

'Drinking isn't an option, it's more of a requirement': High alcohol consumption among some student athletes

April 4 2023, by Marc Harris



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Binge drinking is [commonplace](#) in university sport. Students who play sport drink more heavily and frequently than other students. [Research](#) that surveyed students in England found that 62% of student sportspeople reported drinking at least twice per week, compared with

43% of those who didn't play sport.

The research also found that 54% who play sport reported drinking heavily—more than six units on one occasion—at least once a week. For the students who didn't play sport, this figure was 34%.

Alcohol use is even greater for those who play [team sports](#). The [same research](#) found that 58% of team sport players were drinking heavily at least once a week, compared to 47% for individual sport players.

My [recent research](#), conducted with colleagues, was interested in finding out what was influencing the drinking habits of students who play sports. Over the course of a year, I spent time with a student rugby club and was given permission to be part of the group.

I attended matches, away games and social gatherings, and carried out interviews with players, coaching staff, committee members, supporters and senior student union staff. I gained a detailed understanding of the pressures sportspeople faced to drink alcohol.

Our [research](#) found that student sportspeople face numerous pressures to drink heavily and often. Some of these pressures come from inside the sporting environment—from traditions, expectations and teammates. What's more, alcohol was easily available and promoted to the athletes.

Under pressure

Our [research](#) found heavy alcohol consumption was a tradition embedded within university rugby. Players were expected to drink alcohol following matches, and attending [social events](#) was obligatory. Those who didn't drink as expected were punished with humiliating challenges and a lower social status. Ben, a student [athlete](#), said,

"You always feel under pressure to go out for a drink. After rugby or after you've played a game. It's more intimidating drinking with the rugby team than with anybody else and that's just a fact. I have never been as scared as I was at the first rugby social here."

These players faced negative pressures to drink heavily, with the fear of embarrassing challenges looming over them.

However, there were also benefits to be gained from drinking heavily and behaving notoriously. The athletes reported that those who stood out from the group were praised and rewarded with higher status within the group's social hierarchy. One student athlete said,

"It is commonplace, normal to go to have a few post-match. You've also got award ceremonies and Christmas, Halloween parties... end of season parties. Usually you have to have a dirty pint [a beer with a mix of alcoholic drinks added] if you've scored a hat-trick or a try, or you are man of the match. It's everyone trying to out-do each other and impress each other. "

There was an expectation among many of the players that to play rugby they also had to drink alcohol. This expectation was reinforced by several external pressures they faced.

Culture of alcohol

Alcohol was easily accessible, cheap and heavily promoted to athletes. Students told me that a nightclub provided funding to sports clubs on the condition that they held social events in the student union—with the expectation that student sportspeople would attend the nightclub afterwards.

Coaches accepted that the team drank heavily, and to some extent

reinforced it—for instance by rewarding players with alcohol. This gives athletes [mixed messages](#). They are expected to behave responsibly but are also praised and rewarded with alcohol.

Coaches could act as [role models](#) by encouraging, praising and rewarding more moderate drinking behaviors. Methods to build team cohesion and help athletes bond with each other which aren't centered around [heavy drinking](#) would also help—such as team-building exercises, sports days, alcohol-free socials, quizzes and alcohol-free dinners. A coach said,

"I see alcohol, as one form, of a huge array of different things that you can use to generate a team culture."

Senior athletes have a high level of influence over novices. Allowing those who support a more moderate [drinking](#) environment to have a [leadership role](#) could help support a more measured approach to alcohol over time.

To support sportspeople to drink less, the way alcohol is marketed and promoted to these groups needs to be challenged. Universities have a duty of care over [students](#) and using [alcohol](#) for commercial gain could be jeopardizing this.

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