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Parker becomes face of The League

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By Kyle Stack
Special to ESPN.com
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Professional athletes are known for using a large amount of discretion in how they outfit themselves on the court or field. So, when an athlete invests money in an athletic shoe and apparel company, it says something about his or her trust in that brand. That's what has formed the relationship between Cleveland Cavaliers guard Anthony Parker and The League CEO James Harris.

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Fernando Medina/NBAE/Getty Images The League investor Anthony Parker wears last year's model of the company's shoes.

Parker, 35, is in his eighth NBA season of a nomadic basketball career that has taken him to four NBA teams, the now-disbanded Continental Basketball Association, and stints in Israel and Italy. Given no assurances of how long his basketball career would last, Parker found it necessary to think about what he would do after his playing days.

A chemistry major at Bradley University, Parker's business knowledge was restricted earlier in his career to what he observed around him. He saw players opening car washes and restaurants; he even looked into the viability of owning a fast food restaurant. Nothing captured his attention. Back in the NBA in 2006 after six seasons overseas, Parker was still searching for a sound business investment.

"The more you read [about business], the more interested you get in trying to learn from people in other businesses," Parker said during a recent phone interview. "But I didn't know where an opportunity would come from."

Harris also was searching for a new path. What separated him from Parker was that he was hoping that path would form from an existing venture -- [The League](#). The company was founded by Harris in 2000 after he met ex-NBA player Jalen Rose [who is now an ESPN commentator] through a mutual friend, Norm Nixon, another ex-NBAer who starred on the Los Angeles Lakers squads of the early 1980s. Harris figured Rose was the marketable player he needed to start his company.

Harris, a former basketball player and finance major at the University of Texas-Arlington in the late '80s, was confident his basketball background, business know-how and NBA player connections would transform The League into a successful brand. He also thought he had the perfect name for his brand of shoes and apparel. "We thought The League was a great name, but nobody ever trademarked it," Harris said by phone from his office in Los Angeles.

Rose and other ex-NBAers Antonio Davis and Sam Mitchell were shareholders in the company from the beginning. The League launched in major retail stores in 2002 and had moderate success. However, by 2004, Harris found out what it's like to be an up-and-comer in the multibillion-dollar basketball shoe industry. He said

a major brand had a problem co-existing with The League in a production facility in China and kicked it out.

Harris spent years searching for another facility, eventually settling on another shoe manufacturing plant in China. The company's apparel is produced at several plants throughout the United States, Mexico, the Dominican Republic and, in the future, Haiti. "A lot of times you'll find that there are substandard factories," Harris said, emphasizing that a company must avoid those facilities. "You can't put out garbage shoes, because if you do, your name is going to be ruined."

In 2008, Harris and Parker came together when Mitchell, at the time Parker's coach on the Toronto Raptors, introduced them by phone. Parker explained he was pleasantly surprised by Harris' plan for The League. He was an investor a month after that first phone call, although he preferred not to disclose the size of his investment.

"It was about the vision of the company and making sure that people [who] were involved with the company had the same vision he had," said Parker, who has a \$2.85 million salary with the Cavs this season. "He's very passionate about what he does and what this brand can be."

“



It was about the vision of the company and making sure that people [who] were involved with the company had the same vision he [The League CEO James Harris] had. He's very passionate about what he does and what this brand can be.

” -- *Anthony Parker*

Parker acknowledged he didn't know much about the shoe industry before his investment in The League. He said that he, like most professional basketball players, didn't previously take into consideration the material and production costs associated with the gear he wore.

For instance, the most expensive parts of the shoe are the molds for the outsole and midsole. It's something Parker never thought of until he began asking Harris more questions in 2009 during their text and phone conversations. Harris said Parker started learning more about the company during that time, when Harris would give him long-winded answers to questions Parker had about the ins and outs of the basketball shoe industry.

Parker continued asking him for more information, so they began discussing other companies' strategies, how to locate reputable factories, what to communicate with buyers in the United States and how to market products. Harris had him meet designers, retailers and marketers who worked with The League. "He got really into it," Harris said. "That's what I liked -- he was hands-on."

Parker is enthusiastic that with The League's official relaunch of its shoes and apparel this spring, he will realize the process of helping build a brand from the ground up. "This is an opportunity to get ownership in something," Parker said.

Harris has been talking to several NBA players who possibly will join Parker as spokesmen for The League before the end of the 2010-11 season, although Parker likely will remain the face of the brand. Harris wouldn't reveal the names of the players because of the sensitivity of the negotiations. But he said he's happy with what he called the company's inside-out approach of signing NBA players before gaining a sizable market share.

"We want guys in the NBA understanding this is a really great product, then having the consumer looking at it

and saying, "It must be pretty good, because they have four or five guys wearing shoes," Harris said.

That association with NBA players, along with making quality apparel at affordable prices, is how Harris expects to compete with brands such as Nike and adidas. He said he'll have a valuation of The League just before the brand's new shoes go into production Jan. 15. They'll retail for \$80, and Parker, who's wearing last year's model, will be sporting them by the time they're released.

Parker has a goal for the new year -- to delve more into The League's inner workings. He said he'll begin learning about how products are distributed and the process by which a shoe is constructed.

Once the rebranding effort is underway this spring, Parker hopes to be in the middle of expanding his knowledge on how the company operates. "It's going to be good for the company and fun to learn about."

Kyle Stack is a freelance writer in New York City who also contributes to ESPN The Magazine.

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