“Do they love us? Do they hate us?”: Examining nonprofits’ perspectives on their relationships with professional sport organizations

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Abstract

Professional sport organizations are increasingly engaging in corporate social responsibility initiatives within their local communities. While literature has examined why professional sport organizations work with nonprofits, the beneficiaries of these partnerships tend to be dismissed from the literature. Even though professional sport organizations and nonprofit organizations share a reciprocal relationship, scholarship tends to solely focus on the perspectives of just the professional sport organizations. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to allow nonprofit organizations to share their experiences and perceptions based upon their relationships with professional sporting organizations, and to examine what unique benefits and challenges nonprofit organizations encounter by partnering with professional sport organizations. Drawing on the collaboration continuum, the current study accounted for the (de)evolution of relationships between nonprofit organizations and professional sport organizations over time. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 26 nonprofit practitioners who have collaborated with professional sport organizations in the United States. Thematic analysis of each interview was conducted to find commonalities between nonprofit organizations' perspectives. The findings indicate that while nonprofit organizations across all three stages of the collaboration continuum value their relationship with professional sport organizations, they hope that professional sport organizations adjust their utilization of their unique resources to better fit the specific needs of nonprofit organizations.

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Abbreviation	Definition
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CSA	Corporate social advocacy
CSR	Corporate social responsibility
DEI	Diversity, equity, and inclusion
IOC	International Olympic Committee
FIFA	Fédération Internationale de Football Association
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, and other sexual orientations and gender identities
MLB	Major League Baseball
MLS	Major League Soccer
NBA	National Basketball Association
NFL	National Football League
NHL	National Hockey League
PR	Public relations
PSO	Professional sport organization
WNBA	Women's National Basketball Association

“Do they love us? Do they hate us?”:

Examining nonprofits’ perspectives on their relationships with professional sport organizations

Professional sport organizations offer golden opportunities for contributing to positive changes in society. For instance, the Cleveland Guardians of Major League Baseball (MLB) found that one out of every two fans who attended a Guardian home game learned something new because of the teams’ informative in-game content and activations based on diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (Cleveland Guardians, 2025). Corporate social responsibility initiatives, such as the Guardian’s, are one of the most considered notions in the field of sport management (Walzel et al., 2018). To date, academic literature on both professional sports and corporate social responsibility examines why professional sport organizations partake in community-serving initiatives. Inadvertently, scholarship on both professional sport organizations and corporate social responsibility fails to acknowledge and assess the perceptions and expectations of the nonprofit organizations—the medium in which most professional sport organizations deliver corporate social responsibility (Formentin et al., 2021). By better understanding the actual needs of nonprofits, professional sport organizations can better leverage their assets to contribute more efficiently and effectively to society.

Thus far, sport management and sport sociology scholars have examined professional sport organizations’ (PSOs) point of view when it comes to implementing corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives in their community (Formentin & Bortree, 2019). Such CSR initiatives include PSO front office staff volunteering at food drives, or PSOs providing game tickets to families with low socio-economic status (Formentin, 2014). PSOs recognize that they are expected to be socially responsible towards their communities because of their unique and

rare resources that most industries cannot reach, such as media access, 'celebrity' athletes and coaches, and state-of-the-art facilities (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009; Breitbarth et al., 2015; Carlini et al., 2021). However, this past literature overlooks the perceptions and needs from the nonprofits who partner with PSOs (Formentin et al., 2021). As such, it is unclear if nonprofits derive value from working with PSOs, as well as to what extent such collaborations contribute to nonprofits' goals and mission. Studying nonprofits' perspectives can help inform more effective models of nonprofit-PSO collaborations.

To date, only a few known studies have provided insights from nonprofits collaborating with PSOs (e.g., Formentin, 2014; Formentin & Bortree, 2019; Formentin et al., 2021). Formentin and colleagues' studies have explored the nonprofit-PSO relationship in the context of public relations and care ethics, finding that nonprofit practitioners prefer being in caring relationships with PSOs that are built upon trust, mutual exchange, human flourishment, and responsiveness to nonprofits' needs. These studies also alluded to the benefits that nonprofits yield when working with PSOs, wherein the unique aspects of sports help nonprofits gain recognition through the use of celebrity athletes and large audiences. Moreover, these studies found that nonprofits also face barriers when working with PSOs. In particular, nonprofits felt as though they were restricted to the PSOs' needs and schedules rather than the necessities and availability of the nonprofits. Furthermore, nonprofits perceived communicating with PSOs as much more difficult than communicating with non-sporting partners (Formentin, 2014; Formentin & Bortree, 2019; Formentin et al., 2021). In order to explore the functions of CSR in professional sport and its impact on society, there is a need to be more attentive to those who presumably benefit in this two-way relationship that otherwise tends to favor the needs of PSOs. While research has shed light on the fact that PSOs' CSR efforts can contribute to the betterment

of society, the actual impact of these efforts are yet to be fully discovered (Lacey & Kennett-Hensel, 2016). Therefore, the purpose of the current study is to build upon Formentin and colleagues' studies in public relations, as well as relevant literature in sport management and sociology literature to better understand how PSOs' CSR initiatives are perceived by their partnering nonprofits. Drawing upon Austin's (2000) collaboration continuum, the current study also explores the nature of each nonprofit-PSO collaboration to identify optimal practices for PSOs to foster and maintain their relationships with nonprofits.

The current study applies Austin's (2000) nonprofit-business collaboration continuum model to the professional sporting context to better understand the types of relationships that nonprofits and PSOs acquire. Focusing on one metropolitan area sports market in the United States, 26 semi-structured interviews with nonprofit practitioners were conducted in order to understand nonprofits' perspectives on their collaborations with PSOs. Upon analysis, the findings of this study indicate that nonprofits across all stages of the collaboration continuum are appreciative of their relationships with PSOs, but yearn for PSOs to better use their unique resources to fit the demands of nonprofits' in need. Therefore, this current study aims to make significant contributions to various disciplines (i.e., public relations, sport management, and sport sociology), and has critical practical implications for PSOs and the communities that they serve.

Literature Review

This literature review will begin by defining corporate social responsibility and why corporations partake in this phenomenon. Next, the literature review will define the ways in which professional sport organizations practice corporate social responsibility with nonprofit organizations. From there, the literature review will briefly outline the scarce amount of research

on the perspectives of nonprofits who partner with professional sport organizations. This literature review will conclude by addressing the gaps in the literature and seek areas of improvement that can be applied to the professional sports industry.

Corporate Social Responsibility

The "brilliant" term corporate social responsibility "means something, but not always the same thing, to everybody" (Votaw, 1972, p. 25). Despite decades of research and implementation of CSR, scholars have not settled on a singular definition of this phenomenon. The most popular definitions of CSR stem from business literature, including Carroll (1979), who asserts that "[T]he social responsibility of business encompasses the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary expectations that society has of organizations at a given point in time" (p. 500). Herein, the economic responsibilities are most important, and refer to the need for corporations to make a profit. Beyond economics, corporations must also encompass legal responsibilities by obeying the law. Next, corporations must be ethical by acting in a consistent manner alongside societal expectations that go beyond the law. Lastly, corporations must fulfill their discretionary expectations whereby they partake in voluntary activities that benefit society that also go beyond societal expectations. An aspect of Carroll's (1979) definition that must be taken into consideration is that the issues corporations take on to fulfill their CSR duties change over time and across different industries. With corporations and CSR practices evolving, recent literature is revamping the ways in which CSR is framed and executed.

As of 2025, corporations are still in tune with definitions, such as Brown and Dacin's (1997), whereby CSR reflects a corporation's "status and activities with respect to its perceived societal obligations" (p. 68). Such obligations improve the workplace while also going "above and beyond what companies are legally required to do" (Vogel, 2005, p. 2). However, going

"above and beyond" depends solely on the corporation and their most vital needs at any given point in time, such as pharmaceutical company Pfizer, whose goal is to "help build healthier communities around the world" by providing monetary grants to nonprofits across the world in times of natural crises (Pfizer, 2025, para. 1). Along with various definitions of CSR and how it has evolved, comes various issues that are seen as being 'socially responsible'. Literature is continuously refining how CSR is defined. While there is no explicit type of issue or cause that must be addressed through CSR, the overall premise of this phenomenon is still that corporations are responsible for their actions that surpass their firm's interests while simultaneously embracing "societal concerns into their operations" (Cobourn & Frawley, 2017, p. 113). CSR tactics depend on the business who executes the socially responsible initiatives.

Depending on the academic discipline, and in some cases throughout one discipline, the meaning of CSR still remains inconsistent. For instance, in the realm of sport management, CSR can either be seen as CSR *through* sport or CSR *of* sport (Rowe et al., 2019). The former refers to non-sporting organizations using the power of sport to reach their commercial goals while establishing CSR initiatives (Walters, 2009). To illustrate, Coca-Cola, a beverage company, awarded $1,500 to the "Water for Schools" program across the continent of Africa every time a goal was scored during the 2010 Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup (Levermore, 2013). Conversely, the latter form of sport CSR alludes to sport organizations engaging in socially responsible activities (Babiak & Wolfe, 2013). CSR of sport includes initiatives, such as the Women's National Basketball Association's (WNBA) Washington Mystics Fund that supports opportunities for girls in basketball by dedicating equipment, clinics, and court refurbishments to basketball programs across the Washington D.C. metropolitan area (Washington Mystics, 2024). Despite the variability between CSR definitions, disciplines can

agree that CSR focuses on corporations ‘doing the right thing’ by fulfilling societal needs (Sheth & Babiak, 2010; Yang & Babiak, 2021). But what is considered the ‘right thing’ for corporations to take on and what is not?

As the United States political climate dramatically shifted in the early 2020s, consumers made it clear that they expect corporations to address social issues, such as racial injustices and the COVID-19 pandemic (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2020). With questions surrounding ethics, or ‘doing the right thing’, becoming of rising concern for corporations, it became apparent that CSR was needed more now than ever as social issues prevailed across the United States (Barnett et al., 2020). CSR intends to result in financial benefits and a ‘good guy’ reputation for corporations that partake in socially responsible initiatives (Hong & Li, 2020). But with American society becoming further polarized with a vast gap between the Democratic and Republican political parties, consumers are developing enhanced viewpoints of corporations depending on corporations' deemed political stance (Gracia & Hartig, 2024). With such polarization occurring, consumers may either boycott or support a corporation based on value alignment (Rim et al., 2022). One of the latest corporations many consumers are boycotting is the general merchandise retailer, Target. In January of 2025, Target decided to phase out its diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, cutting ties with Black and LGBTQ+ companies, resulting in a national boycott (Karnowski & The Associated Press, 2025). With this example in mind, many corporations tend to avoid any ‘controversial’ CSR issues, such as taking a political stance, to avoid any possible conflict between stakeholders that would put their relationship at jeopardy (Anderson et al., 2024; Dodd & Supa, 2014; Sparvero & Chalip, 2022). Scholars refer to these ‘controversial’ stances made by corporations as ‘corporate social advocacy’, or ‘CSA’ (Hong & Li, 2020).

Corporations tend to steer away from CSA in order to avoid the possibility of turning their stakeholders away. In general, corporations partake in CSR initiatives that support widely accepted issues, such as decreasing obesity in the early stage of life or enhancing educational access for individuals in need (Babiak & Wolfe, 2013; Kihl & Tainsky, 2013; Lou et al., 2024). CSR initiatives focus on 'non-controversial' or 'non-offensive' societal issues that are largely accepted causes corporations and their stakeholders can agree upon improving, such as charitable giving to youth-focused organizations and providing resources to disaster relief (Hydock et al., 2020; Lou et al., 2024). Hence, CSR provides general support for societal good that most individuals and corporations can agree upon (Overton et al., 2021). By leveraging the universal appeal of sports, PSOs have the potential to provide good to society.

Corporate Social Responsibility in Professional Sports

With sports being "at the center of society" (Mamo et al., 2022, p. 4), professional sport organizations (PSOs) are expected to act and behave in socially responsible ways, arguably even more so than corporations in any other industry (Breitbarth et al., 2015). PSOs are expected to meaningfully address and engage in the specific needs of their communities (Babiak & Kihl, 2018; Thormann et al., 2023). Unlike other industries, professional sports have unique resources, such as extensive financial assets, stadiums and practice facilities, and high-profile public figures, such as star athletes (Formentin, 2014; Smith & Westerbeek, 2007). Industries outside of sports cannot develop alternatives for such resources that the sport industry obtains (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009). With PSOs recognizing the potential reach they can have on their local communities, PSOs have the power to positively influence and mobilize society through their corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts (Smith & Westerbeek, 2007; Trendafiova et al., 2016). For the purposes of this study, CSR will be defined through the viewpoint of CSR of sport

(Babiak & Wolfe, 2013), whereby PSOs provide philanthropic support to their local communities for the greater good of society without intentionally causing disturbances with stakeholders (e.g., fans, board members, sponsors, corporate partners).

CSR is beneficial for PSOs and PSOs are beneficial for distributing CSR (Godfrey, 2009). Professional sports have a unique nature and resources, such as mass media distribution and tax breaks (Formentin, 2014; Smith & Westerbeek, 2007). Therefore, CSR tends to play a different role in professional sports than it does in other industries (Sheth & Babiak, 2010; Smith & Westerbeek, 2007). Another distinguished attribute that professional sports acquire that arguably other industries do not is deep interest and passion among consumers, or fans (Cashman, 2004, as cited in Babiak & Wolfe, 2009). CSR coupled with such passion and interest promotes unity and engagement across communities (Carlini et al., 2021).

While professional sports can be a vehicle for bridging social and economic gaps through CSR (Cobourn & Frawley, 2017), PSOs are seemingly further enticed by the human and financial capital that comes to them through CSR (Sheth & Babiak, 2010). The CSR initiatives that PSOs take on tend to account for the impacts such derivatives have on just the PSOs rather than the impact of these initiatives' beneficiaries. PSOs—like any corporation—flaunt the good things that they and others do for society, such as Major League Soccer's (MLS) Hometown Heroes Showcase where MLS teams honor nonprofit leaders in their local community (Major League Soccer, 2025). Yet, this flaunting creates skepticism, wherein some consumers (i.e., fans) are skeptical that PSOs' communication and practices involving CSR are in place for the self-interest of the PSO rather than the benefits to society (Koch et al., 2024; Mamo & Anagnostopoulos, 2023; Walker & Kent, 2009). Lacey and Kennett-Hensel (2016) warn PSOs that heightening awareness towards their CSR efforts to fans can come with heightened

skepticism of the PSOs' motivation behind such efforts. When PSOs act in a self-serving manner, their stakeholders start to become suspicious, which can backfire greatly on the PSOs (Koch et al., 2024; Mamo et al., 2022). To avoid such backfire, PSOs must strategically communicate their CSR efforts.

The financial and human capital that can emerge from participating in CSR are major contributors as to why PSOs partake in socially responsible initiatives. For instance, PSOs can use their partnerships and associations with nonprofit organizations to alter public perceptions of their organization's philanthropic endeavors (Lee et al., 2018). Information regarding CSR is often put out by the PSOs forwarding information on their CSR initiatives through their own media avenues, leading to substantially biased perceptions of their contributions to society (Walker & Kent, 2009). Namely, the National Football League (NFL) regularly airs commercials across the NFL Network and partnering broadcasters to showcase their Play60 Initiative, which empowers "youth to get physically active for at least 60 minutes a day" (National Football League, 2025, para. 1). This bias of controlling their narrative works in the favor for PSOs' as CSR efforts have been shown to positively influence favorable fan attitudes towards each team, resulting in an increase in fans and followers, as well as growth in ticket and merchandise sales (Devlin & Sheehan 2017; Sanzo et al., 2015). In addition to financial incentives for partaking in CSR, PSOs also face pressures to contribute to their communities.

The financial motives are not the only reason why PSOs engage with CSR. PSOs' face numerous pressures regarding if, what, and how they engage in CSR (Yang & Babiak, 2021). Babiak and Wolfe (2009) interviewed executives from PSOs and found that PSOs engage in CSR with their local communities largely in part due to pressures. These pressures are brought forth through both internal and external sources. Internal pressures emerge from PSOs' executives

who realize that their organizations have the valuable, rare, and inimitable resources to implement corporate social engagement in their team's local community (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009). For instance, the Philadelphia Eagles Chairman and CEO, Jeffrey Lurie, "whose family has been personally touched by autism" (Philadelphia Eagles, 2018, para. 3) created the Eagles Autism Foundation in 2018 to use the Eagle's platform to take "action for autism" through "research, advocacy, empathy and unity" by partnering with autism-based nonprofits and hospitals in the Philadelphia area (Philadelphia Eagles, 2024, para. 1). Internal pressures, like Luries, do not exist in isolation.

External pressures beyond PSOs have a say on if and how CSR is carried out. External factors behind PSOs' corporate social engagement include maintaining financial and physical resources, as well as infrastructural support from the public (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009). External pressures from society emphasize the funding PSOs acquire beyond their essential needs to function as an organization. Leagues and teams across the United States incorporate CSR-based programs into their organizations and have dedicated departments and/or foundations geared towards community engagement. In many cases, professional leagues initiate networks of partnerships with national nonprofits, which in turn, have the potential to disperse local nonprofits on the team level (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009; Formentin, 2014; Vanc & Masler, 2021). For example, the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the WNBA, jointly, have the philanthropic NBA Cares program. NBA Cares is both leagues' "global social responsibility program that builds on the NBA's mission of addressing important social issues around the world" (National Basketball Association, 2023, para. 1). NBA Cares has compiled over 60 million youth engaged basketball clinics worldwide. This league-wide youth initiative consists of programs developed by the league itself, while also branching out to programs across every team

in the league (National Basketball Association, 2023). Likewise, the National Hockey League (NHL) has each team further disperse their league-wide initiatives, such as Hockey Fights Cancer, into every teams' hands (National Hockey League, 2024a). NHL teams partake in a variety of Hockey Fights Cancer initiatives, such as highlighting cancer survivors during games, creating Hockey Fights Cancer merchandise, and assisting and recognizing cancer-based nonprofits local to every team (National Hockey League, 2024a). These initiatives adhere to the external pressures from society and larger domains of the sporting industry to show that PSOs have the capability of informing audiences about societal concerns.

Both internal and external pressures from stakeholders play a pivotal role in the execution and outlook of PSOs' CSR programs. With numerous CSR initiatives aimed at engaging internal stakeholders (Rowe et al., 2019), PSOs often struggle to navigate the demands of their external stakeholders, which can lead to trivial partnerships (Schyvinck & Willem, 2019). In a case study of an MLB team, Kihl et al. (2014) found that inadequate understanding and communications between the team and their community partnership resulted in unmet accountability and expectations of the program implementation, which could lead to possible tensions between PSOs and nonprofits. Conversely, clear and genuine communication practices have been shown to lead to more trustworthy and authentic partnerships between PSOs and community stakeholders, thus resulting in desired outcomes for both parties (Heinze et al., 2014; Koch et al., 2024). Maintaining a strong connection between local nonprofits and PSOs helps the PSOs better understand the needs and expectations of the communities they serve (Yang & Babiak, 2023). It is important to note that these communication practices and factors playing into the evolution of CSR between PSOs and nonprofits are based primarily on executive leadership perceptions of PSOs, thereby largely dismissing nonprofits.

Partnerships Between Professional Sport Organizations and Nonprofit Organizations

Professional sport organizations have the capacity to reach a wide range of communities, while simultaneously striving to convey goodwill towards society (Lacey & Kennett-Hensel, 2016; Vanc & Masler, 2021; Walters, 2009). Therefore, PSOs implement collaborations specifically with local nonprofit organizations to enhance their teams' reputation and create a loyal fan base within the specific regions they serve (Babiak & Wolfe, 2013; Chiu et al., 2023; Rowe et al., 2019; Sheth & Babiak, 2010; Walters, 2009). In particular, nonprofits are a consequential actor in corporations implementing CSR, especially in the realm of professional sports where nonprofits are the norm for carrying out CSR efforts (Kihl et al., 2014; Marquis et al., 2013). Arguably, PSOs need nonprofits just as much as nonprofits need them.

Compared to PSOs, nonprofits have limited resources and staff (Babiak & Trendafiova, 2011; Babiak & Wolfe, 2009; Carlini et al., 2021; Formentin & Bortree, 2019). Furthermore, nonprofits' revenues cannot be leveraged to shareholders like PSOs' can (Formentin & Bortree, 2019). Therefore, nonprofits face a "double-bottom line" wherein they must focus on both the execution of their mission and their revenue streams as two separate entities (Shumate et al., 2018, p. 1349). On the other hand, PSOs reach national audiences and have revenues worth billions of dollars (Carlini et al., 2021; Sung & Lee, 2016), both of which appeal to nonprofits—who are in dire need of resources. Therefore, nonprofits are able to raise awareness about their mission and seek support from broader audiences when they are able to partner with PSOs (Babiak & Trendafiova, 2011; Formentin & Bortree, 2019; Vanc & Masler, 2021; Yang & Babiak, 2021). In other words, nonprofits have the societal capabilities and trust that PSOs lack in order to address specific social needs, and corporations—such as PSOs—have the resources and competence that the nonprofits need (Aaker et al., 2010; Austin & Seitanidi, 2012; Shumate

& O'Connor, 2010). In most instances, this formula of nonprofits being the 'social workers' of these relationships leads to the nonprofit carrying out a majority of the work on behalf of the PSOs (Kihl et al., 2014). Like partnerships in other industries, both partners here can face challenges with differing priorities and methods. Yet, by combining the unique resources from both nonprofits and PSOs, all partners can benefit from their joint CSR efforts (Lee et al., 2018). This equation is nothing new to PSO executives and nonprofit practitioners, but the ways in which this formula can be amplified can better leverage the benefits for both enterprises while also minimizing any potential misalignments.

PSOs strategically engage in CSR activities that would not have the potential to alienate any of their stakeholders. Most PSOs work alongside nonprofits that center around PSOs' 'community pillars' that focus on youth, education, health, and patriotic ambitions (Smith & Westerbeek, 2007; Sparvero & Chalip, 2022). The initiatives that PSOs and nonprofits often implement together include collaborating with local community organizations to tailor educational programs for youth, such as the NFL's Seattle Seahawks partnering with youth-based nonprofits in Seattle to "educate, empower, and encourage youth" (Seattle Seahawks, para. 1). Another well-known CSR endeavor throughout professional sports involves honoring military personnel. For example, the NBA, WNBA, and the teams across both of these leagues partake in the Hoops for Troops initiative, which honors and helps fund retired and active service members across the nation (National Basketball Association, 2023). While these recognitions are well-earned and fit the needs of PSOs' community pillars, there is a profusion of other types of nonprofits that tend to rarely—if at all—partner with PSOs.

As opposed to partnering with youth-, health, and military-based nonprofits, not all PSOs and their foundation work have the same mission. Instead, all PSOs aim to support those in need

within their local communities (Walker & Kent, 2009). Sport organizations are becoming more culturally aware of their stakeholders. Smith and Westerbeek (2007) state that sport CSR can proffer the opportunity for cultural diaspora. Recognizing this opportunity, a portion of PSOs do promote communities for diverse networks by "incorporating the margins into sports" (Vanc & Masler, 2021, p. 170). While not as implemented or well-known as other CSR initiatives, some PSOs are implementing culturally diverse events with the help and guidance from nonprofits that represent marginalized communities. To illustrate, teams across the MLB, a league whereby 30.2% of its players identify as Hispanic or Latino, celebrate and honor Hispanic Heritage Month (Castrovince, 2023; Vanc & Masler, 2021). Similarly, the NHL, a league where 90% of their players are white, launched NHL Unite to promote inclusivity for underrepresented communities across the historically exclusive sport (National Hockey League, 2024b; Whyno, 2022). It is important to note that while these CSR initiatives are emerging in the professional sporting context, nonprofits have persistently been attentive to these exclusionary issues.

Nonprofit Organizations' Perspectives

Nonprofits are well aware that they have the opportunities to entice partnerships with corporations because of the reputational gains that CSR practices yield to larger corporations (Formentin, 2014). Gaining nonprofits' understanding of how their relationships with PSOs are established helps contribute to maximizing the benefits for nonprofits (Formentin & Bortree, 2019). Therefore, Formentin (2014), Formentin and Bortree (2019), and Formentin et al. (2021) interviewed local, United States-based nonprofit practitioners who have collaborated with PSOs, and found that there are numerous unique benefits nonprofits benefit from partnering with PSOs, such as reaching national audiences to help promote their nonprofit, as well as being deemed as 'credible' by consumers for being associated with such large and profound entities. However,

Formentin et al. (2021) also found that there are some drawbacks for nonprofits when partnering with PSOs, such as nonprofits receiving minimal resources when they do not fit PSOs' cause-fit expectations—or what causes align best for the PSOs. Such drawbacks from PSOs add onto the societal challenges that nonprofits face on a daily basis apart from their partnerships.

Nonprofits are organizations that have "a legally approved purpose or social cause beyond profit generation" (Fraraccio, 2025, para. 3). While major sporting entities, such as FIFA and the International Olympic Committee (IOC), are considered nonprofits, nonprofits in the current study consist of charitable organizations, foundations, and hospitals (Chelladurai, 2016). These nonprofits' incomes are not dispersed to shareholders, so they continuously seek funding and partnership opportunities (Fraraccio, 2025). However, nonprofits are well aware that if they obtain support from poor-fitting sponsors, their brand is at stake for damage rather than the sponsor itself (Cornwell & Wenner, 2022). Consistent with Smith and Westerbeek (2007), it is important to note that in terms of partnering with PSOs, nonprofits based on youth and health are typically the preferred types of nonprofits that PSOs seek out to partner with for their own reputation. Conversely, smaller nonprofits outside of this youth and health realm find it both difficult and intimidating to approach PSOs (Formentin et al., 2021). This power imbalance can leave nonprofits feeling less autonomy in their relationship with PSOs, as well as deeming the partnership with PSOs as not that impactful. In other cases, nonprofits may choose not to partner with a PSO based on a misalignment of values. For instance, nonprofits surrounding domestic violence may choose not to partner with a PSO based on the PSOs slogan that incorporates violent language such as "Fight!" (Formentin, 2014, p. 186). Then again, relationships where PSOs show investment in nonprofits' missions, nonprofits feel a greater sense of validity and credibility (Formentin et al., 2021).

Lee et al. (2018) took a multi-faceted approach of exploring the public's perceptions of PSOs' CSR partnerships. Lee et al. (2018) went beyond exploring the focal organization (i.e., PSOs) by taking government entities', multibillion dollar corporations', and nonprofits' perceptions of PSOs' CSR initiatives into account and found that warmth and competence increase these sectors' willingness to donate to PSOs' CSR initiatives. The works of Formentin (2014), Formentin and Bortree (2019), and Formentin et al. (2021) take a look specifically at nonprofits' perspectives of PSOs' CSR initiatives. These few studies have thus far illustrated that partnerships between PSOs and nonprofits vary—with some nonprofits benefiting greatly from PSOs, while other nonprofits anticipated varying results from collaborating with PSOs. For instance, in regards the nonprofits' anticipations differing, gestures such as highlighting a nonprofit on a stadium's jumbotron may sound delightful, the intended viewers (i.e., fans) tend to pay minimal attention to the video (Formentin et al. 2021). Further, if fans do pay attention to the video, they do not take much—if any—action afterwards to contribute to the nonprofit. In fact, consumers may be less willing to contribute to these nonprofits featured by PSOs since they feel that their contribution would not compare to the supposed donation from the multibillion dollar PSOs (Bennett et al., 2013). Therefore, in most cases, these features tend to not bring forth any donations to the nonprofits. Furthermore, Kim et al. (2023) found that the quality of a relationship between a PSO and a nonprofit can have a greater impact on the nonprofit than would a donation of an autographed item, for example. Of other concern to nonprofits is who they are competing against to receive anything from PSOs (Formentin, 2014).

Despite the extravagant revenues PSOs bring in, such as the NFL's Dallas Cowboys bringing in nearly $800 million in revenue in 2023 (CEO Today, 2025), PSOs do not have the capability to fund every request they receive (Armstrong et al., 2018). When a PSO allocates

their funds and resources to multiple nonprofits, each nonprofit senses that the quality and importance of their relationship with the PSO has declined, as the PSO is not solely focused on their organization (Formentin et al., 2021). In realization, the relationship between nonprofits and any of their donors (particularly PSOs), does not always lead to consensus (Capizzo & Harrison, 2023). Therefore, in order to promote beneficial CSR together, PSOs and nonprofits must communicate with effective language and context on the expectations, values, accommodations, and potential risks to provide societal change through the larger audiences of sport.

Research on sport CSR is still in its infancy and more is needed to develop efficient models of sport CSR, as sport CSR literature has been built upon literature outside of sport management (Carlini et al., 2021; Chiu et al., 2023). Formentin (2014) asserted that research had "seemingly overlooked a key perspective in CSR relationships: that of the beneficiary" (p. 2). More specifically, these beneficiaries refer to nonprofits. Unlike the PSOs whose CSR initiatives generated significant attention in literature (Breitbarth et al., 2015; Carlini et al., 2021; Chiu et al., 2023), nonprofits that work with PSOs still receive minimal attention from sport management and public relations scholars. With that, a scarce amount of literature accounts for nonprofits' perspectives and insights on their relationship with PSOs'. Even beyond sport management and into general CSR literature, beneficiaries, such as nonprofits, remain understudied (Formentin & Bortree, 2019). Chelladurai (2016) claims that it is necessary for scholars to focus as much on nonprofits in sport as the literature does on PSOs. To enhance efficient models of sport CSR, scholars must understand the evolution, unique benefits, and challenges that nonprofits face when partnering with PSOs.

Theoretical Framework

Literature that does examine stakeholders' corporate social responsibility perspectives in professional sports relies on stakeholder theory. Stakeholder theory accounts for stakeholders who have the power to influence an organization's business operations, such as corporate social responsibility initiatives (Mamo et al., 2022). These studies are indeed important to the literature and the current study, indicating that professional sport organizations' corporate social responsibility efforts may not meet the expectations of their stakeholders (Mamo et al., 2021). However, stakeholders in these cases tend to refer to professional sport organizations' fans, board members, sponsors, and corporate partners—all of whom provide monetary value to professional sport organizations—dismissing other stakeholders such as nonprofit organizations community partners who seek assistance from professional sport organizations rather than increase revenue for professional sport organizations (Babiak & Wolfe, 2013; Carlini et al., 2021; Chiu et al., 2023; Mamo et al., 2021; Mamo et al., 2022; Walzel et al., 2018). Noticeably absent from the aforementioned list of stakeholders: nonprofits. While Sheth and Babiak (2010) argued that professional sport organizations themselves deem local nonprofits as critical stakeholders, the literature itself has yet to elaborate on these stakeholders' perspectives.

Breitbarth et al. (2015) argues that "CSR and sport research should be able to bridge the gap between theory and practice" (p. 264). Therefore, in order to thoroughly evaluate PSOs' CSR initiatives, research is needed to understand the beneficiaries' (i.e., nonprofits) needs and if current PSOs' CSR initiatives fulfill such necessities (Formentin & Bortree, 2019). There have been minimal attempts towards expanding theoretical frameworks in sport CSR (Walzel et al., 2018). Thus, gaining nonprofits' perspectives not only contributes to the called for literature, but can also inform actual CSR practices. Mamo and Anagnostopoulos (2023) call for researchers to assess the public's perceptions of PSO's CSR efforts over time as "the public is salient in the

sport stakeholder ecosystem" (p. 1003). Furthermore, Trendafiova et al. (2016) argue that the focus must shift from the benefits PSOs gain from CSR towards the viewpoints of multiple stakeholders beyond those internal to PSOs. While I agree with both statements, I further argue that the nonprofits' viewpoints of these sports organizations' CSR efforts must also be assessed over time to evaluate the evolution and impact that PSOs' efforts have on the communities that they are reaching to.

PSOs' are facing increasing pressures to obtain long-term CSR potentials for their communities (Vanc & Masler, 2021). In fact, the more a PSO knows about nonprofits, the more PSOs contribute to and create mutual benefits that meet nonprofits' needs (Formentin & Bortree, 2019). Research has shown that having a long-term relationship between nonprofits and reputable organizations (e.g., PSOs) can foster sensations of connectedness, welcomeness, and responsiveness between the relationship (Formentin & Bortree, 2019). But what does this mean for nonprofits that recently started or are seeking to start a relationship with a PSO? And how have nonprofits that have been collaborating with a PSO for a long time, continue and strengthen such relationships? To answer such questions, Austin's (2000) framework can make an important contribution to the sport CSR literature.

Public relations literature uses Austin's (2000) collaboration continuum to both categorize and characterize nonprofit-business relationships based on three different stages: philanthropic, transactional, and integrative (see Figure 1). The philanthropic stage is the most common stage of nonprofit-business relationships as it fosters a model between a charitable donor and a recipient. For businesses, this stage is typically "nothing more than a minor charitable gift" that is reactive to the nonprofits' request (p. 73). Here, there are infrequent and minor interactions and communication between both parties without top leadership representing

the business. These collaborations tend to lack strategic value between both entities with a peripheral importance to each others' missions (Austin, 2000). Depending on the outcomes and rapport between both organizations, this relationship can evolve into more.

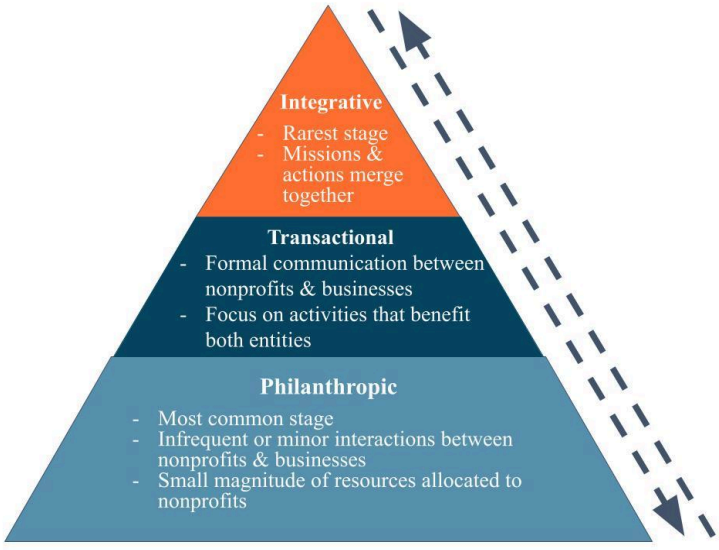

Figure 1: Austin's (2000) Nonprofit-Business Collaboration Continuum

In Austin's (2000) next stage, or the transactional stage, communication evolves to a formal method of communication between both entities. Transactional collaborations take a partnering mindset to incorporate an overlap of values between the nonprofit and the business while also ensuring that the two entities remain separate. In order to do so, there is an increase in employee involvement and communication between the nonprofit and business compared to the philanthropic stage. Here, resource exchanges focus on specific activities that benefit both the nonprofit and the corporation. This stage typically includes sponsorships, cause-related marketing, and occasionally, a sharing of board members and contract arrangements between the nonprofit and business. The reciprocation between both organizations goes beyond alleviating

nonprofits' resource scarcities (Austin, 2000), which can lead to the possibility of these collaborations continuing up the continuum.

Finally, the highest, rarest, and most ideal stage of the collaboration continuum, the integrative (or alliance) stage, involves amplified versions of the transactional stage. Here, both partners' values, missions, and actions merge together in order to adhere to collective actions and organizational integrations (Austin, 2000). In this stage, there is a shared understanding and open-mindedness for businesses to learn about the social needs of nonprofits as well as the role businesses have in meeting such needs (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012). Integrative collaborations help foster stakeholders' interest in the ongoing relationships between the nonprofit and the business (Austin, 2000).

The collaboration continuum enables nonprofits and businesses to work together to pinpoint their relationship to help identify their relationship, understand how their relationship evolves, and determine the future direction of the relationship (Austin, 2000). It is important to note that while progression along the continuum can occur, so can regression. It must also be noted that the three continuum stages are not discrete. Rather, the three stages can fuse together with some collaborations obtaining facets from different aspects of the continuum. Furthermore, evolution between stages can occur incrementally, whereby some variables of a relationship advance before others. Again, this leads to configurations of characteristics across all three stages of the collaboration continuum (Austin, 2000). Applying all three stages of the collaboration continuum allows for researchers and practitioners to examine the possible evolution of nonprofit-business relationships (Austin, 2000), which has yet to be considered in the professional sporting realm and literature.

Research Questions

Mapping the nonprofit-PSO relationship upon different stages of the collaboration continuum helps better understand the opportunities for establishing these relationships and the challenges that occur. Informed by Walzel et al.'s (2018) broader question of "how does corporate social responsibility translate into nonprofit organizations?" (p. 523), the following research questions will help identify the aforementioned gaps, as well as help provide future implications and solutions to fill this void in literature and improve the partnership and practices between professional sport organizations' and nonprofit organizations' corporate social responsibility engagement together:

Research Question #1: How does the collaboration continuum manifest in nonprofit and professional sport organization relationships?

Research Question #2: How are the relationships between nonprofits and professional sport organizations established from the perspective of nonprofits?

Research Question #3: What unique benefits and challenges do nonprofits believe they yield from partnering with professional sport organizations?

The first research question seeks to understand where nonprofits and PSOs stand from the perspective of the nonprofit. More specifically, this research question aims to identify the multitude of each nonprofit-PSO relationship in the dataset to better understand how relationship types benefit or hinder nonprofits' relationships with PSOs. This first question also aims to understand how these relationships evolved—or devolved—between stages over time. The second research question aims to understand how nonprofits view the establishment and maintenance of their relationships with PSOs, as well as the parameters around ending a relationship with a PSO. The last research question has a two-fold purpose. First, it strives to

understand what advantages nonprofits gain when partnering with PSOs and how these advantages are exclusive to just professional sports. Second, this research question also explores the obstacles nonprofits face when partnering with PSOs that they would otherwise not face with their other partners outside of the sport industry. In all, this research study aims to address the gaps in literature as well as practice between PSOs and nonprofits' joint CSR by providing a space for nonprofits to share their perceptions and rooms for improvements on this relationship.

Methods

Research Design

This study implemented a qualitative research design to gather and examine the detailed perceptions that nonprofit practitioners have with their partnering professional sport organizations. Compared to quantifying participants' thoughts, qualitative content analyses derive a greater sense of understanding and explanation of nonprofit practitioners' perspectives (Altheide, 1996). For the purposes of this study, the best way to obtain such qualitative data is through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews consist of questions from an interview guide, follow-up questions, and probes (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). These types of interviews allow for the researcher to facilitate a conversation with nonprofit practitioners that reflect upon the participants' experiences and future aspirations of working with professional sport organizations. All interview instruments consisted of general questions about each nonprofit practitioners' demographics and greatest organizational needs. The semi-structured nature of the interviews also allowed participants to speak freely, rather than constrained to only the questions from the interview guide. The researcher asked probing questions if clarification or more detail were needed from each participant (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Interview questions were, in part, replicated and refined from Formentin (2014). Other interview questions developed

through review of the literature, guidance from committee members, and curated based on each nonprofit and any prior knowledge of their relationship(s) with a professional sport organization.

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews via Zoom, an online video and audio platform that allows researchers to conduct synchronous interviews. Synchronous interviews administered online is an established way of conducting online research in sport studies (Cleland et al., 2020). This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the researcher's institution.

Sample and Data Collection

All participants, their affiliated nonprofit organizations, and their respected relationships with PSOs pertain to one metropolitan area in the United States that is home to seven PSOs. This metropolitan area included established PSOs that have been a part of the community for decades, as well as emerging PSOs that have recently undergone and are still undergoing professionalization. Participants were identified by a two-step process. First, the researcher read public-facing impact reports and community-related news articles and programs on the seven PSOs' websites. In addition, the researcher also searched through these PSOs' social media platforms to identify nonprofit collaborations that may have not been updated on the websites. This first step allowed the researcher to identify nonprofits who have collaborated with PSOs. It is important to note that because PSOs continuously update their websites (Vanc & Masler, 2021), the nonprofits were identified during January and February of 2025. From there, the researcher went to the identified nonprofits organizations' websites to identify publicly-known contact information to reach potential participants via email. A total of 26 nonprofit practitioners agreed to participate and partook in the study.

The majority of participants identified as women (*n* = 19), while only seven participants identified as men. Moreover, the majority of participants were white (*n* = 17). Seven participants were people of color: four were Black, one was biracial (Native American and white), one was Pacific Islander, and one was American Indian. Two participants did not disclose their race. The youngest participant was 24 years-old, while the oldest participant was 58 years-old. The average age of the participants was approximately 42 years. Participants had been working for their nonprofit between 1 to 31 years, with an average of 10.2 years of experience at their nonprofit. Each of the 26 participants represented a nonprofit that collaborates with PSOs. The nonprofit practitioners worked in a variety of roles, with most pertaining to upper-level management positions: nine held various department Director positions, while eight participants held the position of the Executive Director of their nonprofit. Other roles included two Vice Presidents, two Managers, two Development Officers, one President and CEO, one Lead, and one Coordinator. Almost half (*n* = 11) of the nonprofits were youth-based, while five were food-based, four were health-based, two were disability-based, one was Native-based, one was race-based, one was faith-based, and one was first responder-based. A majority of PSOs collaborated with large nonprofits based in the metropolitan area—two of which were national based nonprofits—while some PSOs also collaborated with smaller and emerging nonprofits. Most nonprofits collaborated with multiple PSOs, ranging from one PSO to six PSOs. Therefore, each nonprofit, for example, could be the philanthropic stage with one PSO and the transactional stage with another PSO. In total, the dataset included 90 nonprofit-PSO relationships across the 26 participants and their nonprofits.

All interviews were conducted between January 22, 2025 and March 11, 2025. The researcher (white woman with experience in a community relations department of a PSO)

conducted all interviews by herself. The participants were not compensated for their voluntary participation. Participants had the option to not answer questions or withdraw from the study at any point in time. Interviews lasted from 14:15 minutes to 41:20 minutes, with an average interview length time of 25:10 minutes. Data collection ended once data saturation was met, whereby data was collected until no new trends from the dataset emerged (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013).

Data Analysis

To begin the data analysis, an undergraduate research assistant, who is the Outreach Manager at a local performing arts nonprofit, cleaned the transcripts that Zoom automatically transcribed. All identifying information was removed prior to the coding process to ensure the confidentiality of all participants, their nonprofits organizations, and their partnering PSOs. While social identities provide value and significance, the collective use of pseudonyms with information about gender, race, age, and nonprofit type could possibly identify participants. Therefore, in order to ensure anonymity for all participants and their nonprofits, only general descriptions of each participant and nonprofit will be disclosed with only pseudonyms, and on occasion for context, type of nonprofit.

The researcher read all clean transcripts multiple times before analyzing them, using two forms of data analysis on NVivo Release 1.7.2 (4855). First, the researcher took an inductive, thematic approach to analyze the large amount of data collected from interviews to help the researcher determine patterns, themes, and concepts within the dataset (Alam, 2021). Next, the researcher took a deductive approach to identify where on the collaboration continuum each relationship in the dataset (n = 90) lies based on the length, quality, and quantity of each relationship that the participants described (Natow, 2020). Following multiple rounds of

coding—and in order to help prevent bias from the researchers' previous experiences in the sporting industry—the researcher consulted the research assistant who also acquired the position as a 'critical friend' for the primary researcher. As a 'critical friend', the research assistant provided reflexivity to the primary researcher to encourage exploration and challenge the primary researcher's interpretations of the data (Smith & McGannon, 2018). After consulting with the critical friend twice about codes and themes, the primary researcher finalized the data analysis to address the study's research questions.

Findings

This chapter outlines participants' descriptions of their relationships between their nonprofit and professional sport organizations, which are expanded upon to help construct a more nuanced understanding of professional sport organizations' corporate social responsibility initiatives. The emerging themes from participants are constructed from the data analysis and are organized around the research questions that drive this study. This chapter begins with an exploration of the collaboration continuum in nonprofit-professional sports organizations relationships. From there, this chapter will expand on how these collaborations are established from the nonprofits' perspective before elaborating on the perceived benefits and challenges nonprofits face when collaborating with professional sport organizations.

Collaboration Continuum

While many nonprofit organizations held relationships with multiple professional sport organizations, not every relationship acquired the same philanthropic endeavors with PSOs as the others. Of the 90 nonprofit-PSO relationships, a majority (n = 69) were in the philanthropic stage of Austin's (2000) collaboration continuum at the time of data collection. The transactional stage consisted of 15 relationships, while the integrative stage consisted of six relationships.

Philanthropic Stage

Nonprofit-PSO relationships in the philanthropic stage were represented by a varied allocation of resources, as well as minimal communication between both entities. A lot of communication between nonprofit practitioners and PSOs in the philanthropic stage occurred through PSO interns who turnover every season or through online in-kind request forms. Hayden, who works for a youth-based nonprofit, alludes to the giving process as just "simply filling out a form, getting on a list with the 10,000 other nonprofits in [state], and then [PSOs] kind of crank out as many gifts as possible." There are instances in the philanthropic stage where nonprofit practitioners do communicate with PSO staff members, but the relationships in this stage had similar experiences to Marissa's nonprofit where their relationship with PSOs ebb up and down throughout the years:

> So, we haven't done anything with the [PSO] and the [PSO] in a while. They invite us to their annual like [initiative] Day, or whatever, where it's like an event that we attend. But other than that, we haven't really done anything together. So, I feel like it maybe is a little inconsistent, I guess, and how it's not like we always do the thing together every year.

Here, Marissa illustrates that the varying communication has coincided with the quality and quantity of benefits from the PSOs. As the next stage will demonstrate, nonprofits in the philanthropic stage have the potential to evolve into the transactional stage of the nonprofit-business continuum over time.

Transactional Stage

Relationships between nonprofits and PSOs in the transactional stage consisted of nonprofits frequently receiving grants and higher quality in-kind donations from PSOs. The

relationships in this stage also illustrated the PSOs taking on more initiative than they did in the philanthropic stage. Sandra referred to her relationship with one PSO as "an inbred type of relationship." Brenda describes a transactional relationship with the same PSO as Sandra:

> They've [PSO] incorporated us into their foundation's giving strategy. So, there's ongoing meetings. There's like a menu of events that we get to pick from where they say, 'Hey, you're a charitable partner of us, which opportunity really works for you and your staff?' And then we align on the details from there. But again, we know that there's going to be a financial contribution, regardless.

Teddy's nonprofit has two transactional collaborations:

> They [PSO] do like a skills development for youth, and we host that at our campus. And so, it's people from all over the state coming to our place to meet their players and learn how to bat and catch and all that kind of stuff, which is a lot of fun. […] We're beneficiaries of [another PSO] on a multi-year grant. And they also did clinics with us. And through those clinics, we've had some players who have been connected to our work and have wanted to continue a relationship.

Nonprofits in the transactional stage also receive other perks from PSOs, such as tours of PSOs' facilities, check presentations at games, and sponsorships. These dividends were viewed as a bonus for the nonprofits in the transactional stage, but expectations for nonprofits in the integrative stage.

Integrative Stage

Unsurprisingly, only a handful of relationships in the dataset ($n = 6$) were a part of the integrative stage at time of data collection. In Lisa and her nonprofit's case, a "[PSO] have their own foundation that is half essentially, or at least a portion of the proceeds always go to

[nonprofit].” Penelope and her nonprofit think that “the [PSO] in and of itself have really been our brand going outwards into the community and partnering with other partners.” Michelle reflects on a PSO that her nonprofit has an integrative relationship with and how she hopes that her other relationships will someday be like this one:

> We have such a great relationship with [PSO] that's really mutually beneficial. And that's kind of the goal that I try to establish with these sports teams that they're not just *giving, giving, giving* for our benefit, but that we're benefiting each other [emphasis added].

Participants highlighted that these collaborations did not begin as integrative. Instead, these collaborations evolved over time to get to this distinguished stage.

Collaborations Evolving Between Stages

In some instances, collaborations between the nonprofits and PSOs in this study evolved—and seldom devolved—over time. Many nonprofits spoke in hopes of evolving into a bigger partnership with PSOs, with some participants insinuating that evolution was occurring during the times of interviews, such as Molly’s nonprofit “trying to get the next level of involvement and buy-in from the teams.” More illustrated examples of evolution took time as Hayden noted that his nonprofit “didn't see any financial money come probably three to four years down the road.” Likewise, Lisa’s relationship with a PSO took time before it ultimately evolved into an integrative relationship:

> So, I think that's where it's kind of transitioned into being more of a transactional thing of like, ‘You give us money because we are a nonprofit.’ To now like, ‘How can we work together and make both of our organizations look great in the community?’

In Harry’s case, his nonprofit and a PSO evolved simultaneously as both entities “came up together.” Likewise, Brenda and a PSO have “grown along […], because when our partnership

started, they were little. And now, […] I think there's a lot more opportunity." While Penelope and her nonprofit did not grow up alongside a PSO, her nonprofit has a mantra that acknowledges that evolving with PSOs comes with growing pains:

> We kind of have an internal mantra. First year, it's gonna suck. Second year, you learn and you grow, you change, you make changes. And by year three, that's when you really capitalize. And then you just grow from there. Baseline, I would say, like one to three years is really just the growing pains. You got to stick with it. You got to make sure that you're, on the donor side, stewarding and making sure that these folks have your like; you're buying into them, but they're buying into you. Because then by year three, it's so big and so wonderful and so captivating that it really just then kind of runs itself. And then that's when we really see both sides bringing in new partners, engaging with them in new ways. One, just to keep that relationship fresh and exciting, because no one likes a dull relationship. And two, making sure that again our expectations and their expectations are still being met by doing good in the community.

Tammy also alludes to growing pains by sharing how collaborations with PSOs do tend to go in and out of stages, but as long as there is communication, it is not an issue:

> There's years where I think that relationship ebbs and flows, as I think would be natural for a professional sports organization, right? But at least there's always been, even if small, a line of communication, and that's invaluable. Like we'd rather have somebody say, 'Oh, no, we're not, you know, being as much of a vibrant partner this year' than to ghost us, and they don't.

Participants explained that these evolutions do not happen overnight. Rather, they take many years—and sometimes hardships—to progress. Next, I examine how relationships between nonprofits and PSOs are established and maintained.

Establishment of Relationships

Relationships between the nonprofits and professional sport organizations were established either by the nonprofits taking initiative, the PSOs taking initiative, or one of the organizations having a champion (i.e., personal connection or referral) into the other organization. A majority of the relationships in this study began with the nonprofit organizations reaching out to the PSOs. In rare cases did the PSOs reach out to the nonprofits to establish a relationship. Relationships that began with a champion helped play a role in bridging the two entities together.

Nonprofit Organizations Starting the Relationship

Many relationships between nonprofits and PSOs started by nonprofits filling out donation request forms on PSOs' websites. While some transactional relationships were formed by the nonprofits initiating communication, most relationships that are started by a nonprofit begin in the philanthropic stage, such as Wendy's:

> So, the process for the in-kind has all been on my end reaching out to the organizations. And most of the times the communication has only been if we've received the item or not. There really hasn't been like, 'Nope, too bad you're not gonna get one this year.' So, it's sort of like the one-sided communication a little bit.

For nonprofits, such as Marissa's, that get past the "one-sided communication" Wendy alluded to, it can still be a bit of a struggle to pursue a relationship with some PSOs:

> I think I've approached people, but I don't think anything's ever panned out about we

> sometimes will do like a sponsorship or like a match for a fundraising campaign. But I don't think any of the sports teams have taken me up on that.

Building a relationship with certain PSOs proved to be a challenge for Sandra and her nonprofit:

> [We] tried to find an in with the [PSO], and it's like we can't find it. It's almost you have to find a player to sponsor you. There's not that, they're not as open, I guess. [PSO], we've talked on and off about doing stuff, but it's kind of just been a talk. And then we're like, 'Let's talk, let's look into things', and then nothing ever happens.

Similarly, Amir questioned if he was reaching out to the correct staff at PSOs to start a relationship after not hearing back from PSOs:

> Just didn't hear back. And I'm like, I don't know if I'm contacting the right people, or you know, how you just meet someone and say, 'Hey, I want to connect you with someone.' Everybody is supposed to be some guy or some person that's connected somewhere. So, I've lost a lot of motivation or just kind of like confidence and just meeting random people that's supposed to be connected to some of these teams. So, it's like, if it's not someone that I see on TV that's connected to the organization, it's like, 'Nah, I'll pass, so have them reach out to me.' Because the last thing you want to do is like sell false hope to someone or just broken promises. It's not good. So, I would just say, I don't know if I'm reaching out to the wrong people or the right people. They're just not getting back.

While this lack of response can be discouraging, it is important to recognize that continued effort can lead to great outcomes.

Although forming connections with PSOs this way can have challenges, in some cases it can produce rewarding relationships. For instance, in Hayden's experience, his most advantageous relationship with a PSO began with him reaching out, which over time evolved

into the transactional stage. As Hayden put it, “it was a hundred percent me reaching out to them. I think it was me pestering them enough for them to finally be like, ‘Okay, we'll sit and talk with you.’” It is clear from the participants’ insights that the initial step of establishing the relationship falls on the nonprofit, especially in cases when nonprofits do not have a connection with anyone at a PSO. However, persistence in connecting can play a pivotal role in initiating these relationships.

Professionals Sport Organizations Starting the Relationship

Participants tended to state that their strongest relationships with PSOs occurred when the PSOs initiated the relationship with nonprofits. To illustrate, Brenda shared that “I would say in my experience, the most meaningful partnerships are the ones where we are approached by […] a sports team.” However, Brenda did note that there was one case where it felt as though a PSO reached out to her nonprofit just for the interest of the PSO to tell the nonprofit “‘Hey, we have this event, and we really need you to show up to do XYZ for us.’”

For the children’s hospital that Penelope works at, she needs to monitor and manage the requests she receives from PSOs in terms of who—and in what capacity—can visit patients for bedside visits:

> I think that it definitely depends on what you're asking of them or what they're asking of you. Cause it's very easy to say, ‘Hey, I'm X organization. I have a bunch of players that want to come in.’ […] While other local children's hospitals have much different safety protocols in terms of who can be in their rooms, who can do bedside visits, who can engage, we often have one tier to two tiers higher. So, we kind of get snubbed and we snub ourself.

As the participants outlined, when PSOs reach out to their nonprofit, the relationship is seemingly transactional or integrative. Many of these nonprofit practitioners also alluded to the PSOs reaching out to their nonprofit first because the nonprofit had a champion, or connection, at the PSO.

Having a Champion

There were a handful of partnerships that began by an employee at either the nonprofit or PSO having a connection, or a champion, at the other organization. Sometimes, these champions were third parties, or mutual friends not affiliated with either organization that connected the nonprofits and PSOs together. In many cases, these champions were a PSO staff member that sat on the board for a nonprofit. Nonprofits that have a champion to a PSO tend to find the contribution from the PSO to be more authentic and impactful. In Cathy's case, a high-profile member of a PSO is a part of her organization's board: "Coach [...] is actually on our board, which is amazing. He's been on our board for a couple of years and is really active as a board member. We quote-unquote, use him to help us fundraise." From Michelle's experience, one particular PSO staff member is "willing to like bend over backwards to make everything work" for her nonprofit's collaborations with this PSO. In Fiona's case, her nonprofit and a PSO developed a profound relationship with each other due to a former athlete of the PSO once being a beneficiary of the nonprofit while growing up:

> And it turns out that [athlete] was a [nonprofit] kid. And so, he tells his story on our behalf all the time. If there is a microphone in front of him, he is going to tell you that he is a [nonprofit] kid and how he benefited from the [nonprofit] and how he chooses to now give back to the [nonprofit].

Alternatively, Sandra's nonprofit acquired their PSO champion as her nonprofit is affiliated with "the first responders for [PSO facility]. […] I think that's really where it started. And then they said, 'Well, we should help [nonprofit]'."

While knowing people at the PSO helps some nonprofits, the absence of champions can be barriers for nonprofits who do not have similar access. For Wendy, whose nonprofit did not have a champion at either PSO her nonprofit collaborated with, reflects on how having a champion would provide her nonprofit with higher quality offerings:

> [W]ith sports teams in particular, it's who you know that depends on what you get. […] If you have sort of someone on the inside, you get a little bit better offerings. And I'm not saying necessarily if that's a good or bad thing. Just that's sometimes how the way people work too, is like, 'Oh, I'll give, I know this person. I'll give them a better deal sort of thing.'

These champions were a huge factor in helping nonprofits and PSOs maintain their relationships.

Maintaining Relationships

All study participants want to continue their relationships with the PSOs. While some participants know there is a future with PSOs, others do not know what the future holds between their nonprofit and PSOs. Helena hopes that her nonprofit "can continue to engage with [PSOs]. Honestly, it's really up to [PSOs]." In parallel, Marissa felt as though "we're always trying to maintain" relationships with PSOs, and Tammy felt that continuing relationships with PSOs is "really dependent on their leadership and values, and if that's important." Reflecting on her experience of maintaining relationships, Michelle was unsure of the status of her nonprofit's relationship with one PSO:

> And they're very secretive. It's hard to know what their priorities are. It's hard to build a relationship. It's hard to know where we sit in their priorities because they're very tight lipped. And I just don't know where we are. Sometimes I'm like, 'Do they hate us? Do they like us? […] They're just hard to build a relationship with, and a lot of it is personality. You know, so much of what we rely on is the personality of the person running it.

Maintaining relationships takes time and effort for both nonprofits and PSOs. Arguably, this time and effort is more taxing on the nonprofits. While some nonprofits found that the benefits of working with PSOs outweigh the time and effort it takes to make these collaborations work, others felt that this maintenance entails more effort than value. In rarer cases, the insufficiency of maintaining relationships can lead to the cessation of some collaborations.

Parameters to Ending a Relationship

In most cases, nonprofits had not even had internal talks about any parameters around ending a relationship with PSOs. In instances where values no longer align, possibly due to a player controversy that a PSO does not condemn, nonprofits will more than likely step away from the PSO. For Lillian and her Native-based nonprofit, there is no documentation of ending a relationship with a PSO. However, as Lillian ruled that, "*if, if, if* there was like a mascot that probably wasn't favorable, yeah, we probably really wouldn't be supporting that team" [emphasis added]. The sole case in this study where a nonprofit stopped working with a PSO indefinitely occurred when the team was what Amir called "a no call, no show", it was:

> [A] huge deal breaker to me, from like even wanting to reach out to them ever again, you know? And I really carried that because I had to deal with those heartbroken students, young people. And that weighed really, really heavy on me, because it was like I let them

> down. And that was something that I said, 'I will never, I never want to experience that ever again.'

Misaligned intentions would be a reason for Brenda and her nonprofit to stop working with a PSO:

> I think, just being thoughtful of what are you actually asking the nonprofit to do. Because if it's really just to meet your own organizational charitable giving goals that don't actually benefit the nonprofit, we probably should reevaluate if this is actually a relationship or if you're just asking for, you know, a feel-good story.

Besides Amir's relationship with one PSO, no other relationships between nonprofits and PSOs in this study have ended indefinitely. Participants made note that PSOs would have to do something outrageous in order to cut ties with them, especially considering the benefits that nonprofits yield from collaborating with PSOs.

Benefits of Working with Professional Sport Organizations

Altogether, participants expressed having beneficial interactions and experiences when working with professional sport organizations. Emerging themes across the dataset show that nonprofits feel legitimate, grateful, and appreciative when collaborating with PSOs. Other benefits the nonprofits yielded were the unique aspects of professional sports that leave lasting impacts for the communities that nonprofits serve. Participants reckon that having an aligning mission with PSOs' community pillars further elevates the benefits of working with a PSO.

Feeling Legitimate

Participants felt that their nonprofit was considered legitimate when they were affiliated with a PSO. Stephen believes this legitimacy can be explained by the high level of trusts consumers place on PSOs:

> I think the sports teams have an awareness that they're usually a pretty trusted brand to folks. You know, something that a lot of people, you know, are fans of the [PSO] and are gonna trust what the [PSO] say. And I think they know that they can help get the word out to folks.

Amir accentuated the importance of his nonprofit being associated with a PSO:

> And it's like, 'Oh wow, that [PSO] stand with them, so [nonprofit] must be legit,' or '[nonprofit] has to be doing something that's really important for these [PSOs] to show up.' And I think that's what happened with [nonprofit]. A lot of people start seeing us and noticing, like taking us serious.

Echoing Amir, Lisa stated that:

> When players come forth and say like, 'This is an important organization to me, like how can we participate? And how can the [PSO] support our family giving back to [nonprofit]?' I think that's just also a really special, special piece.

For Diana's nonprofit:

> [B]eing on Monday Night Football, being at halftime years in a row, or being at a [PSO] game and they put our name now in the outfield for one month every season. [...] people see us as bigger and having more impact.

These feelings of legitimacy led to meaningful impacts for the nonprofits and the populations that they serve.

Meaningful Impacts

For a lot of the nonprofits, the experiences that come with collaborating with a PSO are unforgettable memories that those who nonprofits serve may never get a chance to be a part of. As Fiona describes, nonprofits that serve individuals in poverty see lasting impacts on their

communities when they collaborate with PSOs: “Sometimes [children] get to go to games, and very often they get to meet players. And those are things that they naturally wouldn't be able to do when you're living in a life of poverty.” Speaking on the behalf of the first responders of Sandra’s nonprofit, she believes that first responders being “a part of an organization [PSO] or feel recognized by an organization [PSO] that [first responders] respect, I think was something very big.” Further, Molly’s nonprofit, which works with children affected by illnesses, reflects on the impactful experiences collaborating with professional sports can have on such children:

> Getting to meet and see behind the scenes, there's so much more that goes into a sports team than just the players or the athletes on the field. I mean even just giving them a little bit of a peek behind the curtain and different perspective, I think is equally impactful too and just their future and what they see and dream for themselves.

From Teddy’s experience, having professional athletes talk with the youth his nonprofit serves had more of an influence than the same message does from any of the nonprofit staff:

> And yet, to have a pro [PSO] player sit in front of a room of students and say, ‘Hey, y'all should really do school. School is important’ does a lot more, I hate to say it, but does a lot more than our staff saying it. […] When the guy whose job it is to help you do education says that, you're like, ‘Yeah, whatever man. I don't care.’ When one of the starting five of the [PSO] says, ‘Hey, you should work hard in school’ you go, ‘Oh yeah, I need to work hard in school.’ So, we'll take the help wherever we can get it. But it is funny how their words carry more weight.

By the same token, Diana shares how meeting professional athletes leaves lasting impacts on the youth from her nonprofit: “Getting to know players, it's really special. It's really unique. And there's something you can't really describe. There's a magic to it.” Moreover, Lisa refers to her

nonprofit's partnerships with PSOs as being top tier because of the impacts they have on the patients at her nonprofit:

> I would say our professional sports teams are always in the Tier 1 category. And that, I think, is because of not only that we know that their impact on patients and families being on site or at the games are so critically important, but we also know that the awareness that can be built from having a partnership and alignment with those teams is critically important to [nonprofit].

These impacts seemingly allude to the uniqueness that professional sports and athletes obtain.

Unique Awareness of Sports

Most nonprofit practitioners consider working with professional sports to be unique compared to their other partnerships outside of the sporting industry. For example, Frank states that "Most of the non-sport organizations don't really have the brand recognition that the [PSO] have, so they can't do quite as much on the awareness side." Frank further elaborates on the awareness and resources that PSOs bring that other partners could not:

> I don't know how many people fit in that arena, but there's probably 15,000 people there, plus people watching on TV, plus the people who are connected, plus the people who get to see the social media posts. The amount of people who pay attention to you as a function of being associated with the [PSOs], whatever it is. Think it's nice. So just that elevated brand awareness is always important.

Similarly, Troy alludes to the uniqueness of sports and the impacts that sports can have:

> I think there's something that there's a lot there with the young people looking up to the athletes, […], and the level of attention that sports has, it's a natural magnet. We're all kind of, you know, you watch whatever you watch. It could be ice skating, it could be

football or basketball, whatever it might be. But it tends to be a pretty captive audience.

When differentiating partnering with PSOs versus partnering with non-sporting entities, Helena expresses that she thinks "what makes the sports teams different is that they have the ability to provide us with a lot of value beyond the funding," such as having "teams come and do a kickoff at a school" and athletes saying "'This is my nonprofit for the season. I'm going to raise awareness.'" Unique benefits beyond fundings, such as awareness appeal to nonprofits to further their mission in ways that non-sporting collaborations in general could not.

Alignment with Mission

Participants expressed that the relationships between nonprofits and PSOs get further elevated when their missions and values align. As Brenda, who works for a childhood cancer nonprofit put it, "I think childhood cancer definitely has a soft spot for professional sports teams." Furthermore, Penelope, who works for a children's hospital, stated:

> I think nationally sick kids sell a lot more than cardiac patients who are like 90 years old and need a new heart. It doesn't really pull on the heartstrings—no pun intended—in terms of what you wanna be associated with in terms of you're a celebrity or a sports figure. I think it's kind of just like that give and take. But oftentimes, I mean specifically for engagement with kids or coming to our events, it's a pretty easy ask.

PSOs seemingly also like to get behind initiatives with nonprofits whose missions hone-in on youth sports, like Dana's: "I'm a little bit biased, but I have to say that the sports organizations really do buy into what we do, because everything that we do is through the lens of sport." While having an alignment of missions with a PSO was not applicable for all nonprofits in this study, it led to many advantages for nonprofits that did align with PSOs' community pillars.

Grateful and Appreciative

Despite where nonprofits and PSOs fell on the collaboration continuum, all nonprofits were very grateful for their affiliation with, and stewardship from PSOs. For instance, Lori states that the families that her nonprofit serves "are super excited to be [at games], and very, very thankful to the [PSO] for inviting them." Alike, Harry and his nonprofit are "really fortunate to have a great relationship with the [PSO]." Olivia and her nonprofit are "so appreciative that it's so easy. I don't feel like we're usually jumping through hoops [with the PSO]." Furthermore, Tammy and the staff at her nonprofit are also very grateful for the opportunity to attend games:

> There's some years where [PSO] donated seats for our staff. I mean that's 50 seats, essentially, you know, staff plus one. And that's a really awesome thing for a nonprofit that doesn't have the capacity to reward our staff in that way as a corporate mind of, 'Let's go to a show, or engage in different components.' And so, that's been a huge thing.

Stephen was appreciative of the openness and creativity working with PSOs can bring:

> I've appreciated how it feels, like there's openness to creativity in terms of figuring out like how do we reach shared goals? How do we use, I think most of the sports teams we work with think of themselves as a platform to elevate and make things better. And so, I think with that, there's some creativity.

The perceptions of legitimacy, impactfulness, uniqueness, fit, gratefulness, and appreciativeness all emerged in several, if not all, interviews. At the same time, however, the uniqueness of the sporting industry can create challenges that nonprofits do not face when working with other entities. Therefore, I now examine the challenges that nonprofits face when working with PSOs.

Challenges of Working with Professional Sport Organizations

Despite the many benefits that nonprofit organizations face when working with professional sport organizations, nonprofit practitioners in this study also referred to challenges

they face when working with PSOs. These challenges encompass the quantity, quality, and accessibility of donations; the fear of ruining a relationship with a PSO; the location of PSOs' corporate social responsibility initiatives; competition between other nonprofits; staff members and athletes leaving PSOs; time and effort it takes for nonprofits to collaborate with PSO; nonprofits feeling used for PSOs' public relations; misleading PSO initiatives; causes not aligning between nonprofits and PSOs; and disconnect between nonprofits and PSOs.

Quantity, Quality and Accessibility of Donations

The quantity, quality and accessibility of the ways in which PSOs engage with nonprofits can significantly affect the nonprofit-PSO relationship. Comparing monetary donations to organizations outside of sport, Stephen feels "it's a little bit lacking, is the funding side of things with most of the sports organizations." Michelle feels similarly:

> They [PSO] don't dedicate resources too. I mean, they're a money-making organization and that's kind of what they're focused on, unfortunately. But in my view, why do you have a community team if you're not gonna, you know, provide resources to the community?

Beyond monetary donations, participants also felt that PSOs could provide more higher-quality experiences to their nonprofits.

One common way in which PSOs engage with nonprofits is to provide tickets to games, but seemingly valuable action can create issues. Some practitioners felt unimportant based on the location of their seats, such as Lori, who revealed:

> But it kind of made you feel like, 'Yeah, you're our special guest, but you have to be literally in the last, like, the top rows.' And then we're sitting in the rain, you know, it was kind of like, 'Okay, this isn't making us feel very good to be stuck way up here', when

> you can see that this game has a million open seats, and they could have put us somewhere better. […] But when you're bringing these families, and you're like, 'Oh, it's this fun special night,' and then you're kind of stuck in the worst seats, there's just kind of that feeling, 'Oh, maybe we're kind of just an afterthought.'

Other practitioners made note that these seats were inaccessible for the communities they serve, particularly older fans and fans with disabilities. Lillian explained that "going to the [PSO] games with the elders, sometimes it can be just a little challenging with some mobility issues that our older population has." Likewise, Olivia shared an example of when fans could not get to their seats, "we had had donated tickets that were way up high, which isn't a problem except for the fact that the stairs are so steep and our members couldn't get up there." Amy, who works for a disability-based nonprofit, expressed dismay in a PSOs accessibility accommodations when they were donated tickets to a game: "So it's not really a negative to the sports teams, but have to be more mindful. […] [PSOs] don't understand. [PSOs] should have a immersion day for *themselves* […] so they understand what it's like" [emphasis added]. While some nonprofit practitioners understood why the PSOs provided them the "worst" seats, they still felt like the PSOs could better implement ways to make the nonprofits feel special, such as providing transportation, food costs, etc. However, participants noted that they need to be careful about such inquiries in order to maintain their relationships with PSOs.

Fear of Ruining Relationships

Many nonprofits feared that if they asked for too much, they could alter their relationship with a PSO. In particular, Dana asserted, "we [nonprofit] really do need to be intentional because we don't want to overstep or over ask." Some PSO initiatives that work with certain communities—such as Amy's disability-based nonprofit—would like to see more from PSOs but

do not complain as Amy states: “I think the feedback is a lot of people appreciate, so they won't complain because they don't get the opportunities often.” In cases, like Teddy’s, there seems to be a notion of if a nonprofit does not do what a PSO asks for, the nonprofit will not receive anything:

> Working with sports teams, I think, is one of the situations where it becomes more apparent what the donor is hoping for out of it. And it feels, it can feel more transactional at times. […] If they get good PR out of it, good for them. But I think that, I've noticed that when we're working with sports teams it feels a little more transactional and a little more, ‘We want to look good.’ And so, it puts us in the weird spot of like, ‘Oh, are we gonna have enough kids show up to this meet and greet,’ and if we don't, does that jeopardize funding in the future? And that can start to feel just a little uncomfortable, like, ‘Oh, you won't donate if we don't have a hundred kids come to your whatever event.’ Also, there tends to be some kind of short notice sort of a thing like, ‘Oh, we want to do this event, we want to do it next week.’ And you're like, ‘Well, we can't just manufacture this PR moment out of thin air.’

While grateful for the opportunities PSOs provide to her nonprofit, Michelle notes that sometimes what her nonprofit receives from PSOs is not what they actually need to fulfill their mission:

> And it's a very difficult message to try to communicate when you're building a relationship, like, ‘Hey! Thank you so much, but can you also give us money?’ is a hard message, because they think they're ‘doing you a favor’ by giving you tickets […], but we also need money to fulfill our mission.

These participants acknowledged the privilege that their nonprofits have with being affiliated with a PSO, but expressed wanting more resource dispersion from the PSOs. Despite these wants, participants stated they tend to avoid asking for more resources in order to ensure their relationship with a PSO continues.

Location

The nonprofits based in the suburban areas of the metropolitan area found it challenging to receive as much as the inner-city nonprofits, and also found travelling to events to be a challenge. For many of the nonprofits, transportation was an issue for their reach. For Amy's nonprofit across the metropolitan area, transportation is a major issue for most of the families they serve. But with PSOs hosting events in the inner cities, "it was hard for some of [the families] to come because of transportation." Wendy, whose nonprofit is 20 miles away from the metropolitan area, similarly noted that PSOs focus on the nonprofits in the PSOs' city. The locations of Wendy's nonprofit and the teams seemingly had an impact on the breadth of their relationships with PSOs.

On the contrary, nonprofits based in and for the inner-city, such as Amir's, felt as though the PSOs focused too much on the wealthier suburban communities than the inner-city communities that may not need the resources and partnership as much as his:

> They're going to do this over here. They're going to do this at this high school. I can't tell you the last time where we had a superstar show up in the inner-city at a local community high school. I can't even tell you. And that's sad.

Amir went on to explain that his nonprofit is located in an area where CSR is most needed (i.e., serving marginalized communities), but makes note that PSOs are often located outside of these communities:

> [T]hose sporting entities, they're on the outside of the need. They're not coming to the middle of it. So how can they even know what's even going on if they're not even coming and see what's going on or know what's going on, because they never come into the center of it?

Despite what nonprofits in the suburbs think and what nonprofits in the inner-cities think, PSOs in this study were reaching both geographic areas. However, the geographic location of nonprofits in relation to the PSOs' location highlighted possible feelings of envy among the nonprofits.

Competition Between Other Nonprofit Organizations

Many nonprofit organizations felt like receiving donations or recognition from a PSO was a competition between other nonprofits. While most nonprofits recognize it is normal for PSOs to work with a multitude of nonprofits, many participants shared that they wish PSOs provided more resources to fewer nonprofits rather than the typical dispersion of scarce resources to plethora of nonprofits. As Lori states: "all of the sports organizations are doing this with so many other nonprofits. It's not like we're their main one, you know? We're one of many." Wendy concurs with Lori:

> I think, for us and I think too, the sports teams, is they're always like the first-place people go or think of when it comes to, I'm just thinking of galas in particular. Like, 'Oh, let's reach out to [PSO]. Let's see what they send us.' So, I feel like they get inundated with requests like that from all sorts of, you know, from schools, from nonprofits, from sort of all sides. That they have to figure out how to allocate that in a different way than like a local orthodontics office might have.

While some participants understood the demand that PSOs face when receiving requests from an overabundance of nonprofits, it did leave some nonprofit practitioners discouraged to reach out to the PSOs.

Professional Sport Organization Staff and Athletes Leaving

Nonprofit practitioners found it difficult to retain their partnership with a PSO if a prominent staff member from the PSO left the organization. Michelle commented on the difficulty of turnover:

> Oh man, it's hard because every time you have a new leader come into a community organization, basically everything changes. You have to start from scratch with the education, with showing them what you've done previously, all that kind of stuff. There's not a lot of institutional knowledge passed from one person to the next, and every new leader of a community group, or community program within the sports teams wants to come in with their own fresh ideas, right?

Likewise, Frank shared that his relationship with a PSO fizzled out when a former PSO employee relocated to another job: "My relationship with the [PSO] was stronger when I had the connection to their Chief Impact Officer [who] moved […]. And so, there's still a relationship, not quite as strong. I don't feel as connected as I used to." Tammy elaborated on having to educate PSOs' interns as they turned over every season:

> [T]he individuals that oversee […] these one-off events for professional sports are often interns. So, then it turns over every year and I'm dealing with a new person who has no idea, they just know, 'Oh, it was you last year, but like, what did they do? And how did they do it?'

This also occurred for individuals from PSOs who sat on nonprofits' board of directors. Elaborating on board members from PSOs leaving, Helena shared that "if our board member changes companies, if they were the only person that was really maintaining that relationship, then like now, we're scrambling to get another board member, because it's so important." Like front office staff, trades involving athletes can also hinder the relationship between PSOs and nonprofits. Noting that a PSOs' foundation does a great job directing players to his nonprofit, Stephen makes note of that "when that player switches teams, that [relationship] has gone away." In either case, athletes who embrace a nonprofit tend to be very prominent in their work with the nonprofit. However, if these athletes got traded to another PSO, the relationship between the PSO and the nonprofit became uncertain.

Time and Effort

Working with PSOs involved a lot of time, energy, resources, and effort from nonprofits. When comparing her partnerships with PSOs and partners outside of the sport industry, Lori expressed that working with PSOs can be "more work for less benefit for us." More specifically, Lori shared her nonprofits experience of partnering with a PSO to host a raffle:

> I will say, kind of a lot of work on our end because you have to apply for a raffle license. You have to pay for that to get the licenses, and it's a lot of paperwork. And you have to do it every time. It's not like you can do it once, and then it's good every year. And then at the end of the game, we get an invoice for their printing and credit card charges, and that ends up being over $1,000. So that's getting taken out. And then we get all of the funds, and then it's our responsibility to distribute those to the winner. So, I mean, it's great. It's a great partnership, but it's, you know, some partnerships are really easy where the

company you're working with is like with [non-sporting partner], it's like, ‘Here's the money’ and we're not having to do a lot on our end.

Hayden elaborated more generally:

> The tough thing is, is there's such a wide, the [PSO] can give you something that's going to be worth $2,500, which is really going to make an impact, or they can give you something that's worth $25 and isn't worth your time, energy or effort, even filling that out.

Hayden also suggests to up and coming nonprofits that they should put their time and effort into other corporations outside of sport:

> But I think about the time, energy, and effort I put into the other sports organizations, and it I would tell newcomers like, ‘I would stay away from them [PSOs] and go find these other corporate partners who can write you a $25,000 check and don't need you to jump through all these hoops and do all this stuff.’ So, I've had good experience with the [PSO], but I feel like I'm one of the lucky ones.

Even events celebrating certain types of nonprofits can be taxing on the nonprofits. Brenda shares that “when there's an ask for us to find families to show up, either we end up financing all of those little things or we ask the families to do that. That doesn't seem kind.” The unique inquiries and resources provided by PSOs led some participants to reaching capacities that they do not experience when partnering with non-sporting partners.

Feeling Used for Media Purposes

The initiatives that PSOs took that involved media presence had mixed reviews from participants. On one hand, some participants cherished the exposure the media provided to their organization, such as Tammy whose nonprofit has benefited from what she refers to as the PSOs’

"social media capital". On the other hand—and for the most part—many participants felt as though the PSOs may be partaking in these CSR initiatives for prestige. Despite benefiting from PSOs' social media, Tammy also believes that "the conscience for the ones in need seems to be missed somewhere, in my opinion, and it's more for a PR opportunity." Likewise, Amir was adamant about teams showing up to nonprofits altruistically without any media presence:

> Don't wait to where you want to highlight someone. Come out in the community when the cameras are off. […PSOs] show up when they want it to look good for them, when cameras are on, right? So don't wait till a player gets in trouble or the organization is getting chewed out for not really supporting them, making certain investments in the community. Do it when the cameras are off, when the lights are off. Get out here, come show support. That don't cost you nothing. Don't cost you anything just to show up. […] Because every time, trust and believe, you can Google this, every time an athlete showed up and did something in community, it was always cameras. Always something that was staged.

Both Brenda and Penelope made it clear that the children from their nonprofit involved in any PSO CSR activation were not to be used for show, with Brenda stating that "[The children are] not zoo animals to be put on exhibit, like this feels very yucky. […] don't ask [us] to be your like little puppet at your event, that doesn't feel kind." Likewise, Penelope stated that

> We often say that we're not a petting zoo, but oftentimes it is a traditional practice for celebrities, sports figures to come into kids' hospitals and do bedside visits or engage with the kids. But we're definitely not there to parade around our sick kids.

While Teddy saw the value of the media presence, he was also hesitant on the intentions of the media put out by PSOs involving his nonprofit.

> So, there is a tension at times for anything PR related. […] There's a tension between wanting to do what we can to get the resources we need to serve our neighborhood and not wanting to use our participants as fodder for a good photo op. And so we've, I would say we've redirected conversations at times when it felt like it was a little too, exploitive would be too grandiose a word, I don't know what a 25% of that word would be. But that idea of just 'No, we're getting more out of this than we're being asked to give.' And it's not just because you want a bunch of kids who look like the kids we serve in a photo op. […] It's not a problem that I think we can solve, but it's a tension we have to manage with them.

Likewise, Harry expressed obstruction when speaking to an overarching entity of a PSO:

> But I'm definitely talking to a brick wall, like you have no idea that like this kid gets picked up in the alley. And this kid, you talk to the big sister because parents don't speak English. Like I could tell you that, but for you, you're just talking. You're just thinking about 'How can I tweet that?', like 'How can I make a video of that?', 'How can I tell that story like for me?'

Understanding where the PSO's point of view was in terms of media at charitable events made sense to the practitioners. However, the feelings of misuse from the nonprofits' point of view were seemingly disregarded by the PSOs.

Misleading Initiatives

In some instances, the initiatives that PSOs engaged in did not fulfill the needs or expectations of the nonprofit. In Barb's case when her nonprofit was chosen as a winner for a PSO's CSR initiative, she thought the PSO would provide her organization with something tangible beyond briefly being recognized at a game:

> But my gut, you know, when we first heard [PSO initiative winner], my mind was like, 'Wow! They're going to present us with a big check!' […] I don't want to, like, knock the [PSO], but it, I will admit, like it felt a little bit like, 'Look, you know, from the outside, people probably thought they were donating to us.' Like why wouldn't you?

In terms of a league-wide initiative that Harry's nonprofit was a part of:

> And I think that programs in the [initiative] have kind of been like, 'Are you serious? That's what you think about us? You're just like quantifying us into dollars?' And I'm kind of like, they're not speaking youth worker language, so they come off as offensive when they say that.

Harry then wonders: "how does the kind of marketing, storytelling universe of pro sports interact with the maybe organic, sometimes really dirty and messy youth work that organizations?" Michelle explained that her organization is "very strict about our kids are not going to be used for marketing purposes. So, this is not a photo op" and "that is also really hard with the professional sports teams because they have to balance wanting the community to know what they're doing to give back, but let's think about the culture of how we're doing this." In instances like the ones described by the participants, the CSR initiatives put forth by PSOs seemingly took advantage of the nonprofits for the betterment of the PSO while minimizing the impact and importance of the actual charities at hand.

Causes do not Fit

Although engaging in corporate social responsibility might align with PSOs' mission broadly, the nonprofits noted a lack of alignment between their organization and the PSOs' causes. Tammy reflected on when professional athletes seek sponsoring or supporting a nonprofit, there are typically no players that home in on child hunger, stating that "We don't

currently have a player that says, 'Yeah, child hunger is my jam!'" Based on both Tammy and Wendy's experience from a food-based nonprofit, it is arguably apparent that PSOs prioritize other types of nonprofits before working with food-based nonprofits. Wendy acknowledges that her nonprofit is not the best fit for PSOs:

> And then I think, too, it also depends on the organization itself. Like food is definitely always impactful, but I feel oftentimes sports organizations really focus on youth in sports, or women in sports, or other disenfranchised groups—which is also important and should be done—but that our missions don't align like a thousand percent with each other. Where, you know, we would still benefit from the partnership. They would probably still benefit for from it. But I just think to like the commercials and things, you always see the players hosting like a youth camp and that sort of thing. So, I feel like that's sort of more in their realm rather than like, for us they're like, 'Yeah, we can provide in-kind gifts for your gala to help you raise money, but we're probably not gonna invest $10,000, because your organization doesn't necessarily fit our criteria of how we want to engage the community.' But, like other organizations, they fit their criteria.

While misalignment of cause-fit expectations is an internal challenge that nonprofits outside of PSOs' community pillars must navigate, nonprofit practitioners expressed that PSOs and their athletes will hopefully jump on board with their missions outside of youth and sport.

Disconnect

While appreciative of all of the work a PSO does for Harry's nonprofit, he notes that "[PSOs] aren't youth workers. They don't run programs. They don't know what I do, and they don't understand what I do." Tammy finds herself educating PSOs on the mission of her nonprofit:

> Like, do [PSOs] understand, you know? I'd love it to be at the level that when they're having team dinner or they're going out to a fancy meal, they realize that fancy meal could have fed 12,000 kids for a week. […] That might feel like shaming, or at a really micro-level that's not the intent, but that education piece.

Participants also brought up the seemingly disconnection PSOs have with exposure, as Brenda states: "And that's probably the biggest thing that I think sports teams sometimes don't realize. They equate exposure with support. They're not the same." Stephen also refers to exposure as not thorough:

> I think of the [PSO] as having a fair amount of money. To see that not feel like a priority in that realm, I think feels fairly frustrating as a nonprofit where we're usually asked to do more with less, you know? We're trying to do fairly simple things, like pay our people […] And so, I'd say that's probably the biggest frustration point is when exposure and funding feel like they're sort of seen as like equal goods on the corporate side. And those really aren't the same in terms of what it takes to run an organization. And I don't think the expectation would be that way if we were not a nonprofit in some ways.

The extreme variations of wealth, resources, and recognition between the two entities led to a disconnect of each other in terms of expectations. These challenges that nonprofits face provide insight into how PSOs can improve their CSR initiatives.

Discussion

As professional sport organizations continue to partake in corporate social responsibility initiatives alongside nonprofit organizations, this study intended to examine the perspectives of these initiatives through the lens of the nonprofits. The uniqueness of professional sports provides both benefits and challenges for nonprofits who collaborate with professional sport

organizations. The nonprofit practitioners in this study provided similar perspectives as the nonprofit practitioners in Formentin's and colleagues' studies (2014, 2019, 2021) pertaining to the benefits and challenges they face when collaborating with professional sport organizations. The nonprofit practitioners in this study also spoke about what their ideal collaboration with a professional sport organization looks like and provided strategies for professional sport organizations to better fit the needs of their nonprofits and the populations they serve.

This discussion begins by situating each nonprofit-PSO collaboration within Austin's (2000) collaboration continuum to consider how this framework is useful to help understand CSR in the sporting literature. Next, this discussion elaborates on how relationships between nonprofits and PSOs form and are maintained—from nonprofits' perspectives. With the collaboration stages and establishment of relationships in mind, this discussion concludes with the benefits and challenges nonprofits face when working with PSOs.

Collaboration Continuum

The first aim of this study was to understand how Austin's (2000) collaboration continuum manifests in the relationships between nonprofits and professional sport organizations. There is a large disconnect between benefits and challenges between the three stages of the continuum. Namely, the uniqueness of professional sports tends to be a major benefit for collaborations in the transactional and integrative stages, where PSOs offer more of their unique resources to nonprofits, such as athlete appearances (Formentin, 2014). However, in the philanthropic stage, many of the distinctive features of sports do not get transferred to the nonprofits. The three stages of the collaboration continuum align with the fact that PSOs vary their levels of philanthropy and generosity depending on the nonprofit they are working with (Inoue & Kent, 2013; Sparvero & Kent, 2014, as cited in Yang & Babiak, 2023).

Mapping onto Austin's (2000) collaboration continuum, the majority (n = 69) of the nonprofit-PSO collaborations fell into the philanthropic stage. The philanthropic stage included a broad range of collaborations and giving practices, from those that have tapered off because of minimal and inconsistent communication with PSOs staff members, to emerging collaborations that have the potential to progress into further stages of the continuum. This stage is the foundation where most collaborations begin before possibly evolving into the next stage of the collaboration continuum (i.e., transactional). This stage includes developing and emerging collaborations that have the potential to grow over time.

It is important to note that the philanthropic stage is not characterized by cynicism, but does feature the most modest collaborations considering that it is the lowest stage in Austin's (2000) collaboration continuum. With that being said, many nonprofits from this study in the philanthropic collaborations tended to receive negligible and inadequate communication from the PSOs. Nonprofits in this stage tended to not have a regular point of contact at the PSO. Rather, nonprofits typically filled out an online form to request an in-kind donation or spoke to an intern that turned over every season. Similar to Kihl et alia (2014) findings, this inadequate communication made some participants from the current study feel frustrated by the lack of clarity and conveyance, especially if participants never heard back from PSOs. While these methods of communication may not be ideal for nonprofits, these communication practices are common for not just PSOs but other corporations who practice philanthropy.

The nonprofits in the philanthropic stage tended to not receive as elaborate qualities of donations from PSOs compared to collaborations in the transactional and integrative stages. Arguably, the PSOs in these lower philanthropic relationships were operating under what Austin (2000) refers to as the "charity syndrome" (p. 73), whereby PSOs provide to good causes (such

as nonprofits) to solicit assistance. These occasional provisions for nonprofits included upper-level tickets or autographed memorabilia signed by not as well-known athletes—both of which were referred to as "minimal donations" by a couple of participants. Nevertheless, some nonprofits in the philanthropic stage received experiences rather than donations. For instance, some nonprofits got to take part in in-game activations, such as singing the national anthem or throwing out a first pitch. Coinciding with Formentin's (2014) findings, some nonprofits in this stage were invited as attendees for panels or discussions hosted by PSOs, but these events tended to be just a one-time or yearly occasion that did not directly impact the nonprofit. For nonprofits on the higher end of the philanthropic stage, PSOs hosted toy and food drives at their facilities for the nonprofits. As with the panels, these drives too were either typically a one-time occurrence compared to annual or quarterly events that collaborations in the transactional and integrative stages see.

The collaborations in the philanthropic stage occasionally include close-knit relationships between nonprofits and PSO staff members, but these relationships have yet to be at the same level as collaborations in the transactional and integrative stages. These higher philanthropic stages consisted of a collection of both in-kind donations, grants, and experiences from the PSOs. In all, nonprofits in the philanthropic stage strive to eventually evolve into the transactional stage.

Transactional collaborations were sparse throughout the dataset (i.e., 15 out of the 90 relationships). As implicitly described by this study's participants, transactional collaborations resulted in increased support from PSOs compared to support in the philanthropic stage. As Austin (2000) acknowledges that collaborations can bypass certain stages, some of the integrative nonprofit-PSO collaborations seemingly skipped the philanthropic stage and started

their collaboration at the transactional stage by PSOs wanting to foster a close collaboration with the communities these nonprofits served. For instance, a couple of nonprofits formed when some PSOs began forming, thus creating a kinship wherein both organizations had similar stomping grounds but both evolved into their own entities.

Participants in the transactional collaborations felt more comfortable communicating with PSOs than participants in the philanthropic stage did (Formentin & Bortree, 2019). Communication in the transactional stages of this study was usually between nonprofit practitioners and a full-time coordinator or manager of a PSOs' community relationships department. The practitioners and PSO staff would regularly communicate together and occasionally meet in-person to discuss initiatives. In some transactional collaborations, nonprofits acquired or were seeking to acquire a board member from their affiliated PSO in hopes to receive guidance, grants, and continued acknowledgement from the PSOs.

Nonprofits in the transactional stage received financial contributions through sponsorships and multi-year grants. Beyond funding, nonprofits received higher quality in-kind donations from the PSOs, such as memorabilia signed by star players. For example, some PSOs provided funding for youth-based nonprofits to renovate their gymnasiums or other sport-based facilities (Babiak, 2010; Slack, 2004). Nonprofits also received more opportunities to plan events with PSOs, such as skills-based clinics specifically for the nonprofit's clientele, or radiothons hosted by PSOs to help raise money for nonprofits. Consistent with Formentin (2014) describing a middle stage of nonprofit-PSO relationships, nonprofits in the transactional stage also received additional resources, such as PSO employees using their volunteer hours at the nonprofits, or players and mascots making appearances at the nonprofits.

While missions between the nonprofits and PSOs may not be integrated in this stage, values are (Austin, 2000). For instance, one nonprofit uses the same diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) consultant as their partnering PSO. So, although both organizations have their own separate mission, they both maintain the same values, making the collaboration between the two organizations seamless and effective. The value alignment in the transactional stage is not merely "lip service" from the PSOs, but is rather upheld and integrated throughout both entities (Koch et al., 2024, p. 454). Based on the value alignments, as well as collaborative events and elaborate donations from the PSOs in the transactional stage, the collaborations in this stage may be in the trajectory of the integrative stage.

Based on the perceptions of the study's participants and their recollection of insight from the communities they serve, the participants would agree that integrative collaborations are the utmost ideal and beneficial type of relationship for nonprofits (Austin, 2000). Like the higher-collaborative nonprofits in Formentin and Bortree (2019), the integrative nonprofits in the current study are similarly delighted with their relationship with PSOs. Arguably, the nonprofits in the integrative stage received the most benefits from PSOs, while also facing minimal to no challenges in these collaborations.

The communication between nonprofits and PSOs in the integrative stage was exemplary. The nonprofits in the integrative stage felt comfortable asking PSOs for more without sounding 'greedy' (Formentin & Bortree, 2019). The comfortability of this stage omitted any patriarchal notion that the PSO had more leverage in this collaboration. Rather, participants in this stage felt that they were in a thorough two-way collaboration that benefited both organizations equitably. As with the authentic communication practices between a PSO and community partners in Heinze et al.'s (2014) study, these genuine practices resulted in more desired outcomes for the

nonprofits. The nonprofits in the stage met regularly with PSO staff across multiple departments—not just within the PSOs' community relations department—signaling a deep commitment to the nonprofits.

The six collaborations in the integrative stage were built upon years of collaboration and included exclusive opportunities and resources for nonprofits that benefited the PSOs as well. For example, PSOs had board members representing these select nonprofits to help engage in the government functions of their partner, which is consistent with the benefits of the integrative stage (Austin, 2000). Other benefits ranged from business trips including both entities to paid contracts between the nonprofits and PSOs. Beyond these advantages, nonprofits also received frequent appearances from athletes, coaches and CEOs, integration and branding throughout PSOs' websites and social media, as well as lucrative grants and sponsorships from the PSOs. In some instances, PSO staff members exceeded the expectations of the nonprofit-PSO collaboration by personally volunteering for the nonprofits in this stage beyond what the relationship anticipated. As Formentin and Bortree (2019) found, these long-term relationships between nonprofits and PSOs fostered mutual connections, acceptance, and understanding.

As these findings illustrate, applying the collaboration continuum to sport management and sport sociology literature allows scholars and practitioners to better comprehend the dynamics of relationships that PSOs obtain with nonprofit organizations. While Austin's (2000) framework should be modified to better fit the distinctive needs of the professional sporting industry—as will be discussed further in the conclusion—the principles of the collaboration continuum lay the groundwork for exploring the nonprofit-PSO collaboration that warrants further investigation to fully understand such relationships.

Establishment of Relationships

Various participants were not able to recall how their nonprofit began working with a professional sport organization, typically because these practitioners were not at the nonprofit at the time of establishment. The nonprofit practitioners that could recall the establishments between their nonprofit and professional sport organizations seemingly described the establishment in one of three ways. The most common way relationships started was by a nonprofit practitioner reaching out to anyone at a PSO and/or applying for a grant on a PSOs' website. In rare cases, relationships began by PSOs reaching out to nonprofits. Other times, relationships emerged by nonprofits having a champion, or a connection, with somebody at a PSO that initiated and facilitated the partnership between the nonprofit and PSO. This section discusses the key factors involved in the establishment of the nonprofit-PSO relationships.

Because PSOs receive hundreds, if not thousands of donation requests from nonprofits (Formentin & Bortree, 2019), it is uncommon for PSOs to be the initiators of most collaborations. Therefore, in line with Formentin's (2014) findings, the inaugural method of communication between nonprofits and PSOs typically began with the nonprofits doing the due diligence of initiating a potential collaboration. Given that many nonprofits persisted initiating all conversations with PSOs if their collaborations grew, nonprofits felt that they were in these 'one-sided relationships' (Mamo et al., 2022). These nonprofits became apprehensive about their collaborations as they continued to carry most of the weight in their nonprofit-PSO relationships. The toll nonprofits faced on continuing these relationships made them question if there was a future to these collaborations.

While ideal to nonprofits, it was rare for PSOs to be the initiators of relationships. Sheth and Babiak (2010) noted that when PSOs reached out to their local communities, the interest from these communities towards the PSO grew. Similarly, when PSOs reached out first to the

nonprofits in the current study—which happened to be in the transactional and integrative stages only—the relationship between the two tended to rapidly develop into the higher stages of the collaboration continuum. However, in a few cases where the PSOs contacted the nonprofits first, some nonprofits experienced a sense of "being used" by the PSOs who seemingly wanted to showcase specific minority populations from the nonprofits (Vanc & Masler, 2021). Arguably, the closer the relationship the nonprofit has with the PSO, the less likely they are to feel leveraged by them.

Nonprofits who had minimal communication with PSOs noted that it seems that the best way to start a relationship with a PSO is having a champion, or connection, within the PSO. A lot of the time, however, these nonprofits just do not know how to get that in or who to contact to ignite a relationship. For nonprofits who had a champion, such connections were either an individual at the PSO who knew someone at a nonprofit or a third party that connected individuals from the two entities together. Having a champion at a PSO not only helped nonprofits establish a relationship, but also created a sense of organizational trust in these relationships (Austin, 2000; Yang & Babiak, 2023). When possible, nonprofits in the transactional and integrative stages would leverage PSO staff members on the nonprofit's board of directors (Formentin, 2014). Having a board member or champion does not guarantee a certain amount or quality of donations from a PSO to a nonprofit, nor does having a champion directly impact the stage at which the relationship between a nonprofit and PSO are in. Rather, having a champion typically helps establish and maintain relationships between nonprofits and PSOs.

Only a few relationships in this study involved nonprofits stepping away from their once-affiliated PSOs primarily due to changes in staff or misalignment of values. In terms of

ending a relationship with PSOs, participants and their nonprofits did not have any written-rules in terms of ending a relationship with a PSO. Interestingly, participants did not discuss with others at their nonprofit about any parameters around ending a partnership with a PSO. Like any other partnership, all nonprofits agreed that they would cut ties—some silently, while others acknowledge—if a PSO did or said something that went against a nonprofits' mission or values. While previous studies have not addressed how nonprofits navigate the parameters around their partnerships with PSOs, Armstrong et al. (2018) suggests that advocacy initiatives by PSOs can hinder their ability to collaborate with external groups, such as nonprofits. In short, the end of these relationships are either due to values not aligning with each other or the time and effort put in by the nonprofit is not worth it.

Benefits and Challenges of Working with Professional Sport Organizations

The nonprofit practitioners' perceptions about benefits and challenges they face when collaborating with professional sport organizations were teased out. Arguably, the nonprofit-PSO relationship can be assessed based on the longevity, quality of donations, and communication dynamics of each relationship. The distinguished benefits and challenges nonprofits face when collaborating with professional sport organizations indicates that collaborating with professional sport organizations is distinctive from collaborating with corporations outside of the sport industry (Formentin et al., 2021). Below I explore the benefits and challenges nonprofits face when collaborating with professional sport organizations, and outline that what nonprofits in the integrative—and sometimes transactional—stage may deem as a benefit is a challenge for philanthropic nonprofits.

First and foremost, all nonprofits in this study accentuated that having their organization's name alongside a PSO is an honor and a privilege. Nonprofits felt as though they

are legitimized by having an affiliation with PSOs—who are recognized and celebrated nationally (Smith & Westerbeek, 2007). Legitimacy was prevalent across all stages of the collaboration continuum as participants and their nonprofits recognized that PSOs are well-respected and trusted brands (Heinze et al., 2014). This legitimacy went hand in hand with the uniqueness of professional sports, which made these collaborations even more special to nonprofits (Formentin & Bortree, 2019; Smith & Westerbeek, 2007). What practitioners deemed PSOs have that other partners outside the sport industry cannot obtain is awareness and audiences (Babiak & Trendafiova, 2011; Vanc & Masler, 2021). Such awareness and loyal audiences led to meaningful and impactful experiences for nonprofits and their clientele.

Both literature and this study's participants can agree that PSOs' CSR initiatives have positive impacts on their communities (Chiu et al., 2023). However, as Lacey and Kennett-Hensel (2016) found that the impact of CSR varies by fans' demographic composition, the impact of PSOs' CSR initiatives in the current study varied based on which stage of the collaboration continuum nonprofits were in. Nonprofits in the transactional and integrative stages presumably had the most impactful experiences with PSOs as they had more opportunities and sharing of resources from PSOs compared to the nonprofits in the philanthropic stage. Nonprofits in the philanthropic stage still managed to make the most out of what PSOs provided them, despite these relationships not being the strongest. Practitioners shared that their nonprofit would otherwise not have the opportunity to attend a sporting event or meet a player if it were not for their collaboration with a PSO (Sheth & Babiak, 2010). Not only did these experiences shed light on once-in-a-lifetime experiences, but it also reminded nonprofits on how grateful they are to collaborate with PSOs.

Along with fans of PSOs who expressed appreciation and gratitude when PSOs partake in charitable efforts (Mamo & Anagnostopoulos, 2023), participants across all stages of the collaboration continuum in this study shared how grateful and appreciative they are acknowledged by a PSO. Even in situations where participants expressed disappointment with the quality or quantity of donations provided to their nonprofit from a PSO, the nonprofits still felt appreciative of the PSOs' gestures and did not take these contributions for granted. In various situations, some of these nonprofits endured the "gratefulness syndrome", whereby if nonprofits extracted resources from PSOs, they would graciously issue thanks but not ask for more in the forthcoming (Austin, 2000, p. 73). Despite the fact that many nonprofits wished that they could have received better tickets or more profound autographs from the PSOs, all nonprofits were very grateful for these donations that their nonprofit would otherwise not have access to.

While all three stages agreed to the benefits, nonprofits across different stages of the collaboration continuum viewed some attributes from PSOs as positive while others viewed them negative. For example, there were less cause-fit expectations in the philanthropic relationships compared to those in the transactional and integrative stages. In other words, meeting cause-fit expectations was a challenge for nonprofits in the philanthropic stage, but a benefit for nonprofits in the higher stages (Lee et al., 2018). As with the collaborations in Formentin et al. (2021), the current study's participants whose nonprofits fit with PSOs had preferable and superior relationships compared to nonprofits whose missions did not fit those of the PSOs'. Consistent with sport CSR literature, the under-represented nonprofits in this study (e.g., disability-, and race-based nonprofits) had less of a cause-fit than the youth- and health-based nonprofits that resulted in enhanced relationships (Smith & Westerbeek, 2007; Sparvero &

Chalip, 2022). More specifically, when nonprofits focused jointly on both youth and health, the better the fit between themselves and the PSOs, thus the higher they were on the collaboration continuum. As Lee et al. (2018) suggests, these benefits flourished the most when the nonprofits' societal strengths and PSOs' strengths worked in tandem.

Along with cause-fit expectations, levels of authenticity also varied between challenges and benefits depending on where collaborations were on the continuum. While not the case for every philanthropic relationship, a few nonprofits in this stage noted that it was difficult for the relationships with PSOs to feel authentic. These nonprofits either felt as though the PSO was putting on a show to look altruistic or that the PSO did not put much effort into their relationship. The nonprofits in the transactional and integrative stage shared a sense of authenticity from the PSOs, mainly because the PSOs showed investment in the nonprofits and their missions (Formentin et al., 2021). Nonprofits that pinpointed authentic practices from PSOs had more positive outcomes for the nonprofit and relationship between both organizations altogether (Heinze et al., 2014). We know from PSOs' perspective that their motives behind partaking in CSR initiatives are key determinants of authentic CSR (Mamo et al., 2022). However, findings from the current study suggest that PSOs partaking in CSR should be motivated to collaborate with nonprofits, aligning with participants' desires for authentic collaboration with PSOs.

Despite the benefits of collaborating with a PSO, nonprofit practitioners across all stages of the collaboration continuum also alluded to challenges that their nonprofits can face when collaborating with these prominent corporations. In some cases, these challenges arose because of nonprofits not having the capacity to partake in any PSO initiatives. In other cases, challenges were seemingly on the PSOs where the nonprofits had no control. While these challenges were

not deal breakers for nonprofits, the practitioners shared that they would like the PSOs to be more mindful of working with nonprofits.

One of the most common challenges nonprofits elaborated on were the accessibility aspects of donations and events. This typically occurred for nonprofits in the philanthropic stage as those in this stage received lower-level tickets, while those in the integrative stage sometimes suites to games. This finding is noteworthy because distributing tickets is a common way in which PSOs provide in-kind donations (Sheth & Babiak, 2010). While the location of donated tickets caused inconveniences to some nonprofits, the geographic location of the nonprofits in proximity to the PSOs was another challenge for nonprofits across all stages of the collaboration continuum (Formentin, 2014). Although all participants and their nonprofits were located in one large metropolitan area, communities within the metropolitan area vary in terms of needs (Yang & Babiak, 2023). Therefore, participants shared mixed feelings when it came to the location of PSOs' CSR initiatives. A handful of suburban-based nonprofits felt as though maybe they did not receive as much attention from PSOs as they were under the assumption that PSOs prefer working with inner-city nonprofits and communities. On the other hand, some of the inner-city nonprofits felt as though their communities were not acknowledged by PSOs and provided examples of PSOs reaching out to wealthier communities in the metropolitan area. Despite the nonprofits' preconceived notations about who exactly PSOs impact, the PSOs reached a wide variety of geographic locations across the metropolitan area.

Following Lacey and Kennett-Hensel (2016) and Walters (2009) suggestions, the PSOs in this study did reach an extensive range of nonprofits. However, as Armstrong et al. (2018) note, PSOs cannot fulfill every request they receive. Rather, the requests by nonprofits in the philanthropic stage were thinly dispersed across a wide range of nonprofits, while donations in

the integrative stage were extensive to a select few nonprofits. Feeling a sense of low recognition (Formentin et al., 2021), these participants alluded to this suggesting that PSOs should provide more donations and resources to fewer nonprofits rather than providing minimal resources to a plethora of nonprofits. Aligned with Formentin's (2014) and Formentin et al.'s (2021) findings, nonprofits—mainly in the philanthropic stage of this study—acknowledged that they internally pitted themselves against other nonprofits in order to secure acknowledgment, resources, and funding from PSOs. Despite the so-called competition, participants alluded to the fact that they are happy that other nonprofits are benefiting from PSOs. Businesses outside of the sporting industry have successfully enhanced CSR practices by limiting the number of collaborations they partake in in order to be highly productive (Austin, 2000).

While a natural part of any business, the departure of PSOs' staff and athletes—especially those who had close relationships with nonprofits—meant that relationships between the nonprofits and PSOs had to rebuild their relationship over and over again. Despite Wang et al. (2024) noting that CSR initiatives can reduce PSO employees' intention to turnover, the departure of PSO employees can end certain relationships with nonprofits, especially if those employees are athletes. Professional athletes' foundations are unique in that they are a nonprofit outside of PSOs but typically gain more leverage within the athletes' PSO—presumably more so than nonprofits in the integrative stage (Babiak et al., 2012). Because many professional athletes have their own foundations that work alongside PSOs, these foundations are divvied up between PSOs and nonprofits. The structure of the athletes' relationship to the nonprofit took two forms: some athletes worked through their PSO's community engagement team, while others went directly to the nonprofit. In the cases where individual athletes started a relationship with a nonprofit but they got traded, the relationship between the nonprofit and the athletes' foundation

ended, thereby often ending the relationship with the PSO as well. In other cases, some athletes continued their philanthropy with nonprofits even from a new location, while some PSOs continued that relationship with a nonprofit that was built by an athlete who later left the PSO and the relationship with the nonprofit behind. While not always the case, relationships in the transactional and integrative stage had easier times transferring from one PSO staff member to the new staff member simply because of the longevity and access to multiple individuals within the PSOs. Because CSR activities are largely determined by PSOs' employees, turnover of such employees can lead to new CSR focuses and practices (Fernandez et al., 2022, as cited in Wang et al., 2024). Still, most transitions between new PSO employees and all three collaboration stages were smooth, but other challenges beyond turnover were prevalent across participants.

Across all stages of the collaboration continuum some participants felt as though their nonprofit was being used for PSOs' public relation purposes. While some of these participants understood that PSOs are a business with marketing and advertising agendas, the media efforts put forth by PSOs did not feel altruistic. Nonprofits would like for PSOs to be more considerate in terms of if, when, and how they "promote" the nonprofit—otherwise PSO stakeholders may become skeptical and suspicious of the intention of PSOs' CSR efforts (Koch et al., 2024; Lacey & Kennett-Hensel, 2016; Mamo et al., 2022). Participants expressed that they wished that PSOs would be more considerate in terms of the role of media and certain underserved populations (e.g., ill children). However, participants recognized that although PSOs obtain an abundance of resources, such as grants and media presence, PSOs can still lack the understanding to use these resources effectively when partaking in CSR.

As participants noted, and consistently with Sparvero and Chalip's (2022) findings, PSOs are not social service agencies. Instead, the knowledge and training that nonprofits obtain to

address specific social needs are outside the scope of PSOs (Aaker et al., 2010; Austin & Seitanidi, 2012; Shumate & O'Connor, 2010). However, PSOs can use their platform and resources to support the nonprofits and their missions. Even so, nonprofit practitioners across all stages of the collaboration continuum revealed having to execute most of this advocacy for both themselves and the PSOs (Kihl et al., 2014). As the participants outlined, collaborating with PSOs does take a lot of time and resources away from nonprofits who are already past their financial, resourceful, and staffing capacities (Babiak & Trendafiova, 2011; Carlini et al., 2021). While the benefits of collaborating with PSOs can outweigh the costs, nonprofit practitioners questioned if such time and effort was worth the hassle and time in order to work with a PSO. However, by PSOs strategically collaborating with social service agencies—like nonprofits—PSOs can use their platform and resources to further nonprofits' messages and societal assets for the betterment of society (Heinze et al., 2014; Schyvinck & Willem, 2019).

It is important to note that while some nonprofit practitioners expressed disappointment or wanting more from PSOs, many of the practitioners understood that PSOs are also a business and have to make decisions that benefit their organization as well. The participants recognize that professional sports organizations are also trying to run a business, and like most businesses, the PSOs typically prioritize their entity over social engagements (Houlihan & White, 2003, as cited in Sparvero & Chalip, 2022). However, the challenges nonprofits faced when working with PSOs seemingly outweighed the understanding. While understanding, some participants made note that PSOs' charitable foundations are only required to allocate just 5% of their assets to charitable purposes, and that PSOs typically donate less than 0.5% of their foundations' income towards their community, leaving them disappointed (Foundation Source, n.d.; Sheth & Babiak, 2010).

Limitations and Future Research

Despite meeting data saturation, this study comes with limitations that offer guidance for future research studies. One limitation of this study is its geographic focus. The study only took one metropolitan area into account. Therefore, participants' experiences could be unique to just the PSOs in this location as structures and management approaches may differ across different regions (Formentin & Bortree, 2019; Rowe et al., 2019). Another limitation of this study is the absence of member checking. Because of the lengthy process it took to transcribe every interview, the primary researcher did not have the time to provide the cleaned transcripts to the participants and have them turned around from the participants prior to data analysis. The absence of member checks may have limited validation of the participants' voices, and thus the findings of this study (Smith & McGannon, 2018). However, implementations, such as having a critical friend that also was versed in the dataset, may have helped reduce any disruption towards this study's trustworthiness, or credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 2007; Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Although this study intended to understand how PSOs' CSR practices vary within the three stages of Austin's (2000) collaboration continuum, the CSR practices included in this study were based solely on the recollection of each participants' experiences. While participants could recount most donations or initiatives they have received from a PSO, participants did acknowledge that they could not recount all donations or initiatives, especially those that predated their employment at their nonprofit. Therefore, many CSR practices that these nonprofits have benefited from were not accounted for in the current study. Thus, future studies should incorporate a public database, such as Charity Navigator or CharityWatch, that accounts for nonprofits' donations and donors to obtain more extensive details for each nonprofit-PSO relationship. Utilizing this additional method of data collection alongside interviews helps

strengthen data triangulation, whereby various methods of data collection sustain the same findings (Creswell, 2017).

While this study is the only known study to incorporate the collaboration continuum into sport CSR literature, the collaboration continuum needs to be further explored in nonprofit-PSO collaborations to better understand relationships across all stages (Austin, 2000). As Austin (2000) suggests, the three collaboration stages can—and should—be refined to help researchers and industry professionals better understand the dynamics of the nonprofit-PSO relationship. Such refinement of these stages may include incorporating additional stages that lay in between two of the original stages. Although characteristics of each stage can be found across all stages of the continuum, some relationships that had transactional or integrative characteristics in the current study, such as a PSO employee sitting on a nonprofit's board of directors, were deemed as philanthropic due to other authoritative attributes of the overall collaboration. Therefore, these overlaps of characteristics may have interfered with the assessment of stages in the current study and should be further considered and refined in future studies.

Lastly, it would be remiss to not note that data collection occurred during an arduous time in the United States for individuals and groups, including nonprofits. Recruitment for this study began a week before major executive orders were made against numerous populations that nonprofits serve. While it was intended to include additional types of nonprofits that have collaborated with PSOs, such as the LGBTQ+ community, the timing of both the recruitment and the executive orders may be reflective of certain nonprofits being unable to partake in the study with the bigger societal concerns at sight. While at times these communities are represented in some PSOs' CSR initiatives, these communities are most likely underrepresented or not represented in this data set because of the current political atmosphere that has many

organizations occupied with navigating the abrupt changes across the United States. With this, the results from interviews are subject to bias based on what types of nonprofits partook in this study (Shumate et al., 2018) and researchers are encouraged to build relationships with nonprofits that remain underrepresented in both the literature and across PSOs' philanthropic endeavors.

Practical Implications

Findings from this study propose several points of consideration for professional sport organizations to implement when collaborating with nonprofit organizations. While nonprofits can also re-evaluate their own practices to better the collaboration with professional sport organizations, this study focused solely on nonprofit organizations' perspectives, and therefore the suggested implications are geared towards their partnering professional sport organizations. Nonprofit organizations do their best to educate and inform PSOs on the societal issues that the nonprofit clientele face. To help overcome the challenges that nonprofits face daily, as well as the challenges that nonprofits face when working with PSOs, nonprofit practitioners suggest strategies for PSOs to implement in order to minimize the challenges nonprofits face when working with them. Foremost, professional sport organizations should take into consideration where each nonprofit-professional sport organization relationship is situated within the collaboration continuum to help establish goals, boundaries, and expectations for every collaboration. Professional sport organizations must also evaluate their current giving practices to see how they can better their contributions to each nonprofits' needs. For example, PSOs should consider donating time to volunteer at a nonprofit rather than sending nonprofits left-over promotional items that nonprofits do not have the capacity to store or give away. Furthermore, professional sport organizations should give careful consideration to how relationships are

maintained, honing in on practices that showcase that professional sport organizations care just as much about the relationship as the nonprofits do. These key points bring forth a basis for interpreting this study's findings into empirical practices.

Because relationships at each stage of the collaboration continuum face varying circumstances, PSOs should consider the specific type of collaboration they have with every nonprofit they work with. For example, PSOs in the philanthropic stage should be more open and available to initiate conversations with nonprofits. This could look like having a PSO practitioner replying to a nonprofit after their request got denied rather than sending an automated email or not even reaching out to the nonprofit. Such initiation on the PSOs behalf may not only contribute to augmented communication between nonprofits and PSOs, but this also provides nonprofits with a champion from the PSO. Because reputational risks often arise in the transactional stage (Austin, 2000), PSOs should implement precautions to minimize such risks for both themselves and nonprofits in any case a risk, such as an athlete controversy, occurs that would negatively affect both organizations. Lastly, PSOs in the integrative stage must adhere to their partnering nonprofits in the way that they adhere to their brand partnerships.

Regardless of where relationships are on the collaboration continuum, PSOs should embrace giving practices that better align with their partnering nonprofits' missions. For instance, both the nonprofit and the PSO should meet to evaluate the resources that nonprofits already obtain and what they need to help fulfill their mission at the very start of their relationship. While financial grants were the greatest organizational need for nonprofits in this study, other nonprofits rely more on volunteers and/or supplies than monetary donations from PSOs. Therefore, establishing needs and expectations from the beginning of a relationship will

allow PSOs to better fit their partnering nonprofits' needs, as well as better understand and empathize with the local communities that they serve.

Importantly, PSOs should continuously check in with their partnering nonprofits to help maintain their relationship. Most participants in this study acknowledged that they were the ones trying to keep their nonprofits name in the PSOs loop, which constrained their time and led to some nonprofits feeling insecure and disheartened. Nonprofit-PSO relationships will be better maintained and nonprofits will feel more valued, recognized, and respected by having a PSO employee or champion check in with their partnering nonprofits just once or twice a quarter to let nonprofits know, for example, that they are at capacity for giving at this time and will reach out when resources are more available, or reach out to see if the nonprofit would be interested in partaking in a certain event.

Conclusion

This study provides insight into nonprofit organizations' perceptions of their relationships with professional sport organizations. The findings not only suggest what aspects of corporate social responsibility professional sport organizations should continue to implement when collaborating with nonprofit organizations, but also what professional sport organizations should modify and enhance to better fit the needs of their partnering nonprofit organizations. Findings from this study also help recognize and understand how relationships between nonprofits and professional sport organizations are established, which can help better examine authentic corporate social responsibility practices within professional sports. Despite the challenges nonprofits faced when collaborating with PSOs, all nonprofit practitioners made note of the privilege and appreciativeness they have acquired from working with a PSO. By better

understanding nonprofits' needs while analyzing and challenging PSOs, PSOs' CSR practices can contribute immensely to the betterment of their local communities.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the sport CSR literature by accounting for the nonprofits' perspectives of establishing and maintaining relationships with PSOs. This study builds upon existing sport CSR literature, while also emphasizing the need of incorporating beneficiaries into this academic field. By acknowledging nonprofits in research on sport CSR has the potential to create and disperse industry trends that help fit the needs of the communities at play. Therefore, understanding the nonprofit-PSO relationship through the collaboration continuum, both scholars and practitioners can assess the best CSR practices for every nonprofit-PSO relationship.

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Appendix

INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT

[Prior to recording]: Kim introduces herself and shares her background in the sporting industry and why this research matters.

For the purposes of the research protocol, once I start recording, I will go through some procedural aspects, which you read in the information sheet. You are welcome to use very specific examples – I will ensure to present it in a way that makes it impossible to identify who you, your organization, or the teams are. For example, I will state "a nonprofit practitioner that focuses on youth."

*Start recording

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for the study titled Giving them a voice: Examining nonprofits' perspectives on their relationships with professional sport organizations.

This is Kim Soltis, conducting an interview with **(name of participant)** on **(date)**.

You were selected as a participant because of your past experience of working with professional sport organizations through your nonprofit.

Your perspective is invaluable for advancing research on corporate social responsibility in professional sports.

Via email, I sent you an information sheet that outlined the procedures. Your responses are confidential and we will not include any information that would make it possible to identify a participant. Records will be stored securely.

As stated in the form, your participation is voluntary and you have the option to not answer questions or withdraw from the study at any time.

Did you have the opportunity to review the information sheet?

- [If no, the researcher will review the information sheet with the participant]
- [If yes, then the researcher will proceed with the protocol]

Do you agree to participate in this study?

Do you agree for the interview to be recorded?

The first set of questions will ask about yourself and your current job.

1. For demographic purposes, if you are comfortable, do you mind sharing how you identify in terms of your gender, race, and age?

2. Where do you currently work and what is your role?
    a. How long have you been in this role?

The next set of questions will ask you about the mission of the nonprofit you work for.

3. What would you say are your greatest organizational needs (e.g., volunteers, donations, supplies)?
    a. What does your organization do to fulfill these needs (e.g., rely on staff/volunteers, write grants)?

4. What have **(name(s) of professional sports organization(s))** done for your nonprofit (i.e., provide merchandise, game tickets, grant funding, volunteering, etc.)?
    a. Can you describe whether this kind of support is something you can only get from working with a sports organization?
    b. How long has your organization worked with (the/each) team?

5. Why are you in this relationship?
    a. How did this partnership come about?
    b. How did the team approach you, or how did your organization approach the team(s)?

6. How has/have your partnership(s) evolved over time?

7. How do you think people who benefit (i.e., recipients) from this collaboration view this partnership with PSOs?
    a. What feedback have the recipients provided about the partnership?

8. If you could design the ideal PSO partnership, what would it be?

9. What parameters do you have in ending a partnership with a sports organization? (e.g., player controversies, media coverage).
    a. Have you ever turned down a partnership? Why?

Is there anything else you would like to add that I have not covered?

"I will stop recording now."

[Stop recording].

Closing Comments:

- Thank you for your time.
- If you have questions, please feel free to contact me.