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Story View (Sports)

Peyton Manning the model franchise for NFL endorsements

Thursday, August 30, 2007

By Bill Reiter
McClatchy Newspapers

KANSAS CITY, Mo. -- It was just a year ago, in the heat of training camp, that Peyton Manning and Michael Vick were virtually the same guy.

Both were face-of-their-franchise quarterbacks. Both were winners who'd taken their teams to the playoffs but couldn't quite win the big one. Both were famous, successful and sought after on the endorsement circuit.

Now Manning's a Super Bowl champion, Vick's most likely heading to federal prison, and the new nexus between money and image is playing out on television and the Internet, where the two couldn't seem more different.

First there's Manning, flickering across the television with a goofy mustache, retro hairdo, Sprint phone and down-home pitch: "You can watch exclusive game highlights of all your favorite players. Like Peyton Manning. That guy's pretty good."

Then there's Vick walking out of a courthouse in Virginia, wearing a dark suit and a somber expression, as commentators threw out words like "prison," "charges" and "trouble."

The real money in the NFL today rests not with how far a player's talent can take his team, but with how far his talent can take his image.

On one end of the spectrum is Manning, with his array of funny commercials for Sprint, MasterCard, Sony and DirecTV.

"Manning, oh man, he has the potential to top the list," says Robert Tuchman, president of TSE Sports and Entertainment, which represents companies looking for players to represent them. "Especially now that he has a Super Bowl ring, and he has no stigma. He's your poster boy for everything in corporate America."

On the other end is Vick, the most high-profile example of the new NFL, where personal conduct means more than ever. Under commissioner Roger Goodell, the word is out that off-field troubles will have checkbook consequences. Just ask Pacman Jones, whom Goodell suspended for the entire 2007 season.

But that's nothing compared with what Vick stands to lose.

"What he did is so pathetic and stupid," Tuchman says. "He easily cost himself \$100 million over his career. That's \$100 million in potential endorsements he could have had. Now, it's gone."

In the middle is the simple truth players, agents, corporations, marketing companies and salespeople have been banking on for years: It's the Q rating, as much as the QB rating, that brings in the bucks.

There's always been a link between sport and celebrity, between what happens on the field and what goes in the bank. A player's Q-rating -- how well-known that person is to the public -- has long been tied to his performance.

Olympians on Wheaties boxes. Running backs stopping by car dealerships to shake hands and say hello. Joe DiMaggio and Mr. Coffee. A little extra money for everyone involved.

Then came the early 1970s.

"The tipping point was the growth of television during that time, and then the absolute explosion with cable television," says Allen Sack, chair of the department of communication and marketing at the University of New Haven and an expert on sports and culture. "This just transformed sports and our society."

This was an era when Ara Parseghian coached at Notre Dame for about \$20,000 a year, Sack said. Thirty years later, the job would have been worth at least 10 times that in endorsements alone.

The tipping point built, grew, tumbled over. Cable television reinvented the sporting scene the way fast food changed how we eat: Suddenly, there was a seemingly endless and affordable supply of games to watch.

Into this changing market stepped men like Phil Knight, whose startup company, Nike, handed out T-shirts with the company name on it. How could it hurt?

"They were amazed," Sack says. "They were just happy to give them away. Then people started running with them -- they became walking billboards."

So they took it a step further. They signed up players to wear their logos.

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"It reached markets beyond what anyone ever imagined," Sack says.

People didn't just want to watch guys like Michael Jordan play anymore -- they wanted to be like Mike, to drink Gatorade like Mike, to eat where Mike ate and wear the shoes that bore his name.

And that meant big dollars.

"An athlete is seen as an iconic, heroic role model because of the competitive nature of sports," says Scott Sanford, senior client director of Davie Brown, an entertainment and sports marketing firm in Dallas. "They're seen as celebrities that can achieve a level of excellence because they're champions."

Seen that way, they continued to get paid that way. Now, companies scramble to lock up athletes at an early age.

In 1996, Tiger Woods signed a multimillion-dollar contract with Nike -- before he ever won a major. Star football players signed million-dollar deals to pitch products, and their lesser-known teammates reaped the benefits, too, selling their smiling faces in their hometowns -- airlines, SUVs, beer, bars, sporting goods, the list went on and on.

"In many ways, what athletes do off the field is more important than what they do on the field," says Larry DeGaris, president of Sponsorship Research & Strategy, a sports research company. "And that isn't restricted to Michael Vick and Pacman Jones. Take Peyton Manning. How much would you know about him if exposure were restricted to football games? Much of his public personality is a consequence of the TV commercials he's featured in."

By the end of last year, Nike's endorsement budget alone topped \$2 billion. Worldwide sports revenue was worth a whopping \$200 billion.

And guys like Manning and Vick were poised to claim a healthy slice of the pie.

Peyton Manning would be arriving soon to film his newest Sprint commercial. Sound people, assistants, cameramen, the director, everyone was moving around, getting ready to turn the man's appeal into money.

"From the minute he walked on the set, it was literally every single person wanting to talk to him," says Tracy Palmer, Sprint's director of consumer advertising. "We literally had to ask our production people to give him a little bit of space. He was shaking hands and high-fiving people and taking pictures, and we were like, 'Timeout.'"

Manning walked over to his chair and sat down. He relaxed. Then he took out his script and began intently studying it.

He ad-libbed -- when would this guy turn down a chance to audible? -- and when it was time, he threw in his own humor, his own lines. He worked the room. He worked the camera. He focused.

"He took his script, and when you hear him talk about how he studies for a game -- and when coaches say how he prepares for a game -- that's how he prepares for a commercial," Palmer says. "At every break he would go to his chair, study, sit there, and you'd hear him talking out loud and practicing his lines."

Of course he was. He knew how much it mattered -- how much every line, every funny moment, every piece of popularity led to the next payday.

Agencies have developed whole departments with one goal: to quantify the value of an athlete's reach, identify his strengths and weaknesses as a marketer, target his or her most effective areas off the field, and then make the connection between the pitch and payday.

Companies have created their own ranking systems, lists that use variables like skill, appeal, looks, humor and perceived intelligence.

"Football players tend to be a lot better-suited to deal with corporate America," Tuchman says. "The players from the NFL -- money-wise and cost-wise -- are guys with huge names that you can work with for a limited amount of money."

Tuchman's company has done the same thing. Its list runs from 0 to 100. Each decimal point on the spectrum is worth cash.

The rankings read like a who's who of sports:

1. Magic Johnson, 99.85. 2. Peyton Manning, 99.80. 3. Michael Jordan, 99.75. 4. Cal Ripken Jr., 99.70, and on it goes.

On this list was Michael Vick, sitting in the low 90s -- a respectable spot, and a lucrative one. He already had a brewing deal with Nike. He'd been on the cover of the 2004 Madden football game.

Then the dogfighting scandal broke, and Vick dropped 20 points.

"That's a lot -- a lot," Tuchman says, adding that Vick's number has dropped to 18.25. "If you look at him, and all the other players, that's at the bottom of the barrel for all these guys, even (compared with) unknown offensive linemen. The issue with Vick now is no one's going to go near him. Maybe his Q-rating went up -- more people who have never heard of him now know -- but does that make him someone you want to use?"

It makes him one hell of a warning to the companies out there getting ready to write seven-figure checks to guys who play a game for a living.

Vick's Q rating meltdown became official last week, when the news broke that he would be pleading guilty and probably head to federal prison, his season finished before it started.

It was a sad scene for friends and fans of the quarterback.

"The deals can go sour," Sack says. "They're great athletes, and you think, 'What more would you want if you're a credit-card company or car company?' But when things go sour -- Pacman Jones, Kobe Bryant -- they take a real hit. A real hit."

If athletes can make millions off the field, then the companies that pay them can lose just as much. A star player caught with someone who's not his wife. The running back mixed up in an ugly brawl. The local hero busted for drugs.

The what-can-happens are minefields for companies pouring money into players, and Vick's story is just the latest example.

"If I'm an agent, I'm sitting my guy down and lecturing him -- and having other people lecture him -- on the importance of keeping up good appearances," says Pat Rische, a

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sports economist and professor in the School of Business and Technology at Webster University in St. Louis. "You're shooting yourself in the foot, and not just Michael Vick. Things like being tied in with domestic abuse, or other things on par with that."

It's a balancing act for businesses and players. The marketing people have to calculate how much an athlete is worth in exposure, and how likely that person is to stay out of trouble while continuing to craft the right image.

"Everything we do is preceded by a great deal of research and internal debate," says Steve Gaffney, Sprint's director of sports marketing. "We turn over every possible rock because at the end of the day these people will appear on our behalf and become synonymous with our brand."

The player must make a decision, too: How much money is worth the constant vigilance you need when you make yourself into a walking billboard?

"Every one of these guys is under the microscope," Tuchman says. "If you're Alex Rodriguez, they're going to know you were seen with a woman in Toronto. People are impacted by this stuff."

Not too long from now, the two ends of the spectrum will play out, yet again, on television.

Vick will have his day in court -- for sentencing. And then a commercial will come on, and there'll be Peyton Manning -- smiling, laughing, selling a phone or a credit card.

A reminder that, for today's athlete -- and his checkbook -- it's what happens off the field that matters most.

A Super Bowl ring has only made Peyton Manning more appealing. "He's your poster boy for everything in corporate America," says one person who connects athletes with companies.

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