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OUT THERE



COOL MILLIONS

If you can rip, you might be blue-chip. Just ask Steve Astephen, the superagent who's turning action-sports madmen into big-league cash machines. **BY JOSH DEAN**

ON A WALL AT THE END OF A BEIGE-CARPETED HALLWAY inside a bland building within earshot of Legoland, in Carlsbad, California, a small gold plaque announces the home of THE FAMILIE—ALTERNATIVE MARKETING AND ATHLETE MANAGEMENT.

Step through the door and you'll see a Red Bull mini-fridge and an explosion of action-sports imagery. On one wall hangs a poster of 29-year-old skateboarder Bob Burnquist, upside down as he performs a 360-degree loop inside a full pipe. On another hangs the scuffed-up skateboard of four-time X Games skate-vert (that's halfpipe) champion Bucky Lasek, 33, next to an array of framed jerseys from the current superstars of motocross: Travis Pastrana, the 22-year-old high-flying freestyle king who last year famously nailed a double backflip; Carey Hart, 30, the fiancé of pop singer Pink and the flamboyant originator of the motorcycle backflip; and 23-year-old Chad Reed, an Aussie and 2004 nominee for ESPN's Action Sports Athlete of the Year. Each is signed with some version of "Thanks, Steve, for making my dreams come true."

Steve is the Familie's founder, Steve Astephen (*AST-a-fin*), a lanky 34-year-old with a long chin, light brown hair, and a love of oversize golf apparel. He's the walking embodiment of a punk agent: He's got a blacked-out AMG Mercedes, hair spiked toward the heavens with gel, and a tattoo on his right forearm that reads *SELF MADE*.

He's also rich. In January 2005, he finalized the sale of his sports agency to the Los Angeles-based Wasserman Media Group (WVG). These days, as president of action sports at WVG, he still maintains autonomy over the management of his athletes.

It's a warm, sunny day in May, and Astephen is headed to lunch when his cell phone rings, as it does incessantly. On the line is one of his 50-odd clients, a 17-year-old amateur motocross rider who's just ridden in his first pro race, despite being dreadfully unprepared, out of shape, and unmotivated—in short, a typical teenager. The kid (whose name Astephen asked me not to use) had barely ended a cell-phone call to his girlfriend in time for the race, a nonstop 30-minute sufferfest around a dirt circuit littered with bumps, jumps, and tight turns. By the time he'd dismounted afterwards, his body temperature had spiked, and without knowing it

he'd peed inside his racing suit.

"Dude," Astephen says. "You don't piss yourself if your body is where it needs to be. This is a gnarly sport. I can't be with you during the week, so you have to listen to your parents."

Astephen peppers him with questions: Is he riding the stationary bike? Icing his swollen ankle? "Don't lie to me," he

her son at the race. "Listen, I wanted to smack him around for the way he talked to you, but you can't be down there," he tells her. "Go to the [rival] Honda pits—there are no moms handing out soda."

Astephen softens his tone. "No one gets to the pros because of an agent," he reminds her. "Mom and Dad get you to the big leagues, but we take over from there."

Forget baseball. Astephen's skaters, snowboarders, and BMX RIDERS are the REAL HEROES TO THE KIDS advertisers are chasing the hardest.

says. "You should be icing it, and instead you're out washing your girlfriend's car."

Later, back at the office, Astephen summons Jimmy Button, one of two former motocross pros who help oversee motocross clients, the agency's most lucrative sector. "Jimmy," he says, "can you build our boy up a little? I just spent ten minutes yelling at him."

Then Astephen gets the kid's exasperated mother on the phone. She'd made the mistake of actually trying to speak to

He hangs up and rocks back in his Aeron chair. "I don't need this—to be arguing with a 17-year-old," he says. "But I can't not do it. This kid could be the next Travis Pastrana."

PASTRANA MAKES SEVERAL million dollars a year flipping motorcycles instead of hamburgers, and for that he can thank Astephen, a regular guy who never went to college yet ended up becoming the most powerful agent in the increasingly

important world of alternative sports. In the last decade, Astephen has turned the Familie into the nerve center of a marketing revolution. With the help of his 18 employees, he has made a big business out of the once unknown stars of skateboarding, freestyle BMX riding, snowboarding, and motocross.

According to Marketing Evaluations Inc., which produces the Q Scores survey, a measure of public figures' "familiarity and appeal," skater Tony Hawk, 37, and motocross legend Jeremy McGrath, 34, are two of the top ten most recognizable athletes in the world among 12-to-24-year-olds, the demographic advertisers chase the hardest. This recognition has paved the way for other action-sports stars to grab the limelight and helps explain why, in 2004, Dave Mirra, 31, a BMX rider and Astephen's marquee client, replaced freestyle skier Jonny Moseley as the host of MTV's *Real World/Road Rules Challenge*. Other examples include Carey Hart, who has a TV show, *Inked*, that revolves around the Las Vegas tattoo parlor he owns and operates, and pro skater Bam Margera, 25, the star of MTV's *Viva La Bam*.

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The games these guys play now amount to a multi-billion-dollar industry, a long way from the poorer days of 1998, when Astephen founded the Familie in his Carlsbad garage. Back then, only pro athletes, Olympic gold medalists who could reap millions every four years, and the rare fringe breakout star like then six-time surfing world champ Kelly Slater could hope to attract traditional sports agents—those Armani-clad, cell-phone-wielding obsessives who roam the halls of the big three sports agencies: Washington, D.C.-based SFX Sports Group; International Management Group (IMG), headquartered in New York and Cleveland; and Octagon, with offices in Los Angeles, D.C., and Portland, Maine.

When Astephen started, even current stars like Hawk, whose licensing empire of skateboards, clothes, shoes, and video games reportedly earns him \$9 million a year, and who's now repped by Hollywood's powerhouse Creative Artists Agency, had yet to go big. What Astephen recognized, ahead of almost everyone else, was that there was money to be made representing athletes who weren't

as famous as Hawk, the working-class pros skating and riding under the radar. Astephen instinctively knew that some of them, like Mirra, would turn into high-grossing cultural phenoms.

But unless you skate, snowboard, ride BMX, or surf, don't bother calling Astephen. He has no time for kayakers, rock climbers, or mountain bikers. It's not that those athletes can't make money, he says; it's that he can't make them enough money for his commission—anywhere from 5 to 20 percent—to be worth his while. According to Astephen, companies like Kraft aren't looking to sell to America's kayakers and mountain bikers, fans of expensive sports pursued by relatively few kids. They want skateboarding, which, by contrast, is cheap, can be done anywhere there's pavement, and is one of the fastest-growing pursuits in America, with more than 11.5 million (mostly teenage) participants.

Astephen has no problem, however, expanding into motocross, which is certainly in his best financial interests. The sport's top athletes, like Pastrana and Reed, earn millions in prize money and motorcycle-manufacturer sponsor-

ships, plus millions more from deals for clothing lines, video games, and product endorsements.

In the skate, surf, and BMX worlds, there are only a few megastars—like Hawk, Slater, and Mirra—who clear multiple millions in income. Below this level, the scale slides down to the other top three or four competitors in each sport, who still may earn in excess of \$1 million apiece each year. The next dozen make money in the \$250,000 range—roughly equivalent to the minimum salary for an NFL rookie. These fat paychecks come from contracts with, to name a few, Slim Jim, T-Mobile, Campbell's, Mountain Dew, Target, AT&T, Disney, Nestlé, Oxy, Powerade, SoBe, and Kraft.

Such deals bring in millions of dollars a year for the Familie (or WMG, as Astephen has taken to calling it post-sale), and the lure of that cash has led to the creation of new, competing agencies as the older firms scramble for a cut—Octagon and IMG both now have action-sports divisions, with the former gaining quickly on WMG. It remains to be seen whether this frenzied momentum can continue, but one thing's for

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sure: The glory days are here. When Astephen's athletes hit it big, the first thing he advises is that they "bank a few million." With that, he says, "they'll never have to work again."

ON A STEAMY JUNE afternoon in Louisville, the Dew Action Sports Tour sprawls across the Kentucky Fair & Expo Center. The production includes the Freedom Hall arena, site of the pipe competitions, and the 33,500-seat Papa John's Cardinal Stadium, next door, where the turf is buried under tons of dirt borrowed from the county fair. The dirt has been sculpted into impossibly high jumps for the freestyle motocross (FMX) events. There's a stage for bands and sponsor tents touting Oxy acne medicine and Right Guard antiperspirant—a roll call of solutions to teenage insecurities.

"Huge names in this second heat!" screams the announcer at the BMX venue inside Freedom Hall. It's an obstacle course of ramps, rails, and drops, in

tain Dew, the tour was created to produce a points series much like NASCAR's Nextel Cup. The idea is to have a full-fledged season in which tension mounts, rivalries develop, and young eyeballs are lured to the TV week after week.

"The pro tour for action sports" is the way NBC's 400-plus promos, shotgunned across the network from the *Today* show to *Joey*, billed the concept. It's a big gamble for the network, but even the gray-suited execs know that the popularity of nontraditional events is encroaching fast on classic fare like baseball and hockey. Dick Ebersol, chairman of NBC Universal Sports & Olympics, has said he first realized this in 1998, after watching his kids ignore the summerlong home-run derby between Sammy Sosa and Mark McGwire to practice skateboarding instead.

The tricky part is keeping the tour alive. The landscape is littered with the ghosts of events that have failed to find traction, including the NBC-televized Gravity Games, which was sold to OLN

"There are a lot of COMPANIES WHO HATE ME," Astephen smiles. "Guys who were making 12 grand a year went to 300 GRAND PRETTY QUICK."

which riders are given two minutes to show off their best tricks. Handlebars spin, pedals whip, hands come off bars, and, in some cases, the whole bike is spun and flipped.

The big names include Astephen's clients Mirra and Ryan Nyquist, 26, a Greenville, North Carolina, rider, whom ESPN designated as the world's best action-sports athlete in 2004. Nyquist comes out fast and big but crashes twice while trying to nail an aerial maneuver. Mirra gets the biggest cheers when he rides out to Metallica—only to crash, too. Astephen, running late because of flight delays, has missed everything.

Mirra's score, an 84.5 out of 100, puts him in tenth place, with a shot to sneak into the next day's finals. But then Scotty Cranmer, a 16-year-old from Jackson, New Jersey, rockets down the ramp to the cheeky accompaniment of Britney Spears's "Toxic" and reels off an audacious front flip over the top of a ramp. Mirra's out.

A collaboration between NBC Sports and Clear Channel Communications, backed by a multiyear deal with Moun-

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ASTEPHEN GREW UP in a lower-middle-class family that moved between various blue-collar suburbs in Boston, the oldest of five kids raised by a divorced mother. When he was ten, he got hooked on skiing after his mom took him to a small hill outside the city. In 1988, he finished high school and boarded a bus to Vail, Colorado, with \$150 to his name. Within a year he'd converted to snowboarding and partnered up with his new friend, Jimmy DeLong, another convert to snowboarding whom he met while working as a lifeguard, to open the Other Side, the first snowboard shop in Beaver Creek.

The shop boomed, but Astephen's mind started wandering. "Way back when I was a kid, I wanted to be a real NBA/NFL-type agent," he says. "When I got to Colorado, I started reading contract-law books and came to understand how to negotiate."

In 1994, Astephen, burned out on the retail grind, walked away from the shop and headed to San Diego to become one of Lamar Snowboards' marketing managers. A year later, when Astephen heard that Reebok had suddenly canceled a contract with one of Lamar's riders, Kevin Jones, he spoke up.

"Nobody was looking out for snowboarders," says Astephen. "Kevin had a two-year contract worth like 80 grand, and they said they were gonna pay him ten grand to walk away. I was like 'No, no, no. That ain't right.' In the end, I got Kevin nearly the whole sum."

When Jones told other pros that his buddy Steve had convinced Reebok to make good, they started asking him for help, and Astephen realized he was staring at the germ of a viable business. But this was 1995—no bank was going to loan money to a board-sports agent. Astephen needed an investor. For three years, he worked out of his garage and then a tiny office in Solana Beach until he got publishing scion Austin Hearst, an avid snowboarder, to put up just under \$100,000.

The Familie, with Jones as its first client, was born, and a sports market that hadn't had agents before suddenly did. "When I heard about him trying to be an agent, I thought, That's a weird idea," says Ken Block, cofounder of DC Shoes, which makes roughly \$150 million a year selling skateboard shoes and snowboard boots. But Astephen's idea came with a downside, according to

Block. "He weakened the close relationship we had with athletes."

"There are a lot of companies out there who hate me," Astephen says, smiling. "Guys who were making 12 grand a year in 1997 went to 300 grand pretty quick."

If all of this makes it sound like Astephen is the only game in town, well, in summer sports, he more or less is. But if his roster has a shortcoming, it's in snowboarding. He may still represent Tara Dakides, winner of eight X Games medals, and 15 other pros, including Todd Richards, who'll cover Olympic snowboarding in Turin this month for NBC, but Astephen has let many male stars slip away—in part because he wasn't the only agent chasing snowboarders in the late nineties.

Around the time Astephen was first arranging deals, Portland, Maine-based contract lawyer Peter Carlisle started representing East Coast snowboarders. His first client, in 1998, was Ross Powers, an 18-year-old from South Londonderry, Vermont, who went on to win a gold medal in the halfpipe competition at the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake. By the time Carlisle sold his agency to Octagon, in 2001, his roster included Kelly Clark, now 22, the 2002 women's-halfpipe gold medalist, and Danny Kass, now 23, who finished second to Powers in Salt Lake. Today, Carlisle is managing director of Olympic and action sports at Octagon, with a client sheet that includes street skater Paul Rodriguez and the golden boy of the 2004 Athens Olympics, swimmer Michael Phelps.

For his part, Astephen is brashly unconcerned about the competition. "The reality is I've never lost an athlete I wanted," he says. When asked about parting ways in 2002 with 20-year-old Shaun White, a freckle-faced redhead from Carlsbad, California, who is a force in both skateboarding and snowboarding, Astephen claims it was due to "personality differences," not to poaching from another agency. (White is now with IMG's fledgling action-sports division.)

"Listen," Astephen says, "as long as I love my clients like I do, they have no reason to leave."

THE NEXT MORNING in Louisville, my phone rings at 8:15. It's Astephen. "I'm headed over to the venue now," he says. "Travis is walking the course."

An hour later, I'm drafting behind an

energetic Astephen as he heads toward Pastrana's trailer. The star appears—his racing suit pulled down to his waist, exposing an upper body utterly devoid of fat—and heads our way, taking the pained steps of an arthritic old man.

"Dude, you know where the medical staff is?" asks Pastrana. "I banged my knee, and it's all swollen up."

They head over to the on-site doctor, who diagnoses Pastrana's injury—an angry bubble colored red, blue, purple, and yellow—as a swollen bursa, the fluid sac between the knee and lower leg. "It might be painful, but you'll be OK," he says. "It's not essential to movement."

"OK," Pastrana says as he suits up. "It just feels weird. I think I'll practice."

Astephen pulls him aside. "Get some good practice in today, but take it easy in the prelims. Just get into the finals—there's no need to go nuts."

Astephen's phone rings. It's Mirra, on his way to a taping for a local morning show at the House of Dew, a temporary prefab Colonial. By the time we arrive, Mirra's getting some last-minute make-up, but Astephen doesn't like the look of the loose, flat-brimmed ball cap sitting atop his client's shaved head. He tells him to lose it.

"As Eddie Vedder says," Mirra answers, "it's not how you look; it's how you feel." The hat stays on.

But how long can you feel this good? Mirra's been a pro for 12 years—a lifetime in action sports. Later I ask Astephen if he's thinking about Mirra's eventual retirement.

"In my heart, he's got five more years; in his, he's got three," he says. "But who knows the answer?"

"Who knows?" is the question that will define Astephen's and his clients' futures. Do action-sports stars have a pop-culture afterlife? If you look at their side jobs, it seems that they do.

Travis Pastrana recently signed with Subaru to race rally cars. Bob Burnquist has a film-production company. Carey Hart's focus is his tattoo shop and show.

"A lot of my guys are a long way from retiring full-time," Astephen says. "But when they do, they'll be fine."

Meanwhile, Astephen's role grows—or, rather, mutates. After Astephen sold his company to WMG—a burgeoning conglomerate owned by Casey Wasserman, 31, the deep-pocketed grandson of former Universal Pictures chief Lew Wasserman—he started integrating his stars

with WMG's various other pursuits to produce projects like Pastrana's latest DVD, *Nitro Circus J*. With the new capital, Astephen recently opened a London office to start building a European motor-sports division.

"Everything's growing," he says, "and I'm addicted to it."

INSIDE FREEDOM HALL, Astephen sits rampside to watch the skate-vert competition, the tour's final event in Louisville, featuring Burnquist and Lasek. The crowds are sparse tonight, but Kevin Monahan, vice president of NBC Sports, isn't concerned. "The tour's about providing programming for the network and Universal, USA, NBC Wireless, Internet broadband, Universal DVD, and Telemundo," says Monahan. All those channels can replay parts of the tour, edit highlight shows, or sell DVDs of the gnarliest tricks.

By the end of the summer, the tour will have attracted a total of 230,000 spectators, spread over stops in Louisville; Denver; Portland, Oregon; San Jose; and Orlando. TV ratings will be solid among the teenagers targeted.

As for Astephen's clients, after a slow start in Louisville, they will end up dominating. Bucky Lasek will win the overall vert title; Nyquist will rebound to take third in dirt jumping; Cranmer will barely miss claiming the overall BMX title; and Travis Pastrana, who will win the Louisville event, won't enter any more freestyle motocross contests, due to injuries. Meanwhile, Astephen will sign the tour's breakout star: 22-year-old Australian BMX rider Ryan Guetder, who will nab the Dew Cup in both dirt jumping and park. Mirra will take the park event in San Jose.

In 2006, NBC and the tour will do it again, making the year another busy one for Astephen's clients, starting with late January's Winter X Games in Aspen, where Dakides and Pastrana, among others, will compete.

But here, rampside in Louisville, Mirra sits quietly, watching Shaun White soar 30 feet over his head. Where action sports go next, he can't predict. But, he says, "the progress has been amazing. I mean, I wish I had this to watch when I was growing up. I'd rather watch skateboarding than baseball any day." **D**

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