

NEWS ANALYSIS

Smoke-free soccer: US women take the lead

US Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Donna Shalala announced in March a new campaign to promote participation in soccer as a healthy alternative to smoking. The campaign was hailed by President Bill Clinton at a White House ceremony. "Young women are bombarded with billboards which suggest that smoking is cool and glamorous and a good way to stay thin," the President said. "The women of the US national soccer team know better. This spring and summer, they are going to make America proud when they compete in the Olympics. And just when thousands of young girls around the country are looking up to them, they are going to make it clear that smoking is not cool. . . . It will make a real difference in people's lives."

The campaign was announced with the airing of a national TV advertisement featuring members of the US women's national soccer team promoting the benefits of a smoke-free lifestyle. The US campaign is called "Smoke-Free Kids and Soccer" and is a collaboration between HHS, the US women's national soccer team, and US Soccer, the governing body of American soccer.

In announcing the campaign, Shalala said the objective was to prevent smoking among girls ages 12-17 and to increase awareness of the risk to performance that results from cigarette use. She launched the campaign at a press conference in Atlanta, Georgia, the site of the 1996 Summer Olympics. "More and more young people, especially girls, are striking the first match that will lead to a lifelong, life-threatening addiction," Shalala said. "This campaign communicates not only the negative effects of tobacco use on athletic per-

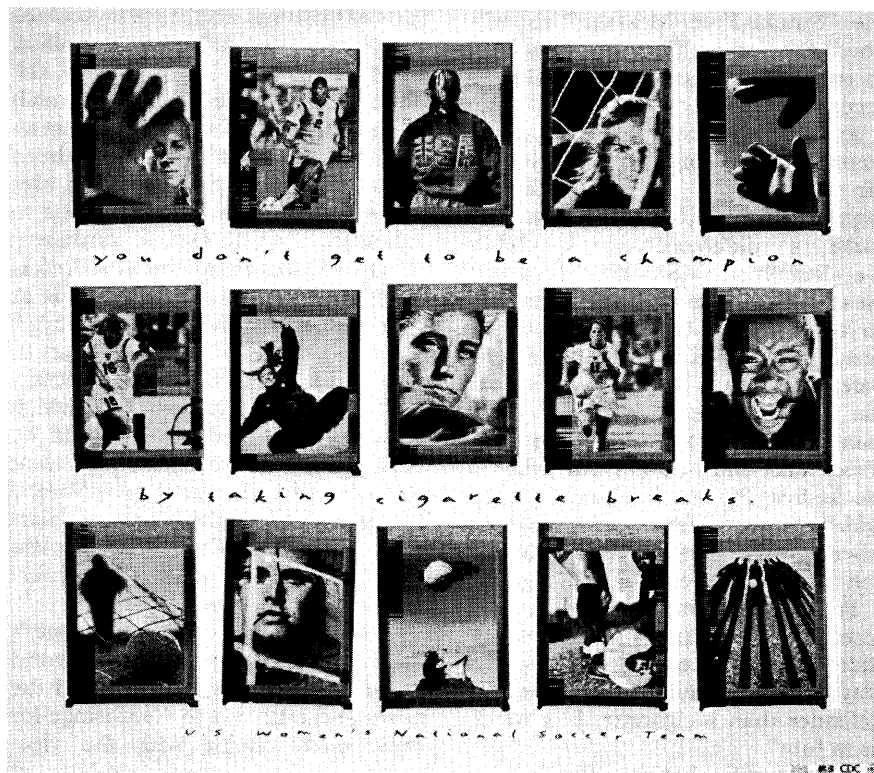


Figure 1a and 1b "You don't get to be a champion by taking cigarette breaks." Promotional posters for the US women's national soccer team's collaboration in the "Smoke-free Kids and Soccer campaign".

formance, but also promotes participation in sports as a positive alternative to smoking." Shalala added: "[The campaign] is an excellent vehicle for reaching young

people with the smoke-free message. Athletics give young people the very benefits they often seek from smoking: independence, status with their peers, a chance to make friends and a positive sense of self."

The campaign includes a 30-second television advertisement, a 60-second radio advertisement, fact sheets on tobacco and athletic performance, and two motivational posters featuring members of the US women's team (figures 1a and 1b). The advertisements aired as paid advertising during the Spring and Summer in communities where the national team hosted "friendly" matches against international competitors. The television advertisement has also aired during national broadcasts of US matches, reaching millions of young soccer fans and their families.

Copies of the HHS posters and fact sheets are distributed to young fans attending National Team games and are made available to youth soccer leagues and state health departments. The campaign debut took place during matches in Atlanta and

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Charlotte, North Carolina between the US and German National Teams. The US women hosted additional games against The Netherlands, France, China, Japan, and Canada in preparation for the Olympics.

US National Team co-captains Julie Foudy and Carla Overbeck attended the White House ceremony and met President Clinton. Along with their team-mates, they have agreed to bring the "Smoke-Free Message" to millions of their fans. They are committed to encouraging more girls to take up soccer and put down cigarettes.

In explaining the importance of the smoke-free campaign Ms Foudy said: "It has been an unbelievable opportunity for us. We have a chance to make a difference in a child's life—literally. . . . Smoking is about life or death: that is why this campaign is so crucial." Ms Foudy, who attends Stanford Medical School, challenged parents, teachers, and coaches to join the "Smoke-Free Kids and Soccer" campaign and "to set an example for these kids and show them what a smoke-free life is all about." Foudy added, "It is a lifestyle to be learned when you are young and a lifestyle that will buy you years of healthy living."

Foudy, 25, an internationally recognised midfielder, summed up the attitude of the fiercely competitive US players: "We'd much rather smoke a defender than a cigarette. Just watch us in July."

HHS public health officials said women's soccer was selected to highlight the smoke-free campaign because of the game's growing popularity among young girls. More than 7 million US women currently play soccer. Among children under 12, soccer ranks second in popularity only to basketball. The rapid growth of soccer and its popularity among youth suggests a bright future for the sport and its role in promoting a smoke-free lifestyle among youth.

Women's soccer is also growing in popularity around the globe. In 1995 Sweden hosted the second Women's World Cup, which was won by Norway. In 1996 women's soccer had its debut as a medal event at the 1996 Atlanta Olympic games. In 1999 the third Women's World Cup is expected to be hosted by the US.

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STOP PRESS: The US Women's Soccer team won the gold medal in the Olympic Games in Atlanta.