

MARKETING & MEDIA

ADVERTISING / By JOANNE LIPMAN

Virginia Slims Tennis Is Slammed Again

The Virginia Slims Tennis Tournament is under pressure to change its name and instead tap a less controversial Philip Morris product as its sponsor.

George Washington University, which was host for the Washington, D.C., leg of the match last week, has asked Philip Morris to name the tournament for one of its more "benign" brands, university officials said. In a Feb. 13 letter to an anti-smoking group, the university's president, Stephen Joel Trachtenberg, said the school is "in conversations with the sponsors . . . about the possibility of their naming it after one of their other, more benign products in the future."

Virginia Slims has been sponsoring the women's tournament for 20 years—until now without much controversy. But this year is different. Congressional efforts to restrict tobacco advertising are gaining ground. A recent public outcry against cigarette companies "targeting" certain groups—such as women and blacks—is drawing criticism to Virginia Slims. Just last week, Louis W. Sullivan, secretary of health and human services, singled out the Virginia Slims tournament by labeling it "blood money."

George Washington officials say they can't ignore the issue. "This is coming at a time when there's a lot more attention being focused on tobacco advertising," says Steven Bilsky, the school's executive director of athletics and recreation. "The political climate is heating up. We weren't naive about the fact that there might be people saying, 'Why would you even host the event at your facility?'"

Instead of the Virginia Slims moniker, Mr. Bilsky says, "Kraft foods, a nice American cheese sponsor, something like that would make sense." Philip Morris owns Kraft General Foods, maker of Velveeta cheese, Miracle Whip salad dressing and Philadelphia cream cheese, among other brands.

Philip Morris seems unlikely to bow to pressure, as does the Women's International Tennis Association, which staunchly supports its sponsor. "We have absolutely

no intention of changing the name of our tournament," a Philip Morris spokesman said. "So we fully plan to continue under the Virginia Slims banner, not just in Washington but at our 13 other named events throughout the country."

Still, the pressure shows how red-hot the tobacco advertising issue has become in recent months. RJR Nabisco has come under fire for plans, since abandoned, to sell one new cigarette brand, named Uptown, to blacks, as well as plans to sell another, Dakota, to blue-collar women. Last week, Sen. Edward Kennedy (D., Mass.) held a rancorous hearing on a bill that would limit tobacco advertising.

The letter from George Washington's Mr. Trachtenberg will be introduced at another congressional hearing today, this one held by Rep. Tom Luken (D., Ohio). Mr. Luken has proposed a bill banning all images from cigarette advertising, allowing only all-text "tombstone" ads. The bill also would ban cigarette brands from being used as sponsors of sporting events.

The Virginia Slims tournament has run into trouble before. Lloyd Elliott, former president of George Washington, kicked the tournament off campus in the mid-80s because of his opposition to the sponsorship.

"I think it's the wrong message to send to young women, particularly undergraduates in a university," he said yesterday. "To suggest that somehow the university endorses the use of tobacco, even tangentially, is to me the wrong message."

Mr. Elliott left the school in 1988, and the tournament returned to campus this year. The school's current administration decided to take the event back in part because proceeds will fund a medical-school scholarship for minority women.

Despite the outcry against tobacco advertising in general and the Virginia Slims tournament in particular, ad executives said Philip Morris shouldn't give in. Changing the name of the tournament—even to that of a fellow Philip Morris brand—would be a marketing disaster, they said.

"Changing the name of the [sponsor] in mid-course is probably the worst thing you can do," said John O'Toole, president of the American Association of Advertising Agencies. "The Virginia Slims tournament is known around the world. The Cheez Whiz Tournament probably wouldn't be too successful."

Another Coffee-Ad Clash

Procter & Gamble is furious over another Maxwell House commercial, this time concerning an ad for Maxwell House Instant that touts its superiority over other instant coffees.

P&G, which makes archrival Folgers, has appealed to the three major TV networks to drop the ad "because of some disparagement of our Folgers Crystals product," according to a P&G spokesman.

The ad doesn't mention Folgers by name but clearly implies the brand in a side-by-side comparison where a spoonful of one brand of coffee glistens.

"America's coffee drinkers believe that Maxwell House Instant looks more like fresh ground coffee than these instant coffee crystals," an announcer says in one ad. "What are those crystals anyway?" a woman in the background asks. D'Arcy Masius Benton & Bowles creates Maxwell House's ads.

Kraft General Foods, which makes Maxwell House, says it is filing a response indicating the claims in the ads are substantiated. "The challenge is without foundation," says a spokesman for the Philip Morris unit.

P&G's challenge of the instant coffee commercial comes on the heels of a separate challenge of a spot for Maxwell House's regular coffee. CBS and NBC agreed with P&G on that challenge and pulled ads that tout Maxwell House as the preferred coffee in taste tests. ABC approved the ad, but P&G has since met with the network and hopes to reverse its decision.

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