



Junk-food giants bad sports in sponsorship



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THE TV ads linked to the London Olympics are up and running. You can get the Atlanta Pork McRib, the Barcelona Omelette or the Beijing Chicken Burger. McDonald's has created menu items to exemplify a flavour of the Olympic Games for which they've been sponsors. At the London venues McDonald's will be the only company allowed to sell branded food and, in case you're hungry after watching all those athletic feats, the world's biggest McDonald's restaurant has been built next door to London's Olympic Park.

A British doctors' group has sounded the alarm over the mixed messages of fast food and sport at a time when waistlines in the Western world are ballooning. While it's too late for London, the Olympic Organising Committee for 2016 must reconsider this sponsorship.

Despite the TV ads already airing in Australia, so far no one here seems to be questioning the nexus between unhealthy food and sport.

Elite athletes do not regularly eat junk food, and research by Sydney University has found that four in five elite sportspeople think it's unacceptable for sport to be used to advertise unhealthy food, while 97 per cent didn't believe in athletes actually promoting it.

By associating itself with sport and athletic pursuits, McDonald's is buying itself a healthy halo. The aim is that viewers (particularly

children) bombarded with advertisements while watching the Olympics will associate their food with sporting success and an active, healthy lifestyle.

These same tactics are being used here in junior sport. In Victoria, McDonald's is a major sponsor of junior sport including Little Athletics and Hoop Time Basketball, while Milo is targeting kindergarten children through Kanga Cricket. Now McDonald's appears to be making a play for junior football with its Mac Pack program. These junior sport sponsorship deals often involve children wearing branded uniforms, using branded equipment, being given vouchers for products, and subjected to intense brand advertising at the event. Junk food companies are turning children into mobile billboards and enthusiastic brand ambassadors.

And it works: research shows children are particularly susceptible to brand sponsorship of sport.

When asked about the McDonald's sponsorship, the UK Olympic organisers replied that without it the Olympics would not be possible. Really? Is there no other company in the world looking for the same level of promotion?

This is the same argument often used here. Sponsorship of junior sport by unhealthy food companies is often pitched as supporting the community and helping kids to achieve their dreams, but it's far

from an altruistic interest in improving your seven-year-old's handball skills. Surely there are other companies that would also benefit from the exposure.

As is always the case with junk food marketing and children, the argument eventually comes down to the old parental responsibility adage, which is fair enough. Yes, it is up to the parents to decide what their children eat. But when a quarter of all children are either overweight or obese, we have to look at what else is going on. One major factor is the volume of junk food marketing that children are exposed to.

These types of sponsorship deals are designed to encourage pester power, leaving parents to deal with the fall-out. The question often thrown at us is: why don't parents just say no? Well, I would like to ask: why should we be put in this situation in the first place? Why do advertisers and others put the onus back on parents to counter the powerful influence of this marketing, why isn't the onus on the junk food companies to operate ethically?

The rights of multinational fast-food companies are being put above the rights of parents and their children, and parents are being told to just suck it up. Is this fair play? We need to break the nexus between junior sport and unhealthy food and stop sending mixed messages to kids, otherwise we'll never get gold in the healthy weight category.

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