

Hazardous drinking in UK athletes linked with alcohol industry sponsorship

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New research from the University of Manchester (UK) and Monash University (Australia) shows a link between alcohol sponsorship and hazardous drinking in UK athletes.

The study, published online today in the scientific journal *Addiction*, is the first to examine alcohol sponsorship of athletes in the UK, and comes at a time when there are calls in the UK, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa for greater restriction or bans of alcohol sponsorship and advertising in sport.

Researchers surveyed more than 2000 UK sportspeople from universities in the North West, Midlands, London, and Southern regions of England. Most of those surveyed played community sport, and around one third reported being sponsored by an alcohol-related industry such as a brewer or pub. Those receiving alcohol sponsorship reported greater alcohol consumption and had higher odds of [hazardous drinking](#) after accounting for factors such as type of sport played, age, gender, disposable income, and region.

Alcohol consumption was found to be high in athletes overall. However, 50% of those sponsored by an alcohol-related industry had scores on the World Health Organisation's Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test that indicated the need for brief counselling and further monitoring of drinking, compared with 39% for non-sponsored athletes.

Associate Professor Kerry O'Brien, who led the study, said "We have

known for some time that excessive drinking is more common in young adults who play sport or are fans, but we are just starting to understand why. It looks like alcohol sponsorship and the drinking culture it perpetuates could be one of these reasons."

The study, funded by Alcohol Research UK, mirrors findings from countries such as Australia and New Zealand, which have similar alcohol and sport sponsorship and advertising arrangements. However, the study went further by testing the alcohol industry's argument that the effect of sponsorship on [alcohol consumption](#) may be unique to New Zealand or caused by heavy drinkers seeking out alcohol sponsorship. The study found that the effect of sponsorship on drinking persisted even after accounting for sponsorship seeking and other factors.

Asked whether the perceived social and health benefits of sport might be compromised by the use of sport for the promotion of alcohol, Dr O'Brien said, "I think most people would agree that sport is an important marketing tool for the alcohol, gambling, and fast foods industries, in much the same way it was for tobacco. Our study raises the question of whether sports that have such sponsorships and advertising might promote poorer health and social outcomes.

Although participation in sport appears to protect children against illicit drug, cigarette and alcohol use, the situation reverses as athletes approach legal drinking age and engage in more hazardous drinking."

More information: O'Brien KS, Ferris J, Greenlees I, Jowetts S, Rhind D, Cook PA, and Kyri K. "Alcohol industry sponsorship and hazardous drinking in UK university students who play sport." *Addiction*, 109: [DOI: 10.1111/add.12604](https://doi.org/10.1111/add.12604) .
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