

Sham news and sports events exposed

The nonsmokers' rights movement turns to political theater as a means of calling attention to tobacco company-sponsored events. The tobacco industry has for many years attempted to improve its own public image by linking itself (by means of money) to other businesses and groups. Tobacco marketers have even pretended to be part of athletics, music, and news.

By November 1981, Philip Morris had launched the "Merit Report," a purported public opinion survey that questioned



Protest by members of GASP of Massachusetts at Philip Morris' Virginia Slims Tennis Tournament, Newport, RI, July 1984.

the public on virtually any subject—except smoking and health. The real purpose of the Merit Report was to promote Merit as the "intellectual's cigarette." The company sent computerized vans nationwide; one of the first stops was Boston's City Hall Plaza. While Deputy Mayor Katherine Kane welcomed Merit's van to Boston, more than twenty GASP picketers captured the lion's share of media attention that day, decrying the misuse of the public plaza to promote Merit cigarettes. Although there had been plans for the Merit van to return to Boston within a year, it never has. The van was given a similar welcome in 1982 in Springfield.

GASP's appeal to Peter, Paul, and Mary thwarted RJ Reynolds' sponsorship of the "Camel Concerts on the Common" in the summer of 1982 (*NY State J Med* 1984; 84:162).

Perhaps the most outrageous tobacco-sponsored event of all is Philip Morris, Inc's Virginia Slims Tennis Tournament.



Logo of Emphysema Slims Tennis Tournament sponsored by medical students of the DOC chapter at the Medical College of Georgia, Augusta, March 1985. More such events are planned to call attention to the hypocrisy of tobacco company sponsorship of sporting events. At the tournament former Surgeon General Jesse Steinfeld, MD, presented DOC's First Annual W.A.R.M. Award (Worst Athlete Role Model) to tennis player Martina Navratilova for having worn the logos of brands of cigarettes on her tennis dress.

Since 1978 when a group of 35 physicians and medical students from DOC (Doctors Ought to Care) paid a "house call" on the tournament in Miami, renaming it the "Emphysema Slims" matches, protests have been mounted in Washington, DC, New York, New Jersey, Boston, Newport, RI, and other sites on the circuit. At a Virginia Slims press conference to kick off the 1983 Boston visit, the then-President of GASP, Rita Addison, much to the consternation of the tournament's promoters, asked Billie Jean King how she could allow herself to be associated with a product that would soon cause lung cancer to overtake breast cancer as the number one cancer killer of American women. Media coverage of the press conference focused on this issue and King's praise for Philip Morris.

GASP has protested each of the tournament's 1983 and 1984 visits to Boston and to Newport, and has distributed hundreds of leaflets to spectators. Virginia Slim's 1985 visit to Boston was canceled; in February 1986 it will come to Worcester.

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