

# Sports stars are no role models, say scientists

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The loutish and drunken behaviour of some of our sporting heroes - routinely reported in the media - has little or no effect on the drinking habits of young people, new research has found.

Researchers at the Universities of Manchester, UK, and Western Sydney, Australia, say their findings - published in *Drug and Alcohol Review* - rubbish the idea that sports stars act as role models for those who follow sport.

"The perceived drinking habits of sports stars and its relationship to the drinking levels of young people has never been examined empirically, despite these sporting heroes often being touted as influential role models for young people," said lead researcher Dr Kerry O'Brien, a lecturer in Manchester's School of [Psychological Sciences](#).

"Our research shows that young people, both sporting participants and non-sporting participants, don't appear to be influenced by the drinking habits of high-profile sportspeople as depicted in the [mass media](#)."

Dr O'Brien and his colleagues, pointing to previous research, suggest that sport and sports stars are much more likely to influence the drinking behaviour of fans when used as marketing tools by the alcohol industry, such as through sponsorship deals.

The research team asked more than 1,000 young sportspeople at elite and amateur level and non-sportspeople to report the perceived drinking behaviour of high-profile sport stars compared with their friends, and then report their own drinking behaviour using the World Health Organisations Alcohol Use Disorder Identification Test.

The researchers found that both sporting and non-sporting study participants believed that sports stars actually drank significantly less than themselves but that their own friends drank

considerably more.

After accounting for other potential factors, sports stars' drinking was not predictive of young sportspeople's own drinking, and was actually predictive of lower levels of drinking in non-sportspeople - the more alcohol non-sportspeople perceived sports stars to drink, the less they actually drank themselves.

Young people's own drinking was instead strongly related to the overestimation of their friends' drinking and, in sportspeople only, to sport-specific cultural habits, such as the drinking with competitors after games.

Dr O'Brien added: "Sport administrators, like the Football Association, are very quick to condemn and punish individual sport stars for acting as poor role models when they are caught displaying drunken and loutish behaviour.

But there is much stronger evidence for a relationship between alcohol-industry sponsorship, advertising and marketing within sport and hazardous drinking among young people than there is for the influence of sports stars drinking.

"We are not suggesting that sports stars should not be encouraged to drink responsibly but it's disingenuous to place the blame on them for setting the bad example.

"It is time that sport administrators consider their own social responsibilities when weighing up the costs and benefits of using their sports and sport stars to market alcohol on behalf of the [alcohol industry](#)."

**More information:** O'Brien, K.S., Kolt, G., Webber, A., Hunter, J.A. Alcohol consumption in sport: The influence of sporting idols, friends and normative drinking practices. *Drug and Alcohol Review* (advanced online access) 2010.

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