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Nutrition Action Healthletter (ISSN 0885-7792) is published 10 times a year (monthly except bi-monthly in Jan./Feb. and Jul./Aug.).

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MEMO FROM MFJ

Olympic Error



Soft drinks likely contribute to obesity more than any other single food or beverage. And obesity increases the risk of diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and cancers of the breast, colon, esophagus, kidney, and uterus.

So why is Coca-Cola the major corporate sponsor of the Vancouver 2010 Olympics?

In fact, Coca-Cola has been a "corporate partner" of the Olympics since the 1928 Amsterdam Games. And that will remain the case at least through 2020, says the company.

Ironically, British Columbia health officials pledged to make BC the healthiest location to ever host an Olympics. After all, it's the only province to get trans fat out of restaurants and may be the first to require calorie labelling on restaurant menus.

(It didn't do too well on the smoking front, though. Thanks to objections from several international sport federations, the "smoke-free" Olympics ended up with "designated outdoor smoking areas" for coaches and officials.)

Here's why the Coke-Olympics connection is so harmful.

The underfunded World Health Organization is trying to help countries trim the human and economic costs of diet-related disease. Some ideas that are percolating: label added sugars in processed foods, limit marketing to children, get junk foods out of schools, and protect precious healthcare budgets.

But efforts like those are undermined when the powerful International Olympic Committee (IOC) teams up with multinational giant Coca-Cola.

The company scored a steady stream of media attention as the Coca-Cola torch, accompanied by free Cokes and Coca-Cola paraphernalia, passed through every province in the westward trek to Whistler.

At the games, Coca-Cola was able to sell its drinks to a captive audience of 5,000 athletes and 1.85 million ticket-holding spectators. Add to that the unparalleled advertising opportunity, as billions of eyes across the globe were trained on athletic events over a fortnight.

Coca-Cola is under attack from health experts in North America and elsewhere for promoting obesity, so the company is willing to pay big bucks to associate its brand with athleticism, clean living, and health.

Using the talented athletes as bait, Coca-Cola has no doubt convinced millions of children, in Canada and around the world, that it is a responsible, health-conscious corporate citizen.

As Coca-Cola's ads were being drummed into people's heads at every opportunity, did you hear anything about soft drinks' contribution to obesity, or the tooth-eroding effect of pop, or the health benefits of drinking tap water? Didn't think so.

Too bad the IOC doesn't recognize the inconsistency of having a global junk-food peddler sponsor the Olympics. What's next? The La-Z-Boy Games of 2012? The Seagram Games of 2014?

"Coke adds life," goes the marketing slogan. They got their math wrong. Coca-Cola doesn't add. It subtracts.

Michael F. Jacobson, PhD
Executive Director
Centre for Science in the Public Interest



A Coca-Cola wrapped in an Olympic flag is still a Coca-Cola.

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