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Can beer ads during hoops

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Michael Starks at Utah State, Kambili Moukwa at Penn and Arman Partamian at SUNY-Geneseo: three recent alcohol-related collegiate deaths. They're among about 1,700 such deaths each year. Thousands more young lives are disrupted or destroyed. Any college president will point to student alcohol use as the most serious and costly concern on campus today.

Despite such tragedies, many in higher education continue to market beer to their underage students and other young viewers during televised college sporting events. And no college sports event is more awash in beer ads than the NCAA men's basketball tournament.

The NCAA's refusal to eliminate beer ads — after requests from a third of its member institutions and hundreds of coaches, athletic directors and youth advocates around the country — demonstrates a callous disregard for its mission to serve the best interests of higher education, college athletics and student athletes. It undermines colleges' efforts to address student alcohol problems and demeans the values of college sports.

On its face, the NCAA's advertising and promotional policy seems reasonable enough. Its rules "exclude those advertisements and advertisers ... that do not appear to be in the best interests of higher education and student-athletes." In

fact, they ban ads for cigarettes, other tobacco products, gambling and *every other alcoholic beverage except beer*. NCAA rules specifically exempt the one drink that is most consumed and abused by college students. The policy clashes with other NCAA alcohol-related guidelines that prohibit on-site alcohol advertising and sales during tournament events.

The NCAA says there are limits on the number and running time for ads that appear during the tournament games and boasts that its policy is the most "conservative and restrictive" of any televised sport. That claim is an air ball.

The limit of 60 seconds of beer ads per hour — or 120 seconds total — results in a concentration of beer advertising spending that is more than 2½ times that on TV generally. Data for 2007 reveal that Anheuser-Busch and Miller figured among the top five advertisers during the games, and beer ranked second to cars in spending.

A recent comparison found the 2008 NCAA Final Four games had twice the number of beer ads than the 2008-2009 Bowl Championship Series football games. One prominent bowl game, the Chick-fil-A Bowl, allowed no beer ads or in-stadium signage. According to Sports Business Journal, the 2007 game was also alcohol-free and raked in revenues that matched those of other college bowl games, including a few in the BCS. Similarly, the Big Ten

Sports Network refuses to accept alcohol advertising, deeming it inconsistent with its brand. It also seems to be doing just fine.

Last August, while announcing that the NCAA would continue to advertise beer during the tournament, executive committee chairman and University of Georgia President Michael Adams acknowledged that "we don't think this type of advertising is appropriate."

Surely there are ads that could replace the beer ads, such as ads for cars, electronics, athletic equipment, telecommunications, sportswear, deodorant, films and, of course, food. Phased in over time, this should be possible without sacrificing revenue.

Sports, especially at the college level, are about competition, camaraderie, teamwork, athleticism and good health. They provide a learning experience for young people and a fundamental building block of childhood development.

The NCAA demeans itself, college sports and higher education by allowing its tournament to be exploited by beer companies, whose essential business model requires that they attract young drinkers and keep them drinking for life.

That's the real March madness the tournament presents, and it's time for it to stop.

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