

Tiger Woods rivals Jordan, Ruth as endorser

By Isadore Barmash

NEW YORK, Sept 15 (Reuters) - Tiger Woods, who this week extended his marketing tie with sports gear giant Nike Inc. in one of the biggest endorsement packages ever, may surpass Babe Ruth, Michael Jordan or Pele as a celebrity endorser, sports marketers said on Friday.

Woods, who has won three major golf titles and nine tournaments this year, on Thursday signed a five-year pact with Nike that is worth far more than his current five-year deal, estimated at \$40 million.

Deals like the new Tiger-Nike pact "certainly pay off for both sides," said Mark Roesler, chairman and chief executive of CMG Worldwide, a sports marketer and agent in Indianapolis. "What everyone tends to look for is an instant association of a product with a well-known celebrity which tends to increase the name recognition of the product. Both the company and the endorser get benefits from their association."

He added: "The more famous you are, the more you transcend the sport you are in and this lasts a long time." Roesler cited the late Jackie Robinson, who broke the racial barrier by becoming the first black American to become a professional baseball player. "We still represent Jackie, whose fame still continues almost unabated," he said.

Marketing experts praise the youthful 24-year-old Woods not merely for his golf skills, but also for the general appeal of his mild, even self-deprecating personality, which

they say has the effect of holding fans in thrall even when he has a bad day.

This quality, which creates a multi-level attraction, adds a layer of benefit to advertisers and sponsors, who derive not only dollar and sales gains, but "panache, (and) a glowing image" that yields institutional advantages, said Jeff Klein, a partner in the New York law firm Weil, Gotshal and Manges who represents various sports figures.

"This can only be true when the marketing centres around a unique personality, like that of Tiger and Michael Jordan, who are on a very short list," Klein said.

Roesler said he expects the newest Tiger-Nike deal, which starts in September 2001 when his current contract expires, to be unprecedented in eventual earnings. "The two deals certainly represent the greatest in dollar volume, so that the potential for Tiger appears to be great indeed."

Bob Wood, president of Nike Golf, declined to confirm reports that the deal would pay Woods \$100 million. But he told Reuters: "I haven't seen one bigger than this, and I've been at Nike for 25 years."

Asked what he considered the potential of the latest deal, Mark Steinberg, Tiger Woods' agent at IMG Management in Cleveland, said, "It's really impossible to speculate on intelligently at this stage because it's so encompassing and expansive. We have to make sure that both Tiger and Nike feel

good about it and they do."

Because of his skill and personality, Tiger has transcended his game, Steinberg said. "He's no longer just a golfer but he is, in my view, the greatest athlete in the world today."

How does he compare with Michael Jordan?

"I don't think it makes much sense to compare him with Michael," Steinberg said. "Jordan didn't try to be the next Muhammad Ali and Tiger Woods certainly isn't trying to be the next Michael Jordan."

Roesler, who says that Woods has risen above his sport, says the view that golf is not as popular in the United States as basketball does not limit his appeal or ability to move Nike's clothes and golf balls and potential golf clubs.

"The association with Nike isn't just based on those products," he said, "but on the legendary appeal of athletes like Tiger and Michael Jordan, who bring a larger-than-life role to the product. Not that many women as men play basketball but Michael is revered by many women. That's happening to Tiger Woods."

Roesler recalled the comment by Babe Ruth almost 80 years ago, when the great slugger was flush from signing a new contract, and a reporter asked him, "Babe, doesn't it bother you when you think that you are making more money than the president of the United States?"

"Well," replied the Babe, "I had a better year than he did."