

# IEG SPONSORSHIP REPORT College Sports Roundup

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## IEG SR One-on-one: Ian Leopold, President, American Collegiate Intramural Sports

*Leopold is the founder and president of American Collegiate Intramural Sports, the largest daily on-campus marketing program in the nation.*

*The origin of ACIS started in 1986 when Leopold founded Campus Concepts Inc.—publisher of the first Unofficial Student Guide—while a senior at Hobart College. Undeterred by an economics professor's failing grade for the company's business plan, Leopold moved forward on the project. The guides, loaded with important phone numbers, event listings and other information, was supported by local advertisers trying to reach the college market.*

*In 1992, Campus Concepts tapped into the most popular extracurricular campus activity by promoting intramural participatory sports at colleges across the country. Leopold soon transitioned from local to national advertisers, saving his company overhead and time.*

*Now rebranded ACIS, the company hosts intramural basketball, football and fitness programs at more than 200 campuses nationwide. ACIS secures marketing rights from each school to offer sampling, signage and other marketing benefits to national sponsors. ACIS bills itself as the country's largest college sports property that reaches more 18-to-24-year-olds than the country's top 20 DMAs combined. ACIS revenue currently exceeds \$10 million.*

*Past and present ACIS clients include Playtex, Tinactin, Procter & Gamble, Sara Lee, Nike, Microsoft, EchoStar, Philips Norelco, Ball Park Franks, Jelly Belly Sport Beans, Gold Bond and Twinlab.*

*With ACIS's sponsorship revenue on the rise, IEG SR recently spoke with Leopold about trends in the college sports space, how ACIS differs from other collegiate sports properties, new sponsorship activity and other topics. Edited comments below.*

### Ian, what kind of big-picture trends do you see today as it relates to sponsorship and college sports?

One thing I noticed this past year at the Allstate Sugar Bowl was less entertainment, even with our own clients. Travel and entertainment budgets have been cut real tight. There's less entertaining, and fewer people are coming to events. More people are staying at home, even though they want to be at major college sports events.

National advertising also has been challenging, but things are still going on at the local and regional levels. Bottlers, trucking companies and other types of regional companies are becoming more important to college sports programs. Twenty years ago they were extremely important, and then they took a back seat to national sponsors. Now schools are forced to go back to the larger regional players and get them engaged.

College sports are still popular and people are still big fans, but they're reticent to spend money on travel and entertainment, and big advertisers have been forced to cut back. That's especially true with automobile manufacturers and auto dealers. They've had to cut way back.

The renewed popularity of college sports among regional companies is a good thing. It's good to go after big



boosters and fans of the sport, and the businesses that have traditionally supported it.

**Has the economy slowed corporate interest in using collegiate sports as a marketing platform?**

Products with a high efficacy for athletes are still going to spend big in college sports. But companies are cutting back on spending across the board, and senior management may cut properties that don't hit the bull's eye.

The biggest slowdown is client entertainment. It's hard to rationalize a junket to see a great basketball game when companies are making cutbacks or laying people off.

**How does ACIS fit into the larger college sports space, such as college athletic departments, conferences, etc. Do you see those types of organizations as competitors in terms of selling sponsorship? If so, how do you play up your point of differentiation?**

We are the recreational side of sports. In the world of college sports, there are only about 50 Division I teams that are of any real significance to national marketers. So most college sports are local and regional to begin with, and only schools like Duke and Nebraska can go after the real big bucks.

The larger college sports programs compete with major league sports, like the NCAA basketball tournament versus the NBA Championship.

On the flip side, ACIS is complimentary to college sports. We're reaching college students directly. The 50 big-time schools go after the big-ticket sports fan. We're going after the kids directly. We bring resources to schools and make students and college sports more competitive. Our events are televised on Fox College Sports, which makes it that much more fun and exciting.

We're basically a grassroots property for intramural college sports. Very few students can relate to playing basketball for a school like Duke. It's another level of play. We do not view college sports as competitive, we consider it complimentary. We're at Duke and Nebraska, and our programs often align with what sponsors are doing at those schools.

**ACIS has a new program called ACIS Fitness. What exactly is the program and why did you launch it?**

ACIS is primarily football and basketball, which skews male. College fitness centers draw more students than most other places on campus. We have a million students a day going to the fitness program, and we can reach a broader range of students, as well as more females.

Lots of companies have contacted us, 'We love your football and basketball program, but we're Playtex Sports Tampons, and we don't want to play in the world of flag football. You've got a million women in your fitness program. Is there a way that we can engage them?'

We've been doing well with the football and basketball programs, but it was time to bring another program on board. We want to increase our capabilities because our programs have been selling out.

**So what exactly is the gist of the ACIS Fitness program?**

It's everything that's not related to teams. So that includes aerobics classes, weight training, etc. That all falls under ACIS Fitness. Each sports center has an ACIS wall media board where females can get samples of Playtex Sports Tampons for an entire week.

We have the ACIS Fitness Rewards program that encourages people to work out more frequently. They get their card punched every time they work out, and they get branded prizes for their efforts.

We also have the ACIS Fitness Challenge, which is like being a member of coffee club. The more you work out, the more gifts you get like water bottles and towels. We host the Fitness Challenge on 100 campuses to



*Playtex will distribute more than 250,000 samples at 200 campuses through its partnership with ACIS Fitness.*



*The Tinactin Chill Toughest Athlete of the Week program recognizes male students during spring semester.*

determine the most physically-fit man and woman on campus. That culminates with the ACIS Fitness National Championships at the U.S. Olympic Committee Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colo.

**Is there anything else that you'd like to add?**

This is the biggest thing: For the first time in my career, companies are now calling us asking for meetings. It was always hard to get meetings. Now people are calling us.

**Why is that?**

College students are recession-proof. They spend every dollar they make, are given or that they borrow through student aid. They're not worried about saving for a mortgage or paying tuition. They are a very desirable demographic in a tough economy. They will spend everything they have, and they are developing their brand habits. Now that they have to do their own laundry, they're buying laundry detergent. They're recession proof and open to new brands.

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