

THE  
**CrossFit** JOURNAL

# STUDENTS STOP SODA

SF State groups beat back pouring-rights contract worth millions. BY BRITTNEY SALINE





Sevan Matossian/CrossFit Journal

Shortly before the Nov. 19 town hall at SF State, groups opposing pouring rights received word that university President Leslie Wong had terminated the contract process with beverage manufacturers.

On Nov. 19, a group of about 20 college students in San Francisco, California, managed to do what countless community leaders and health advocates have failed to do: beat back Big Soda.

After a five-month campaign protesting San Francisco State University's pursuit of a 10-year pouring-rights contract with The Coca-Cola Co. or PepsiCo Inc., the student-run SF State chapter of **Real Food Challenge (RFC)** convinced SF State President Leslie Wong to stop the contract process. Sixteen other student organizations, two grassroots community-health collaborations, several SF State faculty members, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors and more than 10 percent of the student body assisted the RFC.

"We are one of the schools that sets the stage for the West Coast, so it's a big victory for us to show that it is very possible," RFC member Jennifer Rangel said of the group's triumph over Big Soda.

## Pour Health?

Commonplace since the 1990s, pouring-rights contracts grant corporations exclusive sales and marketing opportunities on school campuses in exchange for funds, the use of which is often restricted to purposes designed to funnel money back to the provider. The SF State deal was poised to bring in a one-time minimum contribution of US\$2 million and annual contributions of at least \$125,000, according to a May SF State request for proposals obtained by the CrossFit Journal.

Though Big Soda dollars promise relief in the face of budget deficits and a lack of government funding for higher education, critics argue that ubiquitous on-campus marketing of sugar-sweetened beverages—the **leading** source of added sugar in the American diet—does more harm than good. Added sugar has been shown to increase risk for diabetes, tooth decay, obesity and a host of other health problems.

"The most questionable aspect of these contracts is that they link returns to the companies and to the schools to amounts that students drink," Marion Nestle wrote in "Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health." Nestle is professor of nutrition, food studies and public health at New York University.

The SF State pouring-rights request for proposals named its athletic program as a primary beneficiary of the funds. The deal, for which both Coca-Cola and PepsiCo were vying, would have granted the provider exclusive pouring rights and marketing privileges on campus, 80 percent of beverage retail shelf space, scholarships in the company's name, the chance to name the university's athletic complex for 10 years, and a corporate-named endowed chair in the college of its choice.

SF State students were less than thrilled.

"We're trying to get healthier food on campus," Rangel said. "We're trying to create a better environment and a more ethical environment for SF State, and that just goes against our entire culture."

Promoting sugary beverages on campus, she continued, would conflict with the university's **mission** to confront environmental sustainability, as well as the California State University (CSU) system's **initiative** to provide 20 percent "real food" on campus by 2020. The CSU, Rangel said, defers to the RFC's **definition** of real food: local/community based, ecologically sound, fair or humane.

The possibility of a corporate-endowed chair was also a "big problem," according to Rangel, who worried about how corporate funding might affect academic integrity at SF State, a public institution.

"The acceptance of corporate funding would take away government responsibility to the students to provide a quality and affordable education," the RFC wrote on its **website**. The RFC also suggested a corporate-endowed chair would "make a mockery of our educational values."

## Fighting the Fizz

The RFC SF State chapter spent the summer researching how pouring-rights contracts work and training with national RFC leaders to learn how to campaign. In fall, the RFC partnered with 16 other student organizations in addition to **The Bigger**

**Picture** and **Open Truth Now**—campaigns working to fight obesity and Type 2 diabetes—to give class presentations and generate campus awareness of the request for proposals.

In October, the RFC and its allies successfully passed a resolution against pouring rights with Associated Students Inc., the governing student body of SF State.

"Having that resolution written and passed was a big game changer for us because (Wong) could no longer say it was just a small group of students that are fighting this," Rangel said.

Faculty followed suit with its own resolution "strongly" opposing promotion of Coke or Pepsi products on campus, pointing to measures taken in surrounding areas to limit consumption of sugary beverages, such as the University of California-San Francisco's recent **initiative** to phase out sales of all sugar-sweetened beverages and the San Francisco Board of Supervisors' June **vote** to require health-warning labels on soda advertisements.

When RFC members sought to present their objections directly to Wong, SF State administrators granted them a town hall in October—with representatives from Coca-Cola and Pepsi.

"We hadn't even spoken with President Wong and students hadn't been publicly educated on the issue, and yet they're bringing Coke and Pepsi on campus," said An Bui, RFC SF State chapter president.

Implementing their training, RFC members "occupied the space" during the town hall, Bui said, blocking the soda representatives' table and demanding an audience with Wong. Their efforts paid off with the promise of a second town hall with Wong himself, slated for Nov. 19.

In preparation, the RFC continued its campaign, amassing nearly 3,000 signatures on its petition opposing a pouring-rights contract. The group was invited to attend the Berkeley, California, premiere of the documentary "**Sugar Coated**," and after members spoke at a recent meeting of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, the group earned the board's unanimous support.

On the afternoon of Nov. 19, RFC members marched toward Seven Hills Conference Center on the campus of SF State, where more than 50 students, faculty and other supporters—including CrossFit Inc. Founder and CEO Greg Glassman—waited. As they marched with signs bearing slogans such as "student rights, not pouring rights," choruses of "President Wong, you are wrong!"

wafted through the air. A monstrous inflatable soda can labeled “Type 2 diabetes” in Coca-Cola-styled scrawl tugged at its tether near the entrance.

But as Bui reviewed his talking points in the moments before the discussion, he received word from SF State administration that Wong had done an about-face, retracting his decision to pursue a pouring-rights contract.

Though Wong was not available for an interview with the CrossFit Journal, SF State spokesman Jonathan Morales provided an email statement Wong sent to the SF State community after the town hall.

“After listening carefully to the concerns and information I received from our students, faculty and staff, I have decided not to move forward with the process of establishing a partnership with a beverage company,” Wong wrote.

“It really came as kind of a surprise,” Rangel said. “We were really preparing for backlash.”

San Francisco Supervisor Scott Wiener credited the student campaign leaders with the victory.

“The amazing student organizing was the key factor in the university’s reversal,” he wrote in an email. “The students deserve all the credit in the world, and we were happy to provide support at the Board. The movement to reduce consumption of sugary drinks is growing and getting more powerful by the day. We are going to win this fight.”

It’s a fight SF State students are committed to seeing through.

“Because we rejected the pouring-rights contract, San Francisco State is in a unique position to build new health initiatives for the campus community,” Bui said. “We have taken increased responsibility and a new leadership role to find alternative funding for athletics and also to continue San Francisco’s current initiatives against sugar and soda.”

He continued:

“It was a victory in the sense that we got our foot in the door. It was a fight, but the war is not over. Now the real work starts.” ■

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brittney Saline is a freelance writer contributing to the CrossFit Journal and the CrossFit Games website. She trains at [CrossFit St. Paul](#).



**Pouring-rights contracts are under increasing scrutiny as people begin to realize Big Soda’s money can come with negative effects on health.**