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Hertfordshire, UK
sophie.borland@googlemail.com
Cite this as: *BMJ* 2025;390:r1363
http://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.r1363
Published: 9 July 2025

BMJ INVESTIGATION

Junk food "avoids advertising regulation" with top level UK sports sponsorship

A BMJ investigation finds more than 90 deals between brands of food or drink that is high in fat, salt, or sugar and sporting entities, amid concerns over such sponsorship's impact on the UK's obesity crisis. Sophie Borland reports

Sophie Borland *freelance journalist*

Junk food companies have a broad presence across top level UK sport with sponsorship deals that public health experts say undermine government efforts to curb junk food advertising and tackle the UK's obesity crisis. *The BMJ* has found more than 90 current partnerships that top British sporting stars, teams, and organisations have with companies and brands that sell food or drink that is high in fat, salt, or sugar (HFSS).

The brands include Cadbury, PepsiCo, KP Snacks, Walkers, and Kellogg's; the deals are most prolific in football but extend across at least six of the UK's other most popular sports, including cycling, golf, and cricket. As the 2025 UEFA women's football championship kicks off in Switzerland this month, this investigation finds that female football stars are a major new focus for junk food advertising, with Cadbury securing key players.

The scale of HFSS advertising and sponsorship of sport found by *The BMJ* is "staggering," says Labour MP and GP Simon Opher, and "an urgent call to action" for politicians. In response to the findings, he tabled a parliamentary question asking the government whether it plans to ban sponsorship of sports events by unhealthy food brands.

The food industry has a long history of sponsoring sports, and experts tell *The BMJ* that the marketing has become more "pervasive" and "prominent" than ever—now with huge digital marketing campaigns in the run-up to events and brands being able to target fans through sports stars' social media accounts. The value of the European sports sponsorship market has increased by 15% since 2019 and was valued at a record £20bn in 2024.

Video 1 From Lineker and Walkers in the 90s, to Cadbury's 2025 Winning Pass campaign with six Premier League football clubs, junk food has a long history of sports sponsorship. Public health experts now tell The BMJ that these deals are worsening the UK's obesity crisis

Academics tell *The BMJ* that junk food sponsorship of sports avoids advertising regulations that other junk food marketing has to follow, despite growing concern over obesity and food related ill health and evidence that such deals are worsening the crisis. "Sports sponsorship by food companies is a significant gap in food advertising regulation," says Mike Rayner, a professor of population health at the University of Oxford.

In January 2026 the UK government is due to bring in legislation banning television advertisements for HFSS products before the 9 pm watershed. This regulation has been repeatedly delayed by food industry lobbying, having initially been planned for late 2022. In May 2025, the planned implementation date was shifted from October 2025 to next year.

The BMJ investigation exposes the extent to which sports sponsorship deals will swerve this new regulation to enable HFSS products to appear on daytime television, including Hula Hoops on England cricket shirts, Red Bull logos beside football pitches, and Kit Kat branding alongside Formula 1 race tracks.

Beth Bradshaw, policy and advocacy manager at Food Active, part of the public health charity Health Equalities Group, tells us: "It's so important because it's kids. Some of these sports personalities, these football stars, these rugby stars . . .They are kids' idols."

95 junk food deals

The BMJ aimed to investigate the reach of junk food brands across the UK's most popular sports, high profile teams, and sporting stars. We conducted an internet search for current sponsorship deals between sporting entities and companies and brands that sell HFSS food or drink. As there is no other central repository or record of these deals, our findings might not be exhaustive. We searched for the "partners," "partnership," "sponsors," or "sponsorship" sections of the official websites of teams and governing bodies (box 1). We also searched for recent news stories in the marketing trade press announcing deals with sporting stars and then cross referenced this with their personal Instagram or TikTok accounts to check for adverts.

Box 1: Our searches

For football, the UK's most popular sport, we looked for deals among the national men's and women's teams, and among clubs in the Premier League, the Championship, and the Scottish Premiership for the 2024-25 season, including the women's teams within those clubs. Among the UK's other most popular sports,[1] for Olympic disciplines—including cycling and athletics—we looked for deals among active UK sportspeople who have won Olympic medals or world championships. For cricket, we searched for deals among national teams, players, and tournaments. For rugby

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union, we looked for deals among the four national teams. For motorsports, we included Formula 1. We included deals with sports' governing bodies, and deals we found with companies called "official suppliers."

Our search identified 95 deals with individuals, teams, and official bodies. They include a partnership between the England and Wales Cricket Board and KP Snacks that sees Hula Hoops and Tyrrells crisps advertised on the T20 and test cricket kits, respectively, for both the men's and women's teams. Pringles has a deal with Cole Palmer, who plays football for England's men's team and Chelsea; Snickers has partnered with his national teammate Bukayo Saka, who also plays for Arsenal. The energy drink brand Red Bull has deals with England cricket captain Ben Stokes, cyclist Tom Pidcock, and pole vaulter Molly Caudery, as well as six Premier League football clubs (box 2).

Box 2: Energy drinks expand from extreme sports with "aggressive" move into football

Robin Ireland, honorary research fellow at Glasgow University's School of Health and Wellbeing, says that energy drink brands are using tobacco-style tactics to target youngsters through sport, despite health concerns over their high sugar and caffeine content and research linking them with an increased risk of mental health problems among this audience.

The brands include Red Bull and Monster Energy, which until recently focused on high risk and adrenaline fuelled "extreme" sports. Red Bull owns a Formula 1 racing team as well as having deals with climber Tony Roberts, road and cyclocross cyclist Zoe Backstedt, BMX cyclist Kieran Rielly, and snowboarder Txema Mazet-Brown. Monster Energy sponsors Formula 1 driver Lando Norris, free skier James Woods, and snowboarder Mia Brookes. The climbing and winter sports deals are not included in *The BMJ*'s figures because they are not among the UK's most popular sports,[1] but they show the extent of the brands' reach across multiple disciplines.

Last year Red Bull expanded its strategy and secured deals with six top English football clubs in what media analysts describe as an "aggressive" move into the sport. The clubs include Leeds United, which featured the Red Bull logo on the front of its shirts for the 2024-25 season. The deals with the other teams—Crystal Palace, Everton, Newcastle, Nottingham Forest, and West Ham—enable Red Bull to display adverts beside the pitch and through the clubs' social media.

Monster Energy currently has deals with four football clubs—Brentford, Brighton and Hove Albion, Southampton, and Tottenham Hotspur—having first moved into football in 2019.

Ireland tells *The BMJ*: "The key learning from tobacco is that, if you're a marketer and you're promoting your brand, you want to encourage young consumers—because if you encourage young consumers you may have them for life. There is an absolute assumption amongst many teens that you have to have an energy or sports drink to take part in sport."

A 250 ml can of Red Bull contains 27.5 mg of sugar—above the total recommended daily intake for children (24 mg)—and 80 mg of caffeine, just below the average of a cup of coffee. A 500 ml can of Monster Energy contains 55 mg of sugar and 160 mg of caffeine. NHS advice is that children should avoid caffeine entirely.

Last year research by Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health, linked energy drinks with an increased risk of mental health problems, including anxiety, stress, depression, and suicidal thoughts, among children and young people aged up to 21.[2] Lead researcher Amelia Lake, professor of public health nutrition at Teesside University, says: "These drinks are marketing and advertising a particular message, and there is nothing in place policy-wise to say: this is not a good idea because the health consequences of these drinks, particularly for children and young people, are quite marked. It's crying out for a more upstream approach, where it's signalling to everyone that actually these are not appropriate, and we should not be promoting them with sport because that sends a mixed message."

The government's *10 Year Health Plan for England*, published last week, recognises the issues with the products themselves, with a pledge to ban the sale of high caffeine energy drinks to under 16s—but does not mention their advertising.

Figures from Ampere, a data and analytics company, show that energy drinks' total spend on UK football sponsorship increased by 17% between 2023 and 2024. Other deals include the Thai brand Carabao, which sponsors the English Football League Cup (a tournament between the top four leagues) and five UK football teams.

Official sponsors of the Euro 2025 women's football championships in Switzerland include Just Eat Takeaway, Hellmann's, and PepsiCo. The organisers UEFA forecast that the championships will be watched by 500 million people around the world—and those HFSS brands will be featured prominently on LED boards beside pitches and on interview backdrops during press conferences. Other junk food brands have been capitalising on the tournament's build-up. Cadbury and PepsiCo have launched major marketing campaigns around women's football stars—including England's Leah Williamson and Lauren James, who each have deals with both brands.

PepsiCo started ramping up its advertising campaign in April, with the launch of a squad of global women's football stars wearing Pepsi kits, featuring in TV adverts, special edition cans, and on giant billboards in north and west London. Cadbury has launched an advertising campaign featuring four England and Ireland women's football stars; buying chocolate bars offers fans a chance to win a meeting with these players.

Health halo effect

Emma Boyland, professor of food marketing and child health at the University of Liverpool, tells *The BMJ*: "The rise of digital media has meant an extra level of integration for food marketing campaigns through sport. Previously the marketing would have been limited to in and around the events themselves. Now campaigns start ramping up in advance of events in concerted ways across [the internet], television, outdoor [advertising], competitions . . . The tie-ins are more prolific now, and it's such a prominent form of exposure."

Experts say that sports sponsorship gives junk food firms a "health halo effect" by making their products seem more acceptable and less harmful to consumers. This is supported by research that shows it improves children's opinions of unhealthy brands.[3-5] "Brands are associated with positive health attributes that they typically do not deserve, which is misleading for consumers, especially children," Boyland says.

MP and GP Opher says that *The BMJ*'s findings demonstrate "genuine sportswashing. It mirrors the tobacco industry activity in the 1970s, when it deliberately targeted sport."

Last October a report by the House of Lords urged the government to ban the sponsorship of sports events by unhealthy food brands as part of a series of recommendations to tackle obesity and diet related diseases.[6] The government acknowledged the request but didn't commit to it, saying: "We will continue to review evidence of the impacts on children of advertising for less healthy food and drink products and will consider whether further action is needed."[8]

One of the most glaring examples we found was KP Snacks' partnership with The Hundred, a cricket tournament aimed at families that sees eight regional teams from England and Wales compete in fast paced matches, which begins next month (August 2025). Each team has a different KP brand on its shirt, including

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Pom Bears, Butterkist, Skips, and McCoys. The tournament is screened by the BBC and Sky Sports during the daytime in August, when children are on school holidays.

Cadbury corners football

Cadbury's deals with four top England and Ireland women's footballers are part of a major marketing campaign capitalising on the Euro 2025 championships. The players—England's Jill Scott and Ireland's Kate McCabe in addition to Leah Williamson and Lauren James—star in TV adverts featuring Cadbury Fingers, Dairy Milk, and Hot Chocolate, where they are seen thanking family members for their support. They have all been promoting Cadbury on their Instagram accounts; Williamson recently posted a video of her making an ice cream sundae, topped with what seem to be Cadbury Giant Buttons and a Twirl.

Food Active'sBradshaw says: "You can't underestimate how much some kids idolise those players. These players are in absolute peak physical condition, and they are unfortunately promoting products that just do not generally feature in athletes' diets."

Cadbury also has partnerships with eight football clubs (which have men's and women's teams) in the England and Scotland Premier Leagues. It's deals with six Premier League football clubs began in 2020 and involve them promoting charitable causes, such as deaf awareness and sign language with Arsenal and helping older football fans with Manchester United.

Matthew Philpott, executive director of public health charity Health Equalities Group, is sceptical of Cadbury's motives. He describes it as a "particularly calculated and pernicious example" of brands marketing HFSS products while at the same time targeting specific groups. The deals also enable Cadbury to promote its brand on the clubs' Facebook accounts, to have advertising boards at the grounds, and sell special edition chocolate bars with wrappers displaying the various football clubs.

The brand previously sponsored the Premier League for three years from 2017, which was its first football partnership. A European Sponsorship Association awards case study says that Cadbury's sponsorship of female football stars was prompted by the "challenge of having less in-store visibility due to new HFSS regulations." Legislation introduced in October 2022 restricted the location and promotion of HFSS products in stores.[9]

"It simply should be banned"

Experts tell us that junk foods' sponsorship of sports should be banned owing to the level of exposure it gives to brands and the potential effect on children's health. The new HFSS advertising rules have been heavily contested and delayed by the food industry. The government said the delay would enable them to consult on how some adverts that highlight the overall brand rather than individual HFSS products could be exempt from the new rules.

But we have identified sponsorship deals in sports that would enable junk food firms to advertise HFSS products on TV throughout the day. Nestlé confirms that, from October, when the Mexico Grand Prix takes place, Kit Kat adverts will appear beside Formula 1 race tracks as part of a multiyear deal.

"We need to have some morals and ethics about the types of products we associate with sport," says Robin Ireland, honorary research fellow at Glasgow University's School of Health and Wellbeing. "It's an essential part of many people's lives. The kind of exposure sport gives you, it's like Hollywood. It's big, it's glamorous, and companies want to be associated with it. But we should not be allowing food brands to be using sport to promote consumption of their unhealthy products to young people.

Referring to the advertising of HFSS foods in sports, Ireland adds: "It simply should be banned. We should not be allowing it to be associated in the way it currently is."

The Health Equalities Group's Philpott says: "Why do we feel this is a problem? It's because it is something which has gone under the radar for quite a long time. Considering the disproportionate levels of overweight and obesity we have in the UK compared with other countries in Europe and the need to very significantly turn the tide on this, I would suggest that some sort of ban on marketing of HFSS products through sports channels and assets is something to be looked at with some urgency."

But Joan Walmsley, who chaired the House of Lords' Food, Diet and Obesity Committee, tells us that the 9 pm watershed and total online ban on HFSS products should be "monitored" before looking at extending the legislation to sport. "In the meantime, I'd like to encourage sports people and event organisers to choose different sponsors other than those selling less healthy food. Sport and health should go together," she adds.

In response to The BMJ's findings, Opher tabled a parliamentary question to ask the health secretary "whether he plans to bring forward legislative proposals to ban sponsorship of sports events by unhealthy food brands." The government responded that it had "no current plans to ban the sponsorship of sports events by food brands associated with less healthy food or drink products or ban the advertising of less healthy food or drink products at sports events." It added, "We continue to review the evidence of the impacts on children of less healthy food or drink product advertising and will consider where further action is needed."

Rayner says that it isn't clear how big a problem junk food advertising in sport is, relative to wider junk food advertising. "I think we should just restrict the advertising of all HFSS products to adults wherever you find it, and that would solve a lot of the problems for me, before you tackle sports sponsorship. Most advertising is aimed at adults, quite frankly—not at kids, because kids don't have the money to buy those products. Why not ban the advertising of HFSS to adults and be done with it?"

This feature has been funded by the BMJ Investigations Unit with support from Impact on Urban Health. For details see bmj.com/investigations

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Competing interests: I have read and understood BMJ policy on declaration of interests and have no relevant interests to declare.

Provenance and peer review: Commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

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