

WHEN THE SMOKE CLEARS FROM VIRGINIA SLIMS...

If the WIPTC and Virginia Slims part company, the new sponsor may need to overcome Slims' synonymous association with women's tennis

By Paul Kelly

Virginia Slims, sponsor of the worldwide women's tennis tour for 16 of the last 19 years, has become so synonymous with women's tennis that many people believe Virginia Slims *is* women's tennis—instead of a brand of cigarettes.

But Slims may not be the world title sponsor much longer. Anti-smoking groups have pressured the Women's International Professional Tennis Council to end its associa-

ment professors interviewed by *Sports Marketing News*, however, believe that a Slims successor can quickly create its own identity with a strong marketing program.

"I think it can be done because anything connected with smoking draws the public's attention," said Dr. Catherine Brown, coordinator of physical education and sports sciences at Ohio

that a new sponsor create its own identity quickly. "[The new sponsor] has to be ready to go as soon as it is picked up. If it isn't done within six months, forget it."

A successor could build upon Slims' diligent work since 1970.

"I think a new sponsor would cash in on what Slims has done," said Dr. Janet Parks, chairman of the sports

a subliminal link to the Virginia Slims.

"Maybe the title still could suggest something with 'slims,'" Lewis said. "I believe 'slims' suggests the glamorous side of tennis. It's looking attractive and feeling attractive."

Some professors said it would behoove a new sponsor to use players in television advertising, a luxury Slims doesn't enjoy because tobacco companies cannot advertise on television. "I feel that some of these women like Martina [Navratilova], Steffi [Graf], Chris [Evert] and Gabriela [Sabatini] have developed to a point where they have their own identity," Parks said.

Christine Brooks, director of the sport and fitness market research laboratory at the University of Michigan, said tennis stars could help a successor expand awareness of the sponsorship by promoting tennis at the grass-roots level. Brooks' research has shown that tennis players avidly watch tennis broadcasts on television.

"They somehow have to show that if star women players can do it, so can novice women," Brooks said. "I think the sponsor will find a different niche."

Richard Ensor, assistant professor of sports marketing at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, said while promotional budgets for sports sponsorships are usually three times the amount of the sponsorship fee, the promotional budget of the Slims' successor, will have to be four times the amount if it is to be successful.

"They'll have to spend much more money to educate the public," Ensor said. "I'm not so sure that there are many corporations out there who would be willing to do that."

Most professors said the successor should be a well-established conglomerate that markets female-oriented consumer goods. Most agree that the conglomerate should not use the name of a female-oriented household product in the series title. "I hope they don't make the mistake of associating the sponsorship with household products," Parks said. "It's denigrating to women."

Lewis said an apparel company would be an ideal sponsor because it could capitalize on the current popularity of casual sports clothing.

Sports marketing professors believe that with careful planning and large coffers, a new sponsor can make Virginia Slims synonymous with one thing—cigarettes.

And that's half the battle.



Steffi Graf won the 1987 Virginia Slims Championships in New York.

tion with cigarettes. And according to a WIPTC board member, the WIPTC is concerned that Congressional legislation introduced last year could prohibit sports sponsorship by tobacco companies.

Slims' three-year contract with the WIPTC expires after 1989, and many sources, influenced by the WIPTC's recent hiring of Advantage International to solicit other sponsors, believe the WIPTC will not renew Slims' contract.

On the surface, it appears that a successor to Slims would need more than just the reported \$35-45 million fee for a five-year worldwide sponsorship. A new sponsor must overcome Slims' synonymous relationship with women's tennis, a seemingly difficult and time-consuming task. Whereas most new sponsorships start at ground zero, a successor to Slims might begin at even less than zero.

The majority of American sports marketing and manage-

ment professors interviewed by *Sports Marketing News*, however, believe that a Slims successor can quickly create its own identity with a strong marketing program.

"It would not be that difficult because of the strength of the anti-smoking lobby," said Dr. Angela Lumpkin, professor of sports administration at University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. "I think they [the new sponsor] would be welcomed with open arms."

How long will it take to eliminate Slims' powerful legacy?

"It's going to take a couple of years," Lumpkin said. "The passage of time is a wonderful healer."

"I believe it could happen very quickly," said Dr. Guy Lewis, chairman of the department of sports administration at the University of South Carolina. "How soon we forget, especially if we get caught up in it."

Brown said for people to forget Slims, it is imperative

management division of Bowling Green State University.

"Rather than looking at what is negative, the new sponsor should look at what [Slims] has done that has been positive," said David Boskuil, director of student services at the U.S. Sports Academy.

Long-term commitment to women's tennis is crucial to a successor's fortunes. "It could work," said Dr. Richard Morrison, a professor of recreation and sport and fitness management at Northeastern University. "I'm sure there will be some corporation for which it will be worth it because of the visibility. They will have to go in it for the long-term."

A new sponsor will be faced with a dual marketing challenge—promoting the tour and promoting itself. A popular marketing philosophy among professors is to keep the word "slim" in any new promotions, thereby creating

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