



¹ University College London Hospital, UK

² School of Public Health, University of São Paulo, Brazil

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2025;389:r1200
<http://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.r1200>

Football can't ignore its sugar problem

Soda giants have exploited the world's most popular sport for commercial gain, and FIFA has an opportunity to lead by example by dropping them as sponsors of the 2025 Club World Cup, write **Chris van Tulleken and Carlos A Monteiro**

Chris van Tulleken,¹ Carlos A Monteiro²

During the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, one name dominated the field—and it wasn't a player. Coca-Cola was ubiquitous,¹ appearing on massive billboards, in halftime commercials, and in the hands of athletes during press conferences. This extended beyond conventional advertising: it represented a calculated corporate strategy, illustrating the extent to which sponsorships have integrated unhealthy products into the structure of professional sport.

As the 2025 FIFA Club World Cup begins, we as doctors and public health advocates have a duty to call out Coca-Cola and other sugary drink companies that have entrenched themselves in the world of sports through marketing—profiting off players and fans while contributing to a global health crisis. We need to hold these corporate giants to account for putting profits ahead of public and planetary health.

As FIFA's official sponsor since 1978,² Coca-Cola has leveraged its massive platform to promote sugary drinks to billions of people despite the demonstrable link between sugary drinks and type 2 diabetes, dental caries, obesity, and many other negative health outcomes. Sugary drinks are a substantial contributor to the growing global diabetes epidemic.^{3,4} New research has linked sugary drink consumption to type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease across 184 countries.⁵ These products are ultraprocessed⁶ and nutrient poor, offering no nutritional benefit while fuelling diet related diseases.⁷

By sponsoring the World Cup, Coca-Cola utilises its exclusive branding rights and global advertising privileges to gain unparalleled access to fans in more than 200 countries.⁸ Yet, despite mounting evidence of harm,⁹ Coca-Cola and other sugary drink producers continue to buy partnerships with sport organisations, securing influence and unrestricted access while putting public health at risk. By embedding itself in football and other beloved sports, Coca-Cola isn't just sponsoring the game—it's normalising excessive sugar consumption, contradicting the principles of fitness and health that sport represents.

Perhaps the biggest concern is the appeal to children, who are particularly susceptible to the allure of sugary drinks and their pervasive marketing.¹⁰ With their flashy labels, bright colours, and celebrity endorsements, these drinks foster unhealthy eating habits and consumer behaviour that can last a lifetime. Studies have shown that children who are exposed to sport sponsorships are more likely to

associate positive feelings with the brands involved and to buy their products.¹¹

Downplaying the dangers

Despite the weight of evidence, sugary drink manufacturers have skillfully deflected criticism.¹² For decades these companies have funded studies¹³ and sponsored organisations that appear to be scientific or interested in promoting public health¹⁴ but instead downplay the dangers of their products. FIFA, as the global ambassador and governing body of football, has colluded in this behaviour¹⁵ and continues to profit from the partnership. In doing so, it allows Coca-Cola to “sportswash” away the negative health effects of its product by linking it with athletic achievement and sportsmanship.¹⁶

By engaging with more than five billion people¹⁷ during the 2022 World Cup, Coca-Cola's sponsorship cemented its sugary drinks into the public consciousness. And this behaviour isn't unique to a single company. PepsiCo, with its star endorsement from Lionel Messi, targets the same captive football audience.

Kick Big Soda Out of Sport,¹⁸ a campaign led by concerned global health organisations and advocates, has garnered widespread support and publicity by demanding that the International Olympic Committee end its nearly 100 year partnership with Coca-Cola, against the backdrop of the 2024 Paris Games. Leading medical and public health experts weighed in, urging the committee to end the “health hypocrisy”¹⁹ of continuing to endorse Coca-Cola while promoting the virtues of sport and physical health. Although this was ultimately unsuccessful, determined supporters have ignited a movement to end these pernicious sponsorships—now shifting their focus to FIFA's relations with Coca-Cola as this year's Club World Cup sets the stage for the 2026 World Cup.

We can't ignore the irrefutable link between sugary drink consumption and poor health. The influence of campaigns such as Kick Big Soda Out of Sport and rising global awareness of the dangers posed by sugary drinks show that momentum is shifting. By ending its sponsorship deal with Coca-Cola, FIFA could send a powerful message—that health supersedes corporate sponsorship. The soda industry has exploited the world's most popular sport for commercial gain, and in this moment FIFA has an opportunity to lead by example.

Competing interests: CVT is a BBC broadcaster and *New York Times* bestselling author of *Ultra-Processed People* (Cornerstone Press, 2023).

Provenance: Not commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

- 1 Coca-Cola Europacific Partners. Delivering magic to customers during the FIFA World Cup. 13 Dec 2022. <https://www.cocacolaep.com/news-and-stories/delivering-magic-to-customers-during-the-fifa-world-cup/>
- 2 FIFA Museum. Coca-Cola. <https://www.fifamuseum.com/en/explore/about/partner/coca-cola>
- 3 Global Food Research Program. Taxing sugary drinks: a fiscal policy to improve public health. May 2022. https://www.globalfoodresearchprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/GFRP_Fact-Sheet_SugaryDrinkTaxes_2022_11_corrected.pdf
- 4 International Diabetes Federation. IDF diabetes atlas. <https://diabetesatlas.org>
- 5 Lara-Castor L, O'Hearn M, Cudhea F, et al. Global Dietary Database. Burdens of type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease attributable to sugar-sweetened beverages in 184 countries. *Nat Med* 2025;31:64. doi: 10.1038/s41591-024-03345-4 pmid: 39762424
- 6 Monteiro CA, Cannon G, Levy RB, et al. Ultra-processed foods: what they are and how to identify them. *Public Health Nutr* 2019;22:41. doi: 10.1017/S1368980018003762 pmid: 30744710
- 7 Malik VS, Popkin BM, Bray GA, Després JP, Willett WC, Hu FB. Sugar-sweetened beverages and risk of metabolic syndrome and type 2 diabetes: a meta-analysis. *Diabetes Care* 2010;33:83. doi: 10.2337/dc10-1079 pmid: 20693348
- 8 Inside FIFA. Partners. <https://inside.fifa.com/tournament-organisation/partners>
- 9 Qin P, Li Q, Zhao Y, et al. Sugar and artificially sweetened beverages and risk of obesity, type 2 diabetes mellitus, hypertension, and all-cause mortality: a dose-response meta-analysis of prospective cohort studies. *Eur J Epidemiol* 2020;35:71. doi: 10.1007/s10654-020-00655-y pmid: 32529512
- 10 Cairns G, Angus K, Hastings G, Caraher M. Systematic reviews of the evidence on the nature, extent and effects of food marketing to children. A retrospective summary. *Appetite* 2013;62:15. doi: 10.1016/j.appet.2012.04.017 pmid: 22561190
- 11 Kelly B, Baur LA, Bauman AE, King L, Chapman K, Smith BJ. "Food company sponsors are kind, generous and cool": (mis)conceptions of junior sports players. *Int J Behav Nutr Phys Act* 2011;8. doi: 10.1186/1479-5868-8-95 pmid: 21888675
- 12 Wood B, Ruskin G, Sacks G. Targeting children and their mothers, building allies and marginalising opposition: an analysis of two Coca-Cola public relations requests for proposals. *Int J Environ Res Public Health* 2019;17. doi: 10.3390/ijerph17010012 pmid: 31861344
- 13 Borenstein M. Coca-Cola funds scientists who shift blame for obesity away from bad diets. New York Times 9 Aug 2015. <https://archive.nytimes.com/well.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/08/09/coca-cola-funds-scientists-who-shift-blame-for-obesity-away-from-bad-diets/>
- 14 Aaron DG, Siegel MB. Sponsorship of national health organizations by two major soda companies. *Am J Prev Med* 2017;52:30. doi: 10.1016/j.amepre.2016.08.010 pmid: 27745783
- 15 Inside FIFA. Long-standing FIFA partner the Coca-Cola Company confirmed for FIFA Club World Cup 2025. 20 Feb 2025. <https://inside.fifa.com/tournament-organisation/commercial/media-releases/long-standing-partner-coca-cola-confirmed-club-world-cup-2025>
- 16 Carter MA, Signal L, Edwards R, Hoek J, Maher A. Food, fizzy, and football: promoting unhealthy food and beverages through sport—a New Zealand case study. *BMC Public Health* 2013;13. doi: 10.1186/1471-2458-13-126 pmid: 23399019
- 17 Inside FIFA. World Cup 2022 in numbers. <https://inside.fifa.com/tournament-organisation/world-cup-2022-in-numbers>
- 18 Kick Big Soda Out of Sport. <https://www.kickbigsodaout.org>
- 19 The 2024 Olympic Games: end the health hypocrisy. *Lancet* 2024;404. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(24)01641-6 pmid: 39127466