

Not for kids: parents object to ads during games

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Ads for erectile dysfunction drugs, beer and not-for-children films abound on pro football and baseball telecasts, upsetting parents and politicians worried about harm to young viewers - though a new wave of complaints doesn't seem to be swaying the leagues, networks or advertisers.

Earlier this year, a national media monitoring group urged the leagues to "clean up their act" after reporting that half the ad breaks during National Football League telecasts showed at least one ad featuring sex, drugs or alcohol. A congressman concerned about the issue even introduced bill that would limit ED ads to nighttime.

The San Francisco-based monitoring organization, Common Sense Media, this week provided The Associated Press with preliminary results of a similar ad study on Major League Baseball daytime telecasts - it found the rate of ads for alcohol and ED drugs at least as high as for NFL, and said there were even more ads for junk food.

The leagues, however, don't seem inclined to disrupt the status quo.

"We follow the lead of our broadcasters as it relates to ads, yet we are always sensitive to the opinions of our fans," said MLB spokesman Matt Bourne.

NFL spokesman Brian McCarthy, in an e-mail after the league's opening week, wrote that "we are comfortable with our policies and those of our network partners."

The CEO of Common Sense Media, James Steyer, said the profitable ad policies are unlikely to change without political or regulatory pressure.

Steyer, who has taught law at Stanford University, said the leagues, networks and advertisers all share responsibility for the situation, "but none of them are being held accountable."

After the NFL study was released in January, Steyer said he wrote to commissioner Roger Goodell urging the league to consider changes, while Common Sense Media supporters sent hundreds of e-mails expressing similar concerns. Steyer says the NFL never responded; McCarthy says the NFL is not aware of any letter from Steyer but would be willing to talk with him now.

In May, Rep. Jim Moran introduced a bill that would limit TV ads for erectile dysfunction drugs to between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. - not expecting it to pass any time soon but hoping it would send a warning to the drug makers. The Virginia Democrat had withdrawn a similar bill in 2005 after the companies offered to change their ad policies, but said the ads now "appear to have become even more pervasive and explicit."

"Many parents I talk with are frustrated and annoyed by the overwhelming presence of these ads during programs they watch with their children," Moran wrote to the makers of the three main ED drugs. "Parents should be able to watch a football game with their kids without having to either mute the television or explain the side effects of a life enhancement drug."

Pfizer Inc., which makes Viagra, responded that it only places ads for the drug on TV shows, including sports events, which have a viewership that's at least 90 percent adult. According to the NFL, the average age of its TV viewers is 45 and only about 9 percent are under 18.

"Our goal in advertising our products is to reach patients who would most likely benefit from them," Pfizer's CEO, Jeffrey Kindler, wrote to Moran.

Kindler also noted that the ads' graphic discussion of possible side effects - including long-lasting erections - is mandatory.

There's no comparable move to legislate changes in beer advertising, which constitutes a huge portion of broadcast revenue for many professional sports. Nonetheless, many parents and health experts worry that children are adversely influenced by the drinking-is-fun message implicit in beer commercials.

After the latest Super Bowl, the Drug-Free Action Alliance in Columbus, Ohio, surveyed 8,400 teens, and found that three of their five favorite ads during the telecast were for beer. The alliance said the result is an added inducement for young people to start drinking at an early age and an increased risk of problems with alcohol later in life.

The NFL has detailed rules about types of ads it prohibits on its telecasts - taboo products include hard liquor, condoms, strip clubs, firearms and casinos, as well as movies, video games and other media that contain "objectionable material or subject matter." Wine, beer, oral contraceptives and erectile dysfunction drugs are on the acceptable list.

The networks say they take advertising content seriously, vetting commercials for objectionable and unsuitable content, and often rejecting them altogether or for certain time slots.

"Every network ad and promo is placed based on a program's typical demographics," said Fox Sports spokesman Lou D'Ermilio. "The audience composition for NFL games is overwhelmingly adult."

Yet those demographics don't make it easier for parents of the throngs of children who do tune in.

Lisa Hoover, a single mother from Sarasota, Fla., says she and her three sons are devoted NFL fans who watch many games.

"All the while, I have to explain terms like 'erectile dysfunction' to my kids, remind them that drinking beer isn't as cool as all the ads make it seem, and distract them from Go Daddy commercials that border on soft porn," Hoover wrote last month on her blog.

"While I don't hold the NFL responsible for the juvenile advertising, I'm sure a few pointed comments from Commissioner Goodell to sponsors about respectability wouldn't hurt."

But not all adults see the situation as dire.

Joanne Cantor, a former University of Wisconsin professor who writes about media issues, said on her blog that she shares concerns about the beer ads on NFL telecasts, but has mixed feelings about the ED ads.

"These ads show a side of sexuality rarely seen on television - that is, not-so-young couples in apparently committed relationships," she wrote. "So maybe that part isn't all bad."

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