

Partly cloudy and continued very warm and humid, with a high of 85-90 and southerly winds 5-15 mph. Partly cloudy tonight with a low near 70 and mostly sunny Saturday with a high in the upper 80s.

Flatwater Festival
this weekend at UNL

Special Section

Bryant finds challenges
in multiple daily duties

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College athletes run for the money

By Jonathan Taylor
Staff Reporter

College athletes are prohibited by National Collegiate Athletic Association rules from endorsing any products or appearing in advertisements, but they still do . . . in a roundabout way.

What they do is called 'promotion' by equipment company executives and it happens every time a collegiate athlete goes on the playing field wearing a product featuring a name brand logo on it. So whenever a Nebraska diver springs off the board in her Speedo swimsuit, or a Husker split end catches a pass in his Converse turfshoes, that means exposure for that company and its products.

Such promotions, however, are not done for free.

For the Converse Shoe Company, about \$35,000 is riding on the assumption that when the Cornhusker football team takes the field for its games this season, you'll at least recognize what brand of shoes the players wear.

That amount is approximately how much Converse is paying the Nebraska Athletic Department in free shoes, scholarships and just plain cash to go with their brand, rather than another, such as Nike, which Nebraska had previously been wearing for four years.

The NCAA says indirect promotions like that are OK.

Although the NCAA Executive Committee frequently discusses such indirect product endorsements, so far, subtle advertising techniques like paying schools with nationally-recognized and highly-visible teams to wear one brand of shoe exclusively is not a violation, said Steve Mallonee, a legislative assistant for the NCAA.

In fact, he said, "That's good business judgment."

If an equipment manufacturer wants to sponsor a team, "there is nothing wrong with that," Mallonee said. But, he said, the problems occur when the manufacturer wants to use a picture of a college team in an advertisement.

Direct use of a team or coach in advertisement is a violation, Mallonee said, because it threatens a student-athlete's eligibility.

Indirect advertising may be an ongoing "issue" with the NCAA, Mallonee said, but it is unlikely that any rules prohibiting it will be passed in the future.

That's reassuring to companies like Nike and Converse who bank on their promotion investments paying off.

"Promotion does sell shoes for a company," said Bob Knoll, the Converse sales and promotions representative for Kansas and Nebraska.

He said, for example, that Converse sells "tons more" basketball shoes simply because basketball stars like Julius Erving and Larry Bird wear its product. Because of the increased sales, Knoll said, "those advertisements are actuality."

Using the most visible and well-known athletes and teams to promote products "is just the way the system works," he said, and shows how competitive the shoe industry is.

Karin Morland, created promotions manager for Nike, agreed.

"Nike looks at the best representative in each conference to use them as

a marketing tool," Morland said. Heavily sponsoring more than one team in a marketing area, she said, would be an expensive redundancy.

"Obviously, we don't need to outfit the entire conference in our shoes," Moreland said.

Despite the emphasis by companies to set up contracts with the most successful teams, two Nebraska athletics coaches said they don't think the system is unfair.

Colleges with better athletic programs deserve to get good deals on products, said Gary Pepin, men's and women's track coach. "That's the way the world works," he said. "The achievers have more opportunities than the non-achievers."

Football coach Tom Osborne said the product promotion contracts are no different than television contracts college athletic departments make.

Although the entire Big Eight football conference may get money for appearing on television, he said, those teams that appear more often get a bigger percentage of the deal than the rest. "Rewards go with having a successful program," he said.

"Say your team goes on a bowl game; you receive a pretty healthy transportation allotment, watches and the opportunity to practice more," Osborne said. "Is that unfair?"

And because of the money athletic departments can save, neither coach has any qualms about having their teams used to indirectly promote manufacturers' products.

Tight budgets play a major role in both coaches' decisions of which manufacturer they sign a contract with. For the football team, Osborne said its contract with Converse is "a situation where a lot of people benefit."

In return for the exposure the Huskers will give Converse this season, the athletic department gets 500 to 700 free pairs of shoes, scholarship money for graduate students and non-athlete minorities and cash "endorsement compensation" for the assistant coaches.

While companies like Nike and Converse do offer all coaches the use of their products, Osborne said he turned down the money and receives no compensation other than "a few hundred dollars of Converse clothing," he selects from a catalog.

In all, Osborne said, the Converse contract saves the athletic department \$35,000 to \$40,000.

Pepin said he'd like to save the athletic department that much money too, but the team has not been winning enough in the past few years to attract such lucrative sponsorships.

While the football team has played in a bowl game every year for the last 17, the men's track team has not finished in the top 10 in the past five years. The women's team — past NCAA champions — has not won the indoor title for the past two years.

Because of those records, Pepin said, the track team receives only discounts on shoes. Coaches get nothing free. Unlike Osborne, Pepin has to seek out manufacturers to compare equipment prices and find the best deals.

"Anywhere we can find a place to save some money," he said, "we will try to do that."



Kurt Eberhardt/Daily Nebraskan

"Saving money on equipment is important to the track team," Pepin said, because it leaves more money to be used to travel to meets.

Offering schools free or discounted products may eliminate financial burdens for those institutions, — but serious drawbacks exist for both college athletes and consumers.

Mike Heyl, manager of the downtown Lincoln Athlete's Foot, said the big bucks offered to schools can cause a conflict of interest for financially pinched schools who go with the money rather than product quality.

But both coaches and company reps said that is not the case.

Osborne said that although the Huskers "got a better deal in terms of shoe," the football team switched from Nike to Converse because players compared the shoes last spring and preferred Converse. He said when the

team went shopping for shoes last spring, "we wanted what we thought was the best shoe — not the best deal."

Pepin stressed quality over money as well.

"We try to provide the best quality product we can buy for the best price," he said. "We're not going to put a pair of shoes on an athlete that would hurt the athlete's foot."

Morland of Nike said there is no conflict of interest because schools have the option to buy any shoe they want. No one is forcing them to go with a particular company, he said.

"They have a budget to work on," she said. "They're out to get the most for their dollar."

Knoll said that despite the schools' emphasis on saving money on equipment, safety and performance of the

athlete always takes precedence.

But in the end, Knoll said, the consumer is always on the losing side of the promotions game. "The shoe companies have created a nightmare," he said, by spending large amounts on promotions to garner contracts with the major athletic programs in the country. The cost of promotion, he said, is ultimately picked up by the consumer.

Heyl said companies like Converse and Nike pay for the benefits they give to athletic programs by raising the price of shoes sold in stores like his. Manufacturers may add 25 to 50 cents to the price of shoes, confident that their promotional investment will increase demand despite the price increase, Heyl said.

"All it really boils down to is business," Heyl said.