

## **Business Is Booming For Tennis Ace Naomi Osaka, On Track To Be The Highest-Paid Female Athlete**

Naomi Osaka burst on the scene 12 months ago with a memorable run to the U.S. Open title. She added a second straight Grand Slam four months later at the Australian Open, securing the crown of the world's No. 1 player at 21 years old. Osaka made history with the Aussie win as the first singles player from Asia, male or female, to reach the top spot in the rankings.

But staying at the top presents a new set of challenges when off-court opportunities abound and every player is gunning for you. For some guidance on navigating this tricky course, Osaka recently turned to an athlete who stayed at the pinnacle of his sport for two decades.

"Night after night, people would try to knock Kobe down, but he was so consistently great. That's what I'm trying to learn from him," Osaka says via e-mail about the 18-time NBA All-Star and five-time champion Kobe Bryant, who, like Osaka, falls under the Endeavor agency umbrella.

Osaka wants to follow Bryant's lead off the court, too, playing the long game. She's inked a series of blockbuster endorsement deals since her Flushing Meadow victory that could net her \$30 million in 2019, but she is laying the foundation for a business beyond just collecting piles of cash for photo shoots.

A trio of companies announced partnerships with Osaka this week in BodyArmor, Hyperice and Muzik. The deals will barely budge her endorsement earnings this year, but she received equity stakes in all three emerging companies. "I'm really interested in seeing a young business grow and adding value to that process," she says. "I tasked my team with finding brands that align with my personality and my interests."

Athletes once often waited until late in their careers or even retirement to launch their next act, but global stars like LeBron James and Kevin Durant increasingly are striking while the iron is hot, investing and launching businesses while still at their peak. Osaka has accelerated that curve at an age when her peers are just taking their first legal sips of alcohol. "I want to take an interest in my business now and not wait until the end of my career. Kobe is one of the best to learn from in so many ways," she says.

Osaka, who was born in Japan to a Japanese mother and a Haitian-American father, checks all the boxes for marketers. She's young, accomplished and multicultural, with a soaring social media following. That helped her score the No. 2 spot on [Forbes' 2019 list of the world's highest-paid female athletes](#) with \$24.3 million, behind Serena Williams (\$29.2 million).

Muzik founder and CEO Jason Hardi calls Osaka a triple threat for her talent, design capabilities and philanthropic interests. She worked with Muzik, the "[smartphone of headphones](#)" company, to design a new set of headphones that launches today. Osaka will receive royalties on the product, in addition to her equity stake. Muzik counts Chris Paul, Cardi B, Offset, Paul George and Von Miller among its investors and ambassadors, but the Osaka product is the first celebrity signature line for the company. "We've been waiting for the right time and right person. She really cares about design," says Hardi.

The increased power and speed in tennis have made recovery a critical consideration for top players, and Osaka has used Hyperice's line of recovery and movement products for a couple of years to aid her ability to bounce back after a match. She says the products are everywhere in the tennis locker room. She was a natural when CEO Jim Huether wanted an athlete to help globalize his company's mission "to create healthier humans."

The \$64 million-in-revenue company wants to expand its international presence, which currently represents 30% of the business. Hyperice launched marketing campaigns in Japan and the U.S. this week featuring Osaka as part of a multi-year deal. Osaka, who was raised in the U.S. but represents Japan in international competitions, is expected to be one of the faces of the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics, and the company is already mapping out marketing plans around the Games.

"We always look for athletes who are a little entrepreneurial. It creates more authenticity with the brand," says Huether.

Sports drink BodyArmor is Osaka's third new partner ahead of the U.S. Open, which starts Monday and will feature Osaka as the top seed on the women's side. She was introduced to the brand by Bryant, the third-largest stakeholder in the company after founder Mike Repole and Coca-Cola. Bryant originally [invested roughly \\$5 million](#) in the company in 2013 for a 10% stake. Coca-Cola's [\\$300 million investment](#) last year pushed the value of Bryant's piece to \$200 million. The company, which is on target for \$700 million in retail sales in 2019, wants to surpass market-leader Gatorade by 2025.

"Naomi is a fierce competitor, something I can certainly relate to, and I couldn't be happier to welcome her to the BodyArmor team," says Bryant. "I know she'll show the same type of passion off the court helping BodyArmor become the No. 1 sports drink as she did on the court becoming the No. 1 women's tennis player."

Osaka was crowned the "world's most marketable athlete" this week in [SportsPro Magazine's annual top 50 list](#). Her bevy of endorsement partners like Nissan, Citizen, Shiseido, Nissin, MasterCard and Procter & Gamble would agree.

But no company is as important to Osaka's brand and bank account as Nike, which pays her an estimated \$10 million a year under the new pact. Her partnership with the sportswear giant was announced in April after a fierce bidding war with Adidas. Nike offered a rare exemption in the deal, allowing Osaka to wear the logos of other companies on her tennis apparel—lucrative real estate for elite players. China's Li Na is the only other player granted the exemption: not Serena Williams, Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal, Andre Agassi, John McEnroe or any other current or former Nike athlete.

Nike unveiled a [collaboration with Japanese designer brand Sacai](#) for an 11-piece collection

ahead of the Open. Osaka will have her own Nike logo and athleisure line starting in 2020.

Osaka says the coming months will include a collaboration with a Japanese fashion brand and a project with LeBron and his business partner Maverick Carter. "I want to do things my way and not follow what has been done in the past," says Osaka, "I know I'm in a privileged position, so the main thing is to enjoy it all ... and that means working with partners that I truly like."

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