

Unit 2 Protect

The World of Sports Taking Responsibility

Stewardship of the environment has become an issue that affects almost all aspects of our lives. Consequently, individuals and organizations constantly strive to make small changes to their daily habits to build a greener environment. Individuals practice a more mindful approach to their way of living to reduce their environmental impact while organizations strive to modify their way of doing business to minimize their effect on the environment. The world of sports is no exception and it has a lot of potential to be part of the solution.

Many sporting events have a negative impact on the environment because they require massive structures to host them. To draw more spectators, sports stadiums and sporting facilities are getting bigger, consuming larger areas of land and requiring greater amounts of building materials for construction. Whenever a hectare of grassland is cleared for a construction site, there is a loss of nature. Every ton of concrete and steel used in the building foundation and structure is produced, transported, poured, and put together by equipment and facilities that emit waste into the ground and atmosphere.

Then, after the stadium is completed, large amounts of water, electricity, and other forms of resources are consumed to operate and maintain the facility.

Every sporting event affects the environment before, during, and even after it. For example, a long-track speed skating competition can only take place, provided that the ice of a 400-meter oval track is frozen until it is 3 to 5 cm thick. As long as the competition is on, the track needs to be kept frozen by specialized refrigeration systems while the temperature, humidity, and air quality inside the stadium also have to be maintained for optimal ice conditions. Additionally, all of the stadium employees, athletes, and spectators need to travel to and from the stadium, often from other cities or even from abroad. In fact, more than 25% of the emissions generated by the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics are estimated to be caused by fan travel and accommodations. During the event, spectators and athletes eat and drink, and the plastic bottles and wrappers of whatever they consumed leave trash cans overflowing. After the event has ended, in addition to the significant amount of trash that needs to be disposed of, the effects those people caused and the emissions generated from their travel continue to have a lasting negative impact on air quality.

Alarm bells sounded when research suggested the possibility that nearly one in every four English soccer stadiums could be partially or completely flooded in the near future due to climate change and extreme weather events. Some research even predicted that by 2050 almost half of the cities that once hosted the Winter Olympics would not be able to do so again for lack of snow and ice. Also, the US Open Tennis Championships organizers implemented an "extreme heat policy," having mandatory short breaks for players to cool down during matches, after a few quit their matches due to extreme heat. As more sports are affected by climate change, concerns are growing.

There is light at the end of the tunnel, however. The sports community is optimistic that it can reduce its environmental impact by taking two main steps: transitioning to more sustainable operations before, during, and after events and raising awareness among the public about their impact. Efforts to adopt more responsible approaches have been made by various organizations, and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) is leading the way by setting a good example. The IOC set up the Sport and Environment Commission decades ago and declared the environment as essential to the Olympic Movement, in addition to sports and culture. It has since encouraged host nations to adopt more environmental approaches to putting on the Olympics.

As a result, the Olympic Village built for the 2000 Sydney Summer Olympics became the world's largest solar-powered suburb and the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics adopted a new energy recycling system which used the curling hall's air conditioning unit to heat the showers and bathrooms in the venue. Also, for the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics, the Olympic speed-skating venue was built with salvaged timber. The Olympic Park for the 2012 London Summer Olympics, which was built on industrial land that was once contaminated, was converted to the biggest urban park in Europe. Then at the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics, electricity was generated with hydrogen instead of fossil fuel, which supplied power for many residential buildings in the Olympic Village and Paralympic Village.

Thanks to its popularity, sports is a powerful tool for universally raising awareness about environmental responsibility. Simply put, the sports industry influences billions of individuals that are involved in sports either as spectators, athletes, or organizers. Through sports, strategies to increase awareness and educate the public about the importance of sustaining the environment have shown good results.

Research has found that fans are receptive to ecological or environmental initiatives organized at sporting events, and many are willing to change their lifestyle habits accordingly. The social status of athletes can have a strong effect, too. For example, high-profile athletes and coaches can be sports ambassadors to foster environmental consciousness among fans, especially young people who look up to them. The broad appeal of sports becomes a vehicle to reach many people at once.

While sports provide us with such immense benefits, we—along with sporting event organizers—need to be aware of the adverse environmental effects that sports have at times. As long as we are all aware of the effects, we can take steps toward finding ways to minimize or even completely eliminate them. While Green Sports Day, on October 6th, is a global event that promotes environmentally friendly sports, maybe it's time we declare every day a day to encourage greater sustainability in sports.