

The Enterprise

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A skateboarder with a contract

Local 9-year-old already has many endorsements

By Janice Podsada
For the Enterprise

BOTHELL -- Nine-year-old Skyler can't drink a Pepsi in public because it would violate his contract.

The terms of his corporate sponsorship specify that he quench his thirst in public with a Jones Soda.

Similar terms apply to the five other companies Skyler Siljeg represents: Savier Shoes, Predator Helmets, Lib-Technologies skateboards, Randoms Hardware and Quiksilver clothing.

An amateur skateboard champion who regularly places first in age 10-and-under contests, Skyler acquired his first corporate sponsorship "before he could read," said his mother, Pam Miller, 42, of Bothell. A year later, at age 6, he negotiated a sponsorship, "all by himself," she said.

But Skyler's role is not unique.

The fourth-grader is one of many skateboarders nationwide who receive free shoes, helmets, skateboards and clothing in exchange for donning a "name-drop" T-shirt, or handing out stickers or soda at skate parks and competitions.

Many companies, whose products are geared toward pre-teens, tap the nation's youngest athletes to tout their products.

At 9, Skyler is an old hand at sponsorship. His skateboarding buddy, champion rider Mitch Brusco, 6, of Kirkland, has 11 corporate sponsors. Recently, Mitch's parents, Jennifer and Mick Brusco, hired an agent to negotiate a Lego Sport sponsorship.

A frequent visitor at Skyler's Bothell home, Mitch appeared in the Aug. 11 edition of People Magazine. This fall, he starts kindergarten.

Because skateboarding isn't an Olympic sport, young athletes don't run the risk of forfeiting their amateur status if they accept money or products from a corporate sponsor.

Typically, the kids don't receive money, but they do receive monthly or quarterly shipments of products.

Reader's Choice



Vote for your favorite, from pizza to parks, burger to theaters.

Out & About



Ways to Give

The holidays seem an especially important time to help our friends and neighbors in need. Every year, The Enterprise runs a list of groups and organizations that help those needy people and could use your donations of goods, time and money.

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For small companies on a tight budget, it's a low-cost marketing technique with the potential to win big.

"You send the helmet to 10 kids, and you hope one of them sticks with it and becomes a high-profile skater," said Matt Kelly, whose Vancouver, British Columbia, company, Predator Helmets, is one of Skyler's sponsors.

"Seeing Skyler in one of our helmets ..." Kelly said, "That's the sort of exposure we need, it's better than taking out a magazine ad."

Skateboarding is the fastest-growing sport in America. More than 12 million Americans -- the majority of them 18 or younger -- went skateboarding at least once in 2002. Sales of skateboards have jumped 70 percent the last two years, according to the Sporting Goods Agents Association.

Acquiring the basics -- a skateboard, helmet, kneepads and wrist guards -- costs about \$200, said Jeremy Hanson, a clerk at Lynnwood's Lost Boys Skate Shop. Another \$60 will buy a pair of athletic shoes specially designed to "stick to the board," he said.

Four years ago, 5-year-old Skyler caught Jones' attention. Jones Soda is a brand that appeals to kids ages 8 to 24, said Jennifer Cue, Jones' CEO.

The Seattle company sponsors about 20 young athletes. Skyler and Mitch are featured on its Web site. By Christmas, Jones plans to manufacture and distribute a quarter-million bottles with Skyler's photograph on the label. Another run will feature Mitch "catching air" on his skateboard.

"These guys are our little ambassadors for the brand," Cue said.

Skyler, a sandy-haired, freckle-faced, 65-pound athlete, takes his role as a company representative seriously, said Carlos Ojeda, production manager for Killerpaint.com, a Snohomish custom airbrush company.

"He's very involved. He markets all the companies," said Ojeda, who's watched Skyler hand out samples and freebies at skateboard contests.

"It's called guerrilla marketing," said Mark Forehand, marketing professor at the University of Washington. "It gets the product exposed without it being a blatant ad."

Guerrilla marketing isn't new, Forehand said. "But it's new to see it on a 9-year-old."

Even Skyler's mother is awed by his chutzpah.

After surveying the soft drinks at a local store, Skyler summoned the manager. "You carry Jones Soda. Why don't you carry WhoopAss, their energy drink?" recalled Miller.

Sports



Former Shoreline High School football coach passes away

Tom Wiley had the power to draw people in like a magnet. Those who knew him best say once he had you in his grip, there was no chance of wriggling free.

Revamped Edmonds-Woodway still among top squads

The Edmonds-Woodway boys swim team should again be right in the thick of the Western Conference 4A South Division race.

Meadowdale stocked with key performers

There is no question who is leading the charge for the Meadowdale boys swim team.

But using very young children as corporate ambassadors has some experts concerned.

"The long-term effect it may have on these children is unknown," said Ted Beauchaine, UW child psychology professor.

"We don't have any hard data on this issue because we haven't seen it before," Beauchaine said. "I'm not worried about them now. But it worries me about what their expectations will be later in life."

But company representatives defend the practice of sponsoring little ones.

"It's not like we're out there recruiting, it's like we're living the life," said Kerri Johnson, retail marketing manager of QuikSilver, a California-based sports clothing company.

"We go to the local skate parks. We have relationships with the managers of local skate parks. We hold a lot of skate camps," Johnson said.

Girls are almost guaranteed a sponsorship if they show up for skateboard competitions, said Patty Seder, 44, founder of the 2-year-old Pacific Northwest Amateur Skateboard League.

And the kids seek the corporate reps.

"When I ran a skate park, I met a ton of kids who wanted to be sponsored," said Killerpaint.com's Ojeda, whose company plans to airbrush Skyler's helmet with all his corporate logos.

Skyler typically doesn't seek out sponsorships. But there's one company on his wish-list -- Dr. Scholl's.

"I go through a lot of Odoreaters," Skyler said.

"He really has sweaty feet," Miller explained.

Skyler receives no money from his sponsors, but UPS is a regular visitor.

"It can be like Christmas over here," said Miller, a single mother.

Each month, Jones ships Skyler 120 bottles of soda. Others regularly send boxes of T-shirts, skateboard decks and helmets. It's enough to clothe Skyler's mother, his older brother, Chad, 15, and the neighborhood kids, Miller said.

The same goes for Mitch. Samples provide the family of seven with shoes, sweatshirts and backpacks.

"We wouldn't be able to afford the \$200 board he rides," said Mitch's mother, Jennifer Brusco, 36. A former high school tennis player, Brusco said she turned down a Nike sponsorship at 15 because she would have lost her amateur status.

Other kids benefit from Mitch's sponsors, she said.

One, Triple Eight Protective Equipment, regularly ships safety equipment, more than he needs.

"We give it away," Brusco said. "If I see a kid at a skate park without pads or a helmet, I'll say here, you keep these."

Mitch, however, is old enough to realize the source of his bounty, Brusco said. "He understands that if he stops skating all this would stop too."

While sponsors offer perks, they're a poor substitute for mom's or dad's attention, Brusco said.

At the skate park, she said, kids often ask her to look on. "These are just kids who want parents to watch."

Brusco said parents should go to the skate park, especially if their child is a hotshot skateboarder.

They're the ones being scoped out by corporate representatives wanting to sign the next Tony Hawk, skateboard's equivalent of golf's Tiger Woods.

Both mothers said they want their children to enjoy the sport without feeling pressured.

But it was Skyler who gently scolded his mother after she bought him a Pepsi at a recent skateboard contest. She said he told her:

"Mom, I can't drink that in public."

Janice Podsada writes for The Herald in Everett.

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