

# The corporate athlete

What makes an athlete stand out from the pack?

EVAN HARDING looks at the business of sport and measures the importance of on field performance against off field persona.

*“Unbelievable! Amazing! This man is incredible!”*

Commentator Bob Willis was awestruck. English batsman Andrew Strauss was perplexed, looking back at his broken stumps the same way Mike Gatting had 12 years earlier. Shane Warne had just delivered what has since been labelled ‘the ball of the century’ – for the second century in a row.

With that wicket, Warne became the first player to take 100 wickets in a country other than his own. It was one of 40 wickets he took during the Ashes, one of a record 96 during 2005. And with every wicket, with every record, the business of Shane Warne became bigger and more lucrative.

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Of course, it wasn’t always such smooth sailing. In the lead-up to that Ashes series, tabloids had reported another text-message controversy, an alleged affair and his subsequent marriage breakup. Channel Nine had terminated his contract and sponsorship was at a lull.

These days, Warne has contracts with cricket gear manufacturer County, telecommunication services company Messages on Hold, memorabilia outfit Momentix, and perhaps most visibly, Advanced Hair. Everyone wants to know him again and his 2005 earnings were estimated at \$2 million.

That he was able to turn it all around in a matter of months is reinforcement of the number one rule of sports marketing: that performance on the field has always been the best way for an athlete to escape off-field controversies.

Warne’s manager and brother, Jason Warne, said the leg spinner’s brilliance on the field played a big role in his corporate resurrection. “Everyone and everything has its ups and downs and that was probably a time when Shane had to deal with a couple of things,” he said of the pre-Ashes period. “But he’s shown a lot of character to come through it positively, continue to perform on the pitch and conduct himself well in the media and now he’s reaping the benefits from that.”

“People can absolutely respect and idolise an athlete,” agrees David Flaskas, Managing Director of Grand Slam International, whose clients include Ian Thorpe and Alisa Camplin. “But you’ve got to remind people every now and then of your status as a sports star when the opportunity comes to perform.”

Basketballer Kobe Bryant recently scored 81 points in a game – the second-best performance in NBA history – and there was little discussion about the allegations of sexual assault he faced a couple of years ago. “It’s another example of how performing on the field will make people forget what’s off the field,” says Dr Hans Westerbeek, Head of the School of Sport, Tourism and Hospitality at La Trobe University, Melbourne.



“That performance was from a different planet; it was something that would build up a lot of goodwill. It’s the same with Shane Warne, you can say what you want about the guy but he’s the best spin bowler the world has ever seen.”

While Flaskas and Dr Westerbeek agree that as long as an athlete continues to perform at the highest level he will appeal to sponsors, they point to other factors that can maximise a sports star’s earnings.

“I’d say at least half of how marketable a sportsperson is depends on high performance,” says Dr Westerbeek. “But there’s off-field aspects that make a person more interesting than others.”

These include:

- the type of sport the athlete is involved in;
- the off-field behaviour of the athlete;
- his or her physical attraction; and
- whether he/she can distinguish himself/herself from the pack.

“It is the sport that draws a lot of attention first and foremost,” says Dr Westerbeek. “You can be the best squash player in the world but still you’d receive less attention if you became the world champion compared to Peter Everitt taking mark of the year in the AFL.”

David Flaskas cites a person’s character, his/her reaction to success or failure and humility among the off-field behaviour that influences one’s marketability.

“A good example is Ian Thorpe’s popularity in Japan. His humility in light of great sporting success has really endeared him to the Japanese people.” Among Thorpe’s major sponsors is Japanese media company TV Asahi, which recently renewed its association with the Olympic champion.

Putting back into the community – for example charity work, hospital visits and community services – also can influence the public’s opinion, adds Flaskas. “People like to see athletes putting something back without it being an obvious publicity stunt; see that it’s done with sincerity.”

Then there is the obvious one – looks. Make no mistake, sex still sells. Examples are everywhere, from Maria Sharapova to David Beckham, although there’s no denying that for the sportswoman, looks play a bigger part of the overall package than for men.

“Obviously there’s a distinction between male and female sport,” says Dr Westerbeek. “The media reports on physical characteristics of females first and foremost and the sport comes in second, whereas in male sport that’s the other way around.”

Finally, the ability to stand out from the crowd is the special factor which is harder to define. “I think you need to give something different,” explains Jason Warne. “No-one who plays international sport is a bad athlete but unfortunately not everyone’s marketable either.”

“You only have to look at the Australian Open. You’ve got Marcos Baghdatis who was ranked 58 in the world but there wouldn’t be one person who wouldn’t say he’s extremely marketable in Australia. David Nalbandian is an exceptional tennis player but he wouldn’t be anywhere near as marketable as Baghdatis in Australia.

“They both had a very good tournament but the crowds warmed to Baghdatis more than Nalbandian.”

Of course, it can all unravel oh-so-quickly. Individuals such as Wayne Carey and Marion Jones have plunged to the depths in a matter of days.

Dr Westerbeek highlights some of the more extreme ways one can lose marketability. “Anything that opposes the true, hardcore values of sport can make someone less

marketable. Anything an athlete does that contradicts what sport is all about, which is fairness, equity, health and being non-political.

“That includes everything that athletes do to get to the top without sticking to those four values, like taking performance enhancing drugs, taking bribes or sleeping with the wife of your footy mate.”

That said, you don’t have to get arrested to lose your marketability. Sometimes the only thing to blame is the ticking of the biological clock.

“I think the natural way of becoming less marketable is that you move to the end of your career and your performance is not what it used to be,” says Dr Westerbeek. “Even high profile guys like Michael Jordan, who was supposedly one of the guys that would remain marketable even after he finished playing basketball, has suffered because he’s not scoring 30-odd points every week anymore. He’s less in the limelight and therefore less marketable.”

And once you’ve lost that edge, it can be incredibly tough to get it back.

“There are very few sporting stars who have a high, go into nothing, and then come back and have another high,” explains Dr Westerbeek. “Martina Hingis retired very early in her career and now has an opportunity to come back and do it all again. But for every Hingis story, you get 99 sporting stars who are trying comebacks because they can’t stand not being in the limelight. Sadly, 99 out of 100 of those attempts fail.”

Shane Warne, too, had a comeback, albeit under different circumstances. His 12-month ban from cricket for taking an illegal diuretic gave him the chance to rest his shoulder and get fit, which set the stage for the next, and arguably most spectacular, phase of his career.

The rise after the fall helped push his marketing profile into the next level.

When Warne was the young stud of an emerging Australian team, he counted Nike, Just Jeans, Oakley and Channel Nine among his sponsors. “In the 90s Shane had a core group of sponsors and that lasted through a period which for him coincided with an age factor,” says Jason Warne. “As he got to around 30, for the sponsors he did have, the match wasn’t as good as when he first burst onto the scene.

“There was a definite changeover period as he matured and his profile changed from the young buck to the seasoned campaigner. Over the last four or five years he’s been undergoing that change and on the back of such a positive Ashes series it’s really increased the speed of that change.

“Back in the mid-90s when he first rose to prominence he was exceptionally marketable, so it’s hard to say whether he’s more marketable now ... but he’s probably got a broader reach.”

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And despite, or perhaps even because of his troubles, Warne remains one of Australia’s foremost sportspeople from a business perspective, because while he may have a bowling talent that is beyond anyone past or present, Warne retains an element of the everyman persona that connects with his followers.

Dr Westerbeek believes the controversies might even help Warne gain extra sponsorship in the future. “I think if Warne was only a good cricketer he would not receive half of the attention that he does now,” says Dr Westerbeek. “The papers just love him for the fact he always seems to end up in trouble one way or the other, so that’s a couple of pages filled and you can sell ten thousand extra copies.”

“I don’t think anybody can misbehave and expect to be more marketable. But he’s probably the exception to the rule.” ■