

Power 100: Five Athletes to Watch in 2012

It's never too early to prognosticate. Here are five athletes not in this year's Power 100 who warrant watching



Photographs by Getty Images (5)

By Brian Finkel

Tim Tebow

He's pushing \$10 million in annual endorsement revenue, has more than 1 million Twitter followers, and recently was named America's favorite pro athlete in an ESPN poll. It might be hard to fathom, but despite being our eighth-ranked athlete off the field, Tim Tebow's on-field numbers were so abysmal in 2011 that they single-handedly prevented him from making this year's list. After three straight years of naming Tebow to my Five Athletes to Watch list, his case in 2012 is simple. If he improves as a pro quarterback—even incrementally—you'll see him in next year's Power 100. If he stays the same or regresses, he won't make the Power 100, and he certainly won't be one of my athletes to watch. "How much Tebowmania will translate into his power rankings next season is yet to be seen, but media hype and strong beliefs don't always translate into long-term big business," says **Gerry Philpott**, chief executive of **E-Poll Market Research**.

Yu Darvish

The Texas Rangers spent an enormous \$111 million to sign the Japanese phenom Yu Darvish. The 25-year-old pitcher already has endorsement contracts with Nike, Seiko, and Hisamitsu Pharmaceutical, and he could land more sponsorship deals from U.S. companies interested in entering the Japanese market. If Darvish this year can do in MLB what he did last year in Japan (18-6

win-loss record, 1.44 ERA, and 276 strikeouts), he'll have a high enough on-field score to crack the Power 100. Darvish is an early favorite to win the Rookie of the Year Award, and if he leads the Rangers to their third straight World Series—thus boosting his awareness and popularity—the sky's the limit for baseball's biggest import.

Ryan Lochte

He's been swimming in Michael Phelps's wake for years, but Ryan Lochte is poised for a marketing breakout in 2012, thanks to the London Summer Olympics. Lochte was one of the hottest names at the end of 2011 as sponsors finalized their Olympic brand ambassador lists. His impressive sponsorship portfolio includes Gatorade, Speedo, Gillette, and Ralph Lauren. Having won five gold medals at the 2011 world championships, Lochte took home all major Swimmer of the Year awards. A strong showing in London will result in more gold medals and a spot in next year's Power 100.

Andrew Luck

There's always extra pressure for a sports prospect designated as a "can't miss." With the added hype, however, comes marketing opportunities other athletes can only dream of. Such is the scenario for Andrew Luck, the Stanford quarterback who is almost certain to be the No. 1 pick by the Indianapolis Colts in April's NFL Draft. The biggest question about Luck isn't whether he'll succeed but whether he'll even play. The Colts first have to decide what to do with Peyton Manning as he attempts a comeback from career-threatening neck surgery. If the Colts hand their QB reins to Luck, he can only hope to emulate the Packers' Aaron Rodgers, who also took over for a legendary quarterback (Brett Favre) and worked his way up to No. 2 in the Power 100 ... albeit not in his rookie season.

Li Na

One of the biggest endorsement beneficiaries in 2011 was tennis sensation Li Na. Because of Li's immense popularity in her native China, the 2011 French Open winner last year signed more than \$40 million worth of sponsorship deals with Haagen-Dazs, Mercedes-Benz, and Rolex. Although she's on pace to become the highest-earning woman in pro sports as early as this year, Li still has a way to go to increase her awareness in the U.S. A disappointing first-round exit at the U.S. Open prevented her from more exposure to American sports fans. Nevertheless, Li finished just outside the cusp of this year's Power 100.

Brian Finkel has served as creative director of Horrow Sports Ventures since 2008. For more on the business of sports, follow him on Twitter @thefinktank.