The relationship between sport and the natural environment dates to the beginning of sport itself. Many sports were borne of unique interactions between humans and the natural environment: surfing emerged from indigenous traditions and culture in Polynesia (Booth, 2013; Warshaw, 2011), golfing became popular in the hills of Scotland (Browning, 2018), and ice hockey became “Canada’s game” on the frozen ponds of the North (Johnson & Ali, 2017). From these origins of unique human-nature interactions evolved the controlled, codified, simulated, and artificial facilities we rely on today. Surfers can now practice in wave pools, golfers enjoy manicured golf courses and indoor simulators, and hockey players may experience their sport indoors in all seasons.

The shift toward artificial facilities is, we argue, driven by anthropocentric notions of control over the natural world (White, 1948). Anthropocentrism is defined as “an implicit or explicit assumption that human reason and sentience places the human being on a higher ground” than other beings (Coward, 2006, p. 420). This assumption serves as grounds for the division of humans and nature, and the assumed superiority of humans over all other natural and non-human elements in this world (Sekinelgin, 2006). Anthropocentrism has been identified in the recreation and tourism literatures as a driving force in development (Brymer & Gray, 2010; Cocks & Simpson, 2015; Schulz et al. 2010), however understandings of the impact of anthropocentrism on sport remain underdeveloped. Therefore, the present research explores the influence of anthropocentric frames on artificial environments and sport standardization (via anthropocentrism) in the modern sport industry.

This research was conducted through a review of relevant sport history literature and interviews with industry leaders who have overseen or managed transitions from natural settings to artificial settings. In particular, this is an exploratory multiple case study focused on ice hockey, golf, rock climbing, surfing, and skiing: all sports that have experienced some anthropocentric transition from natural settings to artificial facilities within the last forty years. Interview questions focused on what stimulated and catalyzed the transition to artificial facilities, and how reliance on artificial facilities has evolved over time. Interviews were transcribed and the transcripts coded via a combination of inductive and deductive coding techniques (Saldaña, 2015).

Early findings reveal the artificialization of sport has resulted in several benefits for athletes and the sport sector, and was heavily inspired by the desire to control the environment of play and extend playing opportunities. Examples of benefits include greater opportunities to participate in a range of sports regardless of geography and season, and the potential to ‘level the playing field’ by controlling the conditions of play for competition. However, there are also drawbacks to increased artificialization of sport: namely, the increased costs financially and environmentally (Mufson, 16 October 2019). As the conditions of the natural environment are under scrutiny due to climate change (IPCC, 2014), it is imperative to understand the artificialization process, and to address the issues presented by artificialization of sport. Further, this research will provide the initial groundwork for further studies on anthropocentrism in sport management.