

When the Smoke Clears

Are Virginia Slims and women's tennis happy together, or are they both just waiting to exhale?

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A FEW MILES FROM FLUSHING Meadow, site of the U.S. Open, there hangs a billboard for Virginia Slims, the title sponsor of eight women's tennis tournaments in the U.S. this year. The advertisement appears aged, weathered, neglected; its colors have faded and bits of the sign have peeled away so that what once was there—the smiling face of an attractive woman—is barely discernible.

If a picture does tell a story, this tale isn't as simple as it appears. When the \$3 million Virginia Slims Championships begin at New York City's Madison Square Garden this month (November 16 to 22), the women's tour will be closing a year that has raised more questions than delivered answers, with the most puzzling query being, where is the tour going?

In January, Kraft General Foods, completing its third year of a five-year contract as tour sponsor, is obligated to tell the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) whether it will renew its contract. If Kraft, part of the Philip Morris Co.—which also manufactures Virginia Slims cigarettes—decides to continue as the sponsor, the two groups have 45 days to hammer out an agreement.

Since Kraft is a global company, its association with the women's tennis tour—which will feature 67 tournaments in 22 countries in '93—seems like a perfect fit. Kraft contributes more than \$6 million a year to the tour and, along with Virginia Slims, is responsible for \$15 million in total financial support. Tom Keim, Kraft's director of event marketing, says he's pleased with what his company has been

SLIMS

able to achieve for women's tennis. And Gerry Smith, executive director of the WTA, believes Kraft is "a terrific sponsor of women's tennis." That harmony between tour and sponsor will be most obvious next year when the Kraft Tour introduces its "Blockbuster Events," at least one tournament each month, January through November, with prize money of at least \$750,000.

its product, devaluing its worth, which may be overvalued already.

Thirty-five of the tour's 67 events are characterized as Tier III and IV tournaments with prize money of either \$150,000 or \$100,000. The WTA has to supply players for these events, but the players they offer usually are not big names. Without a Monica Seles or a Steffi Graf to

look at how we're spending our money. Is the [tournament] successful?"

But Philip Morris is sending mixed signals. It did convert the Slims of Philadelphia into a "Blockbuster" event, increasing the purse from \$350,000 this year to \$750,000 in '93. And the Slims of Florida has moved sites—from Boca Raton to a new state-of-the-art stadium in Delray Beach—because of the capacity crowds it consistently draws. These are signs that the company is solidifying tournaments it knows are successful. But as Philip Morris pulls away from tennis, it has introduced a new promotion called the Virginia Slims Shopping Fling. Kicking off this year at civic centers in Dallas/Fort Worth, Baltimore and Atlanta, these shopping extravaganzas will charge a \$5 admittance fee for the opportunity to purchase designer clothes at 50 percent off retail. The money raised will be donated to AIDS projects in the various cities.

A tournament that was dropped from the Slims calendar this year is Oakland, an event the company had sponsored for 17 years. Again, Banks cites a business decision on Slims' part and suggests that a regional sponsor was best for the tournament's growth (Bank of the West, the ninth largest bank in California, is the new sponsor). Banks also says the Oakland event was too close to Slims events in Philadelphia and New York City (they were to be held in three consecutive weeks this month) and that the Slims tournament in Los Angeles is strong enough to carry California. But rumors abound that the reason Slims pulled out is because of the tournament's other sponsors, who refused to link up with a cigarette company.

Philip Morris is the nation's biggest cigarette seller, and the company relies heavily on tobacco sales. Last year, total tobacco sales accounted for 72 percent of the company's operating profits and the Marlboro brand alone pulled in 40 percent



Could protests force Slims to butt out of women's tennis?

But beneath the accord, ill will simmers. Keim admits to hearing rumors about the WTA's plans for sponsorship renewal—from no tour sponsor to no involvement by that sponsor in tour decisions. "There's a new rumor every week and they're distracting," he says. And company insiders say that by having to attach the "Kraft" moniker to the women's tour, the company is prohibited from advertising any one of the more than 3,000 products it manufactures. A consumer can't go out and buy a Kraft. For his part, Smith hasn't hidden his desire to upgrade the tour's image and marketing. He tried to reorganize the tour during last year's Championships, but couldn't find enough support. "I'd love to keep Kraft involved as our sponsor," he said at the time, "but it's clear that women's tennis is not achieving full marketing potential."

If Kraft bows out and another company doesn't come forward, the WTA will be forced to shop

attract crowds or sponsors, these events are not very profitable.

Another hurdle the tour may have to negotiate is what appears to be the waning interest of Virginia Slims, whose interest in women's tennis has been unquestioned for more than 20 years. Next year, Slims is sponsoring only six tournaments in the U.S.—Chicago; Delray Beach, Fla.; Houston; Los Angeles; Philadelphia; and the Championships. That's a dropoff of two from this year and half the number of events it sponsored in '91.

Sheila Banks, director of media affairs for Philip Morris, contends that the decrease is no more than a marketing decision. Explaining why the company stopped sponsoring the Virginia Slims of Albuquerque in '91, Banks says: "The event in Albuquerque didn't draw top-notch players, and the purse wasn't high. The crowds had not been what we had hoped for. When we look at something from a business standpoint, we have to

COURTESY SMOKEFREE EDUCATIONAL SERVICES INC.

of Philip Morris' operating profit.

Joe Cherner, president and founder of SmokeFree Educational Services in New York City, has been lobbying against the sponsorship of women's tennis by Virginia Slims for more than five years. "Virginia Slims is not the right sponsor for a sport that epitomizes good health in women," says Cherner, whose group will protest the Championships this month. "We're pro tennis. We just think women's tennis needs a new sponsor."

Cherner believes his campaign forced Virginia Slims' hand to abandon the Oakland event. According to Cherner, 7UP, one of the tournament's sponsors, pulled its financial support when the soft-drink manufacturer was besieged with complaints about working with a cigarette company. "Philip Morris is putting up a smokescreen that Oakland was a business decision," says Nancy Andrews, who coordinated Cherner's campaign in California.

Banks says that it's "almost laughable to think that the presence of a dozen or so people protesting our presence at a tournament would have any impact on the business decision of a big corporation like Philip Morris." She also defends Slims sponsorship of women's tennis. "I think very definitely that Virginia Slims has a place in sports, not just a place, but many people will say that the name Virginia Slims is synonymous with women's tennis. . . . We largely are responsible for the success of women's tennis."

But the fact is that opposition to smoking continues to grow. Smoking no longer has the cachet it once did. Congress mandated warning labels in 1965 and ordered tobacco companies to put the warnings in their ads in '69. Cigarette ads have been banned from TV since 1971 and smoking has been banned on virtually all domestic airline flights since 1990. Only in recent years has the relationship between sports and tobacco become an issue. Two years ago, Dr. Louis Sullivan, Health and Human

Services Secretary, called for tobacco to butt out of sports: "The sponsorship itself uses the vigor and energy of athletes as a subtle but incorrect and dishonest message that smoking is compatible with good health."

Citing figures that lung cancer has topped breast cancer as the leading cancer among women (51,000 women died of lung cancer last year), Sullivan said that

same time, you have to have some loyalty to the people who brought you to where you are today. And Virginia Slims was there when no one else gave a damn about women's tennis. Obviously, sports and cigarettes don't go together, but we are here because of them. . . . My answer was always that I don't tell people to start smoking. I just tell them if they smoke they

"Obviously, sports and cigarettes don't go together," says Navratilova, "but we are here because of Virginia Slims"

he found it "irresponsible" and "unconscionable" that tobacco companies would use events like women's tennis to promote smoking among women. Sullivan called upon owners of arenas and parks to stop allowing their facilities to be used for sporting events sponsored by tobacco companies and for sports promoters to stop accepting tobacco companies as sponsors.

Whether anti-smoking campaigns are the reason or not, Virginia Slims has made changes in recent years. Samples of the cigarette no longer are handed out at the entrances of tournaments. They are available at booths within the tournament site, but proof of age is required. The woman within the Virginia Slims logo, Ginny, now holds a tennis ball instead of a cigarette. The company has never asked players to use or endorse their product.

"The sponsorship has been a problem for women, and we have been trying to address it the best way we can," Martina Navratilova explained at last year's Championships. "But at the

might as well smoke Virginia Slims, which is probably not a good answer but that has been my answer for years."

Cherner doesn't believe women's tennis owes Virginia Slims anything. "Women's tennis has more than repaid its debt," says Cherner. "Philip Morris has addicted millions of young girls and made billions of dollars off its association with women's tennis. If Philip Morris liked women at all, it wouldn't be sponsoring women's tennis."

Smith allows that the relationship between his organization and a cigarette company is not "good business" and that it has "created publicity not in the best interest of women's tennis." But Smith also maintains that Virginia Slims has "conducted itself in the most impeccable manner you can expect." Smith has said that Virginia Slims can't take women's tennis to the next level, because it is a domestic company and because it can't invest in TV programming. "We need to align ourselves with international interests," says Smith. "That has nothing to do with Slims'

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lack of interest. God knows, they have brought women's tennis a long way, but they are a U.S. company."

Gladys Heldman, who was responsible for getting Virginia Slims involved in women's tennis in the first place, believes there's a fine line between what's appropriate sponsorship and what isn't: "Cigarettes are legal. How about alcohol? How about Neiman Marcus selling fur coats or hospitals polluting our waters with wastes? Where do you stop? As long as it's legal, I don't have a problem with the sponsorship. People will say you can't have Du Pont sponsoring tennis because they manufacture ammunition. I don't approve of ammunition, but I would accept their sponsorship."

Every year, the Virginia Slims Championships ends with a party for the players, media and tennis officials. In 1990 that party included an appearance by the singer Taylor Dane, for which she reportedly received \$100,000. That party will not be held this year. As someone inside the Slims organization has said, "People will come to free dinners, but is it worth it?" Ultimately, that may be the bigger question Kraft and Virginia Slims must answer. ●

Virginia Slims Championships Fast Facts

Site: Madison Square Garden,
New York City.

Dates: November 16-22.

Top Players: Top 16 women,
including Monica Seles, Steffi
Graf, Gabriela Sabatini, Martina
Navratilova, Arantxa Sanchez
Vicario, Mary Joe Fernandez and
Jennifer Capriati, and top 8
doubles teams.

Surface: Indoor supreme.

TV: Prime Network and ABC. See
page 96 for times and dates.

Prize Money: \$3 million; \$250,000
to the singles winner, \$90,000 to
doubles champs.

Defending Champions: Monica Seles,
singles; Navratilova-Pam
Shriver, doubles.