About 12 years ago, whenever she took a flight somewhere, Temple Grandin would turn her seatmates into impromptu survey subjects. The noted animal scientist showed them two sets of photos: one in which sows were confined in gestation crates and another in which the female pigs roamed in indoor barns. None of the photos were inflammatory or designed to manipulate emotions, she says.

Grandin says two-thirds of the people who saw the pictures had “a real problem with gestation crates,” those tightly confining steel cages that often don’t provide enough room for pregnant sows to roll over. “No one in the general public thought it was wonderful,” Grandin says of the crates. .

It would appear that corporate America is catching up to public opinion. Since December, a string of fast-food chains, pork producers and other major companies have committed to raising sows without gestation crates or buying meat from suppliers that have dumped the confinement system. It started late last year when Smithfield Foods, the nation’s largest pork producer, announced that 30 percent of its own sows would be moved from gestation crates to group housing.

In January, Hormel Foods decided to jump on board, announcing it would convert all of its company-owned farms to group sow housing before 2018. A month later, McDonald’s promised to work with its suppliers to eliminate gestation crates, and two of the fast-food giant’s competitors, Burger King and Wendy’s, soon followed suit.

Participants inside (and outside) the pork and restaurant industries say this seemingly sudden movement against gestation crates actually has been in the works for years, the result of a number of factors. Prime among them, as Grandin indicates, is public opinion. To date, eight states including Florida, Arizona, and Michigan, have passed laws prohibiting the crates. Some of those laws were approved in public referendums, like California’s.

Except that, as Grandin notes, gestation crates are “labor-efficient.” The stalls, she says, “require a less-highly trained person to run them,” which was part of the reason the industry started to embrace the housing system in the 1980s. The crates are typically about 7 feet long and 2 feet wide. They save labor and barn space and prevent sows from doing what they usually do: fight with each other.

Grandin, the animal scientist, acknowledges she has had to reconcile her opinion on gestation crates between two opposing viewpoints: science’s general validation of the system and her own visceral emotions when seeing sows held immobile for years. “It’s not life,” she says about the confinement. “The way I look at it is: How would you like to live in an airline seat?”

Adapted from The Guardian Weekly
July 2012
(441 words)
POLITICIANS ARE CELEBRATING THE OLYMPICS BUT FORGETTING THEIR PROMISES, SAYS SPORTS BODY

The body representing the country’s biggest sporting organisations has accused politicians of basking in the glory of the Olympics throughout the party conference season while forgetting the promise to use them to build a national sporting legacy.

The Sport and Recreation Alliance (SRA), the umbrella group for 315 sports organisations including UK Athletics, the Football Association and the Rugby Football Union, is beginning a campaign to highlight the role sport can play in improving health, education, community cohesion and the fight against crime.

Calling for a cross-party commission on how to put sport at the heart of policy, the alliance is also preparing to present detailed research to ministers on the benefits to society of taking more physical exercise at all stages of life.

Andy Reed, chair of the SRA, said: "Politicians of all parties have undervalued the contribution of physical activity in making Britain a better place. It just doesn't get treated seriously as a public policy option. But in the face of the success of the Olympics and the Paralympics and all the evidence that we have put together, people have got to start paying attention. The party conference season has demonstrated that the inclination so far has been to enjoy the glory of success without actually concentrating on what made it happen. There was no substantive debate either at the conferences or in their fringes about how we can use the momentum created by the Games.

Research conducted over six months by the alliance has evaluated the effects of sport in staving off everything from cardiovascular heart disease to mental illness. It found that heart disease, which costs the NHS more than £30bn a year, can be cut by up to 40% if people take more regular exercise. In the field of mental illness the risk of dementia, which costs the NHS £23bn a year, can be reduced by about a third with increases in physical activity.

Similarly, by analysing attendance data in the workplace, the SRA found that physical activity programmes at work can reduce absenteeism by up to 20%. Data also shows that people who take 20 minutes of exercise a day aged 14 are three to four times more likely to participate in sport and recreation aged 31.

Reed added that now was the time to make sure ministers took up the challenge. "We have an unprecedented opportunity to use the galvanising power of the Olympics and Paralympics to make the cultural shift in this country to a genuine joined-up sport and physical activity strategy across all government departments – to ingrain it at the heart of government thinking".

Adapted from The Observer
October 2012
(447 words)
"Fearless" Felix Baumgartner and his family won't have been the only ones celebrating long into the night following his 24-mile freefall. [...] It wasn't a bad day either for the countless sponsorship, media and production staff employed by Red Bull – the energy drinks brand that conceived, paid for and covered the stunt. In coming up with innovative new ways to sell heavily caffeinated fizzy water, the brand is seen as redefining the sports sponsorship market.

Sponsorship experts said on Monday that the online frenzy around Baumgartner's leap served to highlight trends that had been emerging for some time, as sponsors moved away from traditional models and towards their own bespoke spectaculars."The biggest trend in the last 10 years, and the social internet side of things has merely accelerated it, is that creating your own content has absolutely moved to the top of the agenda", said Tim Crow, chief executive of the sponsorship agency Synergy.

Major brands have been talking for years about becoming content producers rather than simply paying media and rights owners to advertise or slap their logos on shirts and hoardings. But none have taken it as seriously as Red Bull.

Red Bull were an early pioneer, trading in their sponsorship of a Formula One team to buy their own in 2004, for example. A couple of years later they bought the Major League Soccer team that was renamed New York Red Bulls. But most of their investment has been in extreme sport and in building up long-term links with individual athletes – funding an army of base jumpers, free runners, snowboarders, cliff divers and BMX riders.

To take but two examples, they have arranged for Robbie Madison to leap on to the Champs Elysées on a motorbike and built a private halfpipe for snowboarder Shaun White and filmed the results. In May the BMX rider Kye Forte conceived an event bringing together 34 of the world's best riders to perform huge jumps against the London skyline in front of 10,000 fans at Alexandra Palace.

Red Bull insists that its stunts start with conversations with their athletes – Baumgartner, who has already leaped from most of the world's tallest buildings, came up with the idea for his space jump seven years ago.

Red Bull, through its own magazines and production arm, can also ensure that their events reach the desired audience regardless of whether they capture the imagination of the mainstream media. The Red Bull chief executive told the US business magazine Fast Company that the concept of investing in events rather than merely sponsoring them was deeply ingrained in the company's culture.