April 3, 2009

President Myles Brand
National Collegiate Athletic Association
700 W. Washington Street
P.O. Box 6222
Indianapolis, Indiana 46206-6222

Dear President Brand:

We write again to urge the NCAA to review its alcohol advertising policy and make a concerted effort to reduce the exposure of countless numbers of young people and college students to advertising for beer during the basketball tournament. We wholeheartedly agree with Executive Committee chair President Michael Adams’ assertion last August that “[beer advertising] is inappropriate in (college sports).” That statement reflects a growing consensus within the NCAA membership that promoting drinking is at odds with colleges’ responsibilities to students and the broader community.

The NCAA advertising policy merely pretends to limit beer ads. Far from being the most “conservative and restrictive” alcohol advertising policy of any televised sport, its limit of 60 seconds of beer ads per hour — or 120 seconds total per game — results in a concentration of beer advertising spending that is more than two and a half times that on TV generally. TNS Media Intelligence data for the 2008 NCAA Men’s Basketball Tournament ranks the beer category — Anheuser-Busch and Miller brands — second to automobiles in spending; brewers bought a combined $42.8 million in air time to promote beer during telecasts of last year’s tournament.

The NCAA can do without beer ads. The tournament’s enormous popularity virtually assures that beer ads would be replaced (at least in substantial part) by ads for products that do not compromise the missions of higher education and college sports. TNS reports record CBS ad sales for the tournament. Total ad revenues from the 2008 games increased 24% from the previous year, with ad spending reaching an all-time high of $643 million. The NCAA Tournament brings in the second highest ad revenue for all post-season sports, and only the Super Bowl generates a higher ad rate than the NCAA men’s basketball championship game. The tournament has solid support among a wide range of advertisers, numbering 300 different advertisers since 1998. It also brings in new potential marketers each season, and its revenues continue to increase.

Beer advertisements have real effects on young people. They reinforce and normalize drinking behavior and undermine campus prevention efforts. Recent research strengthens the link between teens’ exposure to alcohol ads and more frequent and heavier drinking. The wildly popular “March Madness” basketball tournament attracts a large underage audience — including
college students — who receive steady reminders to drink. The content of the beer ads aired during this year’s games invariably includes adolescent humor that appeals to young people and touts the concept of “drinkability,” an Anheuser-Busch-acknowledged euphemism for putting a lot of it away.

Underage drinking and excessive alcohol consumption have real and disastrous consequences. Student drinking problems continue to plague most campuses and strain relations between college administrators, community residents, and town officials. Those problems often increase during college sporting events. As a result, the true intent of college athletics — spirited competition among talented student athletes — often takes a back seat to game day traditions that revolve around alcohol. Excessive drinking too frequently leads to out-of-control fans and alcohol-fueled riots in college communities, causing many schools to adopt policies discouraging binge drinking and reducing alcohol-induced, unruly fan behavior. Promoting beer during college games mocks administrators’ efforts to manage those problems.

We respectfully urge you and the NCAA to make the principled decision to eliminate beer advertising during the basketball tournament and other NCAA college sports telecasts. Doing so would truly be consistent with the missions of higher education and the NCAA, and, most importantly, would be in the best interests of the student athletes and other young people.

Sincerely,

Tracy T. Downs
Manager
Campaign for Alcohol-Free Sports TV

George A. Hacker
Director
Alcohol Policies Project
Center for Science in the Public Interest

cc: Wally Renfro, Vice President and Senior Advisor