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By Charles Darwent. Tuesday, 01 June 1993

UK: SNUFF FEELS THE PINCH - MCCHRYSTAL'S OF LEICESTER.

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Now make of this what you will. A year ago, Adwick Football Club found itself languishing at the bottom of Division One (that is to say, Division One of Doncaster's Bentley and District League), its 11 stout hearts not merely forlorn but badly dressed to boot. At the time of writing, this same Adwick FC has been catapulted to the top of the B and DL - not a game lost in its last season - and now takes to the field in what its captain, Chris Milner, refers to as 'the most stylish kit in the league': a chic, red-white-and-royal blue confection with a logo emblazoned across its front. That logo belongs to the firm who sponsored the kit, and whose product the team's members are both happy to endorse and, in the main, to use. The firm is called McChrystal's of Leicester, and the product it manufactures is snuff. Snuff is made from ground tobacco leaves. So: is tobacco good for you? 'Well, we wouldn't go that far,' says Ian McChrystal, the company's MD, visibly struggling with the temptation to go precisely that far. 'However, we are very happy to be associated with Adwick's successes. We think the team's goal-average shows our product in its proper light.'

Indeed. Although McChrystal confesses to a fondness for football, his firm's sponsorship of the Doncaster team is by no means a simple act of disinterested generosity. Snuff's reputation has taken something of a battering lately, despite the fact that it has a surprisingly large number of British enthusiasts - the Society of Snuff Blenders hazards some half-a-million users regularly pushing powdered tobacco up their nostrils, although McChrystal notes tersely that 'they have been coming up with that same figure for the last 20 years'. The battering partly reflects a new public wariness of tobacco-based products. McChrystal, however, maintains that the whole thing is a heinous case of mistaken identity. Five years ago, HM Government encouraged a Swedish manufacturer of oral snuff (treated tobacco sucked, repulsively enough, through a small muslin bag) to set up shop in Scotland. Shortly afterwards, conclusive evidence that oral snuff was linked to various cancers of the mouth led HM Government to encourage the Swedish firm to shut down - which it did in a blaze of publicity. There is, insists McChrystal, no proof to link conventional snuff-taking to nasal or sinus cancers. But guilt by association is difficult to assuage.

Hence, Adwick FC. 'The lads are all healthy and they mostly take snuff,' points out McChrystal, disingenuously. 'That's the kind of image we want to portray.' Health, however, is not the team's only saleable quality. Until recently, the British snuff world had rubbed along quite happily, reliant on a customer base described by McChrystal as 'fiercely loyal'. Its £5-million annual market has been dominated by an acknowledged titan (Imperial Tobacco's J H Wilson), with the family-owned, independent McChrystal's running a distant second. Sales last year weighed in at somewhere short of £1 million. Snuff-taking has remained predominantly a Northern habit, and - despite its association with Regency rakes dabbling genteely at their noses with lace-edged handkerchiefs - primarily a working class one. The reason for this is that snuff has allowed those employed in professions where smoking is undesirable - mining being foremost among them - to enjoy a nicotine hit without blowing themselves up.

A recent survey conducted by McChrystal's shows that over a third of their customers still live in mining communities, although in year 14 of Thatcherite policies Ian McChrystal speculates sombrely over 'how many of them are still actually miners'. He sighs, 'There is no denying that it's been a bad time for us. We do have quite a big contract with the Coal Board supplying miners' canteens, so every pit that closes is also an outlet lost for us as well.'

The demise of British coal mining has, not unnaturally, concentrated McChrystal's mind on trying to find an alternative market for his product. Thus, we return to the snuff-taking footballers of Adwick le Street. 'It's not just that they're young and healthy,' McChrystal says, eyes a-glint, 'they are also enterprising. They may live in a mining area, but not one of them is actually a miner. Two of them run their own companies - one is a cobbler and one has a moulding business - and there's also a landscape gardener on the team.'

They are, to use an old-fashioned phrase, aspirantly middle class, a phrase that opens up all sorts of pleasing vistas for McChrystal and his product: the South East, Daily Mail readers - who knows where it will all end? 'Since sponsoring Adwick we have had a letter from a bowls club in Doncaster asking for sponsorship as well,' sniffs McChrystal. 'We politely declined.' Bowls as an advertisement for snuff's brave new world? McChrystal clearly thinks not.

If his more sanguine side is occupied with dreams of ruddy-cheeked Thatcherite footballers pausing for pinches of snuff while scoring highly-publicised goals, his saturnine side is clearly haunted by one sole and singularly unpleasant image: the health and safety directorate of the EC. McChrystal is nevertheless at pains to stress that the anti-smoking lobby has been good for the snuff industry. 'Lots of people want to give up smoking but need to keep taking tobacco in some form,' he says. 'Snuff is perfect for them: it clears the mind, it is good for catarrh and you don't blow it all over people.' And adds, with irrefutable logic, 'There is no such thing as passive snuff-taking.' McChrystal happily confesses that he would like to run an advertising campaign on a 'Take snuff instead of smoking' ticket. He concludes though, doubtless correctly, that 'it wouldn't be allowed'. Though he says hopefully, 'I do have letters from people saying that it helps their hay-fever.' And, 'Someone recently wrote to the Sun saying that you could make nicotine patches by sticking on a bit of snuff with a plaster. It would save you fifty quid.'

There are, however, still dark clouds on the nicotine world's horizon. Protest the benignity of his product as he may, McChrystal's snuff tins must - as containers of a tobacco-based product - bear health warnings on their lids. And, due to a new EC directive, they may shortly have to carry them on their bases as well. 'There will soon be no room left for the label,' growls McChrystal. As might be expected, this Eurocracy has got up the European snuff industry's collective nose. 'The Irish have flatly refused to put any warnings on at all,' says McChrystal. And in a rare moment of Euro-unity, Germany's giant Porschl - Europe's largest manufacturer of Schnupftabak - is also contesting the new ruling. McChrystal himself has joined ranks with British competitors to challenge the diktat. He has also solicited a testimonial on the non-harmfulness of snuff from one Sir Donald Harrison MD MS PhD FRCS, who claims, curiously, that snuff-taking is fine 'unless you are a Bantu'.

Heart-warming though all this industrial unanimity may seem, it has been forced on the British snuff world at a difficult time. Despite the best efforts of its participants (and more-or-less static domestic sales on McChrystal's part), overall snuff consumption in the UK has fallen by 5% within a decade. Gains in a falling market may possibly be made through acquisition (McChrystal's has itself done a spot of acquiring, notably of the JIP brand in the late '80s) but anything more permanent is going to require about of corporate reinvention. Here, McChrystal's hands are pretty well tied. Of the 10 flavours of snuff manufactured by his firm - among them, lemon, peppermint, wallflower - one has been on the books since McChrystal's grandfather set up shop in 1926; the most recent is 20 years old.

The company's packaging, too, might be called 'retro', but for the fact that it has simply never changed. Boxes say 'Refreshing! Enlivening! Invigorating!', but for how much longer one cannot say. Customer loyalty, it seems, has its drawbacks. 'When we have tried to change the packaging in the past, people have been worried we'd change the snuff as well,' says McChrystal, sadly. If he is to garner new markets - women, Southerners, white-collar workers - he will have to do it in a way that does not threaten his existing clientele - 'not by changing the product, but by changing its image'.

How? Well, as the 11 newly-clad players of Adwick FC will attest, McChrystal has taken the first, tottering steps into the unlovely world of PR and marketing: a new experience for the British snuff industry. The firm has also run a competition (the first prize - an Edwardian silver snuff-box - was, to McChrystal's unbridled glee, won by an architect). And it has commissioned a point-of-sale dispenser for use in pubs. This is all aimed at a new punter: young, health-conscious, non whippet-owning and most decidedly non-bowls-playing, who may initially experiment with snuff 'as a novelty'. McChrystal claims, 'Pubs are the way forward.' He derives especial pleasure from the fact that his product is now available at the Coach and Horses, Hampstead, London - 'you can even get snuff at Harrods,' McChrystal chortles, though adds, sotto voce, 'but not ours'. Snuff is also youth-friendly in being cheap (£1.92 for the biggest tin of Medicated). McChrystal, ironically, has the EC to thank for this - it levies no duty on snuff tobacco.

And there have been more sensational coups. A claim by Sir Nicholas Fairbairn in the Telegraph that the snuff given free to MPs in the House of Commons was not very good resulted (Parliamentary Ombudsmen take note) in the hasty despatch of several complimentary tins of McChrystal's finest to the Palace of Westminster. This was followed by demands for more to be sent to Sir Nicholas's Scottish constituency: 'So it looks', says McChrystal, infelicitously, 'as though we've got him hooked.'

Whether less idiosyncratic customers will be as easily won over is a matter of faith. 'People always think of snuff-taking as dirty,' pooh-poohs McChrystal. 'You know, hankies turning brown, sniffing, mess all down your front. But then any habit is unpleasant if you look at it the wrong way.' Perhaps.

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