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Sports sponsorship and kids' health: who are the real winners?

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Sports sponsorship and kids' health: who are the real winners?

Abstract

Over the weekend, Australian children and their parents witnessed some of the country's finest sportsmen display feats of strength, skill and endurance in the Australian Football League (AFL) and National Rugby League (NRL) grand finals. I'm sure many young people would have been inspired to emulate the actions and successes of their heroes.

What spectators and viewers would also have seen was the paradoxical promotion of Carlton breweries and McDonalds in commercial advertisements during the games. The websites of the NRL, AFL reveal a similar picture of sponsorship and marketing by unhealthy food and drink companies such as Coca-Cola and Red Bull.

We've also recently seen television adverts for Coles and Cadbury's, where Adam Goodes, the captain of the winning Sydney Swans, and player Dale Thomas promote products that are hardly the fuel of champions.

It's understood, and even expected, that adults might enjoy a few beers and perhaps some pub food during these annual events (and, no doubt, at player post-match celebrations). But the impact of ever-present junk food and alcohol advertising on those of a more impressionable age is of concern.

Keywords

sports, kids, real, health, sponsorship, who, winners

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Academic rigour, journalistic flair

Sports sponsorship and kids' health: who are the real winners?

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Research shows sports sponsorship works to improve brand recall and positive attitudes among children and adolescents.

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country's finest sportsmen display feats of strength, skill and endurance in the Australian Football League (AFL) and National Rugby League (NRL) grand finals. I'm sure many young people would have been inspired to emulate the actions and successes of their heroes.

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Advertising's effect on children

Children's exposure to high levels of junk food advertising affects the food and drink they like, ask for, buy and consume. As for alcohol, the World Health Organization (WHO) has been warning that children should be protected from the harms of alcohol promotion for many years.

Current statistics also tell us almost one in four Australian children is currently overweight or obese. And few eat enough of the right foods or do enough physical activity for healthy development.

We also know that sport sponsorship (financial or in-kind assistance given to in return for promotional opportunities) works. Research by the University of Sydney and the Cancer Council NSW has shown that children aged ten to 14 are influenced by food and beverage sponsorship in sport, with strong brand recall and positive attitudes to sponsors. Almost half participants could recall sponsors of their favourite elite sports team.

This research has also revealed objections from parents and children, sports club officials and sport governing bodies and elite athletes themselves around sport sponsorship involving unhealthy food and beverage companies.

Of course, it's not just elite sport that is promoting unhealthy food and alcohol. Children are also exposed to this type of marketing at their own clubs, where many spend up to 2.5 hours per week. A study of 108 junior community sports clubs in NSW

and the ACT found that 17% of the 347 sponsors were food or beverage companies, 50% of which were deemed unhealthy.



MRHSfan

Time for change

Despite levels of physical activity among Australian children falling short of recommended guidelines, community level sports clubs remain a key setting for participation, with 63% of five- to 14-year-old children involved in organised sport.

Change is clearly needed to shift the focus away from visual presence of unhealthy sponsorship, while ensuring sports clubs remain commercially viable. Many clubs perceive this sponsorship as essential to their operations. But this funding actually represents a relatively small proportion of their income, even though it gives companies major promotion opportunities.

Over the past decade, Victoria and Western Australia have successfully implemented alternative arrangements to fund community sport through the government-funded health promotion foundations. These foundations provide funding to community sports clubs on the basis that concurrent funding from unhealthy sources will not be allowed. National roll-out of these state successes would be an optimal solution.

Another alternative is to establish a public-private collaboration, funded through

philanthropic and corporate support. Organisations could contribute funds to a centralised, independent body, which then hand responsibility for distributing funds to sports clubs on the basis of need and other agreed principles.

A holistic approach could not only tackle unhealthy food and drink but also promote increased and inclusive participation in physical activity. A focus on other health and social behaviours relevant to sport such as sun safety, injury prevention, social inclusion and smoke-free environments is also important.

National policy action around reducing alcohol sponsorship in sport was recently announced by the Australian National Preventative Health Taskforce (ANPHA). The new Community Sponsorship Fund partners government with national sporting organisations to address binge drinking and the influence of alcohol promotion on young Australians. However, unlike the state-based initiatives, this approach is limited to alcohol and doesn't include either rugby codes or AFL.

Gone are the days of tobacco prominence in sport. And alcohol presence is also following suit through initiatives like that of ANPHA. We now need consistency and progress through similar political will at the national level to tackle problems in sport arising from unhealthy food and soft drinks.

[Sport and exercise](#)[AFL](#)[Obesity](#)[NRL](#)[Childhood obesity](#)[Junk food advertising](#)