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WINNER OF 12 PULITZER PRIZES

As beer flows at college sporting events, so does criticism

By [Joey Knight](#)



Customers purchase beer during a college football game between Ohio State and Rutgers. (Brittany Greeson/The New York Times)

TAMPA — It was a collegiate celebration befitting a major facility ground-breaking, or a seven-figure donation, or the attainment of an academic benchmark. Hors d'oeuvres were served; boosters and broad smiles abounded.

"This is a historic day for the University of South Florida, and for our community," Dr. Judy Genshaft, USF's president, told the audience.

And with that, the most prominent structure on USF's main campus — home to more than 30,000 undergraduate students — was re-named after a brewery.

Effective July 1, [the USF Sun Dome becomes the Yuengling Center](#), at least in a formal sense. Many are sure to invoke catchier references.

The Foam Dome. The Suds Dome. House of Brews. Nicknames that stick with the college-age demographic.

"We know from studying this for a long time now, that when kids are exposed to this kind of advertising, they're likely to start drinking earlier," said Dr. Craig Ross, a veteran scientific advisor to the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

"And they're also likely to start drinking more and to be more likely to suffer consequences from their drinking."

Hops, malt and risk flow in the Bulls' newest revenue stream. As part of USF's agreement with D.G. Yuengling & Son Inc., which now has naming rights to the building for the next 10 years, USF and Tampa Bay Entertainment Properties (the Jeff Vinik-owned group that manages the facility) will collect a tidy yearly sum.

Citing a Florida statute that shields the Sun Dome (a direct-support organization) from state open-records laws, the school didn't release its contract with Yuengling. But it's believed USF and TBEP (which gets 35 percent of USF's annual naming rights licensing net profit) will rake in upwards of six figures annually.

"It's money, right?" said Ross, a research assistant professor of epidemiology at Boston University. "There's big money behind all of this and it's extremely tempting to universities to capitalize on that."

But for those who believe an institution of higher learning forming an alliance with a beer purveyor represents a dance with the devil, know this:

The ballroom is getting crowded.

USF's naming-rights agreement with an alcoholic-beverage producer isn't unprecedented. The University of Colorado's basketball teams play inside the Coors Events Center on campus.

Last summer, the University of Texas announced a partnership with Corona Extra, naming the imported beer an official sponsor of the Texas Longhorns.

Moreover, an increasing number of schools are approving the sale of alcoholic beverages at their sports venues.

West Virginia has sold alcohol at its football games to general-admission ticket holders since 2011. In late April, Texas *Christian* University announced that it would sell beer to the 21-and-over general public at its remaining seven home baseball games as a trial run before potentially expanding to other events. Four of the nation's five power conferences (Atlantic Coast Conference, Big 12, Big Ten, Pac-12) have no blanket alcohol policy for their schools' sports venues, leaving it to the discretion of each university. Only the Southeastern Conference prohibits the sale of alcohol in its general-seating areas at sporting events.

But five of the SEC's 14 schools (including Florida) sell beer or wine in premium seating areas during football games.

"Universities have been strongly discouraged for a long time from pursuing this revenue stream, and they've been sort of reluctant to do it," said Dr. Toben Nelson, associate professor of epidemiology and community health at the University of Minnesota School of Public Health, and an expert on alcohol-attributable health.

"But the pressures of competing on a big level ... draws people to try to go after every last nickel and do whatever they can to help their team be successful."

And as the collegiate arms race intensifies, with schools competing to construct sleeker facilities and dazzle recruits with swankier student-athlete amenities, each of those nickels counts. Texas and Ohio State each reportedly earned more than \$1 million in recent seasons from beer sales at football games.

But the burgeoning trend also is leaving a bitter aftertaste.

"(Mothers Against Drunk Driving) has concerns with naming a stadium on a college campus after an alcoholic beverage as a large portion of students on a college campus are typically under age 21 and it is therefore illegal for them to drink," said Larry Coggins, executive director of MADD's west central Florida region.

"MADD would like to remind the University of South Florida to follow safe and responsible practices related to alcohol on their campus."

Officials from USF and Yuengling both say they're doing just that. During Tuesday's news conference announcing the deal, a series of "social responsibility" initiatives were announced. Among them: a designated-driver program for Yuengling Arena events and weekend student discounts for the Lyft ride-sharing service.

But Nelson says there's one problem with such gestures: "None of those things actually work, and that's been pretty clearly demonstrated in lots of science."

"It's very typical for alcohol companies to offer to do education and training to sort of mitigate the impact of what their promotional activities are likely to do," Ross added. "And there's very little evidence supporting that those programs are effective."

As it stands, the SEC remains reticent — to a degree — to join this movement. For at least one more season, the Gators and their SEC peers will have to limit their alcohol sales to premium areas.

The league's power brokers declined to change their policy during their recent spring meetings in Destin, choosing to keep a conference rule instead of letting each school decide for itself.

"There's a lot of things we do as a conference collectively," Alabama athletic director Greg Byrne said. "We think there's value with what the SEC represents, and doing things as a conference has worked very well for us."

But the widespread presumption is that the SEC and many other schools ultimately will back off this stance.

"This is a classic example of privatizing the profits and socializing the costs," Ross said.

"So you have a lot of money that's gonna be made by the alcohol companies. Some of that money will filter through to the university ... but the university and the community are ultimately going to bear the cost of the disease, the injury, the crime, the violence."

Times staff writer Matt Baker contributed to this report. Contact Joey Knight at jknight@tampabay.com. Follow @TBTimes_Bulls.