The connection between sport and tobacco goes back a long way

The connection between sport and tobacco is as old as professional athletic competition itself. Just a few years after teams in the National Baseball League began playing in 1876, trade cards with pictures of the players made their debut in cigarette packages. Numerous cigar and cigarette brands were named after sports-related themes. One brand of chewing tobacco, Bull Durham, promised Congress never again to use athletes to promote cigarettes. Yet when the law went into effect in 1971, tobacco companies merely shifted their TV advertising expenditures into the creation and sponsorship of televised sporting events, the net result being a more cost effective and less hard sell way to retain cigarette brand imagery.

CORPORATE SPONSORSHIP

Among nationally televised sporting events that emerged in the early 1970s were Philip Morris' Virginia Slims Women's Tennis Circuit and Marlboro Cup horse race, and RJ Reynolds' Winston Cup NASCAR (National Association of Stock Car Racing) Race Series. The appearance in 1983 of a weekly column in The Wall Street Journal, entitled "KENT Sports Business" and produced by Lorillard's KENT cigarette fraud, reflected the influx of corporations to sports sponsorship as a hot advertising trend. By 1990 more than 20 different televised cigarette sponsored sports existed in the USA alone, including eight different forms of motor racing. Just as just two exceptions out of 28 teams, every major league baseball stadium featured cigarettes on electronic scoreboards, and billboards for either Marlboro or Winston cigarettes. A similar scenario existed in the National Football League and National Basketball Association. (The National Hockey League had banned such ads from its links in 1981.) Although television advertising for oral tobacco products was prohibited in 1986, leading manufacturers would not be denied their opportunity to circumvent the ban. By 1991, 2736 separate sporting events each year, including the nationally televised Winston Cup races, which spanned a weekly TV programme "Inside Winston Cup Racing". Winston cigarettes were given out at auto races by attractive looking women. Thousands of young men lined up before each race to pose for a photograph with Miss Winston. Commercials for Winston were shown throughout the race on electronic scoreboards, and videotapes featuring these ads were given away to fans who visited the numerous Winston kiosks located around the stadium.

The press acquiesced in the promotion of smoking through sports, refusing to drop the cigarette brand names from the coverage of events, invariably referring to a NASCAR event solely as Winston Cup or to the women's professional tennis tour as "The Virginia Slims" or "The Slims". Leading newspapers including the Miami Herald, the Houston Chronicle, and the Los Angeles Times were co-sponsors of such events.

COUNTER MEASURES

Beginning in the late 1970s efforts were made to counteract tobacco sponsorship of sports in the USA. In 1977 the physicians health promotion group...
Doctors Ought to Care (DOC) started purchasing counter advertising space in several cities on billboards and bus benches, in newspapers, and on TV and radio, and began a 20 year series of satirical "housecalls" at tobacco sponsored events such as the Virginia Slims Tennis Tournament and the Marlboro Ski Challenge. Intended to inspire major health organisations and the business community to put significant funding into breaking the tobacco-sponsored events such as the Virginia Sports Connection, DOC's creations included the Emphysema Slims Tennis Tournament, the Barboro Barfing Team, and the Dead Man Chew Slims Tennis Tournament and the uniform with a prominent no-smoking logo. In the 1980s Surgeon General C Everett Koop, Secretary of Health and Human Services Louis Sullivan, and Representative Henry Waxman all were outspoken in their condemnation of tobacco sponsorship of sports. However, both Democratic and Republican administrations remained silent until the Justice Department under President Clinton acted to enforce the Congressional ban on cigarette brands on TV.

Since 1994, a valiant if as yet unsuccessful attempt has been made by the National Spit Tobacco Education Program (NSTEP) to reduce oral tobacco use by professional and amateur baseball players (http://www.nstep.org). One of the spokespersons for this educational campaign was former Detroit Tigers pitcher Bill Tuttle, who developed oral cancer caused by his use of smokeless tobacco. His mutilating surgery and personal suffering until his death in 1998 served as a stark reminder of the horrific consequences of smokeless tobacco.

Until the Master Settlement Agreement (MSA) of 1998, televised tobacco sponsored sporting events were ubiquitous on both network and cable TV. Limited to one sports sponsorship per brand under the MSA, the cigarette companies' TV presence dropped precipitously. The decision by RJ Reynolds to pull its sponsorship of NASCAR at the end of the 2003 season marked the end of its lavish spending on sports. Thirty years after the passage of the bill to ban cigarette commercials from TV, the company was still reaping the rewards of enormous exposure of its flagship brand on national TV. Today tobacco sponsored motor sports are still a mainstay of the Speed Channel. Marlboro is still getting its fair share of global TV attention through the telecast of Formula One racing; and in the USA it is seen weekly on ABC and ESPN through races on the IndyCar Circuit. Rodeos sponsored in part by USST (and where children are still admitted free) are telecast on the Nashville Network. Athletic imagery predominates in Marlboro's Unlimited magazine (intended by the company to be available only by mail to smokers over the age of 21). Advertisements for SKOAL in popular men's magazines such as FHM and Maxim feature images of extreme sports.

ORAL TOBACCO STILL A PROBLEM

Thus the influence remains, less ubiquitous perhaps than at any time in the past half century but all the more outrageous, considering what we have since learned about tobacco's devastating health toll. Regrettably, as Severson et al. point out in this issue of Tobacco Control, usage of oral tobacco by young professional athletes remains a major problem nearly three decades after Christen and colleagues brought this growing epidemic to the attention of the public. In spite of the 1991 ban on oral tobacco in minor league baseball, the situation continues to be terribly disheartening. With the harm reduction movement all too willing to endorse smokeless tobacco as a less dangerous alternative to smoking, and the manufacturers promoting the product more aggressively than ever, we can only muse that the ongoing association of tobacco products and sports will have left a bitter taste in our mouth for decades to come.

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