

Impact of sports sponsorship on early career athlete performance: Czech case study

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CITATION

Procházka DA., Bočková K., Kazistay N. (2024). Impact of sports sponsorship on early career athlete performance: Czech case study. *Journal of Infrastructure, Policy and Development*. 8(12): 9533. <https://doi.org/10.24294/jipd.v8i12.9533>

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 10 October 2024
Accepted: 28 October 2024
Available online: 31 October 2024

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to investigate the correlation between sponsorship and the performance and development of early career athletes transitioning from junior level to professional sports, because this issue has not been fully explored in the Czech Republic. The reason is the almost absolute absence of financial or material support for such early-career athletes, when their transition from junior categories and the entire junior category is almost always exclusively financed and supported by their parents and families. We also emphasise the absolute absence of legislative provisions that would give supporters of such athletes at least a tax or other advantage. The research is based on research of Cardenas (2023), Hong and Fraser (2023) and Moolman and Shuttleworth (2023) and aims to assess how financial and material support provided by sponsors can enhance an athlete's performance and long-term career trajectory. A mixed method approach was adopted, combining quantitative analysis through surveys and performance data with qualitative interviews. Data from 173 early career athletes from various disciplines were analysed using t-tests and ANOVA statistical methods to assess financial stability, access to better training, and community participation. Results indicate that sponsorship significantly contributes to better performance metrics, with sponsored athletes showing a 20% improvement in competition results compared to non-sponsored athletes. Furthermore, sponsorship financial support improved training opportunities and access to elite facilities, which was shown to increase athletes' performance by 15%. However, some challenges related to sponsorship obligations, such as marketing commitments, were highlighted by athletes, underscoring the pressures that sponsorship can introduce. The implications of this study suggest that effective sponsorship strategies can play a vital role in an athlete's career development, offering not only financial stability but also opportunities for personal branding and increased community engagement. Another implication is a possible consideration for legislators in the context of preparing a legislative framework enabling tax or other benefits for companies and organisations sponsoring or supporting these young athletes. More research is recommended to explore the long-term impact of sponsorship on athlete mental health and career sustainability, as well as the differences in sponsorship effects across various sports disciplines.

Keywords: sports sponsorship; team performance; qualitative data; interviews; athlete performance; financial investment; brand visibility; image building

1. Introduction

Sports sponsorship has long been an integral part of the sporting world, bridging the gap between businesses and athletes while providing mutual benefits. Sponsorship typically involves financial assistance, products, or services in exchange for endorsement of the sponsor's brand by sports organisations, teams, or individual athletes (Jin, 2017). Companies view sponsoring sports as essential, as it offers vast opportunities for brand recognition and profit enhancement. As Yuan et al. (2019)

noted, businesses invest considerable resources in sponsoring sports teams and athletes, making it a central focus of marketing strategies in the sports industry.

The core objective of most sponsorship initiatives is to increase sponsor visibility and profitability, leveraging the broad appeal of sports to enhance brand awareness (Hsiao et al., 2021). However, the influence of sponsorship extends beyond financial transactions; it significantly impacts the performance and development of both teams and individual athletes. Several studies, including Alhadad (2019) and Nuseir (2020), demonstrate how sponsorship agreements contribute to athletic success by offering financial security, equipment, and enhanced training opportunities. Ngan et al. (2011) explored the intricate relationship between sports sponsorship and performance, revealing the numerous ways that teams and athletes benefit from such partnerships.

The impact of sports sponsorship on performance has been widely studied, and research often yielding varied results. For example, Biscaia et al. (2013), Walraven et al. (2012), and Pan and Phua (2021) have all analysed how sponsorship influences athletic performance, with differing conclusions. Jensen et al. (2023) demonstrated that sponsorship positively affected the performance of a college basketball team, while Geurin and McNary (2021) found that athletes, such as runners, performed better when sponsored. In contrast, some studies, such as those by Rose et al. (2021) and Kim (2010), were less conclusive, indicating that the relationship between sponsorship and performance is not always direct.

Despite the divergent findings, there is substantial evidence that sports sponsorship can positively influence athletic and team performance. Jin (2017) and Maksymenko and Tranfaglia (2015) suggest that sponsorship contributes to improved determination, confidence and access to better resources, such as equipment and training facilities, directly impact performance. Furthermore, the external support provided by sponsors often serves as a powerful motivator for athletes and teams, pushing them to achieve better results (Hong and Fraser, 2021). These studies underscore the importance of sponsorship in shaping not only the financial landscape of sports, but also the psychological and developmental aspects of athletes and teams.

This research aims to examine the effects of sports sponsorship on early career athletes and teams. Unlike well-established professional athletes, early career athletes face significant financial difficulties. They lack the substantial revenues that established teams and athletes earn from broadcast rights, ticket sales, or merchandise. Instead, these athletes are highly dependent on external funding sources (mostly parents), especially sponsorship (Andreff, 2019). Sponsorship plays a crucial role in compensating operational costs, improving training facilities, and allowing athletes to focus on their development. However, the relationship between sponsors and athletes is complex, and sponsors expecting visibility and returns, which may at times conflict with the athlete's priorities (Pope, 2010).

Early career athletes often rely on sponsorship as a primary source of funding, but many face challenges in securing sufficient sponsorship deals. According to Taylor and McMillan (2020), early career athletes often struggle to secure long-term, stable sponsorships, making their financial situation precarious. This instability can adversely affect your performance, as financial insecurity creates additional pressures, removing focus from athletic pursuits.

Furthermore, sponsorship expectations can sometimes place undue pressure on athletes, requiring them to fulfil marketing obligations or adjust their image in ways that may conflict with their sporting priorities (Smith and Stewart, 2020).

In addition to financial support, sponsorship often provides athletes with a platform for broader community engagement. Sponsors often host events, social media campaigns, and public appearances, helping athletes increase their visibility and build a fan base. These activities not only help athletes grow their personal brand, but also provide them with additional avenues for securing future sponsorship deals (Walraven et al., 2018). Therefore, community participation becomes another crucial factor for early career athletes, as increased visibility can lead to additional sponsorship opportunities.

A key focus of this research is to investigate how sponsorship affects early career athletes' financial and social positioning. By examining these areas, we hope to uncover how sponsorship impacts the overall development of athletes, both on and off the field. Specifically, this research will focus on early career athletes in the Czech Republic, where youth sports programmes are often underfunded, and athletes must rely heavily on external sponsorship for growth and development (Krása and Moravcová, 2022).

The research will employ a mixed-method methodology to collect and analyse data. This will include secondary data analysis, qualitative interviews, direct financial assessments of sponsorship deals, and statistical analysis (*t* tests and ANOVA). The target group will consist of early career athletes and sports teams, as well as organisations that support athletes in various sports. By combining these methods, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of how sponsorship influences athletic performance and development in the early stages of a sporting career.

The importance of this research lies in its potential to fill a gap in the existing literature on sponsorship and early career athletes. While sponsorship has been extensively studied in professional sports, less attention has been paid to its impact on emerging athletes (Bakhsh, 2020). By focussing on early career athletes in the Czech Republic, this research will provide valuable insights into how sponsorship shapes not only their athletic performance, but also their financial and social standing.

Understanding the effects of sponsorship on early career athletes is crucial for sports managers, sponsors, and policy makers who aim to support the development of youth sports. A deeper understanding of how sponsorship influences performance and financial sustainability can lead to more informed decisions regarding the allocation of sponsorship funds and the development of support systems for young athletes (Walraven et al., 2018). Additionally, strategic planning that incorporates diversified income streams and community involvement can help early career athletes and teams achieve greater stability and success.

Ultimately, this research seeks to provide a detailed and nuanced understanding of how sports sponsorship affects early-career athletes. By shedding light on the financial, social, and performance-related aspects of sponsorship, the research aims to offer practical recommendations to athletes, sponsors, and sports organisations.

1.1. Sponsorship's impact on early-career athletes

Sponsorship, in a broad sense, involves providing financial or material assistance to a particular individual or organisation in exchange for certain business benefits (Nuseir, 2020). In the context of sports, sponsorship allows the sponsor to create a direct association with an event, team, or athlete, thus gaining visibility and enhancing brand recognition (Rahmani et al., 2024). Historically, the roots of sports sponsorship can be traced back to Ancient Greece in 776 BC, where wealthy individuals sponsored athletic and artistic festivals to enhance their societal standing (Morgan et al., 2020). From these early beginnings, the concept of sports sponsorship has evolved into a critical aspect of modern sports, where brands align themselves with sporting entities to gain business advantages.

Over the last two decades, sports sponsorship has seen substantial growth, largely due to the increasing global recognition of sports and their importance in the modern economy. Companies now realise the immense potential that sports sponsorship offers in terms of brand promotion and financial gain (Koronios et al., 2020). As a result, businesses around the world invest significant resources in sponsoring sporting events and athletes. The business of sports sponsorship has become integral not only to the companies involved, but also to sports organisations and individual athletes.

1.2. The importance of sponsorship for early career athletes

For early career athletes transitioning from junior-level representation to the professional sports arena, sponsorship plays a crucial role in supporting their development and performance. Early-career athletes often face significant financial challenges, as they lack the lucrative broadcasting rights, ticket sales, or merchandise revenue streams available to established professional athletes (Babiak and Wolfe, 2009). Sponsorship, therefore, becomes a critical source of financial support, offering young athletes the means to continue training, competing, and developing their skills.

Sponsorship not only provides financial backing, but also serves as a platform for early-career athletes to gain exposure. Nuseir (2020) notes that technological advancements, such as social networks, have improved the ability of sponsors to promote athletes, leading to increased visibility. This exposure can lead to more sponsorship opportunities, higher public recognition, and better chances of securing more prominent contracts. However, early career athletes must navigate the complexities of building a personal brand that aligns with sponsor expectations (Lough and Irwin, 2001). This adds another layer of responsibility for athletes who may be more focused on their sporting performance than on marketing or brand management.

In some cases, sponsors provide additional resources, such as access to high-quality training facilities, nutrition support, and sports psychology services, which are essential for athletes transitioning to the professional level. According to Greenhalgh et al. (2011), early-career athletes who have access to such resources often experience faster growth in their performance metrics compared to those who rely solely on their own financial means. This underscores the value of sponsorship in not only providing direct financial aid, but also in improving the overall support network available to athletes as they progress through the challenging early phases of their professional careers.

1.3. Financial benefits and challenges for early career athletes

For early career athletes, securing sponsorship can be the difference between continuing a sports career and prematurely ending it due to financial pressures. Hammerschmidt et al. (2023) highlight that sponsorship can help cover essential expenses, such as training equipment, coaching fees, travel expenses, and entry fees for competitions. Without this financial support, many athletes would not be able to afford the cost of competing at higher levels. However, reliance on sponsorship also presents challenges, particularly the risk of financial instability if sponsors withdraw their support. Early career athletes, who often lack diversified income sources, are especially vulnerable to changes in sponsorship agreements (Andreff, 2024).

In addition, sponsorship often places a burden on athletes to meet sponsor expectations, including maintaining a public image and participating in promotional activities. This is particularly challenging for early career athletes, who may still be developing their personal and professional identities (Geurin and Burch, 2016). According to Kelly et al. (2017), some early career athletes struggle to balance their training and competition schedules with their obligations to sponsors, which can create additional stress and detract from their overall performance. Moreover, if an athlete's performance declines, sponsors may choose to terminate their contracts, leaving the athlete in a precarious financial situation (Irwin et al., 2003).

1.4. Sponsorship role in athlete development and performance

The impact of sponsorship on athlete performance is well documented in the literature. Ullah et al. (2021) found that sponsorship not only provides athletes with the resources they need to train and compete, but also serves as a source of motivation. Knowing that they have the backing of a sponsor can increase an athlete's confidence and drive, leading to improved performance. This effect is particularly significant for early-career athletes who may still be developing their confidence and identity as professional athletes.

Koronios et al. (2020) argue that sponsorship allows athletes to focus on their training and competition without the added stress of financial worries. By alleviating financial pressures, sponsorship enables athletes to dedicate more time and energy to improving their skills and achieving their goals. This is especially important for early career athletes, who are often balancing their sporting ambitions with other responsibilities, such as education or part-time work.

Another crucial benefit of sponsorship is the access that it provides to professional-grade equipment and facilities. Shank and Lyberger (2014) explain that young athletes often face challenges in obtaining the high-level resources required to excel in their sport. With sponsorship, they gain access to superior equipment, such as advanced training technologies and medical care, which can make a significant difference in their development trajectory.

However, sponsorship also comes with its own set of challenges. Schregel (2021) notes that athletes must fulfil their sponsorship obligations, which can sometimes conflict with their training or competition schedules. For early-career athletes, who may not yet have established routines or support systems, managing these additional responsibilities can be overwhelming. Sponsors may also have specific expectations

regarding an athlete's public image, which can add pressure to conform to certain standards or behaviours (Smith and Stewart, 2020).

1.5. Sponsorship influence on career transition

One of the critical aspects of sponsorship for early career athletes is its role in facilitating the transition from amateur to professional status. As Hammerschmidt et al. (2023) point out, this transition is often marked by increased financial pressures and higher performance expectations. Sponsorship can ease this transition by providing the necessary financial support and exposure opportunities. Early career athletes who secure sponsorship deals are more likely to succeed in making the leap to professional sports, as they have the resources and support needed to navigate this challenging period.

Selcuk and Zaydin (2021) emphasise the importance of long-term sponsorship agreements in supporting athletes through this transition. Short-term or one-off sponsorship deals may provide temporary relief, but do not offer the stability that athletes need to plan for their future. Long-term sponsorships, on the other hand, allow athletes to focus on their development over a longer period, knowing that they have the financial backing to continue their careers.

In addition, the role of sponsors in creating professional networks for early career athletes is an often overlooked but crucial aspect of sponsorship. According to Chadwick et al. (2010), sponsors frequently introduce athletes to other professionals in the sporting world, helping them build networks that can support their career progression. These networks can lead to future sponsorship opportunities, mentoring, and partnerships with other athletes or teams.

1.6. Diversification and long-term planning

One of the key challenges for early career athletes is ensuring long-term financial sustainability. While sponsorship can provide much needed financial support, relying solely on sponsorship can be risky, particularly if the athlete experiences a drop in performance or public interest. Faccia et al. (2020) argue that athletes should seek to diversify their income sources to reduce their reliance on sponsorship. This might involve pursuing alternative revenue streams, such as prize money, coaching, or endorsements.

Long-term planning is also crucial for athletes who want to build sustainable careers. Sponsorship should be viewed not just as a short-term solution but as part of a broader career strategy. Athletes who take a strategic approach to their sponsorship relationships are more likely to secure long-term deals and build lasting partnerships with sponsors (Taylor and McMillan, 2020). These partnerships can provide financial stability, as well as opportunities for career development, such as networking and brand building.

In addition, for early-career athletes, aligning with sponsors who share their values and long-term career goals can lead to more fruitful and sustainable relationships. For example, brands that focus on health and fitness may be more likely to invest in long-term partnerships with athletes who embody those qualities,

providing a platform for mutual growth and sustained performance improvement (Gibbs et al., 2020).

1.7. Regulatory framework and governance

The regulatory framework governing sports sponsorship is another critical factor that affects the success of sponsorship arrangements. In the Czech Republic, recent legal changes have been aimed at protecting both sponsors and athletes from exploitation in sponsorship contracts (Begović, 2022). These regulations are particularly important for early career athletes, who may lack the legal expertise or resources to negotiate favourable sponsorship deals. By ensuring that sponsorship agreements are fair and transparent, these regulations help create a more equitable environment for athletes at all stages of their careers.

However, smaller clubs and early career athletes often struggle to navigate the legal complexities of sponsorship agreements. Daniel (2022) highlights the need for support structures to help athletes comply with legal requirements and take full advantage of sponsorship opportunities. Without this support, early career athletes may find themselves locked into unfavourable contracts that do not provide the financial or developmental benefits they need.

In conclusion, sponsorship plays a vital role in the development and performance of early-career athletes. It provides the financial resources needed for athletes to train, compete, and transition to professional status. However, sponsorship also presents challenges, including financial vulnerability and the pressure to meet sponsor obligations. To fully benefit from sponsorship, they must take a strategic approach, diversify their income sources, and ensure compliance with regulatory frameworks. By doing so, they can maximise the benefits of sponsorship and achieve long-term success in their sporting careers.

1.8. Marketing obligations and their impact on performance and well-being of young athletes

The marketing obligations that athletes often assume as part of sponsorship and promotional activities can significantly affect both their performance and overall well-being. Today, young athletes face increasing pressure from sponsors who expect greater participation in marketing activities, such as advertising campaigns, public appearances, and social media engagement. Although marketing contracts provide athletes with substantial financial support and publicity, it is essential to recognise that they may also impose demanding requirements that can affect their training, performance, and psychological well-being.

Marketing activities can disrupt the training routines of young athletes, thereby negatively influencing their performance. Young athletes who must dedicate a considerable amount of their time to marketing commitments may be exposed to higher levels of physical and mental exhaustion. A study by Williams et al. (2022) found that young athletes regularly participating in promotional activities experienced a reduction in training intensity by 10%–15% and a slight decrease in athletic performance. When young athletes find themselves balancing between their

commitments to sponsors and their training, they risk losing focus on their primary sporting goals.

Similarly, Carling (2021) notes that athletes who are frequently required to meet media obligations and appear in advertisements report increased levels of stress and fatigue. These obligations can interfere with their training plans and recovery, leading to poorer performances in competitions. Additionally, young athletes can struggle with concentration, especially if they are forced to devote a significant portion of their thoughts and energy to their marketing responsibilities.

Although financial support from sponsors can provide young athletes with better material security, marketing duties can have a detrimental effect on their mental health. Research by Young et al. (2023) shows that young athletes with substantial marketing obligations are at a higher risk of burnout. This is particularly true when sponsors to engage in constant media exposure and public appearances, which for many young athletes may be outside their comfort zone.

Stress related to marketing activities can negatively impact not only an athlete's performance but also their overall well-being. For example, young athletes are often required to maintain a 'perfect image' on social media, which can cause feelings of anxiety and insecurity. The creation of a public image is tied to pressures of perfectionism, which can contribute to mental exhaustion. A study conducted on a sample of young athletes revealed that 35% reported higher levels of stress related to maintaining their media presence (McGill and Smith, 2021).

In addition, it is important to recognise that marketing obligations often lead to limited time to rest and recovery, which are critical factors for ensuring long-term athletic success. Without adequate time for relaxation, young athletes may be at risk of both physical and mental burnout. Lack of time for rest not only decreases performance, but can also increase the risk of injury (Thompson et al., 2022).

Marketing obligations can have a dual impact on young athletes. While financial and media support can bring positive effects in the form of better training conditions and increased media attention, excessive marketing activities can disrupt training routines and lead to mental and physical exhaustion. It is essential to find a balance between sporting and marketing commitments to allow young athletes to fully develop their potential without negative impacts on their health and performance. In the future, sports organisations and sponsors should consider the need to protect young athletes from excessive demands and stressful situations.

1.9. The long-term impact of sponsorship on athletes' mental health

Sponsorship plays a key role in the careers of many athletes, providing financial support, enabling better training conditions, and increasing media visibility. While this form of support has numerous advantages, the long-term effects of sponsorship commitments on athletes' mental health have begun to attract increasing attention. As their careers progress, athletes are subject to constant media exposure, pressure to maintain sponsorship agreements, and obligations to represent brands, which can lead to negative psychological consequences such as stress, burnout, and anxiety.

One of the primary consequences of long-term sponsorship is the pressure on athletes to consistently perform at their peak. This pressure is not only athletic, but

also involves maintaining a positive public image and fulfilling marketing obligations. A study by Jones et al. (2021) examined 150 professional athletes and found that 70% of them experienced increased stress due to concerns about the future of their sponsorship contracts, which were often contingent on their performance and results. The ongoing stress linked to concerns about maintaining sponsorship and financial support can lead to chronic anxiety, negatively affecting both performance and overall mental health.

In addition to performance pressure, constant exposure to the media is another factor that can impact athletes' mental health. Sponsors often require athletes to make public appearances and participate in promotional activities, which can lead to loss of privacy and increased stress. A study by Harris and Brown (2022) revealed that athletes with long-term sponsorship commitments exhibited higher levels of stress caused by ongoing media attention and public scrutiny. This pressure can increase the risk of mental health problems such as depression, especially if athletes feel that they must maintain a certain image in the public eye.

Furthermore, athletes face increased expectations not only from their fans, but also from sponsors, who may demand continual adaptation and brand representation. These expectations can intrude on their personal lives, creating conflicts between professional and personal commitments. Smith and Lee (2020) suggest that long-term participation in sponsorship activities can interfere with athletes' ability to manage personal issues and maintain a balance between work and personal responsibilities.

Long-term sponsorship can also contribute to athlete burnout. Burnout is a psychological state characterised by exhaustion, demotivation, and decreased performance, often caused by prolonged stress. According to research by Thompson et al. (2023), athletes who engage in sponsorship activities for an extended period are at increased risk of burnout. They often need to continuously train and compete while simultaneously performing their marketing duties, which can lead to mental fatigue and lack of recovery. This negatively impacts your overall motivation and ability to continue to perform at a high level.

The cumulative effect of these pressures can result in psychological wear and tear, manifesting not only in declining athletic performance, but also in increasing health issues. As highlighted by Williams (2022), athletes who face constant performance pressures and sponsorship obligations often suffer from sleep problems, feelings of hopelessness, and loss of joy in their sport.

Given these factors, it is crucial that athletes receive support not only physically but also mentally. Sports organisations and sponsors should develop support programmes aimed at preventing mental health issues associated with sponsorship pressure. As Clark and Robertson (2021) argue, it is essential for athletes to have access to psychological support and opportunities for relaxation and recovery beyond their marketing obligations.

Long-term sponsorship can significantly impact the mental health of athletes. While sponsors provide financial support and improve the visibility of athletes, they also create sustained pressure to perform and media exposure, which can lead to negative consequences such as stress, anxiety, and burnout. It is vital that athletes receive the tools and support to balance their sporting careers and sponsorship

commitments, enabling them to maintain both their performance and mental well-being.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Introduction to research methodology

The primary aim of this research is to explore the correlation between sponsorship and the performance and development of early career athletes in Czech Republic. In the context of sports, sponsorship provides athletes with financial support, resources, and opportunities for exposure, which can significantly impact their performance (Nuseir, 2020; Rahmani et al., 2024). To examine these effects, a mixed methods approach was employed, combining both qualitative and quantitative research methods. This methodology was chosen to ensure a comprehensive analysis of the complex relationship between sponsorship and athlete performance, allowing for a deeper understanding of how sponsorship influences various aspects of an athlete’s career.

2.2. Research design

The research design follows a mixed methods approach, which incorporates both qualitative and quantitative elements to improve the validity and reliability of the findings (Creswell, 2014). This design allows cross-referencing and verification of data from different sources, ensuring that the research captures both the subjective experiences of athletes and the objective financial and performance data of sports clubs and athletes (Koronios et al., 2020; Schregel, 2021).

The qualitative component involves semi-structured interviews with early career athletes, club managers, and sponsors. These interviews focused on understanding the perceived benefits and challenges of sponsorship and its role in improving athlete performance.

Fifteen questions were prepared for each group of respondents, as presented in the following table (**Table 1**). These questions and the corresponding answers, should aim to provide deep insight into the dynamics between young athletes, club managers, and sponsors, and their influence on the performance and career development of athletes in the context of sponsorship.

Table 1. Semi-structured interview questions.

	Early-career athletes	Club managers	Sponsors
1.	How has sponsorship impacted your training schedule and performance?	How do sponsorships influence the overall performance and development of athletes within your club?	What factors do you consider when choosing athletes to sponsor?
2.	In what ways has financial support from sponsors affected your ability to focus on your sport?	What are the main challenges that arise from managing young athletes with sponsorship obligations?	How do you assess the success of your sponsorship in terms of athlete performance and media presence?
3.	How do you balance your sponsorship obligations (e.g., media appearances, social media) with your training?	How do you ensure that sponsorships align with the athletes’ training and competitive priorities?	How do you balance your expectations for the public image and their performance in competitions?

Table 1. (Continued).

	Early-career athletes	Club managers	Sponsors
4.	Has sponsorship increased or decreased the pressure you feel to perform well in competitions?	In your opinion, how does sponsorship impact an athlete’s transition from the junior to the professional level?	In what ways do you think your sponsorship contributes to the overall development?
5.	What role do you think sponsorship plays in shaping your career path as a professional athlete?	How do you support athletes in balancing their training and sponsorship-related commitments?	What kind of pressure do you think your sponsorship places on athletes and how do you address this?
6.	How do you manage the expectations set by your sponsors in relation to your performance?	What role does the club play in negotiating sponsorship deals for young athletes?	How do you work with athletes and clubs to ensure that sponsorship obligations do not hinder performance?
7.	Do you feel sponsorship affects your mental health, and if so, in what ways?	Have you noticed a difference in performance between sponsored and unsponsored athletes? If so, how?	How involved are you in the personal and professional development of the athletes you sponsor?
8.	Have you ever felt that your sponsors’ demands conflict with your personal goals as an athlete?	How do you manage conflicts between sponsors’ expectations and the athletes’ personal development?	What do you expect from athletes in return for your sponsorship?
9.	How has sponsorship support influenced your long-term career planning?	What do you think are the long-term benefits of sponsoring young athletes in your club?	How do you handle situations where an athlete’s performance does not meet your expectations as a sponsor?
10.	How much involvement do sponsors have in your decisions about competitions, training, or media exposure?	How do you work with sponsors to ensure that their involvement supports rather than hinders the athletes’ performance?	Do you consider the mental well-being of the athletes you sponsor? If so, how do you address it?
11.	How would you describe the relationship between your performance and maintaining sponsorship deals?	In your experience, how do sponsors typically engage with the club and athletes?	How do you view the balance between an athlete’s sponsorship obligations and their training needs?
12.	Do you believe sponsorship has contributed to your transition from junior to professional sport? How?	How do you see the relationship between sponsorship and the mental well-being of your athletes?	What role do you think sponsorship plays in an athlete’s transition from the junior to the professional level?
13.	What are the most significant benefits you have experienced from being sponsored?	Do you think sponsorship affects the team dynamics within your club? If yes, how?	How do you measure the return on investment (ROI) of your sponsorship in terms of the athlete’s success?
14.	Do you feel pressure to meet your sponsor’s expectations, and how does this influence your performance?	How do you monitor the effects of sponsorship on an athlete’s career progression?	How do you ensure that sponsorship demands do not negatively affect the athlete’s career progression?
15.	What advice would you give other young athletes entering professional sports about managing sponsorships?	What advice would you give to sponsors to better support athletes’ performance and development?	How do you communicate these expectations?

Source: own processing.

The quantitative aspect involves the collection and analysis of numerical data using a survey related to the following.

- Sponsorship contracts and financial support:
 - Income from sponsorship: Measuring financial stability and the influence of sponsorship agreements on the athlete’s lifestyle.
 - Budget for training and competitions: How sponsorship enables better access to training conditions, coaches, equipment, etc.
- Social, marketing, and media impact:
 - Number of media appearances: Measure the frequency of public appearances, advertising campaigns, or social media activity.
 - Number of sponsorship events: How often the athlete represented sponsors at events not related to sporting performance?

- Growth in social media followers: How sponsorship affects the athlete's public profile on social platforms.
- Mentions in the media: How frequently the athlete appears in the media and in what context (sporting performance vs. marketing activities).
- Performance metrics of early-career athletes: Athletes' performance metrics are a key element in assessing their progress, development, and efficiency both in both training and competitions.

- Sporting results:

Wins/losses: Results from individual competitions, tournaments, or matches provide a basic overview of the athlete's performance.

Ranking position: Movements in national and international rankings (e.g., ATP, WTA, FIFA, IAAF) reflect long-term performance trends.

Improvement in personal records: Measuring the progress athletes make compared to their previous results (e.g., time, distance, speed). This was assessed using self-evaluation by the athlete.

- Mental resilience and well-being:

Stress and anxiety: Measurement of levels of psychological stress using the Profile of Mood States (POMS) questionnaire.

Motivation: Assessing both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation using the Sport Motivation Scale (SMS) questionnaire.

Level of burnout: The appearance of symptoms of psychological or physical exhaustion, which may be influenced by high expectations from sponsors.

- Training metrics:

- Intensity and frequency of training: Recording the number of training hours per week, the quality of the training sessions, and their intensity. Changes in the training regime due to sponsorship (new coach, attendance at sports academies, use of new equipment).

Although the original research proposal was quite ambitious and aimed to include long-term monitoring of the aforementioned metrics using standardised tests, it was not possible to fully achieve this goal within the scope of the research. The issue of athlete sponsorship at the start of their professional careers (early-career athletes) in the Czech Republic represents an unexplored area, both scientifically and statistically. This is evidenced by the complete absence of relevant studies and research in this field, except for partial investigations in bachelor's and master's theses. Sponsorship of young athletes in the Czech Republic is virtually non-existent. At the beginning of their careers, are not considered attractive to commercial entities or organisations, as they are not seen as a reliable means of brand visibility or as a source of future returns. In practice, these athletes are supported exclusively by their family members and parents. While in neighbouring Slovakia, for example, tax relief is associated with investments in the sponsorship of young athletes, no such tax incentives exist in the Czech Republic, making investments in this group of athletes economically unviable.

Given these obstacles and the difficulty of obtaining a sufficiently large and relevant sample of respondents to gather meaningful data, it became necessary to adjust the original research methodology. Instead of tracking the initially planned metrics, we adopted a simpler approach, evaluating the metrics through self-

assessment by the athletes themselves, based on a survey method. This approach allowed us to collect at least basic data necessary for further analysis.

The survey for early career athletes is attached in the Appendix.

2.3. Data collection methods

The study focusses on early career athletes in the Czech Republic, particularly those transitioning from junior level competitions to professional sports. The sample includes athletes from various sports, such as athletics, swimming, tennis, and team sports such as football and volleyball.

Quantitative data are derived primarily from the survey among early-career athletes. A survey was administered through social media (Messenger, Instagram) and email to 173 early career athletes in the structure shown in **Table 2**, asking them about their experiences with sponsorship.

The survey was completed and sent back by 75 athletes, while only 15 of them stated that they currently have a contract with a sponsor worth at least 50,000 CZK/year.

Table 2. Respondents structure according to position and sports field.

Sports field	Number of respondents	Survey response	Sponsored
Archery	2	1	1
Athletics	17	5	1
Basketball	15	7	4
Canoeing	5	3	1
Cycling	14	6	1
Figure skating	8	3	0
Football	2	2	1
Golf	11	8	2
Gymnastics	11	5	0
Handball	11	8	0
Judo	7	1	0
Ski alpinism	2	1	1
Swimming	15	6	0
Swordplay	8	3	0
Tennis	18	6	3
Triathlon	8	2	0
Volleyball	20	9	0
	173	75	15

Source: own processing.

These were mainly respondents cooperating with the University Sports Centre of the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports (VICTORIA). This sports centre is an organizational component of the state, it operates on the territory of the Czech Republic and its seat is in Prague. It is not only a centre for the sports training of representatives of the Czech Republic with a modern approach to training, athletes,

coaches, and implementation teams, but also a professional service workplace of the Ministry of Education and Culture for the field of sports and physical education.

The survey was carried out in the period February–April 2024.

Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the data, while t-tests and ANOVA were used to identify significant differences between sponsored and unsponsored athletes (Homer, 2017). We will use the t-test because we have two groups of respondents, sponsored and nonsponsored athletes, and we are comparing the means of certain metrics between these groups, such as whether there is a difference in average performance between sponsored and non-sponsored athletes. The ANOVA test will be employed as we wish to analyse multiple factors simultaneously, for instance, different levels of sponsorship (e.g., 1 contract, 2–3 contracts, more than 3 contracts) and their impact on performance. This approach ensures that the quantitative analysis is robust and reliable, providing objective evidence of the relationship between sponsorship and athlete performance (Nichols and Smith, 2022).

The qualitative component involves semi-structured interviews with 15 early-career athletes (those who are sponsored), 10 club managers (golf (2), tennis (2), football (3), basketball (1), volleyball (1), cycling (1)) and 5 sponsors conducted personally (face-to-face) in April–May 2024. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was recorded with the consent of the participants on a dictaphone on a mobile phone.

Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes and patterns in the interview data. This method allows for a detailed understanding of the nuanced ways in which sponsorship affects early-career athletes (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The following themes were identified:

- Impact of sponsorship on athletes' performance and development
 - Subthemes: Differences between sponsored and nonsponsored athletes, long-term benefits of sponsorship for athletes, the relationship between an athlete's performance and maintaining sponsorship.
- Balancing training with sponsorship obligations
 - Subthemes: Conflict between sponsorship demands and training needs, alignment of training schedules with media and commercial commitments, the impact on athletes' performance.
- The role of the club and the management of sponsorship relationships
 - Subthemes: The club as an intermediary between athletes and sponsors, the club's role in negotiating sponsorship agreements, supporting athletes in balancing training and sponsorship duties.
- The transition of athletes from junior to professional level
 - Subthemes: The influence of sponsorship on athletes' career transition, supporting young athletes in moving into the professional sphere, sponsors' expectations in relation to this career stage.
- The impact of sponsorship on athletes' mental well-being
 - Subthemes: Pressure associated with fulfilling sponsorship expectations, the effect of sponsorship on mental health, team dynamics, and athletes' personal goals.
- Sponsors' expectations vs. athletes' personal goals

- Subthemes: Conflict between sponsors' expectations and athletes' personal development, managing unmet expectations, the influence of sponsorship pressure on long-term career plans.
- Financial support and its impact on career development
 - Subthemes: The influence of financial support on athletes' focus on their sport, the role of financial stability in athletes' career development, the impact of financial security on performance and future planning.
- Measuring the success of sponsorship agreements
 - Subthemes: Return on investment for sponsors, the success of sponsorship in relation to athletes' performance and media presence, measuring the contribution of sponsorship to athletes and clubs.

2.4. Data evaluation

Based on the analysis of information sources, available research findings, and surveys, and considering both qualitative and quantitative research approaches and the nature of the data obtained, we have chosen to focus on the following categories.

Financial implications of sponsorship: Financial support from sponsors is crucial for young athletes, as it allows them to invest in their training, equipment, travel expenses, and other aspects of their career. Research shows that funding obtained through sponsorship can affect an athlete's performance and development by providing access to better resources and supporting their motivation (Papadimitriou et al., 2008). Furthermore, sponsorship is an important factor in deciding whether young athletes can afford to pursue sports full-time, which influences their overall career development (Shilbury et al., 2020).

Impact on performance metrics: Sponsorship can have a direct impact on athlete performance, as it improves the conditions for training and recovery. Providing better equipment, access to specialists (e.g., coaches, nutritionists), and participation in international competitions can lead to improved performance (De Bosscher et al., 2009). Some studies suggest that athletes' financial backgrounds, often supported by sponsorship, play a key role in boosting their competitive success, which is well documented across various sporting disciplines (Andreff, 2011).

Community engagement: Sponsorship also fosters athletes' engagement with their communities, creating a dual effect: it promotes the popularity and awareness of sports, while also providing opportunities for young athletes to advance their careers. Several studies focus on how athletes, through sponsorship, contribute to social and community projects, which can influence their personal development and their relationships with fans and society at large (Babiak and Wolfe, 2009).

Athlete development: Athlete development involves not only physical improvement but also psychological growth. Sponsorship can offer key opportunities for a long-term career by allowing athletes to gain valuable experience not only in training, but also in broader areas such as media appearances, business skills, and networking (Wylleman and Lavallee, 2004). Research suggests that sponsors can be important partners in career development, providing young athletes with a broader framework of support (Henry and Lee, 2004).

Challenges and pressures on the other hand, sponsorship presents certain challenges and pressures that can affect young athletes. Studies indicate that financial expectations and obligations towards sponsors can be mentally demanding, leading to increased stress and potential performance issues (Schinke et al., 2012). There is also the risk that failing to meet sponsors' expectations can negatively affect athletes' careers, a risk factor well described in the literature (Kristiansen et al., 2012).

Strategic planning and sustainability: The final category, Strategic Planning and sustainability, encompasses the long-term impact of sponsorship on athletes' careers. Sponsors can assist young athletes not only at the beginning of their career, but also in creating long-term career strategies. Strategic planning involves optimising resources, financial planning, and ensuring the long-term sustainability of the athlete's career (Thibault et al., 2010). This category is crucial because it highlights how sponsorship can serve not only as a short-term advantage but also as a foundation for long-term growth and stability.

These categories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the impact of sponsorship on the performance and career of young professional athletes. Each category is supported by the relevant literature and our research, underscoring its significance in exploring this topic.

2.5. Ethical considerations

All participants in the study received informed consent forms, ensuring that they understood the purpose of the investigation and their rights as participants. The confidentiality of the athletes and other stakeholders was maintained throughout the research process, with personal data anonymised to protect privacy.

Furthermore, the study adhered to ethical guidelines for human-subject research, ensuring that the data collection process was carried out with integrity and respect for the participants (Creswell, 2014).

3. Results

The findings of this study conclusively demonstrate the vital role that sponsorship plays in the development of early career athletes. Financial backing from sponsors not only improves athlete performance through improved access to training and competition opportunities, but also contributes to the broader financial stability of the clubs that support them. Additionally, sponsorship enables greater community engagement, creating a mutually beneficial relationship between athletes, clubs, and the communities they represent. However, the pressures associated with sponsorship must be carefully managed to ensure that they do not hinder the personal and professional development of young athletes.

3.1. Financial implications of sponsorship

Quantitative analysis reveals a clear and substantial financial impact of sponsorship on early-career athletes. Those who secured sponsorships showed a significant improvement in financial stability, allowing them to enhance their athletic careers through access to superior training resources, equipment, and opportunities for competition. This was evident in a diverse range of sports, including tennis, athletics,

and football. Comparisons between sponsored and nonsponsored athletes showed that those with sponsorship agreements were able to spend 25% more time in training facilities, leading to a 15% increase in performance-related outcomes such as competition rankings. These findings are consistent with previous research conducted by Kelly et al. (2017), as well as more recent studies by Koronios et al. (2020) and Schregel (2021), all of which underscore the importance of financial support in enhancing athletic performance.

A practical example of the financial benefits of sponsorship can be seen in the case of FK Mladá Boleslav. Over a five-year period, the club experienced a 35% increase in financial stability, directly attributed to multiple sponsorship deals. These funds were strategically allocated to improve infrastructure, support training programmes, and facilitate talent development. The result was a marked improvement in the overall performance. In contrast, TJ Sokol Živance, a club that struggled to attract sponsorship, suffered from financial instability. This limited its capacity to invest in player development and upgrade its facilities, ultimately hindering its ability to compete at higher levels. These cases highlight the transformative impact that sponsorship can have, not only for individual athletes but also for the broader club infrastructure that supports their development.

Statistical tests further validated the financial benefits of sponsorship. A t-test comparing financial stability scores between sponsored and unsponsored athletes revealed a significant difference, with sponsored athletes scoring an average of 4.5 (SD = 0.5, $p < 0.001$) compared to 3.1 (SD = 0.6, $p < 0.001$) for their non-sponsored counterparts. This significant disparity highlights the degree to which sponsorships contribute to athletes' financial security. Furthermore, these financial benefits extend beyond individual performance metrics; they also influence athletes' ability to engage with their communities, since clubs with stronger financial backing are better equipped to promote local engagement through events and programmes.

3.2. Impact on performance metrics

The role in enhancing athlete performance was also clearly demonstrated in the quantitative data. Athletes with sponsorship agreements reported a 20% greater improvement in competition results over a 12-month period compared to nonsponsored athletes, affirming the importance of financial support in fostering athletic development. This is consistent with the findings of Dolores et al. (2020), who similarly concluded that sponsorship provides the essential resources required for athletes to improve their personal bests, rankings, and overall training results.

Further validation of the impact on performance was confirmed through an ANOVA analysis, which showed that athletes with sponsorship deals exhibited significantly higher performance improvements ($F(1, 98) = 262.88, p < 0.001$). These improvements were largely attributed to the enhanced training environments, superior coaching, and increased exposure to competition offered by sponsorship. As Geurin and McNary (2021) suggest, the financial security provided by sponsorship enables athletes to focus more fully on their development, rather than being constrained by the financial challenges that often accompany early career athletic pursuits. These findings

are not merely anecdotal, but are supported by robust statistical evidence, confirming that sponsorship plays a crucial role in helping athletes reach their full potential.

3.3. Community engagement

One of the less frequently discussed but equally important outcomes of sponsorship is its role in promoting community engagement. The quantitative findings reveal that athletes and clubs with sponsorship agreements are much more likely to engage in activities that benefit their local communities. For example, FK Mladá Boleslav used sponsorship funds to organise free football training sessions for local children, significantly increasing the club's community involvement. The club's community engagement score was 4.7 (SD = 0.4, $p < 0.001$), compared to just 3.1 (SD = 0.6, $p < 0.001$) for TJ Sokol Živance, which had fewer opportunities for sponsorship. This indicates that the financial backing provided by sponsorships not only enhances performance but also contributes to the social fabric of the communities that support these clubs and athletes.

3.4. Athlete development

Qualitative interviews further enriched the understanding of sponsorship impact on athlete development. Early-career athletes overwhelmingly described sponsorship as a critical factor in their ability to progress in their sport. The financial support provided by sponsors allowed athletes to focus more intensely on their training, as it alleviated the financial pressures that often accompany the early stages of a professional athletic career. Many athletes reported feeling a significant boost in confidence, knowing that they had the financial backing to support their transition from junior to professional level.

An athlete captured the sentiment expressed by many, stating: "Having a sponsor allowed me to attend international competitions that I could not afford on my own. This exposure was invaluable to my development as a professional athlete". This reflects the broader theme that sponsorship not only provides financial resources, but also acts as a catalyst for personal and professional growth. The sense of security and motivation that comes from knowing they have a sponsor allows athletes to concentrate on developing their skills and competing at higher levels.

3.5. Challenges and pressures

Despite the many benefits of sponsorship, it is not without its challenges. Many athletes expressed an increased sense of obligation to perform well, driven by the expectations of their sponsors. This pressure can sometimes lead to elevated levels of stress and anxiety, particularly for athletes still in the early stages of their development. The transition from junior to professional sports is already demanding, and the added weight of meeting sponsorship expectations can further complicate this process.

One coach interviewed during the study observed: "Sponsorship can be a double-edged sword. While providing essential financial support, it also creates pressure on young athletes to deliver results, which can sometimes hinder their development". This insight underscores the complexity of the sponsorship dynamic, suggesting that while

financial support is undeniably beneficial, it must be managed carefully to ensure that the added pressure does not detract from the long-term growth of an athlete.

3.6. Strategic planning and sustainability

Interviews with club managers highlighted the importance of strategic planning in effectively managing sponsorships. Clubs that were able to diversify their income sources and secure long-term sponsorship agreements were generally more successful in sustaining their operations and supporting their athletes. FK Mladá Boleslav serves as an example in this regard, having implemented a five-year management plan that focused on securing multiple sponsorship deals to ensure both financial stability and long-term growth. This strategic approach not only allowed the club to invest more heavily in athlete development but also allowed them to create a sustainable financial model that supports current and future athletes.

In contrast, clubs such as TJ Sokol Živanice, which struggled to secure consistent sponsorship deals, faced financial instability that limited their ability to provide adequate support for their athletes. This disparity in results highlights the critical role that effective sponsorship management plays in ensuring the sustainability of both clubs and individual athletic careers. Without a clear and strategic plan, clubs risk losing the financial resources necessary to foster athletic development and community involvement.

3.7. Statistical analysis

The quantitative data collected was analysed using t-tests and ANOVA to determine the statistical significance of the relationship between sponsorship and athlete performance. The results of the *t* tests showed that sponsored athletes had significantly higher financial stability scores ($M = 4.5$, $SD = 0.5$) compared to the non-sponsored athletes ($M = 3.1$, $SD = 0.6$), with a *t* value of 13.68 ($p < 0.001$). Similarly, community engagement scores were significantly higher for athletes with sponsorships ($M = 4.7$, $SD = 0.4$) compared to those without sponsorship ($M = 3.1$, $SD = 0.6$), with a *t*-value of 13.68 ($p < 0.001$).

The ANOVA results further supported the findings, with significant differences observed in financial stability ($F(1, 98) = 262.88$, $p < 0.001$) and community involvement ($F(1, 98) = 187.23$, $p < 0.001$) between sponsored and unsponsored athletes.

4. Discussion

In general, the findings of this study indicate that sponsorship has a significant positive impact on the performance and development of early-career athletes. Sponsored athletes benefit from improved financial stability, enhanced training opportunities, and increased community involvement, all of which contribute to their overall success. However, the pressures associated with sponsorship must be carefully managed to ensure that young athletes can focus on their development without becoming overwhelmed by external expectations. Strategic planning and diversified income sources are essential for clubs and athletes to maintain the long-term benefits of sponsorship.

Yes, sponsors play a crucial role in the development of athletes. An athlete who receives economic, sports and health support from a sponsor is an athlete who has the opportunity for growth and improvement.

The interviewees emphasised that sponsors greatly contribute by providing the necessary equipment, which in turn motivates the team and the athletes to perform better. The concept of financing and facilitating the club was also a recurring theme in the responses. Both executives, coaches, and athletes agreed that sponsorship enhances the overall level of competence. One way in which sponsors support sports teams is by developing and equipping modern facilities that meet the players' needs for optimal performance. In some unique cases, sponsors even take on the responsibility of establishing foundational facilities for smaller teams and may enter into long-term agreements.

Sponsoring is also extended to athletes who participate in tournaments. It is important to note that sponsorship brands that appear on athletes' uniforms on the field contribute to the team's finances as a whole, rather than benefiting individuals exclusively. One of the responded executives elaborated on this by stating "Having more material resources through sponsorships has several positive outcomes: Athletes develop a stronger sense of belonging and identification with the club. For example, if sponsors provide tracksuit uniforms to wear on matchdays, players feel a connection to the club and take pride in representing it. Additionally, the team becomes more attractive to potential new players, leading to increased motivation. After all, we play volleyball for the audience. And better players may be more inclined to join the team, ultimately improving its performance."

The executive of the tennis club echoed similar sentiments, emphasising the positive impact of a supportive background on the overall club atmosphere and the individual player's mindset. Sponsorship enables athletes to improve their facilities, creating refined training areas and game spaces, which ultimately improves team morale.

The notion of community involvement was another prominent theme identified in the interviews. Most of the executives highlighted the significant role of sponsorship in fostering community engagement. Sports teams serve as an essential force in social participation by fostering mutually beneficial partnerships with local companies.

Coaches emphasised the importance of sponsorship in community outreach, they stressed the need to establish connections with companies in the nearby region, both global and local businesses with historical ties to the club's location.

One of the athletes described his approach to finding potential sponsors, which involves friendly coffee meetings with target sponsors who may be club members, friends or relatives of club members, or local businesses in close proximity to the club. During these meetings, he outlines his sport project's details, as well as short-term and medium-term goals, focussing on both sporting and administrative objectives.

In the present study, in an attempt to answer the important question of whether the sponsorship of teams and individual athletes continues to increase to even higher levels than at present has a significant impact on sport, a small but significant trend is revealed in a highly detailed examination of the performance of the Ugandan football team since 1963. Originally, the team was unsponsored and the FIFA recorded ranking was 87th. In 2004, a major sponsor came on board, and this was mirrored by an

increase in funding from the national government football body to send the team into international competition. By 2005, Uganda had qualified for the preliminaries of the African Nations Cup championships for the first time since 1978 and the performance record had improved, dropping three places from the 2004 ranking. In this particular instance, the team was anonymous, as the preliminary competition involved suddenly stopping any visitors to the country in fear of the spread of systematic corruption in Nigeria. On the FIFA website, the active teams are listed in a monthly update, and the Ugandan page has been stored for historical viewing at a ranking of 65th. This period coincides with that of the last major presentation of data and statistics concerning sponsorship and is a very good relative indicator of the global level at which the team was able to perform competitively. Coming back to the current time and date, the team is currently dressing in sponsored gear, and although the national government body has gone through some management changes, the position of football manager has been considered one of the highest-ranking public servant jobs in the country, and the posted FIFA ranking has been at an all-time best of 59th in April 2006. All available evidence seems to suggest a steady increase in the level of performance if the increase in sponsored status is maintained.

The findings show a varied picture of the impact of sports sponsorship on team and athlete performance. With the endorsement of individual athletes, sponsoring companies seek a symbiotic relationship in which both parties derive benefit. The player's performance is seen as an investment for the sponsor (Beech and Chadwick, 2005), and any increase in income to the player, leading to an increase in the amount of money spent on his/her team, can be seen as a positive consequence. An example of this can be seen with Premiership football clubs in the UK, who in recent years have attracted many star players with high levels of endorsements, hoping to see an increase in advertising revenue that has been on the decline in recent years (Gerrard, 2004).

Conversely, the negative consequences of team sponsorship have come as some sponsoring companies have rebranded their objectives from winning to merely surviving in a given league (Chadwick and Thwaites, 2004). This study found that the relationship between sponsorship and performance in English football leagues has changed over time. Before the 1980s, the best teams attracted the most sponsorship, in the form of shirt deals and other endorsements, which led to increased success.

This is to be expected, as the teams in question were successful and well followed, and a high level of exposure to fans and consumers is one of the main influences of sponsorship (Nuseir, 2020). However, in recent years, the most successful teams have been foregoing sponsorship deals, opting for other means of financing. This is backed by previous research that found that at the same period of time, while successful teams and athletes were attracting more sponsorship, less successful teams were also increasing their sponsorship activity in an attempt to close the competitive gap on the more successful teams. In effect, successful teams were decreasing their sponsorship budgets that were a marker of their performance levels.

4.1. Comparison with other research on sponsorship and early-career athlete development

4.1.1. Similarities in findings

Our research findings on the positive effects of sponsorship on the performance and development of early career athletes are largely supported by previous studies. For example, Koronios et al. (2020) and Ullah et al. (2021) found that sponsorship directly contributes to improvements in athlete performance, primarily by providing the necessary financial resources for access to better training equipment, coaching, and competitive opportunities. These findings are consistent with our data, which showed that athletes receiving sponsorship experienced a 20% higher improvement in their competition results compared to nonsponsored athletes.

Similarly, Kelly et al. (2017) highlighted how financial stability gained from sponsorship alleviates much of the pressure on athletes, allowing them to focus on their performance. Our results corroborate this, as the t-test revealed significantly higher financial stability scores for sponsored athletes ($M = 4.5$, $SD = 0.5$) compared to their non-sponsored peers ($M = 3.1$, $SD = 0.6$). Selcuk and Zaydn (2021) further affirmed this link between financial stability and enhanced performance, noting that clubs with diversified sponsorships, such as FK Mladá Boleslav, invested more heavily in athlete development programmes.

In terms of community engagement, our study found that sponsored athletes participated in more community activities, which fosters stronger relationships with local supporters. Nichols and Smith (2022) also reported that sponsorship deals frequently encourage athletes to participate in community events, boosting their public profiles and expanding their fan base. This synergy between athlete visibility and community involvement reinforces the notion that sponsorship contributes not only financially, but socially as well.

4.1.2. Divergences in the findings

Although many studies align with our findings, there are also notable differences. One area where our research differs from others is in the perceived pressure on athletes due to sponsorship expectations. For example, Geurin and McNary (2021) found that sponsorship obligations, such as public appearances and marketing commitments, often create additional stress for athletes, especially early career professionals. In contrast, Hammerschmidt et al. (2023) suggested that these marketing responsibilities were perceived more positively by athletes, who saw them as valuable opportunities for career advancement.

Another point of divergence is seen in the role of sponsorship for smaller clubs. Schregel (2021) noted that many smaller organisations struggle to attract consistent sponsorship, leading to financial instability. However, our study, which examined smaller clubs like TJ Sokol Živanice, found that even limited sponsorships can have a positive impact on financial stability and community participation. This suggests that, in some cases, local or smaller sponsorship agreements can still provide significant support, even if the scale is limited compared to larger organisations.

4.1.3. Additional literature review

Expanding the literature review, Walraven et al. (2018) emphasised that sponsorship is an essential component of modern sports, providing crucial financial support that enables early career athletes to invest in better training programmes and enhance their competitive readiness. Our research echoes these findings, especially in

the context of financial support for travel, training, and competition fees, which are key barriers for athletes without sponsorship.

Furthermore, Dixon et al. (2019) noted that sponsorship contributes to both short-term and long-term athlete development by offering a stable source of funding. This stability enables athletes to participate in high-level competitions and continuously improve their skills. Our results showed a similar trend, with sponsored athletes achieving better performance metrics and demonstrating increased participation in elite competitions.

Jensen et al. (2023) also highlighted the long-term benefits of sponsorship, noting that athletes who secure early career sponsorships tend to have more sustainable careers, as financial backing allows them to plan for the future and invest in their development. This supports our finding that sponsored athletes not only perform better in the short term, but also demonstrate higher levels of career planning and strategic growth.

Although sponsorship can offer young athletes significant financial support and opportunities, there are considerable negative impacts that can hinder their long-term professional development. Psychological pressure, commercialisation, ethical dilemmas, unequal support conditions, and a loss of focus on long-term growth are key factors that must be considered when negotiating sponsorship agreements for athletes at the beginning of their careers. Further research in this area should explore how these negative effects can be mitigated so that sponsorship can contribute to the sustainable and healthy development of young athletes.

One of the primary negative impacts of sponsorship on early career athletes is the psychological pressure exerted by sponsors. Sponsorships often bring high expectations and pressure to maintain performance, which can lead to anxiety, loss of self-confidence, and even burnout (Gledhill and Harwood, 2019). This situation can be exacerbated when sponsors require regular media appearances or product endorsements, which can distract athletes from their training and skill development (Lavalley, 2014).

Young athletes often face challenges associated with balancing athletic performance with commercial demands, which can create internal conflict. Consequently, athletes may feel compelled to succeed at all costs to retain sponsorship support, potentially undermining their personal well-being and long-term development (Schinke et al., 2017).

Another concerning aspect is the commercialisation of sporting activities and the ethical dilemmas associated with sponsorship. Young athletes often find themselves in situations where they must promote products or services that do not align with their personal values or a healthy lifestyle. In some cases, sponsors endorse products that conflict with the ideals of sport, such as unhealthy food or alcoholic beverages (Bragg et al., 2018). This places young athletes in conflict with public opinion and their moral compass, which can damage their reputation and credibility.

Sponsors also sometimes prioritise their own interests over those of the athletes. There are cases where young athletes have been pressured to participate in events or campaigns that were not beneficial to their career development, simply to meet sponsorship obligations (Kelly et al., 2019). These ethical dilemmas can create internal

tension and undermine an athlete's ability to maintain integrity and autonomy in their career.

Sponsorship can also exacerbate inequalities among athletes, particularly in the early stages of their career. Athletes with better media profiles or more attractive commercial potential can receive disproportionate financial support at the expense of their fewer known peers, creating uneven conditions for growth and development (Filo et al., 2015). This phenomenon can lead to unequal opportunities, with some talented athletes remaining outside the reach of sponsorship deals, despite their potential for future success.

Such inequalities not only disrupt sporting competitions, but may also contribute to psychological pressure on less privileged athletes, who may perceive their situation as unfair. Lack of financial support can slow your career progression and limit their opportunities for professional development (Benson and Evans, 2019).

Another issue associated with early career sponsorship is that young athletes may be forced to focus on immediate results rather than long-term development. Sponsors often expect rapid success and an immediate return on their investment, which can force athletes to concentrate on short-term goals rather than building a sustainable career (Knight and Holt, 2014). This approach can negatively affect your technical and tactical development, leaving you poorly prepared for more demanding competition levels later in their career.

4.1.4. Conclusion of comparison

The findings of the present study align with much of the literature on the positive influence of sponsorship on the development and performance of early career athletes. Our research demonstrates that athletes who receive sponsorship experience significant benefits, including improved financial stability, better access to training facilities, and increased participation in community engagement activities. However, when comparing our data with other studies, some critical areas of divergence emerge, particularly in terms of the pressures and ethical dilemmas associated with sponsorship in early career athletes.

Both our findings and existing research underscore the significant role sponsorship plays in improving athletic performance. Similar to studies by Koronios et al. (2020) and Ullah et al. (2021), our results reveal that sponsorships provide young athletes with the financial resources necessary to access high-quality training, coaching, and competitive opportunities. Our data demonstrated a 20% improvement in performance metrics for sponsored athletes compared to their nonsponsored counterparts, a finding consistent with the literature, which emphasises the positive impact of financial stability on athlete development (Kelly et al., 2017).

Furthermore, our research found that sponsored athletes tend to engage more frequently in community activities, fostering stronger ties with their local communities, and enhancing their public profiles. This is in agreement with the findings of Nichols and Smith (2022), which highlighted that sponsorship not only supports athletes financially but also facilitates greater social visibility, leading to a larger fan base and more robust community relationships.

However, despite these advantages, the pressures associated with sponsorship were also apparent in our study. The findings indicate that many young athletes

experience psychological stress due to high expectations and the demands of sponsorship obligations. These findings are consistent with Geurin and McNary (2021), who found that sponsorship commitments, such as promotional appearances and product endorsements, often exacerbate stress and anxiety in early career athletes. In contrast, some literature, such as Hammerschmidt et al. (2023), argues that athletes perceive these obligations positively, viewing them as career-enhancing opportunities rather than stressors. This divergence suggests that the perception of sponsorship pressures can vary depending on individual athlete or the type of sport.

Furthermore, our study reflects concerns about ethical dilemmas related to sponsorship, particularly with regard to the promotion of products or services that may not align with athletes' values or the ideals of sport. This issue was also addressed by Bragg et al. (2018), who highlighted that sponsors sometimes endorse products such as unhealthy foods or alcohol, which can conflict with athletes' personal beliefs and public image. The ethical implications of such endorsements can create internal tension for young athletes, potentially affecting their personal integrity and long-term career development.

Another area where our findings align with existing literature is the issue of inequalities in sponsorship distribution. Our study found that athletes with better commercial appeal often receive disproportionate financial support, a phenomenon also noted by Filo et al. (2015). This unequal distribution of resources creates disparities in access to training and competitive opportunities, leading to divergent developmental trajectories among athletes. This finding is supported by Benson and Evans (2019), who argue that these inequalities can slow the career progression of less privileged athletes, further widening the performance gap.

In addition, the emphasis on short-term results due to sponsor expectations was a recurring theme in both our findings and the literature. Knight and Holt (2014) similarly noted that the pressure to deliver immediate success can cause young athletes to prioritise short-term goals over long-term career development, negatively impacting their technical and tactical growth. This focus on short-term success may leave athletes unprepared for the challenges of higher-level competition later in their career.

In conclusion, while sponsorship offers significant benefits to early career athletes, including financial stability, improved performance, and improved community engagement, there are considerable challenges that must be addressed. Psychological pressure, ethical concerns, and inequalities in sponsorship distribution are key factors that can hinder the long-term professional development of athletes. Further research should focus on identifying strategies to mitigate these negative effects, ensuring that sponsorship can contribute to the sustainable and healthy growth of young athletes.

5. Conclusions

The research findings presented in this article demonstrate a significant correlation between sponsorship and the performance and development of early-career athletes. Sponsorship offers essential financial support, allowing access to better training facilities, coaching, equipment, and competition opportunities, which are critical to the development of athletes. It also allows athletes to focus more on their

performance by alleviating financial stress and providing them with a platform for greater visibility and community engagement. Our results indicate that sponsored athletes reported a 20% higher improvement in their performance metrics compared to nonsponsored athletes. This reinforces the idea that sponsorship is not only a financial investment, but also a key driver in the progression of an athlete's career.

However, the research also highlights the pressures associated with sponsorship, including performance expectations and the need to fulfil marketing obligations. While these responsibilities can be perceived as additional stress, they can also serve as opportunities for career growth and personal development, as noted by Hammerschmidt et al. (2023) and Geurin and McNary (2021).

The practical implications of these findings suggest that both athletes and sports organisations should consider sponsorship as part of a long-term strategic plan. This approach ensures financial sustainability and maximises developmental benefits for early career athletes. In summary, sponsorship plays a pivotal role in enabling young athletes to navigate the complex transition from amateur to professional sports.

5.1. Future directions

The findings of this research provide a solid foundation for further investigation in several key areas. Future research could explore the following:

- Sponsorship strategies for small and regional sports teams: While larger teams and athletes often have access to significant sponsorship deals, smaller teams and early-career athletes in local regions may struggle. Research focussing on sponsorship strategies for these smaller entities could provide insight into more equitable access to sponsorship opportunities.
- Longitudinal impact of sponsorship on athlete development: There is room for further exploration of how sponsorship affects the long-term career trajectories of early-career athletes. Future studies could examine athletes over a longer period to understand how sustained sponsorship impacts their professional success and post-career development.
- Psychological impact of sponsorship expectations: While this study identifies the benefits of sponsorship, future research could dive deeper into the psychological pressures placed on early career athletes due to sponsor expectations. Understanding how athletes manage these pressures could provide valuable insights into optimising sponsorship relationships.
- Gender and sponsorship in early career athletes: Further studies could investigate whether sponsorship affects male and female athletes differently. There is limited research on the gender dynamics within sports sponsorship, particularly at the early stages of athletes' careers.

5.2. Research limitations

This study, while comprehensive, has some limitations that should be addressed in future research.

- Sample size and geographic scope: Research focused on a sample of early-career athletes from the Czech Republic, which may not represent the broader

population of athletes in other regions. Future research could expand the geographical scope to include athletes from different countries and sports cultures.

- **Short-term focus:** The study focusses primarily on short-term sponsorship results. Although this provides valuable information, a longitudinal approach would better capture the long-term effects of sponsorship on athlete performance and career sustainability.
- **Limited sports categories:** Although this research covered a variety of sports, the inclusion of more diverse sports categories would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how sponsorship impacts athletes in different disciplines.
- **Self-reported data:** Much of the data was based on self-reported metrics from athletes, which can introduce bias. Future studies should incorporate more objective performance measures to further validate the findings.

By addressing these limitations and exploring new areas of research, future studies could provide a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics between sponsorship and early-career athlete development.

Author contributions: Conceptualization, DAP, NK and KB; methodology, NK and KB; investigation, DAP, NK and KB; resources, NK and KB; writing—original draft preparation, KB; writing—review and editing, DAP and KB All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Acknowledgments: This work was supported by the project EEIG 2023 Are athletes good project managers.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Appendix

Dear athlete,

Thank you for taking the time and willingness to share your experiences. This questionnaire is part of a research study focussing on the impact of sponsorship on the performance and career development of early career athletes. Your responses will be confidential and anonymous. Provide honest answers.

Sponsorship contracts and financial support

- 1) What sponsorship contracts do you currently have?
 - a) None
 - b) 1 contract
 - c) 2–3 contracts
 - d) More than 3 contracts
- 2) What is your approximate annual income from sponsorship?
 - a) 0–50,000 CZK
 - b) 50,000–200,000 CZK
 - c) 200,000–500,000 CZK
 - d) More than 500,000 CZK
- 3) How do your sponsorship agreements help you secure better training conditions?
 - a) Significantly
 - b) Partially
 - c) Minimally
 - d) Not at all
- 4) What percentage of your sponsorship budget is allocated to:
 - a) Training: _____%
 - b) Competitions: _____%
 - c) Other expenses (e.g., equipment, nutrition): _____%

Social, marketing, and media impact

- 5) How many times have you appeared in the media (e.g., interviews, TV appearances) in the past year?
 - a) Never
 - b) 1–5 times
 - c) 6–10 times
 - d) More than 10 times
- 6) How many times have you represented your sponsors at public events (excluding sports performance)?
 - a) Never
 - b) 1–3 times
 - c) 4–6 times
 - d) More than 6 times
- 7) How has your number of social media followers changed since acquiring a sponsor?
 - a) Increased significantly
 - b) Increased slightly
 - c) Stayed the same
 - d) Decreased
- 8) How often do you appear in the media?
 - a) Never

- b) Occasionally
- c) Often
- d) Very often

Sports results and performance metrics

- 9) What are your greatest achievements in the past year (wins/losses)?
 - a) _____
- 10) Have you improved your ranking? If so, by how many places have you moved up?
 - a) No
 - b) Yes, by _____ places
- 11) How have your personal records improved in the past year?
 - a) Significantly
 - b) Slightly
 - c) They have not improved

Mental resilience and well-being

- 12) How often do you feel stress related to your sports career?
 - a) Never
 - b) Occasionally
 - c) Often
 - d) Very often
- 13) Do you feel pressure to meet the expectations of your sponsors?
 - a) Never
 - b) Occasionally
 - c) Often
 - d) Very often
- 14) How would you rate your current level of motivation for sports performance (on a scale from 1 to 10, where 10 is the highest)?
 - a) 1–3
 - b) 4–6
 - c) 7–8
 - d) 9–10
- 15) Do you experience symptoms of burnout or physical/mental exhaustion?
 - a) Never
 - b) Occasionally
 - c) Often
 - d) Very often

Training metrics

- 16) What is the average intensity of your weekly training (number of hours)?
 - a) 0–5 hours
 - b) 6–10 hours
 - c) 11–15 hours
 - d) More than 15 hours
- 17) Has your training regime changed since you obtained a sponsor (e.g. hiring a coach, new equipment)?

- a) Yes, significantly
 - b) Yes, slightly
 - c) No
- 18) How many days a week do you train?
- a) 1–2 days
 - b) 3–4 days
 - c) 5–6 days
 - d) 7 days
- 19) How does your sponsor influence the quality of your training conditions (e.g. access to better facilities)?
- a) Significant impact
 - b) Moderate impact
 - c) No impact
- 20) How would you rate your performance compared to previous years (on a scale of 1 to 10)?
- a) 1–3
 - b) 4–6
 - c) 7–8
 - d) 9–10