A sporting chance
The role of sport in mitigating climate change
Deloitte Sports Business Group
April 2021
Introduction

Climate change is a defining challenge of our time. As the damage and risk posed by man-made global warming continues to increase, all parts of society will need to play their part in tackling the climate crisis, including sport and sporting institutions.

Sport has an important role to play in tackling climate change, both at an elite and grassroots level. As one of the greatest convenors of people in our society, sport can play a role both in championing progress and leading by example. Those organisations that are most innovative and that make the most progressive steps can gain a competitive advantage over their peers.

In the last year, we have seen sport contribute positively to the campaign for racial equality and justice, particularly in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. Sporting institutions have also contributed to the COVID-19 pandemic response through use of stadia as hospitals and testing centres. Now, there is the opportunity for sport to play a similarly impactful role on climate change.

As individuals and organisations across society increasingly recognise the tremendous challenge of climate change and want to commit to action, the more they will look to engage with organisations and individuals who share similar values. As fans ‘go green’, so must the sports that they follow.

For individual athletes too, an authentic commitment to leadership on climate change offers a route to transcend sport and create a wider positive legacy that may even outstrip success on the field of play.

The sports industry is not starting from scratch, and as outlined in this paper there are many examples around the world of institutions and individuals taking a lead.

By exploring the relevance of climate change to sport, the characteristics it has to bring change and the expectations of key stakeholders alongside some existing positive action we hope to bring the topic into focus and indicate how more can be done. We believe the sporting community still has potential to go faster and further.
Climate change and its relevance to sport

Sport fundamentally relies on the natural world in order to exist, with direct reliance on conditions caused by climate. Whether via the use of snow and ice for winter sports, water for aquatics, surfing or sailing, or grass pitches for football, cricket or many others, climate’s influence on sport is undeniable.

Likewise, sport influences climate change, mostly due to the sheer scale of its popularity. Two of the world’s biggest and most popular international events – the Olympic and Paralympic Games and the FIFA World Cup – have significant environmental and economic impacts that are felt for decades afterwards.

The extensive infrastructure required for elite level sport, both for large international events and for year-round competitions, and the carbon emissions resulting from travel undertaken by spectators to witness their chosen sporting events in person, are both clear examples of the significant impact that sport directly has on the climate.

Climate change is a global problem that requires the whole of society to collaborate and coordinate to find solutions. Similarly, sport necessitates collaboration between its participants, whether teams or individual athletes, and more broadly collaboration is paramount in the organisation of sport locally, regionally, and globally. Sport is therefore a prime example of successful global collaboration, that can be leveraged to address urgent societal issues.

Sport’s characteristics for change

Sport has many of the characteristics required to influence change.

Reach: Sport has a global reach and can engage all of society with its unique ability to influence change through championing causes via global, wide-spread attention.

Finance: Investment in physical infrastructure – typically venues and stadia – can be used to help deliver reduced emissions, affordable and clean energy and promote responsible consumption and production e.g. via recycling and waste management programmes, green space etc.

Collaboration: Partnerships within sport allow organisations to leverage each other’s position in the market in order to achieve a shared goal. Sport has the opportunity to move towards more sustainably responsible partnerships that encourage positive behaviours.

Resource: The sporting ecosystem has a large employee-base across a wide variety of roles. Even a small contribution of a workforce’s time towards sustainable initiatives, for example the training of staff or enabling them to dedicate time towards climate action, can be a significant force for good and help create a sustainable culture.

Legacy: Cooperation between sports organisations, political establishments and other stakeholders (e.g. constructors), combined with due consideration for the lifecycle of infrastructure, can be a powerful tool in creating a sustainability conscious legacy. Legacy considerations can be both tangible and intangible, and can have a positive, long-term impact culturally, economically and physically. The construction of new venues can provide employment, host sporting, musical or other events and be a source of recreational activity for the population.
Forest Green Rovers

FIFA declared Forest Green Rovers the ‘greenest club in the world’ in 2017. The club have shirts made from bamboo, electric vehicle charging points at the current stadium, a fully vegan menu and plans for a new, nearly entirely wooden stadium as part of its green credentials. With the pioneering Dale Vince (who has a background in green energy) as owner, and Premier League footballer Hector Bellerin as a shareholder, the club have a great platform to influence change.

Formula 1

Formula 1 has set an ambitious strategy to become a net zero carbon sport by 2030. It will work closely with all of the F1 partners, promoters, sponsors, the FIA and the teams to deliver more sustainable racing on track and sustainable operations off-track.

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Expectations of sport’s key stakeholders

Across society there are expectations for individuals and institutions to take a more conscious approach to climate action and wider sustainability.

This is also true in sport, with stakeholder groups increasingly demanding sustainable action:

**Fans**: All sporting organisations have supporters that expect more from them – whether on the field of play or off it. As the ultimate consumer of the product fans are one of the most important stakeholders in sport, and through collective power can have a significant impact if they believe the competitors, athletes and players they follow have not acted appropriately towards matters that they deem important.

**Athletes and players**: Many athletes and players are realising the power of their platforms to influence change, with some having a larger number of followers than the organisations they represent. Social and digital media comments from individual athletes is also a more direct means of communication as opposed to through an official club or team channel. They can be more personal and have greater capacity to instil a sustainable mindset and influence actions.

**Clubs and teams**: Clubs and teams will expect their players and athletes to comply with the expectations of fan bases and wider society. There may also be an expectation that their partners and suppliers act sustainably, which can be driven by a desire to align partner aims and values with those of the club or team, also helping protect the organisation’s brand and reputation.

**Broadcasters and media**: There can be societal pressure on broadcasters and media to acknowledge and support environmental causes, and to reflect these in the way they present sport. Broadcasters themselves may also expect that the competitions they broadcast act responsibly. As with clubs and teams, this may be in order to align with their own values, but also has the potential to directly and positively impact the organisation.

**League, competitions and event organisers**: Many leagues, competitions and event organisers need to consider environmental effects due to their dependency on climatic conditions. Further environmental deterioration could risk a competition’s viability altogether.

**Governing bodies**: For many international and national governing bodies, safeguarding the future of the sport they govern is a key objective which can be achieved through encouraging positive action by the sport’s stakeholders. As a result, these organisations have the ability to play a big part in mitigating climate change.

**Partners and sponsors**: Partners and sponsors can benefit from association with players, athletes and sporting organisations that act responsibly. Through these partnerships, the perception of partners and sponsors can be enhanced which can in turn generate consumer goodwill and brand loyalty.
Sustainability Concept of the 2024 UEFA European Football Championship

The German Football Association (DFB) has put the themes of ‘young people, fans, digital innovation, diversity, human rights, the environment, health and fair play’ at the centre of Euro 2024. This was not a requirement of the bid, however the DFB, in consultation with non-government organisations, local authorities and partners, proactively committed to promoting and contributing towards these themes.

The albert Sports Consortium and Sky Sports

The albert Sports Consortium was formed in July 2020 to support the sports broadcasting community as it addresses its environmental impact. It has developed a certification system that can be attributed to sports production. Sky have adopted the system and has publicly stated its ambition to be net zero carbon by 2030.

A 2019 study found that 74% of football fans either agreed or strongly agreed that they cared about the sustainable impacts of their favourite football club1. Another survey showed that 86% of fans thought that football should take care of environmental protection in the same way it takes care of other issues such as discrimination2.

1 https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/50317760
What can sport do?

Sport’s impact on climate change can be improved through the coordination of those organisations that educate themselves on the issues and invest resources effectively, with those acting first having the potential to make the most impact and reap the greatest reward.

A potential course of action for sporting organisations is outlined below:

1. Set out an ambitious vision for climate action, setting targets and embedding them into all aspects of your operation.

Public targets and commitments:
Articulate clear goals to achieve net zero carbon emissions across your operations, reduce waste and resource use. These targets can be mandated by competition organisers to regulate competitors, or by a sporting organisation for action by its employees (e.g. offering employees the opportunity to have targets built into their objectives).

External engagement: Promote climate action messages in stadia, broadcast to millions around the world or thousands locally, as well as social media campaigns to raise climate awareness and activism amongst fan bases. A streamlined and coherent digital strategy can help focus these goals.

2. Implement climate action roadmaps to deliver on your stated ambitions with the required investment, innovation and collaboration.

Operational net zero: Take steps to achieve net zero across your operations, from renewable energy contracts to electric vehicles, sustainable materials and estates. This requires a clear and robust approach to carbon measurement and accounting.

Net zero fan base: Engage with key stakeholders across the value chain to encourage climate action across transport, merchandise, ticketing and other aspects of sporting fandom. Deliver ambitions around climate action messaging and communication.

Sustainable culture: Work with employees and other key stakeholder groups to improve understanding of the importance and relevance of sustainability, explore methods for embedding a commitment to climate action within ways of working and everyday interaction.

3. Ensure climate action continues over time, with progress monitored and tracked through a culture of transparency, oversight, rigour and continuous improvement.

Climate reporting and oversight:
Mandated, competition-wide reporting of carbon emissions increases the transparency of operations and encourages organisations to take more urgent action on climate change. Results being made public can allow comparison between peers, acting as an incentive to comply and improve. Appointing climate champions on Boards and within senior executive committees will improve ongoing oversight.

Workshops to educate fans and players:
raising awareness of climate change can help and empower a large stakeholder base to act and to continuously improve. For example, workshops in academies or athlete development pathways can be impactful and help athletes become sustainability-conscious from an early age and positively influence others throughout their lives.
United Nations – Sports for Climate Action

A long list of sports organisations have signed up to a UN-led framework – Sports for Climate Action – seeking to move the sports sector to a low carbon economy. The aim is for the global sports community to address its own impact (e.g. via measuring, reducing, and reporting greenhouse gas emissions) and in so doing to “use sports as a unifying tool to drive climate awareness and action among global citizens”.

SailGP

Sailing’s premier racing league aims to become the first climate positive sports and entertainment institution through using natural resources to power its race and sport boats, the use of clean energy for its event and business operations and assessing the legacy impact that hosting its events has on cities. It will also deliver actions and innovations that advance the global adoption of clean energy and inspire others to follow suit.

How we can help

Sporting organisations need to balance emerging risks against established business models, which requires curious and courageous problem solving.

Deloitte’s Sustainability Services give clients the capability and confidence to drive real change, build competitive advantage and to make climate-smart choices, so that they can succeed in a low-carbon future. Our team is at the cutting edge, supporting clients across industries to make clear choices for a sustainable future.

Our specialist Sports Business Group offers a multi-disciplined expert service with dedicated people and skills capable of adding significant value to the business of sport. We have worked with more clubs, leagues, governing bodies, stadia developers, event organisers, commercial partners, financiers and investors than any other adviser.

Sports Business Group

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