

SlimFunding

After 23 years of sponsoring women's tennis — and enduring protests from women's and health groups — Virginia Slims is cutting back involvement

By Michael Precker
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It's Virginia Slims tennis tournament time in Houston, and Eric Solberg is ready.

"We're going to annoy them once again," he says.

Mr. Solberg is executive director of Doctors Ought to Care, a Houston-based organization that campaigns against tobacco and alcohol use, particularly among young people.

Virginia Slims, the popular cigarette which has sponsored women's tennis for more than two decades, "has been one of our key targets," he says.

Since 1983 DOC has organized protests outside the Houston tournament, hired planes to fly anti-smoking banners over the West-side Tennis Club during play and organized "Emphysema Slims" tournaments to compete for attention.

The championship match of the \$375,000 tournament is scheduled



A VOLLEY OF PROTEST: The National Organization for Women picketed the Virginia Slims tournament in Delray Beach, Fla., this month.

for Sunday, and Mr. Solberg promises more of the same — keeping a vow by health and women's groups around the country to protest at every Virginia Slims tournament.

"This is a women's issue, and

NOW should be there," says Sheila Jaffe, vice president of the South Palm Beach County chapter of the National Organization for Women, which picketed the Virginia Slims tournament in Delray Beach, Fla., earlier this month.

"Virginia Slims has really helped women's tennis," she says. "They addict and kill millions of women so a few hundred can make big money."

Such criticism of the links between women's tennis and cigarettes has been growing in recent years as part of the larger controversy about alcohol and tobacco sponsorship in sports. But the debate over Virginia Slims may be nearing an end.

Last month Kraft General Foods announced it would not exercise its option for exclusive negotiations to renew sponsorship of the women's tennis tour after the 1994 season. Philip Morris, which makes Virginia Slims, is part of the Kraft conglomerate, meaning that the cigarette's future in tennis also is in doubt.

Critics of the tobacco companies were quick to claim victory.

"I think it's clear that Philip Morris pulled out because of all the public outrage," says Joe Cherner, head of SmokeFree Educational Services in New York. "How can the sport that epitomizes health in women go together with the number one cancer killer in women?"

Officials of women's tennis and Kraft say anti-smoking groups had nothing to do with a business decision, and are far less absolute about the future.

"This does not preclude any further discussion," says Jean Washington, director of event promotion for Kraft General Foods. "We're keeping all our options open."

Although Virginia Slims will have no role in the overall tour, says Sheila Banks-McKenzie, director of media affairs for Philip Morris USA, "We still have the option of sponsoring as many individual Please see MONEY on Page 6C.

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