

Matéria



A premium partnership - Getty Images Sport

IRRESISTIBLE PARTNERSHIP

Ahead of this month's Heineken Cup final, **Matt Cutler** examines one of sport's most successful and enduring sponsorships

A NEW DEAL, announced at the end of last year, saw Heineken extend its 14-year title sponsorship of rugby's European Cup competition for another four years until the 2012-13 season. The deal provided an undisclosed increase on the last deal made between Heineken and the ERC, proving that, for the right property, blue-chip sponsors see value in marketing their way through the current recession.

And it put to bed, for the short-term at least, fears that Heineken's sponsorship strategy may have to alter in an environment where it seems likely more countries will follow France's lead in tightening their regulations on alcohol sponsorship.

France's Loi Evin (passed in 1991 and prohibits both tobacco and alcohol advertising around sport) necessitated a re-brand for the competition, with the tournament known as the 'H Cup' in France.

And while Walter Drenth, marketing director of Heineken Ireland, acknowledges a potential future problem, he says that Heineken is choosing to face debates around drinking head-on by showing its dedication to promoting responsible drinking. "It is a reality that laws over alcohol advertising are getting more strict globally. But within Heineken there is a lot of work going on at a global and local level which is reflected in our 'Enjoy Heineken Responsibly' programmes."

"In France it is always harder to get the message across that Heineken is associated with the tournament," he adds. "But we respect the French Loi Evin and so we use the sponsorship in France more on a trade level."

For Derek McGrath, chief executive of the ERC

(European Rugby Cup), the issue certainly didn't provide a barrier to renewing the sponsorship.

"It is inevitable that there are more society pressures and demands and Heineken respects that and if Heineken are comfortable with the debates then so are we." And if the heat is turned up, with other jurisdictions choosing to take a tougher line on alcohol? "The tournament has survived many issues before and we would be confident to do so again," says McGrath.

Heineken has sponsored the tournament since its inception and, as McGrath explains, its status as Europe's largest brewer, reaching 170 countries worldwide, has been integral to the Heineken Cup's increased awareness both inside and outside Europe. Fans clearly make the association between the brand and the rugby and ERC hopes this will help the tournament reach new markets in the coming years, where the brand is established and rugby may not be.

"There are many benefits to the partnership with Heineken and as the tournament gets stronger so does the sponsorship. Heineken is a global brand and its global distribution opens up more doors for us. Heineken has been central to this partnership from the opening game and their commitment, together with that of our other stakeholders, will ensure the tournament continues to grow in the seasons ahead."

"Heineken and ERC reflect the same values," adds Drenth, "Uniqueness, a level of premium quality and passion for quality, respect, international exposure, engagement, friendship and responsibility."