

Sports for Good, Sports for All: The Transformative Power of Sports and Philanthropy

The USC Center on Philanthropy & Public Policy convened leaders from sports, business, nonprofits and philanthropy to explore how sports can drive civic pride, economic vitality and community wellbeing. With Los Angeles preparing to host the 2026 FIFA World Cup and the 2028 Olympics and Paralympics, as well as other marquee sporting events in the next few years, the program underscored how global events create local benefits.

“Los Angeles dazzles as the stage for all-star games, Super Bowls not to mention the World Cup and the Olympics and will write the next chapter in L.A.’s rich legacy,” noted James Ferris—Center director and the Emery Evans Olson Chair in Nonprofit Entrepreneurship and Public Policy at the USC Sol Price School of Public Policy—in his opening remarks. These global gatherings “inspire us and help to drive the economy,” while philanthropy ensures that sports also expand everyday opportunities for youth, families and neighborhoods, he added.

The opening keynote came from Clayton Frech, founder and CEO of Angel City Sports, and his son Ezra Frech, a two-time Paralympic gold medalist and USC student. Clayton described his family’s devotion to adaptive sports, beginning when Ezra was born with limb differences that required multiple surgeries and prosthetics, and leading to the founding of Angel City Sports.

“Two major things gave me self-confidence—my family and sports,” Ezra said. “We’re all sitting in this room today because we know the power of sport and what it can do for the soul.”

Ezra observed how athletics “can be a catalyst to change history, our perceptions and, in turn, our world.” He traced the legacy of this impact, from Jesse Owens challenging Hitler in 1936 to Mia Hamm and the U.S. women’s soccer team spotlighting pay equity and Nelson Mandela using rugby to unify South Africa. “Sport has the power to unite people in a way that little else does,” Ezra added. He also shared his aspiration to not only compete to win gold medals but also to advance adaptive sports so as to include the physically disabled.

Attracting—and Benefiting From—World-Class Sporting Events

The morning plenary session featured a fireside chat followed by a panel examining how Los Angeles has become a hub for world-class sporting events and what those opportunities mean for the region’s economic and civic life. Leaders representing organizations such as the 2028 U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee, Los Angeles Sports & Entertainment Commission (LASEC), local government and professional teams participated in the discussions.

With the challenges facing the city, “we have the opportunity to use sports and entertainment events to change Los Angeles for the better,” LASEC Chair Bob Graziano said.

The speakers emphasized the city’s unique advantage: its diversity and culture. This enabled Los Angeles to overcome its European competitors in attracting the Olympic and Paralympic games, according to Gene Sykes, chair of the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee and

member of both the LA28 Olympics and Paralympics Games and International Olympic Committee.

“Many of the decision-makers had never been to Los Angeles,” Sykes said of the International Olympic Committee. “The European cities had a real advantage. So we [described how] this city is the most welcoming place in the world.” He emphasized how unique L.A. is, with people from all over the world choosing to live here and embracing the city’s diverse cultural heritages.

With no direct federal funding, however, Olympic organizers must raise billions of dollars through sponsorships, media rights, merchandise and ticketing. Moreover, “The United States is the only nation that does not fund its Olympic or Paralympic athletes,” said Reynold Hoover, CEO of the LA28 Olympic & Paralympic Games. In addition, to host the array of other major events that focus attention on L.A. by hosting the 2026 FIFA World Cups, Super Bowls and All-Star Games, “we have to raise this money privately,” added Kathryn Schloessman, president and CEO of LASEC.

The topic continued in the subsequent panel—moderated by Cinny Kennard, chair of The Center’s Board of Advisors—on the benefits that Los Angeles gleans from major sporting events. Los Angeles Rams President Kevin Demoff described the team’s new practice facility, planned for completion in time for use in the LA28 games, as well as transforming SoFi Stadium into the Olympics’ swimming venue. Expediting the mixed-use project, Demoff said, “will deliver benefits to the community that technically have nothing to do with the games”—but also resulted from them.

Erikk Aldridge, vice president of impact for LA28, highlighted the \$160 million PlayLA youth sports program, which has already reached more than one million enrollments, ensuring that access and opportunity will extend beyond the games themselves. He also spoke about LA28’s collaborations with colleges, small businesses and other organizations working with teens, young adults and transitional workers to get them ready for the employment opportunities arising from the games.

Alan Rothenberg, chairman, L.A. Tourism Board and a veteran of bringing World Cup Soccer to L.A. for many years, emphasized how hospitality and tourism—employing over half a million people—will see billions in economic activity, while global broadcasts project L.A.’s resilience and glamour.

From the city’s perspective, Paul Kerkorian, executive director of the L.A. City Office of Major Events, called the expected \$18 billion in revenue from these games a “tremendous opportunity ... to infuse new economic activity, to create jobs, to invite new businesses and to put forward Los Angeles in the eyes of the world in the best possible light.”

Lulu’s Place: Sports, STEM and Wellness

In the afternoon plenary, the conversation shifted to Lulu’s Place, a youth campus now under construction in Los Angeles’ Westchester neighborhood. Lulu’s Place Chair and President Doug Kimmelman described the project as a tribute from him and his children to his late wife,

Carol “Lulu” Kimmelman, a committed elementary school teacher and athlete who played on USC’s 1983 NCAA National Championship women’s tennis team. Once she decided to teach, Carol was determined to go to South L.A., where she felt she was most needed and could have the greatest impact. “She always said to my four kids, ‘You guys were born on third base sliding into home. These kids were born without a bat in their hand,’” Doug shared.

Through a range of partnerships—including with the TGR Foundation, St. Bernard’s, Westchester High, the USTA, and Cedars-Sinai and Providence Health—Kimmelman noted that Lulu’s Place aims to foster opportunities for young people through academic, athletic and wellness programs.

Mike McKee, vice chair of Lulu’s Place and chair of Tiger Woods’ TGR Foundation, discussed that organization’s science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) programming, which will be added to Lulu’s Place. “We can do things that the schools can’t,” he explained.

Tennis legends Tracy Austin and Pam Shriver compared Lulu’s Place to the National Junior Tennis & Learning model pioneered by Arthur Ashe. “I’ve seen kids who have been part of this, where they have someplace safe to go [and] where they’re taking the initiative every day after school,” Austin said. “I think sports and education go together,” Shriver added. “Sports gave me the motivation to stay in school.”

Sports—Life-changing for Youth

The day’s final session focused on the broader role of sports in youth development. Renata Simril, president and CEO of the LA84 Foundation, traced her organization’s origins to the surplus from the 1984 Games, which has seeded decades of youth programs across Southern California. “Sports is a gateway to opportunity,” she observed.

Julie Uhrman, co-founder and CEO of Angel City Football Club, described how her team was built with gender equity at its core. Alongside her fellow founders, venture capitalist Kara Nortman and actor Natalie Portman, “we decided to use sport as a means ... to drive equity,” Uhrman said. “The challenge, they found, was a lack of access and opportunity.” Angel City FC gives back a percentage of their earnings for girl soccer programs.

Chris Helfrich, president and CEO of Eat. Learn. Play. Foundation, explained how Ayesha and Steph Curry’s foundation partners with the Oakland Unified School District in a model for transforming asphalt yards into playable green spaces and outdoor classrooms. “The idea is to get it right in Oakland ... and then do our best to demand the same for kids in California—and throughout America.”

Private enterprise has a role to play as well. Christopher Schwarzenegger, vice chair of the Special Olympics Founders Council, noted how that event’s corporate donors often go beyond sponsorship by encouraging employees to volunteer. “The Special Olympics gives people community ... and provides pathways for people to get jobs.”

He recalled how Special Olympics athletes honored his grandmother, Eunice Kennedy Shriver, by placing their medals into her grave—a testament to the impact of sports-driven inclusion.

“There are incredible organizations that are doing great work, and it requires philanthropy,” Uhrman wrapped up. “It requires money for them to go deeper—and to do more.”

In summing up the day, Wendy Wachtell, chair of the Joseph Drown Foundation and a founding Center board member, summed up the informative, illuminating and inspirational day: “We hope that if you leave here with one thing today, it’s understanding that sports really can transform lives and it can transform communities. We’ve heard it over and over again.” Sports for Good. Sports for All.

Videos from the event can be found [here](#).

*Now in its 25th year, **The Center on Philanthropy & Public Policy** promotes more effective philanthropy and strengthens the nonprofit sector through research that informs philanthropic decision-making and public policy to advance community problem solving. The Center is a part of the USC Sol Price School of Public Policy, which works to improve the quality of life for people and their communities, here and abroad.*

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