

# Where There's Smoke There's Ire: Tobacco Sponsorship Sparks Debate

By Alison Muscatine  
Washington Post Staff Writer

The marriage between tobacco companies and sports was consummated in the bullpen. It happened nearly a century ago, when Bull Durham began advertising its chewing tobacco on the outfield fences of southern baseball stadiums. Since relief pitchers warmed up nearby, the name "bullpen" was coined.

Now, decades later—long after Lou Gehrig was tagged a Camel man and Lucky Strikes became synonymous with the Brooklyn Dodgers—the tobacco industry is under growing pressure to stop promoting its products through sporting events.

Two weeks ago, Health and Human Services Secretary Louis W. Sullivan stepped up the crusade, calling on tobacco companies to end sponsorship of athletic events and urging citizens to consider boycotting tobacco-sponsored events.

New York City Mayor David Dinkins urged the owners of the Yankees and the Mets—so far unsuccessfully—to replace cigarette and tobacco advertisements in Shea and Yankee stadiums with pro-health messages.

Sen. Bill Bradley (D-N.J.), a former professional basketball star, has introduced legislation for several years that would deny tobacco companies tax deductions they now receive for advertising.

And in Houston, where the Virginia Slims women's tennis tournament took place last week, Mayor Kathy Whitmire proclaimed the city's first annual "Throw Tobacco Out of Sports Day."

The controversy centers on two fundamental questions: One is whether tobacco companies have used sporting events to circumvent laws that prohibit radio and television advertisements of their products. Critics charge that, despite the 1971 television ban, tobacco companies get their logos flashed repeatedly to viewers by sponsoring events and buying billboard space in arenas.

"It's an incredible bargain for the tobacco companies because it buys the advertisement that money isn't supposed to be able to buy," said Richard Danar, a law professor at Northeastern University School of Law in Boston and chairman of the Tobacco Products Liability Project.

The second question is whether the companies purposely target children—potential new smokers—through their promotional activities.

"The only people who start smoking are children," said Joe Cherner, president of Smokefree Educational Services, a non-profit, anti-smoking group in New York. "So the tobacco companies are faced with a business problem. Either they get children to start smoking or they go out of business. Consequently they do everything they can to get children to replace dead smokers—through sports idols."

Tobacco company officials dispute the allegations and say the attacks are politically motivated. "Tobacco products remain legal and the companies that produce them have the right to promote them responsibly, which they are doing," said Walker Merryman, vice president of The Tobacco Institute, a Washington-based advocacy group. Merryman added that abandoning tobacco-sponsored sports promotions "would have absolutely no effect on youth smoking," a view supported by many industry analysts.

While the anti-smoking movement is gaining momentum, it faces a daunting economic reality: The



Tobacco companies, among the first to support women's tennis players such as Martina Navratilova, get around bans on television advertising through sponsorships and prominent display of their logos.

tobacco industry is firmly entrenched in the sports world, spending about \$100 million annually to promote athletic events.

In addition to Virginia Slims's sponsorship of 12 tennis tournaments, Philip Morris USA's Marlboro cigarettes have been the name sponsor for four auto racing events and the Marlboro Cup in horse racing, as well as the Marlboro Challenge timed ski courses popular at a dozen resorts. There are Marlboro sports calendars, and the Marlboro logo is prominently displayed in many major league baseball stadiums.

RJR Nabisco, the parent to R.J. Reynolds tobacco company, sponsors about 2,500 sports events each year, according to Nat Walker, director of public relations for sports marketing. For the past 20 years, Winston has been the name sponsor for NASCAR and drag races, and Camel sponsors race car and motorcycle events. The Winston Eagle is a hydroplane the company sponsors in eight professional races. Prize money for the Vantage Cup, the senior PGA golf tour, comes from RJR Nabisco.

It doesn't end there. Cigarette and chewing tobacco companies have sponsored World Cup soccer matches, Salem Pro-Sail races, Lucky Strike bowling, professional figure skating, rodeos and tractor pulls.

"The tobacco industry would not sponsor sporting events if they were not on television," said Alan Blum, founder of Doctors Ought to Care, a Houston-based anti-smoking advocacy group. "The image they want to be associated with is that of young, athletic men and women."

Walker and other tobacco industry representatives said their companies do not target young people, but view sporting events as a way to win over smokers who may use other brands.

"Market share is what the game is all about," said Walker. "The cigarette business in this country is not growing, it's declining. Our goal is to switch competitive smokers and to enhance loyalty to our products."

Wall Street analysts agree that marketing tobacco products through sports promotions and advertising has little effect on the overall consumption of cigarettes.

"The fallacy here is to think the industry grows because of billboards [in stadiums]. That's wrong," said Emanuel Goldman, a securities analyst for PaineWebber. "It's patent nonsense. Advertising might determine whether someone smokes Marlboros or Winstons, but people don't smoke because of advertising. People smoke because of the three P's—parents, peers and pals."

As the anti-cigarette clamor has gotten louder, cigarette companies have attempted to target specific population groups who are more prone to smoke. Last year, Sullivan sharply attacked R.J. Reynolds for its plans to test-market the Uptown cigarette among blacks, a group more adversely affected by smoking than any other. A few weeks later, R.J. Reynolds drew fire after disclosures that it planned to market a new brand, Dakota, to appeal to "virile females"—young, poorly educated, white women.

Although the industry's growth has dropped 2 to 3 percentage points annually for most of the past decade, it's clear that in one case a cigarette's association with a sport has resulted in tremendous success.

Philip Morris began sponsoring the women's tennis tour in the early 1970s, just as it launched its Virginia Slims cigarette.

Joseph Cullman III, a lifelong tennis fan, was chairman

of the board of Philip Morris at the time. When his friend, Gladys Heldman, asked him to support the fledgling women's tennis tour, Cullman contributed \$2,500. Soon after, Virginia Slims became involved in a bigger way.

"I believed in women's tennis and I believed they were giving women the short end of the stick," Cullman said in an August 1989 interview. "At that moment, we were also bringing out our first cigarette—called the Virginia Slims—designed specially for women. So it was a fortuitous opportunity to combine a historic breakthrough for women and promote our new women's cigarette."

"Virginia Slims has become one of our big winners, and I think everyone gives the tour a big part of the credit for the success."

Cullman's personal and financial support for women's tennis—particularly after the women were kicked out of the United States Tennis Association for forming their own tour—led to undying player loyalty toward his corporation. Nearly all of the top women tennis stars of the past 20 years—including Billie Jean King, Chris Evert, Martina Navratilova and Pam Shriver—have supported maintaining a relationship with Virginia Slims even when other corporations, most recently Procter & Gamble, have offered more lucrative sponsorships.

"Virginia Slims doesn't mean cigarettes to me. To me it's people, it's a relationship, it's tennis," Shriver said. "You don't see anyone wearing a [Virginia Slims] patch on their shirt, and we would never be asked. Philip Morris is very sensitive to us and tries to make us comfortable."

As Cullman explained it: "With growing anti-cigarette publicity, a number of players are under pressure to reduce the dependence on Virginia Slims. But then there is great loyalty because we helped make the women's tour."

While Virginia Slims's influence has waned somewhat with anti-cigarette publicity, some sports interests have voluntarily shunned tobacco advertising. The National Hockey League, which controls the "dasher boards"—the boards directly around ice rinks—has prohibited tobacco advertisements since 1981. The Oakland A's now ban smoking in their outdoor Coliseum and tobacco advertising in their team program.

And, after a 1988 study of 1,110 major and minor league baseball players showed that 39 percent use chewing tobacco at least once a week, Commissioner of Baseball Fay Vincent recently announced a ban on smokeless tobacco—chewing tobacco and snuff—in some minor leagues.

"This game historically has been associated with smokeless tobacco and we want to end that," said Jim Small, manager of public relations for Major League Baseball. "We don't think there is anything romantic about mouth cancer."

Meanwhile, Cherner, who runs Smokefree Educational Services while on leave from his job as a Wall Street trader, has written to New York Mets President Nelson Doubleday offering to pay \$240,000—the going rate—to replace the Marlboro ad on the center field billboard in Shea Stadium with an anti-smoking message. Philip Morris's contract is scheduled to expire later this year and Dinkins, Bradley and several New York City council members have called on Doubleday to accept the offer.

So far, Cherner said, the Mets have not responded.

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