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**ADVERTISING / By KEVIN GOLDMAN**

## Baseball's Stars Return to Make the Pitch

The boys of summer may be returning to Madison Avenue.

After seven years of declining popularity among advertisers, professional baseball players are stepping up to the plate for consideration as product endorsers, according to a closely watched survey of 250 major corporations.

This year's survey by Steiner Sports Marketing has three baseball players in the top 10. The survey, conducted by telephone during the first quarter of 1994, asked corporate marketing executives for their wish list of athlete endorsers. Companies surveyed included AT&T, Citicorp, International Business Machines and American Express.

Steiner, a New York firm that manages athletes and serves as their marriage broker with major companies, observed a downswing in baseball players' popularity in the 1980s. As pitchers, baseball players were perceived as overpaid, whiny and undisciplined. Although their counterparts on basketball courts and football fields were viewed as overpaid, too, they were also seen as hard-working, disciplined professionals. Corporations, sensing a backlash against baseball players, steered away from using them as endorsers.

Baseball players have been conspicuously absent from another survey, Video Storyboard Tests' list of most popular athletes as determined by a telephone poll of 3,000 people throughout the year. Last year, not one baseball player made the Top 10.

But the Steiner survey shows signs of a recovery for baseball players. Frank Thomas of the Chicago White Sox scored a

home run with marketing executives, finishing No. 3 among "hot advertising and endorsement" sports personalities. Although Mr. Thomas already holds contracts with Reebok International and PepsiCo's new All Sport drink, he has yet to enjoy his full endorsement potential, says Brandon Steiner, president of the sports marketing company. "This is the first time baseball has someone who can carry the weight that comes with product endorsement," says Mr. Steiner. "He gets it. He understands what is expected of him — on and off the field."

Ken Griffey Jr. of the Seattle Mariners, who ranked No. 7, could become "Mr. Madison Avenue," predicts Mr. Steiner, if the Mariners continue to play well. The team is tied for first in the American League Western division, but it's a long way until October.

Mr. Steiner says Mr. Griffey, who has "great charm and charisma," is one reason "why baseball is losing its black eye." While Mr. Griffey already appears in commercials for Nike, Nintendo and Kellogg, among others, Mr. Steiner says those are "kiddie" products. The athlete, he says, is poised to cross over and endorse adult items now.

The third baseball player is a former major basketball star and, therefore, doesn't really count: Michael Jordan of the minor league Birmingham Barons finished ninth in the survey.

The top athlete endorser among those surveyed is Shaquille O'Neal of the Orlando Magic. Nonetheless, Mr. Steiner doesn't believe the affable basketball star, known as Shaq, is overexposed. Seen mainly in campaigns for Reebok and Pepsi, Shaq "is the Jordan of the '90s," says Mr. Steiner.

Nancy Kerrigan wound up at No. 2, which is understandable considering her

"rising above adversity" story. The fact that so many marketing executives surveyed mentioned Ms. Kerrigan is a bit surprising, though, because she's already ubiquitous, skating around for Campbell Soup, Walt Disney, Reebok and Mattel, among others. "She has to be careful what she chooses," advises Mr. Steiner, "so her wholesome image fits well with whatever company she represents."

Other athletes scoring well with corporate marketers: Emmitt Smith of the Dallas Cowboys (No. 4); Pat Riley, the debonair coach of the New York Knicks (No. 5); and Troy Aikman, whom Mr. Steiner describes as the "dashing" quarterback of the Super Bowl champion Dallas Cowboys (No. 6).

Mr. Steiner concedes he had to "strong-arm" the companies to suggest a hockey player who could be included in the top 10. "We felt hockey deserves to be" there, he says, adding that the chosen one, Adam Graves of the New York Rangers, "squeaked on." Hockey players rarely get advertising deals, says Mr. Steiner, "because it is mainly an East Coast sport, and the winning teams are usually in Canada."

No matter who the sports celebrity is, however, companies shouldn't rely on that person alone, say marketing experts. "The trap is just getting an athlete, paying them a lot of money and not focusing on a product's attributes," says Hal Ross, president of Mapes & Ross, a communications research company in Princeton, N.J. "A company should still use good selling techniques and assume the celebrity isn't well known."

Another caveat to marketers: Athletes, like other celebrities, are temperamental and subject to career swings. Warns Mr. Ross: You have to be "careful who you build your bridges with."

