Peter Carlisle has quickly become one of the most prominent Olympic and Action sports agents. His current roster of clients includes swimmers Michael Phelps, Ian Crocker, and Lenny Krazelburg, and snowboarders Ross Powers, Kelly Clark, Danny Kass, and Seth Wescott. Carlisle has also been influential in the creation of Disney’s “Swim with the Stars,” the first-ever post-Olympics swimming tour. Additionally, he is the Executive Producer of “Unfiltered,” a documentary film that explores the lives and rivalry of Phelps and Crocker. He is also responsible for signing the largest ever multi-year Olympic endorsement deal (between Phelps and Matsunichi) and the world’s largest swimming endorsement deal (between Phelps and Speedo). In a five-month span, he signed world champion swimmers Katie Hoff and Ryan Lochte each to record 10-year Speedo deals, the longest individual deals in the history of the brand.

In reading your bio, you actually started off representing athletes while you were working for a law firm. Could you talk a little bit about your progression from working in a law firm to working with action and Olympic sports athletes?

I started with some local athletes. I did some work with AHL athletes on the marketing side, but that was short lived. Soon after I started experimenting with that, I got into the individual sports which are much better for marketing. From skiing to snowboarding—a lot of the sports that are up in the Northeast.

Could you talk a little bit about how you saw an opportunity in the action sport space and went after it?

The X Games had been going on for a little while. When you look at the “Extreme Games” that ESPN started down in Newport, initially you would tune in because it was like watching cliff diving on “Wide World of Sports”. It was more of a novelty assembly of these sports. But, over time, the core sports that had legitimacy lived on and the X Games became a packaging of very real, and somewhat novel sports. As this was developing, there was talk of snowboarding becoming an Olympic sport. You could kind of see the writing on the wall once FIS (the international federation for skiing) brought snowboarding into the Olympics. You could see where it was headed. I felt these action sports were going to become the individual Olympic sports of the future, of the next generation.

I am not sure though that I would have made the leap if the Gen Y demographic phenomenon was not going on at the same time. It was creating a sense of urgency among marketers that if they did not have a strategy to hit the very elusive Gen Y strategy, it would hurt business in the future. I saw the convergence of action sports entering the Olympics and the corporate desire to reach Gen Y as providing a huge opportunity for me because there really wasn’t a whole lot going on in the agency industry with respect to action sports. I felt that I had some experience—it was a lot of what I had been doing on the legal side of things—I felt that I could probably make some headway into that area and develop a business out of action sports and ride the momentum as it grew, assuming my theory was right that it would grow. I was fortunate and lucky that it did.

It seems like action sports in particular are pretty ripe for targeting by corporations. But, it is a challenging sector to go after for a variety of reasons. Could you talk about how it is to represent some of these athletes and market them to corporations? Do corporations understand what you are saying to them? Did they understand when you first went to them? Is it more challenging because action sports are so new?

It’s definitely challenging. They want to understand. They really did not understand back then and I still feel very few of them understand as well as they need to. The best ones understand that they don’t understand and they are the ones that succeed because they will either bring people on that do understand or they will defer to the athletes. The athletes are a good barometer of what will work from a marketing angle/campaign. But, it is very challenging. Action sports athletes got into these sports in a way because it was sort of counter culture. They got into it for reasons that had nothing to do with business, for reasons that
Typically, marketers have been able to get into a space and they would offer ten times what these athletes were making in that same category through their other sponsor and the athletes wanted nothing to do with it. I think that is fairly unique. Image took precedence over economics. Image is so important for these athletes that it creates challenges for the marketers, marketers that have always succeeded. Typically, marketers have been able to get into a space as long as they have a budget. In action sports, that is not the case. Money won’t do it. You really have to have the good idea, and you have to show commitment and genuine interest in these sports. If you don’t, the athletes will call you out on it.

The other thing that is unique about the space is that certain companies that initially convinced the athletes they were committed have failed. Nike is a good example in snowboarding. Ten years ago they made a strong push into snowboarding and had a decent stable of athletes and they did TV ads that were actually pretty good. But in the end, the campaign did not work even though Nike is a brilliant marketing company. It did not work in this space because action sports is such a fickle space. In the end, the action sports core was not convinced that Nike cared about these sports. They felt like Nike was just in action sports to position themselves and make money. They really weren’t authentically supportive of the sport.

That was one of my questions. Is marketing athletes in an Olympic sport like swimming significantly easier because it is more established and people are more accepting?

I think it is. I am not sure there are necessarily more opportunities, but the approach is much simpler. Swimming is an Olympic play from a marketing standpoint. Ninety percent of all opportunities in swimming are because of the Olympics. You might have to be creative and develop new vehicles to make swimming more attractive from a marketing standpoint. Whereas with action sports, they are both an Olympic play, but they also have a whole family of sponsors that were there before the Olympics mattered, that derive most of their value through action sports events, whether it be the X Games, Vans Triple Crown, the US Open, or the other events that are important within each action sports industry. That is a totally different strategy. In a sense, it is more complicated, but there are also arguably more opportunities if you can figure out how to navigate your way through the industry. Whereas with the Olympics, there are a lot of big opportunities obviously, but in a way it is a simpler, more predictable approach.

It sounds like with things such as image being important and with athletes sometimes serving as gatekeepers and saying “no” to lucrative endorsement deals, the action sports space is a really challenging one to be in. Can you delve into what you mean by image? From some of the work I have done, it seems that the sponsor needs to be authentically involved with the event.

They either have to be that way or to be perceived as that way. What I mean by image is this—when these athletes hire an agency, they are looking for compensable opportunities through marketing. They also, whether it be swimming, gymnastics, or action sports, in general, these athletes want the same thing. Back in the day, it was a little different—athletes were skeptical of being associated with a mainstream brand or campaign. Now it is totally different. Even the action sports athletes want the out-of-industry deal. They want to be on TV. They want to transcend their own sport and industry and get into the mainstream because that is where the bigger opportunities are.

But the difference becomes when I bring a swimmer an opportunity from the mainstream, they think “this is great. We are helping to change swimming. We are making it more popular. I am going to be compensated through this. I am going to increase my exposure in the mainstream. This is a great opportunity.” Beyond that is, “what is the actual campaign? How are they going to portray me?” And it is not that it does not really matter, it is just much further down the list. And while we always have approval rights over these things, it has never been a concern. Very rarely does an athlete in swimming or any of these other traditional athletics say “I don’t like that because it is going to affect my image.”

In sports like snowboarding or skateboarding, the mainstream does not really understand the industry. So, if you take a cereal box that a company has invested a lot of money in designing and developing this campaign that they think is going to reach the broadest demo of their target consumers, and they show it to us, it may look fine to me. It may look fine to me because it shows them in their sport, it is a good shot where the athlete is going to like the way they are portrayed, and the text is good, the athlete might say “there is no way I am going to do this. That is a shot from last year and there is no way I want a shot from last year on this box.” It is not going to matter to the mainstream market, and it is probably not going to matter to the
endemic market, yet it is so important to that action sports athlete because that is the way this whole culture has evolved. That program could be killed right then and there. That happens nine times out of 10. Whereas in other sports, it might not happen at all.

I would like to move to some of the interesting ways that you have been involved with marketing athletes and marketing the sports they participate in. The first thing I saw was that the snowboarders created a group called the “Collection”. It seems like it was created so that they could maintain the integrity of the snowboarders’ sponsors as it related to competition with sponsors of the US Ski and Snowboard Association. Could you talk a little bit about that?

First of all, when snowboarding started, there were different tours and it was a very individual sport. In order to become a World Cup sport and ultimately get into the Olympics, the sport needed a National Governing Body and an International Federation. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) requires sports to be governed by a strong international federation and that makes it easier to get the sport into the Olympics. FIS, the international federation for skiing, is a strong federation and it made the most sense to put the sport in that federation. So the choice after that was whether or not to have a separate NGB for snowboarding or does it go in with skiing?

So, all of the sudden the skiing NGB began to govern snowboarding in America at least as it related to World Cup competition and World Championships and then the Olympics. But, because actions sports are so different, most of the best athletes never went to the World Championships, they would not go to nationals. They just didn’t care—that wasn’t the heart and soul of the sport. There were other events that were way more important to the athletes—the US Open, Vans Triple Crown, and many others. So, some athletes would join the US Team, USSA, because the USSA would recruit athletes and make overtures to the team because that is what they are built to do and they need to maintain their own credibility within the international federation. They would recruit a lot of the younger athletes like Ross Powers. Way back when Ross was 15, the US Team invited him to be a part of it. The reason he would do it at that point is that he was so young that parents would like their kids to be in a program that was well organized, that was established, that you had grown ups looking after these kids when they were traveling abroad.

When Ross went to Nagano and won a bronze medal (in snowboarding) at the age of 18, he hired an agent. I started working with him right after Nagano in 1998. At that point he was very, very marketable. It became a conflict almost for him to be on the US Team because of the way the US team is structured. All of the members of the US Team, whether it be skiing or snowboarding, sign a team membership agreement that essentially gives the right for the team to market through group licensing deals. Once an athlete becomes marketable, they are losing money if they stay on the team. So the moment Ross became marketable, it made sense for Ross to leave the team. A good example of that was the US Team was sponsored by Phoenix. Their snowboarding brand at the time was Xnix and Polo Ralph Lauren aggressively recruited Ross to endorse their brand in 1998. It was a fantastic opportunity, one that lasted four years and he would not been able to do that if he were on the team. So, Ross left the US team and competed on his own, which is really what most of the athletes do. Very few of the Olympic athletes that you see during the Olympics are actually on the US team. So, as that happened between 1998 and 2002, all of the other action sports athletes, the moment they became marketable, they would leave the US Team. Kelly Clark, she was young, sort of the same path that Ross took. In 2002, she won a gold medal and became very marketable. She left the team. Gretchen Bleiler left the team.

But, there were certain elements of the team that were valuable to these athletes: the ability to have other people organizing your travel plans, the benefit of group insurance, the idea of coaching and having trainers, and the feeling you are participating as part of a group and you are not just out there on your own gave these athletes some confidence. Unfortunately, those things did not offset the loss in income these athletes would suffer if these athletes rejoined the team.

In addition to that, when we were marketing these athletes, we would compete against USSA who was selling its team sponsorship. So, let’s say you are going to sell something to Kodak. You are marketing these individual athletes and USSA is marketing this team program that offers certain marketing opportunities you can only have with a team, like certain turnkey opportunities, bigger programs, that a company might find attractive because it will have a bigger impact and it won’t mean managing these individual athletes. So, I said, “If there is something you would like with the team concept, let’s see if we can create it.” The expense of doing that can be offset by the fact that we can compete now with the US team by offering another group marketing opportunity that the athletes own rather than the NGB. So, in essence once we created the Collection, the athletes have their individual marketing rights to give to a sponsor of their choosing, and they also now have group marketing rights. That is what you see with Snickers. These companies find it very attractive that they can do a deal with the Collection
and get a bunch of athletes that the Collection has and use these athletes together and then also maybe do some individual deals with them if they want to use them in a different way.

It seems that one of the advantages you have in marketing action sports is that there are a lot more events from which they can gain visibility. Whereas when you are marketing more mainstream Olympic athletes, they are only visible once every four years. I am interested in some of the things you have done to keep mainstream Olympic athletes visible and relevant when the Olympics are not going on.

That is the challenge. That is really what we are trying to do between and during the games. You have this relatively small window on this great platform, so you better start launching stuff that will carry you into the four years between the games. “Swim with the Stars” is a good example. We used immediate post-Athens to create not just this tour, but this property that would have legs that would carry us between the games and keep the sport relevant. It is a real challenge, but ultimately that is what we are trying to do.

Can we make a sport like swimming relevant to the mainstream between the games? I am convinced, or maybe just optimistic if you change the packaging of some of these sports, they can become more relevant between the games. They are never going to be the NFL, but that doesn't mean you can't make progress. Take a sport like swimming. I find the swimming finals at a major meet one of the most dramatic events you can go to. The packaging is great, too. The finals happen between 6 and 8 at night. It is a great event, an excellent spectator sport. The problem is that America only sees it once every four years and they don't see what I feel. Why do I love swimming now? Why do I love swimming than a baseball game? Because these swimmers are people to me, they are relevant to me. I understand what is riding on this. I understand the different rivalries. But, that is what America doesn't see because swimming has been packaged the same way forever.

Somewhere we have to get into who these people are as people, what the rivalries are, what the stories are. Why this race matters. If we can do that, by the time we get to the Olympics, by the time American public sees Ian Thorpe line up against Michael Phelps, they are going to care more. If they care more, then we have a platform to build off of. Where World Championships might matter or private events that we create might matter. To me that is the hope and opportunity in a sport like swimming and that is what we are trying to do in swimming. The athletes themselves give us that charge—that is what they have all said—"we want to make swimming more popular."

It seems like the documentary film “Unfiltered” certainly plays into this as well. Could you talk a little about the creation of the film as you were the Executive Producer on the film? Perhaps you could shed some insight as to how that was developed and what the goals and mission of the film were.

The goal and mission was exactly what I just said—essentially to try to change the way swimming is packaged and perceived, and expand the audience to which swimming is relevant. One of the things that is very compelling to people watching swimming is the rivalries, the stories behind the blocks, outside of the pool. It would be hard to do a documentary on swimming that would be appealing to the general public. So, we tried to focus on the rivalries and we tried to focus on the compelling biographical stories and less about split times. To me, split times are irrelevant. It is about who wins. It is about gold medals and it is about rivalries. So, in “Unfiltered,” we wanted to provide a little bit more insight into what these athletes do to prepare for the World Championships, to prepare for the Olympics. What their life is like. Why do they want to win so badly and what happens when they don’t? We just try to tell a story that has not been told. Like a lot of what we do, there is absolutely no roadmap for this. Both with the Disney “Swim with the Stars” Tour and the Documentary, people closest to swimming thought we were crazy to even try it.

How do you measure the success of these efforts? With the “Swim with the Stars” and “Unfiltered,” do you have objectives in place that you measure your success against?

I would define success by making a difference in how the sport is perceived and making it more popular to a broader audience. You are not going to be able to measure that in the short term. That is going to be measured over time when you have a kid that is competing in the Olympics and they say “I played basketball but when ‘Swim of the Stars’ came to town, I went with my cousin who was a swimmer and I got into it. And here I am.” You have just changed swimming a little bit there. Can we make swimming available to more people? Absolutely.

We have sold broadcasting rights for “Unfiltered” in Great Britain. It was aired in prime time and will be aired in prime time between now and Beijing. We are in negotiation with five different international airline carriers to show a 48-minute “Unfiltered” package in flight. If you take something like “Unfiltered,” and say “was it successful?” based on just the superficial measurement, clearly it was. Now, if we spent $1 million to do it, would that be successful? Probably not, because the athletes have hired us to create opportunities and they need to be paid. We are a for-profit business and
we need to be paid if we are going to continue to take these risky marketing ventures to change the sport. In the case of "Unfiltered," I think we made a real difference and continue to make a difference. It is hard to measure, but we have made a difference. And also, it has been financially successful. By those two measurements, there is no question it has been successful. If the athletes are going to spend their time doing this, we like for them to be paid for it and see it as an immediate economic opportunity. Everything we have done with "Swim with the Stars" has been that.

You have signed a deal that is the largest multi-year athlete endorsement deal ever, the deal between Matsunichi and Michael Phelps. Could you talk a little about that? I am particularly interested in the fact that this is a Chinese company sponsoring an American swimmer in the lead up to the Beijing Olympics.

After Athens, because Michael had a pretty complete portfolio of sponsors going into Athens and because of the lifestyle that swimmers have, particularly swimmers that have the lifestyle that Michael does (there is only so much time), we had reached capacity in terms of his American sponsors. Because Beijing was going to be such a significant business opportunity for these athletes, the strategy immediately turned in Athens to establishing Michael internationally, especially in China. So we signed two deals after Athens, one with Matsunichi, which is based in Hong Kong. The other was with TV Asahi, which is a Japanese network that we felt would help us establish Michael in Asia. With Matsunichi, a couple things came into play. One, Michael was potentially becoming the most decorated Olympic athlete of all time. He had certainly achieved more media exposure and commercial success than any other Olympic athlete had, so Matsunichi felt, "Hey this is a guy we can really use between now and Beijing." Also, he is appealing to a younger demographic. He is probably appealing to everyone between 10 and 25, and most appealing in the 10-15 age group. Michael was very appealing to that demo, so Matsunichi thought he would be the perfect person and they felt that appeal would increase heading into 2008. It also worked well for us. Part of the deal was to get Michael over there to do these tours and events so that we could establish him long before he gets to Beijing to compete.

Interview conducted by Jay Gladden, University of Massachusetts-Amherst