Participating in sports during adolescence has become a popular pastime for many. Baseball and softball, however, have become a somewhat niche activity that athletes choose to participate in during high school and overall participation rates by both genders are on the decline. The internal and external influences on athlete motivation and constraints have become a topic of great interest focusing on which influences are stronger determinants of young athletes participation in high school sport, particularly baseball and softball. According to Scanlan and Lewthwaite (1986), an important source of sport enjoyment is a feeling of affiliation and being part of a team. The affiliation and being part of a team coheres with peer approval, another aspect of belonging. In addition, as noted by Crocker, Hoar, McDonough, Kowalski, & Niefer (2004), “A major motive (reason) young people give for participating in sport and physical activity is fun and enjoyment.” Extensive research has discovered motivations and alternatively constraints to sport participation in many forms, our research is not necessarily unique, but rather the intent is to build on this foundational knowledge.

Internal benefit, opportunity, as well as several external support systems, such as family and peer influences how motivated a high school athlete is to continue participation in sport. These motivations help an athlete thrive in their sporting environment, while several constraints can prevent others from participating at the high school level. These constraints include negative socio-demographic factors, early specialization in other sports, injuries, as well as both family and peer influence can inhibit participation for high school athletes. Limitations in the preceding categories can influence an athlete's decision to either quit baseball and softball or never participate in these sports all together. Many benefits are to be gained from youth participating in baseball and softball including both physical and social benefits. Bonding also occurs amongst friends and family of youth athletes, which is mutually beneficial. Additionally, with the placement of baseball teams, communities are provided with several opportunities to expand (Johnson, 1998). Baseball and softball provide numerous benefits that have been severely endangered by the sharp steady decline in youth leagues, therefore something must effectively resolve this drastically detrimental issue.

The purpose of this study was to a) establish motivations and constraints that encourage or inhibit youth participation in baseball and softball and b) differentiate these motivations and constraints based on gender. The goal was to establish what motivations and constraints for participation were most common and expose any differences that may be present for males and females. Specifically, to determine if the reasons females do or do not participate in youth baseball and softball differ from the reasons males do or do not participate in youth baseball and softball. This information is important for future marketing of these sports to increase participation and save America’s favorite pastime. In addition, the responses to be collected will provide insight into how to keep young athletes participating through the collegiate recreational level of sport by strengthening their motivations and diminishing their constraints.

Our study was conducted with six focus groups with five participants in each group, overall thirty participants were interviewed to determine which motivations and constraints affected them. The participants were split into four focus groups containing participants who did not participate in baseball or softball at the high school level and two focus groups containing participants who had competed in high school baseball or softball. These groups were interviewed by unbiased proctors utilizing provided prompts with the intent of gaining a deeper understanding of what encouraged and inhibited these participants during high school. After the focus groups were conducted open coding was used to establish distinct concepts and categories in the data followed by axial coding to determine relationships among these concepts that could be extracted from our data. Lastly, selective coding was used to relate
the codes to a core variable as identified after rereading the transcripts from focus group interviews. This study focused on the assembly of core motivations and constraints for high school baseball and softball players and illuminated both commonalities and differences based on gender. Six motivation categories were determined to encompass all of the responses gathered through focus groups involving individuals who participated in high school baseball or softball. The six categories that emerged included fitness, social benefit, family influence, passion for competition, to impress others, and a sense of belonging as part of a team. Additionally, focus groups with non-participants in high school baseball or softball were questioned regarding what inhibited them from participating, which exposed six main categories of constraints. The constraints were lack of natural athletic ability, lack of interest in sport, friend influence, family influence, specialization in another sport, and injury.

Some interesting outliers that warrant more attention and present more often in a larger sample size included the motivation to participate at the high school level in preparation for participation at the collegiate level as well as the constraint of only encountering dissimilar role models. Dissimilar role models in this case references those of different gender, race, and body type from the high school athlete, which was cited to inhibit their participation. Our data was further analyzed to establish both differences and commonalities between genders as both motivations and constraints. In our analysis the most common female constraints involved lack of interest in sport or lack of physical ability, whereas for male participants the most common constraint by far was specialization in another sport largely in pursuit of a more physical activity. Early specialization however, was noted by a few female participants as well and could be an interesting solitary factor to focus on with research. Participants of both genders stated early specialization occurred long before high school, even as early as elementary school. With a larger sample size it could be argued that specialization would even out between the genders as more high school female sports rise in participation numbers. More research could also be developed to establish how to social construct of female sports being inferior to male sports influenced female athlete’s perceived lack of physical ability and suppressed interest in high school sport.

In regards to motivation females commonly cited the social aspect of high school sports as the key driving factor that encouraged their participation in softball, whereas males were found to be largely motivated by a passion for competition and the pursuit of athletic accomplishment. These common gender based motivations are may be caused by societal expectations that men are driven to compete, while women are built to communicate. The differing expectations placed on females and males from a young age most likely influence their behavioral motivations in high school sport settings. This preliminary study ultimately provided a consolidated foundation of previous research and the development of common trends for both motivations and constraints in high school softball and baseball. The study also designed a tool to categorize further data collection to establish how each of the discovered motivations and constraints are characterized by various sociological variables.