

Professional sport: public health ally or public health foe?

In recent years, the huge popularity of professional sport, which can transcend national and social boundaries, has been recognised for its powerful potential to attract people to positive public health interventions. This has included the provision of programmes within this popular and culturally-valued setting which have proved successful in engaging subgroups of the population, such as men in midlife, who have been traditionally regarded as 'hard to reach'.

However, the widespread appeal of professional sport has also been a focus for the commercial sector, and its highly lucrative potential has been widely exploited over decades. Whilst the advertising, and promotion through sponsorship, of some health-damaging products (most notably tobacco) have been highly regulated or banned, the promotion of many products with potential to undermine individual and public health (including alcohol, sugar sweetened beverages and gambling) remains rife.

This presentation reviews evidence for professional sport as a health-promoting or health-damaging enterprise and setting. It draws on the development and scale-out of such successful interventions as Football Fans in Training, a weight loss and healthy living programme originally designed to appeal to men and positions the potential for public health gain of such initiatives and community-focussed club activities against the long history of commercial exploitation.