

Greening the Sidelines



BY BARBI WALKER

Football fans generate a lot of excitement. From tailgates to painting their faces and bodies in team colors, sports fans have a palpable enthusiasm. College or professional, it doesn't matter - football fans are known for their love of the game. "After all, is football a game or a religion?" Howard Cosell said.

With this passion comes more of everything, including trash. Football fans (and teams, for that matter) generate a lot of waste. With football season in full swing, have you ever wondered how much waste is created at one football game, or the entire season?

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates 17 million people attend professional games and 48 million attend college games per year. That's a combined total of 65 million fans who create about 19,500 tons of trash per year.

Fortunately, stadiums are getting greener across the country, and the NFL, colleges and multiple state and federal organizations are putting plans in place to offset the amount of waste produced in and around football games. From solar-operated trash compactors, to volunteers and employees handing out recycling bags to tailgaters, the amount of trash is declining. With programs like the EPA's Game Day Challenge, colleges have an opportunity to see how they handle game-day waste.

Created in 2009, the program, which is also an initiative of the EPA's WasteWise program, was designed for colleges and universities to participate in a friendly competition to see which school can reduce, reuse and recycle the most waste. The program aims to increase awareness and expand participation by students, faculty, and the entire school community in waste reduction programs in an effort to make college campuses more sustainable.

During the challenge last October, 75 colleges diverted more than 500,000 pounds of trash from 2.8 million fans from going into landfills. This kept almost 940 metric tons of carbon dioxide (CO₂) from being released into the atmosphere, said Eileen Sheehan, spokesperson for the EPA.

"That's equivalent to the greenhouse gas emissions from 179 [average] cars," Sheehan added. And the challenge is growing. In its first year, only eight schools participated; this year 88 colleges participated! Among them was our own Mesa Community College, which diverted 60 percent of its overall trash, recycling, and compost waste from going to landfills.

Although neither Arizona State University (ASU) or the University of Arizona (UofA) are part of the challenge, both universities are working to make their stadiums and games more eco-friendly. Sun Devil Stadium went from producing 322 tons of trash with zero recycled in 2007 down to 179 tons and 31.7 tons recycled in 2010, says Doug Tammara, spokesperson for ASU.

The University of Arizona works with Facilities Management Waste (FMWaste) to dispose of football game waste. Although they do not have it broken down by individual sport, they have facilities in place to capture and redirect trash away from the landfills, said Chris Kopach, FMWaste director. Starting 2011, FMWaste will keep track of how much waste is collected and recycled at all athletic events, breaking it down by sport, Kopach said.

"If we don't have a baseline of where we stand, then we will not know if we have improved," he added about the decision to start keeping track.

The UofA also has 30 solar-powered trash compactors that are parked next to the campus's recycling bins, and an additional 20 are planned for the future, Kopach said.

On the professional level, the NFL has been implementing eco-friendly initiatives and working to reduce its impact on the

environment for quite some time. The Super Bowl, according to the NFL's website, has had an environmental component for the last 15 years and has applied multiple sustainability strategies. The positive effects aren't just during the Super Bowl. Almost every NFL team has some form of "green" going on, with the San Francisco 49ers leading the way in recycling with a rate of

81 percent in 2009, according to the EPA. Our own Arizona Cardinals recycle 120 tons of trash each year, according to the University of Phoenix Stadium's green mission statement.

We aren't talking just about plastic water bottles, wrappers, beer cans and the like that are being recycled at football games; it's also the food.

Food that is prepared but not sold at stadium concessions can't be resold, so it is collected and supplied to local soup kitchens, shelters and other local organizations that provide food for people in need. It's called Prepared Food Recovery.

Non-profit, Rock and Wrap It Up! works to find green ways of providing for the poor and hungry, and the Prepared Food Recovery is one way to do so. There are five NFL teams currently listed on the Rock and Wrap It Up! website that contribute to the program. The Philadelphia Eagles take the cake, or cheesesteak, in donating the greatest amount of food to the homeless. In 2009, the Eagles collected more than 11,000 hot dogs, 3,500 slices of pizza, 4,900 cheesesteaks and 1,800 hamburgers to the Philadelphia Brotherhood Rescue Mission, according to the Rock and Wrap It Up! website.

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What isn't donated to shelters and soup kitchens ends up in landfills each year. While we can recycle things like trash, cups, bags and plastic utensils, inside and out of the stadium, it's food that is often overlooked as the big "waste" hog.

"Food waste is now the number one material deposited in landfills," Sheehan said. "It could be composted, but it's not."

More than 33 million tons of food waste ends up in landfills. The diversion rate for food is only 2.5 percent – making it the least recovered material. According to the EPA, in 2008 food waste was 31.8 million tons and increased to 33.2 million tons in 2009.

Most of it comes from the individual consumer. Concessionaires at stadiums are essentially businesses that strive to minimize losses and food waste on game day. On the other hand, leftover chips, dip, chili, burgers, and hot dogs from our own Super Bowl or football parties more often get tossed into the garbage with a one-way ticket to the landfill. Super Bowl Sunday is the second-largest day to feast after Thanksgiving, according to biofriendly.com.

With our relationship with food, if we think it's disposable, and treat it as such, what does that mean to our resources and planet? If we rethink our food buying habits even just for game day and purchase less food, it can lead to less waste for our planet and less "waist" for our waists - and that's a win-win all the way around. ■

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