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- **FRONT PAGE**
- **LOCAL NEWS**
 - » Obituaries
 - » Tributes
 - » Milestones
- **OPINION**
- **NEIGHBORS**
- **SPORTS**
- **NATION/WORLD**
- **BUSINESS**
- **FEATURES**
- **PHOTO GALLERY**

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MARKETING

Too young to endorse a check, but not too young to endorse a product

Janice Posada
The Herald, AP

September 8, 2003

BOTHELL (AP) -- 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 preteens, 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.



AP photo by Michael O'Leary/The Herald

Skyler Siljeg, 9, practices on a ramp at his home in Bothell. The skateboard champion has acquired six corporate sponsors, ranging from helmets to shoes.

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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.

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.

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.

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.

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"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."

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.

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, sweat shirts 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.

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."