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## Slam Dunk: Scoring with Social Media in College Athletics

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SLAM DUNK: SCORING WITH SOCIAL MEDIA IN COLLEGE ATHLETICS

by  
Callie Mayo

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford  
May 2017

Approved by

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Advisor: Robin Street

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Reader: Professor Jason Cain

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Reader: Dean Charles Mitchell

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## DEDICATION

For my parents and their inspiration and encouragement throughout my study.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Robin Street, for all her guidance and wisdom throughout this process. From inception to completion, she has had incredible patience in meeting and working with me on a regular basis. Additionally, I thank and acknowledge my committee members, Dr. Jason Cain and Dean Charles Mitchell for their input and willingness to serve on my panel. I would also like to thank Ben Brandenburg, Elaine Russell, John Hartwell, Kyle Campbell and Bruce Floyd for their eagerness to share their inputs and experiences with me.

## ABSTRACT

CALLIE MAYO: *Slam dunk- social media: how college athletes should and do use social media.*

(Under the direction of Robin Street)

This thesis will examine the role of social media as a public relations tool in athletics, whether posts are made by an athlete, an athletic department, or an outside source on reputation management. The first chapter will examine current research in how social media is used and monitored in college athletics, as well as the harmful effects it can cause. The next chapter will consist of several interviews with different collegiate athletic departments regarding their policies and training towards social media. The five athletic departments are from the following universities: the University of Georgia, the University at Buffalo, Utah State University, the University of Mississippi, and the University of Florida. Interviews were conducted via email, phone and in person, depending on the location of the school. Chapter three includes four case studies of athletic social media use at four schools: The University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill, The University of Mississippi, Mississippi State University and the University of North Carolina - Wilmington. Each case is examined on how social media affected the athlete or team's reputation. The fourth and final chapter will conclude this thesis by giving recommendations on the use of social media by college athletes and athletic departments.

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## Chapter One: Warm Up

Social Media and the internet have changed the landscape of sport communication more than any other media, according to *Foundations of Sport Management* (Gillentine & Crow 41). This thesis will begin by examining current research in the academic use of social media in the sports field. This chapter includes different examples of how social media networks are used, as well as examples of athletes and coaches who have participated in irresponsible social media activity. Research on social media management is also included in this thesis, taking into account federal and state laws and guidelines established by collegiate governing bodies.

Social media has become increasingly important throughout the world, allowing people to connect to other individuals through social networks in quick and effortless ways. Because of social media's complex role in our lives, many credit it with influencing the growth of sport in the United States (Gillentine & Crow 39). Social media is defined as "platforms that enable users to interact digitally with friends, fans, athletes, celebrities, media, and brands in real time" (Mullin, Hardy, Sutton 348). Social media is useful in sport for the following reasons, according to *Sport Marketing*:

- It builds an audience of fans to interact with in real time
- It engages fans in ways they want to be engaged (special offers, breaking news, websites, sweepstakes, etc.)
- It's viral
- It drives behavior that drives business



- People not only want to interact with brands on social media but also want to buy from brands (Mullin, Hardy, Sutton 345)

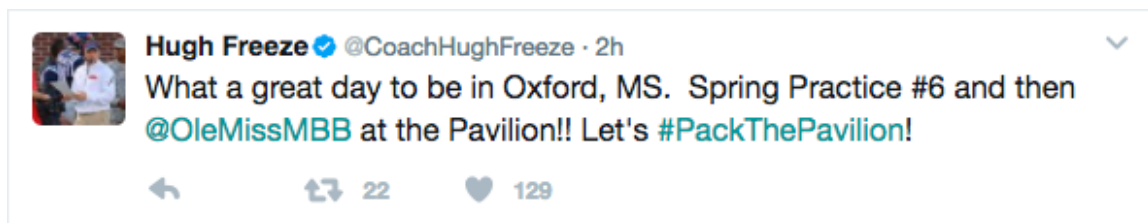
The internet provides the public with countless amounts of information dealing with sports news and game updates, and social media “has created an effective and direct pipeline of information and interactivity between sports figures and fans” (Gillentine & Crow 41). Before 2004, newspapers and television were the main mediums used by sports fans (Gillentine & Crow 41). However, since the start of social media, sports teams, players and fans have relied heavily on social media networks like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube (Gillentine & Crow 41). Facebook is said to be the No. 1 social media platform in sports (Burns). Facebook is known for its targeted marketing, advertising system that gives products and companies the ability to reach Facebook’s almost 2 billion users in more effective ways than before (Gillentine & Crow 41). For example, “sports teams have created fan pages on Facebook, providing them the ability to write messages directly to fans, notify them of team news, and showcase photo and video content of players, coaches, and team personnel” (Gillentine & Crow 41).



Athletes have even used Facebook to share announcements. Neymar da Silva Santos Júnior, a Brazilian soccer player, posted an emotional Facebook status following an injury at the 2014 World Cup.



Twitter was created in 2006 as an online news and social networking site. It quickly became a phenomenon in the sports world as it showed “how quickly new media can be used to mobilize fans” (Kassing & Sanderson 7). Users post and interact with messages, “tweets,” restricted to 140 characters (Gillentine & Crow 42). Gillentine and Crow believe, “Many sport entities, from teams to leagues to individual players and coaches, have used Twitter feeds to communicate directly with fans, and to bypass traditional media channels” (42).



In 2013, 50% of tweets (492 million Tweets) in the U.S. regarding TV were about sports events. Twitter has also popularized this phenomenon called a hashtag (#). A hashtag is a

type of label (a hash or pound sign) used on social networks that makes it easier for users to find messages with a specific theme or content. People use the hashtag symbol before a keyword or phrase in their tweet. Now, almost every sporting event or game has a hashtag associated with it. Some popular sport hashtags include: #MarchMadness, #CWS and #FinalFour.



YouTube is a video sharing website that was created in 2005 (Gillentine & Crow 42). Numerous sports teams and leagues have created YouTube accounts to post their own videos, which in turn enhances brand awareness and outreach (Gillentine & Crow 42). Fans also use YouTube to watch related video content before sports events and to get major sport news such as post game interviews or game highlights.



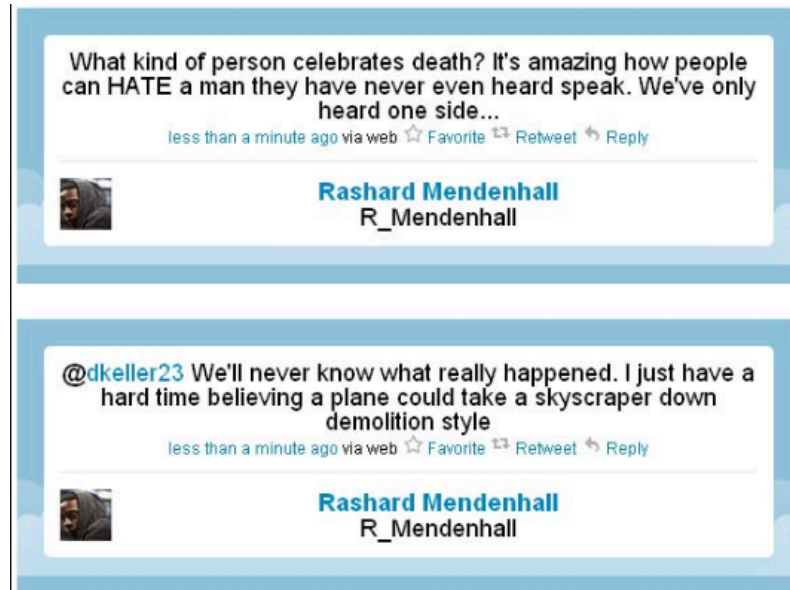
Memphis TigerNetwork

Subscribe 3,447

Despite all the benefits, social media poses the possibility of potentially harming the reputation of a team or university. The moment a negative message is shared, it is spread for the whole world to see. The quick and effortless nature of social media becomes damaging in this sense (Bentley, He Tweeted What 452). Student athletes, coaches, other athletic employees and even outside sources can post damaging information and have the information spread rapidly, often causing a public relations blunder for a team or university. Increasingly, we see student athletes as the source for these types of situations. Student athletes are typically young adults around the age of 18-22, among the highest users of social media. Thus, data proves that college athletes are constantly active on numerous social media sites (Duggan et al 1).

It is important that student athletes properly behave on social media because student athletes not only represents themselves, but also their teams and universities. By inappropriately using social media networks, student athletes could cause a violation or suspension of their respective team as well as a personal loss of scholarship and financial aid. For example, in 2008, Buck Burnette was removed from the Texas Longhorn's football team after posting a Facebook status regarding his view on newly elected president Barack Obama. Burnette posted, "all the hunters gather up, we have a #\$\$%&er in the whitehouse" (Daulerio). Once Longhorns coach Mack Brown heard of the news he kicked Burnette off the team (Daulerio). In 2011, the men's golf team from Bethany College was suspended from three tournaments after a nude team photo was posted to Facebook (Bentley, He Tweeted What 458). Although this photo was not necessarily considered offensive, the player's juvenile actions tarnished the image of this private, liberal college in Lindsborg, Kansas. Also in 2011, Rashard Mendenhall, a running back

for the Steelers, received criticism after his tweet about the death of Osama bin Laden (Walker). Due to the controversy, Mendenhall lost a successful endorsement deal with Champion sports apparel (Walker).



The main concern following social media incidents like the ones stated above, is the lack of student athlete social media training. Of the 1,373 student athlete participants in the 2016 Fieldhouse Media survey, 97% have a Facebook account, 84% have a Twitter account, 93% have a Snapchat account and 89% have an Instagram account (Deshazo, Social Media Use). Fifty-two percent say they have had no social media training (Deshazo, Social Media Use). In addition, the 2013 College Sports Information Directors of America survey about social media training for student-athletes and coaches showed that 56% of the universities surveyed do not provide training for student-athletes in the use of social media, and 67% do not have a social media policy for student-athletes (CoSIDA, survey).

With the high-level of involvement of student athletes on social media and the growing concern of misrepresentation, collegiate athletic department leaders must determine how to monitor or police student athletes' social media accounts without interfering with First Amendment rights and privacy privileges. Eric D. Bentley stated that several college coaches "are reacting to this potential for inappropriate postings from their athletes" by not allowing their athletes to use any social media (He Tweeted What 453). Others are disciplining athletes for their use of social media (Bentley, He Tweeted What 453). While private colleges, universities, and other entities "can enact strict social media policies or discipline an athlete for an inappropriate tweet or Facebook post without risking a valid First Amendment claim by the athlete" (Bentley, He Tweeted What 455), public colleges and universities are subject to potential First Amendment and other constitutional claims (Bentley, He Tweeted What 453). For a public university, Bentley states that an athletic department has the ability to discipline a student athlete if it falls under the following categories of unprotected speech:

1. Fighting Words/True Threat
2. Defamatory Statements
3. Obscenity
4. Violation of Criminal Law
5. Violation of Reasonable Team or NCAA Rules
6. Harassing Speech (Unnecessary Roughness)

In addition, some states have enacted social media account laws for educational institutions. These privacy laws would prohibit an educational institution from forcing students to release social media account user names and passwords. The following states

have such laws: Arkansas, California, Delaware, Illinois, Michigan, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oregon and Utah (Publications).

Instead of taking away all social media privileges, athletic directors and coaches could place reasonable limitations on athletes' use of social media, as well as training athletes on the dangers associated with social media postings and addressing posts on a case-by-case basis (Bentley, *He Tweeted What* 460). For example, the NBA and NFL place a limitation on all players in their league by not allowing their players to use social media sites 45 minutes and 90 minutes, respectively, before a game and not until all their responsibilities after the game are finished. The most beneficial practice for an athletic department is to "educate its athletes on the dangers and pitfalls involved with the use of social media" (Bentley, *Unnecessary Roughness*). To avoid major social media pitfalls, sport properties, athletes and celebrities should install some basic guidelines:

- Manage access to accounts
- Keep personal and official account separate
- Reserve the right to delete but do so with caution
- Own your mistakes (Bernard, p. 361-362)

Lauren McCoy states that there are three main methods for regulating student athletes' social media: ban, guidelines without monitoring and policies that include monitoring (228). A ban limits a student athlete's social media usage entirely. For example, Clemson has banned football players in the past from using social media during the regular season in efforts to cut down on distractions. While bans like these could be effective, they could also lead to legal issues regarding free speech and privacy (McCoy 229). Guidelines are imposed to "educate students on how to properly act and respond on

social networking sites” (McCoy 229). They warn students of the potential danger in social media, as well as tips to follow when using social media, such as never including any personal information in a post. While guidelines are instructive, they do not include any monitoring activities (McCoy 229). Although a student athlete may know when a post is inappropriate due to prior training on the issue, he/she still has the ability to post such information on social media without being regulated. Lastly, the most effective method is to establish a social media policy that allows monitoring by coach or department (McCoy 229). Policies are seen as a contract between a university and a student athlete that emphasizes that a student athlete can be reprimanded for his/her social media behavior ((McCoy 229 - 230). The University of Houston Athletics has a written social media policy for all of its student athletes (see Appendix A). While participating in social media activity, student athletes are expected to adhere to a set of guidelines. Some of the guidelines stated are all student athletes must comply with all NCAA regulations, leave out all personal information and conduct himself/herself as if they were on a live interview. If a student athlete decides not to follow any of the stated rules, he/she could face one of several penalties. The penalties depend on the severity of the incident but could be anything from a written warning to expulsion. This method also allows schools to use the services of companies such as Varsity Monitor and UDiligence to monitor their athletes’ social media activity (Stienbach). Both companies use software systems to flag potentially destructive posts on a student athlete’s social media sites. If a post is flagged, coaches are automatically alerted (Stienbach). Athletes are notified through email if any of their posts were flagged in the last 24 hours, allowing them time to take responsibility and delete the post (Stienbach).



The need for social media education extends beyond student athletes. Coaches, student information directors, athletic directors and other athletic department staff members have a presence on social media, as well. It is important that they also are educated on the use of social media so they can set the standard for all their student athletes. In May 2016, Tate Martell, a five-star recruit, announced that he was withdrawing his commitment from Texas A&M (Curtis). Shortly after, A&M's wide receivers coach, Aaron Moorehead, took to Twitter stating, "I feel sorry for ppl (sic) who never understand loyalty. I can't really even vibe with u. At the end of the day trust is 100 & everything else is BS," followed by a series of other tweets (Curtis). Ultimately, the emotionally charged tweet led two other notable recruits to drop Texas A&M as one of their school considerations (Curtis). When used appropriately, social media can provide many benefits for coaches and staff. Kevin DeShazo states that there is a significant amount of opportunity for coaches on social media because, "they get to control the message of their program, highlight the caliber of people on their team, brag about the on and off-field accomplishments, show why recruits should want to sign and why fans should want to support" (For coaches).

In the United States, college sports teams are sanctioned by collegiate sport governing bodies. The three major sanctioning organizations include the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), and the National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA). While the NCAA is the most relevant to this thesis, it is also important to note some of the characteristics of the other two. The NCAA, which oversees 1,123 colleges and universities, is responsible for establishing and enforcing rules surrounding college sports

for their three divisions – Division I, II and III. The NJCAA acts as the governing body for 525 community and junior college athletic programs. The smallest association of the three is the NAIA, which manages around 260 colleges and universities. It is important to note, that none of the three governing bodies have a social media policy that is enforced over the members of their association.

The next two chapters of this thesis take a more in-depth look at several university athletic departments' social media policies, as well as an examination of multiple case studies in which social media affected an athlete and/or a team's reputation. All universities interviewed and examined are members of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). The NCAA states, "the committee recognizes that social networking sites are a preferred method of communication in present society, particularly so among college-age individuals. While we do not impose an absolute duty upon member institutions to regularly monitor such sites, the duty to do so may arise as part of an institution's heightened awareness when it has or should have a reasonable suspicion of rules violations. If the membership desires that the duty to monitor social networking sites extend further than we state here, the matter is best dealt with through NCAA legislation" (Social Media - NCAA).

NCAA rules on the use of social media are only directed toward coaches and other staff members during the recruitment process. As a NCAA coach or institution you can:

- Market and promote your school/program by setting up social networking pages like Facebook, Twitter and/or YouTube.
- Send messages to recruits through a social network's email function - Facebook message or direct message on Twitter (Flynn)

Coaches cannot use the school's social networking pages to:

- Feature photos of prospective student athletes
- Contact individual prospects publicly or through text messages
- Discuss specific recruits on any wall, public forum or chat room
- Contact prospect when it is impermissible as per NCAA recruiting laws (Ortiz)

## **Chapter Two: Locker Room – The Expectations of Social Media Use**

This chapter includes interviews, conducted by phone, email or in person, with individuals at five athletic departments regarding each school's social media policy for student athletes, training programs, and other various components installed to promote positive social media practices. The five athletic departments examined are from: the University of Georgia, the University at Buffalo, Utah State University, the University of Mississippi and the University of Florida. The individuals interviewed all play a significant role in their school's athletic department and are well informed on the policies and procedures practiced by their student athletes, coaches and department.

### **University of Georgia**

The first athletic department discussed is the athletic department at the University of Georgia. Ben Brandenburg is the Assistant Director of Digital Services/Recruiting. Brandenburg has served his position since July 2001 where he is responsible for planning and implementing Digital/Social Media/Branding strategies for UGAA sport programs with a concentration on recruiting and team services.

According to Brandenburg, UGAA's best philosophy is to hold the head coaches accountable. It is part of the coaches' job to manage, enforce, and constantly keep track of their athletes on social media. From the start, the athletic department speaks with all head coaches on the effects of social media and the importance of the power of a brand.

Once the coach is informed on the importance of social media, it is then his or her job to try to get their athletes to “buy in.” Because of their high trust in coaches, coaches are responsible for their own social media accounts, but the media relations department helps coaches in terms of content. For instance, if the coach wants to tweet a video or graphic he/she will obtain it from the videographer or graphic design team then post his/her own individualized message. Brandenburg says creating and using social media accounts is a coach’s personal decision, but he believes it is the best way to stay in front of recruits, fans and donors.

Aside from coaches educating their athletes on the do’s and don’ts of social media, UGAA has recently implemented a new structure called Social Media 101. Student athletes are educated on positive social media usage and good examples of brand statement. In addition, coaches and staff meet with freshmen to help them understand the significance and power of social media. Brandenburg says they try to instruct them early to reduce the chances of mistakes being made. In a situation in which a student athlete is not representing the school well on social media, the player is immediately asked to take a post down or to explain it to his or her coach. Brandenburg says one benefit of social media is that most players were active on social media prior to college, so coaches and staff members know who to look out for during the recruiting process.

Brandenburg says UGAA has not had many problems with outside sources posting something negative about one of their athletes or their athletic program. He says there will always be comments, and their job is just to keep it positive. It is up to UGA coaches on how they are going to respond to these instances since it is his or her social

media platform. However, UGAA will never respond from an official account or team platform.

### **University at Buffalo**

University at Buffalo is the second athletics department that was examined for this thesis. Elaine Russell is the senior director of marketing for UB athletics. Russell is responsible for all marketing and promotional efforts in the UB athletics department.

According to Russell, UB athletics does not have a written social media policy that they physically turn over to the student athletes. The UB athletics media relations' staff handles social media and meets with each team and student athletes at the beginning of every year. Additionally, they do media training, which now includes social media training. Russell personally gives presentations to new students giving "think before you tweet" types messages. Russell provides real time examples of student athletes or pro athletes who have tweeted or posted inappropriate messages and faced consequences because of their posts. "The best we can do is educate our student athletes and our staff by saying what you might think is funny on social media can be interpreted completely different by a fan, recruit, teammate, media, etc.," says Russell. If a student athlete were to ever post something inappropriate on social media Russell says he or she would immediately be asked to take it down and to look at it in a different perspective.

UB athletics employs sports information workers who are with athletes whenever the mass media is present. They or the coaches will have more of the conversations about misusing social media. UB athletics has not had to deal with many problems regarding

social media. Russell says they have had to deal with more compliance issues, such as a student athlete unintentionally endorsing a company.

For UB athletics, coaches handle their own social media accounts. Russell says for certain sports the media relations person might have access to the coach's account to help spread the message, but for the most part everyone handles his or her own account. The teams' primary account is "UB Athletics." Their four big platforms are Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. Russell, the marketing office, and the communications office all have access to those accounts, and they are constantly working together to handle media stories, fan engagement, and other messages. In addition, each UB sport has its own Twitter and Facebook account, and the individual team handles those. It is usually an assistant coach or student athlete, who is trained to properly handle social media, that takes on the task of specific sport accounts.

Russell says when people complain about different aspects of their program, they try to answer every issue and complaint. However, if there are comments bashing a coach or a player, they usually don't even acknowledge them and they will hide them. "We have our Facebook to promote the good things that we are doing and it should be a friendly fun page for people to go look. So when people post negative remarks, I usually just go hide the comment," says Russell. Ignoring them and moving on is their attitude.

### **Utah State University**

The third athletics department I examined for this thesis is Utah State. Since June 2015 John Hartwell has been with the Utah State Aggies as vice president and director of

athletics. Hartwell's duties include anything from monitoring teams and players to fundraising and budgeting.

While Utah State athletics does not have a formal policy, they provide social media training at the beginning of the year for all new and returning student athletes as well as team social media training. Here student athletes are taught the do's, don'ts, and risks of social media. "The tricky part now is the possibility of dealing with situations on stance, political views, and other things like that, like the whole Colin Kaepernick situation. We have not ventured so far into limiting folks from saying things of that nature, but we do allow having further limitations by team, which the coach can decide if he or she wants to be more stringent than general guidelines," says Hartwell.

For Utah State athletics, the media relations department has access to all official Utah State athletics social media accounts, but individual coaches are allowed to post as it relates to staff. In terms of monitoring student athletes, all of their coaches require all student athletes to provide them with username information from all of their social media outlets. This allows the coaches to read all of the their athletes' posts and react quickly if something inappropriate was posted. There is also a designated person in the media relations department who also gets all of that information. In the case of an inappropriate post, the designated person in media relations would immediately notify the head coach and John Hartwell.

In the couple of instances Utah State has had with student athletes misrepresenting the school on social media, the student athlete has been asked to take it down, and then the coaches have handled whatever team discipline there has been. However, Hartwell said they have not had any violations that have reached the level of



what he would call a crisis. When outside sources post something negative about a Utah State athlete or their athletic department they don't respond, unless it is from an official source. "If there is some general statement out there we may post something contrary to that just for general information purposes but not in direct response to a smear or an allegation. It would open up a whole can of worms if you did that," Hartwell says.

### **University of Mississippi**

The fourth athletic department I interviewed for this thesis was the University of Mississippi. Kyle Campbell has helped manage the Ole Miss Athletics Communication Department for six years and most recently as associate A.D. Campbell supervises the communications staff, serves as the media contact for the football programs, oversees the school's digital content, and also works closely with the local SEC Network team and coordinates talent. Overall, he assists in the athletic department's public relations strategy.

The Ole Miss athletics' social media policy varies from team to team. Kyle Campbell said, "The big point that we try to stress with all of our student athletes is social media responsibility." Ole Miss athletics holds a summer program for all incoming student athletes. A big portion of their program is dedicated toward social media responsibility, as well as personal branding. "Over the course of their careers if issues arrive we basically take them on a case-by-case basis," says Campbell. Throughout the year, the coaches stress the importance of making good decisions and being responsible when it comes to social media. They make sure the athletes know that they are representing their team, family, and hometown. "As much as the coaches drill it in their

heads, they understand the significance and importance of it. Then if we see issues we can address them one by one,” Campbell said.

For Ole Miss, the entire marketing communications unit handles the social media accounts. It is a joint effort between the media and PR office, the marketing office, and the creative wing. Coaches handle their own personal accounts, but Campbell’s office provides assistance with them, specially regarding content. Ole Miss has had issues throughout the years regarding a student athlete misrepresenting the school on social media. “In each of those instances the first step is to go directly to the student athlete. We sit down with them and really try to make them understand the consequences of being irresponsible there. We try to show them good examples to work from and really just guide them through that situation,” Campbell said.

As a department, Campbell said they are always monitoring everyone’s accounts and keeping a close eye on them. “It’s always a concern when you have 400 student athletes and hundreds of staffers. Everyone is on social media so there is always an opportunity that people can make a mistake and not represent us well”. If outside sources post something negative about an individual or the athletic department, the Ole Miss Athletic department officials try to be as transparent and engaging as possible. If they feel like there is a consensus sentiment posted by multiple social media users, they try to address it as quickly as possible.

### **University of Florida**

The University of Florida’s athletic department is the fifth and final athletic department I examined for this thesis. Bruce Floyd works under the communications

department as the social media manager for the Florida Gators. He runs the top-level social media accounts for the Florida Gators.

The athletic department at the University of Florida has no specific student media policy at the top level. Instead, individual coaches have the option to determine requirements and limitations on a sport-by-sport basis. In addition, the department provides seminars to student athletes. These seminars delve into the pitfalls associated with social media.

Each sport at Florida has specific social media accounts. Also many of Florida's coaches have their own accounts. As the social media manager, Bruce Floyd runs any social media account named @FloridaGators. The sports accounts (ex: @GatorsFB) are accessed by that sport's sports information director. Floyd stated that specific employees within their marketing office have access to accounts in order to share out specific marketing initiatives.

Floyd stated that they have had to deal with some missteps of their student athletes on social media. What they try to do is approach all of these situations as another opportunity to educate and inform the individual and other student athletes. When dealing with outside people posting something about an athlete or the athletic department, Floyd said their response depends on what is said, who is saying it, and the credibility of the message or messenger.

### **Common Trends**

The five athletic departments interviewed above have many common trends. First, none of the five athletic departments have a formal written social media policy that is

executed to their student athletes. Instead, all of the departments place all the authority on the coaches when it comes to determining social media rules and guidelines. Thus, every sport's team could have different social media standards at the same school. All of the five athletic departments provide some type of social media training for their student athletes. While all the departments administer these programs and seminars at different times throughout the year, all schools recognize that educating their student athletes on social media is something that cannot be overlooked. In addition, all coaches at these five universities have personal social media accounts.

### **Chapter Three: Game Time – Social Media in Action**

In this chapter, four case studies will be examined. Three of the cases will show how social media can negatively affect an athlete, team, athletic department or university's reputation. While the third case shows how a college swim and dive team used different social media platforms to advocate against the elimination of their team. These cases involve the University of North Carolina –Chapel Hill, the University of Mississippi, Mississippi State University and the University of North Carolina - Wilmington. All three negatives cases indicate different social media errors and result in different outcomes. Two of the three cases examine the results of an outside source posting negative content about a player. While the other case shows the consequences of a player posting negative content on his own social media accounts.

#### **The University of North Carolina –Chapel Hill**

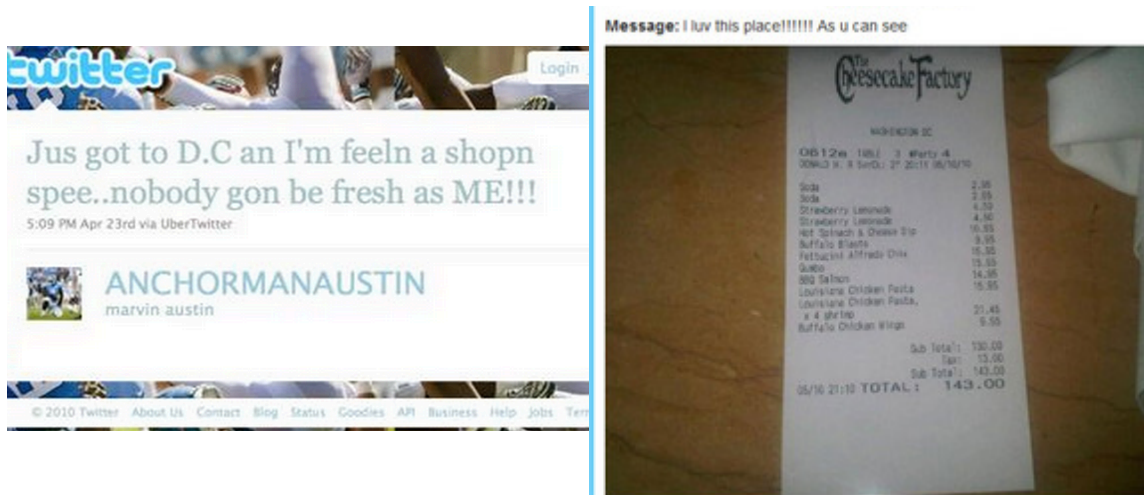
On May 29, 2010, UNC defensive tackle Marvin Austin sent out the following tweet:



His post was referencing a song by Rick Ross about a nightclub in Miami, Florida (Barbour).

It was reported that Marvin Austin was allegedly at the club for a sport's agent party two months earlier along with fellow teammate and UNC receiver Greg Little (Barbour). Austin's tweet prompted the NCAA to open an investigation on the football program because they thought Austin was implying that he was receiving free champagne from sports agents, which is a major NCAA violation (McCoy 226). The football program was ultimately involved in two investigations. One regarded players receiving improper benefits, and the other involved academic misconduct (Barbour).

A series of tweets from Austin's twitter account led the NCAA to believe that he had been receiving improper benefits during his time at UNC (McCoy 226). Although his twitter account was immediately deactivated when noise of the NCAA investigation started to buzz, in different occasions Austin "posted pictures of a watch for his sister, a bag from an upscale sunglasses store in Miami and a \$143 bill from The Cheesecake Factory in Washington"



Unfortunately for UNC, the NCAA uncovered that Austin and Little were not the only players who had been receiving improper benefits. In addition, due to information

shared by a football player during an interview regarding the first allegation, the NCAA started investigating into possible academic fraud involving a tutor in the university's academic support program (Feldman).

What had started as an investigation of improper treatment for two players, Marvin Austin and Greg Little, eventually consumed the entire football program. On September 1, 2010, North Carolina suspended Austin (Associated Press). In addition, 13 players missed North Carolina's season opener against LSU on September 4 (Associated Press). A couple days later, John Blake, defensive line coach and associate head coach, was forced to resign (Feldman). North Carolina eventually formally dismissed Austin, and the NCAA declared Greg Little and defensive end Robert Quinn permanently ineligible (Feldman). In 2011, the NCAA investigation was still in full force. North Carolina ultimately decided to fire Butch Davis, the head coach, and athletic director, Dick Baddour, announced his resignation (Feldman). Finally, in March of 2012, the NCAA issued formal sanctions against the North Carolina football program. North Carolina football faced a postseason ban for 2012, which bans a team from playing in postseason bowl game and conference championships, reductions of 15 scholarships, and three years of probation (Whiteside).

On top of many other violations, the NCAA reported that the school did not properly monitor the social networking activity of its student athletes (McCoy 226). Prior to the investigation, the UNC athletic department did not have a defined monitor practice or social media policy for its student athletes. However, the university updated its guidelines for student athletes regarding social media. Now, athletes are informed that at least one coach or administrator will monitor his/her sites regularly, and the coach or

administrator will evaluate postings that identify possible improper benefits or agent related activities (Whiteside). The policy also states repercussions the athletes could potentially face if they were to violate any of the rules, like the loss of scholarship or expulsion from the team (Whiteside).

After the NCAA declared the North Carolina football program had “failed to monitor the social networking activity,” of its student-athletes, many other universities started making decisions on how they were going to increase their monitoring of student athletes’ online activity to prevent being faced with similar allegations (McCoy 227). Different athletic departments choose different methods of monitoring, but now most departments agree that ignoring social media completely is no longer an option. UNC’s situation could have easily been prevented or minimized if the university had installed a social media policy or had employed the services of a companies like UDiligence or Varsity Monitor that were mentioned in Chapter One of this thesis (Medcalf).

### **Laremy Tunsil at the University of Mississippi**

Since head football coach Hugh Freeze arrived at Ole Miss in December of 2011, the football program has experienced many victories and successes. His accomplishments were highlighted at the 2016 NFL draft when Ole Miss had three first round picks: offensive tackle Laremy Tunsil, wide receiver Laquon Treadwell and defensive tackle Robert Nkemdiche. However, the night quickly turned sour when an anonymous person hacked Tunsil’s Twitter and Instagram accounts. The posts immediately affected Tunsil, who was seen as a potential No. 1 pick, and caused him to fall down the draft board to pick No. 13 from the Miami Dolphins.



So what exactly happened to Tunsil this night?

7:47 p.m.- Tunsil's Twitter, @KingTunsil78, showed a 30-second video of him taking a hit from a bong attached to a gas mask (Grossman).



8:15 p.m. - @KingTunsil78 was shut down (Grossman).

9:23 p.m. @KingTunsil78 is live again with a public apology. The tweet is later deleted (Grossman).

9:43 p.m. Tunsil is drafted 13<sup>th</sup> overall by the Miami Dolphins (Grossman).

9:46 p.m. Tunsil in an interview with Suzie Kolber, an ESPN reporter, admitted that was him in the video, but said it was posted on his Twitter account by a hacker (Grossman).

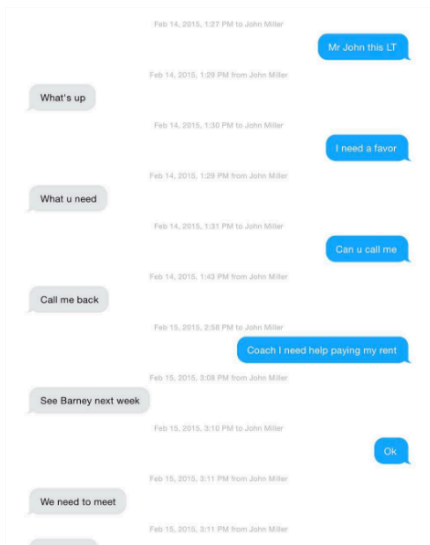


Laremy Tunsil said "someone hacked my twitter account" and that the video was "years ago." He said he learned of it in the green room.

8:46 PM - 28 Apr 2016

Retweets: 638, Likes: 775

At the same time as the interview, Tunsil’s Instagram account, @kingtunsil, posted screenshots of text messages from an Ole Miss assistant (Grossman). These text messages indicated that Tunsil took money from the Ole Miss athletic program.



10:26 p.m. – Tunsil admits to taking payments from Ole Miss (Grossman).

Not only was Tunsil’s social media debacle detrimental to himself, it also ended up being damaging to the entire Ole Miss football program. The NCAA began to investigate the Ole Miss athletic program in October of 2012 when the women’s

basketball coach, Adrian Wiggins, was fired due to recruiting violations (Information about NCAA Case). The Ole Miss football program was not in the spotlight until Laremy Tunsil was arrested for fighting his step dad, Lindsey Miller, in June 2015. Miller provided a great deal of information to the NCAA about his and Tunsil's relationship with Ole Miss boosters and other agents (Information about NCAA Case). In January 2016, the NCAA gave the university 120 days to respond to the official findings of the investigation (Information about NCAA Case).

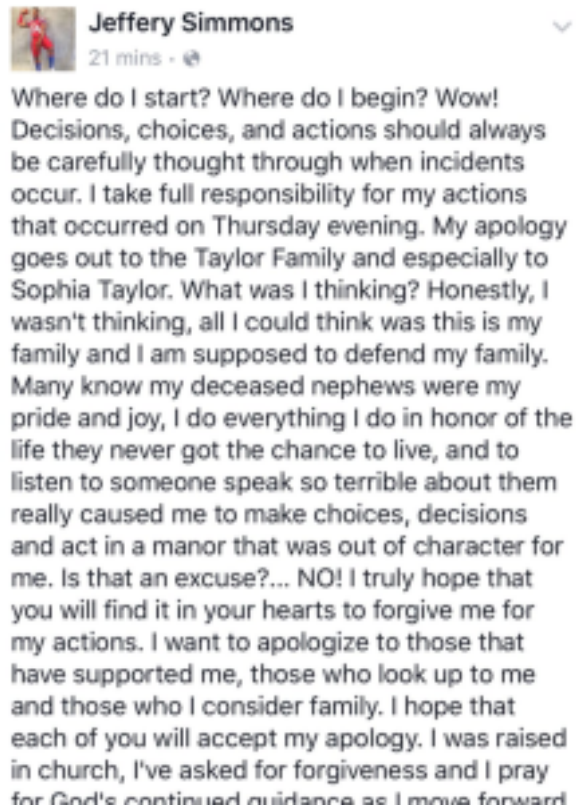
For the moment, the investigation was over and the university could breathe. However, due to the NFL draft night fiasco that following April, the NCAA decided to reopen its investigation into the football program. Although none of the final allegations imposed by the NCAA specifically related to Laremy Tunsil, the incidents that happened the night of the NFL draft gave the NCAA enough reason to open an investigation with the Ole Miss football program that could ultimately cause severe damage to the entire program. Unfortunately, a student athlete social media policy could not have prevented this, but this case shows how damaging an outside source can be to an athlete and team's reputation.

### **Jeffery Simmons at Mississippi State University**

In March of 2016, Jeffery Simmons, a 5-star defensive end who committed to Mississippi State, was shown on a video hitting a woman several times while she was on the ground (Fowler). According to Simmons, it was in response to comments the woman made about to a family member. Simmons was charged with simple assault and disturbing the peace after the video went viral (Fowler). The video, which occurred at

Mayfair Apartments in Macon, Mississippi, shows a woman lying in the street with her head covered (Fowler). A man, identified as 6' 4", 251-pound Simmons, repeatedly strikes the woman on the ground while a large crowd surrounds them (Patterson).

Simmons immediately apologized with this post:



Despite the charges, Jeffery Simmons was admitted to Mississippi State University (Cade). "After careful assessment, the MSU athletics department has determined Simmons may be a part of the football team, but he will be evaluated by the licensed professionals at the university's Student Counseling Services and be required to complete any program prescribed by that office. Additionally, he will be suspended for the first game of his college career," the school wrote in a statement (Cade). The school considered this incident tolerable because Simmons was merely

using “physical force against one of those involved in the altercation” after he attempted to break up a fight between his sister and another woman (Cade).

Mississippi State Athletic Director Scott Stricklin also released in an official report,

“Based on conversations our staff has had with school, community and church leaders in Noxubee County, this incident appears to be uncharacteristic of Jeffery. It’s a highly unique circumstance to administer discipline to a student for an incident that occurred prior to that individual joining our university. However, it’s important that Jeffery and other potential MSU students understand that these types of actions and poor decisions are not acceptable. We expect the structure and discipline Jeffery will be a part of in our football program to benefit him. Jeffery will be held accountable for his actions while at MSU, and there will be consequences for any future incidents” (Cade).

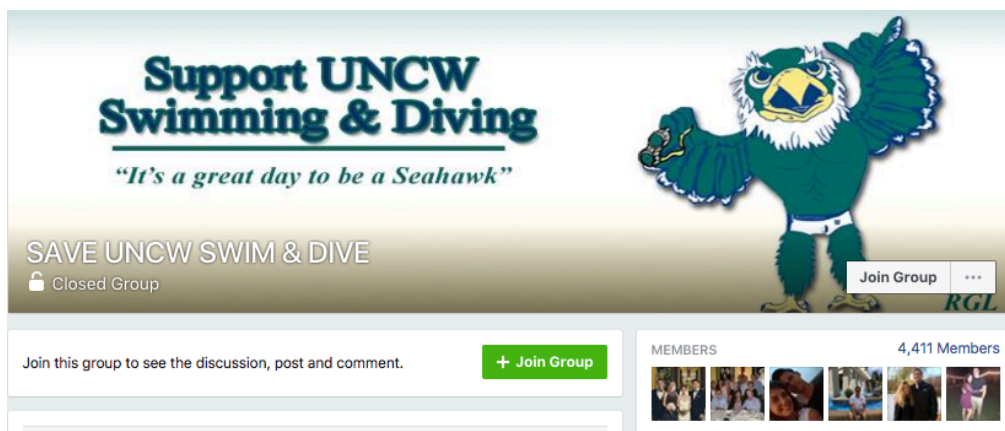
In the end, Simmons received “the same suspension for smacking a defenseless woman that he would for a mere targeting penalty” (Crist).

This decision by Mississippi State University and its athletic department was not taken lightly. Mississippi State, its athletic department, and its coaches received much backlash and lost a lot of credibility (Crist). Many believe Mississippi State let Simmons on the team solely based on the fact that Simmons had the chance to help improve the Mississippi State football program (Crist). While in this case study the affected university and athletic department did not receive any formal punishments, it shows how a video-gone-viral can alter the public’s outlook on a university and athletic program.

## Swim and Dive Team at the University of North Carolina -Wilmington

On May 15, 2013, the Intercollegiate Athletic Reviews Committee at the University of North Carolina-Wilmington advised the university to remove the following sports: UNCW men's indoor track/cross country, men's and women's swimming/diving and softball teams (Bonner). The elimination of these five sports teams of over 100 student athletes would save the UNCW athletic department \$800,000 per year (Bonner). To fully enact the removal of these five UNCW teams the Chancellor Gary Miller had to have final say (Bonner).

The men and women's swimming and diving teams started a social media campaign in attempt to raise awareness about the situation and ultimately save their teams (Hull 533). "Within hours of the release of the Intercollegiate Athletics Review Committee report, the university's male and female swimmers and divers had generated more than 1,000 members to a Facebook page, started a petition at change.org and a hashtag on Twitter," according to Brian Mull (Mull). The Facebook page, Save UNCW Swim and Dive, was created to announce any events associated with the team, and it hit over 10,000 members within the first 48 hours (Ginthner).



The women's swim team captain created the online petition, and within the first 24 hours there was already over 6,000 signatures (Ginthner). By the end of the campaign, it had 14,637 supporters.

## Save UNCW Swimming and Diving

 Sara Smith Ellicott City, MD





#Fight4UNCWswimanddive

### Petition Closed

14,637 supporters

363 needed to reach 15,000


 Share on Facebook 

Add a personal message (optional)

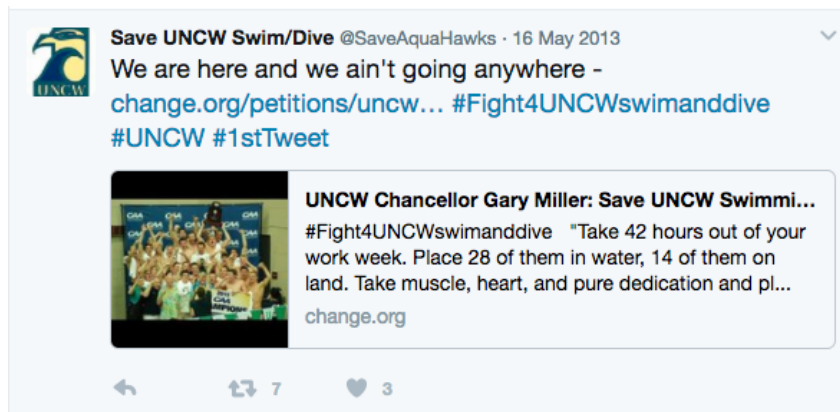


UNCW Chancellor Gary Miller: Save UNCW Swimming and Diving

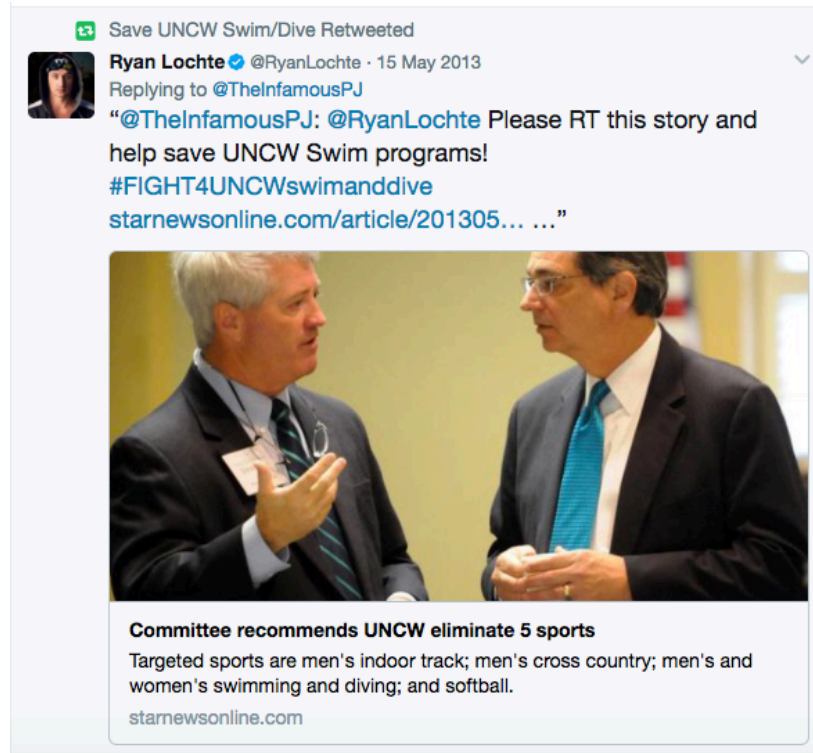
 Post to Facebook

 Send a Facebook message

A twitter account was created to promote their issue, as well. Here, the hashtag #fight4uncwswimanddive was implemented (Ginthner).



UNCW also used their Twitter account to gain celebrity endorsements (Ginthner). Some notable celebrities who retweeted the campaign were Lance Armstrong, Ryan Lochten and Missy Franklin (Ginthner).



In addition to the tactics above, “alumni sent emails to the chancellor and media members protesting the proposed changes” (Mull). Over 50 universities showed support through social media or other online platforms throughout the campaign (Ginthner). The campaign reached over 8 million people total, and was promoted on two TV stations and three radio stations (Ginthner).

On May 30, 2013 UNCW Chancellor Gary Miller announced that none of the five sports teams would be eliminated from the athletics department (Ginthner).





Through this 15-day campaign, the UNCW athletes demonstrated how different social media platforms could be used in a positive and effective way (Hull 533). The UNCW athletes gained community support by reaching as many people as possible, even celebrities, through different social media platforms (Hull 533). UNCW swimmer Carly Tanner, reflecting on the campaign, stated, “Social media was a priority. In today’s world, you can spread news like wildfire online. We knew it would be the fastest and easiest way to get the word out. I’ve never been huge on tweeting, but this was more important to me than anything else. I just wanted to make as much noise as possible and show how much it means to me,” (Hull 543).



## **Chapter Four: Postgame Evaluation**

This thesis showed that although there is a need for social media regulation in college athletics due to a regular pattern of inappropriately behavior on social media outlets by student athletes, there is not one common policy that is implemented by all college universities and athletic departments. Out of the five athletic departments interviewed, not one department had a formal written social media policy for their student athletes. There were several common trends throughout the different departments, such as leaving the social media supervision in the hands of the head coaches and providing a proper amount of social media education to the student athletes. However, both the NCAA and its members could benefit if there were one common social media policy student athletes were expected to follow. This would decrease the confusion between the NCAA and its expectation of how college athletic departments should handle their student athletes' social media activity, as well as provide better guidelines for student athletes when using social media.

A consistent and clear social media policy should also be implemented across the entirety of an athletic department. These social media policies would be even more successful if each sport were required to follow the same social media procedures. Allowing a coach to determine his team's rules and procedures creates uncertainty across the athletic department. It is important to recall that an administration should not prohibit all of the student athlete's social media use, in the case interfering with the First Amendment. And in the case of interfering with state laws the administration should not

force a student athlete to turn over his/her password and username for all social media accounts. But according to the research in this thesis, it is legal for athletic departments to create policies with guidelines that student athletes are expected to follow. These policies are instated to not only protect the student athletes but the universities as well.

The case of Laremy Tunsil at Ole Miss is very unique because it deals with an unknown hacker. This situation highlights the importance of managing individual social media accounts. Ideally, the owner should be the only person who has the information to access his/her social media account. It is also advised to change passwords frequently and make them complex. If for some reason more than one person has access to a personal account, it is important to know exactly who those people are.

In conclusion, social media has become an unavoidable part of the sports field. Fans, student athletes, coaches and athletic directors are all involved in social media networks to maximize their sports experience. Many benefits are associated with social media like immediate access to information, connectivity to those around and the ability to positively advocate for a cause, like in the UNCW case. However, without the proper education, training and discipline social media could be detrimental to a student-athlete, team and/or university. When using social media it is important to keep in mind:

1. It's a tool, not a toy
2. Nothing is truly private... ever
3. If you retweet it (or share it), you own it
4. Personal branding: every tweet reflects who you are (Gaio, 2013)

## Appendix A

### **The University of Houston Athletics Social Media Policy**

1. Make sure your social media activity is in compliance with applicable Texas and federal law, as well as NCAA, conference, and university bylaws, policies, rules, and regulations.
2. Consider setting your security settings so that only your friends can view your profile/Twitter feed(s). If you do not know how to do this, please contact the Athletics Communications office and they will be happy to assist you. Do not give out your passwords to anyone. Make sure to change your passwords regularly.
3. You should not post your email, home address, local address, telephone numbers, social security number, birthdate, banking information as it could lead to unwanted behavior such as stalking or identity theft.
4. Be aware of who you add as “friends” or “followers” to your social media venues. Many people may not have your best interest at heart and may look to take advantage of you or seek unwanted interaction.
5. Use commonsense. Respect differences, appreciate the diversity of opinions and speak or conduct yourself in a professional manner at all times. For example, you should refrain from posting items that are physically threatening, defamatory, obscene, in violation copyright law, unlawfully harassing or discriminatory or items that are materially disruptive to the University, the Department of Athletics, or your team
6. Monitor what other post about you and remove posts from your social media page

as you determine necessary.

7. Make sure that your online activities do not interfere with your responsibilities as a member of your team. In this regard, do not engage in social media activity four hours before your upcoming athletics event or during completion or other official athletic department or team events. Additionally, do not engage in social media activity between the hours of midnight and 5 a.m. of the night before your team's athletic event/competition. Give yourself a break from social media, get some rest, and get ready for your team's event/competition.
8. Do not post any information that is proprietary to the Athletic Department, which is not public information such as tentative or future schedules, team playbooks or strategies, or information that is sensitive or personal in nature, such as travel plans and itineraries
9. Behave on social media as you would in front of a crowd of strangers – be proud of where you come from and where you are at. Do not let anyone have a reason to dilute that pride by sullyng your name through social media comments.
10. Remember, a great deal of damage can be done in just 140 characters, so think before you Tweet. If you have any doubts about the appropriateness of a social media comment, do not share it.
11. Try to conduct yourself as if you were doing a live interview with a media organization. There is no such thing as privacy on your social media pages. The speed with which a negative comment can spread in social media can be staggering. The best advice is to imagine that ESPN is sitting in your room and double-checking your comments before you decide to hit the SHARE or TWEET

button. Once you post your comment, it may last in cyberspace forever, including being accessible to professional sports organization or your future employer.

### Social Media Discipline Procedures

If a student-athlete's social media activity is found to be inappropriate in accordance with this policy, he/she may be subject to the following penalties:

1. A written warning
2. A meeting with the Director of Athletics and Head Coach
3. Penalties are determined by the athletics department, including but not limited to, possible suspension from his/her athletics team, expulsion from his/her term an/or loss of some or all of his/her athletics financial aid.

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