

January, 2009

Commissioner David J. Stern  
National Basketball Association  
645 Fifth Avenue  
New York, NY 10022

Dear Commissioner Stern:

We, the undersigned substance abuse prevention, community, health, and youth advocacy organizations, respectfully request that the NBA reconsider its lifting of the ban on courtside hard liquor advertisements, and annul other proposed policy changes that would allow teams to promote hard liquor on team websites, at point-of-sale retail locations, and in-arena promotions. Those changes can only aggravate a professional sports advertising environment that is already awash in promotions to drink beer that captivate young people with their themes and humor.

Courtside advertisements are intimately linked to the game and send a message that alcohol and professional basketball go hand in hand. It is difficult — if not impossible — to avoid those ads while watching the players run up and down the court. In fact, their positioning will likely create almost constant television impressions filled with liquor ads. Courtside liquor ads not only promote drinking to the thousands of underage fans who attend the games, but also highlight logos and brands for the hordes of young viewers at home. Permitting any courtside alcohol ads — as well as other promotions to drink — is insensitive to the young basketball fans and inconsistent with the NBA CARES community-oriented programs.

There are many good reasons for the NBA to reconsider *all* alcohol advertising during its telecasts. Alcohol is the drug of choice among young people. Drinking that begins in high school often continues into college. More than four in ten college students drink at “binge” levels — consuming five or more drinks on at least one occasion in the past 30 days. Binge drinkers are more likely than non-binge drinkers to be injured, assaulted, or sexually assaulted.

Alcohol advertising during sports telecasts reinforces and normalizes drinking behavior among young people and appeals to a young population of sports fans. Recent evidence has linked teens’ exposure to alcohol advertising with more frequent and heavier drinking. It is bad enough that beer commercials steadily inundate millions of underage viewers during NBA games. Opening the door to a flood of new, stealth hard-liquor ads can only make matters worse. It certainly will not help in society’s efforts to deter underage drinking.

Drinking by young people has real and tragic consequences. Alcohol is a significant factor in the four leading causes of death among persons ages 10 to 24: motor-vehicle crashes, unintentional injuries, homicide, and suicide. Research shows that alcohol use by young people may cause long-term harm to their developing brains, including damage to proper learning and memory functioning, compared to older drinkers.

The NBA has a large following of underage fans. According to a 2004 ESPN poll, a higher percentage (22.5%) of the NBA fan base is under the age of 21 than for any other professional sport. This is not surprising since the NBA has a long history of reaching out to young fans through the Jr. NBA/Jr. WNBA programs which organize summer camps, tournaments, skills competitions, coaches clinics, and player appearances "...to develop a life-long passion for the game of basketball...." The NBA's recent initiative with the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) to enhance youth basketball programs will generate even more young fans who can be delivered to product marketers, including alcohol producers.

Sports are a fundamental developmental activity for young people, helping to build character, teamwork, leadership, and promote physical activity. We question the exploitation of athletics by alcohol marketers seeking to expand their markets. Young people comprise an important part of the basketball fan base actively recruited by teams through special promotions, the sale of branded children's clothing, and the sponsorship of various youth activities and community events. Many kids admire pro stars and look up to NBA players as role models. It is just plain wrong for the NBA to be procuring millions of underage persons to be targeted by companies that push alcoholic beverages.

We commend the NBA for its commitment to social responsibility through programs supporting youth, family, education, and health-related causes, including drug abuse prevention. However, we are deeply troubled by the NBA's lack of concern for the health of young people and their futures, considering that alcohol is their number one drug of choice.

**We respectfully request that the NBA revisit its beer advertising policy and reconsider its recent decision to lift the ban on courtside hard liquor advertising and prohibit teams to promote hard liquor on team websites, at point-of-sale retail locations, and in-arena promotions.**

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Alabama Citizens Action Program, Birmingham, AL  
Athletes for a Better World, Atlanta, GA  
Baker Community Counseling Services, Inc., Macclenny, FL  
Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, Boston, MA  
Center for Science in the Public Interest, Washington, DC  
CommPre – A Program of Horizon Services Inc., Hayward, CA  
Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America (CADCA) Alexandria, VA  
Institute for Public Strategies, California, Montana, Mexico  
Lee County Coalition for a Drug Free Southwest Florida, Cape Coral, FL  
Marin Institute, San Rafael, CA  
Media Literacy for Prevention, Critical Thinking, Self-Esteem, Santa Fe, NM  
National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, Inc. (NCADD), New York, NY  
North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, MD

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Northern Lights Youth Services (NL SADD), Hillsboro, ND

Oregon Partnership, Portland, OR

Starting Point of Ozaukee, Inc., Grafton, WI

Tarrant County Challenge, Inc., Fort Worth, TX

United Methodist Church – General Board of Church and Society, Washington, D.C.

Youth Leadership Institute, San Francisco, CA