Brand associations are considered to be the basis for brand image formation and represent the thoughts and ideas that an individual has in their memory for a particular good or service (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993). It is important to understand the brand associations that consumers hold, as these associations are one of the primary factors that drive consumer purchase decisions and brand loyalty (Aaker, 1991). It has also been suggested that brand associations are the most important component of spectator based brand equity in professional sport (Ross, 2006).

Despite the important nature of brand associations, research in this area has only recently become a topic of interest in sport. Gladden and Funk (2002) were the first to examine what types of associations sport fans have for their favorite professional teams. They determined there were 16 different associations which could be categorized as attribute (success, head coach, star player, management, stadium, logo design, product delivery, and tradition), benefit (identification, nostalgia, pride-in-place, escape and peer group acceptance), or attitude associations (team's importance, self-perceived knowledge, and affect).

Ross, James and Vargas (2006) extended their research on conceptualizing brand associations in sport, and developed the team brand association scale (TBAS) which measures 11 team brand association categories for professional sport teams: brand mark, rivalry, concessions, team history, organizational attributes, non-player personnel, stadium community, team success, team-play characteristics, social interaction, and commitment. Since its' development the TBAS has been utilized in a variety of ways including testing the reliability and validity of the scale (Ross, Bang, & Lee, 2007), using the TBAS to segment consumers (Ross, 2007), and to examine changes in team brand associations after exposure to brand extensions (Walsh & Ross, 2009).

Despite the growth of research in this area, more work is needed to further the study of brand associations in sport and provide sport managers with information that can be useful in their day-to-day team operations. As Ross and James (2007) suggested, it is important to know if there are differences in team brand associations across different segments of customers. As such, the purpose of this study was to determine if there were differences in a team's brand associations based on frequency of ticket purchase.

The study was conducted with a sample of consumers of a National Hockey League (NHL) team. A total of 700 individuals were randomly selected from the team's internal database. In addition, during data collection it was determined that the majority of respondents from the database were either season ticket holders or purchase multiple game tickets each year. In order to get a more representative sample of ticket purchasers in the market an additional convenience sample of 316 students at a major university in the team's market were utilized. A total of 259 participants responded to a self-administered online survey which measured the brand associations held for the team using the TBAS, and also how often they purchased tickets for the team. Ticket purchase was measured as being either a 1) season ticket holder (n=66), 2) non-season ticket holder who typically attends more than one game per year (n=73), 3) non-season ticket holder who typically attends only one game per year (n=43), 4) non-season ticket holder who has bought tickets in the past but does not attend a game every year (n=38), or 5) those that have never been to a game (n=39). Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was utilized to determine if there were differences in the TBAS dimensions based on ticket consumption.

Using Wilk's criterion, the MANOVA suggested a significant difference between the groups on the team brand association dimensions (Wilk Lambda = .566, F (4, 254) = 3.41, p < .01). Post hoc tests revealed that there were no significant differences in the brand association dimensions between the team's heavy users (season ticket holders and those non-season ticket holders that attended multiple games per year). In addition, light users (those that have purchased tickets in the past but do not attend every year and those that have never been to a game) displayed no significant differences in team brand associations. Further post hoc tests indicated that the majority of the significant differences were noted between the heavy and light users. Specifically, all team brand association dimensions, except concessions, displayed some evidence of being significantly higher for the heavy users.
The results suggest that those that purchase the most tickets for this particular team also have the highest brand association dimension ratings. It is likely that those who are season ticket holders or are non-season ticket holders that attend more than one game per year would be considered to be highly identified fans (Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002; Wann & Branscombe, 1993), and thus access more team brand associations than those at lower levels of identification (Ross & James, 2007). From a practical standpoint teams can utilize this method in order to understand what brand associations are most salient for their different segments of ticket purchasers. This would allow a team to develop targeted marketing campaigns in which they can reinforce the team’s core brand associations in hopes of impacting ticket consumption (Aaker, 1991).

While the present study provides further insight into brand associations in professional sport, more research is needed. In particular, one area for future research would be continued examination into differences in team brand associations among varied demographic segments. In addition, this study only focused on one particular team and league. Future research should replicate this study with other teams and markets in order to verify differences in team brand associations among ticket purchasers. Additional research might investigate in what instances teams would be more or less likely to observe differences. This would provide information on how to best nurture team brand associations, and ultimately influence ticket purchase through brand positioning strategies.