Evaluating athletic teams’ rosters at the high school, college and professional ranks anecdotally depicts race may be a factor for the sport in which individuals participate. For instance, men’s college basketball has an overrepresentation of African American athletes compared to the general population, while college baseball teams are predominantly White (Lapchick, 2010a); a notion further supported by the National Basketball Association and Major League Baseball (Lapchick, 2010b, Lapchick, 2011). The 2010 census indicated African Americans constitute 12.8% of the U.S. population, while Hispanic/Latinos are among the minority groups demonstrating the strongest area of growth (US Census, 2010). Furthermore, the current growth rates place White individuals as a minority within the next 40 years (US Census, 2010).

Past research (Cordell, Betz, & Green, 2002; Philipp, 1998; Philipp, 1999; Shinew, Floyd, & Parry, 2004) has indicated a correlation between race and potential participation or welcomeness in a variety of sport and leisure-based activities. Coupled with the growth of racial minority groups, it is important for sport managers to develop a stronger understanding of why individuals choose to participate in various sports and what factors might impact perceived welcomeness and success in such activities.

Phillips’ (1995) welcome theory provides a theoretical foundation for this research study. Accordingly, an individual’s perceived welcomeness is derived from three major elements: history, socialization and discrimination. History stems from both an individual’s personal experiences with leisure based activities and the historical context within the environment (West, 1989). An individual’s family, friends, and other peers comprise the socialization factor (Barnett & Chick, 1986; Phillips, 1997), and research has supported the notion that a “family who plays together, stays together” (Freysinger, 1994). Similar to Dovidio (1997), Phillips (1995) defines discrimination as subtle forms of prejudice (e.g., African Americans being placed in more athletic positions than their White counterparts) that are often denied by those in the majority. In an examining all three components of welcomeness, Phillips (1999) found several differences in perceived welcomeness in a variety of leisure-based activities between Whites and African Americans.

Based on the previous research, the research questions driving this study were: (a) Do individuals perceive there to be different levels of welcomeness in sports due to race; (b) Do individuals perceive there to be different levels of potential success in sports due to race; and (c) Does regional location have an impact on the racial perceptions of welcomeness and potential for success?

Data (N = 489) were collected at four universities throughout the United States to attain a representation of the various cultural groups: the South East (n = 149), North East (n = 115), South West (n = 172), and Midwest (n = 53). Overall, there was a good racial composition of the same (White, n = 360; Minorities, n = 129). Via online data collection and two 8-point Likert-type sliding scales (0 = Very Unwelcome, 7 = Very Welcome; 0 = Very Unsuccessful, 7 = Very Successful), participants were asked to gauge their levels of perceived welcomeness and potential success of Whites, African Americans, and Latinos in the following 21 NCAA sanctioned sports: baseball, basketball, bowling, cross country, fencing, field hockey, football, golf, gymnastics, ice hockey, lacrosse, rifle, rowing, skiing, soccer, swimming and diving, tennis, track and field, volleyball, water polo, and wrestling. This methodology was adapted from Phillips’ (1999) study in which he measured perceived welcomeness in leisure activities. A sliding scale was used, as opposed to a traditional Likert Scale, to allow participants more accurate ratings of their perceptions.

Paired sample t-tests were utilized to determine if differences in perceived welcomeness and potential for success was present among the three racial groups. Results indicated Whites were perceived as more welcome and possessed higher potential for success that African Americans and Latinos in 12 of the 21 sports, and were also reported to have higher perceived welcomeness than African Americans in baseball, cross country, and soccer. African Americans were perceived to be more welcome and successful to participate in basketball and football than
the other two groups, as well as cross country, golf, track and field than Hispanic/Latinos; more welcome in bowling and more successful in gymnastics, skiing, tennis, and wrestling compared to Hispanic/Latinos. Finally, Hispanic/Latinos were perceived to be more welcome and possess a greater potential for success in soccer than both Whites and African Americans, and more welcome to participate in baseball than African Americans.

A MANOVA was computed to determine if differences occurred based on the region. The interaction effect of race by region was significant for Whites perceived welcomeness in cross country ($F[3, 481] = 17.83, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02$), fencing ($F[3, 481] = 22.26, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02$), lacrosse ($F[3, 481] = 15.81, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02$), and rifle ($F[3, 481] = 31.56, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$). African Americans by region demonstrated significant differences for baseball ($F[3, 481] = 27.80, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02$), and none for Hispanic/Latinos. Of the 21 sports, 14 demonstrated significant differences for Whites in perceived success, six items for Hispanic/Latinos and no differences were found for African Americans. A full analysis of the results will be depicted in the presentation.

The analysis demonstrated regional and racial differences in perceived welcomeness and potential for success. The results further bolster those of previous research which have demonstrated significant differences between racial groups perceived welcomeness in leisure based activities (e.g., Phillips, 1997; 1999; Phillips & Brezina, 2003; Shinew et al., 2004).

Two main themes emerged from this data set, which facilitates forward movement of the literature. First, the results support the notion of white privilege in the United States. Overall, Whites were perceived to be more welcome than their racial counterparts to participate in a greater array of sports. Furthermore, there were no sports in which Whites were below the midpoint of the scale. Conversely, African Americans and Hispanic/Latinos were perceived as not welcome in 12 sports. Secondly, it is critical for sport managers to understand differences in perceived welcomeness. Breaking down barriers, creating opportunities, and changing discourse around various sport and leisure activities can only enhance potential participation rates in the future. Future research and limitations will be addressed in the presentation.