Anecdotally many claim that sporting events are a means to fostering positive social benefits for individuals. However, there is little quantifiable and empirical evidence to support this notion (cf. Long & Sanderson, 2001; Green, 2008; Warner & Dixon, 2011; Warner et al., 2011). Furthermore, due to researcher constraints (i.e., increased review board scrutiny for studies involving those under the age of 18) little is especially known about how short-term participatory sporting events impact adolescents. One of the social benefits that sporting events have been suggested to enhance, and probably the most pertinent to adolescents, is an enhanced sense of community. Previous research has determined that a greater sense of community among adolescents has been linked to decreased levels of loneliness (Pretty, Andrews, & Collett, 1994), reduced substance abuse (Battistich & Homs, 1997; Mayberry et al., 2009), reduced delinquency (Battistich & Homs, 1997), improved well being (i.e., greater happiness and less worry) (Albanesi et al., 2007; Pretty et al., 1996), and increased prosocial civic engagement (e.g., charity events) (Albanesi et al., 2007). Thus, it may not be surprising that numerous sport-related programs for adolescents have claimed to foster a greater sense of community.

Although, sport-related programs and events are well intended, a lack of evidence exists on their effectiveness (cf. Chalip, 2006a; Green, 2008; Long & Sanderson, 2001; Smith & Waddington, 2004). Additionally research has demonstrated that even these well-intended sport schemes can have inadvertent negative consequences and can do more harm than good (e.g., Deery & Jago, 2010; Green, 2008; Hartmann & Depro, 2006; Kleiber & Roberts, 1981). Considering this, it is becoming increasingly more important to be able to assess the conditions under which such sport-schemes have a positive impact and enhance a sense of community.

Recent investigations have determined that active sport participation can enhance a sense of community for adults (e.g., Swyers, 2010; Warner & Dixon, 2011), but this research has been limited to adults who had longer durations of exposure to the sporting environment (i.e., 1 or more years). A gap in the literature exists regarding whether or not a short-term participatory sporting event can be empirically demonstrated to increase adolescents’ sense of community in quantifiable terms. Therefore, the aim of this research was to assess the community impact of a participatory short-term sporting event for adolescents while identifying the mechanisms, if any, which significantly changed during the course of a short-term participatory sporting event.

In the summer of 2011, a sport organization in central Texas offered a free 3-week participatory sporting event for adolescents in the community. In order to assess if any increases in sense of community were experienced for adolescents who took part in the event, a pre-post research design was used. The Sense of Community Index-2 (SCI-2), which was built off McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) widely accepted theory and has been recognized as offering of reliable subscales, was used (Chavis, et al., 2008). Therefore, sense of community was measured using the SCI-2, a 24-item (6 items per subscale) survey that utilizes a Likert-type scale. Previous research has demonstrated that the SCI-2 is a very reliable instrument (coefficient alpha=.94) to quantitatively measure sense of community. Its 4-subscals consisting of 6-items each related to Reinforcement of Needs, Membership, Influence, and Shared Emotional Connections also have been found to be reliable with coefficient alphas ranging between .79 to .86 (Chavis et al., 2008).

A total of 28 participants completed pre and post surveys, representing 41.8% of the total participants in the 3-week sporting event, were analyzed using a one-way repeated measures ANOVA. The sample was balanced in terms of gender (14 female, 14 males) and the average age of the participants was 15.3 years old.

The results indicate that there was about an eight point difference between the pre-test score (M=74.64, SD=17.38) and the post-test (M=82.46, SD=15.62), this improvement in overall sense of community was significant [F (1,27) = 5.07, p = .033, partial η ²=.16]. Thus, the results suggest that the short-term participatory event had a significant impact on the sense of community experienced for the adolescents. Upon analysis of the survey subscales, it was further determined that the adolescents reported significant increases related to Reinforcement of Needs [F (1, 27) = 4.45, p = .04, partial η ²=.14], Membership [F (1, 27) = 4.45, p = .04, partial η ²=.14], and Influence [F (1, 27) = 5.34,
p = .03, partial η² = .16]. Although there was an improvement in Shared Emotional Connections from the pre-survey, this change was not statistically significant [Shared Emotions F (1, 27) = 3.17, p = .09, partial η² = .10].

This exploratory research contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it provides sport managers with a better understanding of how to empirically measure the social benefits of sport for our adolescent participants. Second, this research contributes to the literature by highlighting adolescents as important stakeholders within our sport system. After all adolescents have influence within families and on family-decisions, especially as they relate to leisure activities and events (Darley & Lim, 1986; Turley, 2001); yet, a vast majority of the social benefits and sporting event literature focuses on adult population (e.g., Giginov & Hills, 2008; Sparvero & Chalip, 2010; Warner et al., 2011). Third, the practical implications for both large and small scale sporting event managers concerned with leaving a legacy will also be discussed.