

USA Triathlon: A Race Toward Sustainability

Executive Summary

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Brian Boyle

The staging of sport events occurs over a fixed duration of time, requiring an influx of resources and human involvement. This situation can result in environmental issues such as excess greenhouse gas emissions and waste generation. Economic outcomes are not always equally shared amongst local host communities, and unequal access to participation can manifest in unforeseen ways from the event organizer's perspective. Sports organizations are recognizing the potential for operation related negative impacts, yet most efforts to mitigate these adverse outcomes lack theoretical grounding and holistic approaches aligned with principles of sustainability. Furthermore, the multitude of stakeholders in the form of athletes, vendors, suppliers, organizers, municipalities, and attendees burden communication and planning efforts. Organizations must allocate time, effort, and resources to understand the complexity of sport event management to develop appropriate management strategies.

USA Triathlon (USAT) is not exempt from the challenges faced in sustainable event management. With 400,000 plus members, USAT is the largest multisport organization in the world. Through managing five owned events and sanctioning over 4,300 races on an annual basis, the combined potential for a negative sustainability footprint is substantial. To temper the potential impacts of USAT events, this project focused on the development of an overarching sustainable event strategy to equip management, operations, and race directors with a suite of resources to manage and mitigate the overall sustainability footprint of events toward desired outcomes.

The *USA Triathlon Guidebook to Sustainability* was created to cultivate organizational awareness and understanding of sustainability while ultimately providing a strategy for sustainable event management. The guidebook, approved by USA Triathlon, includes a detailed change management strategy, best practices, useful case studies, links to resources, and key performance indicators to measure and evaluate success. The theory of change employed in this project argues that promoting awareness and fostering knowledge will lead to an organizationally understood sustainability strategy that transforms current event management approaches and outcomes. The critical step to improving sustainable outcomes for USAT events was ensuring that USAT developed a literacy of sustainability principles and applying those principles to their events. Therefore, the guidebook is a sustainability strategy, serving as a tool for promoting the adoption of sustainable approaches, thus creating the basis for sustainability competencies to cultivate within the organization.

Several resources and methods informed the development of USAT's sustainable event strategy. The research included an intensive literature review of peer-reviewed articles, canvassing of the sport and event landscape through event guides, case studies, and certifications, along with subject matter experts' interviews. Drawing on this extensive research, completion of a gap analysis on the current state, and creativity were incorporated to achieve results in devising an encompassing suite of sustainability resources for USAT. Along with research, The Council for Responsible Sport's Responsible Event Framework was the primary resource used in outlining the sustainability strategy for USAT event management due to the holistic approach the framework establishes to guide all event stakeholders and organizers towards achieving environmental, social, and economic goals. The framework provided additional value by suggesting metrics to focus on and identifying indicators that can determine successful progress towards sustainability.

As a measure of quality control and viability of implementation, the *USA Triathlon Guidebook to Sustainability*, along with ancillary support documents were produced via a formative evaluation process. Not only did USA Triathlon management participate in the review process, but several subject matter experts working in the sport and sustainability space also participated. The backing of the subject matter expert review provided necessary proof of concept that assisted in overcoming USAT pushback on aspects of the sustainability strategy. Ultimately, the formative evaluation method instilled baseline literacy of sustainability competencies in USAT to ensure that select employees understand why a sustainable event strategy is imperative and how the strategy works to address sustainability problems.

A comprehensive sustainable event guide now exists to be applied to USA Triathlon owned and sanctioned race events. Although other green event guides exist, the *USA Triathlon Guidebook to Sustainability* is the only guide explicitly focused on triathlon races through the lens of holistic sustainability. Furthermore, the guide serves as the first sustainability strategy integrated by USA Triathlon as an organization. Three primary categories comprise the guidebook; Introduction, Operations, and Marketing, along with several subcategories.

In addition to the guidebook, two ancillary documents, a sustainable event checklist, and one-pager were created. These documents serve as introductory and implementation tools created primarily to assist race directors of sanctioned events. The intended goal of these documents is to cultivate a scenario in which sustainability efforts are efficiently planned for and implemented throughout the entire portfolio of USA Triathlon owned and sanctioned races.

The *USA Triathlon Guidebook to Sustainability* and additional documents are available on the USA Triathlon website. All documents will also be distributed to sanctioned race directors directly from USA Triathlon. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is unknown when the implementation of the sustainability strategy will occur. However, once applied to events, it is anticipated that the guidebook will have immediate impacts on reducing environmental harm. Over the long term, the guidebook will serve as a resource that ensures the economic productivity of USAT events to local host communities. Additionally, the guidebook provides consideration for equity and inclusion of triathlon, creating pathways to grow participation in the sport, aligning with the mission of USAT.

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To manage the ever-evolving pursuit of sustainability, USA Triathlon would benefit from the creation of a role or team within the organization dedicated to sustainability. Furthermore, an opportunity exists for future students to work with USA Triathlon. Burdened by COVID-19, the *USA Triathlon Guidebook to Sustainability* pilot event was postponed, thus creating the need to pilot when events return. Additionally, event data needs to be compiled and analyzed to baseline the current state. Further assistance could be required in establishing a carbon offset program or pursuing sustainable event certifications. With the *USA Triathlon Guidebook to Sustainability* serving as the first iteration of a sustainability strategy, the guidebook will surely need to be reevaluated, amended, and expanded upon over time.