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The Biz: Laila Ali Goes From Boxing To Kellogg's Cereal Boxes

June 02, 2008

LAILA ALI, who added some punch to her promotional power with Dancing with the Stars, is now fighting for more exposure via deals with Kellogg, Nickelodeon and Subway.

The boxing champ and daughter of the legendary Muhammad Ali, Laila Ali has seen her profile skyrocket since the ABC dancing contest (she was a third-place finalist), with a hosting gig on NBC's American Gladiators and regular segments on CBS' Early Show. She and her reps are in discussion for various licensing deals, and she's set for more rounds of exposure via 5 million boxes of Kellogg's Smart Start cereal, a new series on MTV Networks and a Subway sponsorship that will focus on healthy choices while eating for two (Ali's pregnant with her first child).

"She's an elite world champion athlete, so health and fitness is central to who she is," said Eric Kaufman, president of Premier Sports & Entertainment, Los Angeles, which shepherds Ali's promotions and endorsements. "But she has a unique selling point in that she's relatable to a lot of demos."

While it may seem like she's everywhere come fall, Kaufman says the strategy is to focus on building her as a long-term brand in areas like wellness, cooking, beauty and mom-to-be products, apparel and fitness gear.

Ali's appearance in Smart Start's "Get Up & Go" promotion in August springs from her ongoing deal with adidas. The cereal boxes will direct consumers to adidas.com/training where they can watch the workouts of Ali and other athletes and get tips from professional trainers. They also can win adidas gear and a chance to go to the Athletes' Performance Institute, training ground of world-class athletes.

The sports marketer chose Ali because "combining her relevance as an icon to women while leveraging adidas training content allows us to encourage consumers to be active in addition to eating healthy," said Stephen Pierpoint, vp-sports performance at adidas America, Portland, Ore.

Alongside her co-hosting duties with Hulk Hogan on American Gladiators, now in its second season, Ali will be at the center of Student Body on MTV Networks' The N in August. The show, like The Biggest Loser for teens, aims to transform a group of kids through exercise, healthy eating, confidence building and volunteer work. It's produced by Reveille, a company known for its brand integrations. Ali's existing sponsors could turn up in the unscripted show, as could others that reinforce the makeover message. There's also licensing potential from that series, with The Biggest Loser blazing that trail in categories as varied as cookbooks, workout plans and ready-made meals.


The Subway deal was inked before Ali's pregnancy, presenting an interesting situation for the marketer, who's decided to delay the co-promotion slightly but take advantage of the life stage that Ali is now in. A campaign later this year is likely to carry "eat fresh" health and fitness messages tailored to women who are expecting and for new moms. Celebrity licensing has become ubiquitous, with everyone from Donald Trump to Cesar "The Dog Whisperer" Millan plying their wares. It accounted for \$3.4 billion in retail sales in '07, according to industry tracker the Licensing Letter.

Though it's a crowded field, it can have a huge upside, "but you have to be discerning," said licensing veteran Gary Caplan, president of Gary Caplan Inc., Studio City, Calif. "You can't put the celebrity in contrived or opportunistic deals." Ali is considered one of the country's top female athlete endorsers—Maria Sharapova and golf pro Michelle Wie are at the top—with some \$4 million in deals with adidas, Vaseline and Vicks. feedback@brandweek.com

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