

Hook 'em horns and heavy drinking: Alcohol use and collegiate sports

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Abstract

Heavy alcohol consumption has been associated with collegiate sporting events, but little is known about specific levels of consumption over the course of an entire sports season. Ongoing web-based daily monitoring at the University of Texas at Austin allowed assessment of drinking levels of students ($n=541$) over two full football seasons. High-profile football game days were among the heaviest days for alcohol consumption, comparable to consumption on other well-known drinking days such as New Years Eve and Halloween weekend. Men increased their drinking for all games, and women with greater social involvement were more likely to drink heavily during away games. Among lighter drinkers, away games were associated with a greater likelihood of behavioral risks as intoxication increased.

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1. Introduction

Emerging adult college students are among the heaviest drinking demographic groups in the United States. Those who attend college consume considerably more alcohol than their non-college peers (Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2005), and they experience high rates of negative

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consequences associated with excessive alcohol use (Wechsler et al., 2002). Although examination of typical and peak consumption patterns can shed light on general patterns of college drinking, traditional assessments of alcohol consumption such as Quantity/Frequency indices (e.g., the Daily Drinking Questionnaire; Collins, Parks, & Marlatt, 1985) have significant limitations (e.g., Neal et al., 2006). Such assessments require students to rely on heuristically-based estimates of “typical” consumption patterns, and are therefore unlikely to capture drinking episodes that are outside of individuals’ normative consumption patterns.

Recent evidence suggests that collegiate drinking, and heavy drinking in particular, is often associated with specific social or recreational events within the college environment. Although these events may represent college students’ heaviest drinking occasions, they are likely to be excluded by traditional quantity/frequency assessments of alcohol use. Thus, the identification of events that promote heavy drinking, the degree to which alcohol use increases in conjunction with these events, and factors that influence drinking during these events, has become a recent focus of empirical research. For example, although it has widely been considered a period of sustained heavy drinking for many students, only recently has drinking on Spring Break been empirically documented as a specific heavy drinking context (Lee, Maggs, & Rankin, 2006; Smeaton, Josiam, & Dietrich, 1998). Likewise, Halloween (Miller, Jasper, & Hill, 1993) has been associated with increased rates of alcohol consumption, and recent investigations have documented heavy drinking practices on college students’ twenty-first birthdays (Neighbors, Oster-Aaland, Bergstrom, & Lewis, 2006; Neighbors, Spieker, Oster-Aaland, Lewis, & Bergstrom, 2005). Another drinking context, which is particularly relevant to a wide range of campuses across the country, is university-related sporting events.

1.1. Collegiate sports and alcohol consumption

Whereas other heavy drinking contexts occur only once a year (Spring Break, Halloween) or once in a lifetime (twenty-first birthday), sporting events occur on a weekly basis throughout the academic year. Students who self-identify as sports fans endorse higher rates of heavy drinking compared to other students (Nelson & Wechsler, 2001), yet there exists only limited empirical evidence to suggest that heavy drinking occurs on days on which college sports teams play games. Many college students view campus sporting events as an opportunity for heavy drinking, both to celebrate important victories as well as to express solidarity and enhance group cohesion with fellow students (Rabow & Duncan-Schill, 1995). This latter finding emphasizes the fact that heavy drinking associated with sporting events may be linked both to the athletic event itself, as well as to the social context associated with the athletic event. Games days, like spring break, are viewed as “party days,” in which a more disinhibited social atmosphere is likely to lead to increased alcohol use as well as other behavioral risks. As such, a large percentage of alcohol-related violations occur on college game days (Coons, Howard-Hamilton, & Waryold, 1995) which can be reduced by limiting the supply of alcohol (Bormann & Stone, 2001).

Only two studies have examined the rate of alcohol use associated with specific sporting events. Large increases in alcohol consumption were observed on the days of the semi-finals and finals of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Final Four basketball tournament (Neal, Sugarman, Hustad, Caska, & Carey, 2005). Over 60% of the sample reported alcohol consumption on each game day, and among those who drank, average consumption on the Saturday semi-final game was 8.2 (SD=5.5) drinks and average consumption on the Monday final game was 6.9 (SD=4.8) drinks. For comparative purposes, on a typical Saturday only 45% of the sample consumed alcohol, and average consumption was 3.2 drinks.

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