Women’s low representation in leadership and decision making positions has been well-documented (e.g., Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Lapchick, 2015, 2016a, 2016b). Various explanations for this phenomenon include hegemonic masculinity (Messner, 1992), homologous reproduction (Stangl & Kane, 1991) and gendered organizational culture (e.g., Acker, 1992; Shaw, 2006). Sport organizations have implemented different strategies to address women’s low representation in leadership and decision making positions (e.g., gender ratios (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007, 2008), diversity strategies (Cunningham, 2008)). These strategies have been informed by feminist literature, which aims to empower women by creating policies and procedures that limit biases against women and perceptions of women’s leadership (e.g., Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Arguably, these feminist approaches have had a limited effect, as research shows that women continue to experience low representation in leadership and decision making positions (e.g., Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Lapchick, 2015, 2016a, 2016b). However, over the past several years, the sport industry has seen a trend (albeit anecdotally) where men have hired women into prominent leadership positions in sport organizations (e.g., Becky Hammon with the NBA’s San Antonio Spurs, (Davis, 2016), Jessica Mendoza with ESPN’s baseball coverage (Carfado, 2016). Such anecdotal evidence contradicts the current gender in sport literature where women perceive men who act as gender allies is an important strategy in hiring women into leadership positions.

Gender allyship represents a departure from the existing gender in sport leadership paradigm on considering strategies for increasing the number of women in decision making and leadership positions. Women’s perceptions on the status quo and current interventions (e.g., distributive justice paradigms) are well understood in that they do not actually address social processes or alter how sport organizations function (e.g., Shaw, 2006). However, women’s perspectives on gender allyship are not fully understood. The purpose of this research is to present women’s perspectives and insights on male allyship within the sport industry. The following research questions guide the study: 1) do women feel that gender allyship is necessary? and 2) what role do women feel they need to play in creating gender allies?

Gender allyship is an extension of the allyship literature, where members from dominant social groups align and act with marginalized or oppressed groups to address inequities in power and systemic oppression (e.g., Bishop, 2002; Edwards, 2006; Reason, Millar, & Scales, 2005; Tatum, 1994). Allyship has primarily been considered within the education and social justice literatures, and focused on creating white allies to address racism (e.g., Bishop, 2002), yet the practice of allyship as a strategy is offered as capable of being applied to any social constructed category (e.g., race, gender). Allyship has yet to be applied to gender issues, and sport proves a powerful context for investigation. In a sport context, gender allyship looks to enlist men who occupy positions of power within sport organizations as allies to align with women in order to increase the number of women who occupy positions of power within sport organizations.

Through providing a clear role and purpose to address the gender-leadership gap, gender allyship looks to disrupt the dominant social practices within sport organizations through male allies’ use of resistant discourses, or discourses that challenge the status quo (Shaw & Hoeber, 2003). Resistant discourses offer a clear strategy for men to move from the position of being reluctant gatekeepers (e.g., Cunningham, 2008; Hoeber, 2007; Shaw & Penney, 2003) to working together with women to address the gender-leadership gap. Gender allyship provides a positive, inclusive role, which has proved effective at engaging members of other dominant social groups (e.g., white) in conversations about marginalization or oppression of minority social groups (e.g., black, Hispanic) (Brown, 2002; Tatum, 1994). Through positioning men as part of the solution, gender allyship looks to leverage the positions – and inherent power – of the male allies to create change in organizational contexts by creating more opportunities for women.
In order to generate a theoretical explanation of women’s perspectives on the utility of male allies seeking leadership positions a combination of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) and critical discourse analysis (Wodak & Meyer, 2016) approaches were used. Data collection is on-going. Primary data is based on theoretical sampling where semi-structured recorded interviews are being conducted with women who have requested men to serve as allies to secure a leadership position in a sport organization. Interviews will be transcribed verbatim. The constant comparison process will guide data analysis where all data will be compared for similarities and differences. In the first stage of analysis, data will be openly coded where similar conceptual data will be group into broad categories and themes associated with participants’ perceptions on success when men are integral to or independent of career paths, the importance of examples of gender allyship to other men, and the need for gender allyship within the sport industry. Properties and dimensions will then be identified during this process to further define categories.

Pinpointing relationships between categories and connecting concepts to existing literature and theoretical constructs will be carried out through axial coding. Theoretical coding will integrate the resulting codes into a theory to explain how women perceive and navigate the process of gender allyship (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Throughout the process, memoing will be used to organize and conceptualize the resulting categories. These insights will be compared to the existing perspectives presented within the sport management literature. The presentation will conclude with conceptualizing the role that women play in gender allyship and offer theoretical, empirical and practical implications. Recommendations for future research will be discussed.