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MAGAZINE DESK

Why, Isn't He Just the Cutest Brand-Image Enhancer You've Ever Seen?

By Margaret Talbot (NYT) 7388 words

The Extreme skate park in downtown Louisville, Ky., sits between a loop of interstate highway and the headquarters of a grain company whose sign reads "Producer Feeds -- Since 1869." The park looks a little like a homemade Hot Wheels track, something a resourceful toy-deprived child might make out of flour-and-water paste. It has every feature a skateboarder could want, though. The city of Louisville, which opened the park a little more than a year ago, is hoping to attract ESPN's X Games to the city, and maybe other skateboarding competitions, which used to be scruffy, outsiderish sorts of things and are now widely popular and potentially lucrative. So the park has a 24-foot full pipe, two 11-foot bowls, two 8-foot bowls, two 4-foot bowls, a vert ramp and a fun box with grinding ledges -- all smooth and undulating, made of unpainted and slightly scuffed concrete.

At 1 in the afternoon on a hazy Monday in midsummer, a day that started off with a downpour and left glittering puddles here and there, the park is not that crowded. Maybe a dozen skateboarders and two or three bikers are zipping through the bowls. There's a guy in his 30's named Dave who's deaf, so his pals at the park call him Deaf Dave. There's Chad and Tyler and a few other 12- and 14- and 15-year-olds with mosquito-bitten shins and baggy shorts and glow-in-the-dark wristbands, most wearing the dogged half-scowls of adolescents working really hard at the only pursuit they know for certain to be cool. There's an elderly woman wearing a pink polo shirt with a hairdo of close-cropped curls like iron filings who is exhorting her three grandchildren. ("Travis, get in there and don't let 'em snake ya," she yells with surprising vehemence.) There's a husky, freckled boy with a T-shirt that says "Keep Staring -- I Might Do a Trick." And there is Dylan Oliver, who on this July day is all of 4 years old.

Since Dylan is, at 4, a weirdly, prodigiously good skateboarder -- and maybe, as the Lexington paper called him, "the next big 'little' thing" -- there are also some other people here today: his mother, his father, his grandmother, me, his shop sponsor, his shop sponsor's wife, his board sponsor, his board sponsor's videographer and four members of camera crews from two local network affiliates, who have been following Dylan's skateboarding achievements to date.

Dylan is 38 inches tall and weighs 35 pounds. When he walks or runs, his arms swing in forceful little arcs at his sides. When adults are talking about skateboarding, he stands right underneath them and tips one ear up toward them with a grave look on his face. He carries his deck, which is to say his skateboard, everywhere he goes, and he likes to wear his helmet in the car, which makes his mother, Julie, wonder whether other drivers will think she is either a very bad driver or a neurotically protective mother.

After about an hour of skating the bowls today, and with his father's coaxing, Dylan is making a go at a flight of three stairs. It's not a particularly hard trick for him. He has flown over six stairs before, and he has dropped into an 11-foot bowl. He can ride on the back two wheels of the board in what's called a manual. He can do 50-50's and board slides, and he can jump off six-foot ledges. Still, the pavement is a little wet, and Dylan is not really a daredevil; he just likes to skate, so he's taking his time. His helmet looks big on him, and a lone tuft of straw-colored hair sticks up from one of the holes on top. He chuffs the helmet back and forth on his head with the heel of one hand, squeezes his lips together in concentration and squints.

"Damn, he's little," says Jason Brown, who is 32 and the owner of Nice Skateboards, the company that sponsors Dylan.

Dylan soars over the steps and lands with a sharp, echoing crack of wheels on concrete. And then the next time he doesn't: he falls

on his head and somersaults and lies there staring up at the sun for a few minutes as if it were more interesting than he had previously thought.

"That was a real head bonker, Buddy," Brown says genially.

"Yup," says Dylan, who is by that time back at the top of the steps, getting ready to do it again. This time, Brown jumps up the steps on his board just as Dylan is coming down, and Dylan, distracted, falls once more. Brown gives Dylan a little nod, one skate dude to another, but otherwise, neither acknowledges the fall.

The adult males in Dylan's life, the ones who see him lighting up their own prospects as well as his, tend to talk about him more seriously and treat him more respectfully than adult males usually talk about or treat 4-year-olds, and with more of a self-conscious sense of history, as if they were writing the ESPN documentary script aloud. "When I first saw him at the skate park, I thought he was awesome," says Chris Redmond, who owns the skate shop that sponsors Dylan. "He had a lot of potential, a lot of heart for a 4-year-old, a lot of good understanding of the skateboard."

Redmond and Brown watch Dylan land his next attempt to fly over the stairs, and nobody says anything for a few minutes, until Michelle Redmond, Chris's wife, interjects. "He's so cute!" she says, shaking her long hennaed hair in astonishment. "You can't help but stare at him 'cause he's so damned cute!" Then she, too, gets serious. "But with Nice Skateboards and us on his team," she says, "there's a wealth of skateboarding experience behind him. He's a fortunate little guy."

"One time," says Dylan's grandmother Jenny, laughing her smoker's laugh, "a lady here at the park says, 'Well, I think he's a midget,' and his mama says: 'No, he's not. He's my son! And he's 4 years old!'" Dylan trots over to her with his skateboard tucked under one arm, takes a swig from her water bottle, trots back.

"I don't know," Brown says. "I think kids are just getting really advanced as human beings now. You know?"

A year ago, when Dylan was 3, he got on a skateboard for the first time. The board was a neighbor's, and it was too big for him. He rode across the front porch, ollied, which is to say, jumped, over the steps and managed to stay on. His mother remembers seeing his head go flying past the window. Now, at 4, he has a career, or something like it, which is strange, but that's the way things work these days. A kid Dylan's age who is noticed at skate parks can start collecting sponsorships -- equipment and clothing companies that will begin by giving him discounts in exchange for conspicuously wearing or using their products and will then often progress to putting him "on flow," supplying him with a regular stream of goodies. They may pay him for winning a contest or showing up in the papers sporting their logos. They may feature him on Web sites or in videos or put him on a company-sponsored team. He may become a celebrity in his field long before most kids have any idea what they want to be when they grow up, and maybe long before he does.

Child prodigies are more common in all sports now than they were even 10 years ago. They may be more common because, as Jason Brown says, kids are just getting more advanced as human beings -- sometimes it does seem that way. They may be more common because parents start their kids in formal lessons at earlier ages, or because there are more sports to choose from, and therefore a greater chance that kids will find one at which they turn out to be remarkable. The Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association, which 10 years ago tracked participation trends in 60 sports, now tracks 103, including new extreme sports, like wakeboarding (which is like water-skiing on a surfboard), and hybrids of traditional team sports and extreme ones, like roller hockey (which is hockey on in-line skates).

But the likeliest explanation is that companies are discovering young athletes at earlier ages and competing with one another to do so. We have seen very young, very talented athletes before. Tiger Woods was golfing when he was 2. Gymnasts and ice skaters have often started as toddlers. But they have rarely been marketed as aggressively as prodigies can be now, and few have stood to make the money they can make now. Nike signed a soccer player named Freddy Adu at 13 to a \$1 million endorsement deal in the spring. (The company previously signed the basketball player LeBron James, who, at 18, may not quite be a prodigy but is certainly on the young side, to an astonishing \$90 million deal.)

Luke Mitrani, a 13-year-old snowboarder, has a lucrative multiyear contract with Mountain Dew. On a smaller scale, Mitchie (Little Tricky) Brusco, a skateboarding sensation out of Kirkland, Wash., who is only 6, has deals with Jones Soda, Lego and Termite Skateboards, among others. A standout 12- or 13-year-old snow- or skateboarder can make "a strong six figures annually in endorsements alone," says Peter Carlisle, a sports agent who represents extreme athletes at a company called Octagon.

In extreme sports like snowboarding and skateboarding, there are no eligibility rules like those in the N.C.A.A., which prevent a young athlete who has accepted endorsement deals from playing college basketball or competing as an amateur. There are no age restrictions at all. Golfers have to be at least 18 to play full time on the PGA Tour; in women's professional tennis, the number of tournaments a player can participate in yearly is limited by age. But skateboarding and other extreme sports routinely make pros and pitchmen out of the very young.

"With figure skaters, they have a coach and they have some financial issues, but they have not opened up their lives to the business of the sport," Carlisle says. "There are kids that may be represented by agents, and the hope is that they will become marketable through their sport, but companies aren't banging down the doors of 12-year-old tennis players. With the action sports, companies see the kids as marketable today. The moment these kids, however young, can affect marketing or sales is the moment the company moves in."

All of this is starting to make really young athletes in some other sports attractive as endorsers: in the spring, in what may be either the nadir or the zenith of prodigy-marketing, Reebok introduced a commercial campaign built around a basketball player, Mark Walker, who was 3 years old. (This was shortly after Reebok's rival Nike landed LeBron James and Freddy Adu.)

Like Reebok's "Terry Tate: Office Linebacker" ads, the Mark Walker campaign was meant to be a "brand-image enhancer" that would make consumers feel warm and upbeat about Reebok and put them in an "aspirational" mood, but without pushing any specific product. "If we can get that kind of a response out of a consumer who is engaged with our brand, that's a good thing," says Denise Kaigler, vice president for global communications at Reebok. "Actually, that's a very good thing."

Partly such campaigns are a matter of attracting Gen Y'ers -- the athletic-shoe-buying, generally free-spending 13-to-24-year-old demographic -- and of appealing to their parents at the same time. Companies assume that parents who dream of raising stars of their own will delight in knowing about the precedents set by little Mark Walker or Mitchie Brusco and will want to track their careers, if only to pick up a few tips. That's what American meritocracy means now, after all -- not that any child can grow up to be president but that any child can grow up to be famous enough to be a brand-image enhancer.

"With the Mark Walker campaign, the thinking was, This wasn't Allen Iverson; this was just a cool kid," Kaigler says. "And we felt that if we could create a platform for him and his parents to showcase his talents, we'd be connecting with all those feelings that parents have when they go to their kids' dance recitals or Little League games or whatever it is."

Campaigns based on prodigies also offer the reassurance -- for both marketers and consumers -- of knowing that the spokesman is, at 3 or 6 or 10, unlikely to be arrested on a drug charge or embroiled in a sex scandal, like, say Nike's endorser Kobe Bryant. They also try to borrow and play on a certain feeling, which is the feeling of loving an activity for its own sake -- loving it in the way that very young kids love it, in the way that makes your body still feel the motion, as you are drifting off to sleep, of the waves or the wheels or the ball thwinking into your hand.

Marketers have a sort of code for talking about this -- they talk about how the young athletes they promote have "heart" or "passion." They talk a lot about "fun." And it seems that to tap the selling power of this particular spirit of fun -- which is an ideal, sort of like the ideal of purity or innocence -- you have to tap younger and younger children. Four-year-olds are useful for these purposes. It's not as if they even love the game per se -- not like 8-year-olds, who are keen on rules and stats. Four-year-olds love what they are doing at the moment -- or do not love it, but in any case they are not doing it for the bling-bling or the glory. They are, if you want to put it that way, passionate. (What is a temper tantrum if not an excess of passion?) If anyone loves a sport for its own sake, then surely it's a 4-year-old.

And 4-year-olds aren't going to worry, as some teenage athletes in sports like skateboarding might, about selling out -- they don't know what selling out is. They don't believe in their sport as a subculture, a prickly refuge from the adult world, in the way that some adolescents do, so they probably won't project much in the way of ambivalence or disaffection when they are promoting a product. (Crankiness, maybe, but that can usually be staved off with a snack or a nap.)

The appeal of sports prodigies is, in part, the same as the appeal of the little beltors and crooners on "American Juniors" -- or for that matter of the first child actors to appear on the American stage in the mid-19th century: the chamber-of-wonders-like pleasures of beholding something in cunning miniature, the satisfactions of seeing children engaged in the sort of games and entertainments that adults like to engage in, rather than in their own arcane, inscrutable child's play, the mingled delight and pathos in knowing that

children will probably display their emotions upon winning or losing even more nakedly than exhibitionistic adults. The "double talent" of the first child performers, notes Leo Braudy in "The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History," "was to be sentimentally endearing while they mimicked the grown-up stars of the day." They invited audiences into an "exploration of a relationship extremely close to that which existed between one's inner nature and the self-made 'character' one ought to show to get ahead in the world," between innocence and ambition. That is still the double-talent of child performers, but with young sports prodigies now, there is also the appeal of the promise they seem to embody: of riches, of superior physical fitness and of fierce but meritocratic and seemingly transparent competition.

"I done good," Dylan observes from the back seat on the way home from the skate park. "Only I didn't get to skate very much, though."

"No," says his father, Al Oliver, laughing. "Only about three hours."

Dylan cried for a few minutes when we left the park, but not once when he fell.

"Look, Mama! Look, Mama!"

"O.K., Dyl, what am I looking at?"

"Steps!" he crows. "I could ollie those, Mama!"

The world, it is clear, is chiefly interesting at the moment to the extent that it is skateable. A stretch of concrete is to Dylan like an open field of tall grass or a perfect climbing tree to another child: rife with possibilities, impossible to pass in a car without a stab of regret and a sense of injustice.

At home, he would like to be 1) skateboarding; 2) watching "Tony Hawk's Gigantic Skatepark Tour" on video; 3) playing with fingerboards and a toy skate park, on which, the afternoon I am there, he is re-enacting moves he did at the park, perfecting them by proxy: "If I woulda done that, Daddy, I woulda landed it."

Neither Julie Oliver, who is 30 and works as a secretary in a doctor's office, nor her husband, Al, who is 30 and a paramedic, is a skateboarder. Al played baseball in high school but doesn't consider himself an athlete, really, and Julie doesn't play any sports. Between them, Julie and Al have three older children from previous relationships (Jeremy, 11; Michael, 10; and Alyson, 8), and none of them were particularly into skateboarding. So Dylan's talent is not something his parents anticipated. On the other hand, it is something they are going with, enthusiastically. "If Regis and Kelly call, be sure to give 'em our number," Al says.

Al is seriously considering becoming a certified trainer -- somebody who can travel on skate tours and do the first aid, like special bandaging and treating swelling and bruises with ice, which the pre-eminent skateboarder Tony Hawk, and therefore Dylan, call "torturing with ice." Al and Julie have learned the names of all the major skating tricks, along with words and phrases like "that was really sick," as a term of praise, and "gnarly," which sound odd coming from Julie, with her sweet, girlish voice. At the skate park, each time Dylan's board clatters away from him, Al chases after it, like a gnarly manservant. And when Dylan rolls his Nice-sticker-plastered skateboard back and forth over the living-room carpet and says, "This is the specialest deck I ever seen," Julie says: "You know, they made a smaller deck especially for him. This may be the skateboard they sell with his name on it someday -- that may be the official Dylan Oliver deck."

Jason Brown says that they shouldn't push Dylan into competition, especially national competition, too early. "That's when it burns you out," he tells the Olivers. "That's when it's no fun anymore. It's work. Plus, he could get trampled." (Brown has something of the skate-dude guru about him: he is soft-spoken enough that you have to listen pretty hard when he talks, and if you ask him, he can tell you stories about skating with some of the legends.) But if they take it slow, then the fact that Dylan started so early will make him "that much better of a skater when he's older," Brown says. "It'll be, like, inbred in him. O.K., he may have a little trouble when his feet get big, but basically, he will skate as well as he can walk down the street." (Brown also tells them that when Dylan returns to prekindergarten this fall, "you're gonna have trouble making school interesting for this little guy after all the cool stuff he's been doing." School was never very interesting for Brown.)

The Olivers are following Brown's advice, though at first they found it a little deflating. It's tricky. On the one hand, it's exciting to

be invited to competitions like the Grom Series in Philadelphia, which was held a few months ago. On the other hand, Dylan was really restless there. He loved skating the hallways at the hotel. But he didn't like waiting with 75 other kids for his turn to compete: he wanted to get out there and skate and didn't really understand why he couldn't. Sometimes people forget -- since he's such a quick study, since he doesn't cry when he takes nasty spills at the skate park, since he is best friends with 20- and 30-something hipster dudes like Jason Brown and his gorgeously tattooed Nice Skateboards teammate Larry Leshner -- that he is only 4.

The sponsorship possibilities are enticing, and a little confusing, for the Olivers, too. The Nice deal is great: Brown's company supplies Dylan with skateboards -- and because skaters tend to go through 15 or 20 boards a year (they get wrecked with enough hard-core use), and the board, or deck, of the skateboard alone costs about \$50, this is no small thing. (With all the wheels, ball bearings and everything else you need, the cost is more like \$150, though it is usually only the decks that get worn out, their tails eroded down to a point from riding on the back wheels.) Of course, Dylan is happy to paper his board with Nice stickers and to wear Nice T-shirts when he's at the skate park and to lend his name and image to the company's promotional videos. Indeed, the Olivers are hoping to pick up other sponsors -- they know there are young skateboarders who are sponsored by 8 or 10 companies, meaning they get everything from their sunglasses to their ball bearings to their power drinks free, in exchange for wearing or using the company's product wherever they are likely to be seen by other kids.

"O.K., say you've got a 10-year-old skater, and he's really good," Peter Carlisle says. "And let's say Oakley eyewear, as an example, has sales reps in that kid's area. Part of what they want is to get all the cool kids, all the best skaters in the area, to wear Oakley. Well, the easiest way to get them to wear it is to give it to them. So they'll say, 'Hey, we'll give you two free pairs a year, but you gotta put this sticker on your board.' They're not gonna come on real heavy; they want to bro down with these guys. So it's, like: 'Here you go, man. We want you to have these. Have fun with them, O.K.?'"

Agents like Carlisle, who represents Mitchie Brusco and Luke Mitrani, usually hear from parents of sports prodigies a little later, when would-be sponsors start seeking out their children more aggressively and pushing for signed contracts. In fact, if parents come to him before that -- and these days, some do -- he says that he is suspicious of their motives and won't take them on as clients. "If parents are coming to me, and it's clear they want to proactively market their kid, or they want to sign contracts of such long duration that the kid is trapped, whether he wants to stick with the sport or not, or if they're pressuring kids to do stuff they don't want to do, then I'm not comfortable with that. If somebody is coming to me and saying, 'Look, we're getting all these contract offers, and we don't know how to handle them,' that's one thing. If they're coming to me saying, 'Hey, we saw Mitch Brusco on TV, and how can we get that for our kids, and how can we get on even more TV shows?' that's another."

Even with parents who are not pushing their kids out there but reacting to offers that come, Carlisle has to dissuade them from accepting every TV appearance, especially ones in which the kid is presented as a novelty act -- goofy local TV stunts, "America's Funniest Home Videos" -- because, he says, his job is to preserve the possibility of respect for the kid within the sport. "If he's doing silly stuff, he'll be seen as ridiculous by the core audience," which is to say other people who love that particular sport or play it themselves. Carlisle also makes a point of calling Brusco "Mitch," as if to ensure his future street cred, though on Mitch's Web site, where he looks winsome and pink-cheeked and little, he is identified as Mitchie. Still, Mitchie has done the "Today" show and a local show called "Eric's Little Heroes"; he has also made an appearance on "The John Walsh Show," in which Walsh, trying to keep up with Mitch on a skateboard, broke his ankle in three places. (Mitchie, says his mother, Jennifer, is "blessed with this gift of balance" -- and if you don't have it, you don't have it.)

Every parent has his or her particular scruples. Jennifer Brusco didn't want Mitchie to sign any deals that meant "he'd get paid to wear a company's clothing all the time," she says. "I mean, he's 6 years old -- if he wants to wear a Spiderman T-shirt one day, I want to be able to let him do that." And to forestall jealousy within the family, she wanted corporate largess extended to the four other Brusco children whenever possible. When Muskoka Woods, a sports camp in Canada, offered to treat Mitchie to a week at camp, three of the other four got to go, too. When Mitchie signed with Lego, the other kids got to go online and pick out any Lego product they wanted. "It was awesome to see their excitement," Jennifer says.

Sponsored kids like Mitchie are "walking, talking, living, breathing billboards," as Mike May, a spokesman for the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association, puts it. Inevitably, there's pressure for them to stay in the sport, to stay visible and to outdo themselves. And with that kind of pressure "comes a justifiable concern about burnout and about whether the body can continue to perform as it has been performing," May says. "There's been a recommendation for a long time that young athletes should do three different sports a year, so that certain muscle groups get a break and that kind of thing. Nowadays, though, you see more and more specialization at an early age."

In part, that's because sponsorship is just too hard to turn down. "When Quicksilver came to me and said, 'Can we sponsor his clothing?' I had to laugh," says Pam Miller, whose son Skyler Siljeg is a 9-year-old skateboarder. "I was, like: 'Hey, I'm a single mother. You can dress him until he's 18!'"

Like Mitchie, Skyler is a member of the Jones Soda Emerging Riders team, which also includes, among other, older athletes, a 12-year-old wakeboarder named Troy Ingolia. Jones is a small Seattle-based company with a groovy, slightly retro Northwesty thing going -- it picks odd snapshots sent in by customers for its labels; its slogan is "Run With the Little Guy"; the on-hold music at the corporate headquarters is R.E.M. And ever since the company started out, in Vancouver, British Columbia, seven years ago, it has tried very purposefully and successfully to become popular with skateboarders -- putting coolers of Jones Whoopass Energy Shots or cream soda in tattoo shops where skateboarders hang out and signing up skaters and other extreme athletes for a Jones-sponsored team, which entitles them to a monthly allotment of free soda and a page on the Jones Web site, where they can list their accomplishments and, of course, their favorite Jones Soda flavor.

Peter van Stolk, the company's shaved-headed C.E.O., speaks of this campaign in lyrical Northwest C.E.O.-speak. "It's about the passion and the time and energy you put into something and the wanting to succeed, not the success itself. There are the professionals and the people who are passionate. Everyone wants to sponsor the professionals, the Kobe Bryants -- that name just came to mind. We wanted to associate ourselves with the passionate people."

Wyndi Rejniak, until recently Jones's marketing director, sounded a bit more pragmatic: "We were looking for the kids who find the trends, and those tend to be kids in action sports."

Still, when a representative from Jones first approached Skyler, his mother was amazed: "This man with blue hair came up to Skyler. He'd seen him skate, and he said, 'Does he have a sponsor?' I said: 'A sponsor? Whoa, he's only 5!'" Skyler started skating that year. "Not as young as Mitchie," his mom says. "Sometimes I wish we would have started when he was 3." Still, Skyler was young enough that "he took what he saw on video games and TV and tried it, because at that age he thought he could do it all." He continued to excel at skateboarding -- by age 7, he had won or placed in a dozen competitions -- and Jones quickly became a big part of his life.

When Skyler told kids in kindergarten that he was sponsored by a soda company and they didn't believe him, his mom mentioned it to their Jones sales rep. "And the rep asks me where his bus stop is and what time the bus leaves," she says. "The next day, there's a leopard-printed Jones van at the bus stop, and they've got cases of soda, and they're passing it out to all the other kids. I've gotta say, it was a great marketing move."

When Skyler was learning to read, the sales rep would come by the house "with product" and test him on Jones labels. At his competitions and skateboarding demonstrations, Skyler and his family hand out Jones Soda by the caseful. But Skyler has several other sponsors now too. And the weekend I spoke with her, Miller said she was "having the Lego Bionicle team over for a barbecue" to get to know her son.

On the summer evening I visited the Olivers at their small brick house on a busy street in Louisville, we had spaghetti and meatballs for dinner, then settled down in front of the wide-screen TV to watch segments about Dylan that were on two local news shows. The older kids were away, so it was Dylan's evening. We had to sit through several disconcerting local news stories -- a grisly car accident, an abandoned baby, a couple of teenagers who had made prank phone calls telling people that their relatives had been killed -- and Dylan was getting bored.

"I want to go skateboarding," he said, and when none of us moved from the couch: "Come outside and play with me. Pleeeeeze." Dylan took a flying leap onto the other couch in the room and from his perch there accelerated his campaign for some outdoor time.

"Not now, honey," Julie said at last. "We've gotta watch you on TV."

And then a couple of months later, Al reported on the phone that they had "taken things to another level. Dylan's trying out for three companies, including a shoe company and an apparel company, that want to sponsor him. We've sent his video to Jay Leno and the Tom Green show, and we're waiting to hear." Jones Soda, the Olivers were delighted to reveal, had signed Dylan up as a rider. In September, he would turn 5 and start his second year of prekindergarten.

Both parents had a new sense of Dylan's potential. "Look at this little basketball player -- Mark Walker," Julie said. "I mean, it blows

my mind that a company like Reebok is willing to put so much money into a kid that young." Julie says that she and Al can't really imagine Dylan giving up skateboarding. "He's almost 5 now," she said. "He was 3 when he started, and he's skated every day since then." But, she added, "at the same time, we've gotta look at the fact that he's only 4. We have to be honest and say we can't guarantee he'll be doing this in three or four years. We couldn't sign a contract that lasted that long. But if a big skateboarding company offered him a month-to-month, we'd go for anything."

Not long after I met Dylan, I went to Kansas City, Mo., to see Mark Walker, the 3-year-old basketball player Reebok had signed, for an undisclosed amount, as a spokesman. Can you call a 3-year-old "a basketball player"? It sounds like too fixed an identity for somebody as protean as a preschooler. In any case, what Mark does, with remarkable consistency, is shoot hoops. In the Mark Walker video on Reebok's Web site, he makes 18 baskets in a row, aiming for an eight-foot-high hoop in his family's garage and counting each one off in a 3-year-old's lisp. There's an older home video of him in diapers sinking a ball into a little basket from way across the room. There's an interview in which he states his favorite foods and his favorite basketball players (Kobe Bryant and Allen Iverson, who is also, as it happens, on Reebok's payroll) and provides an answer, possibly not entirely spontaneous, to the question of how he got so good -- "itsagodgiventalent." And at the end, he recites: "I'm the future of basketball. I am Reebok."

That, in particular, impressed a number of people as kind of gross. "A 3-year-old saying I am Reebok strikes me as just about the creepiest and most disheartening image a company could possibly offer to society," Rob Walker wrote in Slate. A Kansas City Star sports columnist named Jason Whitlock complained about athletic shoe companies that did "little to nothing to inspire poor kids who have more brains than brawn" and argued that there was "something fundamentally wrong with a powerful shoe company promoting a 3-year-old boy as 'the future of basketball.'" An Iowa paper ran its denunciation of the Mark Walker campaign under the headline "Diaper Dandy's Message Is Soiled."

None of this has been particularly discouraging to Reebok, however, in part because for all the grumbling in the print media, TV has embraced L'il Mark. Reebok ran his TV commercial only once. But Mark has made appearances on the "Today" show, on "Live With Regis and Kelly" and on BET. On "Regis and Kelly," he played pig with Pat Sajak and Kelly Ripa, who dressed in cute little shorts for the contest and said, "Who's your mom now?" to L'il Mark when she made a good shot. Mark stared directly into the camera a lot, looking slightly stunned. This kind of exposure has been a boon to his Reebok Web site, which since May has had almost 700,000 visits. Meanwhile, Reebok has received 1,500 e-mail messages and 60 videotapes in response to its invitation to parents ("Does your son or daughter have super talent?") to tell the company about their own prodigy. And Denise Kaigler of Reebok says she thinks the campaign has been a great success at piggybacking on the "whole fascination with reality TV, regular people doing amazing things, that kind of stuff."

Mark and LaShawn Walker live with L'il Mark in a prosperous new housing development in a suburb outside Kansas City. It's a neighborhood with a lot of cul-de-sacs and three-car garages, where the trees are too young to give any shade but the lawns are meticulously landscaped and uniformly green. Lush carpets of impatiens, like the blankets of flowers draped over winning racehorses, spill out of concrete urns. The houses are large and handsome and hard to tell apart -- I think I'm there when I see a basketball hoop in the driveway, but there are hoops in too many driveways, though no one is out playing.

LaShawn, who used to be a sales rep for a pharmaceuticals company, now has her own interior-decorating business. Mark Sr. is a graphics designer who played college football at Southwest Missouri State. Reebok sent a representative from the company's headquarters to sit in on our interview, but it wasn't really necessary. The Walkers, and particularly LaShawn, are, after just a few months of this sort of thing, remarkably polished and on-message.

It was LaShawn who sent the home videotape of Mark to Reebok. The tape ended up on Kaigler's desk and sat there for a while, but after Kaigler finally watched it, and showed it to Micky Pant, Reebok's chief marketing officer, a plan for Mark's future developed quickly. About two months after she sent the tape in, LaShawn got a call from Pant himself, and he "told us: 'What your son is doing is absolutely amazing. It's. . .'" She pauses until she can remember the word. ". . . hypnotizing.'" Pant told her that he had showed the tape on his laptop to players at the N.B.A. All-Star game, including Kobe Bryant, and that it had created a lot of buzz. Kaigler, meanwhile, had noticed that the parents in her office were particularly taken with L'il Mark. A commercial featuring the 3-year-old seemed like the next step.

When I ask LaShawn what she had hoped for when she sent the tape in, though, and what she expects for Mark now, she talks about the importance of education. "He's so young," she adds. "We're just going to celebrate his youthfulness."

"We don't have any expectations," his father says, "if that's what you mean."

Of course, that's just as well, especially if they had specific expectations for him in the N.C.A.A. Depending on what the rules are in 15 or 20 years, L'il Mark's endorsement deal with Reebok might prevent him from playing college basketball. Then again, though LaShawn doesn't want to say how much they got from Reebok, she does say it was enough to pay for college -- comfortably -- so at least he won't need an athletic scholarship. People have chided the Walkers, still, for maybe acing their son out of a college basketball career. And people have chided them for placing too much emphasis on basketball in the life of an African-American boy.

"You can't control what other people think," says LaShawn, who already has that gracious, can't-be-bothered J. Lo-style deflection of bad press down pat. "There has been some negativity, but we don't dwell on that. We have the support of our family and friends and people who know us."

In any case, the Walkers seem globally ambitious for Mark, who is bright and sparky and entirely likable. If basketball is his ticket to greatness, so be it, but whatever the ticket is, they seem determined to find it. The first thing LaShawn says when I walk into their immaculate house is, "Mark, show her the telescope you got for your birthday" -- his 4th birthday, on June 17. Then she asks him to tell me the phases of the moon, which he does, slurring them together in a singsong way but making it: "waxingfullmoonwaningnewmoon." Later, LaShawn will tell Mark to recite the phone numbers of all his relatives, and he will lie on the floor and say them all without pause, spinning himself around with one foot, while the four adults stand in a circle around him, smiling foolishly.

"We show him the same excitement when he learns his numbers or his flashcards as when he makes the next shot," LaShawn says. Though, of course, he is not being asked on TV or signed up as a commercial spokesman because he can count to 200.

Mark is wearing navy blue Reebok shorts, a gray Reebok T-shirt and Reebok high-tops. He is, however, 4, and therefore not particularly on-message. He asks me how old I am, and when I say 41, he says, "WOW!" He asks the guy from Reebok to play hide-and-seek with him. When he burps at lunch, he looks enormously pleased with the sound produced, which was indeed loud and froglike -- just about as pleased, in fact, as he looked a little earlier when he made several baskets in a row and scored seven points against the guy from Reebok. He presses his skinned knee underneath the glass table where he is eating, so that it is slightly magnified, and studies it with open-mouthed fascination.

His father says, "Mark, do you want ketchup or barbecue sauce on your hamburger?"

"Unh-huh," Mark says.

His mother says, "Sweetie, tell Miss Margaret what TV shows you were on."

He says: "I was on glass. I was on boo-boo. I was on house, and I was on poo-poo." I wish my 4-year-old were here because this is excellent 4-year-old humor, real Noel Coward stuff for the preschool set, and mostly wasted on adults who are trying to get information out of you.

"Remember, sweetie?" LaShawn coaxes. I had asked about the TV appearances, and LaShawn wanted to help. "Remember on 'Regis and Kelly' when you spotted me in the audience and you said, 'There's Mama,' and you came running down and gave me a kiss? Kelly said, 'Ahhh, you're going to have all the moms in America crying.'"

"My tongue is hot," L'il Mark observes. But he is a sweet guy and eventually tells me the correct names of all the shows he has been on.

At one point we go outside to watch Mark play basketball. This feels to me like one of life's awkward moments -- watching a 4-year-old perform while his parents and his corporate sponsor watch me watch him perform. His mother and I are sitting on fold-out chairs in the driveway. LaShawn is wearing a crisp white shirt over black pants and sipping a Sprite. Mark gets his dad and the guy from Reebok to play with him. It's extremely hot, but Mark seems oblivious, the way kids usually are to the weather when they are doing something they want to do. L'il Mark is in a jolly mood, and it is striking how little frustration he shows when he misses a basket, which he does. In fact, he keeps trying to forgo his trademark shot -- the one in the videos, the one that always works for him, which is a two-hands-behind-the-head move, remarkably consistent in form. He wants to try doing one-hand layups, which he recently saw some older kids do and which most of the time he can't do.

"He's been watching a lot of street ball," Mark Sr. says

"A lot of street ball?" the guy from Reebok asks.

"Well, some street ball," Mark Sr. says. L'il Mark is barreling toward the basket, one hand up in the air, cradling the ball. "No, no, no, you don't," his father says. "I don't want to go chasing any balls into the street." L'il Mark tries a layup again. Misses. Gets scolded. Cheerfully goes back to the trademark shot. Sinks it.

"See how you make it when you do it that way?" the guy from Reebok says. "You should stick with that shot."

They seem about ready to wrap it up -- it's nearly nap time -- when L'il Mark suddenly dashes inside.

"Where you going?" LaShawn asks.

"I gotta get some money," he calls over his shoulder. "I gotta pay him for playing basketball. I gotta pay the guy."

LaShawn shakes her head and says, "Where'd he get that idea?" And a few minutes later, out comes L'il Mark, waving a dollar bill in his hand for the guy from Reebok.

CAPTIONS: Photos: The future of basketball? Reebok's spokesman, er, spokeskid, L'il Mark has been known to sink 18 baskets in a row.; Dropping in at the Extreme skate park in Louisville, Ky.: For Dylan Oliver, the world is just a series of obstacles for him to do tricks on.; In the new American meritocracy, any child can grow up to be a name brand: Dylan, left, and L'il Mark, right, with their parents. (Photographs by Michael Edwards for The New York Times)

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