
CHAPTER 1: WHY GREENING SPORTS MATTERS

The sports industry's growing embrace of energy efficiency, renewable energy, recycling, water conservation, safer chemicals and healthier food is educating millions of fans about the importance of protecting the environment and natural resources on which we all depend. Through their leadership on the field, court or rink, professional and collegiate sports—and their sponsors—are showing their many fans practical, cost-effective solutions to some of our planet's most dire ecological issues.

Sports leagues, teams and venues are adopting environmental practices to improve their operations and save money while using their unique cultural and economic influence to demonstrate to thousands of businesses and millions of people how to be better environmental stewards. Yet, despite the impressive strides this industry is already taking to protect the environment, the sports greening movement is just beginning. The potential is enormous for professional sports to help move society toward more sustainable practices and lead our economy to a stronger future.

It goes without saying that sports are a hugely popular, economically influential industry. And while team loyalties vary and sports management practices differ, there is one thing we can all agree on: Sports belong to no particular political party. Consequently, perhaps no other industry is better suited to confirm that environmental stewardship has become a mainstream, nonpartisan issue. Hundreds of millions of people of all political, social, religious and economic backgrounds watch sporting events each year, and the global supply chain of the sports industry includes the largest and most influential corporations in the world. In fact, while only 13 percent of Americans say they follow science, 61 percent identify themselves as sports fans.¹

Consider how culturally influential sports can be: Jesse Owens in 1936, debunking the Aryan supremacy myth. Billie Jean King beating Bobby Riggs in the first female-versus-male professional tennis match, a big step toward pay equality. Passage of Title IX, leading to financing for women's athletics. Muhammad Ali's conscientious objection to the Vietnam War and his role as a spokesman for civil rights. Magic Johnson's openness about his HIV/AIDS infection, which helped to destigmatize that illness. Jackie Robinson breaking the race barrier in Major League Baseball.

Consider as well the combined visibility and market influence of the Super Bowl; the World Series; hockey's Stanley Cup playoffs and Winter Classic; the NBA playoffs and finals; the U.S. Open Tennis Championships; the pro basketball, baseball, hockey and soccer all-star games; and

international soccer's World Cup competition. Now consider the value of mobilizing that combined influence to promote greening.

Greening is the process of reviewing operations and procurement policies with an eye toward reducing environmental impacts. It is an ongoing enhancement process that all businesses need to engage in to advance sustainability. The ecological threats we face are real. We have a narrowing window of opportunity in which to limit the ecological damage we are causing, to reduce global warming impacts, to save our oceans and the fisheries they support, and to protect biodiversity and our last remaining wild spaces.

If the sustainable economy does not exist, then it needs to be built. Overwhelmingly it will be built by the private sector. Government, of course, has an irreplaceable role to play in building the infrastructure needed for commerce and culture. Government must also encourage ecologically intelligent private sector investments through incentives and smart regulations. To date, however, government has failed to provide incentives and regulations that will adequately encourage sustainable investments at the scale needed. Indeed, most government incentives and regulations continue to encourage and subsidize ecologically ignorant manufacturing.

There is no single business undertaking or law that can solve our many ecological problems. Rather, it will require countless contributions from every corner of society. However small our day-to-day actions may seem, our collective purchases add up to meaningful regional and global impacts. Most individuals and businesses can do only relatively small things, whether it's buying products made with recycled content, purchasing renewable energy, driving a fuel-efficient car, or conserving water. What is clear, however, is that everyone has to do something to address the ecological pressures we collectively face. And the many small ecological initiatives being implemented throughout the world of sports are adding up, offering us the hope that we can turn current ecological trends around.



Awareness is the first step in healing. A cultural shift toward environmental awareness is required to effectively address the serious ecological problems we face as a planet. We need to change the way we think about our relationship to the planet that gives us air to breathe and water to drink.

Lessons from previous cultural shifts that have moved our society forward suggest that the change needed today in our thinking about the environment will not be led by government. The Civil Rights Act did not become law because Congress led the way on race relations. The Vietnam War did not end because Congress led the way on defunding United States participation in that conflict. In each case, government did not lead on the reforms needed to address these issues; it followed. Congress was forced to act by a cultural shift in public opinion.

The same is true about environmental stewardship. Clearly, government is not leading the way in addressing the urgent issues of global climate disruption, biodiversity loss and so many other ecological threats. We must encourage government to respond to these threats, and in order to do that, we need to promote a shift in how Americans view their relationship to the planet. We need business leaders to enhance how business is done, and cultural leaders to help expand society's expectations about sustainability.

To instigate this, few sectors can be as influential as the sports industry. It is clear that bringing environmental information to our cultural leaders is as important as bringing that information to our political leaders. Indeed, perhaps it is more important. Sports are the ultimate cultural unifier. If we want to change the world, we need to bond through our common connections rather than emphasize our differences.

As of this writing, 15 professional stadiums or arenas have achieved LEED green building design certification, 18 have installed onsite solar arrays, and 68 have energy efficiency programs. Some 38 professional teams have shifted to renewable energy for at least some of their operations. Millions of pounds of carbon emissions have been avoided, and millions of pounds of paper products have been shifted toward recycled content or eliminated altogether. Recycling and composting programs have been or are being developed at virtually all professional stadiums and arenas. The large sports concessionaires that collectively feed tens of millions of people each year have all developed environmentally preferable menus for at least some of their offerings. Certainly much work remains to be done, but it is heartening to note that meaningful changes are being put into place throughout sports and that tens of millions of fans are being educated about environmental stewardship by teams and leagues around the world.

There is a reason some of the largest industries on earth pay millions of dollars to affiliate with professional sports. They know that sports offer an effective way to influence the culture of the marketplace. All industries meet on a football field. The energy, water, chemical, auto, textile, plastics, and food industries are all suppliers or sponsors of professional sports. The sports industry is among the largest economic sectors in the United States, generating more than \$400 billion in economic activity annually.²

Sports can be a powerful engine for social change. Now, environmental stewardship is starting to benefit from that influence as teams and venues have begun to inform their fans about their commitment to environmental protection, even as they save millions of dollars by integrating environmentally progressive features into their facilities and operations, making their organizations more financially viable and ecologically responsible.

ENDNOTES

1 13 percent of Americans following science closely: www.nsf.gov/statistics/seind10/c7/c7s1.htm. Sports followers: Marist Institute for Public Opinion, "Marist Poll," Dec 15, 2011.

2 \$400 billion sports industry: Plunkett's Sports Industry Almanac 2010, Plunkett Research Ltd. (2010) Accessed August 20. <http://www.plunkettresearch.com/sports-recreation-leisure-market-research/industry-and-business-data/trend>.