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Marketing Experts Dish On Marketability Of NBA Prospects

In advance of tonight's NBA Draft, four marketing executives took time this week to speak separately with THE DAILY's Rob Dunning about the marketability of several expected lottery picks, most prominently Greg Oden, Kevin Durant and Chinese F Yi Jianlian. Pickett Advertising Exec Creative Dir Bob Dorfman, Strategic President Peter Stern, CSMG Int'l Exec VP/Marketing Services Nova Lanktree and Marketing Evaluations Exec VP Henry Schafer give their take on the marketing potential of tonight's prospects:



**Oden's Personality Could Help
Overcome Big Man Marketing Obstacles**

Q: Five years from now, who will be the most-marketed player, Greg Oden or Kevin Durant?

Dorfman: I think it is going to be Durant. Historically speaking, big centers don't really get the big-time deals. The one exception to that is Shaq. If you look on the playgrounds, who are the kids saying 'I am Shaq' or 'I am Oden'? They don't say that. They emulate the guards and the forwards, the guys with the flashy moves, the drive to the basket, making cool shots. The big giants are just a little harder to identify with and are a little harder to capture the imagination of fans.

Stern: Durant. Big men win titles, and forwards and guards win Madison Avenue. When looking at Durant's explosiveness on the offensive end, he could probably break out earlier than Oden, who is sort of in the trenches doing a lot of the dirty work that big men do.

Lanktree: Durant. It just seems like he has got some personality components that seem to be appealing to a lot of people. He is getting good write-ups about his personality. Marketing with athletes is to be compared to show business. Great athleticism doesn't translate necessarily into great marketing. It is the personality stuff added on to great athleticism that usually makes someone marketable.

Schafer: Going into the draft, they are perceived very similarly by sports fans in terms of their appeal and recognizability. My feeling is that if Oden can make it as a center, which usually gets a lot of emphasis, he would have the edge. However, if Kevin Durant proves to be a humongous scorer early in the first few years of his career, it could go his way. It is a tough call. Right now they are coming into the NBA with the same kind of likability and recognition as LeBron James



Exec Feels Playing In Seattle Could Dampen Durant's Marketability

did in 2003-04.

Q: Assuming Oden and Durant are taken with the first two picks, what impact will playing in the Pacific Northwest have on their marketability and the NBA's ability to market them?

Dorfman: It is going to hurt a bit. Imagine Baron Davis if he played for the Knicks. He would be huge there. On one hand it is going to help Oden because he is playing in Nike's backyard and they've signed him and will have easy access to him. He'll certainly become the face of a franchise that really needs a face. Durant with Seattle is going to have a little more of a problem because who knows how long that franchise is even going to be in Seattle. It could be in Oklahoma City, which could be worse.

Stern: Overall it is going to limit them because they are not going to have as much exposure with the games falling so late on the East Coast and with Seattle and Portland being smaller markets. Will they still get endorsement deals? Yes. Is their potential hurt? I think so.

Lanktree: I think that ten years ago if you asked that question, it probably would be, 'Oh, that is very hard because it is not Los Angeles, Chicago or New York and the other cities are hard to market'. If they perform in a stunning, star-like way, networks will cover their games. The network coverage, or ESPN coverage, will sort of knock down that barrier. As long as they are exposed by TV, the market is not as critical as it used to be.

Schafer: That is always a problem for athletes in any sport when they are not getting consistent exposure across the country, and that is going to be a drawback unless they really have breakout rookie seasons and start marketing themselves outside of the NBA. LeBron was wise enough to take the advice to start doing commercials right away and get out there in front of the public on a regular basis. What I see is, they will definitely have a problem if that doesn't happen.



Execs Feel Yi Has Marketing Upside

Q: Excluding Oden and Durant, who is the most marketable player in the draft?

Dorfman: There are a few guys. Yi Jianlian could be a real interesting story. If he pans out, he could be fascinating. With the Beijing Olympics coming up, he is going to be a big, talked about character. He seems to have more of an interesting game than Yao Ming and certainly would bring in the big Asian market. Joakim Noah is a well-known face. I don't know how great a player he is going to end up being, but he certainly has a real great personality that really showed through. The fact that he was in the Final Four two years in a row will certainly help his visibility. Maybe Mike Conley, who is probably going to go third. He has an interesting story, is a point guard and could be a spectacular player.

Stern: The wild card guy [is] Yi Jianlian. With everything that is happening in China, with the '08 Games around the corner and the success we have seen from Yao Ming, if he performs, I think he has enormous upside.

Schafer: They are the only two we have actually measured believe it or not. We didn't have much interest on a national level from our client base to get into other athletes.

Q: Is there a market for Yi Jianlian, both in the U.S. and in China, considering the space that Yao Ming currently occupies?

Dorfman: I think there is space for him. Yao obviously had the advantage because he was kind of the first dominant Chinese player and companies did a very good job with him and did a nice job selling him and presenting his personality. As it turns out, he was kind of an endearing character and was pretty funny on camera, even with limited English ability. Assuming [Yi] is going to be a strong player on the court, certainly he is going to be gigantic in China and could do fairly well here. It would be fun to see him and Yao together in spots. I think that would be a great pairing.

Stern: I think there is room without question. That would be great for the marketplace and the league if he could break through a little bit.

Lanktree: I do think that is possible. Obviously the Asian population is growing in the United States especially. The fact that the Olympics are going to China in a relatively short amount of time, it is a possibility. The NBA forms very strong corporate partnerships, and if they want to be catalytic in the marketing efforts, they can do a lot to help that. He might have his own little place in the sun.

Schafer: The door is definitely open for him with Yao Ming's success and the way he has been marketed in this country. Again, it is a question of whether the athlete can take advantage of the opportunities here in terms of playing successfully once in the NBA and quickly learning the English language. That is a big, big plus in terms of being marketed effectively in this country. A lot of great athletes from other countries have failed to do that.