Trust in sport organizations is multilevel where it operates at the individual, team, and organizational levels (Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012) and within a referent groups. The level of trust represents the level of analysis (e.g., executive council or national governing body), while trust in a referent group refers to the target of the trust (i.e., the trustee—athlete, administrator, governing board, sport governing body). Trust, as highlighted by Das & Teng (2004, p.86), is “one of the more frequently used and yet least understood of significant concepts in the social sciences” and, despite growing focus in academic, defining trust as a construct can be difficult. Moreover, in the past, there has been “an aggressive misunderstanding of trust” (Flores & Solomon, 1998, p. 206) and the emphasis on trust being a dynamic process of human interaction has only recently come to the fore. In its simplest form, trust can be defined as ‘a willingness to be vulnerable’ (Mayer et al, 1995).

As research in to the area has developed, concepts like ‘confidence’ and ‘exchange’ have been added to simpler definitions. For example, trust now tends to be viewed “as an expression of confidence between the parties [in any type of relationship] in an exchange of some kind” (Jones & George, 1998, p.531), in that an individual would believe that they would not be out in harm’s way or have their vulnerability exploited. Lewicki & Wiethoff (2000) differentiate between two different arenas where trust can occur – in a professional setting, or calculus-based trust (CBT), or in a personal relationship, or identification-based trust (IBT). Building on the work of Shapiro et al (1992), CBT is based on the idea that individuals will do what they say they are going to as they might fear the consequences and the damage to one’s reputation. IBT, on the other hand, according to Lewicki & Wiethoff (2000), “exists because the parties can effectively understand and appreciate one another’s wants” (p. 96) and feel that their interests will be protected. It is clear when we consider the governance of the sport industry, in particular, that sometimes the lines between CBT and IBT can become somewhat blurred. For example, if we consider the US Postal cycling team, did athletes within that team trust in their managers, and indeed in their team captain, because they feared the consequences of not doing what was expected of them or did they trust based on the idea that they (and their interests) would be protected?

The purpose of this paper, then, is threefold: first of all, we conceptualize trust in sport, to begin to understand where and how these different types of trust (CBT and IBT) manifest in the broader sport industry; second, we conduct a multi-level analysis in order to examine how the associations between stakeholders might facilitate the building of such trust relationships; and, third, we examine the multidimensionality of the construct of trust, as introduced by Butler & Cantrell (1984, p.19), which includes five different but interconnected dimensions – “a) integrity, honesty and truthfulness; b) competence, technical and interpersonal knowledge and skills required to do one’s job; c) consistency, reliability, predictability, and good judgment in handling situations; d) to protect and save face for a person; and e) openness or mental accessibility, willingness to share ideas and information freely”.

A multi-level analysis is important in the area of trust, where it is acknowledged that the interactions in individual relationships can be, and are, constrained by the organization and vice versa. As previously highlighted in the definition provided by Jones & George (1998) who suggest that relationships are based on an exchange of trust between different parties, and as discussed by Rousseau et al (1998, p. 398), “micro-level trust relations are constrained and enhanced by macro processes… Conversely, broader forms of trust, particularly between firms, can be influenced by micro-level arrangements”. In the context of the sport industry, athletes need to trust each other as well as their governing bodies to protect their interests and the credibility of the sport and, in turn, governing bodies need to be able to trust the athletes that they refrain from any activity that will undermine the integrity of sporting competition.

This paper will propose a theoretical framework upon which future lines of research in the area of trust in and of sport can be built, whilst also identifying the practical implications of such research.
This is the first paper in a multi-faceted analysis of trust in sport, centering around corruption and scandal in international sport and its impact on the relationship between stakeholders. By understanding where and how trust is built between stakeholders in the sport industry, we can start to analyze how trust could be restored, if at all, when a violation of that trust occurs.