Collective Environmental Action within the Professional Sport Industry

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Background
The environmental movement that emerged in the United States during the late 1960s created a multiplicity of overlapping agendas focused on sustainable development and environmental sustainability, which has been sustained by engaged and networked collective action (Rootes & Brulle, 2013). Collective action can be driven (although not always) through environmental movement organizations whose existence is predicated on the expectation that they further the interests of their members (Olsen, 2009). Additionally, the selection and problematization of issues are central to environmental movement organizations mobilizing collective action (Johnson, 2006).

The Natural Resource Defense Council (NRDC) and the Green Sports Alliance (GSA) have been central in stimulating the greening movement within professional sport (i.e., “the process of reviewing operations and procurement policies with an eye toward reducing environmental impacts” (Hershkowitz, 2016)). In 2006, NRDC formed an alliance with Major League Baseball (MLB) that was intended to bring best practice to team operations (Henly et al., 2012). In 2009, GSA was established as an industry-specific non-profit environmental organization with the purpose to “pull together and mobilize the sports industry’s disparate efforts into a powerful non-political sports-based environmental movement” (Hershkowitz, 2016). Both organizations have attempted to de-institutionalize production beliefs that posit environmental degradation as an inevitability and instill new environmentalist values. In doing so, NRDC and GSA, as institutional entrepreneurs, have mobilized their constituents to embrace new organizational forms (Rao et al., 2000). In addition, the league associations themselves have polished their voluntary environmental programs (e.g., NBA Green) and the National Hockey League (NHL) in 2014 released the first sustainability report by a major professional league in North America. Cumulatively, the professional sport industry has been subject to a three-pronged non-regulatory approach to collective environmental action – NRDC, GSA, and the leagues.

Purpose
The purpose of this study was to understand the role of collective action within the implementation of pro-environmental initiatives within the professional sport industry in the United States. Given the rapid growth of the Green Sports Alliance and the reported greening of the professional sport industry, our research question was to what extent does the dominant environmental issues promoted at the industry and league levels mirror the delivery of pro-environmental initiatives at the level of the professional sport organization?

Methods
Data collection involved multiple sequential methods. The contextualization of environmental action within the professional sport industry was understood by reviewing relevant website passages, mission statements, and sustainability reports as published by NRDC, GSA, and the Major Leagues. This process of contextualization was undertaken specifically with the goal of capturing the salient environmental issues that characterize collective action at the industry and league level. The emergent environmental issues at the industry level included energy efficiency, sourcing of renewable energy, water efficiency, pollutant reduction (e.g., air and water), environmentally intelligent procurement (e.g., recycled paper products, local food, etc.), waste management, and fan engagement. Differences in the prioritization of environmental issues at the league level were evident. For example, the NHL’s broad commitment aligned more closely with that of the NRDC and GSA. However, the National Basketball Association (NBA) appeared to focus on community outreach, fan engagement, and greening of its operations, and the National Football League (NFL) appeared to prioritize resource efficiency and waste management.

The extent of pro-environmental initiatives within the five major North American sport leagues (MLB, Major League Soccer, NBA, NFL, and NHL) were explored through a systematic and objective content analysis (Berelson,
of team, stadium/arena, league, partner, and third party websites. The content analysis was characterized by key word searches that were derived deductively from the findings of a similar content analysis undertaken by Blankenbuehler and Kunz (2014) as well as the process, as referred to earlier, of environmental collective action contextualization. Furthermore, the content analysis focused on information published within the last decade (i.e., June 2007 to May 2017), which allowed the data to be synchronized with the chronology of environmental collective action within the professional sport industry.

Results
A total of 1,333 unique initiatives were recorded from 134 United States based professional sport organizations with a subsequent average of 9.95 initiatives per organization. Furthermore, 47 unique categories of pro-environmental initiatives emerged. Stadium/Arena consumer waste recycling (79.10%) was the most frequently implemented pro-environmental initiative, which was followed by the installation/retrofitting of efficient lighting fixtures (61.19%) as the second most frequent. Juxtaposing the salient environmental issues as understood by the agents of collective action with the disclosed initiatives from each professional sport organization reveals both similarities and differences. In terms of similarities, when interpreting initiative outcomes a significant level of fit between the salient environmental issues and individual initiatives exited. For example, 85.82% of teams engaged in waste management initiatives, 73.88% fan engagement, 72.39% in energy efficiency, 66.42% pollutant reduction, 58.21% sourcing of renewable energy, and 51.49% water efficiency. More nuanced results at the league level were prevalent, for example, 83.3% of hockey teams engaged in fan engagement versus only 65.63% of football teams. Such difference is likely attributable to the relative prioritization of environmental issues at the league level. However, there emerged one particular environmental issue, environmental justice, which did not feature in the discursive frame of the collective action agents. Yet, 67.16% of teams were engaged in some form of community conservation either directly (i.e., tree planting, neighborhood cleanups) or indirectly (i.e., grant giving to conservation-focused non-profit organizations).

Conclusion
This research sought to focus on what Babiak and Trendafilova (2011) would consider as mimetic or associative forces. However, Babiak and Trendafilova also found that professional sport organizations were subject to two other pressures – that of public expectation and government regulation. Subsequently, while collective action agents have been proactive in setting an industry and league-wide agenda for environmentalism, the determinants of action are much more complex. We conclude the presentation by discussing the role of such determinants and speculate on their relative influences on collective action at the industry and league level.