

Site Scores Image Points for Kobe

On his tricked-out kb24.com, the NBA star explores his genius, reputation and retail power

Genius succeeds against all odds," says a kid holding up the new Nike Zoom Kobe III shoe in a spot appearing on www.kb24.com, Kobe Bryant's state-of-the-art Web site. Indeed, in the succeeding-against-all-odds department, the site proves that no one has done that better than Bryant himself.

Talk about a thorough cleansing, image-wise.

A mere two years ago, Bryant was a lone wolf and an *enfant terrible*. He appeared in a Nike spot called "Love Me, Hate Me," which focused on his arrogance and swagger. A non-sugarcoated approach, it came across as a more honest, yet still carefully orchestrated, coming out after the star athlete's very public, reputation-damaging trial for sexual assault. The case was settled, but then Bryant went on to feud openly with Los Angeles Lakers teammate Shaquille O'Neal and coach Phil Jackson, which only cemented his reputation for being aloof and unlikeable.

Cut to last week, when a thoroughly likeable, approachable and easygoing Bryant appeared in a video on his Web site, gesturing with a bag of ice on his injured hand, and commenting on, among other things, the Oscars.



"I gotta say I'm disappointed that Cate Blanchett didn't win," the possible NBA MVP opined. "Cate Blanchett was Queen Elizabeth, if you ask me. I think she was robbed."

That's part of the greatness of the site—that he has a place to register random thoughts as well as sell his shoes. A bag of ice, a reference to the queen—there's all kinds of rehab going on. Perhaps Bryant's interest in cinematic royalty was stoked by the popularity of kb24, which

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features one badass coat of arms. Combining hip-hop design elements and crown heraldry, the look is equal parts Diddy and Fiddy, with personalized touches like a black mamba snake (Bryant's nickname) and reproductions of some of his tattoos.

The site is the work of Zambezi Ink, which calls itself a "mixed-media ad and strategy house," started by two guys who worked on "Love Me, Hate Me" at Wieden—one a senior writer on Nike basketball and the other the Nike basketball account manager.

With this site, Bryant has complete control over his image. It's intentionally clean and easy to navigate, not a clunky interface. It's a gathering place for fans and a retail outlet, as well as a news site, with content updated regularly, and a new video posted once a week.

That clever coat of arms comes from Studio Number One designer Shepard Fairey, the fanatically popular artist behind the "Obey" guerilla street art campaign that has plastered images of Andre the Giant on lamp posts and mailboxes coast to coast, as well as the iconic Barack Obama posters featuring the colorful Social Realist-style portrait of the senator along with the words "Hope" and "Progress."

But back to what started it all—the promotion of Bryant's cool new signature Nike shoe, the Zoom Kobe III, which looks big, light and spiderwebby in these five "Genius" spots, one of which has been unveiled on the site every week for the past five weeks.

Each spot features the same boy genius—a great geeky kid, maybe 10-years-old, with big teeth and glasses. He holds the shoe up to the camera the entire time (which is quite funny) as he delivers a fabulous monologue. "Let me ask you something," he opens up in one, "Could Einstein formulate the theory of relativity with just five numbers?" He later answers his own question with "Mathematical travesty! Real



geniuses use every tool..." Meanwhile, Bryant, dressed as Albert Einstein in a white wig and moustache and khaki suit (actually looking more like a black Mark Twain) shoots baskets behind him, and, still in costume, hangs on the rim.

All the spots are cleverly written, and start with the kid holding the shoe and asking a question as Bryant dunks, jumps and dribbles in the background, dressed as Einstein, Leonardo da Vinci, Mozart (his best overall look) and George Washington Carver.



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The concept suggests that award-winning Nike spot starring LeBron James, in which James plays four different characters, and is hardly recognizable as any of them. But James is able to show his acting chops as he plays each character—a wise old man, a young businessman, a kid in swim goggles, etc.—and his spots are funnier. In "Genius," Bryant is a silent, costumed presence in the background, and while it's comical to have a guy dressed like da Vinci running around the court in his hat and cape, it's hard to tell it's him.

It doesn't matter. The shoe, which is seriously cool, sold out on the site within hours. (It's the first time an athlete's personal Web site has been used as a retailer of Nike products.) This is the beginning of a new form of retail/street culture/retirement. Because genius succeeds against all odds, if, as the kid says, "it has the right equipment."

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