

Beware the drink trap

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Article

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I spent a lot of my money on booze, birds and fast cars - the rest i just squandered.

AS the festivals approach, more and more advertisements on alcohol and alcoholic beverages are appearing in the mass media, enticing the people to drink.

But let us all, drinkers and all, look at the life of Best, whom Pele called "the greatest footballer in the world".

Signing on as an amateur for Manchester United in 1961, Best's football career had been meteoric.

Within two years he signed a professional contract with United and made his English League debut.

Before long the football world became aware of his talents.

Best took the football world by surprise in 1972 when he announced his retirement from the game, saying he had been drinking a bottle of alcohol a day.

He continued to play for a decade or so, but it was downhill all the way, as far as his game and his life were concerned.

In 2000, he was suspected of having liver failure and had anti-alcohol pellets implanted in his stomach the next year.

It was no surprise that the following year he underwent a life-saving liver transplant, the result of alcohol abuse.

Last year, he was banned from the roads for 20 months for drink driving. This year, in October, he was hospitalised when there was a reaction to medication because of alcohol.

On Nov 25, after over 30 years of battling with alcoholism, the football world lost a legendary player.

The 59-year-old Best, due to irreversible lung complications, was unable to breathe without life support.

He was a delight to watch on the field, beating any defender almost at will by using any combination of tricks, swerves and pace, and he was a wizard with his heading and shooting with either foot.

But his football skills went down the drain because of alcohol addiction.

Skilled as he was on the field, Best was unable to tackle his drinking habit. "I was born with a great gift and sometimes with that comes a destructive streak," he once said.

The irony of it all: Barely a day before Best was consumed by alcoholism, Britain introduced 24-hour pub drinking.

The doctor who treated Best condemned the relaxation of the licensing laws, saying it reflected a "society falling apart" (Malay Mail, Nov 25).

It was not so long ago that Britain was concerned about binge drinking which was defined as drinking more than double the recommended daily limit (that is eight units for men, equivalent to four pints of beer, and six units for women).

A 2003 British Government report estimated that it cost the country £20 billion (RM135 billion) a year in lost productivity and health and police costs.

The BBC (Sept, 19, 2003) recorded a study which showed that 17 million working days were lost due to hangovers and drink-related illnesses each year.

The annual cost to employers was estimated to be £6.4 billion with the cost to the country's National Health Service in the region of £1.7 billion. Many billions are spent clearing up alcohol-related crimes and social problems.

Most of all, alcohol-related problems reportedly are responsible for 22,000 premature deaths each year. Some said these figures may be just conservative estimates.

For example, there are 1.2 million incidents of alcohol-related violence a year. Around 40 per cent of accidents and emergency admissions in Britain are alcohol-related. Between midnight and 5am, that figure rises to 70 per cent.

Alcohol-related accidents and illnesses land around 150,000 people in hospital each year.

The fear is not just about the potential effects of longer pub hours on crime and disorder, but also its impact on the nation's health. Admittedly, the number of people in their 30s being admitted to hospital with advanced liver disease is already said to be on the increase, especially among women.

So it is no wonder that many experts have expressed concern over the new 24-hour pub drinking.

This is in stark contrast to what is happening in Thailand where the Government and people are not only actively fighting tobacco use but also alcohol.

A case in point involved a Thai beverage company. The country's Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), ahead of the Stock Exchange of Thailand's board meeting, advised that the alcohol business should not be listed (Nation, Oct 15).

They argued that if the listing was approved, it would damage Thai society as alcohol adversely affects the drinkers. They also said that the people under the influence of alcohol could victimise others.

The SEC reported that it heard from the Finance Ministry that the Government was planning several measures to control the sale of alcoholic drinks — similar to the cigarette-display ban.

What is interesting about this development is that Thailand was able to demonstrate a very consistent policy to promote a healthy lifestyle among its population, namely against drugs, tobacco and alcohol.

Another very interesting point is Thailand is a largely Buddhist society where its monks are actively involved in promoting healthy life- styles.

This is important to highlight because it shows the campaign against alcohol has nothing to do with the paranoia about Islam as it has always been portrayed in Malaysia.

For instance, past attempts to do something similar were sidelined by vested interests, despite the authorities articulating the issue on a health and scientific basis.

Meanwhile, what is becoming increasingly evident heightened advertising activity (more so at the year-end) featuring alcohol beverages in the media, especially newspapers.

This is noticeably so after the banning of tobacco advertisements in the media.

The breweries and other companies are fast filling the vacuum left by the tobacco companies, placing alcohol-laced messages which depict glamour, success, good times, etc.

Presented in an attractive, colourful and creative way, the alcohol advertisements seem to be directed at the younger generations in particular, reminiscent of tobacco ads.

The Ministry of Health had recently announced that 2.1 million Malaysians are at risk of chronic diseases due to alcohol use (NST, Oct. 11).

In fact, early this month, the Sarawak State Assembly was told that the number of students who admitted drinking alcohol had increased to 2,507 this year, compared to 1,697 last year.

Perhaps it is time to sober up and heed some hard lessons from the tragic departure of George Best, especially during this festive season.

To all Christian readers, a Merry Christmas.

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