

Where There's Smoke ...

By PAMELA MILLER
Surgeon General's Warning: Smoking Causes Lung Cancer, Heart Disease, Emphysema and May Complicate Pregnancy.

But it's done wonders for women's pro tennis. And that's where the controversy comes in.

The most recent round of debate over tobacco company sports sponsorships was fueled by the Health and Human Services Secretary, Dr. Louis Sullivan, who called a press conference to de-nounce the tobacco-backed Virginia Slims Tennis Tournament.

"Dr. Sullivan, is the most obscure member of the cabinet, and he saw [the issue] as a safe political podium to mount," contends Walker Merryman, vice president of the Tobacco Institute.

"When the tobacco industry sponsors an event in order to push their deadly product," Sullivan said in February, "they are trading on the health, the prestige and the image of an athlete to barter a product that will kill the user."

It's a trade that, despite public criticism, the Women's International Tennis Association (WITA) has been happy to make.

So happy, that when the WITA contract with Phillip Morris expired in 1988, the association signed a new one with the cigarette company good for another five years. The deal was struck despite a sponsorship bid by

Proctor and Gamble; renewed debate with anti-smoking groups, and other public criticism.

Under the new arrangement, however, through 1995, the women's tour is now under the umbrella sponsorship of Kraft, also owned by Phillip Morris. Despite its new name "The Kraft International World Tour," Virginia Slims retains the right to promote the event in certain markets. Of the total 64 matches, about 12 or 13 will carry the cigarette brand's name, says Ana Leird, WITA public relations director.

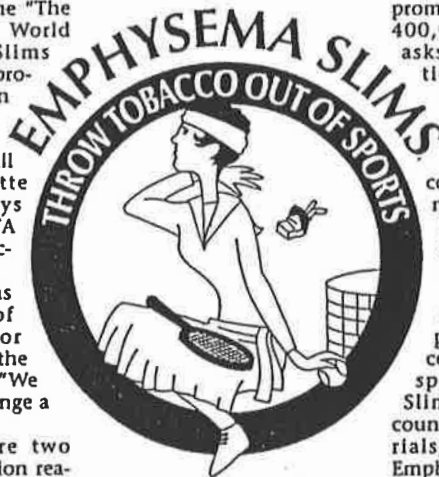
"Phillip Morris has provided a lot of opportunities for young women over the years," Leird says. "We see no reason to change a loyal relationship."

In fact, there are two decades and 23 million reasons to maintain it. Phillip Morris, whose contribution to the 1990 tour's purse rings in at \$23 million, was the sole supporter of women's tennis in 1970, when Virginia Slims sponsored the first U.S. women's pro tournaments offering a \$7,500 purse.

"The popularity of women's tennis is largely due to Phillip Morris," says Andrew White, a spokesman for the firm.

The obvious bias of White and Merryman notwith-

standing, a correlation does exist between the mid-seventies "tennis boom," the concurrent influx of women into the sport and Virginia Slims' financial backing of the pro tour.



Few dispute the debt owed Phillip Morris by women pro players. Martina Navratilova, Chris Evert and Billie Jean King have all spoken out for continuing the "loyal relationship." Yet some suggest that relationship need not continue indefinitely.

Eve Ellis, head teaching pro at Central Park's Eve Ellis School of Tennis, New York City, is a former pro

whose gratitude to Phillip Morris is not without limits. That was ten years ago, she says of the cemented relationship. "We know things now we didn't know then."

Among them; the lethal consequences of smoking.

"Is it appropriate for a major women's sport to promote a product that kills 400,000 people a year?" asks Jim Smith, promotional director for Doctors Oughta Care (DOC).

DOC was formed in 1977 to counter tobacco company promotions including sports sponsorships. DOC's own tennis tournament, Emphysema Slims, draws former tennis professionals and celebrities in an all-out spoof of the Virginia Slims event. Among its counter-promotional materials, DOC created an Emphysema Slims logo — a Virginia Slims look-alike sans cigarette — posters, bumper stickers and T-shirts that parody cigarette ads in an effort to throw tobacco out of sports.

And recent indications suggest that after spending more than a decade attempting to harrass WITA into kicking the habit, DOC may be closer than ever to its goal.

"I would be very surprised if the new [Phillip Morris] contract lasts five years," says DOC president Rick Richards.

Richards has reasons for optimism. First, the new generation of tennis powers, too young to remember the circuit's humble beginnings, won't be bound by the same tobacco ties as the women veterans.

Another recent development is the strong interest in the tournament expressed by other corporate sponsors.

"There would be no lost revenue [should WITA drop Virginia Slims]" Richards says. If Proctor and Gamble is any indication, some serious dollars are waiting in the wings.

In fact, now that the women's tournament is established, when it comes to local support, the tournament might be better off if it were to stop smoking now.

In Houston, Put Out Smoking In Tennis (POST) rallied against the Slims event there. And a bank in Albuquerque withdrew its substantial sponsorship money to avoid adverse publicity generated by the tobacco connection. According to the Albuquerque promoter, Sharon Walsh, Phillip Morris' contract prohibits her from discussing the controversy.

"We have had a profound effect," says Richards, "and raised the consciousness of good corporate citizens." In the end, he says "women's tennis will become increasingly embarrassed to be associated with a company whose product kills people."

COURT REPORT

Get out your Rolodex. Most of the tennis industry's biggest news items over the past couple of months have been about changes in key management personnel...First Mizuno signed Ivan Lendl to promote the company. Then it hired Larry Collins away from Yamaha Corporation of America to run its new tennis division. Can product be far behind? Don't look for anything to reach stores before the end of this year. But Collins promises that Mizuno will have a line of products ready for the Super Show in Atlanta. A full range of products is in the works including racquets, apparel, footwear and accessories. In the meantime, Lendl is playing in Mizuno brand products sold in Japan. It's speculated that he is playing a Mizuno-disguised Adidas racquet until his new sponsor develops its own equipment line...Over at Yamaha, David Orr is filling the position vacated by Collins. As national sales manager for tennis, Orr is in charge of all marketing and promotional activities...Donnay USA signed a long-term contract with International

Management Group (IMG), hiring the Cleveland, OH-headquartered firm to act as management consultant for the racquet maker's U.S. distribution, sales, marketing and promotional activities. Tom Seavy, who joins IMG from Nike where he served as head sales agent for the Northern California region, will head up the consulting team. As part of the deal, he has also been named president and chief executive of the racquet distributor. "We want to make Donnay a major brand," says Seavy. He predicts that the consulting arrangement will hike Donnay's sales up to \$10 million in the first year. What's ahead? Donnay is expected to move out of its U.S. headquarters in Williston, VT. Look for IMG to seek similar arrangements with other companies...Scott Rogers will be cleaning out his desk at Pro Kennex. Rogers, who has been the company's vice president of sales and marketing, is leaving the company to pursue personal interests. He told *Tennis Merchandiser* that he'd like to have more control of the direction of a company and that forming his own firm might be the best way for him to realize his goals. Rogers is also

thinking about leaving the tennis business. He may take up golf...Big changes at Ellesse USA. President Matt Chamlin and vice president, sales and merchandising, Bob Clancy, are no longer with the Reebok subsidiary. The two had been with the company just short of 18 months. No replacements for the two executives have been named. Instead, Marilyn Tam, who heads Reebok's apparel products division, has been put in charge of Ellesse...Martina Navratilova has signed a licensing agreement with designer Herman Gelst to design, manufacture, and distribute her new line of apparel. "MN by Herman Gelst." Along with traditional tennis items, the line will also feature a collection of garments made from washable leather. Navratilova says she's not trying to make a fashion statement with the leather line. "I'm trying to look good."...New Balance will be asking people to say yes to tennis, no to drugs, through 130 clinics this summer. Participating pros will be supplied with footwear and apparel...And Jimmy Connors signs an endorsement deal with Estusa.