



NBA Star Sells \$15 Sneakers

By Mike Celizic

As a kid growing up with six siblings, Stephon Marbury couldn't understand why his parents couldn't scrape together \$150 to buy him the hot sneakers his heroes wore in the NBA.

When he grew up and understood how much money that was and how little his parents had, he decided to do something about it.

His solution? A \$15 quality basketball shoe worn in games by the star point guard of the New York Knicks, Stephon Marbury.

"Anybody who grew up in a household with a lot of brothers and sisters, they know how it is as far as, you know, everybody wearin' the same sneakers – hand-me-downs," he told TODAY correspondent Kevin Corke.

The shoe, which comes in a variety of styles and fabrics, is called the "Starbury." It's made by Steve & Barry's University Sportswear, and, while it is inexpensive, it's not cheap or shoddy. Marbury introduced them last August and has just introduced the Starbury II, still at the same affordable price.

Mark Cuban, the outspoken billionaire owner of the NBA's Dallas Mavericks, called the product "the biggest business story of the year."

Steve & Barry's has given no sales figures, but it has been reported elsewhere that in little more than half a year, some three million pairs of Starburys have been sold. That's been enough to inspire Chicago Bulls star center Ben Wallace to join Marbury in wearing the shoes for the remainder of this year. Next year, Wallace will have his own Steve & Barry's line —the Big Ben.

Growth of the signature shoe

Marbury grew up in the Coney Island section of Brooklyn, while Wallace hails from small-town Alabama. But they have a lot in common.

Like Marbury, who had six brothers and sisters, Wallace came from a big family – he had ten siblings – and wore whatever shoes one of his older brothers had outgrown. Also like Marbury, he was offended at the exorbitant prices the big shoe companies charge for the signature footwear of the game's biggest stars.

"Why you want your name associated with a pair shoes nobody can afford?" he told TODAY. "I think that defeats the purpose."

Both players are foregoing big endorsement checks by putting their names on – and their feet in – inexpensive shoes. Once upon a time, all basketball shoes were affordable. But then Nike founder Phil Knight realized that if he could design a special shoe and put it on the feet of one of the game's greatest players, he could charge a premium for them.

In 1985, he signed Michael Jordan, the promising young star of the Chicago Bulls, to an endorsement deal and brought out the first Air Jordan sneaker. The shoe was red and black with a big Nike Swoosh on the side and was so brash in their design that the NBA told Jordan he would be fined if he wore them in games. Knight gladly paid the fines and in no time at all, every kid in America had to have a pair.

As Jordan matured into the greatest player of all time, fans camped out in front of shoe stores to be the first to buy the latest model Air Jordan, and kids were mugged for their shoes. Jordan himself made more money from Nike endorsements than he did from playing basketball.

After that, every new star had to have a signature shoe, with prices running up to \$175 and endorsement deals worth tens of millions of dollars.

Marbury has at times been accused of being selfish with the ball on the court, but no one has ever called him selfish in his personal life. Not satisfied with making an affordable shoe available, he's also given 3,000 pairs to high school basketball teams in New York City. His new Starbury II's even come in a women's model.



Not everyone is happy

Marbury has been razzed by other players for wearing \$15 sneakers, and there's been some jibes traded between Cleveland Cavalier megastar LeBron James, the current king of the high-priced shoe market, and Wallace over the shoe's quality.

The big companies say it's not built as well as their shoes. But one of the shoe's designers, T.J. Gray, told a newspaper reporter, "We're building them with the same construction, we're using similar materials."

And consumer advocate Ralph Nader, who has been challenging James over conditions in the Chinese factories where his shoes are made, singled out Marbury for praise in an open letter posted online at LeagueOfFans.org.

Addressed to James, the post said that Marbury "challenged the entire basketball sneaker industry, in part, to present inner-city kids with an affordable (yet still stylish and well-made) alternative to the \$150 shoes that you and others endorse."

Instead of taking millions to wear somebody else's shoes, Stephon Marbury decided to take nothing up front to wear his own. Instead, he gets a royalty on each pair sold. Wallace has the same deal.

To both, it really isn't about the money, but about the satisfaction of knowing that they're doing something for kids and families by giving them a well-made shoe with NBA cachet at a price affordable by all.

"You see the smiles on kid's faces," Marbury said. "I've had so many people come up to me and just . . . it's not even about basketball."

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