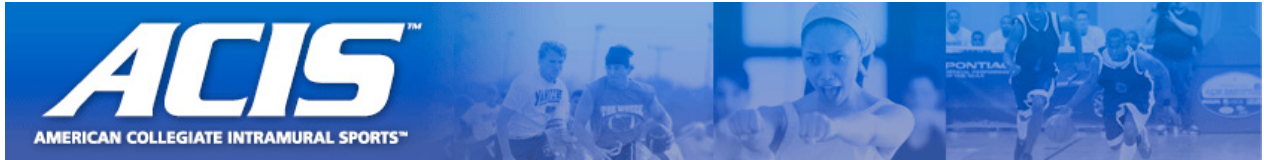


# NYSportsJournalism.com

SPORTS, SPORTS MARKETING, SPORTS MEDIA and more ...



## Q&A: Ian Leopold

By Barry Janoff, Executive Editor, NYSportsJournalism.com

(Posted March 18, 2009)

As difficult as it may seem, someone has been able to convince more than 3 million college students at 250 campuses nationwide to leave their videogames, put down their cell phones, iPods and BlackBerrys (temporarily, at least) and participate in sports. That's what American Collegiate Intramural Sports can boast via programs that include football, basketball and fitness. Since 2004, [ACIS](#), based in New York, has overseen intramural competitions in flag football (fall) and basketball (spring), and this month extended its fitness program from six months to year round. Considering that the participants - 18-24, who spend more than a combined \$50 billion a year just on food, beverage, electronics and entertainment - on also are high on the list marketers deem as target demographics, it is no surprise that ACIS lists among its marketing partners Microsoft, Nike, P&G, General Mills, Hershey's, Kodak and Philips. The new ACIS Fitness program includes six corporate sponsors: Pepsi's Aquafina, Schwinn, Playtex Sport, Tinactin, Jelly Belly Sport Beans and Nike. Throughout the 2009 spring semester, the ACIS Fitness Challenge will test strength, endurance, flexibility and agility, with top participants invited to the ACIS Fitness National Championships on April 25 at the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Col. Highlights of the event will be featured on a 30-minute television show on Fox College Sports. Ian Leopold, president of ACIS, spoke with NYSportsJournalism.com about connecting students with sports, sports with marketers and marketers with consumers.

**NYSportsJournalism.com:** ACIS and several marketing partners are in the midst of a new fitness program. How did that come about?

**Ian Leopold:** Intramural team sports are among the most popular activities on college campuses. So when you combine intramural sports with fitness, you have the second largest activity on any campus behind going to class. Fitness [programs] are actually larger than any team sports. We have 250,000 on average in each of our team sports. But we have a million a day in our fitness program. And that's because it's everything that is non-team related. So if you are participating in racquetball, squash, if you are going to the gym to work out with your buddies, if you are enrolled in a Pilates or yoga class, all of that encompasses fitness. So the ACIS Fitness program first off connects all that ACIS is

doing. Second, the participants in our sports - basketball and football - skew male. Our football program, for example, is probably 70-30 male-female. Fitness is 50-50, and fitness classes skew heavily female. So now that we are working with brands such as [Playtex Sport](#), they really wanted us to create programs to focus on the female consumer. Fitness allows us to do that.

**NYSJ:** It would seem that your intramural and now fitness campus programs really hit a sweet demographic for marketers, mostly 18-24-year olds.

**Leopold:** In the case of Playtex, we did a beta test with them last year and then pre- and post-test controlled research, and the numbers we came back with were pretty compelling. So they came back and wanted to be involved in a bigger program. A similar thing happened with the folks over at Tinactin. They are usually associated with football, and they will be back with our football program in the fall. However, a lot of activity associated with football takes place in the locker room. So they are doing signage in locker rooms, they are putting magnets with their slogan, "Tough actin' Tinactin," on lockers. You don't sample a product like that, but there is a lot of activation you can do to get consumers to think about the product when you do have a need for it. With Playtex, women use the product, but associating them with what we are doing, having yoga instructors wearing Playtex-branded items, having Playtex-branded mats and water bottles, you can see how it fits together.

---

**"Our demographic is very Internet savvy and very digital savvy.  
That said, they also are very savvy in how to avoid the  
advertising messages in the Internet and digital spaces."**

---

**NYSJ:** How do college students react to these types of marketing efforts, such as in-your-face branding of products they already use?

**Leopold:** It's in your face, but in a subtle way. We are not hitting them over the head. It's not artificial. That type of guerrilla marketing would be rejected by these kids. We are making the brands a seamless part of the program. We are supporting what these kids are already passionate about. They are going to yoga and Pilates, and we are making Playtex and Tinactin a part of the experience, supporting the experience. It makes sense [to these consumers] that Playtex and Tinactin, for example, would be part of the workout experience.

**NYSJ:** Are you finding that students in the ACIS environment are loyal to your marketing partners?

**Leopold:** Definitely. They are very loyal. Our partners are absolutely, unequivocally seeing dramatic, exponential growth among the 3 million students who participate in our programs. Our partners are seeing on average a 65% lift, and some even 100%.

**NYSJ:** Are students still engaged by traditional advertising, such as TV and print, or has there been a dramatic shift to Internet and digital?

**Leopold:** Our demographic is very Internet savvy and very digital savvy. That said, they

also are savvy in how to avoid the advertising messages in the Internet and digital spaces. Television is still very much part of their lives. So if you walk into a dorm in the afternoon you'll see a bunch of girls watching soap operas. However, you can't reach the college marketing with ads on TV or billboards in a way that is cost-effective. I can't say it's not effective, because if someone is engaged, if college kids are watching March Madness on TV, they see the ads, message is reaching those eyeballs. But it's not cost-efficient to do it.



**NYSJ:** Do you see that engagement among college students going up during an event such as March Madness, which attracts a lot of people to a specific event?

**Leopold:** March Madness and College Bowl games, that's not really about college marketing and reaching a college audience directly. That's college sports marketing, which is reaching the general consumer. College students are very passionate about their own school, but once their school gets eliminated from the tournament, their passion for the tournament drops significantly unless they are a basketball fan. You don't see any higher level of intensity and engagement on a college campus during the tournament. In fact, I would argue there is less engagement.

**NYSJ:** What are you looking at regarding ACIS growth this year and beyond?

**Leopold:** We are growing and will continue to grow, both in participation among students and in the number of marketing partners we have, and also in the way in which our partners will activate. Our sales are up over 30% year-to-date, and our goal as a company is to increase our revenue by more than 30% over the next year. And we are on track to do that. Our football program continues to grow and our Fox College Sports [TV](#) show has been a success. The new ACIS Fitness program is attracting, and will keep attracting, students who are new to ACIS. Plus, it is year-round rather than seasonal. We are expanding our presence on the Internet and in digital spaces and we are expanding our presence on college campuses across the country. To my knowledge, we are the first company in the college space that is a compelling brand. There have been compelling marketers, but we are a compelling brand with great marketing behind it.