Researchers have examined many concepts relating to sportsmanship. However, the definition and even the value of sportsmanship vary among sports and organizations. Sport has long been lauded and condemned for its role in personal moral development. In the landmark essay Sport and Sportsmanship, Charles Kennedy (1931) posits that sportsmanship is not simply a theoretical or scholarly concept, it is a moral imperative which should permeate both the field of play and all of life. According to Keating (1964) there are many other substantial claims regarding sportsmanship as a virtue, unfortunately it is a moral category ignored by traditional philosophers and theologians. Freezell (1986) builds upon the early work and states sportsmanship is a relevant course of study due to the prevalent place of sport in American and international culture. Current studies examine sportsmanship at a variety of competitive levels including professional, collegiate, recreational, and youth sport. Attempts at defining sportsmanship most often list certain expected behaviors by the athletes, coaches, administrators, fans, and parents. According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA, 2003) a good sportsman possesses fundamental values based on respect, fairness, civility, honesty and responsibility. Most sport and recreational organizations go beyond a definition and include a code of conduct and/or ethics for the athletes and all other stakeholders.

Much of the sport behavior research examines sportsmanship and development issues at the youth level. According to the National Council of Youth Sports, estimates for participation vary with some as high as 44 million a year depending on the age group. Data mined by ESPN’s Kid’s in Focus in 2013 show 21.5 million kids between ages 6-17 are playing team sports, but they also state that youth sport is so big that academics and organizations “don’t really know the numbers”. While there have been recent declines in football, soccer, basketball and baseball participation, mainly due to injury concerns, a majority of youth are still participating at some level.

Prior research has shown both the positive and negative role of sport participation in the development of young people. The majority of sport research supports the physical and psychological benefits of athletic participation. Leadership skills, self-discipline, respect, self-confidence, self-esteem, and the ability to cooperate, and psychological well-being are just some of the benefits of competition (Smoll, Cumming & Smith, 2011; Duda & Ntoumanis, 2005; Kavussanu & Harnisch, 2000). There is some research to suggest that youth sport participation negatively impacts altruism and moral development (Blair, 1985; Shields & Bredemeier, 1995). Others have shown the mental and physical demands can damage self-esteem and result in anxiety and depression (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009; Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, Thogersen-Ntoumani, 2011).

According to Goldstein & Iso-Ahola (2006) competition and sportsmanship are inextricably linked. Poor sportsmanlike behavior can include violence, aggression, and abuse, cheating and willing at all costs attitudes (Wells, Ruddell & Paisley, 2006). In youth sport there are many stakeholders for which sportsmanship can be considered. Attempts to understand relationships between the youth sport leader, parents, spectators and the young athlete behaviors are common. Kidman, McKenzie and McKenzie (1999) examined the content of spectator comments during youth sports events. The investigation results generated categories of parental comments that functioned to reinforce or motivate young athletes. Arthur-Banning, Wells, Baker, and Hegreness (2009) investigated the relationships between parental, spectator and coach behavior at youth basketball games and the subsequent impact these behaviors had on the young players’ behavior. While intuitive, their findings suggest parents and coaches do have an impact on the behavior of young athletes. Specifically, the researchers found that when parents, fans and coaches exhibited unsportsmanlike or sportsmanlike behavior young athletes also demonstrated these behaviors. Ryska (2009) proposed that an athlete’s level of competitiveness, sport motivation, and perceived purpose of their sport participation all impacted sportsmanship behaviors. Rainey and Larsen (1988) showed that even officials are not immune to violating the normative rules of sport. The most common explanation was that umpires were affected by other’s expectations.
Previous investigations provide insight into the relationship among youth sport participation and the behaviors of players, coaches, parents, fans and umpires. However, an understanding of sportsmanship and behavior in youth sport still needs clarification. Considering the problems present in sport at all levels, a study of sportsmanship in youth is timely and relevant. The purpose of this investigation was to examine Little League baseball player, coach, and parent behaviors related to the established concepts of sportsmanship.

This in-depth qualitative study examined behavior of coaches, parents, umpires, and players within a specific Little League baseball organization. The researchers interviewed randomly selected all-star players and observed coaches, parents and umpires participating in the 2014 baseball season. The characteristics of qualitative research include eliciting understanding and meaning, the researcher as the primary instrument, an inductive orientation to analysis and richly descriptive findings (Patton, 2002). This type of research does not provide a cause and effect relationship. The aim of this study was to describe the phenomenon and provide a narrative of the observed behavior for this specific group. The research team stayed in the field from the beginning of the 2014 season in May through completion of the season at the Great Lakes Regional tournament in August. Both practice and games were observed. According to Patton (2002) direct observation has several advantages; the inquirer is better able to understand and capture the context, has less need to rely on prior conceptualizations, and may notice things that escape others. According to Kvale (1996), interviews are difficult, but provide the richest source of information. The research team interviewed 10 players. The questions were semi-structured and open-ended, leading to a conversation type discussion with the athletes. Conducting a good interview is like participating in a good conversation by listening intently and asking questions that focus on examples and feelings (Eisner, 1998). The subjects were minors and according to Gill, Stewart, Treasure, and Chadwick (2008), “The semi-structured interview format is, arguably, the most suitable for children, as it provides them with some guidance on what to talk about. Children, particularly younger children, generally find such guidance helpful in an interview situation.” Furthermore, interviews with young children produce unique, detailed and trustworthy accounts, improving understanding on a variety of issues (Gill, et al., 2008). All interviews were kept anonymous with no names or team affiliation being used at any time.

For trustworthiness, a reflexive journal was kept, member checks were performed and interviews were transcribed and reviewed. The results are still being analyzed, with interesting themes emerging regarding sportsmanship in the Little League organization. The results will be presented via these themes with detailed description and quotes. The implications of this work and future research considerations will also be provided. Early results are promising for academics and practitioners who emphasis the importance of sportsmanship at the youth level. Suggestions for youth organization administrators will also be provided.