

The Olympic game's up: it's time for the IOC to stop promoting sugary drinks

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When football star Cristiano Ronaldo set aside two bottles of Coca-Cola at a press conference for the UEFA European Football Championships in 2021, the visual went viral. Despite Coca-Cola being an official event sponsor, Ronaldo initiated an on-camera rejection of the product. It was seen by the public as a rebuke to the idea that Coca-Cola is a benign drink embraced by athletes at the top of their game. Ronaldo instead held aloft a bottle of his preferred 'água,' and with just a few seconds of footage, the soft drinks behemoth reportedly lost \$4 billion in market value.¹ Such is the power of sport.

High-profile sporting event sponsorship is usually a highly effective marketing strategy. In 2022, the Coca-Cola Company had 233 active sponsorship agreements worldwide across 21 sports.² In fact, in 2023, Coca-Cola had the most sports sponsorship of any other brand, even surpassing sports companies like Nike.³ Its largest active deal is with the International Olympic Committee (IOC).³ These deals enable brands to leverage consumers' emotional connection with sports' greatest sporting moments—they are there at the finish line, the final siren or gold medal performance of every athlete. But sporting event sponsorship also lures individual athletes into tacit endorsements that many would otherwise choose to avoid.

There's no question that sugary drinks offer little or no nutritional value. They are also a key driver of nutrition-related diseases worldwide, including obesity, type 2 diabetes (T2D), high blood pressure, and heart disease.⁴⁻⁸ Moreover, they contribute to undernutrition when consumed instead of foods containing essential nutrients.⁹⁻¹³ In the interest of health for all, promoting unhealthy sugary drinks clearly has no place in sport. However, despite the evidence of health harm and the contradiction to the IOC's mission to champion athletes' health, Coca-Cola remains a top-tier sponsor of the Olympic Games and retains a contract through to at least 2032.

SUMMARY BOX

- ⇒ Sugary beverages, like fizzy drinks, offer little to no nutritional value and are key drivers of nutrition-related diseases, including obesity, type 2 diabetes (T2D) high blood pressure, and heart disease. Their production also requires immense water usage and creates millions of tons of plastic waste annually, contributing to the climate crisis.
- ⇒ Coca-Cola has maintained an almost 100 year contract as the leading sponsor of the Olympic Games. Athletes at the Olympics perform under the banner of companies sponsoring the Olympic Games and as such implicitly endorse an unhealthy, sugary beverage, while the companies benefit from an unparalleled advertising opportunity.
- ⇒ This sponsorship also grants Coca-Cola's executives entry to elite spaces occupied by political and corporate leadership and the occasion to exert their influence.
- ⇒ It's time for the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to cut ties with Coca-Cola in the interest of athletes, spectators and the planet.

At the Paris 2024 Olympics, Coca-Cola, along with other sponsors, has surrounded stadiums and arenas with their branding and marketing. This implies tacit endorsement of its products by more than 10 000 athletes. Most athletes will have no say in which companies' logos are scattered around them during sporting events, ceremonies, and press conferences. And the millions Coca-Cola pays for blanketing the Olympics buys the company much more.

The estimated US\$3 billion deal Coca-Cola signed in 2020 to extend its Olympic sponsorship gives it access to unparalleled marketing opportunities.¹⁴ Most crucially, in addition to the visuals that have been beamed onto phones and screens across the world, Coca-Cola is also buying adverts to further market its product into the living rooms of millions of homes where impressionable children are watching. Globally, the Olympic Games are one of the most widely viewed television events. The 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics reached a broadcast audience of more than 3



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billion people.¹⁵ Additionally, 28 billion video views took place on broadcasters' digital platforms.¹⁵ With a viewership this size, advertising during the Olympic Games is a coveted opportunity for companies to feature their products, however detrimental those products might be to consumers.

Using event sponsorship to build brand awareness and loyalty works. According to the authors of one study, two-thirds of 10 to 14 year-old children could recall the brands associated with their own youth sports team (including one food sponsor).¹⁶ The younger children (aged 10 to 11) were more likely than older children to demonstrate loyalty and positive feelings towards the sponsors and noted they felt the need to return the favour by purchasing the sponsor's products.¹⁶ The reality is these actions further exacerbate a public health crisis of poor nutrition. In addition, children's rights are infringed on by these manipulative, profit driven practices which purposefully take advantage of children by beaming messages into their digital worlds that exploit their emotional vulnerabilities and their limited ability to process and evaluate information.¹⁷

Other benefits of sporting event sponsorship are more surreptitious. Coca-Cola's sponsorship of the Olympic Games also gives its senior executives the opportunity to rub shoulders with the world's elite athletes as well as corporate and political leaders. The millions poured into these sponsorship arrangements get Coca-Cola far more than a seat at the opening ceremony. The company has bought entry to various events where relationships are forged behind the closed doors of corporate privilege.

This strategy culminates in a gold medal opportunity to 'sportswash' an unhealthy product. It's turning a blind eye to the increasingly tarnished reputation of a company that uses up precious water resources to profit from sugary drinks production.¹⁸ Additionally, their packaging and distribution processes contribute mightily to plastic pollution,¹⁹⁻²¹ greenhouse gas emissions,²²⁻²³ and water insecurity in poor communities,²⁴⁻²⁷ all further inflaming the world's climate crisis. By continuing its association with Coca-Cola, the Olympic movement risks being complicit in intensifying a global epidemic of poor nutrition, environmental degradation, and climate change.

At the WHO's World Health Assembly in May 2024, standing before the world's health leaders, IOC President Thomas Bach publicly committed to promote a healthy society through sport and to protect children from unhealthy products' marketing. This pledge was in keeping with Sustainable Development Goal 3, 'Good Health and Well-Being,' aimed at reducing the crushing global epidemic of non-communicable diseases. The IOC must acknowledge that Coca-Cola's continued association with the Olympics contradicts this goal and the fundamental values espoused by this iconic sporting event. It's time for the IOC to end its unhealthy partnership with Coca-Cola, and to recommit to its core values.

The public health community needs to lift its own game. The WHO and many others, including the World

Obesity Federation, the World Cancer Research Fund International, and the International Diabetes Federation, all advocate for measures to reduce the consumption of sugary drinks.²⁸⁻³¹ This advocacy must include a greater emphasis of the unique role of sports marketing in the commercial determinants of health.³²

As stewards of the Olympic movement, the IOC must recognise that it is out of step with global norms, community expectations and the rights of children. It must prioritise the health and well-being of athletes and the public and prove that 'The world of sport is ready to be a part of this team to build healthy and resilient communities everywhere,' to quote Thomas Bach.³³ The IOC can do this by:

1. Terminating Coca-Cola's contract.
2. Refraining from entering into future agreements with companies whose products harm public health and the environment.
3. Promoting healthier and more sustainable alternatives in all aspects of Olympic sponsorship and branding.

The IOC must acknowledge that Coca-Cola's continued association with the Olympic Games contradicts the fundamental values of this global event and puts the Olympics at risk of being complicit in our nutritional and environmental crises.

By severing ties with Coca-Cola, the IOC can send a powerful message that the Olympics stand for integrity, health and sustainability. Let's implore the IOC to act swiftly in the best interests of athletes, spectators and the planet.

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