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Sports Business

Michael Hiestand

Skateboard phenom, 6, wheels into role as pitchman

Skateboarding has been good to Mitchie Brusco. It's brought him nine endorsement deals so far. But it's still unclear whether Brusco will be able to juggle the demands of being a student-athlete, and whether he'll begin to believe his own press clippings. When, that is, he can read them all. Brusco, who starts kindergarten in the fall, turned 6 last month.



Mitchie Brusco earned endorsement deals before his fourth birthday.

Marketers with tie-ins to Brusco, suggests his mother, Jennifer, are getting much more than just the athlete-endorser with the least chance of being arrested. At a recent appearance for sponsors at a skateboard gear trade show in California, Brusco was asked to demonstrate a 15-foot "vert drop." That, says his mom, "is when you go straight down and your wheels aren't touching anything. Mitchie didn't even wobble."

Such resolve helped him land sponsorships before turning 4. He now has deals, largely for free merchandise, with makers of skateboard shoes, pads and four companies making skateboard parts. And with Jones Soda, whose energy cola is big with skateboarders, and with Lego, for blocks to make little skate parks.

Peter Carlisle, who heads the division representing Olympic and action-sport athletes at the sports marketing firm Octagon, has been an unpaid adviser to the Bruscos since they contacted him two years ago. Though it's easy to be cynical about athlete endorsements — think Tiger Woods would really rather *not* drive a Buick? — Carlisle suggests Brusco's Lego deal is the real thing: "Mitchie thinks Legos are cool."

So is Mitchie's timing. The Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association says that 12.5 million Americans skateboarded in 2001, meaning the sport's total participants topped baseball, and has more than doubled since 1995. Skateboard gear sales have also more than doubled since 1995 and now top U.S. dollar sales of football gear. Says the SGMA's Mike May: "The beauty of so-called extreme sports is that there are no rules in marketing. A youngster can make a living at an earlier age than in any other sport. There are no parameters as to what's right or wrong."

Brusco, who lives in Kirkland, Wash., has gotten lots of media exposure, including an NBC *Today* show

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appearance. But unlike other sports prodigies who popped up on TV as tots, such as Woods and Andre Agassi, Brusco and other extreme sport athletes don't have to wait for their marketing opportunities. Largely, says adviser Carlisle, that's because extreme sport athletes needn't worry about deals costing them any future NCAA eligibility — at least until colleges hand out skateboarding scholarships. And, he says, "Gen Y, as a demographic phenomenon for marketers, wasn't in existence" when Woods wowed viewers of *The Mike Douglas Show* as almost a toddler.

Brusco's talent, however, isn't as easy to explain as his marketability. It all started, says his mom, when her son spotted a \$10 skateboard, emblazoned with the Tasmanian Devil, at a local Target store. She says her initial suspicion that he was only attracted to the cartoon character — none of the family's other four children were skateboarders — was quickly dispelled: "He wouldn't get off it. He changed his clothes on it."

She says her son, who has competed in at least 30 skateboard events since 4, especially likes the sport "because he gets to hang out with the bigger guys" well into elementary school. And the whole Brusco family gets a kick out of boxes of free stuff from sponsors. That's about the only thing that really sinks in about his endorsements, his mom says: "He just knows the boxes show up."

Carlisle represents snowboarder Luke Mitrani, 12, who has deals with Lego and Mountain Dew, but calls Brusco's marketing success "unprecedented." Asked what he'd advise the boy if he formally represented him, Carlisle takes the long view: "I'd say there's time. Let's walk before we run."

Reviewing the books

Philip Propper De Callejon, a Los Angeles equity analyst, believes he's the first fan allowed to inspect the financial records of a major league sports team. Anschutz Entertainment, which privately owns the NHL Los Angeles Kings and their venue, the Staples Center, allowed him to scour the receipts after he requested to in writing. Propper De Callejon, who spends about \$4,500 annually on Kings tickets, will post his finding on the letsgokings.com site as early as Monday.

He says the team will have veto power "over releasing any numbers I shouldn't see but will have "no control over my conclusions, findings and analysis" — and all he got were some free sodas as he went over the numbers. So why bother? "Fans invest themselves emotionally," he says. "So they have the right to know teams are making the financial effort."

Spice rack

Wednesday, Oregon's Grand Ronde tribe offered to pay the entire cost of a proposed \$350 million baseball stadium in Portland, Ore., meant to attract the Montreal Expos in return for the right to build a casino in Portland. Spokesman Justin Martin says the tribe might want stadium naming rights but not team ownership. Though the deal needs approval by the governor, Martin notes it wouldn't be the first ballpark built on betting: "Stadiums have been built with lottery-backed bonds. What's the difference between state and tribal gaming?" ... The NBA will soon introduce official NBA jeans, covered in team logos, priced at \$89-\$125 and made by Ounk; one of the company's partners is the Knicks' Allan Houston.



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