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## Sneaker Cents

By Sean Gregory

Walk into Steve & Barry's sprawling New York City store, and a perplexing sign greets you: DUE TO LIMITED SUPPLY AND TO BE FAIR TO ALL CUSTOMERS, STARBURY FOOTWEAR IS LIMITED TO TEN PAIRS PER PERSON, PER DAY. Yeah, right. Ten pairs of quality, star-endorsed basketball shoes? Don't you need a second mortgage for that?

Not since Steve & Barry's, the fast-growing retailer, and Stephon Marbury, the oddball NBA point guard, got behind the Starbury brand. Their message: You don't have to break the bank for a sweet pair of sneaks.

For years, ridiculously priced brand-name shoes have dominated athletic footwear: LeBron James' new shoe, from Nike, costs \$140; the latest Air Jordans rise to \$175. In fact, kids have been killed for the latest "cool" sneaker. But the Starburys, sold exclusively at Steve & Barry's, cost just \$14.98, and consumers have been scooping them up like shrimp at a buffet. In the two months after their August 2006 debut, Steve & Barry's sold over 3 million pairs. And the cheap-shoe love has lasted. "C'mon, this is the best thing that has happened in a long time," says Curtis Washington, 44, before bouncing out of a store with five Starbury boxes.

More millionaire athletes are joining this anti-Nike movement. Chicago Bulls center Ben Wallace will release his \$14.98 Big Ben shoe under the Starbury label on Nov. 5. In a true coup, Steve & Barry's also signed tennis star Venus Williams to market a line of shoes and clothing called EleVen. On a scale of 1 to 10, Williams boasts, "It's a step above the best." EleVen debuts Nov. 15; nothing is over \$20.

The Starbury brand has helped raise the Steve & Barry's profile. The retailer is known for its cheap

casual and college-themed clothes and was looking for a way into athletic footwear when it got word that Marbury also wanted to market an inexpensive shoe. The privately held company had 120 outlets before the Starburys launched; it will have 270 by year-end. Its president, Andy Todd, admits margins are "tight" on a \$15 sneaker, but the company controls costs by spending little on advertising, for example--letting the stars generate the buzz.

Should Nike be worried? Both Nike and Adidas say the Starburys haven't cut into sales, so the big boys have no plans for cheap sneaks. These companies insist their \$100-plus kicks offer extra features that help a player's performance. "It would be tough for us to go to that price point because consumers expect so much from our product," says Travis Gonzalez, an Adidas basketball spokesman.

And Steve & Barry's faces hurdles of its own. EleVen should score, but Wallace, 33, is past his prime. Then there's the Marbury mystery. He has always baffled fans with his dual talents for driving to the hoop and saying loopy things, like when he called himself the best point guard in the league (not by a long shot). Now he's baffling Steve & Barry's. Marbury has a financial stake in Big Ben's success, but Venus Williams stands on her own. She has won six Grand Slams, after all. Still, Marbury is irked. "I'm doing sneakers, so she should have been under my line," he says. "But obviously, that didn't happen." The company, clearly surprised by Marbury's comments, decided not to respond.

It's somewhat amazing that Marbury has any endorsements given his brutal off-season in which he 1) defended Michael Vick's dog-fighting (later recanted), 2) told an interviewer he wanted to "see the spit on your mouth" during a bizarre TV appearance and 3) admitted in a sexual-harassment trial against his coach, Isiah Thomas, that he called a New York Knicks executive a "bitch" and had an extramarital tryst with a Knicks intern. What's the problem? says Marbury. "My sneakers aren't going anywhere, and they're still affordable," he says. "People aren't going to stop living."

He's probably right. At \$15, anyone can sell these sneakers. Give Marbury credit for being the first.

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