Under Armour is using Nike's strategies better than Nike

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By signing stars like Stephen Curry, Under Armour borrowed a page from Nike's playbook -- and it's working. Photo: EPA

Nike used to eat companies like Under Armour for lunch.

Over the years, Converse, Reebok, Adidas and a host of lightweight wannabes each tried to knock Phil Knight's Swoosh off its pedestal — using technology, popular athletes as pitchmen and testosterone-fueled marketing campaigns.

They all failed.

But Knight may find the 19-year-old Under Armour a little tough to shake.

The company, founded by 42-year-old CEO Kevin Plank, is copying a page from Knight's marketing playbook — signing star athletes as pitchmen and plastering its logo on the uniforms of top college teams.

But Plank has sort of out-Knighted Knight.

Under Armour has under contract Jordan Spieth, the hottest golfer in the world, ranked No. 2. Tiger Woods, Nike's highest-profile golfer, is ranked No. 258.

Under Armour also has the hottest NBA star, Stephen Curry, to offset Nike's all world talent LeBron James.

On the business side, Under Armour shares have outdistanced Nike's over the past year, rising 64 percent to Nike's 46 percent.

Plank also signed super model Gisele Bundchen to appeal to women.

"It's a well-curated group of aspirational athletes and models," retail strategist Melissa Gonzalez told The Post. "It sells the story of inspiration."

Other rivals pale in comparison. Reebok never reached this point because they couldn't figure out how to connect with customers — and Adidas didn't excel because they offered so many contrasting trends, brand-building expert Denise Lee Yohn noted.

"Under Armour has successfully built a strong brand by engaging certain market segments really well," Yohn told The Post.

The retailer is able to do what past sporting apparel brands couldn't because its founder has stuck around without leaving things to committees and directors, according to The Retail Doctor CEO Bob Phibbs.

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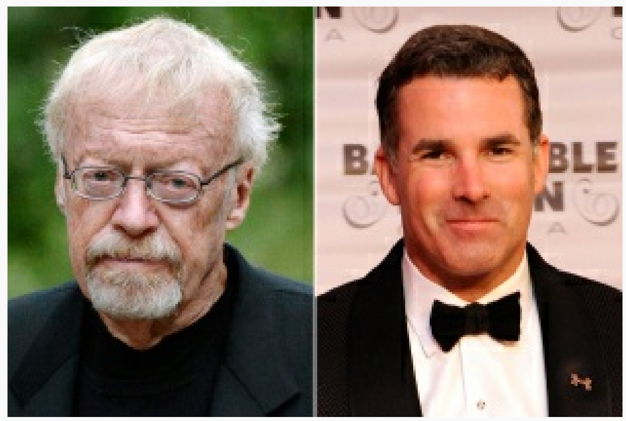

Nike founder Phil Knight (left) and Under Armour's Kevin Pkank.Photo: Getty Images; AP

"They are scaling up so quickly because their founder is extremely competitive," Phibbs told The Post.

Coincidentally, Knight announced his plan to step down last month after a 51-year career with Nike. The company will find out if it can be as competitive without the founder's DNA walking its C suite.

To be sure, Under Armour's $3.1 billion in revenue is one-tenth of Nike's $30.1 billion — and Nike's 40 percent market share and relationship with retailers is rock-solid.

In fact, Nike's $3.9 billion in cash on hand is more than Under Armour's total revenue — so catching up to the champ will not be easy for Plank.

But a well-financed, well-run rival to Nike should make things interesting in the post-Knight era — for investors and consumers.

Under Armour should stay a popular company, but won't catch up to Nike for another 20 to 30 years, Morningstar analyst Paul Swinand said.

"Nike has the advantage of years of history before the conception of Under Armour in 1996 and has a wide gap in both US and international market share," Gonzalez told The Post.

Under Armour shares gained 10 cents on Friday to close at $96.05. Nike shares fell 0.8 percent to $113.04.