



Natalie Spilger

CHICAGO RED STARS SOCCER TEAM

GREEN LACES FOUNDER

“It’s a joke in Morocco that the state bird is a black trash bag,” says Natalie Spilger, defender for Chicago Red Stars women’s soccer team. “They get caught on their shrubs and look like a field of birds from a distance.”

Natalie’s sport has taken her around the globe. Her travels have taught her that environmental priorities differ around the world, and sustainability efforts have to be tailored to their region to succeed. What works in Morocco, for example, may not work in Sweden, and vice versa.

Natalie played for a pro team in Sweden in 2008. The wealthy

country’s environmental sophistication stunned her. “I was amazed that people separate their trash into eight different containers,” she recalls. “Clear glass, colored glass, hard plastic, soft plastic, compost. It was second nature to them. They didn’t think of it as environmental.”

Natalie grew up in California conserving water during droughts, recycling and turning off lights to save energy. With a civil engineering degree from Stanford—where she co-captained the soccer team—she began working on efficient building design after graduation.

It wasn’t what she’d planned to do. Through her teens and college years she’d worked obsessively toward a professional soccer career, dreaming of one day playing at the Women’s World Cup or in the Olympics. She’d played on the U.S. women’s under-16, under-18 and under-21 national soccer teams. But despite training harder than anyone she knew, she hadn’t made it to the women’s national team. Faced with few other options to play professionally, she quit in 2004.

She didn’t pick up the ball again for two years, and this time she came to it with a

different attitude. She wasn't playing to be better than anyone else on the field, but for the pure love of the game.

"I started having fun," she says. "Not putting the pressure on myself to achieve anything made me a better player, a calmer player." She was soon snapped up by a Swedish team and then the Chicago Red Stars,

a charter team of the Women's Professional Soccer league.

Now that her soccer career has taken off again, Natalie wants to use the opportunity to promote the environment through her non-profit, Green Laces. The organization invites athletes and fans alike to brandish their environmental ethic with shoelaces.

"My call to athletes is that it's time we start going beyond advertising our sponsors, and start advocating our values," she says. "Our bodies are billboards. We can endorse something that lasts the lifetime of our career, or endorse a value that goes deeper and extends beyond our own lifetime."

GREEN LACES

IN 2008 NATALIE SPILGER FOUNDED THE NON-PROFIT GREEN LACES, WHICH INVITES ATHLETES AND FANS TO DECLARE THEIR ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES BY SPORTING THE ORGANIZATION'S LACES.

"WE HAVE ACTUALLY CHANGED THE SHOELACE INDUSTRY IN SOME REGARDS," SAYS NATALIE. A SHOELACE MANUFACTURER WANTED TO DONATE LACES, BUT NATALIE REFUSED TO TAKE THEM BECAUSE THEY WEREN'T MANUFACTURED IN AN ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY WAY. "THEY'RE NOW REDOING THEIR ENTIRE PRODUCTION LINE TO BE GREEN, AND TO MAKE THEM FROM RECYCLED YARN," SHE SAYS.

THE ORGANIZATION ALSO SIGNS UP ATHLETES AS ENVIRONMENTAL AMBASSADORS. ONCE THE LIST HAS REACHED OVER A THOUSAND, GREEN LACES PLANS TO ORGANIZE ATHLETES TO PETITION MANUFACTURERS OF OTHER SPORTING GOODS TO MAKE THEIR PRODUCTION LINES ENVIRONMENTALLY AND SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE.



Natalie showing she's a fan of the planet with her Green Laces.



INDUSTRY EMITS 19% of human-produced CO₂ and more water pollution than electricity production or agriculture. Industrial pollutants are so ubiquitous they've turned up in Arctic and Antarctic ice cores.

Take a standard cotton t-shirt. One pound of chemicals is used to grow five pounds of conventionally-grown cotton, enough to make about ten t-shirts. Transporting the fiber around the world emits CO₂ and other pollutants.

It's often bleached with poisonous compounds and the dyes include toxic heavy metals. The silk-screened design is most likely made of a PVC-derived chemical that is a hormone-disrupting carcinogen. 1.4 billion t-shirts are sold annually in the U.S. alone.

There are alternatives, like this pile of organic cotton in India, which needs fewer chemicals to grow. Less hazardous dyes and printing methods are now available. Many companies are

improving processes to use fewer resources and pollute less. Labeling and certifications are emerging to help consumers make sense of environmental claims. Product labels in the U.K. show how much CO₂ was emitted during manufacturing. Green Seal certifies products that pass its environmental criteria, as does the Forest Stewardship Council for wood and paper products.