Over the past decade, considerable attention has been given to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). CSR is pragmatically referred to as the business-society relationship (Swanson, 1999) and it has become a prevalent business agenda formed by economic, political, and social factors around the world (Baughn, Bodie, & McIntosh, 2007). In sport, CSR has also gained traction as a way for sport organizations to build their reputations by engaging with their local communities while also embracing the organization’s strategic marketing goals (Lau, Makhanya, & Trengrouse, 2004). Indeed, in 2010, the European Commission noted that CSR “is more relevant than ever”, and that it is a “key element to ensuring long term employee and consumer trust” (McShane & Cunningham, 2012). The question, then, is not whether or not to engage in CSR activities, but how to engage in CSR activities (Smith, 2003). We propose that one important aspect of a sport organization’s CSR program/s is stakeholders’ perceptions of the authenticity of those programs. As such, this research is designed to uncover the dimensions of authentic CSR programs in sport and develop a valid and reliable measurement instrument.

While the academic literature of CSR has become prevalent in the management and business ethics field, CSR within the context of sport literature has lagged behind and has only begun to receive academic attention in more recent years (e.g., Babiak & Wolfe, 2006; Bradish, 2006; Smith & Westerbeek, 2007; Walker, Kent, & Rudd, 2007; Woolf, Heere & Walker, 2013). However, CSR in sport is of particular research interest because of the inherently unique features of sport that make it a natural vehicle for CSR (Smith & Westerbeek, 2007). As such, the CSR concept of “doing good” in sport has played an increasingly important role for sport organizations in balancing business objectives with philanthropy. For example, the NHL Green initiative, unveiled in 2010, is an environmental campaign that promotes sustainable living and business practices. The Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) became one of the first governing bodies in sport to form an internal corporate social responsibility division (Bradish & Cronin, 2009) to support “the grassroots of the game, development work, and partnerships with relief organizations” (FIFA, 2004, p. 66).

However, some research has shown negative outcomes of attempts at “doing good”. While consumers would presumably want businesses to engage in socially responsible and philanthropic activities, insincere initiatives with ulterior motives may potentially leave a negative or conflicting impression on stakeholders if they feel that the company is not really committed to the cause in question (Beckman, Colwell, & Cunningham, 2009; Bingham, Dyer Jr., Smith & Adams, 2011; Kahili, 2010). For example, the NFL’s pink initiative has been dissected and questioned by critics. In recognition of National Breast Cancer Awareness Month, the NFL introduced its pink campaign in 2009, “A Crucial Catch”. Every October, players and officials wear pink items which are then auctioned off with proceeds going to cancer research. Although this public gesture seems to be driven by philanthropy, critics have suggested their tactics are over the top “pink washing” at best and a deceitful charitable practice at worst (Sternberg, 2013).

Gilmore and Pine (2007) claim that authenticity is “the new business imperative” and ‘buzz word’ of the 21st century. Beckman et al. (2009) view authenticity as “evaluation, judgment, or assessment of how real or genuine something is” (p. 199). Lowenthal (1992) indicates that consumers now realize that they are exposed to authentic and inauthentic things, which renders consumers’ quest for authenticity “one of the cornerstones of contemporary marketing” (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry Jr. 2003 p. 21).

While authenticity has been described as one of the vital concepts in modern marketing in consumer research (Beverland, 2005; Brown et al., 2003), only recently has it been examined relative to CSR activities. Driver (2006) briefly discussed authenticity when offering an alternative perspective in the field of CSR, and Beckman et al. (2009) further examined perceptions of authenticity as one of focal factors to the success of CSR in Chile.
Kochhar, & Ferguson (2012) examined the relationships among CSR communication, authenticity, and public communication strategy. More recently, Skilton (2013) explored authenticity and appropriation in CSR.

Though there has been little work done regarding authenticity in CSR activities, we have reviewed the theoretical premises and empirical findings regarding authenticity in a variety of disciplines (e.g., tourism, brand management, human behavior, leadership, ethics, sport management, etc.) in order to identify the common components that are vital to CSR activities in sport. As a result we uncovered the following components:

Benevolent: the degree to which stakeholders perceive CSR initiatives as altruistic (as opposed to commercial/profit seeking, e.g., Beverland, 2006; Holt, 2002).

Commitment: the degree to which stakeholders perceive the organization as dedicated or steadfast in the CSR initiatives (as opposed to adjusting initiatives to meet current trends, e.g., Faust & Householder, 2009).

Community link: the degree to which stakeholders perceive CSR initiatives are connected to their communities (e.g., Beverland & Farrelly, 2009; Beckman 2009).

Congruent: the degree to which stakeholders perceive a congruency between an organization’s CSR efforts and the vital core of its business (e.g., Babiak & Wolfe, 2009; O’Connell et al., 2008).

Reliable: the degree to which stakeholders perceive the CSR program actually does what it promises to do (e.g., O’Connell et al., 2008).

Transparent: the degree to which stakeholders perceive CSR decisions, practices, outcomes, etc. to be open/available to public evaluation (e.g., Waddock & Googins, 2011; Wicki & van der Kaaij, 2007).

In order to ensure the above dimensions fully represent the concept of authenticity in CSR, focus groups (stratified by age and gender: adult males, adult females, mixed groups) will be conducted in which participants discuss their ideas of authenticity regarding various CSR programs of sport organizations. Following that, items will be generated to measure each dimension and these will be judged by a panel of experts (i.e., 5 sport management faculty with expertise in CSR, and 5 sport practitioners with experience in CSR activities). Once the initial survey is developed, it will be pilot tested with a sample of 250 students and the finalized measurement model will be tested via a confirmatory factor analysis (utilizing M-Plus 6) with a national sample of 300 sport fans derived from Amazon.com’s mTurk service.

This measure of authenticity will be a valuable contribution both theoretically and practically. It is anticipated that a valid and reliable measure of authenticity could be utilized by sport practitioners to assist in decisions regarding adaptation, design, and implementation of CSR activities. Further, the measure could be utilized by sport researchers to determine CSR authenticity’s role in various stakeholder’s perceptions of the activity as well as the organization itself. These and other contributions will be discussed.