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A Baseball Habit Begins to Feel the Pinch

By TIM ROHAN AUGUST 3, 2015

SAN FRANCISCO — Most days he is at work at AT&T Park here, Giants pitcher Madison Bumgarner can be seen with a clump of smokeless tobacco lodged in his lower lip. Bumgarner, a [World Series hero](#) and the face of the team, grew up in small-town North Carolina, where, he said, nearly all men dipped. He has been doing it since he was in fifth grade.

“Pretty much all the time,” he said.

Next year, though, Bumgarner will have to break the habit, at least at his home stadium. Signaling a profound shift in the culture of baseball, Mayor Edwin M. Lee of San Francisco signed an ordinance in May that banned smokeless tobacco from all public athletic fields in the city, including AT&T Park, starting on Jan. 1, 2016.

The move was pushed by the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, a nonprofit group that approached San Francisco lawmakers as the first step in a plan to eventually rid Major League Baseball of smokeless tobacco. Matthew Myers, the president of the organization, said he expected at least six more cities with major league teams to pass similar legislation by the end of the year. A similar motion has been proposed by a Los Angeles city councilman. Myers plans to approach more cities until the entire

league is accounted for.

“It will turn into an inevitability,” Myers said in a phone interview. “This is going to happen. The only question is, will it happen in enough cities so that baseball is tobacco-free by next year? Or will it take one more year?”

Details of how the ordinance will be enacted and enforced in San Francisco are still being worked out, and Giants players are unsure how they will respond. George Kontos, a relief pitcher who does not dip, summarized one popular opinion this way: “We’re all grown-ups. You should be able to make your own decisions.”

Baseball has been linked to tobacco for more than a century. Images of players in tobacco packages were the forerunner to what became the baseball card industry. Smoking in the

dugout and bulging cheeks packed with chewing tobacco were staples of the game for generations.

But smoking ordinances and public awareness of the dangers of tobacco have driven cigarettes and chewing tobacco (the kind that is packed in the side of the mouth) almost entirely out of the sport. Many players, however, still dip

Myers said he had approached the Major League Baseball Players Association twice — before the last collective bargaining agreement was completed in 2011 and again last year after [Tony Gwynn died of mouth cancer](#) that he attributed to tobacco use. But the union has remained firm, opposing any ban on smokeless tobacco.

Myers turned his attention to San Francisco because the city was known for its progressive thinking and because the Giants had just won their third World Series title in five years and were, in many ways, the standard-bearers of the league. He approached the city’s

Board of Supervisors in January, and in April, the ordinance was passed unanimously.

“For most members of City Councils, concerned about kids in their community, this is a no-brainer,” Myers said. “It’s something simple and straightforward that will have an effect, literally, on millions of young boys.”

Under the current collective bargaining agreement, players cannot dip during televised interviews or carry cans of smokeless tobacco while fans are in the park. Dipping has been banned in the minor leagues since 1993, and the Professional Baseball Athletic Trainers Society has found that only about a third of all players chew, down from about half two decades ago.

It appears that about a third of the Giants use smokeless tobacco. At least seven members of the Mets do, too, including members of the team’s young core.

Myers’s group argues that star players who dip influence children to use smokeless tobacco. Although fewer major leaguers use it now, its use among high school boys has changed little in recent years, according to [a recent study](#) by the University of California, San Francisco, which estimated that nearly 15 percent of them use it.

Mark Farrell, the member of the Board of Supervisors who sponsored the ordinance, started using tobacco while he played college baseball at Loyola Marymount. In his freshman year, he said, he was one of only two players on the team who did not. He kept the habit through law school and has since quit. But now, raising two boys, he has seen youth coaches using tobacco in front of children.

“This almost becomes a self-enforcing mechanism, just by passing this,” Farrell said. “Coaches don’t want to be out on our park fields proactively breaking the law in front of parents. Players don’t want

to be on the field, on television, blatantly breaking the law.”

Enforcement is expected to be similar to how the city handles smokers. A police task force will not be formed. More officers will not be assigned to AT&T Park. Rather, people who see the ordinance being violated will be encouraged to file a complaint, and officers already stationed at the park will most likely be authorized to give citations, comparable to parking tickets.

“It’ll have to be a lofty fine,” said Jake Peavy, another Giants pitcher who started using tobacco in fifth grade. “Just because of the money guys are making. Or they’re not going to stop.”

Andrew Susac, the Giants’ backup catcher, receives emails from his mother relaying horror stories about people who have had parts of their jaw removed because of the effects of tobacco use. Susac tried gum and sunflower seeds as alternatives, but they did not suffice, he said. He tried a nontobacco imitation, but that did not work, either. He tried using pouches of coffee grinds, but they made him jittery.

Susac guessed that he dipped five times a day during the season, including in the morning, after lunch, on the bench during a game, and on his ride home. At another point during the day, whenever he gets an urge, he dips once more.

“Half the time I do it, I don’t have a real reason to,” Susac said. “It’s part of the game, I feel like. You come to the field, get bored or whatever, and just throw in a dip.”

Visiting teams must follow the ordinance, too, and more than half the major league teams will pass through San Francisco’s no-dipping zone next season. Yankees pitcher C. C. Sabathia said that he could go a week without dipping but that other times, he had the urge to do it every day. Myers has offered to develop a program to help players wean off tobacco.

“If they pass a law,” Sabathia said, “I won’t do it anymore.”

Bumgarner also seemed unworried about having to curtail his use. He said that he had quit a few times throughout the years without much trouble and that he dipped only as a habit, not for the nicotine rush.

“I know I can quit and be just fine from that second on,” he said.

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