Sport and Social Media
A perfect marriage in an imperfect world

By Leszek J. Sibilski

From the melting snow of the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics to the stifling heat of the Australian Open Tennis Championships in Melbourne, where plastic water bottles melted and players suffered heat exhaustion, climate change has once again proved itself relentless and unforgiving.

So are we going to sit back and let it ravage our lives? Or affect our love of sport? As a former Olympian, I definitely hope not. Let’s unite the power of sport with the might of social media to create an alliance that will face up to the world’s environmental enemy number one.

Fact – the world is getting warmer

It’s no good denying it – temperatures are going up. According to the World Bank’s ‘Turn Down the Heat’ reports, the planet could warm from its current global mean temperature of 0.8°C above pre-industrial levels to as high as 4°C by 2100, even if countries fulfill current emission-reduction pledges.

What does that mean? More extreme heat waves, sending health, socio-political and economic ramifications across the globe. The President of The World Bank, Jim Yong Kim, is already calling for action to hold warming below 2° C. The question is, what can we do?

Turn to sport, it’s a big deal

OK, so sport is not the most obvious choice for addressing climate change. But, whichever way you look at it, sport is huge. It captivates billions and employs millions. Some estimates say it’s worth 600-700 billion euros, making it one of the world’s biggest industries. And best of all, it brings people together from all walks of life and all corners of the globe to play and compete, or just spectate.

Sport can shape the way people think about the environment. Because it’s so popular in every continent on Earth, sport has a vital role to play in delivering a powerful eco message. It keeps humans healthy but it can also keep the planet healthy too. To paraphrase the motto of the YMCA, sport can regenerate the *body, mind, spirit and nature* – enhancing the individual and the land in which he or she lives.
Many believe sport holds the potential to be the most influential element in the environmental movement. More influential than politics. More influential than business. Sport has the capacity to transform the way people view the planet and be a driver for environmental change.

Bring on the superstars

The universal power of sport is not only its popularity but also the celebrity status of its stars. High profile professional athletes make great ambassadors and role models. That’s why we want them to step up and make a stand against climate change.

How can they help? By talking about the effects of climate change and creating a debate. By inspiring people to change their lifestyles to prevent further damage to the environment. And most of all, by helping educate our greatest resource, young people, the inheritors of Earth.

Of course, even the most well-meaning actions of the most famous sporting stars may not be enough to reverse the trend of climate change. Which is why we need to call on an amazing new phenomenon – social media. Uniting the power of sport and social media creates a force for change that quite simply can make anything possible.

Harnessing the might of social media

As a father of two young athletes, I want the global sport community to understand and talk about the consequences of climate change. And one way of doing that is through social media. While researching this blog, I was overwhelmed by the dizzying numbers at play in the world of social media – numbers you’d normally find in the Powerball Mega Millions lottery.

Millions, billions, trillions

The metrics of social media usage are mindboggling. Take the 2014 FIFA World Cup Brazil™, the biggest single social media sporting event ever. An astounding 350 million Facebook users worldwide made 3 billion posts, comments, and likes during the tournament. There were over 600,000 tweets per minute on Twitter during some parts of the final. And over 32 million tweets during the telecast of the match.

Then there’s television. Three million tickets were sold for the tournament but that’s next to nothing compared with the global television audience – around 3.6 billion.

So, you could say there were three global arenas at the 2014 FIFA World Cup™ – the stadiums, the television and the Internet. Do the maths and you’ll see that’s over 7 billion people interacting with the tournament, more than the world’s population. Statistically, everyone on the planet was in some way involved in this revolutionary sporting extravaganza.
Rewind…London 2012

The incredible social media explosion in Brazil had its roots two years earlier at the Olympic Games. Back then, the International Olympic Committee billed London 2012 as the ‘first social media Olympic Games’ but fell short by limiting genuine interaction with the athletes and restricting their messages.

Still, it was an impressive debut for social media. For the first time, digital coverage exceeded traditional broadcast coverage with sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google+ attracting 4.7 million followers. There were 150 million tweets about the Games, more than 960,000 mentions on Twitter about Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt and over 830,000 for American swimmer Michael Phelps. Superstars get people talking.

Not just a plaything for the young

Don’t think social media is just for the youth either. The fastest growing age group on social media are people over 65. The percentage of individuals over 65 who say they use social media has more than tripled from just 13% in 2009 to 43% in 2013. Furthermore, 60% of baby boomers in the 50 to 64 age group are using social networks to communicate. These people are avid sports fans with the time, flexibility and money to enjoy sports and latest gadgets.

The world’s fastest growing opportunity

One billion Facebook users in 2014, 255 million Twitter users every month. The pull of social media is growing by the day. There simply is no better way to talk about global climate change, inspire people to change their thinking and generate action.

The opportunity is immense. Take that new phenomenon, the ‘selfie’. Everyone is taking them, from President Obama to tennis star Serena Williams and astronaut Akihiko Hoshide. Selfie was the Oxford English Dictionary word of the year in 2013 and thanks to it, as many as one trillion photos will be taken this year. Apps like Snapchat and Instagram that encourage people to take photos are boosting the popularity of the selfie, making it a vital weapon in the fight against climate change.

Sport and social media – a marriage made in heaven

So, it’s clear. Sport is as popular as social media, and social media is as popular as sport. They’re natural partners, ready to work together in perfect synergy. The future of sport is linked to how we interact with keyboards, touchscreens and remote controls.

Did you know almost half of all tweets are about sport? No surprise then that Twitter recently unveiled its first official partnership with a sports franchise, NASCAR, sending strong signals of what lies ahead for the global sporting community.
How sport and social media are getting it together

On March 23rd 2013 at 8:30 pm, world famous footballer, Lionel Messi, with 43 million fans on Facebook, challenged his followers to join Earth Hour by turning off all lights. They responded.

On November 21st 2013, major professional US sports league executives and the US Olympic Committee, testified before Congress for the first time about the consequences of climate change within the sports community. And in February 2014, as a result of Sochi’s melting aftermath, 105 Winter Olympians lobbied for climate change awareness by signing a petition urging world leaders to address climate change on a global scale. The posts and tweets around this initiative tell the story – welcome aboard, what took you so long!

On March 4th 2014, football ambassadors Ronaldo and Zinedine Zidane, together with friends and backed by UEFA and UNDP, staged a football match at the Stade de Swisse in Berne. The proceeds from this match, the 11th Annual Match Against Poverty, went to support recovery efforts in the Philippines in the wake of Typhoon Haiyan, one of the most powerful storms on record. Social media helped make it a resounding success.

By July 2014, Architecture for Humanity, together with FIFA and Streetfootballworld, had built 19 community centers including football pitches in 15 African countries. The goal – to use soccer as a means for social change, with social media supporting the initiative.

The key word is CONNECT

Social media is all about connecting. Sport is all about connecting. We at Connect4Climate are all about connecting. The future looks brighter if we can get social media and sport working hand-in-hand to face up to climate change.

And why not? Soaring access to mobile devices across the globe, the explosion of tweets and posts, an obsession with selfies – these trends are empowering the world to actively participate and contribute in real time while watching sport. We have a tremendous opportunity to create countless platforms to connect against climate change and a whole host of other contemporary social problems around the world.

The key challenge is to EVOLVE

Climate change is relentless. The world’s resources are limited. We need to find new ways to fuel our lives. In this environment, the need to evolve is essential.

Sport offers a powerful platform that can influence the future for generations to come. And in social media, we have digital and networking opportunities that can really make a difference. Uniting the two provides the force we need to secure the ultimate prize – the health of Planet Earth for our children, their children and all future generations.