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The Game: Kobe's Allure Is Rebounding; NBA Scores With Road Trip

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THERE was a time when Kobe Bryant's marketing portfolio topped \$56 million. But serious allegations in 2003 sent his stock plummeting. Now, there are signals that Bryant's value is on the rise.

In 2003, Bryant's status as an elite NBA star with the Los Angeles Lakers was being tapped via marketing deals with McDonald's, Nike, Sprite, Spalding and Nutella. When a woman that July accused him of sexual assault, Bryant's attractiveness as an endorser—and many of the deals—faded (a civil settlement ended the case).

Today, call Bryant the "comeback kid."

E-Poll Market Research, Encino, Calif., which tracks the ups and downs of thousands of celebrities, conducted four online polls on Bryant between August 2002-February 2006, each among 1,100 people culled from the firm's data base. (E-Poll did not reveal the total number of consumers to whom it has access.) In the first, 79% liked Bryant to some degree; from among 46 attributes (people could select as many as they wished), 45% picked "confident" and 35% said "good energy."

An August 2004 survey mirrored Bryant's fall. Only 51% liked him and a combined 27% called him "cold" or "creepy" (versus 6% in the earlier poll). After the 2003-04 season, teammate Shaquille O'Neal was traded and head coach Phil Jackson left, both seen as power moves initiated by Bryant. An August 2005 poll reflected this: just 42% liked him, 27% said he was "insincere" and 34% described him as "cold" or "creepy."

Jackson returned to the Lakers for the 2005-06 season, during which time he and Bryant re-embraced; Bryant and O'Neal ended their feud; Bryant scored an astounding 81 points in a game; and the Lakers made the playoffs. In a February 2006 poll, his appeal was at 51%, and a combined 44% said he was either "confident" or "exciting" (his high was 70% in 2002). "Bryant's burnout was instantaneous," said Gerry Philpott, CEO at E-Poll. "By comparison, we've seen Barry Bonds' drop has been slower and longer."

Bryant is still down the list of athletes on E-Poll surveys over the past year. The top 10 (with likability marks of at least 59%): Brett Favre, Steve Young, Kristi Yamaguchi, Mia Hamm, Michelle Kwan, Arnold Palmer, Jerome Bettis, Peggy Fleming, Lance Armstrong and (tied) Michael Jordan, Peyton Manning and Wayne Gretzky.

EXTRA INNINGS: As part of its playoff activation, the NBA will roll out its 2006 Rhythm 'n Rims tour. A 15,000 square-foot basketball and music theme park will visit 12 NBA cities from May 5 (Memphis) through July 29 (New York). NBA partners include adidas, Nokia, AOL, Hannspeer, EA Sports, Toyota and T-Mobile. Also, the NBA has renewed its trading card agreements with both Topps and Upper Deck through 2009. The deals will include expanded retail marketing. Financial terms were not disclosed.

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