

Football Sponsorship

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Sports sponsorship is a longstanding and effective form of indirect advertising for the tobacco industry, particularly in terms of increasing the uptake of smoking among young people.¹

Motorsports, golf, cricket, tennis, sailing and badminton are among many sports which have received tobacco money.^{2 3 4}

With one-fifth of the world's population, nearly a billion people, connected to football directly or indirectly, this sport provides the tobacco industry with a massive potential audience.⁵ By associating with football, the tobacco industry is able to increase brand awareness among key demographics in all parts of the globe, link their brand with images of health and success, normalise its presence and contribute towards its **corporate social responsibility** goals.^{6 7} Note: In this article we use the word football though in some countries the sport is more commonly known as soccer.

Tobacco pack advertising

The tobacco industry initially promoted its products as a means of maintaining an athletic physique.⁶ In the 1890s tobacco companies began producing collectible cards with images of football players. The cards, which featured cigarette advertisements, were placed inside cigarette boxes. The practise all but stopped during the Second World War due to paper and tobacco shortages, but companies such as Carreras, now **British American Tobacco** (BAT), continued advertising, putting images on cigarette cartons.^{6 8}

Tobacco brand names are still used to develop links with sport, including football. An analysis by *Kleb et al* looked at cigarette packs from 14 low- and middle-income countries to see how many had sports-related themes. It found 36 brands with distinct "sports appeal" including the use of football imagery and text. "The pack is a powerful medium through which tobacco companies continue to associate their products with idealised concepts associated with sports," the authors conclude.⁹



Football-themed cigarette pack produced by Semarange in Indonesia in 2015. Image from The use of sports imagery and terminology on cigarette packs from fourteen countries, <https://www.tandfonline.com/>

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Football star endorsements

Tobacco brands have used particularly well-known football stars to endorse their brands. In the United States in 1964, such testimonials were prohibited under the voluntarily Cigarette Advertising Code. However the code was widely felt to be ineffective and in other countries tobacco associations with the sport continued.^{10 11}

Where previously the England captain in the 1950s would be proudly pictured with a particular brand, now prominent footballers are often called out if seen smoking. Zinedine Zidane, Mario Balotelli and Fabien Barthez, are among those who have been criticised for setting a poor example.^{12 13}

Nonetheless, the attractiveness of using individual football stars continues – whether they wish to or not. In 2002, the English Football Association threatened legal action against BAT after the company used images of England World Cup captain David Beckham and star, Michael Owen, in newspaper advertisements in Malaysia.¹⁴ In 2012, Indonesian cigarette company **Gudang Garam** used its digital sports channel to form a link with Manchester United and England star Rio Ferdinand, before the footballer cut ties with the company. It subsequently focussed on motorsports content.

More recently, **VPZ**, which operates e-cigarettes stores in the UK and has financial links with Philip Morris International, launched a campaign on 10 March 2022 to coincide with National No Smoking Day, calling for a “complete ban on smoking”. The retailer enlisted the services of former Tottenham and Liverpool player Neil “Razor” Ruddock to act as the campaign ambassador. As part of its anti-smoking campaign, VPZ argued that “vaping is fundamental to reaching this target” and highlighted its “vape clinic” services.¹⁵

Since television money flooded into the game in the 1990s, football has vastly expanded its global reach. Its top stars have ever-greater global exposure and marketing power which continue to make them attractive targets for tobacco companies.

Sponsoring clubs, leagues and cups

Tobacco companies have sponsored football leagues, clubs and cups around the world. The practice is helped by the fact that the global governing body of football, FIFA, and its continental confederations such as UEFA, often have little authority over national leagues which are structured in a variety of ways. In these regulatory gaps tobacco companies continue to exploit football brands, in particular in the continents of Africa, Asia and South America.

An internal presentation from Philip Morris in 1994 outlined the benefits for targeting the Asian football market to promote the Marlboro brand. It said: “[Football] Perceived as a very masculine, somewhat rugged sport; very popular among YAMS [young adult male smokers], nicely complements F1 as a Marlboro property.” It proposed sponsoring regional and national cups and leagues and identified China, Indonesia, South Korea and Hong Kong as priority markets. It proposed spending US\$9m over three years sponsoring the China National Football League.¹⁶ That deal went ahead despite the fact there was a law banning tobacco advertising in sports stadiums.¹⁷ The sponsorship deal

did end a year later, partly due to the advertising ban. Marlboro had eventually paid more than US\$1.2m each year for the rights – which was twenty times more than the China Football Association's organisational budget. "The commercialization of Jia-A league opened a brand new era of Chinese sports," according to one study.^{18 19}

RJ Reynolds' Camel brand sponsored cup competitions in Uruguay (Mundialito Uruguay), Japan (Toyota Cup) and venues across Europe for the European Cup Winners cup in the 1980s. An internal analysis concluded that the European advertising had great potential but "it will be a slow and expensive process".²⁰ Tobacco companies have invested in that process.

In Jamaica, Craven A, produced by Carreras, was the title sponsor of the country's premier domestic league competition until the early 2000s.²¹ Tobacco companies have also sponsored domestic leagues in Colombia (Copa Mustang) and Indonesia (Liga Dunhill) as well as individual sides such as Austria Vienna (Memphis cigarettes) and FK Sarajevo in Bosnia and Herzegovina.²²

In 2017, Nyasa Manufacturing Company took ownership of Big Bullets FC in Malawi.²³ In 2020 Zimbabwe professional side Dynamos Football Club (known to its fans as DeMbare) agreed an increased sponsorship package with Gold Leaf Tobacco.^{24 25} Cairo's Eastern Company Sporting Club, also known as El Sharkia Lel Dokhan, is named after the Egyptian tobacco company, and in 2021 the company's top management asked all smokers to support the team in the Egyptian football league stating that "sports is the good image of the company".²⁶

In 2019, Djarum, an Indonesian tobacco company that ranks as the world's leading clove cigarette producer²⁷ bought an Italian football club called Como 1907, a team that plays in the Italian Serie B league.²⁸ The new owners brought in former England international Dennis Wise as CEO and have attracted young footballing talent as well as more well-known faces such as Spain's Cesc Fabregas.²⁹

The ownership of the club is actually via Djarum's subsidiary SENT Entertainment Ltd. Through Djarum's television arm Mola TV, it has developed a reality TV series called Dream Chasers: Garuda Select which followed 24 young footballers trying to succeed in Europe under the direction of Wise. This collaboration between sport and media has echoes of F1's successful Netflix series Drive to Survive which has been credited with increasing interest in the sport in America. Motorsport is a recipient of huge tobacco sponsorship given the opportunity to reach new young markets.^{30 31}

Djarum also owns a badminton club and has sponsored other sports events in the past.³²

In many cases the financial support offered by tobacco companies is vital for some clubs and it is not always about them being targeted by cigarette manufacturers. In 2001, the US Soccer Federation, the charitable arm of football in America, contacted Philip Morris about setting up a "Smoke Free Kids and Soccer Program" to distribute grants. "Obviously we are interested in your input and would love to hear any ideas you might have," the Foundation's associate director of development and outreach wrote.³³ Philip Morris already had years of investment in football in America, such as through the Miami Cup in the 1980s.³⁴

As well as these professional sides there is a tradition of works teams who took their official names from tobacco companies. These include BAT Sports FC in the UK, a club

originally formed by the workforce of British American Tobacco, and whose team was once nicknamed the 'tobacco men'.³⁵ Another example is the BSG Tabak Dresden, a German team that was named after the local tobacco manufacturer in the 1940s.³⁶

FIFA World Cup and Confederations Cup

American tobacco company **RJ Reynolds** was an official sponsor of the 1982 FIFA World Cup in Spain. Though Mexico had tobacco advertising bans in place when it hosted the 1986 World Cup, tournament organisers negotiated a deal which allowed RJ Reynolds to advertise. After 1986, FIFA announced that it would no longer accept sponsorships from the tobacco industry.³⁷ FIFA then introduced a ban on tobacco use at the 2002 World Cup in South Korea and Japan, but, four years later in Germany, the ban was dropped.³⁸

In 2005, the World Health Organization (WHO) **Framework Convention on Tobacco Control** banned "all tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship", and with the increasingly global nature of TV coverage and consequent bans on cross-border advertising, companies were forced to remove all cigarette branding.³⁹ FIFA, with help from the WHO, developed its own tobacco-free policy, and in South Africa in 2010, introduced a comprehensive ban on smoking during its competitions.⁴⁰

In 2017, FIFA updated its tobacco-free policy to include **heated tobacco products** (HTPs) and **e-cigarettes** (also known as electronic nicotine delivery systems, or ENDS).⁴¹

For the 2022 World Cup an agreement between FIFA, the WHO and the Government of Qatar prohibits smoking and the use of e-cigarettes in the stadium bowl and fan zones and only allows it in outdoor designated smoking areas in the outer perimeter of the stadiums. This will be enforced by tobacco monitors.⁴² One UK-based manufacturer of e-liquids has promised to pay the fines of England fans caught using such products.⁴³ Meanwhile Indonesian clove cigarette manufacturer Djarum, already one of tobacco companies most actively using sports to promote its products, will repeat its 2018 World Cup strategy of sponsoring community-based world cup screenings, including World Cup-themed promotional material.⁴⁴

UEFA European Football Championships

UEFA introduced a tobacco-free stadia policy in all its competitions in 2012, prohibiting the use, sale and promotion of tobacco and e-cigarettes in all internal and external areas of host stadia.⁴⁵ In 2014, **Healthy Stadia** studied the extent and nature of smoke-free policies operating at football stadia within Europe and found that only 10 of 22 countries with bans completely prohibited smoking.⁴⁶ The same study, which explored the legislative framework surrounding smoke-free stadia in Europe, showed gaps between legislation and practise.⁴⁶

The first European Championships staged under the policy was Euro 2012 in Poland and Ukraine, with the policy extending to France 2016.^{45 47}

The postponed 2020 European football championships saw the launch of a Tobacco-Free Declaration developed by the European Healthy Stadia Network to help clubs,

leagues and governing bodies develop tobacco-free policies. An updated survey found a marked increase in smoke-free stadia compared with 2014.

It showed that 29 out of 50 UEFA national associations responding were operating complete smoke-free policies, 21 had partial policies while three had no policies at all. In addition 51 of the 53 associations responding had policies prohibiting the sale and advertising of tobacco products and 26 had specific policies prohibiting e-cigarettes.⁴⁸

The Dutch Football Association is one of those with voluntary codes stronger than national legislation and aims to have all stadia and training areas smoke-free and no advertising or promotion of both conventional and [newer nicotine and tobacco products](#).⁴⁸

VIP facility at Bayern Munich's stadium in Germany sponsored by a tobacco company

UEFA national associations are only part of the football picture in each country. Examples such as cigar sponsorship at Germany's prestigious Bayern Munich ground show there are still gaps in the advertising and promotion ban.⁴⁹

During the 2020 UEFA Championships, British American Tobacco's [HTP brand glo](#) acted as official sponsor for the Italian national Football Federation, despite the Italian Ministry of Health and consumer rights organisations exposing it as illegal sponsorship of tobacco products.⁵⁰

Glo sponsorship of the Italian National Football Federation included a sales area in the Rome stadium, allowing fans to win and personalise glo products on site.⁵¹

A survey conducted by Tobacco Tactics found varying levels of compliance with such legislation. Spanish journalists reported a lack of awareness of legislation banning tobacco use at stadia and a general acceptance of smoking as a matter of culture. Journalists in Romania reported seeing occasional tobacco advertising since the autumn of 2019. By contrast, reporters in Denmark reported neither witnessing tobacco use, nor advertising in or around stadia and reported general compliance with laws.⁵²

- For more information see the Healthy Stadia [guidance on tobacco free stadia](#).

Promoting Newer Products

The uneven application of tobacco advertising bans has opened the door to advertising the growing sales of [newer nicotine and tobacco products](#) such as e-cigarettes and HTPs. Despite many countries now having smoke-free regulations inside stadia for domestic competitions, this does not always stretch to prohibiting the use of e-cigarettes and heated tobacco products (HTPs). For example, the English Football League does not prohibit them within its ground regulations.⁵³ One of the early examples of NGP manufacturers taking advantage of this is Birmingham City in the UK which in 2013 signed a sponsorship deal with local-based Nicolites to carry the e-cigarette logo on its first team shirts.⁵⁴ In Scotland, the sponsors of Rangers FC, launched a range of e-cigarettes flavours honouring the club's Ibrox brand.⁵⁵ Chinese e-cigarette companies have been forging links with football clubs. In 2021 Geekvape and French Ligue 1 giants Paris Saint-Germain agreed a deal "for co-branded products in

authorized countries”.⁵⁶ Innkin signed a sponsorship deal with the English Football League in October 2020.⁵⁷ Notionally this supposed to support smoking cessation campaigns in October but the deal has continued.

Also getting a boost from an association with football are [Snus](#) pouches. In 2018 it was reported that hundreds of professional footballers in the UK used the Scandinavian smokeless tobacco product despite its sale being banned. They included England star Jamie Vardy. One footballer said: “It’s big in the game.”⁵⁸

Closed Stadia During Covid-19 Pandemic

In 2020, most domestic league seasons were cancelled, delayed or shortened mid-season due to the [COVID-19](#) pandemic. Before the pandemic, domestic league matches across Europe drew audiences of 20 million to enclosed, or partially covered stadia, and matches were played behind closed doors once leagues resumed.⁵

Companies such as [Phillip Morris International](#) have exploited the lockdowns and referenced the COVID-19 pandemic in promoting special offers for home delivery of its HTP, IQOS, to Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Romania and Spain.⁵⁹ All four countries will be hosting matches in the UEFA 2020 European Football Championship matches.⁶⁰

However, the pandemic has also worked to enhance tobacco control policies in some instances. In Belgium, a general smoking ban was implemented in football stadia in October 2020 to aid the safe return of fans and discourage them from removing their masks. The Belgian Pro-League has now announced that it will become totally tobacco-free from the start of the 2021 season.⁶¹

- For more information go to our [COVID 19](#) resources page.

Related links

Healthy Stadia: [Tobacco-Free Stadia Guidance](#)

World Health Organization: [FIFA World Cup 2022 resources](#)

TobaccoTactics Resources

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