9 Reasons Why Alcohol Ads Don’t Belong in College Sports

1. Arizona State University, Ohio State University, Texas Tech University and the Universities of Florida, Minnesota, and Nebraska support a national effort to eliminate alcohol advertisements in college sports. They are among more than 365 NCAA-member schools and 16 athletic conferences in endorsing the Campaign for Alcohol-Free Sports TV’s “College Commitment.” Other prominent voices for change include college sports leaders Tom Osborne, John Wooden, Joe Paterno, Rene Portland, Jim Calhoun, Grant Teaff, and Dean Smith.

2. Alcohol is the number one drug of choice among young people. Underage drinkers consume between 10 and 20 percent of the alcohol in the United States. Alcohol is a significant factor in the four leading causes of death among persons ages 10 to 24: motor-vehicle crashes, unintentional injuries, homicide, and suicide. Underage drinking costs Americans nearly $62 billion annually due to alcohol-related traffic crashes, violent crime, burns, drowning, suicide attempts, alcohol poisonings, fetal alcohol syndrome, and treatment of alcohol abuse. Drinking that begins in high school often continues into college; and many students begin drinking more frequently and regularly once in college.

3. Underage drinking and excessive alcohol consumption threaten student health and safety. Student alcohol use can lead to a multitude of problems for the drinker, other students and the surrounding community. Many students drink heavily, and more than four in ten students drink at “binge” levels — consuming five or more drinks on at least one occasion in the past 30 days. Binge drinkers are more likely to be injured, assaulted, sexually assaulted, do something they regret, forget where they were or what they did, cause property damage, get into trouble with police, have lower GPAs, and lower income potential. Research has begun to document the damaging effects alcohol has on developing brains.

4. The costs of student drinking plague college campuses nationwide. Colleges and universities often end up paying for the effects of student drinking. Monetary costs include: campus property damage (dorms, stadiums, etc.), lost tuition from drop outs and failures, college personnel who have to deal with the alcohol-related issues, college counseling centers, security staff, administrative hearings on academic and disciplinary cases, and the potential of litigation for harms caused by underage drinking and excessive alcohol consumption. Intangible costs include: strains in the relationship between colleges and the surrounding community, a diminished reputation, and the time lost and stress felt by college administrators and personnel who work on alcohol-related issues.
Underage drinking, excessive consumption, and alcohol problems often convene prominently in college sports. While they take place in an environment dominated by young people as athletes and fans, college sports — particularly football and basketball — have become important venues for marketing and advertising beer. College students who are sports fans are more likely to engage in binge drinking behavior, including adopting extreme drinking styles and participating in drink price specials. Colleges are cracking down on tailgating to discourage binge drinking and reduce alcohol-induced, unruly fan behavior. News stories abound covering student athletes suspended for alcohol use, out-of-control fans damaging property, and alcohol-fueled riots wreaking havoc in college communities.

Alcohol advertisements encourage young people to drink. Recent evidence has more closely linked teens’ exposure to alcohol advertising with more frequent and heavier drinking. Those ads tell the wrong story about sports — they reach too many underage persons and undermine the positive values that sports contribute to the lives of young people. Underage students who watch the games are needlessly and relentlessly exposed to promotions to drink. The advertisements also exploit the many underage players whose performances attract viewers — young and old — to the ads.

Beer advertisements undermine the educational missions of colleges and the NCAA. The NCAA’s general advertising policy “exclude[s] those advertisements that do not appear to be in the best interests of higher education.” The policy bans ads for cigarettes, other tobacco products, organizations promoting gambling, and alcoholic beverages. Strangely, it makes an exception for beer! In 2004, the beer industry spent more than $68 million to advertise alcohol during college sports programming; and that level of spending may be even higher today. Given the problems of underage and excessive drinking on college campuses, beer ads during NCAA telecasts are not in the best interests of higher education — or of the nation’s young sports fans. Andy Geiger, former Athletic Director at Ohio State University, sums it up best: “It's inconsistent to say you want to discourage underage drinking and turn around and huckster the stuff on your broadcasts.”

Alcohol ads are not an essential source of revenue for colleges and the NCAA. In 2003, only 4.5% of the total advertising dollars spent on college sports telecasts were for beer ads. That amount is a small part of most athletic department budgets and an insignificant part of overall college budgets. Over time, those revenues can be replaced. Many colleges and athletic conferences thrive without alcohol advertising dollars. Even the Big Ten Network prohibits advertising for alcohol beverages on its new satellite sports channel. Institutions of higher education should be able to figure out how to replace the modest amount of money they receive from alcohol ads.

Americans overwhelmingly support restrictions on alcohol advertising during televised college sports. Three in four Americans express concern about underage and binge drinking on college campuses and they think it is wrong for universities to make money from beer advertising on college sports. 69% of Americans believe that airing beer commercials on college sports programs is inconsistent with the mission of colleges and universities. 77% of parents say it is wrong for colleges to take money from beer companies that promote drinking while at the same time trying to discourage underage and binge drinking among their students. 84% of Americans think beer advertising on college games is not in the best interests of higher education.


September 2008