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The alcohol and sport nexus

Followers of the alcohol debate will have heard the very strong calls by anti-alcohol advocates for Australia to break something called the 'alcohol and sport nexus'.

This demand is always resolutely expressed, as if it is absolutely self-evident that the supposed link between alcohol and sport is harmful for sport and society and that, like oil and water, sport and alcohol can never be mixed successfully. 'Breaking the nexus' has become a totemic phrase for the anti-alcohol critics.

But what do the critics actually mean when they refer to the 'alcohol and sport nexus', and is it likely to be harmful? Do professional athletes knock back a drink while the cameras are on them and so cause underage drinking? Obviously not. The critics are really targeting alcohol being advertised around sports matches, and that many sports clubs depend on their bars for income.

In reality, the 'nexus' as such is that the segment of the population that has the greatest level of alcohol consumption – men aged 18-25 – also have the highest level of watching and playing sports. Quite simply, the connection between alcohol and sport is that they share the same segment of the population as their biggest customer base.

I believe that the critics have observed that young men watch and play lots of sport, and also noted that young men drink more than other groups, and mistakenly decided that alcohol's advertising and sponsorship involvement with sports causes and encourages the lots of young men to start drinking, and to do so heavily.

A large part of the 'nexus' argument comes from sports stars behaving very badly while under the influence, therefore giving drunkenness a big tick in the eyes of the impressionable young. I think this is correct, and it is a valid concern.

However, I can't see how an end to alcohol advertising or sponsorship will reduce or end the ability of highly-paid athletes to drink too much in public. It is not like they are short of funds. Nor will it reduce the media's coverage when it inevitably happens again.

'Breaking the nexus' is simply a furphy, and one deliberately created to attack alcohol sponsorship without requiring a strong and credible argument that is actually backed by real science.