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## **Alcohol related harms and elite men's football. Lower risk in elite footballers but questions persist over alcohol marketing to football fans.**

On the heels of world football body FIFA's highly publicized last-minute change of heart concerning alcohol provision at the 2022 Qatar World Cup (1), researchers of a linked Swedish study in the *BMJ* compared the prevalence of alcohol-related disorders amongst elite male football players in Sweden with rates in men from the general population to determine whether elite football players were at increased risk of such disorders (2). Perhaps unsurprisingly, population controls matched by sex, age, and geographical location had a significantly higher risk of alcohol-related disorders than the footballer group. Most researchers would welcome the access to data from which this study benefits: the researchers were able to use players' personal identity numbers (a number given to all Swedish citizens) to assess alcohol related diagnoses in footballers born from 1885 right through to the current century, a considerable wealth of information.

Ueda and colleagues focused on elite players, given the media attention to known instances of alcohol addiction in several high profile football players. Using goal scoring, number of games, and number of seasons played in the top tier as proxies for level of performance or so-called eliteness, the risk of an alcohol related disorder did not vary by performance. The protective effect of being an elite football player on a diagnosis of alcohol related disorders was present only for players who first played elite football in the 1960s, but not for players from earlier eras. This is likely to reflect the economic changes in football in 1960-2000, when the opportunity to televise football brought new income into the game through advertising sales. During this period, corporations, including alcohol companies, were able to promote their brand to wider audiences (3). The increased revenue in the sport was accompanied by the professionalisation of players' contracts and an increase in footballers' incomes. Increased income is likely to have changed players' drinking habits since the 1960s and mitigated alcohol related health harms (4).

Whilst the high-profile, risk taking behaviour of a few footballers still captures media attention, it is perhaps more relevant from a public health perspective to focus on football consumers: the fans. Arguably, sport sponsorship was developed by the

tobacco and alcohol industries (5), with active involvement by the food and drink industry eager to promote their products that are high in fat, salt, or sugar. With the development of digital technologies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century enabling online betting, these industries were joined by the gambling industry (6). All clamour to reach the global audiences that international football can command, seeking to be associated with the game's excitement and passion. Unhealthy commodity industries are keen to obscure the health hazards associated with consumption of their products and have, arguably, successfully sought a so-called health halo by associating themselves with sport (7). When transnational corporations such as Coca-Cola, AB InBev (Budweiser is one of their brands), and Mondelez International (the owners of Cadbury) sponsor football clubs and competitions, they expect a return on their investment (8). Campaigns such as Budweiser's "Light Up the FIFA World Cup" in 2018 ran in 50 countries across television and digital channels, helping to drive up beer revenues by 10% (9). A 2022 audit of 178 elite professional male football teams in 10 European countries found that three quarters of the teams had at least one alcohol related sponsor or partner (10).

Since marketing and sponsorship are designed to encourage consumption, one might hypothesise that alcohol disorders would be highest amongst fans, in direct contrast to the players themselves. Evidence certainly indicates that alcohol marketing is directly linked with higher consumption, particularly amongst young people (11). With growing opportunities for data linkage with electronic health records, as exemplified here in Sweden, researchers might be able to compare the incidence of alcohol related disorders between the general population and football fans to ascertain the impact of football related marketing.

Further research could also look at how and when elite footballers object to alcohol sponsorship and whether elite footballers pushing back on alcohol can influence the consumption habits of fans. Before the ban on alcohol sales at the 2022 World Cup matches, at the 2020 European Championship (held in 2021 because of the covid-19 pandemic), Paul Pogba - the French footballer and a practicing Muslim - moved a bottle of the sponsor's beer away from the camera (12). Following in his footsteps, his teammate Kylian Mbappe was reportedly hiding Budweiser's name in his post-match photos as the Qatar World Cup because he wanted to avoid promoting alcohol, being aware that he is a role model for many French children (13).

Despite, as this study suggests, lower rates of alcohol related health disorders among modern elite football players, football clubs, competitions, and leagues in 2022 (including in Sweden) continue to promote alcohol alongside other unhealthy commodities (8). Playing football may be healthy but watching it may be the very opposite. Whilst fans could not buy alcohol at matches at the Qatar World Cup, digital advertising boards alongside the pitch promoted beer to millions of global television viewers. Playing football could be healthy but watching it could be the very opposite.

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