

Tobacco sponsorship sullies WTA

Women's tennis has come a long way, baby, but apparently not far enough to sever the umbilical cord with its founding sponsor: Virginia Slims.

The background is, for various reasons, Kraft General Foods is stepping aside as overall tour sponsor (with \$33 million) of the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) after next season.

Virginia Slims will remain involved. More on that later.

Kraft and Virginia Slims both are owned by Philip Morris, whose considerable resources launched the women's tour in 1971 when no one else would take a chance.

But the WTA now faces a "crossroads" in its marketing strategy for the '90s.

The goal is ensuring players



COMMENTARY

By Rachel Shuster

sustain lucrative incomes in the face of media-savvy competition from other professional sports for the ever-elusive entertainment dollar.

Yet strikingly absent in public discussion of this new direction women's tennis should take is any signal that the

WTA is ready to repudiate tobacco sponsorship of its events.

Virginia Slims, through 1994, will retain title sponsorship of the players' bonus pool, the ranking system and other statistics and six tournaments. That includes the season-ending Virginia Slims Championships, played at New York's Madison Square Garden.

More tournaments used to be on the schedule before smoke-free groups chased Virginia Slims from some campus

arenas and public facilities.

But even when Kraft bows out, Virginia Slims can continue sponsoring tournaments. And individual tournament directors can continue selling local sponsorships to anyone, including Virginia Slims.

All this apparently sits well with tour leaders. As Billie Jean King told USA TODAY tennis writer Doug Smith, Philip Morris' involvement is not just "the cash dollars" but the effort "beyond the dollars."

King — an idol to many sports-loving girls growing up, including myself — is just dead wrong on this issue.

I don't want to hear any more about Virginia Slims stepping into the breach and saving women's tennis.

There's a difference between being appreciative and being indebted.

For as much as Virginia Slims gave to women's tennis, the players gave back to Virginia Slims many times over in the way they validated the new

product on the market targeted for women.

No, they didn't smoke Virginia Slims. And they didn't encourage anyone to smoke.

But they didn't have to for the message to be sent vicariously, in a way that got around the ban on TV tobacco ads:

You want to be cool and exciting like the women playing tennis, then give Virginia Slims a try.

Those were the days before package labels warned that cigarette smoking can cause cancer.

No such excuses today.

So why doesn't women's tennis get the new message?

That's what people participating in a vigorous letter-writing campaign to the WTA want to know. Some samples:

► Surely you agree that your association is sending a message to the public that "smoking is OK" when you promote Virginia Slims (or allow them to promote you). But

I can't believe you really agree with such a statement. — Brooklyn's Deborah Huntington, whose grandmother was New York's No. 1 women's tennis amateur and whose mother, a smoker, has lung disease.

► *It would indeed be ironic if a game that extols supreme physical condition should be linked with a product that causes grave bodily deterioration and ultimately death. — M. Millar Graff, whose brother, David, the first Marlboro man, died from emphysema.*

► *Virginia Slims of Chicago is as much a cigarette-marketing campaign targeted to women as a tennis tournament. With lung cancer the top cancer killer of women — 53,000 lives in 1992 — surely there is a better way to demonstrate support for women's sports. — Stephen Sener, Illinois division president, American Cancer Society.*

Surely there is. Women's tennis should be leading the way to find it.