Childhood obesity and overweight is a significant clinical and public health concern (Wang & Lobstein, 2006; Maddison, Foley, & Mhurchu, 2009; Vignolo & Rossi, 2008). According to the Centers for Disease Control (2009), the prevalence of obesity and overweight has increased among all age groups, and approximately 18% of children and adolescents in the United States are obese. A major contributing factor to the prevalence of overweight and obesity is an increase in sedentary activities among children (Epstein, Paluch, Gordy, & Dorn, 2000; Gentile,Welk, & Eisenmann, 2009; Robinson, 2004). Sedentary behaviors such as television watching, video game play, and computer use displace physical activity and have been shown to be related to obesity (Harris, 2009; Hu, Li, Colditz, & Willett, 2003; Jebb & Moore, 1999). Ultimately, children are less active today than they were in the past, and they are unlikely to meet the minimum recommended guidelines for physical activity (CDC, 2009).

In response to the growing epidemic, professional sport leagues have identified childhood obesity and physical activity as a target of community outreach efforts. At the league level, the National Football League (NFL) developed NFL Play 60, a national youth health and fitness campaign “focused on increasing the wellness of young fans by encouraging them to be active for at least 60 minutes a day” (Goodell, n.d.) Similarly, the National Basketball Association (NBA) launched NBA Fit, a health and wellness program that promotes healthy lifestyles for all ages and has program components that specifically target children (Thompson, 2008). The involvement of professional sport leagues (and their associated teams and athletes) is consistent with recommendations from public health practitioners and researchers who have suggested that professional athletes may be able to impact health outcomes related to physical activity, including childhood obesity (Estabrooks & Hayman, 2008; Kohl & Hobbes, 1998; Leslie, Yancey, & McCarthy, 1999; Vieweg, et al., 2005). This recommendation is based on the idea that sport figures are aspirational role models and that their celebrity cache can make living a healthier lifestyle attractive to youth (Yancey, et al., 2009). However, the theoretical foundations for such claims are rarely elaborated, and in the absence of a theoretical framework, it is difficult to understand why programs are successful (or unsuccessful) (Green, 2000).

In an effort to better understand the most appropriate and effective points of intervention for professional sport leagues, teams, and athletes, it is important for physical activity promotion programs to have a theoretical foundation. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to apply traditional public health planning theory and methods to existing league-wide physical activity interventions in professional sport. To accomplish this, an intervention mapping approach was applied to the issue of childhood obesity. The intervention mapping process comprises a series of steps that result in a “blueprint for designing implementing, and evaluating an intervention based on a foundation of theoretical, empirical, and practical information” (Bartholomew, Parcel, Kok, & Gottlieb, 2006, p. 17).

A review of the literature was conducted and used to create a logic model derived from Green and Kreuter’s PRECEDE model (2005). The logic model approaches the issue of childhood obesity from a social ecological understanding of health problems and their solutions in which “health is viewed as a function of individuals and of the environments in which individuals live, including families, social networks, organizations, communities, and societies” (Bartholomew, et al., 2006, p. 25). Next, the expected program outcomes were identified and operationalized into specific performance objectives. Then, theoretical methods to influence change and the necessary conditions for the desired change were identified.

Once the theoretical foundations were established, qualitative methods were used to collect data for NFL Play 60 and NBA Fit. Key informant interviews were conducted with representatives from nonprofit partner organizations and professional sport teams and leagues. A semi-structured interview format was used, with particular attention paid to the following elements: theoretical and/or practical underpinnings of the program, program design and components, social marketing, catalysts for program development, delineation of program development tasks between sport and public health professionals, planning for sustainability, and evaluation of program outcomes. In addition, content analysis was conducted of program collateral and program media. The results of the analysis were
then compared to the theoretical framework developed through the intervention mapping process to provide a comparison between positive and normative program development.

In this presentation, the methods, strategies, and program components of these physical activity initiatives will be presented and analyzed. The ways in which sport-driven programs conform to or deviate from health promotion theory will be discussed. The results of this study provide guidance to how professional sport team programs can be integrated into the larger public health planning process and how professional sport assets can be leveraged to impact childhood obesity. Finally, the utility of theory-based program planning in evaluating physical activity initiatives will be discussed.