

The art of medicine

Unhealthy histories: sports and addictive sponsorship

Professional sport has been criticised for its role as a vehicle to market addictive products or services. Despite the harmful health effects on society, football audiences are inured to seeing sponsors of such products not only on pitch-side hoardings and shirts, but also embedded in television rights, competition names, prematch build-up, corporate hospitality, and social media. Tobacco's successful movement into sports sponsorship established the template on which other addictive sponsors, notably the alcohol and gambling industries, built their strategies. The integration of sports and addictive commodities highlights strategies to influence consumption by those within the unhealthy commodities industry. Using the UK as a case study, we revisit the evolution of these relationships to provide critical insight into these processes.

The start of this type of sponsorship in the UK is tied to professionalisation of players, sports, and clubs. This embedded the centralising motive of profit and revealed the potential of sport as an investment vehicle. Initially, these opportunities manifested through endorsement of certain brands by individual sportspeople, rather than companies sponsoring teams or events. Within cricket, tobacco advertisements featured leading cricketing stars, such as the "father of cricket" W G Grace, posing with cigarette brands or featuring on the collectable cards included inside cigarette packets. By the 1950s famous British cricketers such as Denis Compton, Len Hutton, and Godfrey Evans appeared in cinema advertisements endorsing cigarette brands and cementing the homosocial appeal of sportsmen smokers.

The nature of sports sponsorship changed in line with the wave of professionalisation during the 1960s. The 1963 sponsorship of a cricketing cup by razor blade manufacturer Gillette (The Gillette Cup, 1963–80) began the trend of linking sporting competitions to a sponsor. Big tobacco companies brokered the earliest large-scale sponsorship deals in sport and introduced their own cricket competitions. Around the same time, decades-long partnerships between motor racing teams and tobacco companies were also forged. The first was launched in 1968 when John Player & Sons sponsored Team Lotus, painting its cars red, white, and gold to advertise Gold Leaf cigarettes. Others followed suit and racing teams became synonymous cigarette brands. The growth of these relationships against the UK's progressively more stringent regulatory context is notable. Spurred by growing awareness of the carcinogenic properties of tobacco, televised cigarette advertising was banned in 1965. Arguably, this

incentivised tobacco companies to find other, less direct, ways to promote their harmful products. The alcohol industry also emerged as another important player. The first alcohol sponsorship of a football tournament occurred in 1970 when Watney Mann brewers bought the naming rights of a football tournament: the Watney Cup (1970–73). This marked the beginning of series of cup and competition sponsorship deals, some of which, such as the F A Cup and Budweiser endured until less than a decade ago. By the 1980s the alcohol industry had diversified its approach, moving from cups to teams, with numerous sponsorship agreements, including Carlsberg's primary sponsorship of Liverpool shirts (1992–2010) and Chang's sponsorship of Everton (2004–18). In recent years, gambling companies have gained increasing prominence in the sports sponsorship landscape. These new partnerships built upon the long-standing association between sports and gambling, creating an increasing symbiosis between them. Since the advent of telegraphy, dedicated racing press (such as *Sporting Life*, founded in 1859) advanced the relationship between racing and betting. The existence of these specialist presses, whose purpose was to advance the sport and its primary product, betting, exemplify a kind of "sponsorship" opportunity unavailable to alcohol and tobacco companies. However, it took far longer for more systemic gambling sponsorship to emerge in sport.

In the 20th century there was continuing unease around the type of commodity gambling represented and questions about the morality of those who both engaged in and provided it. Depicted as a "vice", to some gambling was a pursuit that served to further subjugate disadvantaged people by entrapping them in continuing cycles of poverty. Despite legal restrictions, gambling remained popular and by the 1960s the government changed legislation for off-course betting, giving rise to the high street betting shop. But a turning point came in 2005, when the Labour Government passed the Gambling Act. This repositioned gambling as a recreational activity that people could enjoy if they so wanted and restrictions on the promotion of gambling were lifted. Advertising, marketing, and sponsorship were quickly adopted and capitalising on the previous century's link between gambling and sports, sports sponsorship became prevalent. The wholesale 2002 advertising ban on tobacco in the UK created a void that gambling companies started to fill. By 2020, in the top two tiers of English football, the Premier League and the English Football League Championship, nearly 60% of football clubs were sponsored by gambling companies. These partnerships are now an intrinsic feature of professional sports businesses, with betting partnerships and sportspeople acting as global gambling brand ambassadors.

Yet historically and in the present day, few of these clubs or partners have been willing to publicly express understanding of the potential detriments to health and wellbeing associated with their sponsor's commodities. Neither do they seem to have considered the ethical conundrum of how pushing harmful products to fans aligns with their corporate and social responsibilities. This disinclination echoes a longer history of the tension between dealing with the health and social consequences of addictive products, on the one hand, and their economic and fiscal contributions, on the other. In 1981, a key government report about alcohol in society steered away from raising the price of alcohol, despite evidence to suggest that this strategy could limit harmful drinking. Instead, the report recommended that the public be encouraged to "drink sensibly". Persuading people to consume alcohol in moderate quantities was a task for health education campaigns. Health educators designed eye-catching, mass-media campaigns to encourage the public to give up smoking and drink in moderation. Similarly with gambling, gamblers are exhorted to "gamble responsibly". The extent to which such campaigns achieve their goals, is, however, open to question. Some commentators questioned the effectiveness of health education for lasting behaviour change. Although health education campaigns borrowed many of the tactics (and were sometimes even designed by the same companies) as those promoting addictive products, encouraging people to consume less, or stop altogether, was a more difficult task than getting people to buy them in the first place. The paradoxical nature of messaging around potentially addictive products was nowhere more apparent than in sports sponsorship. Watching professional sport could encourage healthy behaviours in spectators such as increasing their physical activity, but the presence of advertisements promoting such products as tobacco, alcohol, and gambling that could endanger health sat in uneasy tension with any more positive impact.

Furthermore, the individualisation of responsibility deflects focus away from the actions undertaken by the producers of these products, including how products are promoted to consumers and the complex nexus of commercial relationships that underlie partnerships between sports and addictive commodity producers. In 2022, it has been uncovered that some football clubs were given a proportion of the losses incurred from their fans who were referred to gambling websites. These types of commercial arrangements highlight the need for sports clubs' affiliates of these producers to recognise their role in the harms generated. Greater scrutiny of the relationships between sports clubs and addictive products and their impacts should be undertaken through the prism of exploring the commercial determinants of health.

History shows us that once partnerships between addictive commodities and sports are established, they become difficult to undo without legislative intervention. As these relationships become embedded into businesses practices, profits override concerns of health promotion and protection. The history of sports sponsorship by tobacco and alcohol companies reflected a desire to use sporting contexts to promote their products and also because these offered a way to side-step the increasing regulation of advertising. At the same time, even as knowledge of the damage caused by alcohol and tobacco grew, more emphasis was placed on individual choice and personal responsibility to reduce harm, rather than addressing the actions of the producers of these substances. The expansion of gambling in sport sponsorship builds on such historical precedents. These precedents tell us little will change without government intervention, and even then, history also shows how adept these industries are at circumventing new rules and practices. What is needed is a broader ranging set of regulations whereby businesses have a statutory duty of care to prevent harms and this priority is threaded through all business practices. Underpinned by legislation, such a pivot would encourage sports clubs to think increasingly carefully about their role in promoting potentially harmful products to their fans and their duties to their fans' health and wellbeing.

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