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DRINKING AND GAME DAY: THE EXPANSION AND SOLUTION TO ALCOHOL ABUSE IN COLLEGIATE SPORTING EVENTS



By Karan Arul, *University of Rochester*

For the typical American sports fans, a night out to watch a college sporting event involves a celebration of athleticism, spirit, and teamwork. However, as of the 21st century, the act of purchasing and consuming alcohol has become increasingly complimentary to “enjoying the game” in a collegiate sports stadium. In the United States, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is the frontrunner in proliferating collegiate athletics. Yet, the NCAA and its over 1200 member schools “enjoy great profitability from selling and advertising alcohol.”¹ As college sporting events continue to rival their professional counterparts in popularity and allegiance, attending a college stadium to view a game has developed its own attractive culture. Although this culture is known for its conviviality, the acceptance, sale, and consumption of alcoholic beverages during high-profile sporting events has become synonymous with the “college game day experience.” This trend is alarming because high risk drinking, defined as having five or more drinks in one sitting, is correlated to consequences from unintentional injury to poor academic performance among university students.² Unfortunately, past actions to completely outlaw drinking in stadiums have been unsuccessful in determining the role of alcohol. Therefore, the best course of action for fans and lawmakers to end alcohol abuse begins with understanding why the stadium setting glorifies alcohol consumption. Through education, it is then possible to provide practical alcohol regulations that will make sports fans more inclined to casual – rather than excessive – drinking.

The debate concerning alcohol consumption in sports settings has become further polarized due to past failures in ending the stubborn relationship between excessive drinking and “enjoying the game.” Correlations between drinking and spectator sports result from the collegiate atmosphere and economic media that propagate stadium drinking. For example, if children grow up viewing their parents freely using alcohol in college tailgating events, they may develop a more open mindset to drinking on campus.³ On the other hand, the American media trend of combining million-dollar alcohol advertisements with high-profile college sports has created an influential, albeit hypocritical, relationship of drinking and sports. Since the 1990’s, the NCAA has benefited economically from alcohol advertising despite pressure from the White House, hundreds of college presidents, and the American Medical Society.⁴ An end to excessive spectator sport drinking cannot be fixed by merely banning alcohol in all college stadiums - a popular route of action taken in the early 21st century in states with stringent liquor laws. The act of completely outlawing alcohol in sports venues presents an impossible task that creates grounds for increased criminal behavior. The prevalence of excessive drinking prior to actually entering a sports stadium (known as “pre-game drinking”) is a complex alcohol-related issue because it is often not subject to stadium laws. Equally complicated, luxury “skyboxes” within major stadiums are “leased private property” and legally support alcohol consumption.⁵ To effectively address the drinking culture of collegiate sporting events, fans and lawmakers must be held responsible. Initially, sports legislators should look to the campus and media-related factors that have created an infatuation between drinking and college sports. Afterward, stadiums will be able

¹ Marc Edelman and David L. Rosenthal, *A Sobering Conflict: A Call for Consistency in the Messages Colleges Send About Alcohol*. New York City, NY: Fordham Intellectual Property, 2010, 1417.

² Travis Glassman et al., *Alcohol-related fan behavior on college football game day*. Gainesville, FL: Routledge, Taylor, and Francis Group, 2007.

³ Caitlin Abar et al., *Brief report: Tailgating as a unique context for parental modeling on college student alcohol use*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Elsevier, 2010, 1103.

⁴ Edelman and Rosenthal, 1417.

⁵ Warwick Saban, *Our Drinking Problem*. Little Rock, AR: Arkansas Times, 2004, 7.

to introduce the solutions of moderated alcohol sales, increased security, and alcohol-free alternatives that will create a sports environment devoid of excessive drinking and its negative behavioral consequences.

Turning on the television during the NCAA Final Four or Collegiate Baseball World Series, one may find it apparent that alcohol advertisements hold a great position in collegiate sports media. Similarly, stadiums of Division I sports schools, such as Syracuse University, are known for their “eight dollar beers” and alcohol signs adorning mega-sized viewing screens. However, the relationship between alcohol and college campuses presents a peculiar situation. Traditional collegiate undergraduates will spend the majority of their time on campus below the legal U.S. drinking age. Why, then, is drinking within a college stadium a cultural trend if alcohol consumption is “one of the leading risks of death among American college students?”⁶ The social setting of a college campus provides various opportunities for students to model drinking behaviors. On a larger degree, the economics required to broadcast college sports throughout the country create a subtle connection between stadiums and drinking. Ironically, the social and economic trends that have contributed to the massive appeal of college sporting events in America have also glorified excessive drinking.

Understanding why a significant number of college fans choose to openly abuse alcohol begins with the collegiate atmosphere inherent in the stadium setting. As students begin a new phase of their lives in college, they are placed in an atmosphere that encourages free thinking and decision making. However, the independent actions of students on campus are often affected by social pressures. College students, in particular, may develop an interest in high-risk drinking from exposure to similar behavior. Contrary to popular belief, parents may be the most responsible for creating dangerous drinking trends in their students. According to a study from the *Journal of Adolescence*, the drinking psychologies of students are directly related to the drinking behaviors of their parents during tailgating events on college campuses. Tailgating involves consuming alcohol and food in a social setting prior to viewing a sporting event. As demonstrated by the Social Learning Theory, students observing parental alcohol use imitate this behavior in a similar context. In other words, college students were more likely to engage in high risk drinking if they had previously been exposed to “parental drunkenness” in a collegiate setting. When compared to other occasions of parental heavy drinking, tailgating events proved to be the best indicator of future student drinking.⁷ University students also tend to overestimate typical alcoholic consumption at tailgating events, a likely effect of constant exposure to drunkenness in this setting.⁸

In addition to encouraging excessive drinking at tailgating parties, the college atmosphere promotes a yearly schedule of sporting events that create weekly opportunities to abuse alcohol. Unlike “once-in-a-year events” that are guilty of high-risk drinking (such as St. Patrick’s Day, Spring Break and New Year’s Eve), university-related sporting events occur throughout the academic year. As noted in an *Addictive Behaviors* study from 2007 labeled “Hook’em Horns and Heavy Drinking,” the heavy drinking consistent with university-related sporting events can be attributed to the year-long athletic schedule *and* the social context shrouding it. College students commit to heavy drinking during sporting events as a way to “celebrate important victories as well as to express solidarity and enhance group cohesion” with fellow fans. Furthermore, it is noted that sports enthusiasts who identified as “light drinkers” were more likely to abuse alcohol if placed into a “game day” environment.⁹ The collegiate sports atmosphere holds a responsibility in promoting alcohol use if a casual drinking fan becomes more inclined to excessive drinking when inside a stadium.

⁶ United States Congress, *Introduction of Resolution Expressing Sense of Congress that Alcohol Advertising during Broadcasts of Collegiate Sporting Events Should be Terminated*. Washington, D.C.: 2004, 1613-1614.

⁷ Abar et al., 1103-1106.

⁸ Clayton Neighbors et al., *Event-and context-specific normative misperceptions and high-risk drinking: 21st birthday celebrations and football tailgating*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006, 282.

⁹ Neal et al., *Hook’em horns and heavy drinking: Alcohol use and collegiate sports*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Elsevier, 2007, 2682-2690.

An argument against this claim may be that excessive drinking during collegiate sporting events results from the natural tendency for enthusiastic fans to celebrate with their family and friends. This argument discounts the importance of the “stadium setting” in glorifying alcohol abuse by focusing on the conviviality inherent in viewing sports rather than the physical experiences of “game day.” However, past decisions to completely remove alcohol from stadiums demonstrate the relevance and tradition of drinking on “game day.” According to an article from the *Arkansas Times*, a complete outlaw of alcohol in the University of Arkansas has only further exacerbated the issue. The parking lot of these stadiums which outlaw alcohol consumption tend to be prevalent with the “biggest crime scene” - a sea of tailgaters accustomed to public intoxication. This shows that drinking prior to the start of a game is the result of the game environment as opposed to merely gathering with friends. Within the stadium, luxury “skyboxes” are free from campus policies that forbid drinking. This case of “selective enforcement and curious exception” within the University of Arkansas stadium is reminiscent of alcohol policy throughout the state. As of 2004, Arkansas consisted of 32 “wet” counties and 43 “dry” counties which differed in alcohol policy. The “dry” counties have been effective in limiting alcohol sales since liquor businesses reported decreased business. Although the stadium setting has adopted a parallel approach in regulating alcohol policy, the tradition of “game day” drinking has prevented an end to alcohol-abuse.¹⁰ Scholars have also noted that “game days” brew “disinhibited social [atmospheres]” that result in a “large percentage of alcohol-related violations.”¹¹

This reliance between alcohol and spectator sports is more apparent when compared with other public settings such as movie theaters. Unlike people viewing a movie, fans attending college sports have come to expect that beer will be involved to supplement their experience. As a result, actions taken to outlaw alcohol in sporting events have created criminal environments similar to prohibition era America, which was accustomed to unenforceable laws and high crime rate. This demonstrates that the social context associated with the stadium setting is more influential in fostering an alcohol-friendly environment than the mere aspect of spending time with one’s peers.

The successful movement toward a casual drinking culture in collegiate sports also requires understanding of economic factors which promote alcohol abuse. In general, the development of American spectator sports to attractive 21st century status is due to the media trend of displaying alcohol advertisements in the context of games. As of 2004, alcohol advertising accounted “for more than one-half of college sports advertising revenue.” Although the NCAA has a century-old mission of “preparing student athletes for lifetime leadership,” the revenue benefits generated from mega-alcohol advertising have adversely affected collegiate alcohol culture. Typical advertisements contain celebrating young adults and the occasional hint of “adolescent humor.” According to U.S. Representative and former University of Nebraska football coach, Tom Osborne, alcohol advertisements geared toward college students tend to make alcohol more acceptable in stadium settings. Although social stigmas and learned behaviors that encourage college students to drink are difficult to change, alcohol advertisements present a fixable problem. Studies on popular opinion of alcohol have shown that around “seventy-one percent of Americans support a total ban of alcohol ads” during collegiate sporting events.¹² An end to alcohol advertisements in the presence of high-profile games will effectively deal with the college sports industry’s “double standard about alcohol use in higher education.”¹³ It is unjust and hypocritical that the NCAA, which promises to instill lifetime values to its young athletes, also thrives on alcohol advertisements which generate millions of dollars in revenue.

Critics may argue that the outlaw of alcohol advertisements surrounding collegiate sporting events only prolongs

¹⁰ Saban, 7.

¹¹ Coons et al., *College sports and fan aggression: Implications for residence hall discipline*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, 587.

¹² United States Congress, 1613-1614.

¹³ Edelman et al., 1417.

the eventual outlaw of all alcohol in campus stadiums. As shown by the actions of the University of Arkansas, outlawing alcohol sales is ineffective in quelling alcohol-fueled crimes. Recent decisions by U.S. universities to *sell* alcohol during sporting events have proven that alcohol sales are *needed* to create a casual drinking environment. In 2014, West Virginia University and the University of Texas began sale of alcohol during all Division I athletic contests, joining a list of twenty-nine other campuses nationwide. Although this measure may be viewed as a means of increasing revenue like alcohol advertisements, alcohol sales only account for a fraction of a university's total sports-related income. According to University of Texas President, Bill Powers, the sale of alcohol would only generate “marginal revenue.” Instead, he cited improving the viewing experiences of alumni and fans who are open to casual drinking as the main reason for alcohol sales.¹⁴

The regulation and sale of alcohol had a beneficial effect for West Virginia University. Coupled with other tactics such as prevention of “in-game tailgating,” sales lead to a “35% decrease of alcohol related altercations.” By actually providing beer and wine merchants on game day, fans will not feel the need to binge drink in a parking lot since they can legally drink inside the stadium. A Harvard School of Public Health study found that “53 percent of sports fans usually engage in binge drinking” prior to the beginning of a game.¹⁵ As Bill Powers notes, people tailgating believe “they’ve got to polish off [their alcohol] sort of in a binge” prior to walking into a stadium.¹⁶

If a moderate drinking fan has access to alcohol during the phase of a game, they will be less likely to participate in pre-game binge drinking and instead choose to drink within the stadium. More importantly, increased security and the enforcement of underage drinking will have the effect of making stadiums devoid of alcohol-abuse and its negative behaviors. Once stadiums have made the decision to sell alcohol during collegiate sporting events, policymakers will be required to implement stadium laws that can be viewed as safety initiatives. According to an experiment from the *Journal of American College Health*, non-drinking and moderate drinking fans showed high support for increased law enforcement. The college community surveyed showed the most public support for restricted alcohol policy in order to reduce occasions of drunkenness and underage drinking. This degree of public opinion is noted as “fundamental to shaping the policymaking process.”¹⁷ Prolonged alcohol consumption has been labeled a prime factor of fan aggression and its financial consequences. In addition to diminishing the stadium experience, violent fans can cost stadiums hefty sums in restoration and cleanup fees. Equally pressing, the mixture of intoxicated individuals and high-density crowds has shown to have a direct effect on innocent fans. A survey in the *Daily Texan* looking at “14,000 college students at 119 nationally representative four-year colleges” concluded that students who identified themselves as fans were more likely to become victims of secondhand effects of others’ binge drinking. Possible effects included “disruption of sleep, property damage, and verbal abuse.”¹⁸

Interestingly, in order to lower the abuse of current stadium drinking culture without completely outlawing alcohol, fans choosing not to drink must be equally represented. By limiting tailgating hours and addressing security concerns, fans who choose to drink will be addressed while lowering the chance of alcohol-abuse. However, fans who do not choose to drink may wish to further lower the influence of alcohol on their “game day” environment. By incorporating specific alcohol free areas and pre-game events within sports venues, policymakers will create stadiums that accommodate collegiate fans who decide to stay sober. Of importance, alcohol free areas can be implemented to separate college students from alcohol-tolerable environments due to the prevalence of heavy

¹⁴ Brian Davis, *Texas to Begin Selling Alcohol at Longhorns Games Friday*. Chicago, IL: Tribune Content Agency, 2014.

¹⁵ Jasmine Johnson, *Alcohol Ruins Game Environment*. Austin, TX: Texas Student Media, 2014.

¹⁶ Davis.

¹⁷ Glassman et al., 255-260.

¹⁸ Johnson.

drinking among this demographic. Since college students “consume considerably more alcohol than their non-college peers,” they are more likely to experience the physical consequences of drunkenness.¹⁹

An experiment aimed to prevent high risk drinking among college students at the 2006 NCAA Championship Football Game cites useful measures that can prevent high risk drinking. By incorporating “pre-planned prevention efforts” such as alcohol-free venues and “celebration zones,” students were less than three and a half times likely to engage in high-risk drinking. The success of the celebration zone may be attributed to its setup as a police patrolled and barricaded refuge for fans to celebrate their team’s victory. Similarly, prior of the start of a game, the inclusion of nonalcoholic pre-game events to counteract tailgating parties garnered highest support from non-drinkers.²⁰ By combining preventions to accommodate casual drinking sports fans and non-drinkers, stadium officials will find grounds to lower the previously elusive problem of tailgating. While the sale of alcohol will make fans more inclined to purchase alcohol within a stadium, the further inclusion of sober pre-game events will provide an attractive alternative to binge drinking. Ironically, these scientific studies indicate that it is possible to provide a safe atmosphere for non-drinking collegiate sports fans without completely outlawing alcohol sales. The incorporation of alcohol-free venues and events creates an attainable atmosphere that can separate at-risk college students from older fans who wish to enjoy a beer on the sidelines.

The prevalent counterargument against the use of fan support of alcohol-related measures of intervention focuses on the quality of the gathered data. The majority of studies have been largely based on data provided by large, public universities that have a tradition of devoted college sporting fans and high revenue from athletic departments. In fact, the *Journal of American College Health* cites the limitation of using a sample “from a large school in the southeast,” as a misrepresentation of the drinking patterns of other universities.²¹ For example, the University of Texas, which is noted for recently allowing alcohol sales, actually generated one-hundred and sixty-five million dollars in athletic revenue in 2013.²² Therefore, the glorification of alcohol and “drinking culture” of large public schools may not reflect the patterns of alcohol abuse in less glamorized college towns. However, policies aimed at making stadiums open to casual drinking can be created that work for large public schools and small private schools. Although traditionally less-populated private schools experience a lower degree of tailgating events and sports-related revenue, students are actually “more likely to experience behavioral risks” from alcohol in a “small-party setting.” The proposed measures to reduce the prevalence of tailgating such as alcohol sales within stadiums and non-alcoholic pre-game events would therefore be useful in private schools even though they share in a nontraditional “game day” experience.²³ By advancing policies that are created from an understanding of the collegiate atmosphere, students nationwide who share in an at-risk demographic will be accounted for. Although drinking cultures are unique for every school, college students, as a group, attend sporting events to “feel a sense of camaraderie that helps to build positive feelings” about the overall college experience.²⁴ Unrelated to size or following, stadiums throughout the U.S. may benefit from policies to lower the grasp of alcohol on spectator sports while enhancing the attractiveness of collegiate athletics.

As more sports fans in the United States continue to engage in the collegiate athletic experience instead of the professional industry, greater light will be shed on the state of alcohol abuse in stadiums. If unruly, drunk college fans continue to perpetrate increased crime and behavioral disputes, stadium policymakers will need to prescribe

¹⁹ Neal et al., 2007.

²⁰ Travis Glassman et al., *Winning isn’t Everything: A Case Study of High-Risk Drinking the Night of the 2006 National Championship Football Game*. Lansing, MI: Journal of Alcohol and Drug Education, 2008, 31.47 Ibid.

²¹ Glassman et al., 258-260.

²² Davis.

²³ Neal et al., 2691.

²⁴ Edelman et al., 1417.

measures to lower the presence of alcohol on “game day.” Modern reliance between drinking and college spectator sports is a product of a social background and economic foreground. Unlike the professional setting of a “big league” contest, college atmospheres thrive on a sense of open decision making that may be affected by social pressures from peers. In fact, sometimes these peers are actually tailgating parents whose negative actions influence future college students.²⁵ Similarly, the relevance of alcohol advertisements during high-profile sporting games works to create a public image that endorses drinking in stadiums.

According to former U.S. Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, Joseph A. Califano, alcohol and drug use has lost “thousands of our nation’s best and brightest” and significantly affected the future and global standing of the United States.²⁶ Past attempts to completely outlaw alcohol sales in stadiums has shown to further amplify the presence of drinking via binge drinking. As public discussions concerning alcohol consumption in stadiums grow, policymakers and concerned fans hurry to change the “wet culture” of college sports.

The most effective way to cater to all fans requires making stadiums open to casual drinking and the sale of alcohol. Simultaneously, fans and college students who will benefit from a sober viewing experience should be placed in alcohol-free alternatives that thrive on safe practices. When collegiate sports begin to adopt a casual drinking atmosphere, fans and policymakers will shift their attention to the most important people in the stadium – the athletes.

²⁵ Abar et al.

²⁶ Edelman et al., 1394.

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