

BUSINESS

Endorsers turn political, and keep deals

BY ZACH SCHONBRUN

Contrary to most sports agents, Leigh Steinberg said, he never had a problem with his clients talking publicly about politics.

"Traditionally the definition of a conservative athlete has been a campus liberal who just saw the withholding from his first bonus check," Mr. Steinberg joked.

But when it came to wading deeper into sociopolitical issues, many of the most prominent athletes — like Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods and Derek Jeter — preferred staying, in Mr. Steinberg's terms, "scrupulously apolitical." The reason was often financial. As Mr. Jordan famously, or perhaps apocryphally, contended, "Republicans buy sneakers, too."

But this month, Stephen Curry, one of the N.B.A.'s marquee attractions, effectively ditched that notion like a pair of old sneakers. In an act that some might once have considered commercial suicide, he criticized the chief executive of his own sneaker brand, Under Armour, for complimenting President Trump.

After Under Armour's chief executive, Kevin Plank, described Mr. Trump's pro-business approach as "a real asset" to the United States, Mr. Curry told The San Jose Mercury News, "I agree with that description, if you remove the 'et.'" He later said he would not be afraid to leave any company "if it wasn't in line with who I am."

The reaction was forceful — in support of Mr. Curry. Other Under Armour endorsers, like the movie star Dwayne Johnson, also known as the Rock, and the ballerina Misty Copeland, released their own critical statements aimed at Mr. Plank. One analyst downgraded Under Armour's stock price target, to \$14 from \$24 per share. And on Feb. 15, Mr. Plank took out a full-page ad in The Baltimore Sun saying, in part, that his comments "did not accurately reflect my intent."

An Under Armour spokeswoman said that Mr. Plank had since spoken to Mr. Curry, Mr. Johnson and Ms. Copeland and "they all understand the context in which those comments were made."

Mr. Steinberg — who is perhaps best known as being the inspiration for Tom Cruise's sports agent character in "Jerry Maguire" — was stunned at how it all unfolded.

"In days past, what would Under Ar-



Stephen Curry, one of the N.B.A.'s top players, criticized the chief executive of his own sneaker brand, Under Armour, for complimenting President Trump.

BEN MARGOT/ASSOCIATED PRESS

mour have done?" Mr. Steinberg said. "They would have cut Steph Curry."

The fact that Under Armour did not cut Mr. Curry, and instead reached out to him in a conciliatory manner after his comments, was, to Mr. Steinberg, a sign of a transformative shift in the endorser-endorsee dynamic.

"Seriously, an athlete calling out the C.E.O. of the company?" Mr. Steinberg said. "It's remarkable."

It is fair to wonder how much Mr. Curry had to lose by speaking out. As one of the most talented and popular players in the N.B.A. — with the top-selling jersey in the league and a salary of \$11 million — he would appear to be fine financially. But so, too, were those celebrities, like Mr. Jordan, who typically declined to weigh in on contentious topics.

By taking a political stand, particularly in today's divisive climate, Mr.

Curry is potentially alienating the millions of people who support Mr. Trump, many of whom might no longer want to wear or buy his apparel.

"You are making a strategic decision that, 'Hey, I accept the wrath that might come from these 65 million people who I'm now speaking out against,'" said Americus Reed, a professor of marketing at the University of Pennsylvania.

"I'm not sure that courage is the right

word, but it's a decision that bears costs."

Those costs, said Harry Edwards, the sociologist and civil rights activist who helped to inspire the raised-fist protest by Tommie Smith and John Carlos during the 1968 Summer Olympics, were overstated in the past and are understated today.

"For years, people said athletes are making so much money they have so

"Seriously, an athlete calling out the C.E.O. of the company? It's remarkable."

much to risk that they won't speak out. Today they're saying they're making so much money they can afford to speak out," Mr. Edwards said. "The reality is that both are equally wrong."

The influence of endorsers, particularly athletes, has changed in recent years. Joe Favorito, a longtime communications strategist in sports and entertainment, said Mr. Curry wore the Under Armour logo on a televised stage almost every night and, through social media, had an enormous platform to reach consumers on a whim. This creates more of a necessity to pair endorsers with companies that match their personalities.

"You have athletes who are more in control of their brand than ever before," Mr. Favorito said. "They're not just signing on to take a check. They're signing because everything about their personal brand is aligned with the brand they're working with."

In some cases, the personal brand's allure has grown stronger than the company's.

In the past, endorsement contracts were often drafted with language that penalized the endorser for "making comments or taking positions that were controversial and potentially incur negative reaction," Mr. Steinberg said.

Today, however, he might approach a new endorsement deal — particularly with a high-profile client — a little differently.

"There needs to be a discussion going in about the nature of the athlete's views or what his actions might be, and the nature of what the executive's actions might be, and where that might conflict," Mr. Steinberg said.

As more endorsers relinquish their political neutrality, companies may have to decide if signing a celebrity like Mr. Curry is ultimately worth it if they don't see eye to eye on matters beyond the color of the sneaker.

"He is not biting the hand that feeds him. The hand that he's feeding bit him," Mr. Edwards said, "We always had that a little bit backward, but now it is clear whom is feeding whom."

Activist takes on retailers selling Trump family products

SAN FRANCISCO

BY RACHEL ABRAMS

Sitting in a basement office that she rents by the hour, Shannon Coulter ticks off the activities she gave up in defiance of President Donald J. Trump: renting movies with her husband on Amazon, and shopping at Nordstrom, Macy's and other retailers that sell Ivanka Trump's products.

A Nordstrom bag sat on a nearby table. It represents a victory lap of sorts for Ms. Coulter, who has almost single-handedly spearheaded a retail revolt against the president and his family. She was wearing a new silver Elizabeth and James lariat necklace purchased at the department store soon after it scrubbed Ms. Trump's name from its website.

"The goal," Ms. Coulter said, "came originally from a place of really wanting to shop the stores we loved again with a clear conscience."

It's been a wild ride these past few months for Ms. Coulter, who runs her shoestrung movement from her home, or from cheerfully decorated work spaces like this one — surrounded by bright-blue furniture, clam chairs and decorative pillows that feel more Silicon Valley than anti-administration war room.

Enraged by a video that emerged last October of Mr. Trump bragging about sexually assaulting women, Ms. Coulter began a boycott of any sort of product connected to Mr. Trump. At first, it was just a tweet — a list she had compiled of companies that sold Trump products — but the ember quickly turned into a coast-to-coast blaze.

Thousands of people have contacted the stores Ms. Coulter has on her boycott list, including Macy's and Amazon. Retailers including Nordstrom, Neiman Marcus and T.J. Maxx have backed away from products connected to Ms. Trump, the president's oldest daughter, since Ms. Coulter's efforts began. A herd of activists and celebrities, including the feminist writer Gloria Steinem, the Olympic diver Greg Louganis and the actress Lucy Lawless of "Xena: Warrior Princess," have expressed support.

The attention has transformed Ms. Coulter, 45, a digital marketing specialist, into the unlikely general of the digital army now supporting her campaign, Grab Your Wallet.

"People describe me as an activist in media coverage; I don't know who they're talking about," she said. "I've never done anything this organized or structured or purposeful."

The new role has taken up much of her time, and has made her the target of criticism and attacks from Trump supporters. She's lost count of how many times she has been called a "bully" or a "disgrace." The abuse gets more menacing with each victory; a recent email included her mother's name



Shannon Coulter is a founder of a campaign to boycott retailers who sell Trump-family products, like Ivanka Trump boots, right.



DREW ANGERER/GETTY IMAGES

"People describe me as an activist in media coverage; I don't know who they're talking about."

in the subject line, with threats to publish more of her personal information.

In the latest twist, the boycott has drawn Ms. Coulter, a self-described progressive liberal, into a growing debate over whether targeting Ms. Trump is sexist.

And she said she worries that people will think she is profiting from the venture. Ms. Coulter was particularly upset when a knockoff "Grab Your Wallet" group sold clothing and other merchandise on Facebook. "We don't even have a T-shirt, we don't have stickers, nothing," she said, adding that she does not accept compensation from companies, or donations.

"I don't think either of us envisioned that some of the things that have happened would happen," said Sue Atencio, who helped Ms. Coulter get the site started.

In many ways, Ms. Coulter has embraced her new position. She answers emails at all hours and scours Twitter for tips on companies to add, or remove, from the boycott list. Then there are the phone calls — lots and lots of phone calls — from angry Trump supporters or journalists or the companies that want to get off her list.

There is no doubt that it has changed her life. She doesn't sleep or socialize as often as she used to. Most of her work on Grab Your Wallet is done after she eats dinner with her husband, taking up what free time she has.

"She went underground, basically," said Amie Penwell, a fellow San Francisco resident who hasn't seen much of her friend of seven years recently.

The negative attention has made Ms. Coulter careful about her privacy. She insisted on meeting at the work space for an interview, to avoid having a reporter at her home, out of fear that it could be targeted. She would not let her husband, whom she met online in 2010, be interviewed.

Born in Indiana, Ms. Coulter studied journalism at Penn State. She said she began her career by "piggybacking" on the Bay Area's technology boom, helping start-ups with their email marketing.

A year ago she started her own agency, DoubleKnown, which helps executives and small businesses build their online presence through blog posts, social media feeds and other digital tools. The company has one other employee and a handful of education and technology clients, but has stopped taking on new accounts since Grab Your Wallet took off.

Political activism has not been a big part of Ms. Coulter's life since college, when she spoke at a rally raising awareness about violence against women. Her most recent organized effort came after the shooting at Umpqua Community College in Oregon in 2015, when she circulated a list of lawmakers who had voted against tougher gun control

measures.

"Maybe that gave me a taste of what something like this would be like," she said, describing herself as a chronic list maker. "I like the efficiency of them."

After becoming incensed by the video, Ms. Coulter began searching retailers' websites for Trump-branded products and collecting the names on a spreadsheet. Wondering who else might be interested in a boycott, she looked at Twitter, and found Ms. Atencio, who had tweeted "fashion not fascism." Ms. Coulter contacted her and suggested they announce the boycott together.

Since then, most of the work has fallen to Ms. Coulter, though she refers to Ms. Atencio as her "spiritual guide" and sounding board. Ms. Atencio, 59, sees herself as the less visible half of a musical duo. "I feel like I'm the Garfunkel and Shannon is Paul Simon," Ms. Atencio said.

Grab Your Wallet now includes a list of places to shop and not shop, and a short script for people who want to call companies to complain. As many as 32,000 people visit her site in an hour, Ms. Coulter said. When the women's marches took place across the country in January, 350,000 people arrived during a 24-hour period.

In early February, Nordstrom and Neiman Marcus removed Ms. Trump's name from their websites. Employees at T.J. Maxx and Marshalls were instructed not to display Ivanka Trump

products and to throw her signs in the trash.

None of the retailers credited Grab Your Wallet with their decision — the department stores blamed poor sales — and it is not possible to know to what degree Ms. Coulter and her followers have influenced the companies' decision making. But in the waning days of January, Trump-related complaints, many of which mentioned Grab Your Wallet, were Nordstrom's most common customer feedback, according to a person with direct knowledge who was not authorized to speak publicly. Nordstrom said it did not have "specific numbers" on the number of customers it had heard from.

"I attribute it directly to the Muslim ban," Ms. Coulter said, referring to the executive order on immigration that Mr. Trump issued on Jan. 27. "I can see when the numbers spike when certain news events happen."

Monitoring those spikes, updating her list and responding to emails, tweets and press inquiries have become Ms. Coulter's second full-time job.

"My life is so completely here," she said, gesturing to her MacBook, "that it all just sort of overlaps and is an endless stream of emails and tweets and Facebook posts."

She does get some help from volunteers, like the woman who helps run the legitimate Grab Your Wallet Facebook group, which has more than 12,000

members. But for the most part, Ms. Coulter is on her own.

That means the threats and negative attention are also directed largely at her. People ask her why she's "attacking another woman," or call her a bully.

People like the Fox host Jeanine Pirro have argued that Ms. Trump's brand has nothing to do with the White House, and that she is being unjustly targeted. Defenders also point to a proposed maternity policy that Ms. Trump developed with her father's campaign, and her brand's hashtag, WomenWhoWork, as examples of how she promotes women.

"We have to stop destroying women based on the men in their lives," Ms. Pirro said during a recent episode of her show.

S.E. Cupp, a conservative author and commentator, stopped short of calling the boycott of Ms. Trump's products sexist. But in an email, Ms. Cupp said that it seemed "misdirected."

"I'm never a fan of going after the kids, grown or not, of presidents," she said. "Nor does it feel consistent with the anti-Trump argument — that he's 'anti-woman' — to economically punish his daughter, to a working wife and mother."

A spokesman for Ms. Trump's brand declined to make someone at the company available for an interview. In a statement, the company said it had been "swept into the political fray, becoming collateral damage in others' efforts to advance agendas unrelated to what we do."

Ms. Coulter finds such comments perplexing. She pointed out that Ms. Trump moved to Washington and has taken on an informal advisory role in the White House. She frequently sits in on her father's meetings with foreign leaders. Ms. Trump's husband, the real estate developer Jared Kushner, is a top adviser to President Trump.

In addition, Ms. Coulter said, Ms. Trump played a prominent role in the presidential campaign.

"Someone who passionately campaigned for a man who likes to grab women by the genitals will never convince me that she's on the side of women," she said. "Ever."

Ms. Steinem also said that Ms. Trump was fair game, particularly after the election, when it can no longer be argued that she is just doing her "filial duty" on the campaign trail.

"It's appropriate to boycott her not because he is her father," Ms. Steinem said, "but because she supports his policies."

Despite the long hours, Ms. Coulter said she could continue running Grab Your Wallet indefinitely. She's considering turning the campaign into a nonprofit and running it full time, and is struggling to figure out what to do with her fledgling business.

"I'm trying to understand what the right next step is," she said. "I think as long as he's in office, this will be alive."