Is Tennis Acing the Sustainability Game?

Jamee Pelcher, University of Tennessee
Sylvia Trendafilova (Advisor), University of Tennessee
Jeffrey Graham (Advisor), University of Tennessee

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In the past 10 years, scholarship in the area of sport and the environment has steadily grown. Scholars have engaged in a number of topics ranging from corporate social responsibility and the environment (Trendafilova & Babiak, 2013) to evaluation and analysis of environmental actions of sport organizations (Bunds & Casper, 2015) and best practices for planning environmentally friendly events (Mallen et al, 2015). In response, the sport industry has begun to recognize the importance of addressing the natural environment, with some governing bodies taking necessary steps towards sustainability (Casper & Pfahl, 2015). In particular, the professional tennis community has taken proactive steps to become more environmentally sustainable by partnering with the Natural Resources Defense Council in the United States and the Sports for Climate Action movement internationally. Additionally, in 2014 Roland-Garros (French Open) became the first French sporting event run on an international scale to obtain ISO 20121 certification, meaning the event met rigorous sustainability standards. However, less is known about specific sustainability efforts at the four major Grand Slam professional tennis tournaments (i.e., Australian Open, French Open, Wimbledon, and US Open), which take place annually and are the most important annual tennis events globally. Understanding the sustainability efforts at these events has important implications for sport practitioners and scholars looking to gain insight into sustainability trends over time. Consequently, the purpose of this study was to examine specific sustainability efforts at all four Grand Slam tennis tournaments.

A qualitative content analysis guided the data collection and analysis for this study (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Krippendorff, 2012). Data were gathered by analyzing environmental sustainability efforts taking place at each Grand Slam tournament location. Results indicated Grand Slam facilities focus primarily on energy and water conservation initiatives, increasing sustainable food choices, and improving spectators’ knowledge about environmental sustainability. For example, Roland-Garros’s partners encourage fans to adopt environmentally friendly practices. The Australian Open focuses on reducing electricity usage (e.g., LED lighting) and saving water (e.g., low water usage sanitary fittings, comprehensive storm water retention system). In addition, food and beverage efforts focus on using plates made out of plantation bamboo and wooden cutlery made from either recycled materials or plantation timber. The US Open collects tennis balls to donate to various community and youth organizations. In addition, they reuse more than 12,000 gallons of food grease and convert it into biodiesel fuel. Lastly, Wimbledon provides recycled water bottles and encourages spectators to bring their own bottles, eliminated plastic bags on rackets, and focuses on energy savings and waste reduction.

The Grand Slam event strategies have broad applications beyond professional tennis, and give insight for managing large-scale annual sporting events in an environmentally sustainable fashion. Moving forward, research must approach environmental sustainability in a more holistic manner, making connections that go beyond single event analysis. To do so, we need the input and collaboration of both scholars and practitioners. During the presentation, we will solicit discussion on specific suggestions and directions for collaboration and action within the industry.