

George Vecsey

Sponsor Plans Boomerang

It is hard to tell which is more of a surprise: that the United States actually has a team going to the World Cup of boomerang competition, or that the United States team is actually sponsored by the forces of good health.

But both are true. Three Americans are leaving early next week to compete with six other nations in the World Cup of boomerang, to be held in — roight, mate, you guessed it — Australia.

Much of their modest funding comes from a Houston-based group called DOC (Doctors Ought to Care), which warns of the dangers of smoking. The United States competitors say they turned down a \$12,000 offer from a tobacco company on principle.

"I'm asthmatic," said Eric Darnell, one of the American boomerangers. "I get off an airplane feeling totally polluted. I couldn't see wearing the logo of a cigarette company."

Much of the big money in sports these days comes from products that can ruin your liver, your lungs or your teeth. Athletes compete with logos on their uniforms, or perform with giant beer, cigarette and soda advertisements looming over them.

The message to spectators is clear: sit on your foam cushion, watch somebody else sweat, and use the sponsor's product, which will leave you in worse shape than when you began.

You couldn't even call it insidious. A recovering alcoholic, struggling day by day to maintain his sobriety, could whack a home run, and the huckster in the broadcasting booth would shriek, "Hey, —, this Bud's for you."

Or an outfielder with a parent stricken with cigarette-related emphysema could make a catch in front of a giant cigarette advertisement. With American soccer in the malodorous embrace of a cigarette firm, one can only dread the bombardment of youthful soccer players if the United States is awarded the 1994 World Cup.

BUT the most immediate World Cup is the first one for the boomerang, to be held in a corner of New South Wales called Barooga.

Wearing an emblem with two no-smoking logos superimposed on a boomerang, three Americans — Darnell, Chet Snouffer and Barnaby Ruhe — will compete on May 8, 11 and 14 against teams from West Germany, France, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Japan and the host country.

"Boomeranging, pardon the expression, is taking off," said Darnell, who has been the Johnny Appleseed of the sport in this country.

Competition will be in six events: maximum time aloft, fast catch, Aussie round (five throws

with varying wind), accuracy, consecutive catches of increasing difficulty and team relays.

"Our sport needs lung power," said Darnell. "To be sponsored by cigarettes would seem to be a contradiction in terms."

As a child, fascinated by the wind, Darnell made gliders and then boomerangs out of wood. (Now they are all made of polypropylene, which is more malleable.) Darnell later teamed up with Benjamin Ruhe, the uncle of his current teammate, to write a book, "Boomerang: How to Throw, Catch and Make Them," which has sold over 100,000 copies. At 43, he is ranked second to Snouffer in American competition.

While Australian aborigines "kept it alive for 10,000 years," Darnell notes, other weapons and toys of a boomerang's curved shape have been found in excavations in Egypt, Poland, the Netherlands, Florida and Arizona.

"The first time I went to Australia, I was surprised to see all the throwers are of British descent," Darnell said. "My biggest fantasy is to throw a glow-in-the-dark boomerang from the top of Ayers Rock, near Alice Springs, which is a sacred place to the aborigines."

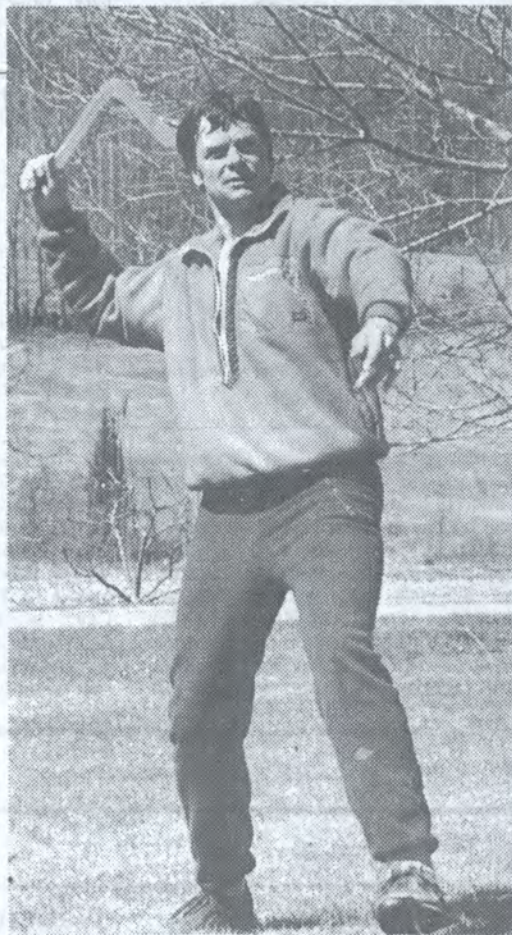
But first they will compete in the World Cup, sponsored by DOC rather than a cigarette company.

"Pelé is one of my heroes because I played high-school soccer," Darnell said. "It makes me sad to see him wearing T-shirts for a tobacco company. I detest the image of a baseball player standing on the field, spitting tobacco juice."

Needing a sponsor, Darnell was put in touch with Dr. Alan Blum, the coordinator of health promotion at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. Dr. Blum had been the editor of the Medical Journal of Australia and the New York State Journal of Medicine.

WHEN he was based in his native Nassau County, Dr. Blum persuaded more than 7,000 doctors to pay between \$10-\$25 for annual dues to DOC for what he calls "pro-health, not anti-smoking" activities. Some members of DOC in Nebraska held a fund-raising Dead Man Chewing Tobacco Softball Tournament. Doctors in Houston and Georgia raised money with an Emphysema Slims Tennis Tournament.

"Why not have a counterbalance?" Dr. Blum asked. "The powerful pseudo-masculine connection between cigarettes and athletics has never been broken. Until recently, athletes could be in cigarette ads. Where is the redress for the damage they did?"



The New York Times/Donna Light

Eric Darnell, member of United States boomerang team, practicing in Strafford, Vt.

The news is not all bad. Airlines in the United States now ban smoking on flights of less than two hours. New York City has tough new rules against smoking, although with the awareness of city government, sports reporters continue to smoke in press boxes, another sign of the vicious grip of tobacco on the sports industry.

"Now the companies simply buy up the entire sport," Dr. Blum said. "Tractor pulls. Auto racing. Skiing. Pro golf. You've got one company sponsoring tennis tournaments with teen-age girls. You've got all-star ballots in basketball. You've got a sports calendar in The New York Times. One of these days you're going to see the Marlboro World Series or the Winston Super Bowl."

But not the United States boomerang team. After Darnell had inspired his teammates to turn down the potential cigarette sponsor, Dr. Blum tapped the treasury of DOC for \$2,000 for uniforms, and now he's working on the \$4,500 for the airline tickets, still needing \$6,000 for expenses.

The three athletes will still have to inhale recycled cigarette smoke in the so-called no-smoking section all the way to Australia. But at least they won't glorify the stuff while they compete.