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Sport and alcohol: perfect mix?

We live in a sports mad country where every weekend millions of people roll up, tune in or flip to the back page to support their team.

It's sensible that companies would choose to sponsor sporting clubs in order to reach these millions of potential consumers. The idea is to attract brand loyalty, and the wine industry, like most industries, has thrown its hat into the sport sponsorship ring.

This year some major sponsorship deals have been announced—Tyrrell's Wines in the Hunter Valley has tied up a deal with the Melbourne Football Club, as both companies will celebrate 150 years in 2008. Hellyers Road Distillery in Tasmania announced its sponsorship of the Hawthorn Football Club and following this move, Tamar Ridge committed to sponsorship of Hawthorn as the official wine supplier.

Other notable deals include Chalice Bridge Winery which sponsors the Fremantle Football Club, Sirromet Wines which sponsors V8 Supercar racing, Seppelt Wines which sponsors the Melbourne Cup Carnival, the Hardy Wine Company which was the official wine supplier of the 2007 F1 Grand Prix, and the list goes on and on.

Many of these sponsorships are worth tens of thousands of dollars, and a couple are reportedly worth millions. If that kind of spend is out of your reach, there are individual AFL player sponsorships available for varying amounts, for example you can pick up a Western Bulldogs player for \$3,290.

Wolf Blass Wines is a well known sport supporter, and even went so far as to appoint a Wolf Blass Cricket Ambassador in Stuart MacGill—spin bowler and passionate wine collector. As part of his ambassadorial duties, MacGill captained a team in the Wolf

Blass Twilight Cricket Series, where Wolf Blass wines were offered for tasting. Not a bad move for raising brand awareness among non-traditional wine drinkers.

At Tasmanian whisky maker Hellyers Road Distillery, the sponsorship of the Hawthorn Football Club is a natural extension of the Tasmanian State Government's major deal with the Hawks. Hellyers Road chief marketing officer Ian Locke said while commercial-in-confidence prevented disclosure of sponsorship cost, he was willing to explain the rationale behind the decision.

"Tasmania has naming rights status to the Tassie Hawks through an underwriting of \$15 million over five years and Victoria is Tasmania's largest market for food and beverage, therefore it is a crucial market for our whisky, vodka and whisky cream," he said. "The principal concentration of the Tasmanian Government sponsorship spend is Victoria. That blue *TASMANIA* is all over the place—not just on the chests of players—so we are looking to piggy-back on the spend, which principally raises Tasmania's profile in Victoria. And of course for Hawthorn, they want to be associated with Tasmanians because they see the opportunity to grow their membership base."

To offset the cost of the sponsorship, Hellyers Road is offering a special co-branded 'Go Hawks' bottling for Hawthorn members. This is for online purchases only and members must be over 18 years of age.

"We regard that as responsible marketing of a spirituous beverage and arms-length from any overtures of promoting to young people or the off-field exploits of sportspeople," Ian said. "We also are working through linkages and other product opportunities with Hawthorn's other

sponsors. Again they tend to be Victorian based so the exposure is good. We have picked up good sales to members, exposure to retail outlets, respect that we are out promoting our product—you know the drum—accepting the responsibility we have to get the message about our product to the consumer.

"The other important opportunity that we are working on is in-bound tourism and getting people through the door at our visitor interpretation centre. We are doing this in conjunction with Tourism Tasmania, which has identified the importance of promoting activities for visitors once they get off the plane or ferry in Tasmania. Food and beverage is an important link in this activity. Again, we have special offers for Hawthorn members who visit us and flash their membership card."

But sport sponsorship isn't for the faint hearted. With the amount of negative press that alcohol related misdemeanours in the sports industry are currently receiving, it will be interesting to watch the alcohol and sport sponsorship story over the next five years. Some believe that sporting clubs, especially football clubs, will give in to public pressure and turn their backs on alcohol-related alliances.

If this happened Australia wouldn't be alone. The sponsorship of sporting events and people by alcohol companies in some countries is already banned. *Wikipedia* reports that the primary European rugby union competition, the Heineken Cup, is called the H Cup in France because of the country's restrictions on alcohol advertising. Will similar bans be introduced in Australia? I don't think so. In a sports and drinks mad culture like ours, I think commonsense (and the lure of the almighty dollar) will prevail.