubs recognized the benefits of club coaches’ being offered opportunities to attend group training sessions of their players as well as participating in consultancy sessions to share information with federation coaches. The following quote illustrates the advantages of coaches’ attending group training sessions of their players:

We are invited to attend some of the group training sessions at the center which is a big advantage because then we can position the level of our players within their age group. I only have one very good U11 player at the club, so attending the group training sessions allows monitoring his progress compared to his age group. Also, I can discuss his [club player] progress with the federation coaches, and then they often discuss technical aspects with us which are always very interesting. (Club 2)

However, participating in consultations was somewhat problematic due to the nature of *coaching at club level*. Club 2, for instance, noted that “the consultancy sessions are really worth it for us . . . the feedback is worth it.” However, “Tennis coaching at club level is often a secondary activity for people with another full time job” (TV 4), and other *work commitments* interfere with coaching commitments. TV 4 explained the problematic nature of the club coaches’ commitments as follows: “It is difficult to motivate club coaches to come to the federation center.” In assessing the situation and in acknowledgment of the restricted club coaches’ time, the federation indicated that

We could not communicate more, but maybe more efficiently. Communication can be done by phone or email, but most important is to meet the player and club coach in person at the federation, so that the player can play and we can discuss the player together. But then the club coaches need to reschedule their club training sessions. So we try to limit this to only a couple times a year. (TV 1)

Club 3 noted how the benefits of coach development and information sharing translate into athlete development as follows: “The more information we can share together, the more visions we can bring together about a player, it all adds value for the development of the player.”

## Club Management/Development

The use of labels (i.e., points system) appeared to stimulate clubs to meet certain *quality standards*: “The



quality labels are good. It indicates what a club stands for and what they do. The way the criteria are made for the clubs is a bit complex, but it is good. It is also not easy to label the clubs" (Club 3). Club 2 added, "Most clubs who have the labels deserve it. And it stimulates to achieve the criteria. You need to invest in that, you need to make sure that your children go play on the Kinder tour, you need to motivate them and their parents." Also, Club 1 added that another benefit of that program for clubs was that "if we have the labels, it is a bit easier to find sponsors."

In evaluating the labels, some criticism also emerged. Even though quality labels appeared to stimulate clubs to meet certain quality standards, there was lack of *transparency* and *flexibility*. Club 7 noted that "how the club develops talented players appears not important to the federation, it is how you tell them you do it, it has to be according to their guidelines, to receive points." Club 6 noted "I think it is ridiculous that the federation cannot show some flexibility so that a player can train extra hours during school time. I think, sometimes the federation is too strict with its rules." This quote is an example that captures the ways in which some clubs were irritated by the federation's power and the necessity to comply with the rules.

Overall, clubs expressed positive views on their partnership with the federation and the ways their relationships have *improved over time*. Club 5 summarized this as follows:

I think there has been already a positive evolution of the federation. Before it was the clubs against the federation, now it is cooperation. I think the federation should invest even more in the clubs and provide the clubs with support so that the clubs can get even better. If the clubs become better, then the players will become better. . . . if the clubs are stronger, the players can develop longer in their clubs.

The results on overall club satisfaction and partnership assessment varied depending on the club's capacity and resources. Specifically, well-resourced clubs with adequate athlete and coach development expertise expressed a different opinion as to the overall value of their partnerships with the federation than less resourced clubs. TV 1 drew a comparison as follows:

I think that is a good system for the younger players with younger coaches who don't have much experience, in the smaller clubs. But once you have a good organization, where you have your own reports and aims and programs for the players, the federation reporting is just extra work, and you can question the added value.

It appeared that these partnerships "work well" for clubs that see value in the federation's involvement with player development and could use even more support. However, for the well-resourced clubs the evaluation of their overall partnership was not as favorable:

Actually, we don't need the federation. I mean, what is their added value for us? Do our players get better when they train a couple times at the federation? It is difficult to measure. Is it a hassle for our players to go train there? Yes definitely. It means additional communication, reporting, while we have a system ourselves that is really good. We need to put our reports in the Dropbox system. (TV 1)

Similarly, the value of the federation's involvement with coach development was met with skepticism: "Those consultations for the coaches . . . there is nothing we did not know yet. We have a lot of expertise here. Our coaches have experience, so maybe we need those consultation sessions less than other coaches at smaller clubs" (TV 1).

## Discussion

Developing elite tennis players was a common goal for the federation and clubs, and this reciprocity confirms that convergence of objectives (see Kouwenhoven, 1993) can be a condition for IOR formation. Clubs were interested in accessing financial benefits, gaining club coach expertise, and enabling club players to participate in group training sessions and at international tournaments under the guidance of federation coaches. The importance of obtaining resources in forming IORs is congruent with the findings of Babiak (2007), who argued that resources obtained through partnering can add strategic, functional, and operational value to the organizations. This finding is consistent with previous research (e.g., Alexander et al., 2008; Babiak, 2007), suggesting that organizations seek partnerships with organizations that have more expertise to use external knowledge to increase the efficiency of programs. In its role as the leading and coordinating organization for player development, the federation was also interested in forming IORs with clubs and sharing resources and information aimed at strengthening the clubs' capacity and club coaches' expertise in relation to player development. For the federation, efficiency reflected its ambition to ensure clubs can provide quality player development programs.

The federation's effort to portray itself as an open house, where players can train, get advice, and receive support, represents a strategy used to enhance its image and status and a means to legitimize its position within the sport system in Flanders. Image and reputation are important intangible resources that are derived from combinations of internal investments (the federation's efforts) and external evaluations (club evaluations; Kong & Farrell, 2010). In nonprofit settings, strong image and reputation are linked to higher quality and delivery of services or programs and the creation of a competitive advantage (Boyd, Bergh, & Ketchen, 2010). This stance accurately reflects the definition of legitimacy as a "generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and

definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Indeed, evidence in this study supports Suchman’s (1995) seminal work on organizational legitimacy, which suggests that organizational efforts to strengthen legitimacy have an effect on how other entities (i.e., clubs) perceive the organization as more meaningful and trustworthy. The federation’s efforts for legitimacy is deeply rooted in the traditional hierarchy of sport structures where federations, as governing bodies for sport, are typically superior to clubs in the sport system (Shilbury & Kellett, 2011).

The results illustrate IOR power relationships and the positioning of the two types of organizations in the sport system in Flanders. According to Etzioni’s (1964) categorization of power, the federation exercised “utilitarian” power, generated through its financial resources (e.g., equipment, programs, financial support to clubs) and “normative” power formed through symbols of prestige and esteem (e.g., quality labels). Quality labels (e.g., the Youth Fund) emerged as a way for the federation to exercise power and control over clubs, expressing an asymmetry in their relationship. At the same time, it was necessary for clubs to comply with federation regulations and meet certain criteria to receive recognition through the quality labels. Hence, the federation’s asymmetry was directly linked to the club’s necessity for IOR formation. As predicted theoretically, relationship formation on the contingency of asymmetry “creates interdependencies that necessitate the loss of decision-making latitude and discretion” (Birškytė, 2012, p. 178). Furthermore, the type of quality label determined the amount of subsidies provided to clubs. To achieve stability, clubs tended to comply with the federation’s rules and tried to achieve high-quality labels. The emergence of stability as a factor in partnering with the federation is not surprising given that previous research has highlighted the high need for sport clubs to attain resources (Wicker & Breuer, 2011). Particularly at a competitive level, sports can be time and cost intensive, for both the athletes and the sports club (Breuer & Wicker, 2009). Hence, clubs with competitive athletes tend to have higher expenditures for coaches’ salaries, training lessons, and competition fees (Wicker, 2011).

The results suggest that the management and evaluation of club–federation IORs revolved around player development programs (e.g., joint player development programs for players under the age of 12). Even though the joint player development programs represented a strategy that promoted harmonious relationships and facilitated elite player development, the federation’s centralized program (i.e., the ESS) for players over the age of 12 was a source of tension for clubs that felt capable of continuing to develop these players yet their players would transition to the ESS. Specifically, some clubs expressed their frustration in losing their best players to the ESS without receiving any recognition for their time and effort in player development. An interesting finding from a study on the effectiveness of ESS in Flanders (De Bosscher, De Knop, & Vertonghen, 2016) revealed that ESS athletes highly commended the quality of club coaches and coaching services offered at club level

instead of the ESS. Similar to MacLean et al.’s (2011) findings on basketball clubs’ losing their best players to rival clubs, the current study highlighted that these tensions can also be evident between clubs and the federation, articulated through clubs’ concerns over losing their best players to train in the ESS. This centralized program appeared to create friction in IORs as it is likely that these clubs lost trust in the federation to develop players after the age of 12. This collaboration–competition dichotomy was evident in Babiak’s (2007) finding that reciprocity stimulated cooperation and at the same time having the same goal caused conflict, power, and control issues. Babiak and Thibault (2009) also noted that even though organizations in the Canadian sport system collaborated, they also competed on different levels for resources, including athletes.

Clear division of roles was an essential approach in coordinating IORs. Specifically, the federation and the clubs were clear in relation to the joint programs and the role of club coaches in those programs as the parties responsible for the development of talented players. In the division of roles, the federation was clearly responsible for offering guidance, feedback, and consultancy to club coaches and players, which facilitated the coordination of IORs. Clearly defined roles and responsibilities imply a well-managed relationship (e.g., Babiak & Thibault, 2008, 2009; Frisby et al., 2004) and accountability. In addition, written reports were a way of formally exchanging information and sharing knowledge on programs and aspects of athlete progress. Division of roles, responsibilities, and reporting mechanisms are typical traits of highly formalized sport organizations (Theodoraki & Henry, 1994). Organizational structures characterized by formalized procedures, roles, and programs and specialized roles for volunteers are indicative of “the Boardroom” design archetype (Kikulis, Slack, & Hinings, 1992). In the boardroom domain, the acceptance of public/government funds places greater pressure on recipients to satisfy the government’s interest in the development of elite athletes and their performance at international competitions. Consequently, organizations are evaluated in terms of the bureaucratic practices they have in place and the support they provide for domestic and high-performance sport program units (Macintosh & Whitson, 1990). By implication, federations focus exclusively on their national high-performance sport programs and introduce more professional control over the direction of their organization. This further explains the asymmetry in club–federation relationships.

There was evidence that formalization enabled the federation to be explicit about its structure and requirements in relation to elite athlete development. However, formalization was also a source of frustration for club coaches who had difficulties complying with several reporting requirements. Lucidarme et al. (2014) suggested that when working with volunteers, or people that have another full-time job and engage in a partnership after work hours, there is less time to commit in that partnership. Hence, it is likely that when club coaches

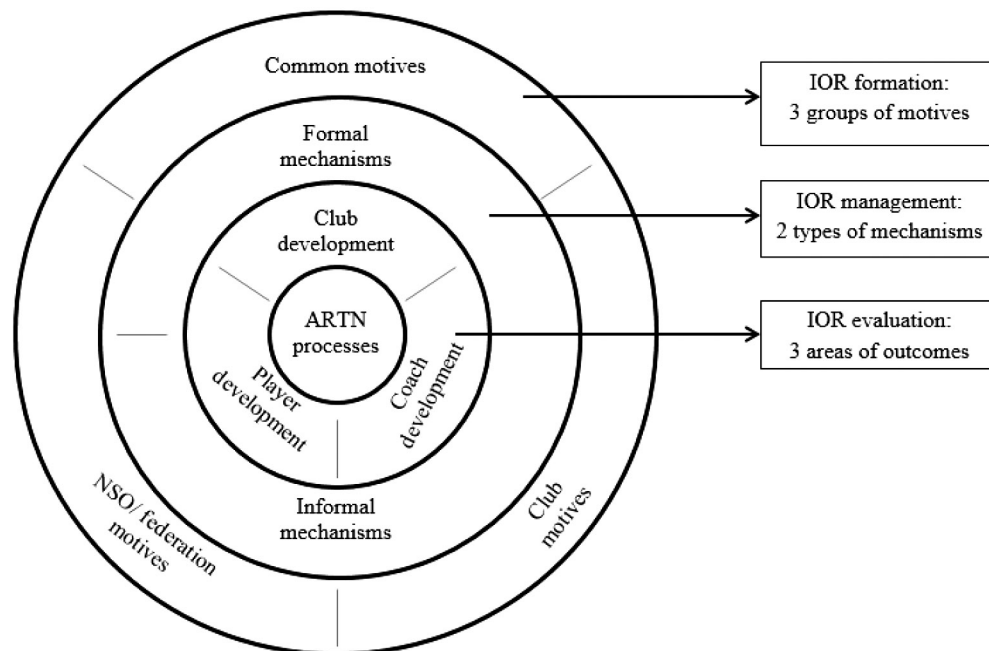
have another full-time job, their availability to commit to the federation's training sessions, consultancies, and reporting requirement is restricted. Moreover, the results showed that club coaches often prioritized the operation of their own club. Similarly, the federation indicated the need to focus its resources on its own players first, before providing support to external players. Based on the results, prioritizing their internal goals may be explained on the basis of the federation's call for additional personnel to foster its cooperation with club coaches. Hence, there may be room for both types of organization to manage their IORs better and improve their player development outcomes.

### Theoretical and Practical Considerations

From a theoretical point of view, this paper complements existing studies (e.g., Alexander et al., 2008; Frisby et al., 2004; Misener & Doherty, 2012, 2014) as it extends the application of IORs to elite athlete development (e.g., Babiak, 2007). In particular, this paper contributes to the ongoing discussion on the ways IORs enable sport organizations to achieve common goals, in this instance, elite athlete development. Figure 2 is a preliminary presentation of player development IORs between a federation and tennis clubs. This dyadic examination of IORs enabled the depiction of IOR motives for forming relationships and the mechanisms used to manage these relationships (see Figure 2). It also allowed the identification of the positive role that joint programs and clear divisions of roles have on elite athlete development. Joint athlete development programs allowed the clubs and the

federation to work together, exchange information, and increase efficiencies in their operations (Oliver, 1990).

Sotiriadou, Brouwers, and De Bosscher (2016) explained that despite some variations across countries, clubs, national and state organizations, as well as education and private providers are all key partners in elite pathways and create an integrated network of IOR partners. Figure 3 shows that at the heart of IORs between the NSO and the clubs are the ARTN *athlete development outcomes* (Green, 2005; Sotiriadou et al., 2008). This study demonstrated that for sport organizations to achieve these outcomes and maximize effectiveness in athlete development, there is a need for cooperation, consultation, and involvement from both types of organizations. Specifically, Figure 3 shows that there are three categories of *motives* that can drive the formation of IORs. These are the motives that drive the NSO to form partnerships with clubs, the motives that drive clubs to work with the NSO, and motives common to both types of organizations. These categories of formation motives (or antecedents to IOR formation) lead into two types of *management control mechanisms*: formal and informal. Control mechanisms can either facilitate or potentially hinder athlete development progression in three key areas: coach development, club development, and player development. In particular, partnerships are particularly useful during the *attraction*, *retention*, and *transition* processes of athlete development. Hence, it is concluded that IORs between the NSO and clubs/academics can result in efficiencies in athlete development. Efficiencies occur in spite of situations (e.g., centralization of key services, prioritization of internal athletes, and time pressures of



**Figure 3** — The influence of interorganizational relationship (IOR) on the attraction, retention/transition, and nurturing (ARTN) processes of athlete development. NSO = national sporting organization.



coaches) where partners (e.g., well-resourced clubs) are confronted with issues (e.g., losing elite players to the ESS, being unable to nurture them beyond a certain age) that represent barriers or potential areas of conflict in relation to effective athlete progression within the ARTN processes. This finding reiterates that the final stage of athlete development (the *nurturing* process in the ARTN) in the system is occurring at a higher level (e.g., national) and to a degree controlled by NSOs.

The findings in this study pinpoint the influence that the centralized services the federation offered to clubs has had on the evaluation for IORs. Specifically, well-resourced clubs expressed dissatisfaction in their overall evaluation as centralized training, poaching of athletes, and compulsory coaching consultancy sessions were of a lesser value to them. These findings offer new knowledge in the area of managing elite sport because they link (a) sport development outcomes to organizational capacity and (b) organizational capacity to the centralized approach in managing elite sports. It can be concluded that, in the case of Flanders, a centralized system can present a barrier to elite athlete development for the most resource-capable clubs. These findings help augment a growing body of literature on managing high-performance sport. Specifically, in their study on the organizational capacity of five sport systems (including Flanders), Truyens, De Bosscher, and Sotiriadou (2016) examined the role of organizational resources and demonstrated that different sport systems have diverse resource configurations, especially in relation to program centralization, athlete development, and funding prioritization.

Various formal and informal control mechanisms (e.g., Babiak & Thibault, 2008) illustrated the ways these organizations interact and the challenges they encounter. These interactions and challenges represent various managerial and practical implications. Given that the clubs' capacities to deliver player development pathways vary, federations should gain knowledge of the clubs' and club coaches' capacity to develop athletes and aim to tailor their support and manage their partnerships on that premise. For example, clubs with only a few KDT players might need more group training sessions at the federation center than clubs with many KDT players that can occasionally organize their own high-level group training.

This knowledge and adaptation of IORs based on clubs' capacity to deliver players at various development stages is significant for another reason. The club–federation IORs for developing players under the age of 12 (e.g., joint program KDT) were in principle harmonious. However, their IORs became strained as tensions emerged when clubs felt undermined and lost their best players to the ESS. These clubs received no recognition for developing players who met selection criteria to train at the ESS. This tension and lack of recognition could potentially undermine the drive for these clubs to stay interested and engaged with player development. In response, federations might have to consider allowing players to train longer at well-resourced clubs with their club coach, and invest more in providing external support to the clubs

(e.g., financial), club coaches (e.g., consultancy sessions), and players (e.g., international tournament support and group training), instead of centralizing the best players at the ESS from the age of 12. Moreover, a rewards system (e.g., subsidies, equipment, or training support) that enhances club capacities to deliver player development outcomes may be an essential strategy to manage IORs tensions and encourage clubs to continue enabling elite player development. Clubs that have the resources to develop elite players might welcome some flexibility from the federation to implement player development programs more autonomously.

## Conclusion and Future Research Directions

The examination of IORs between local tennis clubs and a tennis federation provided insights into their roles, actions, and interactions (Andersen et al., 2015) within the elite player development system in Flanders. Even though the results of this study may be relevant to other sports similar to tennis (e.g., middle to late specialization, commercialized sports, or sports where clubs engage in athlete development), it is important to interpret the findings with caution as the focus of this study was on a specific sport within a specific sport system. Hence, it is likely that in other sports or countries IOR formation and management between clubs and the federation may vary widely. As Kikulis et al. (1992) argued, investigations of a set of organizations “require a consideration of the unique organizational interactions and the context in which they have developed” (p. 348). For instance, early specialization sports (e.g., gymnastics) might require federations to set up elite athlete development–related IORs with clubs at an earlier stage of athlete development. Similarly, there are sports where athletes transition from another activity (e.g., transition from gymnastics to diving or aerial skiing). It is likely that the club–federation IORs for the organizations to which athletes transfer might be less prominent or important for athlete development. Therefore, as Kikulis et al. (1992) predicted, future research should continue exploring sport-specific IOR interactions and context.

A further consideration is the potential limitations that examining a relatively small region (Flanders, the Dutch-speaking community of Belgium) may present to this study. Flanders covers an area of 13,522 km<sup>2</sup> and has a population of 6.2 million (Belgian Federal Government, 2013). Hence, Flanders is a small region in comparison with some tennis champion powerhouses including Spain, France, and the United States. It is likely that the geographic proximity between clubs and the federation in Flanders facilitates a coordinated approach to player development and the implementation of joint programs. In the case of Flanders, it is relatively easy to organize group training session, and coach consultancy sessions do not require excessive travel, management, or coordination other than clear communication. In larger countries, IOR



formation and management may present challenges due to distance and access to, and costs associated with, transportation or travel time. In addition, the presence of RSOs or SSOs in larger or federated countries (e.g., Canada and Australia) means that IORs may not be dyadic, and thus, may be more difficult to manage (Alexander et al., 2008). Therefore, future research is recommended to examine how IORs may facilitate elite athlete development in larger countries, how these countries overcome challenges related to distance, and the involvement of more than two partner organizations.

Last, this study offers insights into IOR formation and management at a certain point in time. Pressures for clubs to manage athlete development in a professional and efficient way can lead to increasing their expertise and capacities (Sotiriadou & Wicker, 2013). As clubs improve the quality of player development programs, their coaches gain more expertise and knowledge. As larger numbers of clubs achieve high standards, it is likely that interactions with the federation will change over time. Therefore, federations might need to adapt their joint programs and support to the clubs according to the growing athlete development capacities of clubs. Moreover, the federation might need to consider the role and operation of its ESS as tensions between the federation and clubs are likely to grow when more clubs can provide high quality player development programs and developmental continuity for players over the age of 12. Hence, as Alexander et al. (2008) suggested, it is important to explore the ways IORs evolve over time. A study of this nature would allow sport organizations to revisit the management of IORs over time and adapt accordingly.

In this study, joint elite athlete development programs and transparency in roles and responsibilities represent the cornerstones of federation-club cooperation. IORs appear to operate under a fine line as a frequently harmonious cooperation can be tainted when organizations prioritize their own interests. The federation's centralized services can also disturb IOR balance as clubs lose successful athletes to the training center, without recognition of their contributions and with no real opportunities to offer development continuity to their athletes. To strategically foster IORs, clubs' interest and motivation to continue their elite development contribution is essential because undermanaged partnerships between federations and clubs can result in losing the clubs as a key stakeholder in elite player development.

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