

NCAA sides with beer industry at the expense of students



GEORGE A. HACKER

An amazing thing happened following a meeting of the NCAA's executive committee last month. University of Georgia President Michael Adams, speaking on behalf of the committee, reported that "we don't think [beer advertising] is appropriate for [college sports]." That revealing admission reflects, for the first time, a clear public discomfort within the NCAA concerning the association of college sports and beer promotion.

The executive committee had an opportunity to protect the best interests of student athletes and other young people by removing beer ads from NCAA telecasts. More than 400 college presidents, athletic directors and coaches recently called on the NCAA governing body to change its advertising policy, even offering a suggestion to phase out the beer ads gradually. However, the executive committee ignored the values of the NCAA and higher education by once again refusing to adjust its flawed advertising policy and its alliance with beer marketers.

Former University of North Carolina basketball coach Dean Smith put it best when he asked, "If aspirin were the leading cause of death on college campuses, do you think chancellors, presidents and trustees would allow aspirin commercials on basketball and football telecasts?" Not for a minute.

You wouldn't know that the NCAA's advertising rules plainly "exclude those advertisements and advertisers ... that do not appear to be in the best interests of higher education and student athletes" and explicitly prohibit ads for most alcoholic beverages. NCAA advertising rules ban ads for cigarettes, other tobacco products, organizations promoting gambling, and alcoholic beverages, yet they permit ads for beverages with alcohol content of 6 percent or less (beer). The NCAA also prohibits all on-site alcohol advertising during its tournament events and forbids the sale of all alcoholic beverages.

Last month's advertising policy review, if not its result, has begun to take



Riots after college sports teams' wins or losses are often fueled by binge-drinking students.

those standards more seriously by questioning the appropriateness of airing beer ads during college sports. That's not a great surprise, given widespread understanding that beer drinking results in so much obvious harm on college campuses.

Across the nation, nearly 45 percent of college students are binge drinkers — consuming five or more drinks on at least one occasion in the past 30 days — according to the Harvard School of Public Health college alcohol surveys. Those students too often get into trouble with the law, get into fights, suffer and cause injuries, cause and suffer sexual victimization, get sick, and jeopardize their college education. Heavy drinking disrupts the lives of other students and community residents. Most college officials agree that student drinking is their biggest headache. Colleges invest heavily in treatment and prevention programs to reduce abusive drinking and for law enforcement and disciplinary actions to punish inappropriate and even criminal behavior.

Sports, particularly football and men's basketball, are the nexus of underage and excessive drinking among students, and the results are not pretty.

Sports fans are more likely to engage in binge drinking, and many student athletes have been suspended for alcohol use and its consequences. Alcohol-fueled fans have rampaged after team wins and losses, damaging property, battling police, setting fires, and wreaking havoc in numerous college communities.

Alcohol advertisements encourage young people to drink. They build expectations about drinking, and, according to an evolving body of research, teens' exposure to alcohol advertising has been linked to more frequent and heavier alcohol consumption.

Should the NCAA be helping to bring young people to beer ads?

Last April, 115 college presidents and athletic directors urged NCAA President Myles Brand to end all alcohol advertising, including beer, on future NCAA sports telecasts. Those presidents and athletic directors are part of a growing movement that numbers some 360 colleges (about one-third of the NCAA's membership), 16 athletic conferences, and hundreds more athletic directors and college coaches committed to eliminating beer advertising during college sports telecasts.

University of Memphis basketball coach John Calipari noted that coaches have to deal with alcohol issues among their players. "[W]e're saying we don't want these kids to drink, but we want to take the money from the companies that are advertising to these players about drinking. ... We shouldn't do it."

When the NCAA governing bodies convened in Indianapolis in early August, they missed an opportunity to make real progress. They could have listened to the organization's members and ended the embarrassing promotion of beer in college sports. They could have followed the lead of the Big Ten, which last year prohibited all alcohol advertising on its new, independent sports television network, asserting that such advertising was inconsistent with the Big Ten brand and those of its members.

Regrettably, the NCAA ignored the rational approach put forward by its members — a three-year gradual phase-out of beer ads — that would allow all parties time to adjust and permit CBS, which broadcasts NCAA's basketball championship tournament, to find other advertisers.

NCAA athletes show amazing skills and courage on the field and on the court. Their athleticism and talent exemplify the importance and highest values of sports. Sadly, the NCAA's decision on beer ads and its choice to put the interests of the beer industry over the best interests of higher education and student athletes reflects a continuing lack of courage.

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