Kim, Smith, and James (2010) stated that sport participants have an economic value up to four times higher than that of sport spectators in the United States. One participatory sport that has experienced tremendous growth in participation numbers since the mid-1990s is road racing. Running USA (2013) defined this trend as “the Second Running Boom” (para. 1). With the exception of the year 2003, the number of runners finishing a race in the U.S. has increased every year since 1994 (Running USA, 2013).

One race that has experienced great success in its 35-year existence and continues to grow each year is the BolderBOULDER 10K, which takes place in Boulder, Colorado every Memorial Day. With over 52,000 participants, it is the third largest running race in the U.S. and the seventh largest in the world (BolderBOULDER Facebook, n.d.). Additionally, professional athletes from around the world compete in the event for one of the largest non-marathon prize purses in road racing (BolderBOULDER Facebook, n.d.).

To celebrate the race’s 35th year in 2013, race organizers hosted an online competition titled, “I AM BOLDER” in which participants were asked to upload a video or written story and photo to the BolderBOULDER Facebook page about their experiences with the race. The BolderBOULDER Facebook page said, “During the month of April we want to hear your BolderBOULDER story. Go to the I AM BOLDER app on our Facebook Page and share your story. One lucky winner will have his/her story shown on the big screen at Folsom Field at this year’s BolderBOULDER” (BolderBOULDER Facebook, 2013).

With over 15 million road race participants and over 26,000 road races taking place in the U.S. in 2012 (Running USA, 2013), it is evident that road race events compete with each other to attract participants. Understanding what motivates individuals to participate in such events is a key factor for sport managers and marketers in differentiating their road race from competitors, growing their events’ participation numbers, and establishing a stronger brand presence in an ever-expanding marketplace. Utilizing social cognitive theory, this study sought to qualitatively examine the “I AM BOLDER” contest entries to gain a better understanding of the motivations for running the BolderBOULDER from those participants who submitted videos or stories.

Introduced by Bandura (1977), social cognitive theory (SCT) emphasizes the reciprocal or bidirectional relationship between a person, his/her environment (physical or social environment) and behavior. According to McAlister, Perry, and Parcel (2008), a key to SCT is that “human behavior is a product of the dynamic interplay of personal, behavioral and environmental influences” (McAlister, Perry, & Parcel, 2008, p.170). Further, SCT emphasizes that a society or group of people have the capability to interact with the environment to realize environmental changes that benefit the entire society. According to Bandura (2004), there are five core constructs of the SCT. These include 1) knowledge, 2) self efficacy, 3) outcome expectations, 4) goals, 5) social/structural facilitators and impediments in the person’s environment. Examining these core determinants allows researchers to explain why people engage in certain behaviors and why they do not.

Previous research on road race participants’ motivations has largely utilized quantitative surveys and questionnaires (e.g., Eagleman & Hack, 2011; Havenar & Lochbaum, 2007; Masters, Ogles, & Jolton, 1993; Ogles & Masters, 2003). Such studies uncovered many different motivations for runners. For example, Eagleman and Hack (2011) surveyed participants in a road race series consisting of 31 races ranging in distance from 5K to 10K and found physical fitness and self-esteem were the strongest reported motivators. Similarly, Ogles and Masters (2003) examined motivations of marathon runners and developed the Motivations of Marathoners Scale (MOMS). They established nine main motivations for marathon runners: competition, personal goal achievement, psychological coping, self-esteem, life meaning, health orientation, weight concern, recognition, and affiliation. Ogles and Masters (2003)
encouraged future research on sport participants “in specific events” (p. 83), as this could reveal knowledge to assist sport managers increase participation in their events.

Drawing on the limited literature examining road race participants, the present study was unique in its qualitative examination of participants’ own stories and narratives about their motivations for taking part in a specific race. Furthermore, the race examined was one deemed successful within the road race management community, evidenced by Runner’s World magazine honoring it with the title of “Best 10K” race (Flax, 2009). Utilizing qualitative document analysis (QDA) methodology (Altheide et al., 2008), three researchers independently watched and read the user-submitted videos and stories from the 2013 BolderBOULDER “I AM BOLDER” contest and noted keywords, phrases, and direct quotes from each video and story in order to determine the overall themes from the submissions. Throughout the coding process, Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) constant comparison method was used to compare the previously coded data to the currently coded data in order to better identify themes.

Following the coding process, the researchers discussed and compared their findings and determined the following four major themes were present within the “I AM BOULDER” contest submissions: family, health, the ‘event’ experience, and empowerment. Several sub-themes emerged within each of these main themes. For example, under the family theme, sub-themes included tradition, in memory of, friendly competition, and bonding. An overarching frame for nearly every submission to the contest was the concept of loyalty, which was defined by Park and Kim (2000) as having two dimensions: behavioral, which they described as “the degree to which a participant purchases a service or program repeatedly” (p. 198), and attitudinal, which they described as “the process of attaching psychologically to a selected recreational sport program” (p. 198).

Viewed under the lens of SCT, these findings illustrated the relationship between Bolder Boulder 10K participants and their various environments, and how these environmental factors contributed to participants’ sense of loyalty towards the Bolder Boulder 10K. The findings suggested that a participatory sporting event’s ability to develop a sense of loyalty amongst its participants can be vital to the event’s success. Furthermore, the themes and sub-themes discovered in this study revealed components that assist in building such participant loyalty. While some themes were consistent with the motivations identified by previous research, others such as family and the ‘event’ experience differed from previous findings. These findings hold implications for both sport management and marketing practitioners and researchers. From a practitioner standpoint, the results of this study can assist road race managers in developing their events in ways that foster loyalty. From a research standpoint, the results add to the limited body of literature on participatory sport motivations and offer a foundation from which future qualitative and participatory event-specific research can be conducted. The results and implications of this research and their relationship to SCT will be explained and discussed in greater depth during the presentation.