

November 11, 2005

Nike Relaunches Kobe Bryant After Two Years of Prep Work

By **STEPHANIE KANG**
 Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
 November 11, 2005; Page B1

Two years ago, explosive criminal allegations against basketball superstar Kobe Bryant derailed his career as a pitchman for a variety of products. But with Mr. Bryant's legal problems now behind him, one of the few big companies that stuck with him -- shoe giant **Nike Inc.** -- is preparing to capitalize on its low-key two-year effort to keep him marketable.

Mr. Bryant, the Los Angeles Lakers guard who was once one of the National Basketball Association's most popular stars, signed a four-year, \$45 million endorsement deal with Nike in June 2003. The agreement called for the company to create a line of signature sneakers and apparel for Mr. Bryant, with the star receiving royalties.

But just weeks after the deal was signed, Mr. Bryant was accused of sexual assault in Colorado. His image disappeared from ads produced for **McDonald's Corp.**, **Russell Corp.**'s Spalding ball division and Nutella, part of confectioner Ferrero U.S.A. Inc. **Coca-Cola Co.** stopped running ads in which Mr. Bryant pitched the company's Sprite soda, later signing Cleveland Cavalier and fellow Nike endorser LeBron James to star in spots for its "Obey Your Thirst" campaign.



The first stage of Nike's Kobe Bryant ad campaign ran in *Sports Illustrated*.


Now, two years later, the criminal case against Mr. Bryant has been dismissed and a related civil lawsuit has been settled. With a new NBA season in gear, Nike and Mr. Bryant are slowly relaunching the star's career as a product endorser.

The central part of the effort is a new basketball shoe tentatively called the Zoom Kobe I, which will step in for a different Kobe-branded shoe that was scheduled to be launched but was stripped of his name after his legal woes began.

Whether Mr. Bryant and Nike succeed may depend on how well the company has paved the way for a comeback. For the past couple of years, Nike quietly promoted Mr. Bryant's prospects with an under-the-radar campaign intended to keep the star's cachet high among shoe collectors and other taste makers, even as he fended off his legal problems.

Immediately after the assault allegation, Nike kept its distance from Mr. Bryant publicly. He continued to wear the shoe Nike had developed for him in NBA games -- after a recent Lakers practice, he said the shoe "came from my head" -- but it was released to stores as a general basketball shoe called the Air Zoom Huarache 2K4. Dozens of NBA players wore it, and a later version, the 2K5. And ad spots for it featured NBA stars like the San

DOW JONES REPRINTS

 This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit: www.djreprints.com.

- [See a sample reprint in PDF format.](#)
- [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

Antonio Spurs' Manu Ginobili and Steve Nash, of the Phoenix Suns.

But even as Nike laid low, it was testing Mr. Bryant's long-term viability through back channels. Eventually, the shoemaker released Huaraches customized for Mr. Bryant that landed in upscale sneaker boutiques and on auction sites like eBay.

The reaction among shoe fans was strong. Customized Huaraches -- with details like Mr. Bryant's jersey number on the strap or his logo on the back heel of the shoe -- quickly sold out at upscale retail shops. A Los Angeles sneaker shop called Undefeated last year raffled off a chance to win a pair of shoes specially made for Mr. Bryant, as well as tickets to the Lakers-Miami Heat game Christmas Day. Winners took home one of 25 pairs of shoes with laser etchings of "Kobe" on the tongue and Mr. Bryant's signature on the shoe.

The tiny production of such customized products helped build excitement in the shoe-collector world. Nike doesn't disclose how many shoes it makes, but retailers say it made only a few dozen pairs of a Huarache 2K5 shoe called L.A. Maps, which comes in Laker team colors with a map of Los Angeles lasered onto the upper. Those shoes, given to Mr. Bryant and select Nike staff, are now selling on eBay for more than \$1,000 a pair. Other models feature what's come to be known as Mr. Bryant's logo -- a dagger-like etching whose meaning is widely discussed on message boards like niketalk.com¹, a fan site unaffiliated with the company.

"It's a way to test the waters -- ask, 'Could we introduce a full-fledged signature shoe?' " says Jim Andrews, senior vice president of IEG Inc., Chicago, which tracks sponsorships and endorsements.

Now Mr. Bryant's own signature apparel and footwear are starting to come out from underground. Mr. Bryant's new signature shoe will debut at retail chains like **Foot Locker** Inc., New York, in February, along with a line of athletic apparel.

How far Nike can go with Mr. Bryant remains to be seen. According to Marketing Evaluations Inc., which measures popularity, Mr. Bryant has become the least liked of all NBA players, not just because of his legal issues but also because of his public feuds with former teammate Shaquille O'Neal and coach Phil Jackson. Yet among male teenagers and young adults -- the primary drivers of Nike's high-priced footwear sales -- Mr. Bryant continues to be a star, according to market research firm Umbria Inc., which tracked 12 million blogs last December for data on popular NBA players.

Traditional consumer-product companies "will not touch him now," says David Carter, executive director of the Sports Business Institute at the University of Southern California. But athletic-product companies like Nike have a little more leeway to work with controversial stars. "Time heals a lot of marketing wounds," Mr. Carter says.

Meanwhile, Mr. Bryant's reintroduction to Nike advertising has also met some resistance. The company recently rolled out its first Kobe print campaign since his legal troubles were resolved. The ads list criticisms of Mr. Bryant -- like "selfish," "overrated" and "uncoachable" -- and rebut each one with boasts about his tough training regimen. People familiar with the situation say that some readers complained about seeing Mr. Bryant resurface in an ad campaign.

For his part, Mr. Bryant says the ads capture his essence as a hard-working player. "The way we go about it, whether it's print ads, TV or even viral marketing, is to remain true to form," he says. "There are moments in time that represent the genuine athlete. That ad is insight into me as a genuine athlete."

In any case, television viewers are starting to see more of the basketball player. Mr. Bryant is one of the NBA stars featured with comedian Ali G in commercials for TNT. He will also appear in a public service announcement for the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

There's another factor Mr. Bryant's comeback hinges on: the strength of his on-court performance. But so far, so good. As of yesterday afternoon, the Lakers had won three of their five season appearances, and Mr. Bryant led the NBA in points per game.

"Most people let the basketball speak for everything else," says Alex Wang, a sneaker collector and writer known as "Retrokid." "Kobe's one of those guys. People will talk about him. His jerseys will sell. That's the fact of life."

Write to Stephanie Kang at stephanie.kang@wsj.com²

URL for this article:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB113167620949994439.html>

Hyperlinks in this Article:

(1) [JAVASCRIPT:OpenWin](#)

("http://www.niketalk.com/";",",",',na+me+lo+sc+re+st+',true,0,0,true);void("")

(2) <mailto:stephanie.kang@wsj.com>

Copyright 2005 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com.