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Kindergartner is a sponsor's dream

All whiz-kid skateboarder knows is he gets free stuff

By MICHAEL HIESTAND

USA Today

09/19/2003

Skateboarding has been good to Mitchie Brusco.

It has brought him nine endorsement deals so far. But it is still unclear whether Brusco will be able to juggle the demands of being a student-athlete and whether he will begin to believe his own press clippings.

When, that is, he can read them all. Brusco, who started kindergarten this fall in his hometown of Kirkland, Wash., turned 6 years old in February.

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. During an appearance early this year for sponsors at a skateboard gear trade show in California, Brusco was asked to demonstrate a 15-foot vert drop. That, said 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. Among his other sponsors are Jones Soda, whose energy cola is big with skateboarders, and 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. While it's easy to become cynical about athlete endorsements, Carlisle suggests Brusco's Lego deal is the real thing: "Mitchie thinks Legos are cool."

So is Brusco's timing. A Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association survey found that 12.5 million Americans skateboarded in 2001, meaning the sport's total participants surpassed baseball. And the number of participants has more than doubled since 1995.

Skateboard gear sales also have more than doubled since 1995, and now surpass U.S. dollar sales of football gear.

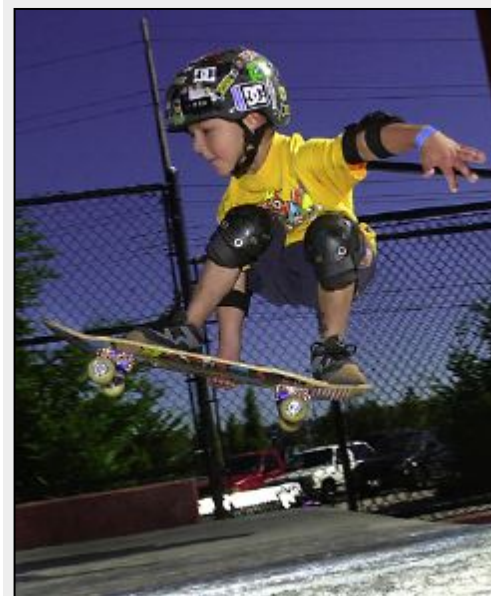
"The beauty of so-called extreme sports is that there are no rules in marketing," said the SGMA's Mike May. "A youngster can make a living at an earlier age than in any other sport. There are no parameters as to what's right or wrong."

Brusco has gotten lots of media exposure, including an NBC "Today" show appearance. But unlike other sports prodigies who popped up on TV as tots, such as golfer Tiger Woods and tennis player Andre Agassi, Brusco and other extreme sport athletes don't have to wait for their marketing opportunities.

Carlisle said that is largely because extreme sport athletes need not worry about financial deals costing them any future NCAA eligibility - at least until colleges start handing out skateboarding scholarships.

Beyond that, Carlisle said, "Gen Y, as a demographic phenomenon for marketers, wasn't in existence" when Woods wowed viewers of "The Mike

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AP/ELAINE THOMPSON

Skateboarder Mitchie Brusco, shown in September 2002, gains elevation while working out at a park in Seattle. Brusco, now 6 years old, has achieved a level of success in skateboarding that already has garnered him nine endorsement deals.

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Douglas Show" with his golf skills as almost a toddler.

Brusco's talent, however, isn't as easy to explain as his marketability. It all started, his mother said, when her son spotted a \$10 skateboard, emblazoned with the Tasmanian Devil, at a local Target store. She said her initial suspicion that he was attracted only to the cartoon character was quickly dispelled.

"He wouldn't get off it," she said. "He changed his clothes on it."

Jennifer Brusco said her son, who has competed in more than 30 skateboard events since age 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 said: "He just knows the boxes show up."

Carlisle represents snowboarder Luke Mitrani, 12, who has deals with Lego and Mountain Dew, but he called Brusco's marketing success "unprecedented." Asked what he would advise the boy if he formally represented him, Carlisle takes the long view.

"I'd say there's time," he said. "Let's walk before we run."

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