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SUSTAINABLE SPORTSWEAR: WORKING TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE SPORTING FASHION

Zoë is a passionate and dedicated sustainability professional and former Olympic athlete. With first-hand experience of the power of sport to inspire, unite and empower, combined with practical experience from working with Formula E motor racing, Zoë joined BASIS in 2021 to help accelerate sustainability within the sports sector.

The clothing sector is one of the most polluting industries in the world, second only to oil and gas, and produces more emissions than maritime shipping and international flights combined. While we all want to expand participation in our beloved sports and support our favourite clubs by buying replica shirts, it is time to educate ourselves on the social and environmental cost of sports clothing. In a 2021 webinar, now available online, BASIS discuss how to work towards sustainable sportswear.

Introduction

BASIS (The British Association for Sustainable Sport) exists to help develop best practice strategies and integrate sustainability into the sports sector, to encourage action and collaboration and to use the influence of sport to educate our participants and fans.

Through webinars, workshops and members' forums, we encourage open dialogue between leading academics, sustainability professionals and professional sportspeople, engaging all relevant stakeholders to inspire systematic sustainable change within their organisations. In turn, this allows sports organisations to leverage the power of their platforms to facilitate change through the invested attention of loyal fans.

BASIS recently hosted a stakeholder workshop considering sustainable sportswear, with the lens specifically on the sport of cricket. The discussion, however, is relevant to the sports sector as a whole and raises an interesting environmental and social debate on how the industry

needs to address fundamental issues within supply chains, codes of conduct and its sporting community to help tackle this particular sustainability problem.

Scale of the problem

The clothing sector as a whole is the second most polluting industry in the world. Accounting for 20% of industrial wastewater production and 10% of global carbon emissions, it has an environmental impact only beaten by fossil fuels. The economic value of the associated waste and discarded clothing is estimated to be approximately \$500 billion.

While sportswear only accounts for a small portion of this global industry, it is a sector heavily reliant upon highly polluting synthetic fibres, as consumer expectations of performance clothing demand fabric to be sweat-wicking, stretchy and breathable.

To illustrate the scale of the problem we considered the game of cricket. For a single match, 24 individuals will take to the field – 22 players across both teams plus two umpires. Assuming that all 24 involved wear a minimum of a t-shirt, trousers and socks, this accounts for 96 items of clothing.

Keeping these 96 items of clothing in mind we can cast the lens closer onto the environmental impact of a single polyester t-shirt. Manufacturing requires 5.5 kg CO2 emissions, equivalent to driving a car for 22.2 km. Across all 24 taking to the field, the manufacturing emissions of their t-shirts alone are equivalent to driving a car for almost 533 km. These numbers don't even factor in the other items of clothing being worn, the fact that the majority of this type of clothing eventually ends up in landfills or the 1900 microfibers released by each t-shirt from a single wash.

Beyond traditional cricket whites, the competition kit is often screen printed with dispersive dyes and finished with chemicals to enhance technical properties such as sweat-wicking. Accordingly, downstream of factories producing these items, associated water pollution is a huge environmental problem as toxic chemicals, heavy metals and dyes get washed into the waterways.

Environmental concerns aside, the significant social impact of the clothing industry represents a hidden sustainability cost. Wages often amount to around a third of the local living wage, there is little or no guidance for safety or safeguarding and limited job security. Life working in large clothing factories can ultimately be dangerous and for the 80 million employees across the sector financially unrewarding.

Sustainable solutions

To fully tackle these embedded sustainability issues, we need a top-down systematic view across the whole supply chain. Clothing needs to be manufactured with a view to materials circularity, infrastructure needs to be in place to facilitate second life opportunities and procurement pathways need to be developed.

Innovation - More research and investment is needed across the clothing sector to facilitate a move from relying on virgin polyester. Options include using more sustainable natural fibres, such as bamboo or Tencel™, which has the advantage of recovering 99.9% of the water used in production. Alternatively, recycled synthetic materials, made from existing plastics in the waste stream, offer a reduced carbon footprint compared with virgin polyester.

Circularity - Materials and designs need to help facilitate circularity in the sportswear sector. There is a huge amount of stored waste sitting in wardrobes across the world that inevitably will end up in landfills at a later date. Investing in community reuse schemes for unwanted sports kits is an easy way to extend the life of these garments while helping to reduce the cost of access to sports in marginalised communities. The Lord's Taverners charity sports kit recycling scheme is one great example. It helps young people in the UK and across the world to access kits and equipment, which otherwise would have become redundant.

Governance - There is a need for sports rights holders and governing bodies to be more open-minded about innovation and change, to enable progress in the sustainability space, especially with relation to technical and specialist kits. While personal protective equipment must retain all necessary safety properties, regulations need to allow more freedom to explore how this can be achieved sustainably to allow suppliers to drive progress.

Urgency - Action needs to drive the narrative. Now is not just the time for talking about sustainable innovation. Now is the time to leverage our collective position as an entertainment property and become a leader in this space. By empowering sports teams and personalities to 'champion' the sustainability message we can educate a large audience and facilitate change. We see sports stars frequently use social media to appeal directly to fans about societal and sustainability issues. It would be great to get to a point where we see professional athletes expressing their preference for sustainable sportswear as suppliers drive innovation and competition in this area.

BASIS

Do you want to be part of conversations that are driving transformative change within the sports industry? By joining BASIS, you can help shape the sustainability narrative in sport, gain access to a network of like-minded professionals and advance the sustainability strategy within your own organisation. For more information contact info@basis.org.uk. ■

