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# LABEL YOU UNFORGIVEN

BY ANDRÉA MARIA CECIL

CrossFit Founder on health-warning label for sugary beverages in California: "We know sugar is poison."





Dave Re/CrossFit Journal

A health-warning label on sugary beverages in California is the first step in addressing chronic-disease epidemics, public-health advocates said.

“Putting a skull and crossbones on a Coke can is the beginning of the end for sugary drinks. And it should be,” said Harold Goldstein, executive director of the California Center for Public Health Advocacy. “Sugary drinks are the single leading contributor to obesity and diabetes. That’s where we need to start.”

Such a label would give the consumer a moment of pause, said Laura Schmidt, professor at the Institute for Health Policy Studies at the University of California-San Francisco School of Medicine.

“The main thing that the warning labels can do is they can make the consumer think twice before reaching for the product,” she explained.

CrossFit Inc. Founder and CEO Greg Glassman is a label supporter. He recently visited nine California affiliates as part of CrossFit’s “California Invasion: Rally to Fight Big Soda.” At each of the nine stops in Southern and Northern California, he asked members of the community to contact their state senators via [CrushBigSoda.com](http://CrushBigSoda.com) to voice their support for such a label in The Golden State.

Once a label is in place in California, it will spread to the East Coast and then abroad, Glassman said.

“Current consumptive levels of sucrose are deadly.”

## Seeking Balance

For Bill Monning, it’s about informing the consumer. The Democratic California senator has twice introduced a state bill that would require a health-warning label on sugary beverages.

“This isn’t happening on a level playing field. We have the most sophisticated marketing of these products, particularly to young people, just like the tobacco industry used to do,” he said of Big Soda’s advertising might. “The label warning is one way we can try to balance that overwhelming assault of marketing tools.”

The label would read, “Safety warning: Drinking beverages with added sugar(s) contributes to obesity, diabetes, and tooth decay.” It would apply to any nonalcoholic drink that has added caloric sweeteners and contains 75 calories or more per 12 fluid ounces.



Laura Schmidt



Dr. Robert Lustig

Monning, the Senate majority leader, first introduced the Sugar-Sweetened Beverages Safety Warning Act in February 2013 as [Senate Bill 1000](#). SB 1000 passed the Senate but wasn't considered in the House. In February 2015, Monning again introduced the act—this time as [SB 203](#). It was one vote short of making it out of the Senate Health Committee.

Come the next legislative session—scheduled to begin in December—Monning said he intends to revisit efforts aimed at reducing consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages. That could manifest itself as a version of SB 203 or of 2013's [SB 622](#)—which would have required a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages—or an entirely different strategy.

“We will explore all options,” Monning told the CrossFit Journal in mid-October. “We will continue to explore the label warning, we may review the tax proposal, and we may come up with some other innovative approach.”

“[Sugar Coated](#)” filmmaker Michèle Hozer noted that warning labels on food were on the table in the 1970s, but the U.S. sugar industry successfully lobbied government officials to reconsider. In short order, the government declared sugar a safe product—free of adverse metabolic effects—that could even curb hunger.

“The idea that we go after liquid sugar,” she said, “that we put warning labels on those sugary beverages, is important because of that tsunami effect on the liver.”

## Not the Only Solution

Even with a warning label, multiple strategies are needed to affect people's behavior, public-health experts said.

“Not one policy is going to make all of the difference. It's going to take a lot of small changes,” Schmidt said.

Christina Goette described “system-level changes” that would make sugary drinks less accessible; for example, forbidding government funds from being used to buy sugar-sweetened beverages and limiting sales of the drinks wherever children are present. Goette is the senior health program planner at the San Francisco Department of Public Health.

The best public-health strategies are small changes in the environment, Schmidt noted. That can mean anything from counter-advertising and making water more accessible and affordable to disallowing the sale of sugary drinks when children are going to school, she said.

“What we're hoping for is bundling strategies,” Schmidt continued.

What's necessary is a variety of “tweaks,” she said, to bring the food environment back into balance so “it isn't so dominated by corporate interest.”

Changing the food environment by changing the industry is what's most important, said Dr. Robert Lustig, a pediatric endocrinologist of 32 years at UCSF.

“I'm for (a warning label), but you know what? Warning labels on cigarettes didn't stop people from smoking cigarettes,” he explained. “It's an educational moment but education hasn't solved substances of abuse.”

A label is necessary, he continued, but not sufficient.

“I'm just not under the delusion that accepting a warning label is somehow going to change what people do.”

## Three Reasons

Warning labels are only on things known to be dangerous: gasoline cans, ladders, solar panels, alcohol, cigarettes.

For Glassman, the warning label goes deeper. It's about toxicity, corruption and targeting of CrossFit affiliates.

Big Soda has knowingly added a toxin—sugar—to its products for decades in an effort to purposely addict consumers, and in the process sugar-sweetened beverages have been the single leading contributor to skyrocketing rates of obesity and diabetes, Glassman explained at the affiliate rallies.

“We've got the smoking gun. We know. We know sugar is poison,” he said on Nov. 13 at CrossFit Reality in Signal Hill, citing research from Lustig and Dr. Richard Johnson, professor of renal diseases and hypertension at the University of Colorado -Denver's Anschutz Medical Campus in Aurora.

Then there's the manipulation of health science. Both The Coca-Cola Co. and PepsiCo Inc. have funded scientists who say their products are safe. [Coke's commissioned research](#) has blamed consumers' obesity on a lack of exercise instead of on the fact that sugar—particularly in liquid form—suppresses satiety. Pepsi's research, meanwhile, has pointed to sports drinks—such as its very own Gatorade—as necessary for

optimal athletic performance and a remedy for muscle cramping and heat stroke. Independent science has not supported these claims, which have had [fatal consequences](#).

“The label on the can makes it hard to take money from 'em,” Glassman said.

And, finally, Big Soda has funded organizations seeking [legislation taking aim at CrossFit affiliates](#). The most successful effort was in [Washington, D.C.](#), where lawmakers wanted to require licensure for personal trainers. That legislation has been all but repealed after lobbying efforts by CrossFit prompted reconsideration.

“I believe that a warning label will address all three of my concerns quite magically,” Glassman told a crowd of roughly 75 people on Nov. 12 at CrossFit Downey in Southern California.

## A Righteous Cause

The number of diabetics in the U.S. is expected to grow to 100 million people in 35 years, Glassman noted.

“It will be devastating in its impact. It will be the zombie apocalypse,” he told the audience of approximately 60 people at CrossFit Reality.

And medicine does not have a cure for chronic disease.

“You're the only effective, successful and growing response to chronic disease in the world today,” Glassman said.

He continued: “It is a global imperative that your work continue unimpeded. . . . I'll fight till the end of my days to keep you doing what you're doing.”

While at CrossFit Downey, an audience member asked Glassman what was next after Big Soda. His answer was simple.

“Anything that offers poison, targets my industry, threatens my trainers—I'm comin' after ya.” ■

## About the Author

Andréa Maria Cecil is assistant managing editor and head writer of the CrossFit Journal.