

Why Sha'Carri Richardson could be more valuable to sponsors after her failed drug test

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Before her dreams of competing at the Tokyo Olympics went up in smoke last week, Sha'Carri Richardson stood on the precipice of a life-changing payday.

America's fastest woman had begun to draw attention from deep-pocketed corporate sponsors intrigued by her blend of speed, style and showmanship.

At 21, Richardson blew away the competition in the women's 100 meters at U.S. Olympic Trials, solidifying herself as a contender to win gold in her sport's glamour race. She also ran with lash extensions, flowing fire-orange hair and impossibly long acrylic fingernails, evoking memories of America's most celebrated sprinter from a bygone era, Florence Griffith Joyner.

After Richardson won her semifinal heat in a torrid 10.64 seconds, an NBC on-track interviewer asked her, "What do you want the world to know about you?" Responded Richardson with a hint of a smile: "I just want the world to know that I'm *that* girl."

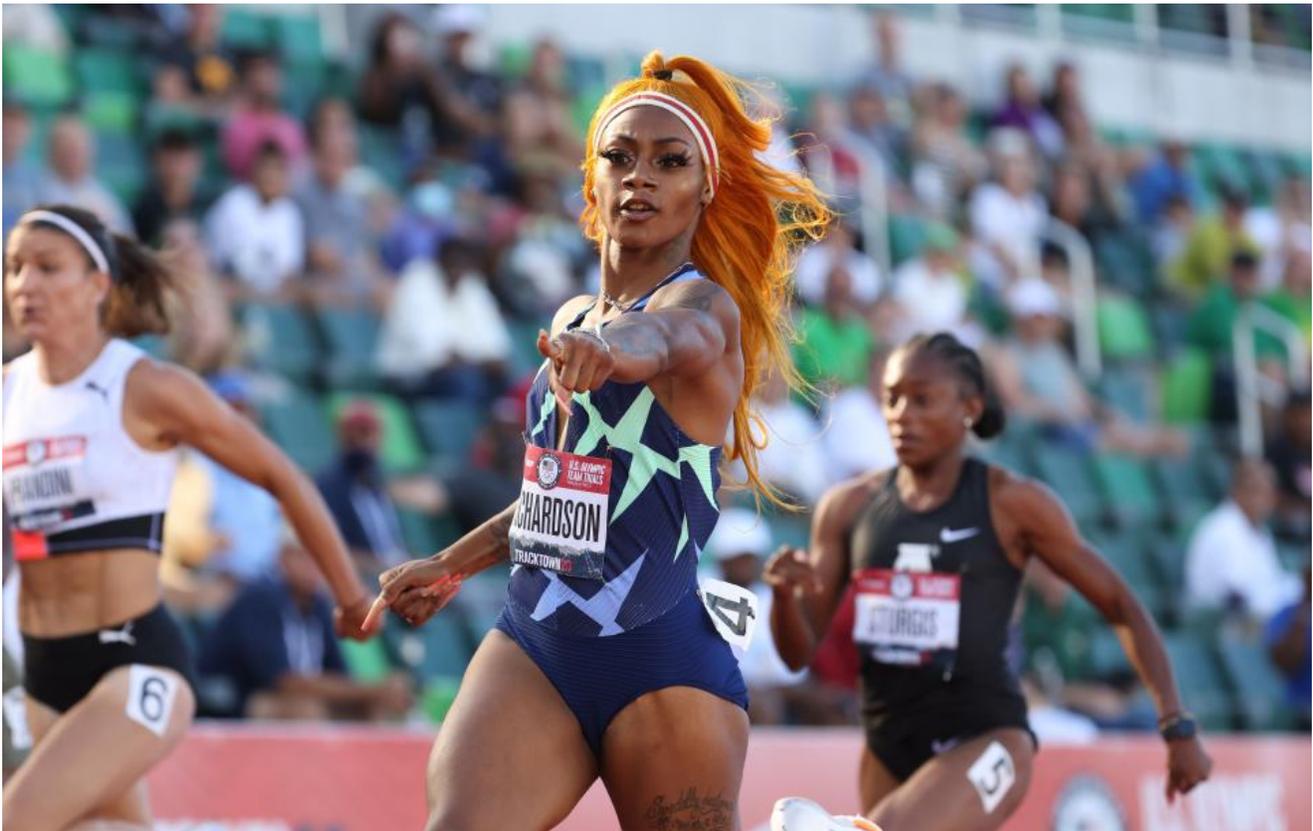
"Between her incredible athletic prowess, her look and her personality, she has lots of attributes that stand out," said Doug Shabelman, CEO of Burns Entertainment, a marketing firm that matches celebrities with endorsement opportunities. "You put a gold medal around her neck, and she is potentially generationally wealthy."

That massive opportunity slipped away from Richardson when she tested positive for marijuana and lost her place on the U.S. Olympic team. But she may yet get the chance to recover that lost income. Sports business experts told Yahoo Sports that, counterintuitive as it may seem, Richardson is actually *more* marketable today than she was a week ago because her name recognition has skyrocketed, the attention has been mostly sympathetic and marijuana use no longer carries the stigma that it once did.

In an interview with the Today Show last Friday, Richardson said that she ingested marijuana days before the Olympic trials after learning of the death of her biological mother from a "complete stranger." She described the experience as "triggering" and "nerve-shocking," and said it sent her into "a state of emotional panic."

Whereas legions of supporters have questioned why she faces an Olympic ban for taking a non-performance-enhancing drug that was legal in the state where she competed, Richardson hasn't blamed anyone but herself. She instead has apologized to fans and sponsors and taken full responsibility, admitting that she was aware marijuana appeared on the World Anti-Doping Association's list of banned substances when she took it.

"While she was one of the most popular Olympic hopefuls during the Trials, the pot ban has turned her into a household name and face and her classy handling of the situation has only raised her public image," said Bob Dorfman, creative director at San Francisco-based Baker Street Advertising. "She's now more valuable to her current sponsors, she can land new ad deals and she can charge more for appearance fees, autographs and the like."



Sha'Carri Richardson competes in the Women's 100 meters at the 2020 U.S. Olympic Track & Field Team Trials. (Andy Lyons/Getty Images)

Sympathy, not outrage

If Richardson is truly more marketable after her failed drug test, then a big reason is that many more Americans are aware of her now than ever before. The outcry over Richardson's Olympic ban has catapulted a headliner in a niche sport to mainstream relevance.

Richardson boasted 124,000 Twitter followers in late June. Today, she has nearly four times that many.

Richardson eclipsed 1 million Instagram followers after winning the 100 at U.S. Trials. Now she has 2.1 million.

An online petition to allow Richardson to run at the Olympics has nearly 600,000 signatures. The list of celebrities to express support for Richardson on social media includes anyone from Seth Rogen and Cardi B, to Patrick Mahomes and Gabrielle Union, to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Megan Rapinoe.

“Weed is great for many a thing,” Union wrote, “but running faster isn’t one of them.”

Quipped Rogen: “If weed made you fast, I’d be FloJo.”

To quantify Richardson’s publicity boost, Yahoo Sports asked Apex Marketing Group to analyze the media exposure she received and assess its value. What the study revealed was that from the evening of July 1 to the evening of July 6, Richardson netted more than \$40 million worth of exposure via digital and print news articles, TV coverage, radio broadcasts and social media.

Meltwater, a leading provider in social analytics, compared the volume of social and editorial content concerning Richardson and four-time gold medal winner Simone Biles, America’s most high-profile Olympian. From June 30 to July 6, Richardson received 12 times as many mentions as Biles, according to the Meltwater study.

A deluge of publicity from testing positive for marijuana once was certain to harm an athlete’s image. Kellogg’s withdrew financial support from Michael Phelps in 2009 after a photo surfaced of him smoking from a bong at a college party. And running back Ricky Williams has estimated that he lost between \$5 million and \$10 million in salary and endorsements after a flurry of positive tests for marijuana stalled his NFL career.

A little over a decade later, Richardson’s failed drug test seems to have inspired more sympathy than outrage. Nike stood by Richardson last week, praising her “honesty and accountability.” In a statement announcing her exclusion from the Olympic team, USA Track and Field said that it was “incredibly sympathetic” toward Richardson and argued for reevaluation of rules related to marijuana.

Colleen Bee, a marketing professor at Oregon State, attributed the compassionate response to Richardson providing an explanation that many fans identified with and “perceived as genuine.” Richardson wasn’t caught taking bong rips at a party. She said marijuana was her means of coping with emotional trauma.

Aimee Huff, another Oregon State marketing professor, said that the support Richardson has received is also a byproduct of America’s changing perception of marijuana. In a recent poll conducted by Pew Research Center, more than 9 in 10 U.S. adults said marijuana should be legal for medical use and 6 in 10 said that it should be permitted for recreational use as well.

No longer is marijuana still too taboo for even mainstream advertising. How else do you explain the likes of Burger King, Jimmy John's and Ben & Jerry's marketing to stoners on 4/20? Or Snoop Dogg asking Martha Stewart to "pass me some of that green stuff" during a recent Tostitos Super Bowl commercial hawking the brand's creamy avocado salsa?

"This is a case where the law is lagging behind public opinion," Huff said. "Public support for decriminalization and legalization is fairly high and is increasing in spite of cannabis being highly stigmatized for decades. Yet, our social institutions — the courts, the justice system, labor laws, and the Olympic organizers — still regard cannabis use as unacceptable, criminal, and worthy of punishment."

Is the time right?

Even though Richardson now has the clout to promote mental health awareness or fight for the legalization of marijuana, sports business experts are split on whether the time is right for her to pursue endorsements.

To some, the window to strike is now with Richardson fresh on consumers' minds, the Tokyo Olympics only two weeks away and mental health a hot-button issue. Dorfman theorized that "any cannabis-related business would love to sign Sha'Carri, as would most fast food, snack food and beverage brands."

"I'd also expect a company like Nike could create some very powerful — and perhaps controversial — social messaging around Richardson's suspension and masterful response to it," Dorfman added.

To others, Richardson's smarter move would be to lie low for now and reemerge after this controversy passes. Any Richardson-centric ad campaign during the upcoming Olympics would have to focus on marijuana, not her athletic feats. Richardson would also risk backlash that she was trying to overshadow the athletes competing in Tokyo.

"If I were her, I would try to make the story go away," said Denise Lee Yohn, a brand leadership consultant and author of the book "What Great Brands Do." "From everything I've read, she wants to be known as one of the greatest athletes in her sport. She has a great future ahead of her as a sponsored athlete, but making too big of a deal of this would be a mistake. It makes much more sense to try to reclaim the story after she comes back and wins on the world's stage."

The decision for advertisers is also tricky.

Any national brands that align with Richardson this summer might appeal to a younger, edgier demographic yet they would also be taking a calculated risk. A significant part of the population remains opposed to legalizing marijuana and doesn't approve of Richardson's use of it.

“Sometimes brands have to risk alienating people in order to stand for something,” Yohn said, “but in this case I don’t think it’s worth it. You’re opening yourself up to a lot of risk.”

The conventional wisdom may be that Richardson squandered a big opportunity by missing out on the Olympics, but experts believe her money-making window is far from shut. They say that Richardson has a chance to be a staple of future ad campaigns, whether it’s this summer, next year or during the buildup to the 2024 Olympics.

At the end of every Olympics, Shabelman fields calls from reporters asking him to assess the endorsement potential of the most prominent athletes. He always cautions that it takes more than a gold medal to make it big.

“The reality is outside of Olympic time, track and field isn’t something that penetrates the culture on a daily basis,” Shabelman said. “It takes a Usain Bolt, a Jackie Joyner-Kersey, somebody who does insane things.”

In Richardson, Shabelman sees an athlete who can one day break through the clutter. She has the speed, the look, the charisma — and now the compelling redemption arc to go with it.

“She might be able to do it because there is a bigger story around her,” Shabelman said. “She really is a marketing dream. If you’re her agent, it’s there for the taking.”