The sport of triathlon is one of the fastest growing sports in the United States. Since 1999, USA Triathlon’s membership roster has grown from 19,000 to more than 135,000 in 2011. Much of this growth stems from an increase in media coverage, variations in race offerings (e.g., Sprint, Olympic, Half-Ironman, Ironman), and a collegial participatory environment (USA Triathlon, 2011). The benefits of triathlon participation are well documented. Triathletes typically lead healthier lifestyles and report increased self-esteem (USA Triathlon, 2011). Additionally, triathletes create sporting goods innovations, which often help other athletes improve their performances in single sports such as running and cycling (Fitzgerald, 2003).

Less discussed, however, are the potential negative consequences of triathlon participation. For instance, triathletes often sustain injuries at higher rates than other athletes (Hamil, 2009). A number of deaths related to triathlon have been reported, and they often occur during the swim portion of events (Aschwanden, 2008). Additionally, triathletes may experience greater stress as they try to balance the demands of training for and participating in triathlons with other responsibilities such as going to work and raising a family (Friel & Bryn, 2009). Recreational triathletes may spend up to 20 hours per week training plus additional time attending to special dietary needs, getting adequate rest, reading about and purchasing triathlon-related sports equipment, and traveling to and from training sites and races. As such, triathlon popular press publications often emphasize the need to balance triathlon participation with other personal responsibilities (Fitzgerald, 2003; Friel, 2009; Friel & Bryn, 2009; Hamil, 2009; Holt, 2009).

The difficulty experienced in balancing these personal responsibilities and various role demands is known as inter-role conflict (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). Consider, for example, a triathlete who spends 20 hours per week training, works another 40 hours, and is raising two children. This individual may experience time-based conflict, in that there may not be enough hours in the day to fulfill the demands of each role. Likewise, this individual may also experience strain-based conflict as a product of stress or anxiety from the triathlon or work role carrying over to adversely affect performance as a parent. A third type of inter-role conflict, behavior-based, may occur as a result of the incompatible behavioral requirements of each role (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

Researchers have examined inter-role conflict primarily through the lens of work and family roles (e.g., Boyar, Maertz, Mosley, & Carr, 2008; Carlson & Kacmar, 2000; Carlson & Perrewe, 1999; Dixon & Bruening, 2007; Frone & Rice, 1987). Dixon and Bruening (2005) created a multi-level framework to explain the antecedents and outcomes associated with work-family conflict. According to their model, perceptions of inter-role conflict are influenced by individual, structural, and socio-cultural factors. Individual-level factors include one’s personality, the values placed on work and family roles, family support systems, and gender. Structural-level factors refer to the amount of time and schedule flexibility associated with the work role as well as the pressure one feels at work. Factors such as gender ideology and cultural norms make up the socio-cultural level (Dixon & Bruening, 2005).

Work-family conflict studies are limited, however, in that they do not account for additional roles within an individual’s role set. Perhaps recognizing this, scholars have extended the scope of inter-role conflict research to examine leisure-family conflict among various leisure roles, including running (Fick, Goff, & Oppliger, 1996; Goff & Fick, 1997), dog sport participation (Gillespie, Leffler, & Lerner, 2002), and sport fandom (Simmons, 2011). Serious leisure roles, such as participation in Ironman, require devotion of one’s time, financial, and energy-related resources, thus creating a climate for inter-role conflict among other roles, most notably, work and family (Gillespie et al., 2002). Such conflict may be even more pronounced for females, as stereotypical gender roles suggest women assume the majority of domestic responsibilities, in addition to work and leisure roles (Dixon & Bruening, 2005; 2007; Powell & Greenhaus, 2010).
The current study seeks to extend the Dixon and Bruening (2005) work-family conflict interface to include the effects of leisure role participation. Particularly at the structural level, serious leisure participation can create additional strain/stress, and requires the allocation of one’s time, a perishable resource, which must be distributed between multiple roles. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine perceptions of inter-role conflict between leisure, work, and family roles among female Ironman participants.

Methods will consist of both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis to address the study’s purpose. A 20-item survey will be distributed to female Ironman participants to assess their levels of inter-role conflict. Purposeful sampling of those indicating high levels of leisure-work-family conflict will be used to identify participants for semi-structured in-depth interviews. The researchers will interview five participants (N = 5), three times each (totaling 15 interviews) and gather their perspectives regarding sport participation in conjunction with their work and family roles. The first interview will focus on documenting three areas: the participant’s (a) personal sport participation history, (b) attitudes towards leisure-work-family conflict resulting from sport participation, and (c) management of such conflict. The collected data will help in developing a conceptual framework comprised of concepts, subcategories, and categories for each area. The second and third interviews will involve follow-up questions identified through constant comparative analysis conducted after each round of interviews.

Results from this study should illustrate the individual, structural, and socio-cultural factors that influence leisure-work-family conflict. From a theoretical perspective, this study should bring together two parallel bodies of research, work-family conflict and leisure-family conflict, by providing insight into the effects of serious leisure participation on work and family roles. This study also has several practical implications. Results from the study should highlight the factors influencing leisure-work-family conflict. Female Ironman participants, and their families, can use the results to make adjustments and develop coping strategies to alleviate any conflict that might exist. Further, by understanding the obstacles serious leisure participants face when trying to balance leisure, work, and family roles, participatory sport organizations such as USA Triathlon can develop/provide programs and services to aid in minimizing such conflict, and ultimately retain members.