Swimmer Phelps, the face of the Olympic Games, also mug of corporate empire

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Second in a series of previews,

leading to the Olympics.

HE’S 23 GOING on . . . well, it's hard to tell.

See, Michael Phelps doesn't really project any age.

Or personality.

Like Tiger Woods, he is a corporate machine whose template was Michael Jordan: First, be untouchable; then, be unreachable; and, finally, sell, sell, sell.

Phelps, who has broken 25 world records since he started doing it as a 15-year-old in 2001, is the United States' sanctioned face of the Olympics.

How much so? Well, rights holder NBC convinced the International Olympic Committee to hold the swimming heats in the evening, Beijing local time, then hold the finals in the morning so it could feature Phelps in its nighttime TV coverage in the United States.

Gymnast Shawn Johnson might be cuter and more personable, not to mention more significant; aged Dara Torres (41) and charismatic Ryan Lochte might be better swimming stories; but Phelps is on the cover of this week’s Sports Illustrated (and in the ads, too).

In the pool, he’s everywhere you want to be, which is good, since worldwide Olympic sponsor Visa is also Phelps' card (and cap) of choice. He broke a USOC rule by displaying a Visa logo swimming cap at the trials earlier this month, but, not surprisingly, he was not disqualified.

After all, Phelps is pursuing eight gold medals, hoping to break Mark Spitz' 36-year-old single-Games record of seven. Omega, the official timekeeper of the Olympic Games, will record Phelps' results in China . . . and Omega is the official wristwatch of Michael Phelps.

Swimwear giant Speedo couldn't hope for a more appropriate spokesman for its slick new LZR suit, which, worn by the best in the world, has been a catalyst for the shattering of almost 50 world records since its introduction in February.
"It's an honor to be able to wear the fastest suit known to mankind," Phelps said. "I've worn a Speedo my entire life, from age 7 to 23. I've always worn it and it's the only thing I know. Speedo has always been a part of my life."

PowerBar hasn't had Phelps forever - only since 2000, when he competed in Sydney as a 15-year-old - but, as any sports TV junkie knows, Phelps gnaws on them, since Phelps' corny "Fear is good" commercial now saturates airtime.

And, apparently, when chocolate/peanut butter flavored, one-word pseudo food isn't enough, one-word protein drinks from PureSport fill the gaps.

Oh yes; this just in from AT & T Wireless: Michael Phelps concentrates when he's getting ready to swim - the way he concentrates when he shaves.

Heck, you can almost see Phelps without his new Fu Manchu, posing, postshave, in a dark, tailored suit, the way Tiger and Roger (and soccer star Thierry Henry) do in their Gillette spot.

Indeed, Phelps emulates their greatness.

"When watching the highlights of Tiger or Roger, seeing the highlights of those guys and how they carry themselves and how consistent they are," he said. "We're all the same way. I'm a creature of habit. I'm sure they go about every tournament or match as if it's the biggest. They're probably the same as me: I don't like to lose and they don't either. You can pick up on a few things here and there and see how they carry themselves and how they focus."

Like Tiger, who has Jack Nicklaus, and Roger, who has Pete Sampras, Phelps has the specter of Spitz and the seven gold medals that hung around the mustachioed one's chest after the 1972 Games.

Phelps' seven gold medals at the 2007 world championships tied Spitz' international meet record. He was denied a probable eighth because the U.S. medley relay team was disqualified in a preliminary race when a teammate left the blocks one-hundredth of a second too early.

At the trials in Omaha, Neb., earlier this month, Spitz said he believed Phelps can win eight; that Phelps was not nearly as prepared for the trials as he will be for the Games. Contrarily, Ian Thorpe, Australia's retired superstar, recently said Phelps probably won't even tie Spitz' mark of seven golds; that the competition is too stiff.

"I don't think anything is too high . . . You never know what can happen," Phelps said. "The only person I can worry about is myself. If I can prepare the best I can, that's all I can ask."

If he wins seven, he can ask for the $1 million bonus Speedo has put up - a bonus that stands from the 2004 Games, when Phelps won six gold medals and two bronzes.

Not that he needs the money.

His seven-figure endorsement totals allow him to live a comfortable life. He lives a reclusive
life in Ann Arbor, Mich., in order to be close to Bob Bowman, his coach since he was a gangly 11-year-old from Baltimore, painfully growing into his 6-4 frame, size-14 shoes and 6-7 wingspan. Four years ago, Bowman left the North Baltimore Aquatic Club near Baltimore where he coached Phelps to coach at Michigan. Phelps, of course, followed (Bowman has left Michigan to become the director of the North Baltimore Club; Phelps will follow him back).

The product of a broken home, raised by his mother with two older sisters, Phelps views Bowman as the dominant male figure in his life. Bowman helped control Phelps' petulance - and he also tied Phelps' tie for his first dance, at age 13.

"It's rare to be able to find a coach/athlete combination that work together so well," Phelps said. "We're more than an athlete/coach combination: We're friends."

Perhaps more than that. Phelps professes to have no input on his competition schedule, and Bowman's grueling training methods are the stuff of natatorium nightmares.

Then again, Tiger's secretive road to greatness routinely incorporated more effort than the rest of the PGA Tour's combined sweat and strain. And, like the maturing Tiger, Phelps wears his corporate coat of Teflon comfortably.

"Right now I'm more relaxed than I was in '04. Going through everything in the past 4 years has helped me prepare better for these Games," he said. "Last time, I was a deer in headlights. I had never gotten that much attention from media."

He has it now - and he knows how to avoid it.

"When I am away from the pool, usually I'm on my couch watching TV, playing video games and sleeping," Phelps said.

Certainly, while gaming or being entertained, he's taking advantage of Matsunichi electronic gear; after all, the gadget company signed him for 4 years and a reported $4 million in 2005.

Not exactly Tiger money, but hey . . . *

Tomorrow: Rowing.

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