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Friday 24 October 2003



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Worldwide: Five-year-old skateboard star jumps into world of sponsorship

By Marcus Warren in Louisville*(Filed: 18/10/2003)*

Dylan Oliver is any sponsor's dream. The dashing young sportsman is talented, cute, passionate about what he does and unlikely to disgrace himself or his promoters with much sordid behaviour.

Dylan is also five years old. Far from being a handicap, in the world of US skateboarding and the related fields of product endorsement and marketing tie-ins, his age works very much in his favour.

At the so-called Extreme Park in the Kentucky town of Louisville, the tiny wunderkind performed moves such as the rock to fakie, the tail stall and the 50-50 grind for The Telegraph this week.

Unlike the bigger boys, he was a 3ft advertising hoarding, his equipment frame covered with the logos of companies keen to exploit his growing fame and connect with his peers, teenagers and youngsters collectively known as Generation Y.

His ludicrously large helmet "no size is small enough for him" was blazoned with sponsors' names, as was his skateboard - although "Mommy" and "Dylan" were painted on that too. Logos decorated his sweatshirt and wristband.

For refreshment, he downed a bottle of purple grape drink from another of his backers, Jones Soda.

"Dylan's done more in his first five years than I've done in my entire life," said his 30-year-old father, Al, his most enthusiastic cheerleader. A paramedic, he also provides first aid and the odd hug when his son takes a tumble.

"This is going to be awesome," Mr Oliver said as Dylan teetered on the edge of one of the skate park's bowls. "It's 8ft high and it's got vertical in it."

This descent he negotiated with ease but others left him flat on the concrete with a bruised chin or a sore ankle. Both times he picked himself up with little

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- ▶ [Louisville's 'boy wonder' travels by skateboard \[21 May '03\] - Louisville Courier Journal](#)

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more than a whimper.

"You take the skateboard away from him and watch what happens," his father said, looking on. "He screams and cries if I try to take it away."

"The first thing he does when he gets up in the morning is put his helmet on," added a 13-year-old friend of the family, Chad Hoerni. "Then he gets upset because he has to take his helmet off to put on his shirt."

A little more than a year since he first mounted a skateboard, Dylan is a sports star, a veteran of TV shows and the beneficiary of several sponsorship deals. Until now, he and his family have been paid only in free products.

According to his agent, Rob Penta, himself a new addition to his burgeoning business empire, Dylan may soon progress to more lucrative contracts - with more generous financial terms.

"Marketing with this kind of age group is getting to be more and more the norm," said Mr Penta. "I wouldn't be surprised if talent scouts start looking at this age more and more."

When basketball star LeBron James [signed a sponsorship deal with Nike worth £61 million at the age of 18](#) earlier this year, America was stunned by its size and the fact that the player was almost untried at the top level.

Reebok then trumped its rival for impact by making Mark Walker, three, the focus of an advertising campaign in which the boy shot 18 hoops in a row and told the camera: "I'm the future of basketball. I am Reebok."

The trend towards signing younger stars has been driven by big business's desire to tap into the biggest bulge in US demographics since the baby boomers, Generation Y, born in the 1980s and early 90s.

"Every company realises the importance of reaching Generation Y in order to sell a product today in some cases, certainly tomorrow," said Peter Carlisle, another sports agent.

Signing up a youngster helps the product but is also good for the child, argued Peter van Stolk, founder and head of Jones Soda. It sends Dylan five cases of their drinks a month, plus another five to take with him to shows.

"We give the kids free stuff and make them feel special. It's really cool that they are being recognised for their talents," he said.

Dylan turned five last month and is beginning to learn to read. But he can already spot corporate logos in a sea of unfamiliar letters, and work out which are missing.

As he sat in Louisville's Basement Skate shop, he studied the stickers on the door opposite. Something was wrong. Oakley, the sunglasses firm which keeps the family in shades, was not there. "Daddy, it has all the same stickers as I'm sponsored by, except for Oakley," he said.

► **24 May 2003: The £61 million schoolboy who just does it for Nike**

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