National governing bodies for sport in the US are charged with two tasks: (1) developing participation, and (2) developing excellence. These two tasks are inextricably linked in pyramid models of sport development whereby a broad base of mass participation serves as a foundation from which to develop elite participants. The effectiveness of pyramid type systems depend on the organization’s ability to recruit participants into the sport, retain them over time, and assist them as they make the transition from beginner to increasingly more elite levels of the sport (Green, 2005). The simplistic nature of the pyramid analogy gives the false impression that athlete development is organized and efficient, with clear pathways from entry to elite performance. Alas, the American sport system is far from efficient. In fact, it is fractionated and chaotic in nature (Sparvero, Chalip, & Green, 2008). The past several decades have seen a significant rise in the number and types of sport programs and providers. Much of this growth can be attributed to two major shifts in our sporting culture. One, the passage of Title IX and the dramatic rise in sport opportunities for girls and women (Boxill, 1993-94). And, two, the increasing commercialization of amateur sport (Slack, 1998). Consequently, the sport development system in the US has become even more complex. Yet athletes seem to face the same challenges they have always faced. The purpose of this study was to examine the sport development experiences of U.S. Olympic athletes prior to the passage of Title IX and before the current level of commercialization of amateur sport. Historical data will be collected to better understand how athlete experiences have evolved in the U.S. sport system and led to the current sport climate.

Many historians believe the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City were among the most culturally significant in the modern history of the Olympic Movement (Witherspoon, 2008). Conducted against the backdrop of the Cold War and the Vietnam conflict, the Games were the first to be held in Latin America and the first to include testing for performance-enhancing drugs. In light of Tommie Smith and John Carlos’s “Black Power Salute” at the competitions, the 1968 Games are also considered one of the apogees of the civil rights movement (Hartmann, 1996). Indeed, these are the broad themes explored by most historians. Missing in this historical scholarship, however, are the individual experiences of each athlete prior to, during, and following the Games.

The authors of this paper, along with an oral history research team, have thus far conducted over 40 interviews with members of the 1968 U.S. Olympic team. The research team was provided oral history training, background information on the 1968 Olympic Games, and a structured set of questions and topics to cover during the interviews. Oral histories are a useful methodological tool to broaden historical knowledge and force researchers to rethink existing understandings (Cahn, 1994). The first set of interview questions asked the athletes about their early sport experiences and how their athletic careers progressed up to the 1968 Games. Following the second set of questions that asked about experiences in Mexico City, the third set of questions explored the experiences of the athletes after competing in the Olympics. The research team continues to conduct interviews with members of the 1968 U.S. Olympic Team who wish to contribute their memoirs to a permanent archive. The interviews allow for the experiences and perceptions of the athletes to be understood in greater detail and for attention to be given to issues affecting them that would otherwise be overlooked (Weiss, 1994).

Similar to sport in the US today, the data reveal an ambiguous sport development system leading up to the 1968 Olympics, which operated under the assumption that eventually the best athletes would emerge to represent the US internationally. The data offered several other examples of a sport system that functioned both similarly and counter to the current sport system. For instance, many of the interviewed Olympians reported being influenced by family and peers to participate in sport at a young age, which is still important today (Stevenson, 1990). The support of significant others also helped the athletes sustain the continued commitment to their careers, also a key challenge to today’s athletes. However, the Olympians also described playing several sports, including the sport they would later excel at, rather than specializing in a particular sport early in their athletic careers. Early specialization is now commonly found in the U.S. sport system, yet the data lend support to research that has shown that most elite
athletes have played a variety of sports during their childhood and even adolescent years. Participating in a combination of sports allows children to identify the sport that best suits their body type and disposition, develop different motor skills, and avoid burnout and overuse injuries (Gould & Carson, 2004).

The Olympic athletes discussed a diverse mix of benefits that they gained through sport that allowed for prolonged commitment. While many of the athletes benefited from their Olympic status later in life, financial gain was much less of an incentive than in today’s sport system. The data indicate an agreement among the athletes that their careers would have been significantly different if they had grown up under the commercialized sport system of today. Coaches’ influences continue to play a prominent role in athletic careers, particularly in regards to the ways in which athletes remain motivated and eventually commit to a specific sport (Fraser-Thomas, Cote, & Deakin, 2008). Many athletes noted a coach who identified their talent in their late youth, and encouraged or directed them to start focusing on the sport that eventually took them to the Olympics. These findings lend support to research that has found elite athletic talent to be the result of a complex interaction between innate and environmental factors (e.g., Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2001), rather than the unsuccessful attempts to predict future athletic success based on talent displayed during childhood. This study also illustrates the lack of support provided to female athletes prior to Title IX. The female athletes noted the paucity of events they were allowed to compete in compared to today, the gender testing they had to undergo in Mexico City, and the lack of athletic scholarships or other professional opportunities—all factors that resulted in many women ending their athletic careers earlier than they wanted or otherwise would have in the current system. Seamlessly transitioning athletes into new athletic stages or out of their competitive careers remains an unresolved challenge to sport development in the US (Bruner, Monroe-Chandler, & Spink, 2008; Pearson & Petitpas 1990; Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001).

Sport development is an emerging subdiscipline in sport management and little historical data have thus far examined the U.S. sport system. Future sport policies are not predetermined, but will shape how athletes experience sport in the U.S. system. This study offers historical data describing the sport development pathways and opportunities of elite U.S. athletes before Title IX and commercialization. The lessons learned via these oral histories can inform future sport development policies and practices in order to better support the athletes claimed to be served by the system.