Although research on sport has clearly progressed (e.g., Heere & Dickson, 2008; Seo & Green, 2008), some have expressed concerns about the choice of methods and their quality (Boucher, 1998; Mahony & Pitts, 1998; Olafson, 1990, 1995). Amis and Silk (2005) have beckoned the sport management community to embrace “innovative ways of thinking about and/or carrying out sport management research” (p. 355). They argued the field should invite “a wider variety of questions, approaches, and methods” (p. 356). Other past and recent works also have supported this call for alternative approaches to research because the present popular methods might too narrowly examine topics and issues important to the academy (Park, 1983; Slack, 1997, 2005; Zeigler, 2007). Indeed, European Sport Management Quarterly produced a special issue on change in December of 2008. Frisy (2005) during her 2004 Ziegler Award address also indicated the field of sport management could more adequately study social, political, economic, historical, and cultural realities which impact sport institutions and organizations. In addition, Amis and Silk (2005) contended that “we cannot obviate the need for an understanding of history and context by hiding behind terms such as reliability, validity, and generalizability” (p. 359).

General historical research method may be defined to include five steps: 1) select a subject of interest to study and narrow the topic by preparing questions; 2) pursue and acquire those documents and artifacts necessary; 3) conduct an historical criticism; 4) analyze and interpret the evidence; and 5) record conclusions and generalizations in a meaningful and understandable narrative. Historical methodology is challenging to work with in a quantitative and qualitatively defined research context because it often does not fit neatly in either category (Booth & Rowlinson, 2006, p. 8). But, the authors of this paper contend, it should be viewed as rigorous. It is a method of research that matches the call of scholars in the sport management and wider management and marketing field(s) for expansion in their approach and conceptualization (e.g. Slack, 2005; Jones & Shaw, 2006; Witkowski & Jones, 2006; Warren & Tweedale, 2002; Zald, 1993; Kieser, 1994). Overall, the historical research process does not mutually exclude other forms of research in a zero-sum game, but rather involves, follows, and respects other research methodologies (Booth & Rowlinson, 2006; Booth, 2005; Kaestle, 1997).

The purpose of this investigation, then, is to identify the frequency of different methods utilized by scholars in notable journals in sport management. We examine the rate at which the various research methods used in sport management journals used historical data or the historical research methodology. At the present moment, no attempt has been made to showcase the recent trend of the use of research methods in articles accepted by these journals. The data for this study consisted of 383 articles appearing in the European Sport Management Quarterly, Journal of Sport Management, Sport Management Review, and Sport Marketing Quarterly from 2005 to 2009. These scholarly publications were chosen because they are major sources of information for scholars and the content they hold within is frequently acknowledged as important to classroom teaching, professional preparation, and academic research. They were also chosen based on their source of publication, in that they present a geographic balance. On average, the four journals produced roughly 76 articles each year; however, this number varied year-to-year based on increases in issues published per year by the various journals. It is important to note that examining recent journal articles can provide a general tendency among various pieces of proposed or newly completed research, and can be compared with the past to demonstrate their diversity. Overall, the identification of the current trends can expose and lead to change of deficiencies in sport research.

Various research methodologies were identified through the researchers’ review and the self-reporting keywords highlighted by the document. Essentially, the researchers conducted a content analysis of published articles to identify current trends in research method selection. The research method areas categorized for the purposes of this work included: 1) Qualitative; 2) Quantitative; 3) Historical; 4) Case Study; 5) Legal Analysis; 6) Conceptual Paper; and 7) Content Analysis. To assure proper selection of the correct category the researchers created operational definitions for each category and developed coding sheets for every journal article. Each coder was instructed to
examine the article before looking at the keywords listed in order to prevent bias about the placement of the article into a particular research method category. The controlled conditions provided an inter-coder reliability of 91.1% and an intra-coder reliability of 97.5%. Both numbers exceed general standards (i.e. 80%) recognized by Tan (1985).

Not surprisingly, the large majority of articles were classified as quantitative (n=179), and the trend analysis showed the highest number of articles using historical data to be quantitative articles (n=40). However, though quantitative articles had the largest numbers of articles utilizing historical data, it was used at the second lowest rate (22.35%). Qualitative based research (n=79), case studies (n=54), and conceptual articles (n=40) all followed quantitative based research as the most frequently published types of work. Qualitative articles (21.52%) also produced the lowest likelihood to use historical data. Case study (n=29) based articles, legal analysis (n=18), and qualitative studies (n=17) followed quantitative focused papers as the most frequent users of historical data. Conceptual papers and content analysis appear less frequent in the journals and thus contributed less to the use of historical data but they each remained greater supporters of the use of historical data than qualitative or quantitative methods.

The journals comparison also produced some interesting results. For instance, Sport Marketing Quarterly emerged as the journal most likely to publish work using historical data or the historical method (51/114 or 44.7%). SMQ was followed by ESMQ (29/76 or 38.2%), JSM (35/120 or 29.2%), and SMR (14/73 or 19.2%) respectively. Interestingly, JSM, SMQ, and ESMQ were all near or above 50% of their total article production for the support of quantitative based research. Other points of interest in terms of journal comparison will also be broached.

Overall, this research shows that quantitative research methods are the most preferred type of method utilized by researchers submitting accepted manuscripts. Furthermore, the results of this work demonstrate several other points of interest related to our focus on historical research. First, true historical method research is rare in these journals; we found only three true historical research method articles over the five years. Yet many of the articles each year used historical data although not necessarily historical methods. We argue that this is a disconnect and should be redressed. We suggest the quality of research overall would improve if the field would support research using this historical method along with others. Perhaps a special call for papers emphasizing historical research methods could strengthen this important facet of the field, which has applications to research as well as teaching.