

Principal Player

Misty Copeland is changing the athletic marketing game and elevating Under Armour's women's division to new heights.

By Margaret Sutherlin

Two years ago, sitting alongside Olympic skier Lindsey Vonn and future World Cup champion Kelley O'Hara, a 5-foot-2-inch ballerina with calves that look like they were carved out of granite debuted her first commercial for Under Armour's relaunched women's line.

Misty Copeland's viral campaign for "I Will What I Want" showcased an athlete, but this time the athlete was pirouetting and landing impossible leaps en pointe. It was a major marketing coup for Under Armour, which was known for its muscular roster of masculine football and baseball stars.

Under Armour's list of sponsored athletes is a who's who of sports — Vonn, Tom Brady, Stephen Curry — but it a ballerina who holds the MVP title in the women's category.

"Under Armour has put all of us female ambassadors on the same platform and playing field as their male athletes," Copeland told FN. "They're showing us in such a powerful and unique way; women are not often seen in that sort of light. That really separates Under Armour from other brands."

Fast forward to 2016: Copeland stars in Under Armour's new "Rule Yourself" campaign, produced by Droga 5. Later this month, she'll make history with the American Ballet Theatre when she takes the stage at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York as the first black female principal dancer for the company.

Copeland is an ideal spokeswoman for the brand. She is as poised, feminine and articulate as she is determined, focused and strong. Her story of perseverance through poverty, racism and overcoming setbacks from injury have been key to connecting her to the Under Armour customer, who values the underdog.

"The fact that Misty is not a conventional athlete in and of itself adds value to the brand," said Denise Lee Yohn, a marketing



expert with her own namesake company. “The Under Armour brand has always been the alternative to the mainstream, so featuring a dancer instead of a more traditional athlete reinforces the position of a different, convention-breaking brand.”

Copeland knows she’s not the typical face for an athletic brand, and she’s not wasting the platform she’s been given to talk about it.

“I think that the dance world is benefiting from having a platform that is so visible and really just showing what we’ve always known: that we’re these strong and credible artists,” said Copeland. “It’s empowering young girls [and teaching] them that it’s OK to be a woman and girl and be a strong athlete and show your muscles and not hide behind that.”

The Under Armour campaign, her children’s book and memoir, a documentary and her appearance on Broadway last fall have made her a household name.

Her newfound notoriety has resulted in some major changes not just in the dance community. Copeland offers up the example of the “Rule Yourself” spot. There, she’s been given an opportunity to show how much practice it actually takes to master a move. With this insider view, people are suddenly starting to appreciate dance’s athleticism, she said.

“You come to a performance and you get to see the finished product,” said Copeland, “but we put in just as many hours and the type of physical training as a basketball player, a football player or a tennis player would do to prepare.”

While the brand isn’t ready to unveil Copeland’s next project, it is counting on her to continue to help bolster its women’s category. In the past few quarters, the women’s division has been a challenge across the industry, but Under Armour will most certainly be turning to its star player to boost buzz.

“How she wears our gear is so special and she’s so respected in the fashion world, so there really is opportunity to be inspired by her,” said Adrienne Lofton, SVP of global brand marketing.

For now, Copeland’s eyes are focused on the stage as she prepares to take a bow as a principal dancer with the American Ballet Theatre.

“It’s almost like this reassurance inside me,” said Copeland. “I think that it’s become easier as time goes on to accept and own a reality that I’m not in a dream. This season will really tell me what it’s like to be a principal dancer.”



THE HEAT IS ON

If it wasn’t enough to have the challenge of taking the stage this spring season as a principal dancer, Misty Copeland is prepping to step back into one of her signature roles: Igor Stravinsky’s “Firebird,” choreographed by Alexei Ratmansky.

It was the role of a lifetime four years ago when Copeland, a soloist for the American Ballet Theatre, was the first black woman to dance the famous part for a major company. “It’s such an important role for me because it changed the path of my career,” said Copeland. “I feel this power in approaching it again. It’s exciting to revisit choreography that four years ago was so difficult that there was no way I should have accomplished it, and then this year I feel like this isn’t so bad now that I have four full-length ballets under my belt. It’s exciting to feel the growth and see it.”