Thrown Out at Home Plate: S.F. Approves Ban on Chewing Tobacco at Baseball Park

By Amy Alexander  
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Last autumn, while we were celebrating the San Francisco Giants’ impressive win in the World Series, health activists were taking a swing at one of the baseball's most storied — if also gross — traditions: smokeless tobacco.

In a final vote Tuesday, San Francisco supervisors approved a measure by District 2 Supervisor Mark Farrell to ban the use of smokeless tobacco from all ballparks within city and county limits, including at AT&T park. The ordinance requires the signature of Mayor Ed Lee before going into effect Jan. 1.

Farrell’s measure didn’t come out of left field. It is the culmination of a years-long campaign by state and health activists who argue that “chew,” “snuff,” and “dip” — nicknames for the condensed wads of potent tobacco baseball players have been wedging between their cheeks and gums for a century — is a bad habit that needs to die.

Matt Myers, president of the Washington, D.C.-based Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, was thrilled by Farrell’s proposal.

“San Francisco’s board of supervisors recognizes some simple but important facts — kids see athletes as role models, and when baseball stars use smokeless tobacco the kids who look up to them are much more likely to as well,” Myers said. "Our national pastime should have nothing to do with promoting a deadly and addictive product."
In addition, in February, Tony Thurmond, Democratic assemblyman from District 15 (Richmond), introduced a measure to prohibit the use of chewing tobacco at major league venues across the state. Thurmond's Tobacco-Free Baseball Act, Assembly Bill 768, is currently in petition stage, and gathering signatures before it will come up for a vote before the full Legislature.

An Assembly member since 2005, Thurmond is optimistic AB 768 will pass: The measure is necessary as a public health matter, he says. Thurmond says it is crucial to advocate for children and youth who look up to professional athletes — whether at AT&T Park in San Francisco or across the bay at the Oakland Coliseum.

"The use of smokeless tobacco in baseball, at any level and in any location, sets a terrible example for the millions of young people who watch the game and far too often see their favorite players using sniff, dip or chew," Thurmond said. "We have a great opportunity to protect our players and stand up for kids by getting tobacco out of the game."

I spent many blissful afternoons at Candlestick Park during the 1970s watching Bobby Bonds, Gary Mattingly, Chris Speier, Willie McCovey, and other Giants greats.

The teams of that era didn't often win the division pennant, but they kept most games interesting. Still, as much as I loved watching the Giants play and experiencing the carnivalesque sound of the organ, the smell of beer, and the salty crunch of the popcorn, I never enjoyed seeing the distended cheeks and mud-colored arcs of tobacco juice emanating from my favorite players' mouths.

Here's hoping the next generation of Giants and A's fans won't have to reconcile those icky images with the players' on-field acts of heroism.

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