

# Editorial: Tobacco Sponsorship of Sport

Clive Bates, Director

Action on Smoking and Health, London

Published in *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 1999; 33(5): 299-300

In 1965 the UK Government banned television advertisements for cigarettes. This was the first response to the seminal report of the 1962 Royal College of Physicians report on tobacco and health. We now know that about 120,000 people die prematurely each year as a result of smoking, and millions are addicted to nicotine or harmed in other ways<sup>[1]</sup>.

Over twenty years after the TV advertising ban, surveys showed that almost two-thirds of schoolchildren still thought cigarettes were often or sometimes advertised on television<sup>[2]</sup>. What had happened? The tobacco industry's marketing budgets, like big balloons full of money, had been squeezed out of TV advertising but had bulged into sponsorship of sport - especially televised sport. Sponsorship is the continuation of tobacco advertising by other means - including through the previously inaccessible BBC. Embassy snooker achieved 376 hours of TV coverage and cumulative viewers of 385 million in the 1996-7 season.<sup>[3]</sup> Some sports have admirably resisted the tainted tobacco dollar - notably association football and the Olympics - but many others, such as cricket, rugby and snooker, have offered a willing vehicle for promoting tobacco. Sport, with its associations with action, youth, and offers excellent images and role models to the tobacco industry. This is especially important in recruiting young smokers - a process of exciting experimentation eventually consolidated by addiction. The approach is described in a tobacco industry internal document<sup>[4]</sup> as follows:

"a cigarette for the beginner is a symbolic act. I am no longer my mother's child, I'm tough, I am an adventurer, I'm not square ... As the force from the psychological symbolism subsides, the pharmacological effect takes over to sustain the habit."

When the Indian associate of the British American Tobacco group sponsored the Indian World Cup Cricket team in 1996 with its Wills brand, a survey showed that smoking among Indian teenagers increased five-fold. There was also a marked increase in false perceptions such as "*You become a better cricketer if you smoke Wills*" and "*teams with more Wills smokers will fare better*".<sup>[5]</sup> Contrary to the widely held perception among school kids, the Indian cricket team had no smokers at all. Sport sponsorship also helps to 'normalise' tobacco use and provide a rationalisation for continued use. For example one UK survey<sup>[6]</sup> put the statement; "*smoking can't be all that dangerous, or the Government would ban sports sponsorship by tobacco companies*" to over 4,000 11-16 year olds. Substantially more smokers agreed with this statement and only one in four (26%) disagreed, which suggests these young smokers were drawing reassurance from the association between sport and tobacco.

The major counter-argument advanced by the tobacco companies and their fellow travellers in sponsored sports is that promotional activities merely influence the choice of brand. This means, they claim, that the total amount of tobacco smoked, and therefore the harm caused, is not influenced by advertising campaigns. The influence of any advertising is hard to measure, but econometric studies do successfully correlate advertising expenditure and tobacco consumption<sup>[7]</sup>. Under the Conservatives, who had no wish to ban tobacco advertising, government economists found that *"The balance of evidence thus supports the conclusion that advertising does have a positive effect on consumption."* And where smoking had been banned: *"In each case the banning of advertising was followed by a fall in smoking on a scale which cannot be reasonably attributed to other factors."* (1994)<sup>[8]</sup> Studies by the World Bank (1999)<sup>[9]</sup> and US Surgeon General (1989)<sup>[10]</sup> reached similar conclusions. Honest advertising professionals are not surprised by the link between advertising and increased smoking - if an advertisement can persuade a consumer to switch tobacco brands, why shouldn't it switch expenditure from non-tobacco products, such as football tickets, beer or kebabs, to cigarettes? The World Bank's background paper on tobacco advertising<sup>[11]</sup> suggests the *"European Union's ban could reduce cigarette consumption by nearly 7 percent."* Even this relatively small reduction would translate to tens of thousands of avoided premature deaths in the European Union each year.

The Government and EU have acted to eliminate tobacco sponsorship by 2003, with an extension until 2006 for events organised at the World level.<sup>[12]</sup> This is both too slow and unnecessary, and the inescapable consequence will be more entirely avoidable death and illness - something that should weigh heavily in assessment of the risks to tobacco-sponsored sports. Despite dire warnings and much anguish among tobacco sponsored sports, tobacco sponsorship in Australia was phased out quickly and without casualties. We already see great progress in the biggest tobacco sponsored sport, Formula One. In July, the Williams team announced it would replace Rothmans with BMW as its prime sponsor. Other automotive and electronics companies are assessing their opportunities. Few will be prepared to be as generous as tobacco and some modest downsizing may be needed, but in Formula One the tobacco money simply fuels grossly inflated drivers' salaries and a technology 'arms race' that has deprived the sport of some of its excitement. The delay to 2003 or 2006 in phasing out tobacco sponsorship is a mistake. New sponsors will be reluctant to start negotiations in competition with the tobacco companies until there are events available to sponsor. We suspect that nothing much will happen until 2002, then there will be a flurry of intense activity. Suppose the Government had announced that Embassy World Cup Snooker would need a new sponsor in 2000. Does anybody seriously believe that a new sponsor, interested in hundreds of hours of TV coverage, would not be found? Under current proposals snooker will have until 2006 to find new sponsors.

It is important to recognise the consequences of tobacco promotion through sports sponsorship. Through a chain of cause and effect, tobacco sponsorship helps to nurture smoking in children and adults, which ultimately leads to illness and untimely death. Delaying until 2003 or 2006 just prologs the agony.

## References

- 
- [1] Callum C. *The UK Smoking Epidemic: Deaths in 1995*. Health Education Authority, 1998.
- [2] Carrick James Market Research, quota sample of 5-16 year olds, 1989 for the Health Education Authority, *Beating the Ban*, 1990.
- [3] World Professional Billiards & Snooker Association, *A sport made for television*: Embassy World Snooker web site: [www.embassysnooker.com/Guide/Page\\_3.asp](http://www.embassysnooker.com/Guide/Page_3.asp)
- [4] Philip Morris, Vice President for Research and Development, *Why one smokes*, 1969. Minnesota Trial Exhibit 3681
- [5] Vaidya SG, Naik UD, Vaidya JS, *Effects of sports sponsorship by tobacco companies on children's experimentation with tobacco*. British Medical Journal August 1996; 313, 400.
- [6] Mori Research Ltd, Schools Omnibus Survey, 1996.
- [7] Andrews, RL and Franke, GR. The determinants of cigarette consumption: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* 1991; 10: 81-100.
- [8] Smee, C. *Effect of tobacco advertising on tobacco consumption: a discussion document reviewing the evidence*. Economic & Operational Research Division, Department of Health, 1992.
- [9] Chaloupka F. et al. World Bank, *Curbing the Epidemic: Governments and the Economics of Tobacco Control*. Washington, May 1999.
- [10] US Surgeon General, *Reducing the Health Consequences of Smoking - 25 years of progress*, 1989
- [11] Saffer, H. *The Control of Tobacco Advertising and Promotion*, Background Paper cited in Chaloupka et al. World Bank op cit. Page 51.
- [12] European Union Directive 98/43/EC