



Alcohol advertising in sports under fire for 'grooming child drinkers'

Health & Fitness April 18, 2013 By: Scott Stevens

Doctors in Ireland are demanding a ban on alcohol sponsorship of sporting events, warning the beverage alcohol industry is “grooming child drinkers.” Sporting bodies are “very much in the alcohol industry’s pocket,” a communications regulatory committee was told April 17 by representatives of the College of Psychiatrists of Ireland (CPI).

The proposed ban is similar to smoking advertising bans in the United States, which forced a sponsorship change for NASCAR's top racing series from the Winston Cup to the Sprint Cup.

Dr. William Flannery of the CPI said the alcohol industry was targeting adolescent children and advertising was linked to the early onset of alcohol use disorders – alcohol abuse and the disease of alcoholism. Medical and youth advocacy groups in the U.S., where one in four minors are drinking (see related examiner article), are watching developments in Ireland and other countries while pushing for similar sports advertising bans in the U.S.

Alcohol companies spent more than \$1 billion on U.S. sports sponsorships and advertising in 2012, from local events to the Super Bowl. If such a ban is successful in the U.S., it would challenge how professional sports and broadcasters generate revenue. For example, Chicago's Rock and Roll half marathon would have to replace official sponsor Michelob Ultra. Nearby, Milwaukee's Miller Park may need to seek a new naming-rights partner other than the Miller-Coors brewery a half mile away in the cradle of America's beer industry.

U.S. alcohol industry watchdog Alcohol Justice has sports advertising in its crosshairs. Their Free Our Sports Youth Film Festival project, which honored it's winners this month, is a call to eliminate alcohol advertising, sponsorships, branding and promotions from every sport. Each entry from youth aged 10-20 generated letters targeting the CEOs of the three top alcohol producers, demanding that they stop using sports events to promote alcohol consumption.

According to the group, “As alcohol-marketing tactics increase in complexity and frequency, they significantly influence youth expectations and attitudes, creating an environment that promotes underage drinking.” Alcohol Justice points to a 2004 survey showed that 75 percent of adults back a ban of alcohol advertising in youth-oriented media, including sports broadcasts.

“There is no product on the planet that could cause children more harm,” CPI's Flannery said. “They are the real targets of alcohol sponsorship.”

The CPI noted that organizations such as the World Health Organization have shown the major effects alcohol marketing and advertising can have on young people in terms of when they begin drinking and how much they consume. “Teenagers' brains are still developing so drinking alcohol at this crucial stage interferes with that development and slows it down,” explained Flannery. “The teen years are crucial stages for developing skills and confidence in how to deal with social situations and various problems that life throws at us. If they are consuming alcohol in these years then their ability to deal with life's challenges in their twenties is impaired as they may only have coped in these circumstances by using alcohol.”

Among several other countries regulating, or trying to regulate, alcohol in sports advertising are Australia, the United Kingdom and France. In Australia, where the alcohol industry has a voluntary ad regulation system, an Australian Alcohol Advertising Review Board (AARB) was formed in 2012 due to complaints of companies targeting young people through sport sponsorship. AARB chair professor Fiona Stanley says, "What reason can there be to expose young people and children to the association of alcohol with their sporting heroes or with behaviors such as driving fast cars and surfing?"

In the U.K., lawmakers are considering a total ban on sporting event alcohol advertising as part of sweeping reforms aimed at stemming the U.K.'s swell of alcohol use disorders and underage drinking. Currently there are complicated rules governing alcohol advertising saying that ads cannot be included around programs or films where more than 10 percent of the audience is under 18. (In the U.S. the standard is 30 percent.)

France brought in a ban on alcohol sponsorship in sports in 2011. Rugby's Heineken cup is called the 'H' cup there.

Is such a ban possible in the U.S.? Alcohol Justice notes that in recent years, public health advocates and lawmakers have become reticent to enact new or enforce current restrictions on alcohol advertisements, citing court rulings backing free-speech rights. "However, with each ruling, courts have continued to clarify their position regarding the regulation of advertising. As a result, through careful drafting, state and local governments can still restrict alcohol advertising. Moreover, governments can look to crafting restrictions that effectively minimize youth exposure while addressing 21st-century advertising tactics. The scientific evidence is clear that the more ads kids see, the more likely they are to drink, and drink to excess."