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Let's Talk About Drugs Media Awards.

Alcohol and sport – who is the winner?

Irish sports attract large audiences across a wide age spectrum. Consequently drink producers target sports participants and supporters by hard marketing ploys, from branding leagues to sponsoring teams. With alcohol consumption on the rise, costing society an estimated €3.7 billion per year, this is causing concern.

The Royal College of Physicians in Ireland states: “Alcohol is a drug, and as such can no longer be perceived as a normal component of sporting activity. We are of the view that alcohol sponsorship of sports events and organisations should be phased out.” They express particular concern about the effects of alcohol on young people, who are showing earlier signs of illnesses such as liver disease. Young people are encouraged to participate in sports for fitness and to promote community values.

An advertisement for alcohol must be shown during evening television, or in an adults' publication. Restrictions govern how much consumption can be shown, while models must be over 25 and look over 30. On the other hand, sponsoring a sport gets the brand name up front – literally, on shirts or in front of the name of the trophy or league. People of all ages see this product placement and it can be repeated in media reports.

Sports undoubtedly benefit from sponsorship; a company provides prize money, a competitor can concentrate on training without having to work, a team is supplied with quality equipment. Notably drink companies do not support small-bore rifle shooting, pole vaulting, parallel bars gymnastics – all Olympic sports. They fund mass media events, team sports, competitors who are national celebrities. Does it work? And if they stopped the cashflow, what would fill the gap?

Liu Xiang, China's first Olympic gold medallist in men's track and field events, became one of the biggest celebrity icons for that country, garnering sponsorship from global and local companies; in 2007 alone he was estimated to have earned US\$23.8 from endorsements. Celebrities in sport are asked to endorse products or firms in order to build brand awareness and boost brand image. Liu Xiang endorsed soft drinks, sportswear, credit cards, insurance, telephones, dairy products, information technology and others. This indicates clearly

that other types of firm are interested in and can benefit from a connection with sport. Close links with an individual may be risky; Liu pulled out of the Beijing Olympics with an injury whereas other celebrities have revealed toxic private lives or habits. But sponsoring an entire league or trophy means there will always be a winner. Attitudes among the public vary.

“I only really got into sports at university,” says Jason. “I joined a club to meet people and the sociable drink afterwards was as important as the match.”

“I train my own horse for showjumping,” says Cliona. “By the time I’ve driven home with the horsebox, groomed her and stabled her for the night, I’ve neither time nor money for drinking.”

“I enjoy a day at the races,” says Pat. “I’d love to have a drink in the racecourse bar but I’m a bus driver, I couldn’t afford to lose my licence.”

“I worry that my children can recognise drink logos and recite the names, just from watching football,” complains Rita.

Paradoxically, top sports competitors cut alcohol out of their diet while in training. Jockeys very seldom drink because with weight restrictions they cannot afford the empty calories, and they are not permitted to drink on a racetrack by the Rules of Racing. Jockeys in Ireland currently have sponsors including hotels, sportswear, insurance and car showrooms.

During the 1980s tobacco firms sponsored showjumping in Ireland, including our most prominent competitors. Growing awareness of health issues forced a change. Now the Department of Health is looking at the connection between alcohol, sport, and young people.

Alcohol is implicated in illnesses ranging from gout to diabetes and is a major cause of heart disease and some cancers. Alcohol is also a factor in at least half of all suicides. The cost of treating alcohol-related injuries and diseases is an estimated €1.2 billion per year, while alcohol-related absenteeism, road deaths and crime bring the estimated cost to €3.7 billion annually. Understanding health issues has changed society’s attitude to smoking, and according to a poll by the Health Research Board, 85% of Irish people believe that the current level of alcohol consumption is too high.

At present, sports and drink producers are both winning. But if the link was severed, other sponsors would step forward to fill the gap, having seen the extent of product placement they would receive, and Irish society would be the winner all around.

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