



A new Nike billboard features Brian Urlacher as a high school player in New Mexico and as a Chicago Bear. The ad debuts Monday as part of the company's new apparel line.

# Bears' Urlacher may have to defend endorsement deals

By Susan Chandler  
Tribune staff reporter

For many Chicago Bear fans, their image of Brian Urlacher began to change during a 2003 face-off with the Green Bay Packers on Monday Night Football.

Sitting in Urlacher's skybox at the newly renovated Soldier Field wearing a No. 54 jersey was Paris Hilton, the hotel heiress who vaulted to fame on her performance in an amateur sex video. Her surprise appearance lent more than a hint of excitement and risk to an otherwise dismal showing by the Bears' star middle linebacker and the rest of the team that night.

Urlacher, after all, was a married man who had portrayed himself as a clean-cut, blue-collar guy dedicated to his wife and young child during his short but highlight-filled career.

His life took an even more lurid turn last week when it was revealed Urlacher is involved in a paternity suit and has recently fathered two children out of wedlock—one with his ex-wife and another with a woman who has been involved in messy litigation with other high-profile men.

Urlacher's wholesome reputation has a few dings in it, some sports marketing experts say, and that could cut into his sizable income as a product spokesman.

"It's not drug abuse. It's not violent crime. It's not gambling associated with the

sport, but it certainly doesn't help," said Jim Andrews, editorial director of the IEG Sponsorship Report, a biweekly newsletter that tracks the sponsorship industry.

"For someone who may have been considering him, it doesn't move him higher on the list. It moves him lower."

Companies such as McDonald's Corp. or Campbell Soup Co., which market their products to families and children, are interested in signing up athletes who embody moral values and keep their noses clean.

Campbell's, for instance, is looking for "NFL players with a big personality who have a humorous side to them: all-American, masculine, good-hearted, big-hearted," said John Faulkner, the company's director of brand communication.

Steve Kauffman, Urlacher's agent, did not respond to Tribune requests for comment.

Other marketing experts doubt that Urlacher's earning power off the field will be hurt much.

Fathering illegitimate children has become so common in professional sports that fans don't pay much attention anymore, they say. As long as Urlacher performs on the field, his side income shouldn't be thrown for a loss, they add.

"This is something that will blow over in a couple of days," predicts Becky Wallace, execu-

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# URLACHER: Advertisers don't always stick with stars

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tive editor of Team Marketing Report, a sports marketing newsletter: "That's where our society is today. Fans expect athletes to have affairs with models and strippers. That's something the men that watch sports expect."

The list of pro athletes who have been hit with paternity suits or otherwise been embarrassed by their sexual escapades is lengthy. Some athletes have multiple children out of wedlock with a series of different women.

NBA free agent Shawn Kemp, for example, has at least seven children by six women, according to Sports Illustrated, and Minnesota Timberwolves guard Latrell Sprewell had three children with three women by the time he was 21.

Charges of sexual assault are an entirely different matter, though. When Kobe Bryant, superstar guard of the Los Angeles Lakers, was charged with raping a hotel employee in 2003, his sponsors ran for the hills.

"When you have someone on trial for rape, do you want that person holding up your product and smiling at the camera? The answer is clearly no," said An-

draws.

Even though the criminal case was eventually dropped, Bryant, a married father of one, hasn't signed any new deals since then. "His endorsements have not bounced back," Anderson said.

## Rookie makes it big

During the early years of his career, Urlacher was a marketer's dream. He came from humble beginnings and worked hard to become a nationally recognized player from the University of New Mexico, hardly a football powerhouse.

After being drafted in the first round by the Bears, Urlacher led the team with 165 total tackles and eight sacks. He became the third Bear in franchise history to be named NFL defensive rookie of the year.

Soon Urlacher was being talked about as the most fearsome defender of his generation, a worthy heir to the Bears linebacker dynasty, which includes Hall of Fame members Dick Butkus and Mike Singletary.

Although Urlacher earned a national reputation for toughness, he also came across as a clean player who didn't take cheap shots.

His popularity was helped by the fact that he came across as unassuming, polite and level-headed. That he was married and had a young child by the age of 22 only added to his charisma.

Among all professional athletes, Urlacher is a solid contender in the endorsement game but not a Hall of Famer.

The annual value of his endorsement deals is estimated to

be in the \$1 million-\$2 million range. That's a far cry from golfer Tiger Woods' \$80 million in endorsement deals last year or tennis player Andre Agassi's \$45 million.

But where Bears players are concerned, Urlacher is head and shoulders above his teammates.

The 2002 season was particularly lucrative for him. Urlacher appeared or played a role in commercials for video game-maker Sega, Fox Sports, ESPN, Campbell's Chunky Soup and Wizards of the Coast, the company that makes Pokemon cards.

On top of that, Urlacher brought home regional deals with McDonald's and Cadillac.

Although his Chunky Soup deal was not renewed, Urlacher last year landed a high-profile commercial for MasterCard that featured him in a yoga class darning glances over the shoulder of Indianapolis Colts quarterback Peyton Manning.

So far, at least, the twists and turns in his personal life don't appear to have affected Urlacher's appeal for Nike. The athlete gear giant is kicking off a national football ad campaign Monday for its Pro Performance apparel line featuring Urlacher.

There will be Urlacher billboards in Chicago and Lovington, N.M., where he attended high school.

The idea, Nike says, is that NFL stars like Urlacher learned the code of the game in its most sacred incarnation: high school football.

## NFL rankings

Urlacher's endorsements are unlikely to ever exceed his player's salary. But that's true for most team-sport players, marketing experts note, because they don't loom as large in the collective imagination of sports fans as individual athletes.

Even among other athletes in other team sports such as baseball and basketball, football

dom see their faces, marketing experts say.

Among the NFL's endorsement kings, the guys who throw the ball are the ones who rule.

Manning may not be able to beat Tom Brady in Super Bowl appearances or titles, but he tops the New England Patriots passer when it comes to endorsements. Manning took home an estimated \$10.5 million last year, compared with Brady's \$9 million.

Also on the big-dollar roster are Green Bay quarterback Brett Favre and Atlanta Falcons quarterback Michael Vick, tied at \$7 million.

The pattern is clear: Offense scores more endorsement dollars than defense.

But in one area, Urlacher bested them. In 2001—when the Bears finished 13-3 and Urlacher was named the Defensive Player of the Year by Football Digest—Urlacher sold more jerseys than any other player in the league on NFLShop.com.

He held on to the top ranking in 2002 even though the Bears limped through the season with a 4-12 record.

Since then his popularity has sagged, but not all that much considering the Bears' disappointing showings. In 2003, his jersey was the fifth-best seller: Last year, No. 54 dropped to eighth place.

"He actually has had outstanding staying power on the list," said Dan Masonson, a spokesman for the NFL. "The tradition of Bears' linebackers has helped Urlacher's popularity."

Now is no time for Urlacher to relax, however.

Sales of his jerseys dropped to 20th in the league from April through June 30 this year, only three spots ahead of Cedric Benson, the Bears' rookie running back who has yet to take his first handoff in a real game.