



**SPORT+**  
**POSITIVE**  
SUMMIT



# **SHOULD SPORT CUT TIES WITH FOSSIL FUEL SPONSORSHIP?**

**SPORT POSITIVE DEBATE REPORT**

**OCTOBER 2023**

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# SETTING THE SCENE

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

Debate speakers shared their thoughts on the question, and attendees of the Sport Positive Summit Debate shared their views anonymously via an app. This report is an snapshot of the thinking in this area.

Co-hosted by:



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

With debate speakers:



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

## DEBATE TOPIC

**Should sport now entirely be disengaging from sponsorship money that comes from fossil fuel/heavy carbon emitters?**

## **SPEAKER INSIGHTS**

**“Where I would begin the process is to say let us separate core fossil fuel companies, who hold the majority of their assets and take the majority of their profits from producing and distributing hydrocarbons.**

**“This is just where you start. It’s about a symbolic action. It’s about saying when it comes to hydrocarbons who are the most culpable? Both of producing this stuff but also of undermining and muddying the climate debate over the past 40 years.**

**“If we start there, I think it would make decisions for sporting organisations much easier.**

**“We can have a think about the other guys further down the line.**

**“We’re always looking for a single superhero but we’re much more powerful collectively....collective strength is what is going to make this happen.”**

**David Goldblatt**

**Sports Writer, Broadcaster, Author, Journalist**



## **SPEAKER INSIGHTS**

**“This is the most challenging thing of jobs like mine.....the tension between commercial, purpose, sustainability. But it is also a great opportunity.**

**“You have to lean into it, be at the decision making table, help them (the commercial team) make a better decision...and try to make our commercial teams see the value of doing better deals.**

**“Do due diligence...we do a score against sustainability - social and environmental - and use that in discussions.**

**“With sponsors, asking how are they helping with solutions in your net zero journey? That’s the framing of it, and actually helping the commercial team find that optimism.**

**“There is a role for both of you (rights holder and sponsor) of a problem in the middle that you’re both trying to solve. And I think sponsors want that too.”**

**Fiona Morgan, Chief Purpose Officer, SailGP**



## **AUDIENCE POLL RESULTS BEFORE DEBATE**

**Yes – 72%**

**No – 21%**

**Don't know – 7%**

## **AUDIENCE POLL RESULTS AFTER DEBATE**

**Yes – 82%**

**No – 13%**

**Don't know – 4%**

**≡ POLL**

# AUDIENCE INSIGHTS

## Audience breakdown

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

## Poll Results

At the start of the debate, 72% of the audience believed that sport should disengage completely from sponsorship money coming from fossil fuel or heavy carbon emitters. By the end of the debate, that number had risen to 82%.

## Themes and insights

The broad themes that came through from the audience in answer to the question were:

1. **Stop taking the money**
  - a. **It's greenwashing**
  - b. **For health reasons**
  - c. **Build the future we want**
  - d. **But be ready for change**
2. **Take the money**
  - a. **Use it for good**
  - b. **Out of necessity**
  - c. **Implement a criteria around the money**

Some other questions, ideas and thoughts came through too:

1. **Where to draw the line**
2. **The role of Innovation**
3. **Use this dialogue to drive bigger changes**



# AUDIENCE INSIGHTS

The direct, anonymous, responses from our audience during the debate can be read in the following pages. Some responses have been edited for clarity.

## STOP TAKING THE MONEY.

### 1. IT'S GREENWASHING

- Partnering with sustainable organizations only lends polluters false credibility. It's wrong.
- We need to reduce fossil fuels to mitigate climate change effects. So why should sport support fossil fuel companies by giving them a platform?
- No fossil fuel company deserves to have the legitimisation the sponsoring sport provides. having demonstrated their power - disinformation, delaying, denying
- Fossil fuel companies have consistently shown they aren't serious about transitioning to renewable. It is tokenism and greenwashing.
- Promoting shameless polluters in exchange for money is the definition of selling out.
- High carbon organisations are only interested in decarbonisation as far as it allows them to continue business as usual.
- Ban fossil fuel/ high carbon emitters from front of shirt sponsorship like football is doing with gambling sponsors
- On the one hand, fossil fuel companies have lied to us long enough - expel them. On the other, do we need to engage with them for solutions - include them?

## 2. FOR HEALTH REASONS

- It's akin to tobacco advertising of yesteryear.
- Sport and carbon intensive industries are entirely incompatible... even if you don't know or care about the environment the impacts on health are obvious.
- It's like putting betting + tobacco brands on shirts. Sport is about health. Why are we allowing promotion of companies causing the planet's health demise?
- If you change fossil companies in this poll to the weapons industry or even tobacco companies nobody would hesitate.

## 3. BUILD THE FUTURE YOU WANT

- We should be partnering with those who will be a key part of the future we want.
- Sponsors should reflect your culture and what's important. We need to help take supporters with us on that journey.
- Being bold and making a positive statement on responsible sponsorship is needed. We can't say we support sustainability while taking this money at same time.

## 4. BUT BE READY FOR CHANGE

- If sport disengages from the fossil fuel sponsorship, is it ready for the de-growth scenario?
- We'd have to fully embrace de-growth and reimagine the commercial model to cushion the economic fallout of losing carbon-heavy sponsorship.

# TAKE THE MONEY

## 1. USE IT FOR GOOD

- Why not take the fossil fuel money and use it on sustainability agendas to accelerate them? Have a plan and timeline, then drop them if they don't change.
- What about using their money in a positive way and be transparent on how you used that money?
- Why are we not celebrating the good that is created from meaningful relationships from fossil fuel partners?

## 2. OUT OF NECESSITY

- What sponsors are left over after we weed out the ones with any corruption, ethical or climate concerns? They don't exist!
- If it were as easy as replacing fossil fuel \$ with a handful of new meaningful partners, don't you think we'd already have those sponsors?

## 3. IMPLEMENT A CRITERIA AROUND IT

- You only accept sponsors around them hitting certain criteria determined by the sport - and these should get harder over time
- What about setting requirements for the sponsors - they have to have science based targets including scope 3?

### **3. IMPLEMENT A CRITERIA AROUND IT (CONT.)**

- **Shall we include a carbon tax in our sponsorship deal? Or a percentage of the money dedicated to sustainability initiatives?**
- **Perhaps a promotion/relegation system for sponsors, who move up/down for eligibility based on their progress and commitment to climate action?**
- **Doesn't it ultimately come down to the fact that sport clubs/leagues won't challenge sponsors on sustainability as it's biting the hand that feeds them.**
- **Heavy carbon emitters should be able to sponsor events, but their logos and any media connecting them to the event should not be allowed.**

# WHERE TO DRAW THE LINE?

- **Until sports are fully independent from fossil fuels for transport, it seems hypocritical to turn down meaningful sponsorship \$ if they are used for sustainability**
- **Should all sports organisations with funds invested in stocks and shares, divest fossil fuels from the funds held by them?**
- **What about links with banks who fund/invest in fossil fuel companies?**
- **Binary question that doesn't distinguish whether the company in consideration is on a high pace to transition, a slow pace or actually expanding drilling**

# THE QUESTION OF INNOVATION

- **How do we collectively pull carbon out of the air? Isn't that the solution needed for all of this?**
- **Fossil fuel companies are investing in carbon removals & biofuels due to sport partnerships. Isn't it positive to maintain these relationships until other solutions appear?**
- **Is disengaging with these companies stumping potential innovation and growth in sustainability with companies that have a lot of money to invest?**
- **On the one hand, fossil fuel companies have lied to us long enough - expel them. On the other, do we need to engage with them for solutions - include them?**

# USE THIS DIALOGUE TO DRIVE WIDER NECESSARY CHANGE

- **Can we flip the narrative and think about reducing costs to reduce the need for these heavy emitters that are likely to pay more?**
- **Ultimately, the change has to come from the biggest emitters. Sponsorship can be used to discuss and promote a legitimate and authentic decarbonisation journey**
- **Even Shell employees made a stance on Shell's rollback plan. Saying it was unacceptable. Sports are not the only ones but governments are not doing their job**
- **Why are we not thinking about costs when considering sponsorship? Can we reduce costs to reduce the 'need' for these high emitters - who pay more traditionally!**
- **If all sporting organisation get away from these sponsors we're not putting each other's under pressure to accept high monetary values that comes from it**
- **We need a fund from philanthropies, companies, governments to replace the \$\$ from fossil fuels & use that \$\$ to advertise for low carbon behaviors.**
- **There is an absence of institutional authority to kick out fossil fuel sponsorship from sport**

# SUMMARY

The question we posed within the debate was should sports organizations cut ties from sponsorship money that comes from fossil fuel/heavy carbon emitters? Looking at the poll numbers, there seems to be no question around the fact the audience agreed sport should indeed disengage from this revenue source.

However, this report provides insights to how taking the money could be/is being rationalised and the complexities that sport is grappling with when it comes to how it would disengage.

Some suggest the business of sport needs to be overhauled; the need for high emitters' cash is predicated on the need for high levels of revenue. If we are to protect our future, sport should be working responsibly and partnering with organisations that align with it's values.

Others argue that we should take the money but use it for positive impacts, include criteria or a carbon tax in sponsorship deals, or only accept sponsors that meet certain sustainability criteria. Then use this revenue for legitimate and authentic decarbonisation. Some even posit that engaging with high emitters for solutions is necessary.

There are concerns over the economic fallout of losing carbon-heavy sponsorship. Alternatives suggested by audience members include seeking funding from philanthropies, companies, governments to advertise for low carbon behaviours, or the idea of taking the revenue but not giving fossil fuel sponsors any visibility.

There is a lot of information in this document to consider. However, to ensure healthy ecosystems to play sport, as well as secure the long-term brand reputation of your organisation in the face of climate-breakdown, not playing an active role in bolstering fossil fuels is clearly the safest bet.

If you currently have a fossil fuel sponsor, or are considering aligning with one - ask yourself; are there REALLY no other options or models to access the revenue you need?

# 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.

Any references that could connect individual comments with the organisation they represent have been removed for anonymity. Some responses have been edited for clarity.

If you have any questions about this report, contact [info@sportpositivesummit.com](mailto:info@sportpositivesummit.com)

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



# OTHER RESOURCES

If this topic is of interest to you, make sure you check out:

## Badvertising

- **Sweat not oil - Why sports should drop advertising and sponsorship from high-carbon polluters:**  
<https://www.badverts.org/reports-and-toolkits>
- **How to screen-out polluting sponsors - A low-carbon toolkit for sports organisations to navigate the issue of polluting sponsorship -** <https://www.badverts.org/reports-and-toolkits>
- **Smoking out the climate: How we beat big tobacco advertising -** <https://www.badverts.org/how-we-beat-big-tobacco-advertising>

## Climate Council

- **CALLING TIME - How to remove fossil fuel sponsorships from sport, arts and events:** <https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/resources/calling-time-fossil-fuel-sponsorship/>

## Sport for Change, by ChangeNOW

- **Sport Sponsors Climate Pledge - An active commitment to contribute to the decarbonization of the sports industry and embrace science-based targets:**  
<https://form.fillout.com/t/g1xD9MmXtBus>