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Advertising / By Stephanie Kang

Nike, Adidas Aim to Look 'Cool' in Sneaker Ads

YOU'VE SEEN THEM dunk a basketball. Now watch them don costumes, do stand-up comedy and dance.

Appearing on behalf of rival sneaker makers, two top National Basketball Association players, LeBron James and Kevin Garnett, are going head-to-head in a series of new television and print ads. But instead of emphasizing their sports prowess, the ads tout aspects of their personality.

The competing ads represent the latest front in an intensifying war between Nike, long the dominant sneaker maker in the U.S., and European giant Adidas-Salomon, which has lately been trying to boost its U.S. presence. Nike's ads, featuring Mr. James, began last month while Mr. Garnett performs on behalf of Adidas-Salomon in ads that began airing Friday.

For decades, the two companies have been fierce rivals, whether trying to create the ultimate sneaker or signing the most marketable athlete. Now they're both aiming to broaden the appeal of their young athlete endorsers by casting them as role models for consumers who want to look cool—but who don't necessarily play ball. The ads are an acknowledgment that sneakers have become as much a fashion statement as a sporting good.

The strategy takes place against a backdrop of controversial incidents involving athletes, such as last season's brawl in Detroit between fans and NBA players.

Adidas's ads show Mr. Garnett of the Minnesota Timberwolves in a series of vignettes designed to show his "five sides." He is first dressed as a field general in the middle of battle barking orders, then rescuing a woman from a burning building. That segues into a scene where Mr. Garnett is a kid playing tag, a gladiator battling in a coliseum, and finally a joke-cracking comic on stage.

"We're trying to portray a positive aspect of the game and athletes that are associated with Adidas," says Doug Sweeny, managing director of TBWA/Chiat/Day, a unit of Omnicom Group, which helped to create the ads.



Adidas's new ad campaign shows different sides of basketball player Kevin Garnett's personality.

Nike's ads, called "Meet the LeBrons," take an almost identical tack. The Cleveland Cavaliers player is depicted as four different characters—a young kid in headphones, an old-timer with suspenders, a rich playboy and Mr. James himself in uniform—all of whom eat, bicker and dance with each other.

As the old-timer "Wise LeBron," Mr. James berates another character by saying "It's not about you, it's about the shoes." A similar tongue-in-cheek attitude can be seen in another spot, where characters groove to the Rick James song "Superfreak." The spots were designed by the company's longtime ad agency, Wieden + Kennedy.

"We were aware of elements of LeBron's personality that had not been seen by most of our consumers," says Ralph Greene, Nike's U.S. basketball brand director. "So our goal was to give consumers a peek at these varied elements of the LeBron persona but to do so in a subtle, figurative and humorous manner."

Nike is "showing the athlete in a different light that might appeal to someone who's more fashion-conscious or image-conscious versus someone who

wants to wear the shoe to jump higher or score more," says Peter Stern, president of Strategic, a sports and entertainment-consulting firm.

Adidas says the similarity to Nike's ads is a coincidence. It says the new spots are an extension of earlier ads that also explored aspects of Mr. Garnett's personality.

The companies aren't disclosing the costs of these new campaigns, but they're a major part of their basketball-related advertising this season. From January through October 2005, Nike spent \$170.2 million on advertising in the U.S., according to ad research firm TNS Media Intelligence. Adidas spent \$77.4 million in that period, TNS Media says.

Both sets of ads quietly promote the athletes' new signature basketball shoes, which carry a suggested retail price of \$120 or more. The Adidas a3 Garnett '06 will hit retail U.S. stores on Friday; the Nike Zoom LeBron III went on sale Nov. 17.

Media & Marketing

When the Shoe Fits

NBA players LeBron James and Kevin Garnett endorse Nike and Adidas in ads touting their personalities, rather than their athletic prowess. B2

Classifieds B4-7, B8