



SUNPOWER
Solar is so 2009.
More powerful. More affordable than ever. Today.
seize today ▶ [Join the revolution](#)



Sports Business

America's Most-Liked Sports Figures

Tom Van Riper, 10.16.09, 6:00 AM ET

Since the Olympic Games in Beijing, gold medal gymnast Shawn Johnson has played it just right. She's been out there on the CMT Music Awards and *Dancing With the Stars*. She's scored a few endorsements, including McDonald's and Secret deodorant. But she hasn't overdone it, hasn't risked a crass reputation by chasing down every last endorsement nickel or showing up on every talk show.

And that's the reason--in addition to talent of course--that Johnson is America's most-liked sports figure, according to the latest surveys conducted by E-Poll Market Research, an Encino, Calif.-based research firm that tracks celebrity likability ratings.

"She didn't overexpose herself after the Olympics," says E-Poll Chief Executive Gerry Philpott of Johnson, who's seen by the bulk of the public as "charming" and "warm," according to the surveys. There's also the advantage of showing versatility: Johnson didn't just sign up for *Dancing With the Stars*, she won. "You don't do that with just athletic ability, you need a style that wins over hearts and minds," says Philpott.

In Pictures: The 10 Most-Liked Sports Figures

E-Poll scientifically surveyed a representative sample of 1,100 people age 13 and over. Candidates were limited to active athletes, coaches or commentators with a minimum 10% awareness rating.

The most common adjective fans use to describe their favorites: trustworthy. The term popped up most frequently for four people: Arizona Cardinals quarterback Kurt Warner, San Antonio Spurs big man Tim Duncan, NFL commentator and former 49ers quarterback Steve Young, and longtime media personality Robin Roberts. All exude a consistency and familiarity that leads fans to believe they'd be perfect barroom buddies (though Young, a Mormon, doesn't drink) or spouses, Philpott points out.

"It means they're seen as dependable, people think 'I can count on them,'" Philpott says.

Of course, never underestimate the power of the Super Bowl, which pushed both Warner and his top pass catcher, Larry Fitzgerald, into the limelight last February. With a pair of touchdown catches in a tough 27-23 loss to the Steelers, the dynamic Fitzgerald got to showcase his talent in front of roughly 100 million people.

Fans also got a big dose of Warner's rags to riches story during the game's buildup (he spent time bagging groceries and toiling in the Arena Football League before catching on in the NFL). It's true that Warner had appeared in two prior Super Bowls with the Rams. But no doubt many people were taken with the 37-year-old's success in wrestling the starting QB job from hotshot draft pick Matt Leinert, a former Southern Cal Heisman Trophy winner, and then justifying the choice by taking the usually mediocre Cards to the Super Bowl.

Also making the cut: rising tennis star Rafael Nadal and NBA superstar Chris Paul, both of whom score with fans as "exciting," among other attributes. Both are still relatively unknown to the broad population, barely making the 10% awareness level cutoff. Nadal's star has just begun growing thanks to his budding rivalry with Roger Federer, while Paul is stuck in NBA purgatory: New Orleans. That means lots of room for growth with the right management representation that's able to tap into the pop culture world.

Certainly, the NBA could use another high-energy public face alongside a polarizing Kobe Bryant and increasingly polarizing LeBron (will he stay or go?) James. And the men's tennis tour could use an injection of personality to complement the super-talented but staid Federer. But the key, apparently, is not biting off too much all at once. It worked for Johnson.

In Pictures: The 10 Most-Liked Sports Figures