

SOUNDING BOARD

THE MARLBORO GRAND PRIX*

Circumvention of the Television Ban on Tobacco Advertising

COVERAGE of motor racing in the mass media has grown dramatically in recent years. Hardly a day now goes by in the United States without a nationally televised automobile, motorcycle, "monster truck," or

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powerboat race on either a major network or a cable network devoted to sports.¹ Major daily newspapers now cosponsor auto races, most notably the Atlanta Journal 500, and blend advertising for the events with stepped-up news coverage. Organized motorcycle, dirt-bike, and kart racing for teenagers and children attracts an increasing number of participants each year.²

Yet, in contrast to the widespread attention given to head injuries in boxing, football, and diving, little has been written about the risk of death or injury to those who race motor vehicles — or to impressionable young fans who try to emulate them. Indeed, no registry exists to record and study fatalities and injuries in the numerous forms of motor racing.³ In the absence of such data, any perception young people (or the public in general) have of motor racing as extreme risk-taking behavior must take a back seat to its well-publicized image of healthy competition, guts, and glory.

The mystery of why motor racing has had virtual immunity from serious scrutiny by sports commentators and the mass media becomes clear when one considers that the sponsors of racing are the country's largest advertisers: tobacco companies, brewers, and automobile manufacturers. In the United States, auto races receive more financial sponsorship (\$276 million in 1988) than any sporting event except the Olympics.⁴

Anyone who attends motor races (general admission to which usually costs \$25 or more, with discounted or free entry for children), visits the sponsors' exhibits and souvenir stands, watches races on television, or reads racing magazines is struck by the intense loyalty of the fans, as well as their detailed knowledge of vehicles, drivers, sponsors, and past races. Motor racing in all its forms, from "midgets" to Formula 1, ranks as the second largest spectator sport in the United States after football.⁴ There is little doubt that efforts to appeal to such a vast audience will generate increased sales of automobiles, automotive products, and other consumer goods.

Television has greatly enhanced the visibility of auto racing and its sponsors, whose logotypes appear on the cars, the drivers, the pit crews, and signs around the track. A race-car driver can sell advertising space on his chest, back, shoulders, and helmet, and the higher the logo is on his clothing, the higher the price. Nor is such visibility confined to the racetrack crowd or the television audience. Photographs of the winning driver, plastered head to toe in sponsors' logotypes, appear in magazines and newspapers and make their way into publications aimed at young boys, many of whom have adopted the fashion of wearing clothing with the logotypes of alcohol and tobacco companies sponsoring motor racing.

Sponsorship of motor racing has become one of the major promotional activities used by the tobacco industry. As expenditures for cigarette advertising have tripled in the past 20 years (to \$3.3 billion in 1988, more than for any other consumer product), the proportion of advertising expenditures allocated to promotional activities such as the sponsorship of motor

racing and other sports has increased from about one quarter in 1975 to two thirds in 1988.⁵

Through its Winston and Camel cigarette brands, the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, the major profit-producing subsidiary of RJR Nabisco, has become the leading sponsor of automobile and motorcycle racing in the United States.⁶ Since 1971 — the first year in which cigarette advertisements were no longer permitted on television — the company has sponsored several entire categories of racing, including the annual Winston Cup Auto Racing Circuit of 29 televised stock-car races, Winston Drag Racing, Camel GT Series, Camel Mud and Monster Series, and Camel Motocross. In 1990 the tobacco company's newest cigarette, Magna, was promoted with an automotive theme and was made the title sponsor for a 150-city tour of a popular auto show, featuring special appearances by the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

Philip Morris, the nation's largest cigarette manufacturer, has also increased its stake in motor racing. Through its Marlboro brand, the company now sponsors several auto and motorcycle teams, as well as four nationally televised races: the Marlboro Grand Prix, Marlboro 500, Marlboro Challenge, and Laguna Seca Marlboro Motorcycle Grand Prix. It is thus not unusual to watch a race in which the sponsor is Marlboro, the officials wear Marlboro logotypes, and two or more of the competing cars and drivers are emblazoned with the name Marlboro. Thus, although cigarette advertising is forbidden on television, Marlboro still receives millions of dollars in low-cost national television exposure. Indeed, although Philip Morris will invest \$30 million in 1991 and 1992 to promote its Marlboro brand on Indy-style cars in televised races (including \$3 million in the Indianapolis 500),⁷ this amount is likely to be far less than the purchase of an equivalent amount of television advertising time. The number of viewer "impressions" of a brand name or logotype per telecast is the standard for measuring the effectiveness of sponsorship.^{8,9} According to *Sponsors Report*, a publication that measures the amount of in-focus exposure auto-racing sponsors receive and then computes dollar-value estimates on the basis of the cost of a conventional 30-second advertisement, Marlboro is perennially the most seen of the 43 team sponsors of the CART (Championship Auto Racing Teams, Indy style) racing series. For example, during the 15 races of the 1989 CART season, Marlboro received 3 hours, 26 minutes, and 50 seconds of in-focus exposure, as well as 146 mentions of the brand name, for a value of \$8.4 million, not including the exposure to fans at the racetrack.¹⁰ In the Indianapolis 500, the most widely watched auto race in the United States, Marlboro received more than \$2.6 million in advertising exposure.¹⁰

An intriguing development in the past decade has been the joint sponsorship of motor-racing teams by tobacco and automobile companies. Moreover, in its newspaper and television advertisements, General Motors includes prominent verbal and visual references to R.J. Reynolds' Winston brand name, as well as photographs of the Skoal Oldsmobile, Kodiak Pon-

tial, and Levi Garrett Chevrolet race cars (Skool, Kodiak, and Levi Garrett are brands of "spitting," or smokeless, tobacco). Advertisements for Nissan cars feature the Camel logotype, and those for Honda feature Marlboro.

At the races themselves, hospital trauma centers advertise their services in the official programs, and ambulances and health professionals from these institutions are conspicuous in the pit. A portion of the proceeds from some races is earmarked for health charities, such as the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation. In return, the charities may assign volunteers to work in the tobacco-company sponsor's "activity pavilion," where visitors receive free packs of cigarettes, have their photograph taken with a "hospitality hostess" or race car, and play various racing-related games to win caps, mugs, sunglasses, six-pack coolers, and other prizes with the sponsor's cigarette logotype.

Coverage of racing has spawned several weekly programs on cable-television networks, including "Speed-Week," "NHRA [National Hot Rod Association] Today," "The World of Speed and Beauty," and "Inside Winston Cup Racing." During a single month in racing's off-season (January 1989), "Inside Winston Cup Racing" (shown four times each Sunday) included 584 mentions of the Winston brand name and 58 minutes, 28 seconds of television exposure of the Winston logotype on race cars, drivers, billboards, and elsewhere.¹¹

In an effort to verify the extent of television exposure of cigarette brands in spite of the ban on such promotions, a videotape recording was made of a nationally telecast automobile race, the Marlboro Grand Prix, which was shown on July 16, 1989. An observer, a medical student with a moderate interest in automobile racing, viewed the 1½-hour program six times. During the first viewing the observer made a list of categories to enable him to tabulate the various kinds of visual exposure to the Marlboro brand. On the second viewing, he measured the length of time the word Marlboro or its red chevron logotype was visible on the screen. On the third viewing, he counted the smaller billboards and banners that were posted along the raceway retaining wall (clustered primarily at the locations of the two main camera views of the race). The fourth time through, the observer counted the number of spoken mentions of Marlboro, as well as the number of exposures of the Marlboro car, which remained in almost constant view regardless of its standing in the race. During the fifth and sixth viewings, the observer counted all other visual exposures of Marlboro.

The observer noted that at no time did the television announcers refer to the race as the Marlboro Grand Prix, but rather as the "New Jersey Meadowlands Grand Prix presented by Nissan." This was in spite of the fact that race officials wore Marlboro Grand Prix shirts and caps, the winner received a Marlboro Grand Prix trophy, and the backdrop in front of which the televised presentation of awards was made included 40 logotypes (counted as 1 by the observer) with the words Marlboro Grand Prix. Table 1 summarizes

the number of times the Marlboro name or logotype appeared during the telecast.

Motor racing, tobacco, and television are now so closely associated as to be inseparable. Fan loyalty, the involvement of media corporations, the support of cosponsors, and the influence of various racing publications are such that efforts to restrict tobacco-company sponsorship would be met with stiff resistance. Indeed, in September 1990, a congressional bill (H.R. 5041) sponsored by Rep. Henry Waxman (and endorsed by numerous health organizations) that would have banned tobacco-company sponsorship of sports was stripped in subcommittee of all provisions to limit tobacco promotion.¹³

But given the extent to which cigarettes and other tobacco products are advertised at motor races that are televised, health advocates seeking to end tobacco promotion may well find their best ammunition in the straight-faced denials by tobacco-company, television, and racing officials that these promotions are intended to encourage the use of tobacco products by young people.¹⁴

The reality is that automobile, motorcycle, and "monster truck" racing has become extremely popular among adolescents and children. *Days of Thunder*, a movie about race-car drivers, drew millions of teenagers in 1990. Several toymakers, including Mattel (a sponsor of a sprint-car team in the 1991 World of Outlaws Series, sponsored principally by United

Table 1. Exposure of the Marlboro Logotype during the 1989 Marlboro Grand Prix Telecast.*

TYPE OF EXPOSURE	NO. OF EXPOSURES
Small raceway sign	4998
Large billboard	519
Marlboro car	249
Start-finish overpass	57
Crew member in Marlboro jumpsuit	31
Graphic of standings	18
Marlboro helmet	11
Marlboro driver in jumpsuit	10
Marlboro jacket	7
Marlboro cap	4
Sign on large screen	4
Wife of Marlboro driver in jumpsuit	4
Marlboro umbrella	3
Marlboro trophy	2
Marlboro cap on another crew member's arm	1
Marlboro written out	1
Marlboro patch on wife's neck	1
Marlboro shirt	1
Awards-presentation backdrop	1
Spoken mention	11
Total no. of times Marlboro seen or mentioned	5933
Total length of broadcast (min)	93.62
Total time Marlboro seen (min)	46.17
Percent of time Marlboro seen	49.32

*Sponsors Report calculated the value of Marlboro's television exposure in the telecast to be \$1,028,505 for 18 minutes, 42 seconds of clear, in-focus air time, plus \$100,835 for 11 verbal references.¹² This was based on the network's price of \$27,500 per 30-second commercial. The discrepancy between the calculations in this table and those of *Sponsors Report* lies in the definition of clear and in focus, especially in regard to the visibility of the smaller raceway signs (which are nonetheless 2 to 3 m [6 to 10 ft] long). Because the Marlboro logotype was found to be immediately recognizable regardless of focus, the data presented here can be considered a reliable estimate of the magnitude of illicit tobacco advertising in televised auto racing. In view of promotions by the network leading up to the race, as well as replays of highlights of the event on the nightly sports news, the data here may underestimate the overall exposure the Marlboro brand received.

States Tobacco, the makers of Skoal),¹⁵ have manufactured toy racing cars with Marlboro and Camel decals that are sold at toy and hobby shops. Other toy cars with the names of such brands of "spitting" tobacco as Chattanooga Chew, Copenhagen, and Skoal have been manufactured by the Ertl Company. In Australia in 1983, "Pole Position," a video-arcade game popular among children, was discovered to feature race cars and roadside billboards with Marlboro logotypes.¹⁶ In spite of denials at the time that the tobacco company condoned such use of its brand names, Marlboro again appeared on roadside billboards in 1989 in "Super Monaco GP" and other popular video car-racing games.¹⁷ The newsletter of the Inside Winston Cup Racing Sports Club includes a page of racing-related puzzles and games for children entitled "Kids' Korner." The winning entry of *National Dragster* magazine's 1989 drawing contest for children 10 to 16 years of age was a sketch of a Skoal drag-racing car.¹⁸ At the racetracks, children sport caps, T-shirts, patches, pins, and pajamas with cigarette logotypes that can be purchased or won as prizes.

Because the bond of racing fans to the cars, drivers, and competitions is so strong and because attendance is at record levels, it is unlikely that the existence of any form of motor racing would be jeopardized by the replacement of tobacco companies with other sponsors. The only foreseeable way in which such a change could come about, however, would be through enforcement of the law against advertising cigarettes on television, which would in itself be likely to lead to a substantial withdrawal of support by tobacco companies.

The Public Health Cigarette Smoking Act of 1969, which prohibits the promotion of cigarette brands on television, calls for enforcement of the law by the Attorney General of the United States and a \$10,000 fine for each violation of the law. Were the law to be applied to the telecast of the Marlboro Grand Prix, complete with the levying of a fine of \$59,330,000 (based on the 5933 Marlboro logotypes televised during the 1989 race) (Table 1), neither media corporations nor tobacco companies could afford to continue televising tobacco-sponsored sporting events. The ruling by the Australian Supreme Court in 1990 that such sports telecasts are indeed cigarette promotions strengthens the case for enforcement of the American law.¹⁹ Australia has also taken the world lead during the past few years in undermining tobacco promotions creatively. Legislation adopted by several states in Australia, most notably Victoria, not only bans several types of tobacco sponsorship but also earmarks the revenue from increased tobacco excise taxes for a Health Promotion Foundation, which provides funding to sports and cultural organizations that might otherwise have depended on tobacco companies for support.²⁰ This innovative approach, emulated by New Zealand in 1990, muted the opposition of certain sports associations that had feared the loss of lucrative tobacco-company sponsorship. Unfortunately, in an era of in-

creasing privatization and given the absence of a tradition of government financing of sports, such a proposal would have little possibility of passage in the United States.

Another approach that could lead to limitations on the amount of automobile racing on prime-time television (and a resultant pullout by tobacco sponsors due to the reduced exposure of their brands to young viewers) would be to make the disproportionately high level of motor vehicle-related deaths among teenagers the subject of a major public health campaign. Research into the influence of motor-vehicle racing on the driving habits of young people might well yield insights into ways to reduce or prevent risk-taking behavior.

It is regrettable that there exists neither a registry of deaths and injuries in motor racing nor research into public health strategies to reduce the number of these violent public fatalities. The Center for Environmental Health and Injury Control of the Centers for Disease Control should aid in establishing such a registry.

As it stands, tobacco-company sponsorship of motor racing can only serve to hamper the efforts of governmental and voluntary health organizations to curtail the use of tobacco. At the same time, these agencies have failed for the most part to approach the tobacco epidemic by studying and confronting tobacco manufacturers that promote tobacco use through the sponsorship of auto races.

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