Parents, especially fathers, continue to play a vital role in the delivery of youth sport, particularly in the United States. In a 2013 report on volunteerism, the U.S. Department of Labor stated that more men volunteered for coaching, refereeing, or supervising sport teams than they did in almost any other volunteer category. The same report also indicates that more than twice as many men (9.9%) volunteered for sport organization positions than did women (2.6%; U.S. DOL, 2014). Additionally, of all the potential volunteer categories, sport volunteer organizations attracted the most men to volunteer with their own children out of any other category. The report concludes, “Parents were considerably more likely than those without children to engage mainly in volunteer activities that are frequently related to children—including coaching, refereeing, or supervising sports teams” (U.S. DOL, 2014, p. 4).

An increasing body of work exploring the phenomenon of fathering through sport has highlighted the need for sport organizations to address the dual roles of father and coach/volunteer, and the potential impact this may have both on participants and the sport organization (Kay, 2009; Messner, 2009). Sport organizations tend to focus their volunteer/coach training on the coach role (e.g., tactics, rules, skill training) at the neglect of the parent role. This may be problematic if behaviors within the father role overstep or are incompatible with the coaching role. The purpose of this presentation is to review recent literature about the ways modern fathers are using sport as a venue to fulfill fathering responsibilities and the implications for sport management, particularly in voluntary sport organizations.

Family systems theory provides a framework for this discussion. Family systems theory suggests that understanding families as systems is based on three characterizations: (1) organizational complexity, (2) hierarchical structure, and (3) adaptability. First, families can be characterized as organizationally complex (Kantor & Lehr, 1975). This suggests that families are made up of changing and evolving individuals, which when combined have dynamic properties that reach beyond a simple collection of individuals (Buckley, 1967). Second, families are characterized by a hierarchical structure (Cox & Paley, 2003), meaning that the family entity is comprised of subsystems, including the marital relationship, the relationships among the children, and the relationships between parents and children. Third, families are characterized as adaptive (Cox & Paley, 2003; Kantor & Lehr, 1974). This property suggests families will respond by adjusting their normalized processes so that they will continue to function even when pressured by internal or external influences (Kantor & Lehr, 1974; Sameroff, 1983).

In recent research involving the role of fathers in the family, it has become increasingly clear that fathers are becoming more involved in familial duties than they once were, which is in part a response to women becoming more active in the workforce (Galinsky, Aumann, & Bond, 2011; Parker & Wang, 2013). In accordance with this societal movement is a shift in accepted hegemonic masculine values, and the development of inclusive masculinity, which encourages behaviors such as nurturing, comforting, and caring (Anderson, 2009). As a result, fathers are trying to find avenues to develop the father-child subsystem and fulfill their fatherhood roles, but in ways that do not completely domesticate their masculinity (Coakley, 2006; Gavanas, 2004). Sport may provide such an outlet, a place where men can be caring, comforting, and nurturing to their children, yet also competitive and aggressive in ways that coincide with historical masculine values (Coakley, 2006).

Some scholars suggest that fathering through sport is a natural avenue for fathers because for many men sport is something they feel comfortable with and knowledgeable about (Harrington, 2006), which serves as a gateway for connecting with their children (Messner, 2009). In this way, sport can be thought of as a comfort zone for fathers, in which they feel needed, competent, and included (Harrington, 2006). It also provides them with the opportunity to show a nurturing and caring side, while also displaying aggression and applauding competition (Coakley, 2006). Additionally, fathering through sport may have particularly positive developmental outcomes for youth, such as
teaching coping skills to their youth (Holt, Hoar, & Fraser, 2005), developing strong father-child relationships (LaRossa, 2005), and acting as buffers for ensuring life balance between sport and other life pursuits (Tamminen & Holt, 2012). However, these positive outcomes are only likely so long as fathers remain involved at healthy levels with their youth’s participation in sport (Hellstedt, 1987; Harrington, 2006; Kay, 2009). As fathers cross the boundaries of involvement, and become overinvolved (i.e., psychologically and emotionally dependent on their child’s youth sport performance outcomes), both the youth and the father suffer, and the potential for positive development decreases (Hellstedt, 1987; Kay, 2009).

While the research about positive fathering is growing, there has been little attention given to the ways in which managers of volunteer youth sport organizations can support and even train their volunteers, who are likely fathers, to be successful as coaches and fathers. Utilizing fathers of children as volunteer coaches and managers within youth sport organizations provides a motivated, inexpensive, and readily available work force for those organizations. It makes sense, then, that sport organizations continue to lean on parents to fill this important need. However, sport organizations cannot assume that parents are automatically equipped with the parenting or coaching skills to be successful in this role, especially if they are unaware of the tensions to begin with. The outcomes from successful fathering through sport reach beyond families to the sport organizations and their participants. Thus, there is a clear need for sport management scholars to study the implications for sport organizations of fathering through sport.

For example, one line of inquiry might address how sport organizations facilitate healthy levels of father-child involvement. Clearly fathers, children, and organizations benefit from healthy levels of involvement from volunteer parents, yet little is understood about the organization’s role in monitoring this relationship, and encouraging moderation. Another line of inquiry might address how organizations should be involved in encouraging positive father-child benefits that are likely to come about through fathering through sport. Rather than assuming these outcomes will automatically happen, organizations should seek to uncover ways in which these positive benefits can be purposefully enhanced. Furthermore, scholars might examine the interaction of fathering through sport with the trend of early youth specialization and year round play. Are year round sports enhancing father-child relationships, or merely promoting higher levels of over involvement? Additionally, this line of inquiry could be expanded to inquire about gender differences. Are fathers of sons or daughters more prone toward over involvement, or is over involvement a gender neutral pitfall? Finally, scholars might examine the effects of sport participation in comparison to general recreation. Are there unique benefits of fathering through sport that cannot be realized through activities such as camping, hunting, or hiking? Or, is it simply the attention and engagement of being involved with children, regardless of the activity, that brings about positive developmental outcomes?

In conclusion, it is clear that additional research is needed in this area to learn more about the ways modern fathers are using sport to fulfill fathering responsibilities and become more involved with their children, as well as the effects and nuances of this phenomenon. Moreover, this line of inquiry must examine how sport organizations can better manage these parental behaviors in an effort to improve youth sports. This rich area of inquiry provides scholars with opportunities for strong theoretical and practical contributions in the field of sport management.