People with disabilities in much of North America prefer people-first language in disability discourse (e.g., “person with a disability” rather than “disabled person”), yet media coverage of athletes with disabilities rarely uses the people-first approach and instead emphasizes the impact of disability (Keller, Hallahan, McShane, Crowley, & Blandford, 1990). Media coverage oftentimes portrays athletes with disabilities using a superhero framework that positions the person as overcoming massive constraints in which mere participation should be celebrated (Hargreaves & Hardin, 2009; Titchkosky, 2001). Perhaps no other place is disability sport celebrated at its highest and covered more extensively in media than the Paralympic Games. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine North American print media’s use of people-first language when covering the Paralympic Games.

Specifically, this research analyzed hometown newspaper coverage of the three Paralympic Games held in North America: 1996 Atlanta Paralympic Summer Games, 2002 Salt Lake City Paralympic Winter Games, and 2010 Vancouver Paralympic Winter Games.

People-first language is placing the person ahead of the disability through emphasis or even sentence structure, and it can be used to help others understand disability in a social context such as sport (Lynch, Thuli, & Groombridge, 1994; Titchkosky, 2001). People-first language is used to “speak appropriately and respectfully about an individual with a disability,” using phrases such as “person with a disability” rather than “the disabled” or “handicapped” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d., para. 2). The alternative of using identity-first language risks supporting myths and stereotypes about disability by using a “demeaning or outdated word or phrase in reference to persons with disabilities” (Patterson & Witten, 1987, p. 245). People with disabilities in North America prefer people-first language, and rehabilitation professionals encourage its use (Lynch et al., 1994; Titchkosky, 2001). However, portrayal of disability in a sport setting has not followed this recommendation (Pate, Ruihley, & Mirabito, 2014).

Disability sport media coverage has typically been identified as either traditional or progressive media coverage (Schantz & Gilbert, 2008). Traditional coverage presents a medical perspective, portraying disability as a problem to be corrected and praising accomplishments as heroic, whereas progressive coverage, particularly in sport, has focused on athletic achievement, abilities, and basic reporting of competition (Schantz & Gilbert, 2008). Athletes prefer a progressive approach although they acknowledge that “supercrip” heroic achievement stories that once dominated the disability sport narrative can be attractive to general audiences (Dummer, 1998; Hardin & Hardin, 2008; Titchkosky, 2001). Pate and Hardin (2013) suggest that traditional coverage with supercrip stories may attract fringe followers, but keeping those followers will require progressive coverage focusing on the actual competition and using language preferred by people with disabilities. They suggest that using identity-first language can be a form of bias from the journalist because the journalist frames the reader’s interpretations by presenting mostly disability-related material (Entman, 2007; Goffman, 1974; Riechert, 1996). The International Paralympic Committee (IPC) offers guidelines on how to write about athletes with disabilities that suggests journalists use a people-first language approach (IPC, n.d.).

This study examined articles published in the Atlanta Journal Constitution, Salt Lake City Tribune, and Vancouver Sun during the games as well as one week prior and one week following. A total of 781 articles were analyzed (317 from the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, 118 from the Salt Lake City Tribune, and 346 from the Vancouver Sun). Textual analysis was used as a systematic approach to examine the published articles as related to date of publication, sport focus, team vs. individual focus, gender focus, type of article, national focus, winter vs. summer games, and person-first language use (McKee, 2003). Content was then analyzed for codes based on the IPC’s (n.d.) guide on how to write about athletes with disabilities, and later constructed into themes.
It is essential to examine people-first language use among media professionals because misuse of language leads to an inaccurate portrayal of athletes with disabilities. Media’s ability to impact discourse and shape perceptions through language use is the cornerstone to media effects. This research will shed light on how print news journalists are framing athletes with disabilities during the Paralympic Games, which can influence public perception of these athletes.