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Brewery's sponsorship has opponents fizzing over Special Olympics benefit

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They're having a party, but not everybody's thrilled about it.

The Texas Special Olympics is set to receive \$1 million from a series of weekend concerts around the state, but sponsorship of the events by Miller Lite beer, has raised eyebrows among several groups, including the International Special Olympics office.

The Houston concert will feature The Who in the Astrodome Saturday.

"This is akin to the Lung Association taking money from R.J. Reynolds tobacco or the NAACP taking money from South Africa," said Dr. Alan Blum, president of a national physicians group that plans to sell satirical T-shirts and pass out literature at the concert. "It's the wrong charity to be associated with alcohol."

Blum's group, Doctors Ought to Care, will sell T-shirts with "Killer Lite" and "We're Pushing a Drug" written over an outline of Texas to contrast Miller Lite's "We're Having a Party" slogan.

The group says Texas Special Olympics has no business affiliating with a brewery since alcohol

abuse can lead to fetal alcohol syndrome and paraplegia due to alcohol-related motor vehicle injuries.

Their T-shirts carry a list of conditions often related to alcohol use, including cirrhosis, pancreatitis and impotence.

"All we are doing is injecting ridicule," Blum said. "Often, we have to point out the hypocrisy and irony for people to look at the issue."

International Special Olympics officials also expressed misgivings about the arrangement, saying the event was only "partially approved" by that group and that they hoped such an affiliation never happens again.

Last week, about 20 groups led by the Texans' War on Drugs also voiced concerns about drunken driving and alcohol abuse at the event.

Denis Poulos, executive director of Texas Special Olympics, said he and others at the state level were aware of the controversies involved, but decided the "benefits outweighed the negativism."

Officials at the International Special Olympics' office, however, said they had not fully approved the link with Miller beer.

Poulos said the year-long planning for the event occurred during a transition phase at the International Special Olympics office.

"Under the current policy, at least dual sponsorship is required when an event is associated with a brewing company," Poulos said.

Deborah Willis, director of marketing and development for the international office, said the group has a "standing policy" not to accept funds directly from alcohol and tobacco companies.

However, alcohol-related companies can co-sponsor events with non-alcoholic products, Poulos and Willis said. Alcohol companies should then be the secondary sponsor, Willis said.

Willis said Miller tried to get a secondary sponsor for this weekend's events, but got only the limited participation of Frito-Lay. By then, Willis said, "The promotion was too far along to cancel."

John Shafer, consumer affairs manager for Miller Brewing Co., said his company has a history of helping Special Olympics and has gone to great lengths to develop a "model program" to prevent possible problems with alcohol abuse.



Post photo by Carlos Rosales

Dr. Alan Blum, right, and Jim Smith, program coordinator for the Doctors Ought to Care program, show T-shirts they'll be selling outside the Astrodome.