Introduction and Background
While professional women’s sport in Australia has been in existence for a number of years, within the last two years, large growths in both size and scale have resulted in unprecedented levels of commercial and consumer interest and exposure (Mason, 2017; Wellington, 2017). Scholars have examined the characteristics of female consumers that are sport fans often within the context of men’s professional sport (Hoeber & Kerwin, 2013; James & Ridinger, 2002; Toffoletti, 2017). However, little research exists that examines the motivations for individuals to consume women’s professional sport in an international context. For organizations like the Australian Football League (AFL) who administer and market a professional women’s sport product (AFLW), understanding these consumer motivations provides guidance in long term marketing strategies which can capitalize on recent levels of commercial growth, and produce long-term consumer loyalty and retention (McDonald, Karg, & Leckie, 2014). Ultimately, through consumer growth and retention, long-term financial success can be achieved (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, & Gremler, 2002) and, from this, a continued focus on the uplifting of women’s sport from both a commercial (e.g. AFLW, Big Bash League cricket, SuperNetball) and participation focus (McDonald, Milne, & Hong, 2002).

Within the sport management literature there has been a concerted focus on seeking to understand the behaviour of sport consumers. An understanding of the motivations of sport fans has for many years been a key consideration for sport management scholars, and has produced numerous areas of research regarding various sport consumption behaviours. With consumer motivations representing the antecedents of consumer behaviour scholarly focus on the understanding why sport fans act the way they do becomes quite imperative (Han, Mahony, & Greenwell, 2016). With these understandings various marketing, management, and financial decisions can be influenced and guided to ensure organizational success (Baker, McDonald, & Funk, 2016). Specifically, scholars have found that sport fan motivations are influenced by numerous characteristics including gender, race, culture, game aesthetics, sport point of attachment, identity, and sense of community (Funk, Mahony, & Ridinger, 2002; Trail & James, 2001). While comparative studies of fan motivations among fans of different sports have been conducted (Keaton, Watanabe, & Gearhart, 2015; Ross, 2006) there remains a relative scarcity regarding studies that identify fan motivations of women’s professional sport in particular. Funk et al. (2002) examined both spectator interest and motivations of spectators of the US Women’s National Soccer team, and found that fans were driven by the sport, interest in a team, vicarious achievement, players serving as role models, and overall entertainment value key motivators of spectatorship. Funk, Ridinger, and Moorman (2003) furthered this understanding within the context of Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) spectators. Findings indicated support for the previously mentioned consumer motivations, but also brought forth concepts such as support for women’s opportunities, escape, and socialisation. While the two studies provide considerable depth regarding the motivations of spectators of women’s professional sport, they operated within the context of spectators of one particular team. Expanding the context within future studies could provide new findings regarding the motivation for spectatorship of women’s professional sport. Furthermore, expanding the sample of consumers beyond those that are simply in stadium spectators could also provide new and unique findings regarding the forces that motivate sport fan behaviors both in and outside the stadium. Additionally, expanding the outcome of motivation beyond spectatorship to brand-related involvement allows for the intricacies of consumer motivations to be fully understood. From these gaps in the literature, the authors present two research questions:

R1: What are the key consumer motivations of brand related involvement (e.g. attendance, media consumption, merchandise consumption) of professional women’s sport spectators?
R2: How do these motivations change with regard to impact throughout the season?

R3: What motivational and consumption differences exist across varying consumer groups?

No longer is sport consumption restricted to the stadium, rather consumers have a multitude of different ways to consume and interact with the sport product (Wakefield, 2016). Understanding the motivations of such consumption, within the context of women’s professional sport could be quite valuable to team managers and scholars alike. Finally, utilizing a new methodological approach in the study of sport fan motivations could provide new and interesting findings in relations to the way that fan motivations manifest themselves and change throughout a league and team’s season. While longitudinal research exists across several sport marketing foci, there exists a relative scarcity in longitudinal examinations of consumer motivations. Such an understanding could provide new insights into the manner in which consumers cognitively engage with and ultimately consume sport products at various points of a season.

Method
Utilizing existing working relationships with the AFL, and individual clubs, research assistants will conduct in-person surveys at AFLW matches in early 2018 for the first stage of data collection in Study 1. During this phase, respondents will be incentivized to provide their email addresses and gender separate from their responses, though their identity will remain anonymous; respondent survey responses will be given a numerical ID that will also be recorded alongside their e-mail and gender (should they wish to provide that information). For the second and third data collection stages, participants from the list of email addresses previously collected will be invited to complete an electronic survey at both the midpoint (stage 2) and conclusion (stage 3) of the 2018 AFLW season. Through this longitudinal approach, analysis of how individuals’ progression in regards to brand associations and motivations will be made utilizing growth curve modelling analysis (Singer & Willet, 2003).

Anticipated Findings
It is important to note that this study is currently in progress, but will be ready for presentation at the 2018 NASSM conference. The utilization of a longitudinal design provides a unique opportunity to gain insight regarding consumer perceptions and motivations. It is anticipated that, through this approach, a coherent understanding of women’s professional sport consumer behaviour can be garnered and effective marketing strategies recommendations posited. With the AFLW entering its second season in 2018, and with league expansion confirmed for 2019 and 2020, this study will provide a unique look into the impact of rapid commercialization of the professional women’s sport product as it relates to consumers’ motivations. Individual clubs and the league have discussed that many fans seem to be driven to consume due to themes around gender empowerment, family atmosphere, and access to the players (Lane, 2017). However, it will be interesting to see if these themes are indeed the most impactful, how they might change throughout the season, and whether differences exist across consumer groups.