During the last three decades five professional female volleyball leagues emerged in the United States. The women's leagues were Major League Volleyball (MLV, 1987-1989), Women’s Western Volleyball League (WWVL, 1993-1994), National Volleyball Association (NVA, 1993-1998), Professional Volleyball League (PVL, 1996-1997), and United States Professional Volleyball League (USPVL, 2002-2003). Unfortunately, every single women's professional league that operated in the United States shut down within five years of its opening. What is surprising regarding this failure is that it occurred despite that a pool of athletes exists in the United States and women's volleyball is a spectator-friendly sport.

Historically, there has been lots of support for women's volleyball. A federal law enacted in the United States in 1972 required the majority of universities and high schools to add women's sports to their programs (O'Reilly & Cahn, 2007). Volleyball was perceived as a socially acceptable and feminine sport already existing at some high schools and universities in the 1970s; therefore, many universities and high schools were keen to add women's volleyball to their programs (Christensen, Guttman, & Pfister, 2001). Since the 1980s, volleyball has been a top three sport at the National Collegiate Athletic Association in terms of female participation (“NCAA,” 2010). This raises the question: Why did women's professional volleyball leagues fail in the United States?

To answer the research question this paper draws on the theory of institutional entrepreneurship, which has received increased attention in the last decade (Hardy & Maguire, 2008). The theory examines how institutional entrepreneurs can enact changes despite being embedded in an institutional context (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006). Institutional entrepreneurship has been used in historical research. For example, Washington and Ventresca (2008) and Leblebici, Salancik, Copay, and King (1991) studied institutional entrepreneurship and/or change and suggested that in order to understand present structures of organizations, it is necessary to study their historical context. Similarly to Washington and Ventresca (2008) and Leblebici et al. (1991), historical research is suitable for this study because it helps us to understand not only the failure of institutional entrepreneurship of women's professional volleyball leagues, but also the current absence of a professional women's volleyball league in the United States.

While institutional entrepreneurship has focused over the years on variety of concepts such as determinants of institutional entrepreneurship (Pacheco, York, Dean, & Saravathy, 2009), field characteristics (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009), and mobilization of allies, the research also highlights strategies that institutional entrepreneurs use in order to initiate institutional change. These strategies include, for example, embedding new technology within institutionalized practices (Munir & Phillips, 2005), implementing measurements (Dejean, Gond, & Leca, 2004), analogies (Leblebici et al., 1991), and private agreements. While the institutional entrepreneurship literature remains silent concerning strategies that lead to an organization's failure, the reasons why a league can fail include a lack of finances (“NFL Folds,” 2007), TV exposure (Starcevic, 2007), and grassroots support (Bottenburg, 2003). Taking into consideration the present research on leagues' failure and institutional entrepreneurship, this inquiry will answer several specific questions: What were the practices and strategies that were associated with the development of the American leagues? What were the common themes associated with each of the strategies?

This research uses the archival research method discussed by Ventresca and Mohr (2002) and follows Yin's (1994) multiple-case study approach. The collected data includes newspapers, magazine articles, archival documents, textbooks, dissertations, and organizations’ internal documents. Apart from the archival data collection, interviews will be conducted with entrepreneurs of the failed women’s professional volleyball leagues who will be asked questions regarding the leagues' operation and failure. Following Leblebici et al.'s (1991) definition of a practice, the data will be coded to discover the practices existing in the empirical setting of the professional volleyball leagues. Consequently, a descriptive label will be assigned to each of the separate groups of practices, and an evaluation of
the practices and strategies by those inside of the industry will be highlighted. Lastly, the practices, strategies, and the appropriate text will be organized into tables to allow not only for comparison between each of the leagues, but also generation of possible reasons consistent with the institutional entrepreneurship theory that can explain the demise of each league.

This research will make several contributions. It will contribute practically to the sports management field and conceptually to sports management literature. Analyzing the previous attempts to establish women’s professional volleyball leagues will benefit entrepreneurs who attempt to design a new women’s professional volleyball league and/or women’s minor league in the United States. The entrepreneurs can use the information from this study for future league management. Apart from this practical contribution, the study will also inform sports management literature. Several authors within sport management have addressed institutional change (Kikulis, 2000; Amis, Slack, & Hinings, 2004; O’Bryan & Slack, 2003); however, the concept of institutional entrepreneurship has not been formulated within sport management literature despite Washington and Patterson’s (2010) recent call for more attention to the factors of institutional change. This research will contribute to the as-yet not deeply researched area of institutional entrepreneurship within sport management.