

TOBACCO SPONSORSHIP IN FOOTBALL : THE POSITION OF FIFA

The Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) is the world governing body for the world's most popular sport, football. Based in Zurich, FIFA was founded in 1904 and now has 204 member national associations in all continents. Surveys show that over 200 million people of both sexes and all ages play football regularly. It is estimated that approximately one-fifth of the world's population has a direct or indirect connection with the sport.

This unparalleled popularity and reach has made football a valuable partner for commercial sponsors wishing to project their brand image. The history of the game shows that corporate sponsorship, although not remotely as sophisticated in its organisation as in the current era, has existed for decades.

In the earlier times, the products promoted through association with football tended to be almost exclusively oriented towards working-class males, who formed the overwhelming majority of the football public. Tobacco goods were prominent among these items. Several famous footballers even personally promoted or endorsed cigarette brands (even including one or two players who were known to be non-smokers...).

The rapid growth of television coverage of football, starting in the 1950s but exploding especially in the 1970s and 1980s, generated a new approach to commercial sponsorship of the sport. Agencies acting as intermediaries between corporations and sports federations created sponsorship modules which particularly exploited the potential of brand-name exposure on advertising boards around football pitches. The demographics of the target public were broadened to both sexes, a wider age-range, and different social classes.

In the past few years, marketing concepts have become more refined and the emphasis has shifted away from mere brand-name projection (although this still remains the prime element) to the establishment of a closer relationship between sponsor and event/federation.

Football has become a highly successful sport in many countries, but in the majority it still struggles to finance its regular sporting activities. The popular conception that the sport is swimming in money is to a large extent a misconception, because for every one wealthy national association there are several impoverished ones.

FIFA is responsible for assisting the national associations to run their own championships, tournaments, national teams, development courses, and so on. All these activities cost money and must be mostly financed locally.

At the 1982 FIFA World Cup in Spain, the RJReynolds company was among the six official sponsors, promoting the Winston brand. RJR's agreement entitled it to a first option on a similar arrangement for the next World Cup, which it exercised. The venue of the 1986 World Cup had originally been fixed for Colombia, but a FIFA decision to increase the number of finalist teams from 16 to 24 overstretched Colombia's organisational capacity and the country renounced the responsibility of staging the event. It was decided instead to play in Mexico.

Unlike Colombia, Mexico's laws at that time did not permit tobacco advertising. However, the FIFA President at that time persuaded Mexico to accept the terms of the agreement already made with RJR and to allow perimeter advertising with the name of another RJR brand, Camel.

In the intervening period, RJR was also entitled to promote its brands at other FIFA events, as well as at those of UEFA (the European Football Union), as both FIFA and UEFA used the same intermediary marketing partner, ISL Marketing. RJR exercised this right whenever the national laws permitted.

After the 1986 World Cup in Mexico, however, RJR decided to terminate its agreements with FIFA and UEFA through ISL. This was also done with the concurrence of ISL itself, as FIFA had expressed its refusal not to carry tobacco publicity at any of its events. Hence for the past 14 years, there has been no tobacco product promoted in any way in connection with any FIFA event.

The most recently completed marketing agreement with ISL, valid for the 2002 and 2006 FIFA World Cup final competitions in Korea/Japan and Germany, and for all other FIFA competitions in this time-period, explicitly exclude the right to appoint sponsors from any tobacco-related category. This condition was agreed readily by all parties concerned.

It is understood that UEFA has also taken a similar step with regard to its own competitions.

(This FIFA position regarding tobacco contrasts with its position with regard to alcohol. The marketing agreements permit the promotion of beer – except at youth events – but not of wines or spirits, as long as this is not in conflict with the law of the country in which the event is being held.)

With regard to competitions other than its own, including for example qualifying matches of the World Cup, each of which is played under the organisational jurisdiction of the host country, FIFA is not in a position of authority to impose its own policies and values as described above. Thus, for instance, publicity rights for a World Cup qualifying match taking place in Malaysia are owned by the Malaysian Football Association and are subject to the laws applicable in Malaysia. Or the right to nominate sponsors of the final tournament of the African Cup of Nations in Zimbabwe belongs to the African Football Confederation (CAF) and is subject to Zimbabwe law. The Statutes of FIFA do not give FIFA the authority to intervene in such competitions.

As much as FIFA actively discourages confederations, national associations, league, clubs and other organisers from accepting tobacco sponsorship, it cannot impose its own judgements upon them.

In this respect, too, FIFA finds itself in a dichotomy in that while on the one hand it has an obligation to promote the good image of the game (which may be done also by refusing to accept tobacco sponsorship), it is also obliged to assist associations and other bodies to maximise their potential revenue in any legally admissible manner (which may include accepting tobacco sponsorship money).

It is FIFA's intention to continue to make whatever gestures it can to demonstrate that, as the centralised world football authority, it rejects the notion of any type of association between sport and tobacco products (as well as other elements of a socially unacceptable lifestyle). FIFA is committed to supporting, as best it can, initiatives to actively discourage smoking, especially among young people. As an example, it appealed officially to the coaches of the teams at the last World Cup finals (who are notoriously subject to smoking in the stress of a match) to refrain from doing so in the public view beside the pitch during games.

Thus it is with interest that FIFA – which maintains an active relationship of cooperation with UN agencies such as the World Health Organisation – will follow the WHO's initiative to establish a Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

Keith Cooper
FIFA Director of Communications
Zurich, 30.8.2000