

U. of I. rejects 'official beer' billboards near campus



A Coors Light billboard officially tied to the University of Illinois can be seen on Chicago's North Side, but not in Champaign-Urbana anymore. (Jose M. Osorio, Chicago Tribune)

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Only select fans can buy a beer at a University of Illinois football game, but according to billboards around the state, Coors Light is now the "Official Beer of the Fighting Illini."

The billboards went up in August, soon after the university reversed a ban on beer sponsorships, allowing them in exchange for at least "six figures" in additional revenue a year, according to officials with the university's Division of Intercollegiate Athletics.

But university officials were blindsided by the billboards. While they had approved the artwork to be used at places that sell alcohol — bars, restaurants and grocery stores, for example — they didn't realize it also would be displayed on billboards, including some near campus.

The signs feature a bottle of Coors Light and the Illinois "Block I" logo on a football, with the words "Official beer of the Fighting Illini."

"We didn't know about them until they went up" in Champaign-Urbana, said Marty Kaufmann, the university's assistant director of athletics.

"It was not represented to us that it would be on billboards," Kaufmann said. "We did not specifically approve billboards. We appreciate that MillerCoors is showing us support, but it is not something we approved the concept of on billboards. The artwork was approved for something else."

The six billboards in the Champaign-Urbana area were taken down at the university's request, MillerCoors confirmed. They were up for about a month.

"When the university expressed concern over the billboards in Champaign, we immediately removed them," MillerCoors spokeswoman Cat Corrigan said. "Like the University of Illinois, we at Coors Light care deeply about alcohol responsibility, and do not want to give the impression that we are advertising to anyone except legal drinking-age sports fans."

The university has decided the billboards in other parts of the state can remain. The only one in the Chicago area can be found along North Damen Avenue between Fullerton and Diversey avenues, where MillerCoors says it is seeking to "drive relevance" with the alumni in the area.

"We had concerns about billboards that appeared in Champaign-Urbana, as they gave the impression they were geared to students," said university spokeswoman Robin Kaler. "We instructed the vendor not to allow any billboards related to alcohol to be posted in Champaign-Urbana. We understand that throughout the state, adult fans of our program sometimes enjoy adult beverages, so Athletics authorized billboards in Chicago and other cities."

The ad appears on another billboard in the Peoria area, according to university officials, although MillerCoors could not confirm that late Friday.

The university's partnership with MillerCoors is the latest effort to garner more sponsorship revenue.

About three years ago, the university outsourced its athletic sponsorship and multimedia rights to Learfield Sports, a division of Missouri-based Learfield Communications, which now sells and maintains the majority of the athletic department's corporate partnerships.

The company established "Fighting Illini Sports Properties" in Champaign to oversee Illini athletics opportunities, including signage, sponsorship, event marketing, radio production and more. Learfield serves as the sports marketing arm for nearly 100 collegiate "properties," including the Big Ten.

U. of I.'s 10-year deal with Learfield includes a guaranteed total of at least seven figures annually for Illinois' athletic department, officials said. With the beer sponsorship, the deal is worth even more.

At the time the deal was signed, U. of I. said it expected to see an additional \$2 million annually in sponsorship and multimedia rights activities. Revenue figures on a copy of the Learfield-Illinois athletics contract obtained by the Tribune were redacted.

Initially, beer sponsorships were off-limits.

But last year, as other Big Ten universities began adding lucrative beer deals, Illinois decided to sidle up.

"We allowed (Learfield) to pitch to beer companies the ability to advertise on the radio network, on our coaches' television shows ... and use our approved athletics logos on point-of-purchase sales, promotional items and advertising," Kaufmann said.

MillerCoors won the bidding process and signed a four-year agreement with Learfield that began July 1. Learfield declined to answer a question about whether there had been a miscommunication about the billboard campaign.

According to the deal with MillerCoors, the university has the right to approve or refuse all marketing materials.

School officials said an added benefit of the partnership is the ability to better track the use of its logo and trademarks, since alcohol companies had been using them in unauthorized ways.

"At least what is out there now is approved and accurate from our brand standpoints," Kaufmann said.

But David Jernigan, director of the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health, has concerns about the marketing.

"First, let's talk about billboards; they're the only form of advertising you can't turn off or turn the page to avoid seeing," Jernigan said. "In terms of young people's exposure, billboards pose a particular risk.

"Now let's talk about college drinking each year: 1,825 deaths; 690,000 assaults; 97,000 victims of alcohol-related sexual assault or date rape. It's a major risk factor in college life."

Such billboards have aroused controversy on campuses for years.

Earlier this year, the University of Connecticut ordered the removal of four billboards, two of which were electronic, featuring UConn's Husky mascot, a towering Coors beer bottle and the slogan, "Huskies Love the Cold" after an outcry from a high-ranking state legislator, according to the Hartford Courant.

Those ads were brokered by a division of IMG Worldwide. The entire marketing agreement between IMG and UConn would reap the university about \$8 million in fees this year, according to UConn athletics department spokesman Mike Enright.

Jernigan recommended U. of I. follow UConn's lead.

"What UConn said to Coors is a nice model for the country," Jernigan said. "They said, 'These two don't mix. We don't want them to mix. It sends the wrong message.'"

MillerCoors provides a \$20,000 annual grant to Illinois to promote responsible alcohol education, according to the school.

Illinois says it was going along with its peers when it approved a beer sponsorship. Kaufmann cited a half-dozen Big Ten universities that he said have partnerships. He said the campus administration, including Chancellor Phyllis Wise, consented.

"We would by no means be the first doing this, but we didn't want to be left out," Kaufmann said. "The landscape has changed a lot in the last three years."

Illinois sells beer to football fans in the stadium's suites and club areas. Both MillerCoors and Anheuser-Busch products are available.

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