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## Can Kobe Sell Swiss Watches?

*Nubeo sets a series priced at up to \$285,000*

By RAY A. SMITH

Kobe Bryant has earned millions from celebrity endorsements with Coca-Cola Co. and Nike Inc. Now, a small Swiss watchmaker wants in on the action, too.

Nubeo, a high-end watch brand known outside the U.S. for its jellyfish-shaped watches, has teamed up with the basketball star to create a limited-edition line of high-tech sport watches starting at about \$21,000 and topping out at \$285,000. The Black Mamba series -- a play on Mr. Bryant's nickname -- will be unveiled this coming week at Baselworld, the watch and jewelry show held annually in Basel, Switzerland, and will go on sale in the U.S. this fall, the watchmaker's American debut.

While NBA players have been some of the biggest product endorsers, it is rare for a luxury watch brand to pair up with a basketball star. Such brands have typically showcased athletes from tennis and golf.

Ivan Castro, a Madrid-born jewelry designer who co-founded Nubeo in 2004, is a huge basketball fan. Mr. Castro reached out to Mr. Bryant's agent and marketing manager who arranged a meeting with the Los Angeles Lakers star last fall. Mr. Bryant, who speaks Spanish and Italian and has a global following, especially in China, had international flair needed for the watches, Mr. Castro says.

Mr. Bryant, who confesses to owning "quite a few watches," says, "I don't do deals or partnerships where I don't get thoroughly involved."

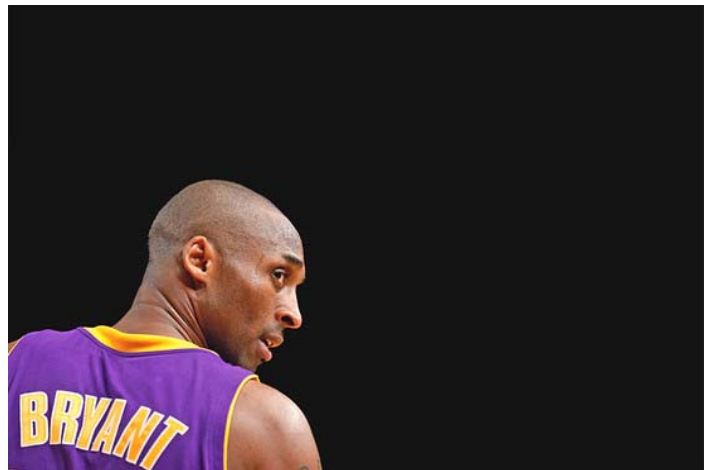
He compares the Nubeo line to his on-court play. "It's just a beautiful watch but you don't see all the intricacies."

Black Mamba's unveiling couldn't be more untimely. Consultant Bain & Co. last month forecast global luxury consumption this year would drop 10% to 15% from 2008.

Swiss watch exports plunged for the fourth straight month in February, falling 22.4% compared with the year-earlier period, says the Federation of the Swiss Watch Industry. When consumers cut back, if they buy at all, they're more likely to buy blue-chip brands, some analysts say, and that hurts niche brands like Nubeo.

Mr. Castro disagrees. His consumers "wear something different from the big brand names," he says. "We must try to follow our own personality, our own rules so we don't go to tennis and golf people," says the 37-year-old executive.

Nubeo, pronounced new-bay-oh and whose rough translation from Latin, the company says, means "shape of a cloud," makes about 4,000 watches a year. It declined to disclose sales.



Kobe Bryant

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**Celebrity athlete endorsers can be "great for establishing a new, ultra high-end brand," says Raymond Graj, operational strategist at Graj + Gustavsen, a New York brand consultancy. But any off-court problems can "torpedo" a brand, he says.**

Mr. Bryant, who is married, faced a felony sexual assault charge in the summer of 2003 after a Colorado woman accused him of rape. Mr. Bryant said the sex was consensual. The charge was dismissed. Some sponsors such as McDonald's Corp. and Coca-Cola's Sprite dropped Mr. Bryant after the accusation, while Nike stripped his name off a shoe it had planned. Nike and Coca-Cola have since resumed relationships with him.

Mr. Castro says he isn't concerned the past incident would tarnish the brand. Nubeo declined to disclose terms of its pact with Mr. Bryant. Mr. Bryant will be paid based on watches sold, a person familiar with the matter said. The partnership runs until 2010 with the potential to be extended.

Nubeo is making just 1,074 of the Kobe watches. Some styles are adorned with sapphires. It plans print and TV ads featuring Mr. Bryant for the fall.