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Tinnion, Daniel , Harwood, Amy , Verhagen, Evert , Akinyi Okoth, Carole  and Robinson, Diana Gai  (2024) Editorial: Paris and pollution, heats in the heat: a topical discussion of the relationship between the climate and sport. *BMJ Open Sport and Exercise Medicine*, 10 (4). e002249 ISSN 2055-7647

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjsem-2024-002249>

Publisher: BMJ Publishing Group

Version: Published Version

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Additional Information: This is an open access editorial article which first appeared in *BMJ Open Sport and Exercise Medicine*

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Paris and pollution, heats in the heat: a topical discussion of the relationship between the climate and sport

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To cite: Tinnion D, Harwood A, Verhagen E, *et al.* Paris and pollution, heats in the heat: a topical discussion of the relationship between the climate and sport. *BMJ Open Sport & Exercise Medicine* 2024;**10**:e002249. doi:10.1136/bmjsem-2024-002249

Accepted 12 September 2024



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Whether by social media app or newspaper, rarely a day passes without a story about the environment and its relationship with athletic performance, policy and physical activity. The latest instalment of the Summer Olympics, Paris 2024 saw climate change take centre stage once more as the French city promised the most sustainable games to date.¹ Starting on 24 July, they may also prove to be the hottest games to date, exceeding the 34°C experienced at Tokyo 2020² and raising the question once more...are the Summer Games really sustainable?

THE BURNING ISSUE

Since Paris last hosted the Olympics in 1924, annual temperatures have increased by 1.8°C, giving rise to an average of 23 more ‘hot’ (25°C +) days and 9 more ‘scorching’ (30°C +) days per year.² As highlighted in the Rings of Fire II Report, dismissing the impact of heat would be a mistake despite the Olympics predominantly taking place in the north. Climate change from human activities increases the likelihood of heatwaves, translating to a 70% increase in heat-related mortality risk.³ In the summer of 2003, a heatwave killed more than 14 000 people across France.⁴ At the time, the maximum temperature recorded in Paris was 39.5°C, now sitting at 42.6°C since 2019.⁵ As a result, ‘scorching’ summers, just like 2003, are now 10 times more likely due to climate change⁶ and going nowhere fast. Last summer, temperatures in Europe and across France were impacted significantly by the Cerberus heatwave, with a high of 42.6°C and almost 5000 deaths.⁷ Understandably, there is a growing concern for athletes also facing exertional heat stress, best reflected in the words of Daniil Medvedev: “I’m a fighter. I will finish the match, but I can die,” he said. “If I die, is the ITF (International Tennis Federation) going to take (sic) responsible?”⁸

THE SPORT–CLIMATE RELATIONSHIP

As the climate crisis impacts sport, sport impacts the climate crisis. Devrika Rao of The Week US observes: “From the greenhouse gases emitted from transporting equipment, athletes and fans all over the world” ... “to the harm done to ecosystems by venue construction, high-density events and poor waste management” ... it’s clear that the athletic sector has played a role in the worsening climate crisis.⁹ In one example, flying ~29 000 athletes and staff to Brazil for the 2016 Rio Olympics generated 2000 kilotons of greenhouse gases. Notwithstanding the additional 2500 kilotons associated with transporting ~500 000 global spectators.¹⁰ An emerging body of research has linked air pollutants like ozone and sulphur dioxide to increased bronchoconstriction and airflow obstruction during exercise, compared with the same pollution exposure at rest.¹¹ A 2022 study found that higher air pollution levels also predicted increased errors and interceptions in professional baseball and American football.¹² Further research in Major League Baseball noted that a 1 part per million increase in carbon monoxide levels over 3 hours caused an 11.5% increase in umpires’ likelihood to make an incorrect call.¹³ All this is to say nothing of the general health burden of air pollution that may impact spectators and individuals in their daily lives.¹⁴

AN ECOLOGICAL SHIFT?

The International Olympic Committee has made moves in an attempt to ‘green’ the games. As part of its sustainability strategy, the five key areas of infrastructure, material sourcing, mobility, workforce and climate underpin an attempt to reduce the environmental footprint associated with construction and transportation and to leave the host city with a better infrastructure.¹⁵ Despite this guidance, sustainability is not always delivered. For

example, the organisers of Rio 2016 promised to restore the city's waterways through investments in sanitation; however, many of them were littered with rubbish only a year later.¹⁶ Indeed, due to concerns around water quality in the River Seine, Paris 2024 saw the postponement of multiple triathlon events, with three athletes also falling ill after the 10 km open water swimming event.¹⁷ While the lasting effects of hosting the Olympics remain to be seen, Mike Gagliardi of NBC News (USA) highlights that Paris is noticeably different compared with 10 years ago, primarily due to its policy on reducing car dependence. Paris has closed 100+ streets to motor vehicles, tripled SUV parking fees, removed ~50 000 parking places and added 1300 km of bike lanes since Mayor Anne Hidalgo took office in 2014.¹⁸ City officials report that this has aided a 40% decline in air pollution.¹⁸ The aim of Paris 2024 was to host more responsible games, contributing to an ecological shift in the world of sports and events, which may still prove to float.¹⁹

From our perspective in sport and exercise medicine, an ecological shift may start by improving our understanding of the impact of environmental factors such as heat on athlete performance, illness and injury. It then may grow into developing or influencing policy/guidelines and shaping future practice. From here, a more comprehensive change would consider spectator well-being and the broader impacts of environmental factors such as air pollution on health or physical activity. This topic collection encompasses several articles across this space, aiming to play a small part at the intersection between climate and athletic performance, policy and physical activity.

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Contributors EV and AH formulated the idea. All authors contributed to the design of the manuscript. DT conducted the literature review and wrote the manuscript. All authors contributed to critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content and approved the submitted manuscript. DT is the guarantor of this work.

Funding The authors have not declared a specific grant for this research from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing interests None declared.

Patient consent for publication Not applicable.

Ethics approval Not applicable.

Provenance and peer review Commissioned; internally peer reviewed.

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