

Executive News Svc.(\$)

APs 11/18 1901 TEN--Virginia Slims-Protest

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NEW YORK (AP) -- A 14-year effort to end Virginia Slims sponsorship of women's tennis got a boost Wednesday when former cigarette model Janet Sackman led a protest of this year's tournament at Madison Square Garden.

Sackman, 61, was the glamorous, young pitchwoman for Lucky Strike and Chesterfield as a teen-ager. But she got throat and lung cancer after 33 years of smoking. She had her voice box and part of her right lung removed.

Sackman was joined Wednesday evening by a group of women doctors and anti-smoking activists, many of whom have lobbied since 1978 to ban Virginia Slims cigarettes from women's tennis tournaments.

"This is ridiculous," said Sackman, who is barely audible and had to learn to speak through her esophagus, a complicated procedure involving burping up air. "Here are strong healthy women sponsored by a cigarette company. It's not appropriate. It's not right."

Given the long and complex history of sports helping sell tobacco, the protesters face a difficult fight. Except for a brief period when Avon sponsored it, women's tennis has been financed in large part by Philip Morris Companies Inc., of which Virginia Slims is a subsidiary.

Women's tennis has grown from a two-tournament event with \$7,500 in prize money in 1970 to a \$20 million, 67-tournament circuit on five continents.

Sponsorship of women's tennis is complicated. The entire circuit is known as the Kraft Tour. Kraft is a subsidiary of Philip Morris. Until 1988, the circuit was known as the Virginia Slims tour. Philip Morris says it switched to Kraft because those products are known worldwide. Anti-smoking groups say the company bowed to pressure to change the product sponsorship.

Until recently, 18 of the tournaments were individually sponsored by Virginia Slims. Now just six remain, including the high-profile New York event. The other tournaments are now sponsored individually by other companies like Acura, Toyota and Bausch and Lomb though the events take place under the umbrella of the Kraft Tour.

Those protesting the Virginia Slims tournaments say Philip Morris has managed to bypass the ban on cigarette ads on radio and TV by sponsoring an event televised all over.

"Women's tennis epitomizes good health," said Joe Cherner, president of Smokefree Educational Services Inc. "Cigarettes is a product that epitomizes death and disease."

But Philip Morris officials maintain they have made women's tennis successful and say their product was designed for women who already smoked.

"We were asked to sponsor women's tennis 22 years ago," said Sheila Banks-McKenzie, director of media affairs for Philip Morris. "We brought it from a sideshow event to the mega-event it is today. But when we started sponsoring it, it was 1970. The tournaments weren't even televised until 1975."

The skilled public relations staff working for companies like Philip Morris have often met their match in the equally media-savvy anti-smoking faction.

Groups like the 5,000-member Doctors Ought to Care (DOC) sponsor annual "Emphysema Slims" tournaments. They carry "Barfboro" bags to protest tobacco-sponsored sporting events. They often wear white coats and call the demonstrations "house calls."

"The empress is not wearing any clothes," said Alan Blum, a Houston physician who founded DOC. "It's cigarette promotion couched as a sporting event. It's cigarette companies hoping you'll believe it's a very competitive, real tournament when it's actually like an exhibition match for a cigarette company."

Sackman still has the statuesque bearing, high cheekbones and blond hair that attracted the attention of a scout for the John Robert Powers agency when she was a Bronx teen-ager.

At 17, she began posing in a striped red, white and blue sweater, a ski pole in one hand and a cigarette in the other, for Lucky Strike ads that appeared on magazine covers around the country. She also appeared on Perry Como's live TV show in Chesterfield ads, back when cigarette companies were allowed to advertise on television.

She said a Chesterfield executive urged her to smoke so she would look more authentic. She smoked 1 1/2 packs a day until she was diagnosed with throat cancer in 1983. It took her six months to learn esophageal speech.

"I've got to tell the world what happens to you if you smoke," she said. "You can't put it into words. It's devastated me and my family."