

# Alcohol normalisation in Europe: the role of alcohol sports sponsorship

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The sobering editorial on why alcohol is so normalised in Europe rightly highlights aggressive marketing and wider industry tactics and influence as a core driver.<sup>1</sup> Alcohol sports sponsorship, associated with increased alcohol consumption including amongst children,<sup>2</sup> merits special attention.

Alcohol sports sponsorship is common. A 2022 audit of top tier male professional football in 10 European countries found that almost three-quarters of teams (72%, 129/178) had at least one alcohol-related sponsor/partner.<sup>3</sup> Sporting events are popular across generations, meaning children are unprotected from marketing. There were an estimated 122.4 billion Guinness-related branding impressions during the 2019 Guinness Six Nations in the UK alone, with 758 million to children under 16.<sup>4</sup> International broadcasting further expands brand reach.

Sponsorship takes advantage of fans' passion and loyalty, and 'implied endorsement' means fans may believe a sponsor is favoured by their team or players by virtue of the sponsorship arrangement.<sup>5</sup> The alcohol industry ultimately aims to increase sales through their sponsorship, with added 'sportswashing' benefits by being associated with sport and exercise, and positive 'image transfer' from the sporting event or team to the brand.<sup>5</sup>

Robust, comprehensive regulation of alcohol marketing in general, and alcohol sports sponsorship in particular, is long overdue for much of Europe.<sup>3,6</sup> Industry claims that alcohol sponsorship is necessary for the financial viability of sport are unfounded.<sup>6</sup> Even where bans exist, industry will employ legally dubious tactics. For example, since 2021 Ireland has banned alcohol advertising in or on sports areas during sports events, yet alcohol marketing persists<sup>7</sup>—both through 'alibi' (promoting regular-strength drinks, without using the brand name) and 'surrogate' (promoting alcohol-free drinks, using similar branding to their regular-strength counterparts) marketing.<sup>7,8</sup>

Alcohol and sport should not be mixed; we need tough regulation now, resistant to industry tactics.

## Contributors

CJG conceived and wrote the correspondence.

## Declaration of interests

CJG is a previous employee of Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP) and current employee of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh (RCPE). SHAAP is based at RCPE. Views expressed are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh.

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