

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETICS

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CAPSTONE ABSTRACT

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Social media is being used amongst intercollegiate athletic departments, student-athletes and the NCAA. This study seeks to understand the impact of social media on intercollegiate athletics. More precisely, this study looks into the specific policies set forth by the NCAA and individual athletic departments. Existing research has established the importance of social media in intercollegiate athletics but there is still some confusion as to how social media can and should be used. Unfortunately, policies do fail to elaborate on the proper tactics student-athletes should be using when engaging in social media platforms.

In order to establish best practices of social media by student-athletes, this study looked into policies that contained social media strategies. Third party consultants in some cases were also used as potential solutions. This study also illustrated examples of how student-athletes and intercollegiate athletic programs have suffered the consequences as a result of their actions on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. There may always be a cause for concern when dealing with social media because of how quickly information is being shared as technological advancements continue to prosper

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of social media on intercollegiate athletics. Social media is on the rise and intercollegiate athletic and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) policies need to deal with it. When participating in college athletics, student-athletes are governed by a host of regulations and rules stemming from the NCAA. These are guidelines that pertain to the actions of student-athletes. Because of the popularity of social media, sites like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram have become suitable resources for the NCAA to carry out disciplinary action against student-athletes and the institutions they attend for the actions that occur on the internet (Sanderson, 2013). The popularity and prevalence of social media combined with the possibility of consequences that could result from the misuse of these sites, have caused some level of concern as to whether the monitoring of such sites should be considered. Some schools have gone as far as taking an uncompromising approach to the use of social media by instituting an absolute ban on student-athletes' use of Facebook and Twitter; Loyola University, University of Minnesota and Kent State University are examples of schools who took such an approach (Epstein, 2012). In addition, research concerning social media policies and intercollegiate athletic legislation is extremely light as social media regulation is comparatively new to the realm of intercollegiate athletics (Sanderson, 2015). This could be a possible reason as to why so many institutions have been accused and found guilty of social media misuse (Parkinson, 2011).

Social media technologies are noticeable participants in the world of sports. These technologies may even be looked upon as visible competitors. One such platform that has created a number of issues for intercollegiate athletic programs is Twitter. Through

individual tweets, student-athletes have triggered public relation problems that the university and athletic department now have to deal with it. More people have to get involved in order for the comments and posts on the internet to disappear or be reworked for a more positive public following (Sanderson, 2013). In response to the presence of social media, athletic departments have created and implemented different strategies in order to deal with potential fallouts on social media sites. These strategies range from constructing social media policies to making connections with third party businesses just to monitor student-athletes social media content. Despite all of the work athletic departments have done in trying to stop the misuse of social media, student-athletes continue to tweet, post and Instagram inappropriate content that can generate negative or positive public relations issues (Sanderson, 2013).

The Internet and Social Media

The Internet has transformed the way in which people communicate. It has created this immense shift in how individuals interact with each other. It has also increased the speed at which one can send or receive a message. With all of the online technological advances, information can be at someone's fingertips with a click of a button. For many people, cell phones and other hand held technological devices have become the outlet for this type of communication.

Through the use of cell phones and other hand help devices, the Internet has created this space where people can communicate through a multitude of social media sites. Social media is this space. As its progression continues, the Internet has sped up the rate at which individuals can connect while changing the more traditional forms of communication. It has a major impact from the communication standpoint of

intercollegiate athletics as evident by the growth and development of sports media coverage and sport communication practices of NCAA participating institutions (Sanderson, 2015).

Twitter, Facebook and Instagram are three social media platforms that are commonly used by intercollegiate athletic departments and student-athletes. They allow people to socially interact anywhere and with anyone. Before the Internet, people spent time writing notes and waiting for phone calls. With very little effort, an individual can connect or contact people from all over the world and instantly communicate with hundreds of people. It all depends on who chooses to follow whose tweets. But with all of this accessibility, people really need to be aware of what they are putting out there for the public to see. Majority of online actions, including chat sessions and e-mail correspondence, can leave online footprints that can be recorded, stored and saved to a computer file (Suler, 2014). Contrary to face to face interactions, the Internet has the ability to retain any occurrence of things said to another. It also has the capacity to keep permanent records of what was said, when it was said and to whom it was said to (Suler, 2014). Users need to constantly be aware of what they are putting out there so that it cannot come back to hurt them at a later date.

Each platform has some unique characteristics which sets them apart, but all three are similar in the publication of personal information. The popularity of each platforms varies because of different capabilities. However, all three are currently used by student-athletes, coaches and intercollegiate athletic department personal. In 2006, Twitter arrived on the forefront of social media platforms. It presented an adaption on the profile-

centric concept created by the founders of Myspace and Facebook. It rapidly caught the attention of social media users. As of 2014, it had over 500 million users. Twitter is so popular because of its capabilities, which were slightly different from its predecessors. On the most basic level, Twitter is a social online network that allows users to send messages to each other called, tweets. A tweet can be defined as an expression of an idea or moment that a user has (Epstein, 2012). It can include photos, text and videos. Millions of tweets are shared in real time, every single day from a host of different users. What sets Twitter aside from other social media platforms is the ability to post a thought or idea in no more than 140 characters. Additionally, Twitter has become a go to source for celebrity gossip, breaking news and athlete trash talk (Epstein, 2012). It has birthed so much attention and popularity because of its' innovative abilities and separate entities compared to that of Facebook and Instagram.

Facebook allows individuals to personalize their profiles with an abundance of information. This information is prompted through introductory questions, with no character limitations. Through Facebook, an individual has the ability to list interests, post thoughts and comments as well as upload pictures, music and videos. It is another example of self-proclamation and self-creation (Epstein, 2012). Often times, this information is extremely personal in nature. Lastly, Instagram allows users to post pictures and follow other users based off their posted picture history. The story is told through images only.

Social media's growth in intercollegiate athletics can be observed through day-to-day activity. College network tweets, student-athletes social media pathways, live

streaming of comments from social media users during intercollegiate athletic contests or events and by the number of users who choose to freely follow intercollegiate athletic departments are all suitable occurrences where athletic administration can measure to what extent student-athletes are using social media platforms (Sanderson, 2015). A lot of athletic departments have accepted social media and use the platforms to their advantage to promote athletic events and intercollegiate success. In an effort to stay relevant and keep up with current technologies, athletic departments have quickly adopted social media by assimilating platforms, such as, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, into established athletic department operations. Those contingencies include merchandise development marketing and sales (Sanderson, 2015). However, athletic departments due face a lot of controversies as to the misuse of social media from student-athletes as well as from coaches.

Twitter, Facebook and Instagram enable people to express themselves in a way they may never have been able to before. Instead of writing in a journal and hoping someone might read it, people now have access to post their thoughts and actions to the online world. Twitter, Facebook and Instagram users can show the world what they are experiencing at any moment. It gives access to the story at hands. These social media platforms also create a space in which people can showcase aspects of themselves they like and really express their interests. Users are able to follow others from all over the world and make connections based on similar interests.

NCAA Policy

With the inclusion of social media platforms by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), policies continue to develop in an attempt to conquer particular goals of the association (Sanderson, 2015). This in part is due to the association's agenda to encourage institutions to take a leadership role in educating their constituents on the proper use of social media outlets. However, there are many challenges faced by the NCAA in determining violations and infractions based on social media conduct because the NCAA rulebook has little to say about the topic. These social media platforms are not even mentioned in the NCAA by-laws. The only official time the NCAA regulates the use of social media is during the recruitment process. In regards to communication, the only thing included in the by-laws pertains to how a coach can go about recruiting a potential student-athlete by means of social media. It states, "electronically transmitted correspondence that may be sent to a prospective student-athlete or the prospective student-athlete's parents or legal guardians is limited to electronic mail and facsimiles" (Parkinson, 2011, p 53). However, all other forms of electronically transmitted communication including instant messenger and text messaging are not supported sanctions of the associations established policy. This is interesting because at a time when social media is one of the main forms of communication for student-athletes, one would think a policy with defined guidelines would be readily available (Parkinson, 2011). In its simplest form, a policy could limit infractions faced by coaches, potential players, current players and athletic administration.

Because the by-laws say very little about the use of social media, it is intriguing how many institutions and student-athletes have had to suffer the consequences of social media infractions (Parkinson, 2011). This will be explained in more detail later.

Typically, the misuse of social media from anyone within the confines of the athletic department fits well within the parameters of a secondary violation charge. Secondary violations pertains to instances that are isolated or unintentional in nature (Parkinson, 2011). Something the NCAA should consider is the mere fact of how technological advances will continue to make rule enforcement in the social media area challenging. New and improved methods of communication are being established continually. Which in turn makes it much more difficult to predict how younger generations will communicate in the future. Due to the nature of the continuation for technology, the NCAA will always be caught playing catch-up, considering its process for making and changing rules is gradual and cumbersome (Parkinson, 2011).

In recent years, the NCAA enforcement staff has been extremely lenient in carrying out expectations of existing rules. Athletic administrations and institutions have been given sufficient time to adapt to technological advancements. The enforcement staff has processed virtually all social media infractions as secondary violations in order to allow athletic departments to figure out their game plans in managing the scope of social media within their programs. However, that time of tolerance is coming to a close as more and more infractions continue to occur. In fact, the NCAA leadership has indicated a change of pace on the enforcement of rules in that it will no longer hesitate to hold those accountable who break the rules. Social media has been around for many years now and in the eyes of the NCAA, compliance staffs at this point should be well-

accustomed to the shortcomings involved in the use of social media. Additionally, consequences and reprimands should have been communicated to all participants who freely choose to partake in social media outlets (Parkinson, 2011). Moreover, the NCAA is also facing an extreme amount of pressure to address social media concerns as violations have become more prevalent from student-athletes' use (Epstein, 2012).

Institutions and Athletic Department Policies

Social media is an ever changing platform that continues to grow and change with each new application. It's quick acceptance and usage by student-athletes has established concern for intercollegiate athletic department personnel who are oftentimes responsible for constructing and carrying out policies. These policies are put in place to protect not only the department but also the student-athletes (Sanderson, 2015). Because of the instant communication and the limitless audience, athletic department personal have had to change their policies and practices in regards to student-athletes and the use of social media due to potential risks. Social media has caused an uproar in athletic departments because employees are unsure of the rules. There is confusion about who should be monitoring social media sites and whether it is an obligation or a choice. Athletic administrations are also concerned about breaking the law, especially if monitoring personal social media accounts impedes on a student-athletes rights. There are many questions that arise when the topic of conversation of social media and student-athletes is discussed (Sanderson, 2015).

In addition, various institutions have taken a negative stance against social media in order to take the responsibility of monitoring off the department. The portrayal of

social media platforms then becomes dangerous and its uses are connected with risk because of the unpredictability. This, in part, is because of all the negative press brought on by tweets from student-athletes. Institutions and universities have had to endure the negativity just as much as individual student-athletes' have had to (Sanderson, 2015). This will be outlined more clearly in the paragraphs to come.

Social media in many ways has become a liability for athletic departments due to the repercussions brought on from the misuse by student-athletes. Coaches have also brought attention to their institutions from an accidental post or misguided tweet. In a study conducted by the College Sports Information Directors of America, administrators uncovered evidence that out of the 450 participating NCAA institutions, thirty-three percent of institutions involved had a written social media policy for student-athletes to follow. But even more surprising than that is how fifty percent of the sports information directors (SID) who participated in the survey, described a time when having to delete a post or tweet from either a student-athlete or coach during their career. Even more recent as the 2012-2013 academic year (Sanderson, 2015).

Social media policies exist at every level in the NCAA but to what extent depends on the institution and their take on what needs to be done. Currently, the NCAA does not have an official policy controlling student-athletes use of social media. However, the NCAA has already begun allowing each affiliated institution the right to decide how to proceed with controlling social media usage amongst their respective coaches and student-athletes (Epstein, 2012). Moreover, because social media policies exist at both public and private schools and some of these schools actively monitor and or restrict

social media usage rather than having policies in place against inappropriate content, student-athletes and coaches need to be made aware of such policies (Sanderson, 2015). Since transportability is an option, individuals need to be able to understand policies can change from institution to institution. In trying to nip this in the bud, many athletic departments have chosen to adopt official social media policies that are incorporated within student-athlete handbooks (Sanderson, 2015).

With regard to social media and student-athletes, academic institutions and athletic departments may choose to be ambiguous in order to maintain control considering all of the obstacles one might face when creating policy (Sanderson, 2013). Institutions also have had ample time to reflect on all of the sanctions and violations that have occurred to take into consideration when creating a policy of their own. There have been a select number of institutions who have chosen to take a hands-off approach to student-athletes' social media use despite all of the recommendations set forth by the NCAA. Pennsylvania State University is one such school that has chosen to not follow the suggestions set forth by the NCAA. The university chooses to not monitor its students' social media accounts as well as its athletes and coaches. An official from the university even stated that if people make the decision to post a comment about the institution or about whatever they so choose, then they have to know they will be accountable for it individually. He also continued to comment on how the coaching administration duties did not include parental responsibilities. In this universities' instance, the refusal to presume the task of monitoring student-athlete activity can realistically be the most legally sound approach, but it is in direct opposition to the NCAA's recommendations. It could also leave the school vulnerable to sanctions, which

in turn could be equally detrimental (Epstein, 2012). In the language of certain social media policies at specific institutions, research has found that many institutions depicted social media as dangerous and correlated its use with risk (Sanderson, 2015). Yet policies lacked any information or insight into how social media could be constructively and positively used by student-athletes (Sanderson, 2015). Thus the expectations of administrations in regards to student-athletes use of social media have to be low considering there is very little information illustrating how to act appropriately over the Internet. These matters need to be met head on with language depicting the proper course of action.

Interpretation of Rules and Policies

Due to the fact that social media policies are currently being constructed and the NCAA by-laws do not include social media usage policies outside the realm of recruitment, it is no wonder student-athletes may misinterpret what they can and cannot do. A study conducted by Sanderson examined the information student-athletes received from intercollegiate athletic department officials and coaches about social media, specifically focusing on Twitter (Sanderson, 2013). As Sanderson made his way through the information, the study uncovered policies that merely informed student-athletes not to post anything inappropriate on social media sites. However, the term inappropriate was never clearly defined or followed up with specific instances. As previously mentioned, if things are not clearly defined, it is difficult to understand how a student-athlete can be held accountable for actions on social media when things are not explicitly explained. In leaving the concept vague and to the interpretation of the viewer, authority rests in the

hands of intercollegiate athletic department and institutional administrators to decide when inappropriate content has been posted. It then becomes an opinioned reaction based on personal viewpoints of the administration (Sanderson, 2013).

Benefits of Social Media

With all of the negative press surrounding social media and intercollegiate student-athletes, it has been lost on many, all of the positive things social media platforms have to offer. Unfortunately, as in most things in life, the benefits of social media are often times overshadowed by negative incidents surfacing from the subject matter of student-athletes' social media posts (Sanderson, 2015). There is a lot of good that can come out of social media when used correctly and appropriately. Social media does in fact, present benefits to intercollegiate athletic departments and institutions, predominately through marketing of products, revenue making capabilities and the branding of the institution. For example, the University of Central Florida, utilized Facebook in order to promote their football team's game winning defensive play against the University of Houston (Sanderson, 2015). It was an attempt to sell additional tickets and put more people in the stands.

One benefit of having student-athletes use social media is being able to see their true identities. Through the many uses of social media, athletes can portray themselves as someone outside the realm of athletics. More of their personality and identity outside the field of athletics can mask the screen. This rare opportunity can show the person aside from the athlete and can actually lead to additional avenues for fans to identify and communicate with the institutions athletic standouts (Sanderson, 2015). It brings the

athlete to the same level as individuals who may never have thought there was common ground or similarities between themselves and the student-athlete.

Another benefit of social media for student-athletes is have the ability to keep in touch with family and friends whom they might be away from due to the location of the school. Communication can be hard enough for individuals when they are in the same room as there family and friends. Putting distance in the middle could make the lines of communication even smaller. But as life changes and people enter into the different stages of life, social media has found this space where people have the ability to connect and share in those moments.

In addition, if used correctly, which truly depends on one's interpretation, social media can also benefit student-athletes from a networking standpoint and career development opportunities (Sanderson, 2015). Both of these tools could prove to benefit a student-athlete long after their collegiate career. Through social media sites, individuals connect for all sorts of reasons. One of those reasons being common ground. Individual posts or tweets could potentially serve to link individuals who may otherwise have never connected had it not been for social media. It could prove to hold a promising future if communicated properly. It all really comes down to whether or not a student-athlete is knowledgeable about the dos and don'ts of social media and understanding how much further a tweet or post really goes.

Down Side of Social Media

Problematic subject matter of social media posts are oftentimes the topic of

conversation with media constituents when student-athletes are discovered to have shared unsuitable material (Sanderson, 2015). According to LSU student-athlete Lewis Neal, “everything comes with a consequence so you have to be smart”. “You can’t just come out and express all of your feelings because you are already high profile so whatever you say is going to be judged regardless”(Harris, 2015, p 1). Unlike sports where an athlete can react to a play, social media should not be about gut reactions. More thought and time needs to go into comments before sending them out over the Internet. No matter how in depth someone tries to delete information put on the Internet, there will always be a cyber-footprint someone can uncover.

Since social media content is looked upon from the eyes of the beholder, it can be questionable and confusing to try and figure out what is considered appropriate and what is not. What needs to be kept in mind is how the definition of appropriate can mean a multitude of things to different people, especially where age is concerned. What a 17-year old college student deems inappropriate is most likely going to be infinitely different from what a 55-year old administrator believes to be inappropriate (Sanderson, 2013). Similarly, it only takes just one ill-conceived tweet, post, or comment to have consequences, reaching as far as resulting in the loss of a scholarship or future career opportunities (Sanderson, 2015). Fair or not, the responsibility of deciding that outcome lies in the hands of athletic department administrators and coaching staffs. Something that may have started out as a joke could potentially cost an athlete everything. For instance, an adolescent in York created a Twitter name that he believed his friends would find funny. However, his decision on his Twitter name had a much more profound effect during his college recruiting process. After finally being accepted to play at McDaniel

College, his coach told him to change his username immediately. What this student-athlete learned after being accepted to McDaniel College was how another school was pursuing him, but decided to stop after learning what his Twitter name was (Seip, 2015). Something as small as a username name turned a college away from pursuing a potential basketball player. Who knows of the opportunities that could have surfaced. But due to what was once was an innocent, meant to be a joke, username, turned out to be just the thing that caused him a possible opportunity.

According to a study conducted by Browning and Sanderson in 2012, interviews were organized with Division I student-athletes about their reactions to negative tweets. The study illustrated how Twitter presented many challenges for student-athletes as it made them vulnerable to a hostile situation based on receiving harsh criticism to which they wanted to respond. However, student-athletes were often banned from participating in such behavior (Sanderson, 2015). This situation also illustrated how student-athletes were educated enough about how a quick response could potentially cause problems for them individually. Being able to rise above harsh comments and posts from fans or just random people becomes a teaching point in intercollegiate athletics. One that provides a valuable lesson in how to deal with criticism.

Consequences of Social Media Misuse

There are many consequences that have been made public as a result of the misuse of social media by student-athletes. The consequences can stretch as far as the loss of a scholarship and as small as game suspension (Bradley, 2011). Either way, student-athletes are reaping repercussions as a result of the misuse of social media. The

University of North Carolina experienced the repercussions in a way no other institution has ever had before because for the first time the NCAA combined social networking in with the allegations. UNC received a Notice of Allegations from the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) that connected several of its football players' to receiving benefits, which in turn made them vulnerable to a violation of NCAA amateurism by-laws. What separates the UNC scandal from others is the fact that as part of the allegations that were made against UNC, the NCAA included the following; "In February through June 2011, UNC did not adequately and consistently monitor social networking activity that visibly illustrated potential amateurism violations within the football program, which delayed the institutions discovery and compounded the provision of impermissible benefits" (Epstein, 2012, p 2).

In the case of UNC, one student-athlete's comments on Twitter became an essential part of the NCAA's case due to the content of the posted information. The individual bragged of being at a club with an agent while making other remarks that visibly revealed violations of the NJCAA's amateurism rules (Epstein, 2012). This made the NCAA's enforcement team's job much easier to build their case because the evidence was spread over the Internet. This case further illustrates to other institutions that a mere tweet, Facebook post or Instagram picture, could serve as the main source for a school losing millions of dollars. It could also go as far as dragging the institutions reputation through the press. Even if, in the end, the NCAA may find fault where nothing has been done to avoid such an occurrence, the damage will have already been done (Epstein, 2012).

Student-athletes are not the only participants of social media platforms that intercollegiate athletic departments need to be concerned with. Coaches need to be spoken to as well because there are infraction violations that can be brought up if their online actions break the by-laws. Intercollegiate athletic coaches are allowed to use social media as long as they adhere to recruiting rules and do not converse about specific recruits. Not every coach is an advocate for using social media to recruit but some have felt that Facebook can actually be a source to communicate with possible recruits. However, because of how quick and instantaneous this form of modern communication is, it makes it extremely easy for coaches to get caught up in possible recruiting violations based on social media posts and tweets (Epstein, 2012). For example, the athletic department at Mississippi State University self-reported NCAA infractions after a coach tweeted the names of specific high schools on a recruiting trip (Epstein, 2012). Another example came from the Penn State Offensive line coach Herb Hand, who issued a tweet signifying that a potential prospect had been released from recruitment due to his social media presence. The offensive line coach also indicated that through social media posts and tweets, he was able to get a good indication of the prospects character and assessed that it did not fit in with the personality of the existing team (Sanderson, 2015). This also depicts how closely social media is looked at.

Coaches are role models or at least should be for student-athletes. Football coach Joe Montesano commented on social media, summarizing it is here to stay and coaches need to change with the times and figure out how to navigate through it. He continued to discuss how coaches try to be the model for each student-athlete while trying to show them how to properly do things the right way by being attentive to the demands of

appropriate social media use (DiVeronica, 2014). It is too easy to simply give the excuse that it was a mistake or failure to understand the process since most coaches first experience with social media has come at a much later stage in life than their players. Coaches need to be educated and held accountable just as much as student-athletes do. It is just as easy to make a mistake as a coach (Epstein, 2012).

Student-athletes need to be very aware of what they put out there on the Internet. Anyone can create trouble with a single comment, picture or online conversation that covers much more than an athlete vying for a scholarship. For instance, players voicing their opinions about playing time or the coaching staff, squabbling with a teammate or trash-talking an opponent have pushed coaches in the direction of becoming more observant and attentive to their players' online activity. One can never be too cautious, especially in the current climate of the online world. Brandon Chambers, an assistant men's basketball coach at Marymount College conveyed the message of never allowing an online post to cost a student-athlete the opportunity for a scholarship to school (DiVeronica, 2014). This is very sound advice for any potential or current student-athlete to take. For example, in 2014, Kent State University issued the suspension of a student-athlete from one of their programs after learning of his online comments about his feelings on the media's coverage about the first openly gay football player, Michael Sam. This is a great depiction of how an individual should have really thought about what they were sending before putting it out there for the world to see and criticize. The university and the student-athlete received a lot of negative publicity as a result (Sanderson, 2015).

There have been several high-profile cases that highlight all the risks of social media use. One such case included a student-athlete from Bloomsburg University who

tweeted offensive remarks from his personal account about Little League World Series knockout Mo'ne Davis. Within hours of his tweet, the student-athlete was suspended from the baseball team at Bloomsburg University. It also did not help his case that this particular student-athletes' tweet elicited national attention that reflected poorly on the institution, the program and the individual (Seip, 2015). Another instance where an upload on social media cost student-athletes time and a ticket off the team occurred at Cedar Crest. A video was uploaded on social media and because of the derogatory content, three basketball players were indefinitely suspended and one was actually removed from the squad. The severity of the misuse of social media was taken seriously enough that players who were suspended and dismissed, missed out on playing in the basketball championship (Seip, 2015).

Unfortunately, student-athletes do not quite understand how quickly a word, phrase or sentence can shape their future. Since the student-athletes of today are enthralled with social media, they are not comprehending how their personal information is out there for people to see. Whether it's right or wrong, the days of speaking freely and words being swept under the carpet are over. What was once considered sacred locker room talk has now become public conversation (Seip, 2015). What once seemed a private place for open dialogue has changed into a space for the public to capitalize on the verbal mistakes of others. The days of information being hard to obtain or having the freedom to openly express thoughts and ideas about whatever you want are coming to a close. The saying once was, every action has an equal reaction. It has now become, every word has an equal if not worse reaction. Technology has allowed information that once was said freely, because the likelihood of it getting back was slim, to reach infinite lengths.

Furthermore, comments that are now spoken through social media platforms were once said in a more confined environment. This is why there was not so much public controversy years ago as there is today. Personal information and thoughts never had the capacity to spread to the audiences that technology is able to reach today (Seip, 2015).

Potential for Lawsuit

Social media is a podium for individuals to express themselves freely. In the United States, individual freedoms are highly protected and in certain instances are strenuously defended in the court system. Any attempted violation on those individual freedoms is bound to draw attention. As of now, there have been no lawsuits to date that have surfaced due to the social media policy of an institution (Epstein, 2012). However, there is a potential for such a lawsuit to occur. This potential is what makes it difficult for athletic departments.

There are many challenges that athletic departments personally face when trying to figure out the best way to approach social media in reference to student-athlete use. There are many obstacles involved with monitoring social media accounts of student-athletes. One such obstacle includes First Amendment concerns. The First Amendment affords that Congress protects freedom of speech. It also ensures that Congress cannot create a law that curtails the freedom of speech. Institutions leave themselves open for potential lawsuits based on the protections of the First Amendment when they decide to monitor their student-athletes' comments on social media sites. This also holds true for when institutions forbid their student-athletes from using social media altogether. This in part is due to the mere fact that such action taken by institutions against student-athletes perpetually threatens their right to free speech (Epstein, 2012).

However, there are some challenges that can be raised based on First Amendment rights. In order to begin a challenge against the rights of the First Amendment involving NCAA member institution social media policies, student-athletes need to hone in on the details of the type of institution they attend. Contractual language of any paperwork that was signed is also important because there could be stipulations outlining communication practices. The challenge of contractual language between the student-athlete and the institution is based on the student-athlete not facing consequences concerning stipulations that are included in their contract (Epstein, 2012).

Additionally, something that does need to be taken into consideration is whether or not an institution or university is public or private. Any institution carrying out the restrictive policy must be a public university. Private institutions are not mandated like public institutions. Due to the extent of First Amendment freedoms, they are afforded only to those who are governed by state actors. This does not apply to the private sector. Private institutions have less to be concerned with than public institutions when constructing social media policies (Epstein, 2012).

Colleges and universities also run the risk of being charged with violating Fourth Amendment rights for organizing illegal searches of student-athletes' social media accounts. When athletic departments are told to monitor student-athletes' pages, it becomes difficult in trying to navigate through how far one can monitor and at what cost the monitoring can happen. Arguments have been made that once student-athletes join social media platforms and freely post information to the site, he or she has willingly handed the information over (Epstein, 2012). From that standpoint, athletic departments technically are not impeding on student-athletes Fourth Amendment rights. However,

there are many arguments that could be made on either side of the dispute. What athletic departments need to be aware of is how there is always a potential for a lawsuit. Each student-athlete, coach or athletic administrator needs to make sure they are taking the proper precautions to not get slammed with litigation.

Furthermore, those schools and institutions who choose to monitor all of its student-athletes social media pages, regardless of suspicion, will continue to do so in part because of the NCAA's notice of allegations against UNC. It suggested that this is the proper course of action in order to sideline violations and infractions. Based off how the NCAA handled the UNC case, schools are feeling more pressure to monitor their student-athletes in order to ensure their programs and reputations do not get dragged through the media. Universities are so afraid of trying to do the right thing while at the same time trying to avoid violating the rights of their student-athletes. It is a very hard balancing act because in most instances, when a school decides to monitor its student-athletes' social media use, such action can be without suspicion. What is in favor for athletic departments is the extent to which courts find the legitimacy of privacy on social media sites. Luckily for colleges and universities, the judicial system will likely conclude that the privacy expectations of student-athlete's concerning their social media use, to be fairly low because first and foremost, by nature, social media websites are shared public forums (Epstein, 2012).

Additionally, when schools take on monitoring student-athletes social media use, the university could also become liable if something negative happens to the student-athlete as a result of the content on their social media pages. If an institution willingly accepts the responsibility to monitor and protect student-athletes and then fails

to implement equitable care in doing so, it could unexpectedly be accountable for this failure because it increases the risk of a potential wrongdoing to the student-athlete. Taking it a step further, if a student-athlete were to be injured in some shape or form, specifically, in a substance-related or hazing incident for example, it is quite possible that such injury could have been anticipated if the institution had been sufficiently executing its voluntarily responsibility to monitor. Perhaps a tweet or Facebook post would have revealed the threatening situation and permitted school officials to engage in anticipatory actions (Epstein, 2012). If schools choose to monitor student-athlete's social media pages, they would also be responsible to take action if anything came up that could serve potential harm to the student-athlete's health. This potentially awkward, hazardous situation, could be clarified by college and university officials, explaining the magnitude to which a student-athletes' online activity will be checked (Epstein, 2012). This will prove to help clarify to the student-athletes what can realistically be expected from the school. However, if an institution or university decides to handle monitoring the use of social media from student-athletes, it must continue to be knowledgeable of any and all possible lawsuits. Even the least meritorious accusation involves a thorough defense and the subsequent reparation of the public image of the institution (Epstein, 2012). All of this needs to be taken into account when figuring out social media policies as well as the extent to which athletic department personnel needs to monitor.

Recommendations

Athletic departments have very difficult decisions to make about social media because of how quickly student-athletes have caught on to the platforms. Athletic department personal have to get ahead of the game if they want to see any results. With

being proactive, universities and institutions will be met by the challenge to not go overboard (Epstein, 2012). For instance, if the social media policy for student-athletes is to outlast a constitutional dispute, the prohibited verbiage must be constrained to those categories of speech that are not protected by the First Amendment. What becomes concerning then for universities and institutions, is the mere detail of the kind of language that institutions are looking to limit in order to escape NCAA scrutiny. That kind of speech is more than likely protected. For instance, in the UNC case, former UNC player Marvin Austin actions on social media, triggered the NCAA inquiry into the UNC athletic program (Epstein, 2012). The language he used in his tweets is protected by the First Amendment. Taking it a play further, speech that is far more distasteful than Austin's boastful remarks is also protected by the First Amendment, yet the NCAA still penalized Austin and the institution (Epstein, 2012).

As a result of the problems colleges and universities have faced due to social media misuse by student-athletes, businesses have popped up who actually do the monitoring for schools. Colleges and universities are looking into third parties to assist in the monitoring process of student-athletes social media content. UDiligence is one such company that was created. It is a company that due to its hard work and results has become a front-runner in this field. There are institutions that have already jumped on board and are currently using this company. One such institution is Texas A&M. Former Assistant Athletic Director Milton Overton summarized his thoughts about UDiligence, reflecting that before a company like this, the only real way to find out about problems or potential problems on student-athletes' social networking pages was to manually search yourself. He continued on by depicting how the process was not only inefficient, it rarely

produced any kind of result. Which is why schools have looked to other options for assistance. It has become a trend for some big time schools to invest in these third party companies to monitor student-athletes activities on social media. A couple of companies include Varsity Monitor, whose intended purpose was to guarantee NCAA compliance; Centrix School in another third party business, whose client list charts Mississippi State University, among dozens of others (Epstein, 2012).

Regardless of what a school or institution decides to do about a social media policy, it must be mindful of the potential consequences (Epstein, 2012). There needs to be a balanced approach, one that is not overly strict or overly relaxed. Social media is going to continue to impact intercollegiate athletics, athletic administration, coaches and players. Ultimately, at a certain point, some degree of control must be exerted, or else institutions could meet consequences that are not only tangible, but could serve to be quite severe on all accounts (Epstein, 2012).

Because social media is everywhere, student-athletes need to be more cautious of what they are putting out there. The Internet changed the speed and methods in which people interact and share information. Social interactions have also changed as a result of social media platforms and the instantaneous actions on others tweeting, posting and instagraming. Student-athletes not only need to worry about what they are personally posting, they also have to be cognizant of what their friends, family and even strangers are publishing. Student-athletes will not be able to escape the public eye because on the most basic level, their information is put on intercollegiate athletic websites for the team's they specifically participate in. Some information is personal but it's limited. This is also based on the individual institutions policy. Certain policies are more elaborate than

others, detailing the restrictions on social media usage. The more elaborate policies went into depth about specifically what not to post which included not posting personal information such as home address, cell phone number and refraining from posting public criticism of teammates or coaches (Sanderson, 2015). Student-athletes should listen to these sound guidelines if they want to remain out of the headlines. Student-athletes can use the example set forth by their respective institutions and apply the same tactics to their personal accounts, limiting the use of private information. In addition, for the time being, student-athletes always have the option to deactivate their accounts while in school, especially a high profile school that always seems to find their names in the media.

Possible Future Research

Social media is such a complex online tool that has continued to grow and progress with technological advancements and the creation and development of new applications. Experts have already witnessed social media change from focusing less on information going viral to creating meaningful engagement between individuals. Social media has moved away from merely depending on the continued success of Facebook as the cornerstone of marketing for social media as well as the realization of content being more than just pieces of information (Sanderson, 2015). Athletic departments need to move their focus as well in order to better serve their student-athletes on expectations pertaining to the use of social media.

Researchers have made developments in the possibilities of the future role social media will play in the context of intercollegiate athletics. Developers see social media as having an ever-increasing function in providing evidence of violations as well as

triggering investigations into student-athletes social media activities. The rules communicated through the NCAA were originally developed with the understanding of knowing social media will continue to develop and change. As a result, policies inevitably will have to change in order to reflect a more realistic approach to managing current social media trends. Patience is the necessary key for all participants in this process because policies are not easy or quick to change. However, researchers have expressed a continued effort towards enhancing policies to fit the current social media structure (Parkinson, 2011).

Additionally, in terms of future research, there are several directions researchers can navigate through. First, researchers could take a look at social media policies established for the entire student body of an institution and compare it to the policy set forth by the athletic department. The findings could prove to show that athletic department policies are more stringent or less restrictive on student athletes compared to the student body. Secondly, researchers could analyze how athletic departments and associations are keeping pace with evolving social media outlets. Focusing specifically on whether or not athletic social media policies are progressing with current social media developments. Lastly, researchers could spend a considerably amount of time investigating how high schools are addressing social media usage (Sanderson, 2015).

Conclusion

It is evident that social media will continue to expand and change with technological progressions. Student-athletes are substantial consumers of social media and this technological form of communication shows limited signs of being a fad. It is not going to disappear. There is a higher probability that platforms will continue to be created

and reformed with the highest advancements before ever going away (Sanderson, 2015). The NCAA and collegiate athletic departments need to face the fact that social media is here to stay and create policy that will enhance a student-athletes approach to it. Student-athletes need to be made aware of the risks while still being educated on the perks of social media. It realistically is a two way street as long as the appropriate message is being conveyed.

The future of social media is unpredictable. Technology is thriving and things keep evolving. According to the NCAA, in the future, social media will play an ever-increasing role in providing evidence of violations as well as sparking investigations due to the information put out there on the Internet. Institutions need to be aware of this and become proactive within their athletic departments to ensure student-athletes are educated on social media and understand the significance of hitting the send button. A current Director of Enforcement was recently quoted as saying how much of the enforcement staffs' case information stems from social media sites including blogs and online message boards. The director continued to discuss how amazing it was at how much information one can get from someone's Facebook page. The information is virtually put out there for anyone to see, take and reuse as they so choose (Parkinson, 2011). This is one of the main arguments as to why the future of social media is so unpredictable. But with all of the potential possibilities come risk and possible consequences which need to be accounted for and addressed.

Over the years, the NCAA has made considerable concessions in order to allow ample time for athletic departments to figure out their approach to social media.

However, that time is coming to an end. Athletics administrators will continue to be encouraged to allocate resources to front-end, rather than back-end, training and to outline clear limitations for social media usage (Sanderson, 2013). Universities and colleges must accept the responsibility to educate and monitor student-athletes social media actions in order to prevent potential lawsuits and devastating repercussions from even being a possibility. In addition, the NCAA must also address the regulation of social media by instituting policy with well-defined guidelines (Sanderson, 2013). Student-athletes also need to take responsibility for their actions and be conscience of what they are putting on the Internet. The sooner all of this action occurs, the better off student-athletes and their member institutions will be concerning social media.

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