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What's in a name? Lots if it's Dwyane

By Sarah Talalay
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When Dwyane Wade and his agent entered a Miami restaurant following a first-round Heat playoff game at AmericanAirlines Arena, the patrons erupted in applause, much to Wade's surprise.

Companies have been contacting agent Henry Thomas seeking the superstar guard for endorsement deals. *The Tonight Show*, David Letterman, *Good Morning America* and *Live With Regis and Kelly* have called requesting No. 3, as soon as his schedule allows, Thomas said. Each request still kind of startles Wade, 23.

"I don't think he fully comprehends yet his rise to stardom, which is refreshing," said Thomas, executive vice president of the basketball division of Chicago-based CSMG. "It's all admittedly happened very quickly."

Thomas said interest in his client has risen since February's NBA All-Star Game. Add in his outstanding play in the playoffs -- even after suffering a rib muscle injury -- that nearly carried the Heat to the NBA Finals, and this recipe for break-out celebrity is sizzling.

He appeared in a TV commercial for the NBA playoffs building a sand castle in the shape of the Larry O'Brien Championship Trophy and is among the 30 players featured in the league's Hardwood Heroes Medallion collection.

Sports Illustrated and *Slam* have done features on him. He'll be on the cover of EA Sports' *NBA Live 06* video game this fall, when Converse will also be releasing a Wade signature shoe. Thomas said other deals are in the works.

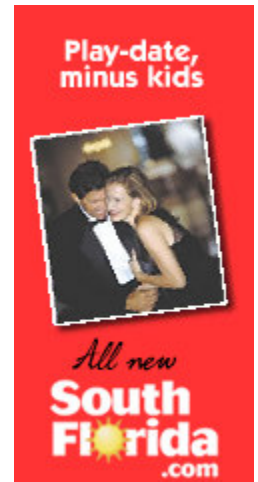
In the meantime, he's the star of a Converse television ad patterned on his nickname The Flash that also features NBA Hall of Famer Julius Erving and former NBA star Larry Johnson.

Wade's jersey was the No. 1 seller in the playoffs helping to push the Heat into the top spot in merchandise sales among all NBA teams.

People named him to its 50 Most Beautiful People list and Sean "P. Diddy" Combs' Sean John clothing line tapped him to advertise its fall collection.

"A very strong indicator of the level of marketability comes with transcending your sport, like being named to *People* magazine's list," said Mike Bass, NBA vice president of public relations.

There wasn't much doubt Wade was talented when the Heat drafted him fifth overall out of Marquette in 2003. But he was overshadowed by two others in his rookie class: the Cleveland Cavaliers' LeBron James, drafted out of high school; and the No. 3 pick, the Denver Nuggets' Carmelo Anthony. But Cleveland missed the playoffs and Denver lost in the first



round to San Antonio.

Compared with James, who signed a \$90 million deal with Nike before even playing an NBA game, Wade's low profile until now has made him a bargain for corporations. His deal with Converse is reportedly a remarkably small \$400,000, but Wade's asking price rose with each playoff win. Thomas would say only that all of Wade's deals total "in the millions."

Rich Altman of Hollywood Collectibles has an exclusive autograph deal with Wade that he hopes to renew in summer. The price tag is expected to go up.

"I am prepared to be competitive with all the other people who might be interested in him," Altman said. "The demand for Dwyane Wade [merchandise] has gone up considerably since the beginning of the year."

When Wade presented a scholarship check to two students in a ceremony at Dr. Michael Krop High in Miami recently, the applause was deafening.

"Not too long ago, nobody knew who I was," Wade said, sharing his million-dollar smile.

"It's come fast," he said. "For me everything has come in a lump sum. It was one thing to the next. I'm just taking it all in and enjoying it."

Part of Wade's rise, observers say, is due to playing alongside Shaquille O'Neal. That the two have forged such a bond as compared to O'Neal's and Kobe Bryant's toxic relationship in Los Angeles, serves to boost Wade even more.

Jeff Chown, president of Davie-Brown Talent, a division of a Los Angeles entertainment marketing consultancy, said Wade has become a household name.

"His play this season has helped put him on the map of the top 10 NBA players," Chown said. "His highlights are on sports shows once a week, minimum. If you watch *SportsCenter*, you know who Dwyane Wade is."

It's not just his play that's so appealing. It's that he's humble and religious, down-to-earth. A family man, who met his wife Siohvaughn in the fourth grade and has a son named Zaire. Last year Wade tithed to his Chicago church.

"He's got a mellow personality that is kind of refreshing, given everyone's chest-thumping style recently," said Bob Dorfman, executive vice president and creative director of Pickett Advertising in San Francisco.

Wade "embodies that unbelievable connection between the past, present and future of the game," said Erick Soderstrom, director of brand development at Converse.

Locally Wade has deals with Levinson's Jewelers and Warren Henry Automobiles, which includes a \$100,000 Range Rover. He has a ring tones agreement with THQ Wireless with three Wade choices, including one in which he says "Pick up your phone, dog."

Thomas said he's taking a deliberate approach -- "I didn't want to just take the first thing that came in the door. I didn't want to saturate him and overexpose him."

Wade said he would wait until the playoffs concluded to consider his next round of business dealings.

"There's going to be a lot hopefully this summer," Wade said.

Count on it.

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