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ADVERTISING

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7-year-old skateboarder rides extreme marketing wave

By [Nick Perry](#)*Seattle Times staff*

VANCOUVER, B.C. — Mitchie Brusco, chocolate mouthed, is springing from bed to bed like a pinball. It's his latest trick.

"I'm in California and I'm on a talk show today," Mitchie explains when he slows down. He's actually in a Vancouver hotel. But one town can seem like another when you're on the road, in demand and 7 years old.

Mitchie is a 49-pound dynamo with short, brown hair and ears that stick out. He is a Kirkland kindergartner with cheeky one-liners who on a skateboard has the poise of a ballerina and the hustle of a pool shark. He has already been featured on the "Today" show and in People magazine. He has an agent in Maine and 11 corporate sponsors.

So far, those sponsors have mainly given him free stuff like soda, skateboards and hotel stays. That could all change now that his parents have signed a deal with the world's largest toy maker, Mattel. The company is developing a line of Mitchie Brusco skateboards to sell in Wal-Mart, Toys R Us and Target stores across the country.

"He is perceived as the best athlete in his sport at his age," said his agent, Peter Carlisle, who also represents several teen clients at the sports-marketing company Octagon.

Mitchie is part of a fresh young breed of "extreme sport" athletes who are reshaping advertising campaigns, lowering the age of target consumers and changing buying patterns. With more Americans skateboarding than playing baseball, big companies want a piece of

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BETTY UDESEN / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Mitchie Brusco, a Kirkland boy, practices his sport after school at a Woodinville skate park. A deal with Mattel will put his name on a line of skateboards.

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the action. Yet even as the mainstream embraces the extreme, at least one cutting-edge company, Seattle-based Jones Soda, is moving on.

Extreme sports are those that push at the limits of gravity and adrenaline. Some of the sports are new. Others — like skateboarding — distill the extreme elements from pursuits that have been around for years. Extreme sports tend to be individual, nontraditional and without regimented rules.

The sports are especially attractive to children, teens and young adults, perhaps because their bodies bounce back more quickly. Whatever the reason, advertisers are going after young children to represent their products in a way they have not for traditional sports.

"These are uncharted waters for marketing," said Mike May, a spokesman at the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association, "although using a child to influence consumers is not a new idea. It's just going in a different direction."

Mitchie is not the only young athlete marketers are chasing. Skateboarder Skyler Siljeg, age 9, lives just a few miles north of Mitchie in Bothell and is also sponsored. The two boys often ride together.

"They have a focus and, it seems, a path that is unique," said Skyler's mom, Pam Miller. She added that Skyler has sponsor commitments that take effort. "Life is work," she said. "I don't think it would be reality if life

The Mitchie 'empire'

Mitchie's sponsors and what they give him:

Age 4:

Jones Soda: Soda, T-shirts, wristbands.

DC Shoe Co.: Shoes, sweat shirts, pants, backpacks.

triple eight: Helmets and protective pads.

The Skate Key:

Discounted products at this Centralia store.

Age 5:

Softrucks: Rubber bases for trick training.

Lego Sports: Legos, clothing.

Age 6:

Bones (Swiss) Bearings: Wheel bearings.

Muskoka Woods Sports

Resort: Family visits to this Christian sports resort in Rosseau, Ontario.

Factor X: Ramps, rails, kickers.

Monkey Business: Deck grips, wax, "hardware" nuts and bolts.

Age 7:

was all fun."

Mitchie's agent said there would be pressure on young athletes like Mitchie with or without sponsorships.

"The pressure comes from the fact that you are that good," Carlisle said. "There's no getting around that, unless you stop skateboarding."

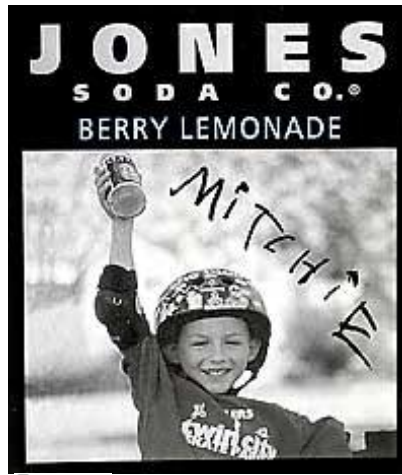
Some deals with children are creating controversy. Reebok last year signed Mark Walker, a then 3-year-old from Kansas City, Mo., with an uncanny ability to shoot hoops. Many criticized the arrangement, especially because it may jeopardize the youngster's eligibility to play college basketball someday. Reebok now appears to have backed off the campaign. But unlike Mark Walker, extreme-sports athletes don't face eligibility dilemmas.

May said that the kids have genuine fun pursuing their sports and often see advertising as an extension of what they are doing. "As long as they can still get 10 hours of sleep and get their homework done, it's probably OK," he said.

Life as a skate park

It all seems to be OK for Mitchie, who isn't focused on the big picture right now anyway.

To Mitchie, life is a giant skate park, an endlessly changing terrain of banked turns, ramps and rail slides. A world of small physical challenges to master, like running through a stack of bell trolleys at the hotel or jumping down steps six at a time. He's a small



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Jones Soda, based in Seattle, was first to sponsor Mitchie, featuring him on Berry Lemonade soda labels.

Hot Wheels (Mattel): Royalties for forthcoming Mitchie Brusco skateboard line.



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For 7-year-old Mitchie Brusco, the backyard trampoline is a place to burn off energy and practice tricks. His mother, Jennifer Brusco, dug the pit where it sits.

kid having a whale of a time. A kid who knows how to "ollie" and "pop-shove-it," but not yet how to multiply 2 and 2.

"He's sick. That stuff's taller than he is," said Brandon Aird, 20, who was watching Mitchie at a Woodinville skate park a few days before the Vancouver trip. Mitchie carefully tested each surface he was about to hit by running his hand or skateboard over it first.

Later, jumping on the family trampoline with a skateboard deck beneath his feet, Mitchie announced, "I'm going to do a sex-change." His mom, Jennifer Brusco, good-naturedly scolded him, asking him to remember another name for the trick. "It's a 'body-varial,'" Mitchie sighed. "But it's a much longer word."

The next day Mitchie was cutting carrot-shaped paper hands for a Peter Rabbit bunny clock at the Helen Keller Elementary school near his home. He got upset for a moment when he cut one hand too thin, but seemed happy with the result. "My sister would probably marry it," he informed a friend at his tiny table.



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Unable to resist the steps outside the Vancouver Art Gallery, Mitchie is quick to get acquainted with the terrain near his hotel.

Mitchie has jumped ramps and ground rails at many schools. "He has a cult following at my school; every day I tell a story about Mitchie," said Deirdre Taylor, a teacher at Hidden River Middle School in Monroe. But he hasn't performed at Helen Keller, and his classmates don't know about his other life. He told his mom that he didn't want to be signing autographs there.

Jennifer Brusco said she may one day have to home-school Mitchie if he does make it big.

Mitchie fell in love with skateboarding half a lifetime ago — age 3-½ — when he spotted a toy skateboard and begged to have it. The board barely left his feet for weeks, his mom said. Neighbors grouped to watch as he began skating down their gently sloping street.

Reporters and marketers fell in love with Mitchie soon after. He made his first television appearance before his fourth birthday, after one of his sisters e-mailed a local station to tell them how good he was. Unsolicited contract offers started arriving in the mail.

At skate parks, Mitchie began closely watching his older peers, zipping along behind them and copying their moves over and over on his own — unintimidated by or unaware of the culture of cool around him. He earned himself a nickname: Little Tricky.

When he was 5, he won a Northwest 8-and-under title and an expenses-paid trip to the Gravity Games in Cleveland, and he returned last year. These days he tests himself in competitions against other sponsored kids, who tend to be much older.

He has never seriously injured himself skateboarding, although when he appeared on "The John Walsh Show," Walsh broke his ankle trying to keep up.

Mitchie's dad, Mick Brusco, bristles at the suggestion that some might think he and his wife are pushy parents.

"You should check out the Little League teams, the basketball and football teams," he said. Some parents force their kids to wear uniforms, attend endless practices, and practice still more at home. Mitchie, on the other hand, finds his own motivation and often begs to be taken to the skate park, Brusco said.

Brusco, a lumber contractor, won a college baseball scholarship and once tried out for the Mariners. Jennifer Brusco played competitive tennis and won a college basketball scholarship. Sports remains important in their home, and Mariners games are a familiar backdrop on their large television set.

But neither parent, nor Mitchie's three sisters and one brother, knew anything about skateboarding until Mitchie began teaching them. The family still wonders just what inspires him.



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Religion has a link with Mitchie's sport at the covered courtyard "skate church" at Cedar Park Assembly of God's Bothell campus.



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On Canadian television's "Vicki Gabereau" show, Jennifer Brusco, left, joins her son, Mitchie, in recounting some of his skateboard adventures to the talk show's host, shown at right. Mitchie got a big laugh from the audience with a remark about his parents' housekeeping habits.

Religion is as important as sports to the family. Mitchie has religious symbols stuck to his skateboard helmet. He prays each night "to keep the nightmares away" and before skateboarding to feel safe, his mom said.

Each week, she takes him to "skate church" in Bothell, where dozens of youngsters meet to jump trash cans on a covered basketball court at the Cedar Park Assembly of God campus.

Organizer Russ Heppner, 21, sets up ramps, hands out pizza and once a month sits the young riders down to tell them, for example, "A really simple, three-point message about Jesus."



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A bundle of energy, Mitchie appreciates the bounce of a bed at the Fairmont Hotel, where his family stayed free as a perk for his TV appearance. Nicole, left, his 5-year-old sister, also made the trip.

The sponsorship game

Mitchie's first sponsor was Jones Soda, which started giving him crates of free pop at age 4. Jones, which cultivates a hip, underground image, was a pioneer when it started sponsoring skateboarders in 1997. But it didn't take long for bigger companies to catch on.

According to the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association, 11.1 million Americans who were over 6 years old skateboarded at least once last year. That's twice as many as skateboarded 10 years earlier, and it's more than the 10.9 million people who played baseball. Other extreme sports are also on the rise: The number of snowboarders tripled over 10 years to 7.8 million, and the sport of paintball attracted 9.8 million participants last year.

Retailers sold \$135 million worth of skateboards, knee pads and other skateboard accessories in 2002, up from \$70 million a decade earlier, according to the association. Spokesman May said retailers sold that much again in shoes, clothes and related products. Other extreme sports are equally lucrative in the \$17.5 billion sporting-goods industry.



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Mitchie's latest deal will put his signature or some other personal stamp on a line of skateboards to be sold for about \$30 or \$35 and marketed to children age 5 to 13, said Jason Bruno, the director of product development at Liberty Group Products, which is designing the line for Mattel. The boards will be made by Mattel's Hot Wheels division and could be in stores as early as Thanksgiving. Mitchie will get a royalty from each one, Bruno said.

The Bruscos come together to pray at bedtime, even on a road trip. They brought a few comforts from home — favorite pillows, soft blankets and some stuffed creatures.

Jennifer Brusco said she and her husband can only wonder at how much the deal will be worth. Most of the money will go to a trustee acting on Mitchie's behalf, she said. One day it could pay his college costs, or perhaps much more. Mitchie's agent declined to discuss details of the deal.

May cautioned that extreme athletes like Mitchie — even at age 7 — need to be careful not to become overexposed. Extreme-sport consumers tend to react to that.

"They like cutting-edge, new products. Once those products become available to the masses, they abandon them," he said. "They become tarnished goods."

Even as snowboarding has become more popular, for some that sport has lost its outlaw appeal. Wariness of becoming mainstream is already evident at Jones Soda, which is moving away from extreme athletes. Its latest sponsorship deals are with a spelling-bee champion and a ballet dancer.

"I'm all about changing it up now," said Jones CEO Peter van Stolk. "We want to shine a light on the underdog and those who aren't getting recognition."

Stolk said he wants to give a boost to children who are passionate and inspirational in pursuits that offer few financial opportunities. He added that his company would continue to find a place for Mitchie and other skateboarders it has supported.



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Fun is where you find it, and Mitchie was along for the ride on a hotel elevator after he'd been for a swim.

Whether Mitchie's success continues may depend on whether Mitchie the skateboarding prodigy evolves into the more grown-up "Mitch."

It's about attitude and maturity, the evolution of the youngest and cutest into Mitch Brusco, serious competition skateboarder. But no one can predict whether it will happen. He could find another sport or lose interest.

"With a kid as young as Mitch, you don't really know how he will feel about things next year," said his agent.

A cut-up on TV

In Vancouver, the team at CTV was preparing for "Vicki Gabereau," a nationally televised talk show.

"I like my hair like this," Mitchie told the makeup artist backstage, while his mom got a touch-up.

Mitchie jumped a ramp, slid a rail and spun onto the stage while the studio audience cheered. As his mom answered Gabereau's questions, Mitchie got chuckles as he rested his head on the table, then picked at his nose. Gabereau was saying that Jennifer must be a champion housekeeper, with so many children, when Mitchie interjected that the house was always a mess and Dad was always cleaning.

Those in the audience cracked up in genuine laughter. Mitchie looked at them a little startled, then smiled widely.

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