



CAN THE GROWTH OF SPORT EVER BE COMPATIBLE WITH ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY COMMITMENTS?

SPORT POSITIVE DEBATE REPORT

OCTOBER 2023

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SETTING THE SCENE

Sport Positive Summit 2023 Annual Debate took place on 4 October 2023.

Co-hosted by:



- **Claire Poole, CEO & Founder, Sport Positive**
- **David Garrido, Presenter, Sky Sports**

With debate speakers:



- **Fiona Morgan, Chief Purpose Officer, Sail GP**
- **Martin Offiah MBE, Former Pro-Rugby Player**
- **David Goldblatt, Sports Writer, Broadcaster, Author, Journalist**

Hundreds of attendees of Sport Positive Summit shared their views, this report is an overview of the industry's current views on this topic.

DEBATE TOPIC

Can growth of sport ever be compatible with environmental sustainability commitments?

AUDIENCE POLL RESULTS BEFORE DEBATE

No – 56%

Yes – 44%

AUDIENCE POLL RESULTS AFTER DEBATE

No – 73%

Yes – 22%

Don't know – 5%

≡ POLL

SPEAKER INSIGHTS

“The key thing here is that everybody’s plans for growth and sustainability are premised on offsets.

“Until we have sorted out the situation with offsets, and actually made them meaningful in some way, I don’t see how the sports industry at it’s current size can be sustainable and meet it’s climate commitments.

“We could be thinking about mitigation. All over the global South sporting institutions are athletes are being impacted by the climate crisis in a way that is much more serious than any of us here. And why are we not thinking about north-south transfers within sport?

“Then sport has to become a really serious advocate politically for transforming carbon heavy transport systems; aviation and public transport. Sport can’t do that by itself, but it could become a much louder and more significant voice in that conversation.

“I think there is a case for a pause...we may need to have a bit of a pause and a rethink on this. I think it would be a really interesting message to say, this is so serious, actually we have to do something really different here.”

David Goldblatt

Sports Writer, Broadcaster, Author, Journalist



SPEAKER INSIGHTS

“Sport will have to say we can’t grow any further, we need to redesign sport. How do you have your events? Who are your fans? Innovation around how we grow sport, how we think about sport differently.

“Keep the hope that we can grow sustainably, but you have to do radical innovation and you have to collaborate and think differently.

“How would we do this differently to reduce our emissions? How would we travel around the world? What’s our hospitality model? What’s our content? Who else can we do a weekend of sport with?

“We can’t underestimate advocacy; sports power to engage fans. It’s the balance between influencing using your voice versus the footprint of the actual events.”

Fiona Morgan, Chief Purpose Officer, SailGP



AUDIENCE INSIGHTS

At the start of the debate, a majority of 56% of the audience said they didn't believe the growth of sport can be compatible with environmental sustainability commitments. By the end of the debate, that majority had risen to 73%, with 5% of people advising they didn't know.

The themes that came through from the audience on both sides of the debate were:

- NO: Choose de-growth or it will be chosen for us
- YES: Co-existence between sustainability and growth is possible

But complexities were underlined in terms of specific facets of this debate on growth such as:

- Travel
- Merchandise
- Economics
- Offsets
- Social value

and ideas arising that may change the outlook including:

- Targets/Standards
- Carbon budgets
- Innovation

Audience breakdown

Sports organisations (leagues, governing bodies, federations, clubs, teams, stadia, associations), athletes, broadcasters, brands, NGOs, UN bodies, consultants, solution providers

DE-GROWTH - CHOOSE IT OR IT WILL BE CHOSEN FOR US

- Eventually getting there is no longer an option. Prof Ed Hawkins at the Summit yesterday showed us convincingly that we're really, really late! De-growth is needed.
- Sport will plateau in any case - athletes are injured too much and there is a legitimate case that there is too much sport anyway, irrelevant of sustainably.
- Why have so many versions of the same thing in national elite sport?
- There are only so many weekends in a year for sport to grow into.
- Human sustainability: some sports are already pushing athletes (and all the people it takes to get them there) to the limit.
- More events, more travel, more procurement cannot mean lower footprint.
- We can't have infinite growth on a finite planet.
- Not sure why professional sport needs to grow. It's fine!
- What about time? Planetary boundary overshoot, tipping points & cascade effects demand immediate action. Surely most globalised sporting events must pause.
- Less is more....quality not quantity....take responsibility, don't lay blame.

CO-EXISTANCE IS POSSIBLE

- As we move towards a net zero economy, growth and sustainability can work hand in hand. In fact growth can encourage more sustainable behaviours globally
- Sustainable growth of sport would be key, can in turn support the 'sustainable movement'
- Yes, depending on cooperative action by sports acting collectively to influence change

MERCHANDISE

- Clubs must accept selling and using less kits. Can they accept to lose that revenue?
- Most countries from the global South are already flooded with "left over" clothing from other countries.
- Why not gett rid of all the merchandise?

TRAVEL

- Travel is mentioned but is largely a mess in the UK in particular. For all events we have lots of occasions where public travel just doesn't fit. How do we fix?

ECONOMICS

- Fans don't want more events, staff don't want more events, athletes don't want more events. Only rights holders chasing (their) FINANCIAL growth do.
- It can only be compatible if there is less focus on and demand for economic revenue.

OFFSETS

- There's only so much offsetting available finite resources need to be more judiciously rationed.
- Is it justifiable to 'offset' environmental impacts with social 'credits'/programmes?

SOCIAL VALUE OF SPORT

- What are creative or innovative alternative metrics that we can adopt to measure the value of sport, that will facilitate the redesign of formats?
- In the extreme, we could all not leave our homes and not turn on the lights etc, but clearly that's not a life to lead. Sports is too important to society to cancel.
- The Olympics are pretty much the only event where all countries come together and participate in a collective and shared positive experience.

SET STANDARDS/BUDGETS

- How can sports organisations put pressure on governing bodies to bring in the right standards that level up the playing field for all clubs and provides a clear framework of action?
- During our recent event we had the target of sourcing locally which fed into our sustainable procurement and it really helped.
- How about carbon budgets for every sport? And let them define the number of games and races....

INNOVATION

- We need to innovate and stop trying to apply same solutions to sustainable goals
- It isn't currently possible, but we have to trust in new technology advances to make it happen! The world is growing whether we like it or not
- What about growth through VR attendees? Future is going to look different...
- There is some really interesting hydrogen work going on in SAF - are sports engaging with the R&D communicating their needs to those doing the innovation?

SUMMARY

Given the growth plans of so many sports organisations, including lots that already have environmental sustainability commitments, we wanted to debate whether these two things can be compatible.

Those taking part in the debate that answered no to this question raised the need for de-growth due to the finite resources of our planet and the environmental impact of sports events. The excessive number of sports events that take place already and are planned, the impact of more sport on athletes, fans and the time available in a calendar year for more sporting competitions was also discussed.

Others shared solutions and ideas such as redesigning formats, setting targets and standards, carbon budgets, collaboration and innovation to enable sustainable growth in sports while reducing the negative impact on the environment.

More holistically, questions about the social value of sports and alternative metrics to measure their value were raised and some outliers suggested that the growth of sport may go hand in hand with encouraging sustainable behaviours globally.

Sport does not sit in a vacuum. The world's population is growing and the debate around capitalism, prosperity and growth could fill a thousand books. Sports organisations from grassroots to a professional level are targeting more participants in their sport, more eyeballs on their competitions, more fans and more revenue.

Whilst the majority of our audience believes the growth of sport cannot sit alongside environmental sustainability, the debate highlighted the crucial need for sports organisations to consider sustainable and accountable growth, that balances the desire for expansion with the need to reduce environmental impact and work within planetary boundaries.

“We have a finite environment—the planet. Anyone who thinks that you can have infinite growth in a finite environment is either a madman or an economist.” Sir David Attenborough

THANKS

To our panellists; Fiona Morgan, David Goldblatt and Martin Offiah MBE.

To our co-hosts; David Garrido and Claire Poole.

To our audience; for your input, honesty and commitment to driving progress forward for sustainability within sport.

To our team; Lauren, Russell, Louisa, Claire, Nancy, Jenny, Mila, Phil and volunteers.

DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in this document do not necessarily reflect the views of Sport Positive Ltd.

All references to individual organisations have been removed for anonymity.

If you have any questions about this report, contact info@sportpositivesummit.com

If you wish to reference the information contained in this report, please attribute quotes to Sport Positive Summit 2023.