

University of Wisconsin Bans Beer Ads During Sports Broadcasts on Radio

*Ryan J. Foley, Associated Press
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University of Wisconsin football fans listening to games on the radio this fall will hear few, if any, beer ads for the first time in years. UW-Madison has ended long-standing sponsorship agreements with MillerCoors and Anheuser-Busch InBev for advertising during Badgers sports broadcasts. The deals, which brought the university about \$425,000 per year, were not renewed after a campus committee recommended doing away with them as part of its fight against binge drinking.

Chancellor Biddy Martin recently accepted the recommendation, which the athletics department had appealed for months, said Vince Sweeney, vice chancellor for university relations.

"It hurts the athletic department financially but they are stepping up and taking one for the team," Sweeney said. "This was an approach that people felt would have a positive impact on the ongoing battle" against alcohol abuse, he said.

Nationally, universities have been shunning alcohol advertising that critics say promotes underage drinking. Some see the decision by Wisconsin, a state known for heavy drinking and close ties to brewers, as particularly noteworthy. "It's tremendously significant that university officials felt empowered enough to stand up to the political pressure that they are going to get as a result of the beer industry's clout in Wisconsin," said George Hacker, director of the Campaign for Alcohol-Free Sports TV in Washington. "What Wisconsin's action reflects is a growing distaste for aggressive marketing to audiences that include large numbers of underage persons."

Just this week, Anheuser-Busch dropped some of its "Fan Cans" promotions in which the company sells cans of Bud Light in school

colors after universities, including Wisconsin, complained. Anheuser-Busch said it would stop selling red-and-white cans in the Madison area.

The university's new policy prohibits beer ads on its statewide radio network during football, men's and women's basketball and hockey broadcasts. Sweeney cautioned that fans may still hear the occasional beer ad during games if local stations sell the few spots they control to brewers. The policy also prohibits beer ads during coaches' television interview shows and in game programs but would allow beer companies to continue hosting tailgating tents before football games, Sweeney said. He said the policy would be revisited after this year.

MillerCoors spokesman Pete Marino said Wednesday the company "looks forward to continuing a good relationship with the university" despite the decision. He said none of its ads target underage drinkers. Anheuser-Busch said it respected the university's decision. "The University of Wisconsin-Madison has been a great partner, and we have enjoyed the opportunity to connect with Badger fans of legal drinking age," said Carol Clark, the company's vice president for corporate social responsibility.

It could be difficult for Badger Sports Properties, the athletics department's broadcasting and marketing contractor, to replace the ad revenue in a recession, Sweeney said. The company's contract calls for it to pay the university \$5.4 million this year or 53 percent of gross revenue, whichever is higher. Sponsorship agreements with brewers have been on and off since the early 1990s, Sweeney said, and whether to allow them was debated for years.

The American Medical Association took out ads in 2007 in student newspapers in Wisconsin and on other campuses urging university leaders to ban alcohol marketing from sports. Ohio State was one of the first schools to end its beer sponsorships in the wake of a student riot following a 2003 football game, Hacker said. He noted the conference's fledgling broadcasting channel, the Big Ten Network, also decided not to allow alcohol ads.

Mike Miller, a Madison doctor and past president of the American Society of Addiction Medicine, said alcohol ads have helped make Madison "the epicenter of the problem of binge drinking by college students." "The university is to be commended for their decision," he said, "because it reflects a need to change our alcohol-oriented culture in Wisconsin."