Families play a vital role in our society, providing members with a means of financial, social, and emotional support as well as personal development (Lavee, McCubbin & Olsen, 1987; Minuchin, 1985). Researchers and practitioners continue to find ways to enhance family functioning on the basis that more functional families lead to greater well-being for family members and ultimately to a healthier and more stable society (Broderick, 1993). One way that has often been proposed for families is to play or recreate together. Family scholars have found support that there is a positive relationship between family leisure activities and positive family outcomes (Orthner & Mancini, 1991). The purpose of this study is to understand the impact of participation in organized youth sport on the family unit.

Family response to stress is critical to family functioning. Past research has suggested that it may be more important how a family responds to stressors than the actual source of the stress (Broderick, 1993; Lavee & Olson, 1991). However, a number of sport scholars have suggested that youth sport may be an increasingly important source of stress on American families (Coakley, 2009; Crocker, et al., 2003). Parents play a vital role in shaping a child's involvement in sport, and the sport environment impacts not only the participant, but impacts the family unit (Coakley, 2009; Cote, 1999). Thus, it is important to understand how participation in organized youth impacts the family.

Seven families were selected for this study and individual, one-on-one, interviews were conducted with each family member. For the sake of controlling some factors, family parameters were limited to those that have two married parents at home, of stable socioeconomic status, and with at least two children, and with at least one child participating in an elite sport league (Broderick, 1993). In addition, the McMaster Family Assessment Device was completed by all family members (Epstein, et al., 1983).

Supporting research by Figler and Whitaker (1991), Frey and Eitzen (1991), and Coakley (2009), the parents characterized recreational sport with greater flexibility, less focus on winning, and an emphasis on fun. Similar to the findings of Fraser-Thomas, Cote, and Deakin (2005), the athletes noted that coach influence was one of the biggest factors in determining if the experience was positive or negative. The athletes added that an emphasis on fun was a determinant on whether they had a positive or negative experience, like Fraser-Thomas, Cote, and Deakin (2008) found. All of the parents interviewed noted that the decision to remain enrolled in sport was in the hands of the athlete. The athletes were in turn engaged in their sport, supporting the research of Dixon, Bruening, and Warner (2008) and Fraser-Thomas, et al. (2008).

Contrary to existing research, the number one issue cited by families was that of time and scheduling. Families that had to spend a great deal of their time coordinating schedules and transportation appeared to have greater levels of stress surrounding sport, less quality time to focus on the marital dyad, and less time to spend as a family outside of sport. In addition, the time demands of transportation limited the extracurricular activities for all other members of the family, with the non-participant being impacted the most. A greater priority was given to the elite sport league, and often siblings had to structure and select their activities in a manner that avoided conflict with the select league.

Theoretical implications from this research focus on the need to include specification of both sport and leisure activities when examining family functioning. They also include the need to examine full families' perceptions of sport, not just the participant, when exploring the impact of sport on people's life quality. Practical implications from this research include the importance of sport organizations’ providing clear and established schedules, expectations,
and options. There are also implications for families to thoroughly explore and understand the costs and benefits of elite sport participation for their entire family both currently and in the future.