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SOCIAL MEDIA AND COLLEGIATE ATHLETIC RECRUITMENT: FRIENDS OR FOES?

by
Brittney N. Jackson

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 2019

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Researching and writing this thesis has been truly eye-opening and inspiring in ways unimagined. A special thank you to Professor Sparks for advising and believing me when I did not necessarily believe in myself. Another special thanks to Professor Baker for always lending a helping hand and assisting me in creating interview questions that invoke beneficial thinking. Another thanks to the student-athletes and athletic program staff who took time from their busy schedules to be interviewed. It is my hope that this work may contribute to the overall advocacy for fair treatment of our student-athletes in a world where social media dominates entire athletic programs and universities.

Prospectus

The purpose of this thesis is to better understand the effects of social media on college athletic recruitment through student-athlete exposure, the transition from a coach-controlled recruitment process to a player-controlled recruitment process, student-athlete and collegiate athletic program reputation management, and overall increased revenue.

The effects will be examined through a review of nineteen published literature sources and the qualitative analysis of interviews conducted with high-school senior student-athletes, university recruitment and media relations staff, and college freshmen student-athletes.

Qualitative research will be conducted with interviews of high-school seniors who are at least 18 years of age who are currently going through the process of collegiate athletic recruitment by Division I universities. The interviews consisted of seven questions that measure and evaluate their experience with social media and their recruitment process. These interviews were designed to gauge the impact social media has on high school athletes and their current recruitment process. Selected high school athletes were chosen from top-performing high schools in the athletics sector from the state of Mississippi based on state rankings by the Mississippi High School Athletics Association and top-performing athlete lists such as Mississippi's Dandy Dozen list and ESPN's athlete rankings. Qualitative research was also done with college freshmen student-athletes. Like the high school senior student-athletes, these college freshmen student-athletes received the same seven interview questions to measure their experience with social media and their recently completed recruitment process.

Qualitative research also consisted of interviews with recruitment and media relations staff of Ole Miss Athletics and Louisiana State University Athletics due to their past experiences

with recruitment issues. These interviews were comprised of ten questions that measured and provided further understanding of the role of social media in collegiate athletic recruitment.

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What is Recruiting?

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) defines recruiting as an instance where a college employee or representative invites a high school student-athlete to play sports for their college. Recruiting happens in a variety of ways including face-to-face contact, phone calls, text messages, mailed material, email material or through social media. A player is actively being recruited until they choose to commit (NCAA 2019).

There are two forms of commitment: a verbal commitment happens when a college-bound student athlete verbally agrees to play sports or college before he or she is eligible to sign a National Letter of Intent. This form of commitment is not legally binding as there is no contractual agreement, meaning that if an athlete chooses to, they are allowed to de-commit or recommit to any school they desire. For many schools, a verbal commitment does not always signify the end of the official recruitment process and because of this, they will often extend an offer to an athlete even after they have verbally committed to another. An official commitment is legally binding through the contractual agreement of the National Letter of Intent. Once this letter is signed, the recruitment process is officially over for that student-athlete. The National Letter of Intent contractually states that a participating college agrees to provide financial aid for one academic year to the student-athlete as long as the student-athlete is admitted to the school and is eligible for financial aid under NCAA rules. However, it is also important to note that while the National Letter of Intent signifies the end of the recruitment process for an athlete because it prohibits other schools from recruiting that student-athlete, the letter is completely voluntary and not required for a student-athlete to receive financial aid or participate in sports. Student athletes also have the option to break their contract but do so through the form of a release and at the risk of sitting out for one full academic year (NCAA 2019).

There are periods within what is called a recruiting calendar where there are limitations on what is allowed when recruiting a student-athlete. These periods include the following: 1. Quiet, 2. Dead, 3. Evaluation and 4. Contact, as illustrated by Figure 1 (NCAA 2018).

As stated by the NCAA, during a contact period, a college coach may have face-to-face contact with college-bound student-athletes or their parents, watch student-athletes compete or visit their high schools and write or telephone student-athletes or their parents.



2018-19 Division I Bowl Subdivision Football Recruiting Calendar

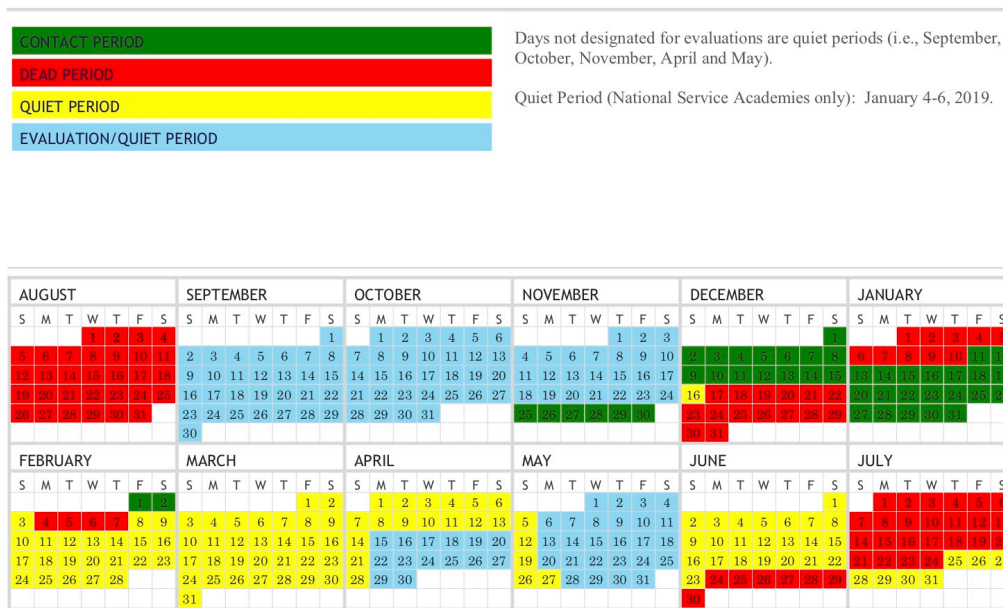


Figure 1. NCAA. (2018, July). 2018-19 Division I Bowl Subdivision Football Recruiting Calendar.

During an evaluation period, a college coach may watch college-bound student-athletes compete, visit their high schools and write or telephone student-athletes or their parents. However, a college coach may not have face-to-face contact with college-bound student-athletes or their parents off the college’s campus during an evaluation period. During the quiet period, a college coach may not have face-to-face contact with college-bound student-athletes or their

parents and may not watch student-athletes compete or visit their high schools. Coaches may write or telephone college-bound student-athletes or their parents during this time. Lastly, during a dead period, a college coach may not have face-to-face contact with college-bound student-athletes or their parents and may not watch student-athletes compete or visit their high schools. Coaches may write and telephone student-athletes or their parents during a dead period.

It is important to note that the “quiet”, “dead”, “evaluation” and “contact” periods are all different for each sport. There is no real consistency from sport to sport when comparing their recruiting calendars. The sport of football has the least amount of contact, followed by men’s basketball, women’s basketball, baseball, then track & field. Also, according to recruiting calendars, the evaluation period is the longest for the sport of football, meaning that coaches are able to figure out who they want, watch their list of desired student athletes evolve over a season but have no real contact with the student-athletes outside of official on-campus visits.

Before the emergence of social media, the student-athlete-coach relationship held more importance, with high school coaches at the center of all conversations and other exchanges with universities. Collegiate athletic programs would send “scouts”, representatives of the program who would measure the talent and value of a player from their performances and practices. Any necessary, needed information would come from interactions with the coaches only. Student-athletes were only responsible for their talent and meeting the academic requirements for the perspective program. Student-athletes did not have to sell themselves, they had someone to do it for them.

The Landscape has Changed

While recruiting calendars and periods are important and have proven somewhat effective for the NCAA and NCAA institutions, social media blurs much of the guidelines laid out by the governing body. Social media shifts the focus of the recruitment process from the coach to the student-athlete directly. Because of social media, student athletes are often recruited years in advance before they ever become high school seniors. Although standard protocol calls for all student athletes who are college-bound to follow the guidelines set forth by the NCAA, the exposure of a young student-athlete mixed with the frenzy of social media can often make those guidelines a bit hazy for all parties involved. An already hazy situation becomes even more unclear as the student athlete and athletic program continue to evolve in the world of social media.

Social media exposes collegiate athletic programs to more athletes than ever before. “The good news is, I have access to worldwide talent,” Matt Tyner, a recruiter and assistant Division I baseball coach at Richmond University says of today’s recruiting landscape... Nowadays, he sifts through thousands of players, rather than the hundreds he looked at when he began coaching in the mid-90s,” (Fiener 2015). Social media makes it almost impossible for collegiate athletic programs to see everyone they would like to see within the weeks permitted by the NCAA. High school student-athletes are receiving more offers than ever to play college sports, but a plethora of offers often makes choosing a college for the next 3-5 years difficult. “Roughly two percent of high school athletes are highly recruited... The other 98 percent are on their own (and probably under-recruited) ... If you play basketball, that means to be a highly recruited athlete you probably need to be the best player in your district. Not one of the better players, not the best player on your team, the best player in your entire district,” (Bastie 2018).

Social media has begun to work against student-athletes. Yes, social media allows student-athletes to get their video highlights out in a quick and efficient manner, but it also makes them just another person who wants an offer. This also suggests that playing collegiate sports is now just as difficult as playing professional sports, with only 1% of college athletes moving on to play professionally.

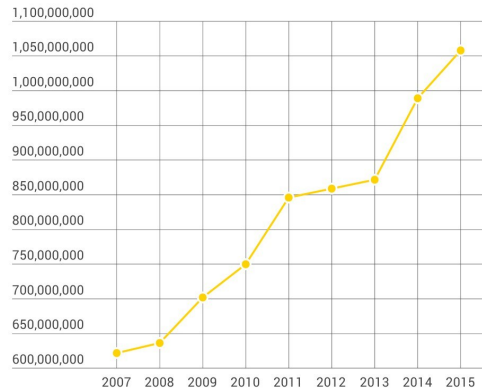
The increase in revenue generated from collegiate athletics in recent years plays a major factor in today's collegiate athletic recruitment. Because of social media and athletic programs' media teams, viewers are able to see the technology-filled stadiums and practice facilities and the extravagant additions that come with being a student-athlete such as school paraphernalia and other apparel. Viewers of this content also include student-athletes who are currently participating in recruitment processes, and viewing this content allows them to not only see where they as a student-athlete could possibly play at the next level, thus shaping their recruitment and athletic program thoughts and perspectives. "Nearly every Power Five college athletics program spends more than \$1 million per year on recruiting. About half – 32 of the 65 schools – spend at least \$1 million per year on recruiting for men's sports alone" (Ching 2018). Though it sounds like a large amount, the money spent on recruiting in no way compares to the revenue generated by collegiate athletics. "In all, there are now 24 schools that make at least \$100 million annually from their athletic department, according to data collected from USA Today and the U.S. Department of Education. That is up from 20 a year ago and 13 in 2014," (Gaines 2016). The NCAA is benefiting as well as seen in Figure 2 as the graph depicts the increase in NCAA Revenue by years from 2007 to 2015. "The NCAA pulled in more than \$1 billion in revenue for the first time in history during the 2016-17 school year...The NCAA also

generated \$129.4 million in ticket revenue and \$60 million in marketing rights for the 2017 fiscal year,” (Rovell 2018).

Colleges are making the money they put into recruitment back, but it is also no secret that these numbers have exponentially increased because of the added value social media has contributed to sports and the people who play them.

Collegiate athletic sports accounts often have hundreds of thousands of followers. For example, the Alabama Football Instagram account has almost 800 thousand followers. The Duke Basketball Instagram account has 1 million followers. People not only follow the athletic programs, but they follow recruits as well. Top high school student-athletes like Bru McCoy (see Figure 3) have thousands of followers before they even touch collegiate grounds. Collegiate athletic programs have more to offer than ever before, and student athletes have more than just the talent the possess on the field. They bring fan-bases, followers, engagement and likes to a school that could potentially turn into revenue for athletic programs as followers become fans of schools not

NCAA Money By Year



” As far as paying players, professionalizing college athletics, that’s where you lose me. I’ll go do something else because there’s enough entitlement in this world as it is.
Dabo Sweeney, Head Coach Clemson Tigers, salary \$1.96 million

Figure 3. Increase in NCAA Revenue by years from 2007 to 2015.

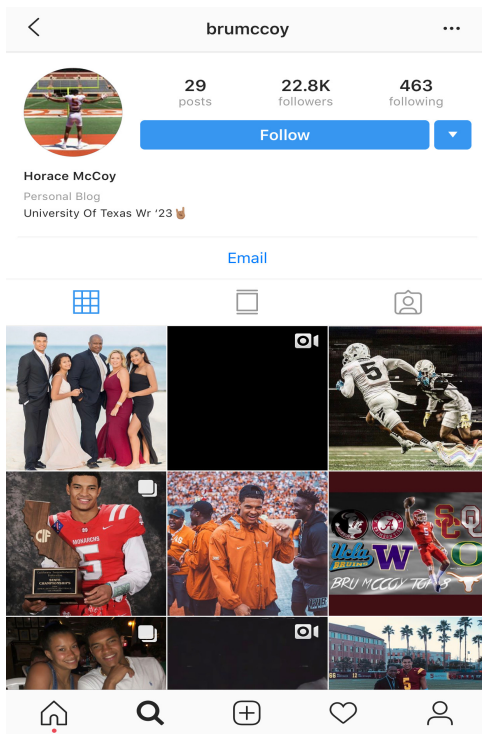


Figure 2. Student-athlete Bru McCoy, a student-athlete with 20 thousand followers on his business-style Instagram.

because of a traditional reason such as family affiliation or region but because of the student-athlete and the excitement generated through social media during the recruitment process, which has now transformed into a type of process similar to the professional drafting process for those who enter the professional league. The collegiate athletic program, student-athlete relationship used to be a commensal one, where the student-athlete gained an education and a chance at the professional level and the collegiate athletic program gained them for three to five years. Social media changed the landscape of collegiate athletics and altered the student-athlete and athletic program relationship. The student-athlete still earns the education and possibility to play at the next level, but the athletic program not only gains quality on the field but also gains the fans that have followed the student-athlete since their time in middle or high school where they began their recruitment process.

Great Athlete, Social Media with No Exposure

According to sports analyst Fred Bastie, it is estimated that over 98% of all student athletes are under-recruited, meaning only 2% of high school athletes make it to the collegiate level. So how does one get recruited? And what role does social media play in assisting in their recruitment? “More schools are using Twitter to give their athletes recognition, in-game updates or final scores,” (DiVeronica 2014). While most high schools tend to have a weaker social media presence, stronger high school programs do tend to generate more buzz on social media. City and state athletic programs also attempt to bridge the gap by maintain their own social media. @MSHighSports on Twitter has about 22,000 followers and reports all high school sports for the state of Mississippi. The state of Texas also has similar accounts, with @Texas6ASports on Twitter having about 40,000 followers and reporting all 6A sports in the state of Texas.

With so many easily accessible team and player statistics readily available on social media, a “noise” is created that makes it hard to stand out or be distinguished. When there is no standout athlete, recruiters tend to shift their attention to teams that win games, due to wins usually equating to higher quality athletes.

What about the stellar athlete caught in the “noise” of social media? This is a sad reality for many student-athletes as they find themselves in the midst of their senior year with no Division I offer. With 84% of student athletes receiving their first college offers

**Timing of First Recruiting Contact (Direct or Indirect) by College Coach
Men's Sports**

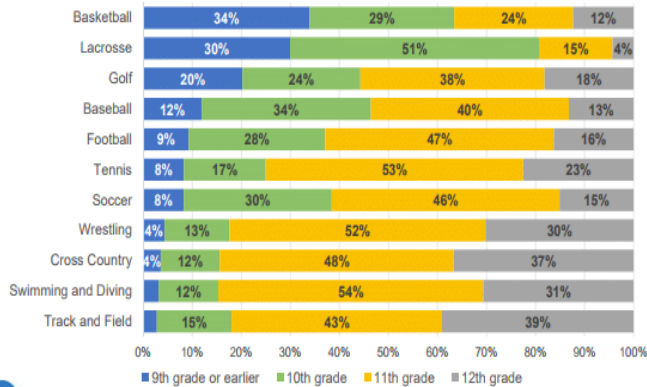


Figure 4. Timing of first recruiting contract by a collegiate athletic program.

by their junior year and only 16% receiving them their senior year (see Figure 4), many student-athletes are taking matters into their own hands and generating their own social media buzz. Apps like Hudl, a social media platform for athletes, allow student-athletes to promote themselves without the “noise” of Twitter or Instagram. However, with Hudl growing to 160,000 registered teams on their app and website, the challenge to stand out amongst the very large crowd still persists. For a great athlete with great performance or potential but no real social media presence, connections and networks reign supreme. This is what balances out the recruitment process and keeps some aspects of it traditional. Recruitment offices are also working to bridge the gap with online submission forms (see Figure 5) to assist student athletes in promoting the content that may be overlooked on social media platforms.



University of Southern
Mississippi Football
Recruiting Questionnaire



Please complete the general information below
before advancing to the questionnaire.

First Name

YOUR FIRST NAME IS REQUIRED.

Last Name

Figure 5. Online submission form for student-athletes to gain the attention of athletic programs.

Despite the efforts of student-athletes and athletic programs, social media has simply made the market too large for every student-athlete to have a successful recruitment process, at least in terms of being recruited to a Division I school. The reality is that every student-athlete will not make it to Division I level school, with many never being recruited to any athletic program. 6.9% of all student-athletes participating in football will play for a NCAA school, and 2.7% of those students will play for a Division I school. To place those percentages into concrete numbers, 73,063 out of 1,057,382 current high school football players will make it to the next level (NCAA 2018). High school sport attendance has increased for the 29th year in a row, and while this could be attributed to population growth, it would be remiss to ignore the increased

exposure of sports to high school athletes via social media. High school athletes see the fame, fast cars and brand deals of professional athletes. They see the official visits of collegiate athletic recruits and trips to schools around the country. They don't see the 6a.m. workouts, the off-season workouts, the long nights away from friends and family, the missed homework assignments or the schedule created by the athletic program that lacks the consideration of naps, time with friends or a phone call with a mother back home.

The Social Media-Savvy Athlete

Collegiate athletics and recruitment are different today in 2019 than they were in 1991 during the time of athletes like Brett Farve. Farve attended the University of Southern Mississippi, and was recruited in what would be considered the traditional way for high school student athletes. A coach at the University of Southern Mississippi came to view his game and offered a scholarship based only on what he saw that night and after speaking with Farve's high school coach and watching the film submitted by the high school coach. There was no social media in 1991, and college football was nowhere near as big as it is today. Farve didn't become a household name until his time at the University of Southern Mississippi was complete. For him, he was just a small boy from small town Mississippi who was given a chance to play college ball. Farve's high school coach was instrumental in facilitating his scholarship to the University of Southern Mississippi (Biography 2018). While there are still many athletes like Brett Farve in 2019, we've seen an increase in athletes like AJ Brown.

AJ Brown is a wide receiver from Starkville, MS who experienced the new reality of recruitment. He grew up with social media and has seen its impact on his athletic career. As a wide receiver in his hometown, Brown led his team to a high school championship, gained the attention of the media and landed himself on the rankings of well-known sports websites such as 247sports.com. A 4-star recruit, Brown received offers from schools around the United States, with fans following his social media from all over the country. He chose to commit to Ole Miss over every other school. He passed up Mississippi State, the school located in his hometown and the school with a relationship fostered by his high school coach. The response to Brown's choice in school from local fans was quick, direct and negative (see Figure 6). He received death threats

from Mississippi State fans who were displeased with his position to choose a rival school.

Nevertheless, Brown continued with his decision, signing in February of 2016. He controlled his message by staying positive and grateful to those who supported him and not responding to those who chose not to support him.

Today's athletes are media savvy. They understand social media as an opportunity and use it to their advantage. Nolan Smith II, who has over 20,000 followers on Instagram, 15,000 followers on Twitter and is verified on both social media platforms, can be seen tweeting and posting inspirational quotes, pictures of him in action on the field and moments with family and friends that are filled with smiles (see Figure 7). "You definitely choose your words more carefully," says Student Athlete B when asked about how he felt knowing that schools were looking at his social media.

"Marketable life style refers to an athlete's off-field marketable features that could be indicative of his or her value and personality. Today, celebrities achieve their status not only because of their outstanding on-field performance, but also in their distinct life style... The marketable life style dimension includes life story, role model, and relationship effort," (Arai, Ko, Ross 2013). For today's student-athletes, social media is an outlet to curate content to make

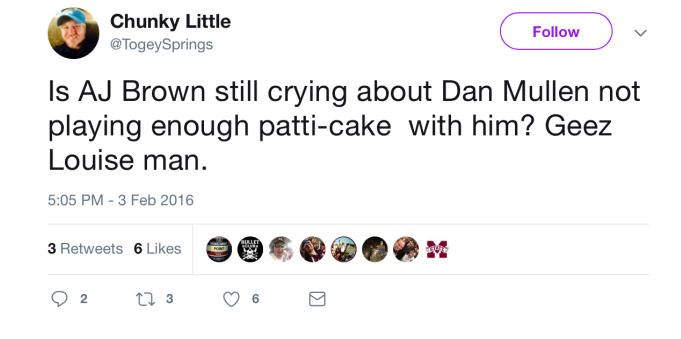


Figure 6. A user on Twitter responds to AJ Brown's choice to commit to Ole Miss.



Figure 7. A post from athlete Nolan Smith's Instagram account showing friends and family.

them relatable, build their image and increase exposure. This positioning through their social media is not only for their collegiate athletic recruitment process but their professional recruitment process as well.

Social media gives the power of fame directly to the people. Talent matters much less than it used to, and what often matters now is the likability and added oddity one brings to society. Social media has taken people who are mediocre in relation to the amount of talent they have and given them exposure to collegiate athletic programs and fame that other talented people who are not media savvy may never receive. While social media tends to showcase those considered regular within society, it also has the ability to expose raw talent.

In June 2015, defensive back Nigel Knott from Germantown High School in Madison, Mississippi created a video of him catching a football while backflipping off a wall. This video would catapult him into national fame that most high school players can only dream of. Knott already had offers from schools around the country, but he wanted the fame to match. He created the video in response to Nyheim Hines, a North Carolinian running back who had just done the same type of video. “Since it’s kinda’ late, I knew I had to catch up in the game,” says Knott in a WAPT News interview in Jackson, Mississippi (2015) when speaking about uploading his video a day after Hines upload his original video. For the two running backs, the videos were about exploring the limits associated with catching a football. Social media would take their experiment to heights unforeseen.

AJ Brown, Nigel Knott and Nyheim Hines are just a few positive examples of the effects of social media. They show the positive side of modern media outlets and reveal that athletes began their walk to fame before they’ve ever walked onto a college campus. Nevertheless, they

show the outcome of those who place effort into becoming social media savvy, a concept not yet understood by some student-athletes.

Good Athlete, Bad Social Media

26% of college admissions programs have used a social media platform to look up an applicant (DiVeronica 2017). Athletic programs are included in this percentage. “Social media allows you to get into their mind a little bit,” says Staff Member A who works in the recruitment department of their athletic program. When something negative comes out, someone from a program has more than likely seen it. “In this day and age, certain topics are kind of off limits,” Staff Member A says when asked about a great player with negative social media.

Student-athlete Yuri Wright was a famed recruit projected to go to a well-known athletic program, particularly the University of Michigan. However, things would change for the football player after a series of inappropriate tweets would surface (see Figure 8), placing Wright’s character in question. His tweets lead his Catholic high school to expel him and, colleges responded by pulling and discontinuing the recruitment process. Rutgers and Notre Dame continued to actively recruit Wright, but Michigan State pulled their offer from the table. Wright’s future hung in the air for about a week. Finally, he committed to Colorado State, a lower rated athletic program. (Smith 2012). While this story seems to end well for Wright, one can



Figure 8. Yuri Wright's career changing tweets.

only wonder what his present career would look like if he played for Michigan, a much stronger program.

Should athletes not tweet at all? “I just use [social media] for football purposes,” says Student Athlete B when asked about his use of social media. Is that realistic for every single

athlete? Most athletes do use social media for other forms of communication, but using social media for leisure can be tricky for someone who also uses the platforms for their recruitment process or career. “High school student-athletes must navigate the rough waters of Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter and Facebook. Any student – athlete or not – can cause or get in trouble with one bad tweet, picture or online conversation. Teens complaining about playing time, cyberbullying someone or taunting an opponent have forced parents, coaches and administrators to be more vigilant about online activity and interactions because you never know who is watching their online activity,” (DiVeronica 2017). Social media is already complex for the average teen, and being a student-athlete only adds to the complexity. Furthermore, limiting what one chooses to post can be perceived as censorship on one’s personality after signing with a collegiate athletic program.

Collegiate athletic programs are beginning to monitor their student-athletes’ accounts as society becomes more immersed in social media. Their goal is to prevent negative publicity and loss of fans. While this may seem like a step in the right direction, student-athletes are not necessarily in agreement with the choice. “It would depend on what that team is offering,” says Student Athlete B when asked if he would agree to having his social media monitored and, in some cases, run by a collegiate athletic program. For Student-Athlete A, the decision to give up rights to social media is a bit easier to make. “As long as I don’t [make any of the] post[s],” says Student Athlete A. For Student-Athlete A, the opportunity to play at another level at a Division I university outweighs the use of a social media account. While many student athletes may disagree with the policies of universities, many obtain the views of Student-Athlete A who would do anything to make it to the professional level. The quality of the school plays a factor in how student athletes feel about losing complete control of their social media. For Student Athlete

B, his social media holds an amount of value that could only be taken away by a championship winning-school. “If Alabama were to say that they want me to come as a freshman to start and control my social media, I would do it,” says Student Athlete B. Alabama *is* a championship-winning team that only takes a certain caliber of student-athletes, so controlling the social media of their student-athletes must be justified in the mind of a student-athlete. Freedom of speech always comes into question when schools place any limit on their student-athletes, regardless of their status or ability to win championships. It is important to interpret the meaning of “freedom of speech” in relation to social media, student-athletes and the recruitment process.

Freedom of Speech and Social Media

No matter what transpires on social media, the social media platforms have protected themselves from any form of liability or fault. This means that the relationship is truly between the student-athlete and the athletic program. With the third-party monitoring platforms like Varsity Monitor and UDiligence slowly closing due to revenue issues and negative publicity, one can only wonder what athletic programs will do in relation to social media. [Without third-party programs, monitoring] becomes a distraction for the coach, it becomes a distraction for the school...” (Steinbauch 2012). While the monitoring of student-athletes’ social media looks differently for each school, it is being conducted.

“The First Amendment explicitly says, “Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of the speech, or of the press.” They also write, “The Supreme Court has interpreted “speech” and “press” broadly as covering not only talking, writing, and printing, but also broadcasting, using the Internet, and other forms of expression.” This means that the Supreme Court recognizes social media as an outlet for free speech, with the exception of a few negative forms of free speech:

“1. In some circumstances, the Supreme Court has held that certain types of speech are of only “low” First Amendment value, such as:

- a. Defamation: False statements that damage a person’s reputations can lead to civil liability (and even to criminal punishment), especially when the speaker deliberately lied or said things they knew were likely false. *New York Times v. Sullivan* (1964).
- b. True threats: Threats to commit a crime (for example, “I’ll kill you if you don’t give me your money”) can be punished. *Watts v. United States* (1969).

c. “Fighting words”: Face-to-face personal insults that are likely to lead to an immediate fight are punishable. *Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire* (1942). But this does not include political statements that offend others and provoke them to violence. For example, civil rights or anti-abortion protesters cannot be silenced merely because passersby respond violently to their speech. *Cox v. Louisiana* (1965).”

While social media tends to magnify the negative actions of student-athletes, majority of student-athletes will maintain an overall clean or decent social media. Most will not use racial or homophobic slurs, will not be recorded while intoxicated and will not do anything malicious while playing as a student-athlete for a high school or collegiate athletic program. If this is true, why has the University of Alabama, the University of Louisville, the University of Arkansas and Old Dominion University all adopted policies that limit social media or ban social media?

According to the NCAA who created rules after an incident at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill:

“The Committee's statements established three guiding principles:

- (1) Institutions do not have a "blanket duty" to monitor social networking sites.
- (2) A duty to monitor social networking arises in two circumstances: (i) if the institution becomes aware of an issue that might be resolved in some part by reviewing information on a site; or (ii) if the institution receives information regarding potential rules violations and it is reasonable to believe that a review of otherwise publicly available social networking information may yield clues to the violations.

These circumstances require institutional awareness of an issue or the receipt of information. They also require that the relevant compliance concern "might be resolved in some

part" by social network monitoring or that it is "reasonable to believe" that such monitoring "may yield clues" about the potential violation.

(3) A social network monitoring duty "may arise" when an institution has or should have a reasonable suspicion of rules violations.

This circumstance does not appear to require actual institutional awareness or the receipt of particular information, nor does it require that social network monitoring might help clarify the relevant concern" (McCaw 2012).

Although the NCAA states there is no "blanket duty" for any school to monitor any social media, schools have taken the duty into their own hands. Florida State University and the University of South Carolina have both had forms of a Twitter ban at some point in time, and other schools have been known to use intelligence monitoring companies such as UDiligence and Varsity Monitor. These companies monitor the accounts of a team and scan for words that could place an athlete's eligibility in danger. Once a post has been flagged, it is analyzed. Depending on the severity or lack thereof, the post could be removed or no action could be taken.

While many see no issues with companies like Varsity Monitor or UDiligence, many see it as a violation of privacy for student-athletes. While student-athletes do make mistakes, many see the third-party companies as a form of censorship: the suppression or prohibition of any parts of books, films, news, etc. that are considered obscene, politically unacceptable, or a threat to security.

While the monitoring of social media may be a form of social media, it is important to remember that while many universities receive public funding from federal and state governments, collegiate athletic programs are often separate entities of their universities and

receive no direct forms of public funding, making them a version of a private entity. Private institutions are allowed to perform censorship in relation to what they deem as inappropriate for their brand and values.

However, social media platforms have taken steps to protect themselves as companies.

According to the Electronic Frontier Foundation:

“47 U.S.C. § 230, a Provision of the Communication Decency Act tucked inside the Communications Decency Act (CDA) of 1996 is one of the most valuable tools for protecting freedom of expression and innovation on the Internet: Section 230.

Section 230 says that "No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider" (47 U.S.C. § 230).

In other words, online intermediaries that host or republish speech are protected against a range of laws that might otherwise be used to hold them legally responsible for what others say and do. This legal and policy framework has allowed for YouTube and Vimeo users to upload their own videos, Amazon and Yelp to offer countless user reviews, craigslist to host classified ads, and Facebook and Twitter to offer social networking to hundreds of millions of Internet users.” (Stone and Volokh n.d.)

Reputation Management and Collegiate Athletics

The average student-athlete enrolled in a collegiate athletic program is 17-24 years of age (NCAA 2018). Because these are considered key years for the formation of the parts of the brain that ensure rational thinking for a human, mistakes made by this age group are often attributed to youth. Colleges often give student-athletes countless chances to change their behavior in relation to attitudes, drug tests, domestic violence cases and criminal charges even when social media sometimes does not. Florida State Athletics stood behind Jameis Winston after his run in with police for shoplifting crab legs out of a Publix, and Ole Miss Athletics also stood behind Ken Webster and Detric Bing-Dukes who stole cleaning supplies out of the local Walmart. In the era of social media, the negative publicity of the actions of a student-athlete reflect on the athletic program as well. At what point do athletic programs stop supporting the mistakes of athletes for the sake of the reputation of their program's brand? "You have to get all of the facts and go from there," says Staff Member A who has dealt with recruits and current student athletes and their share of issues. "I know guys who came in Freshmen year who were kinda' bad and now they're seniors and completely different people." For Staff Member A, the growing pains are worth it because of the men who are groomed within the athletic programs. Even if they do not fulfill their dream of playing professionally, they leave their athletic program with a degree and a mindset to successfully enter the professional world.

Colleges are assisting student-athletes more than ever before in their branding. They offer social media training, branding classes, social media/internet etiquette classes and even provide access to suits and other professional clothing. They are creating entire sectors within athletic programs that develop student-athletes not just educationally or athletically but professionally.

Athlete-development offices are emerging in almost every athletic program so that student athletes can not only understand their mistakes, but grow from them.

Athletic programs are also starting to take a new approach to athlete development. At the forefront of this initiative are community colleges. Community colleges like East Mississippi Community College take athletes who have made mistakes (that are often exposed on social media) and recreate them athletically and image-wise. Chad Kelly, a former Ole Miss Athletics student-athlete would go through the program in the hopes of gaining redemption from his removal from the Clemson University athletic program. East Mississippi Community College has the goal of getting all of their student athletes to Division I universities, no matter the previous situation. Their approach to allowing a student athlete to go into a type of solitude for a growing phase has proven effective for many athletes who have had a major misstep in their career. Student-athlete transfers to programs known for their athlete-development programs are reported on social media immediately (as seen in Figure 11), not only giving information to fans but also to other athletic programs who may one day recruit student-athletes from those same community colleges.

For Division I universities, reputation management is an ongoing process. It includes the development of real relationships with student-athletes to provide better assistance and resources. This is where social media helps greatly. “[Social media] gives me the opportunity to do research on them before they get to me,” says Staff Member B when speaking on how social media helps

September 18, 2015

CHAD KELLY IS REWRITING HIS STORY



After stints at Clemson and East Mississippi Community College, Ole Miss quarterback Chad Kelly is ready for the big stage vs. Alabama. (Getty Images)

By David Ubben

Chad Kelly had a few questions for his junior college coaches, sending them digging for their record books.

"How many yards did Bo Wallace have here?"

"What about Randall Mackey?"

Kelly was fresh off a **dismissal from Clemson** and heading for a season in the juco ranks. His coaches at East Mississippi Community College hadn't even named him starter for the 2014 season, but he already

Figure 9. A social media story about Chad Kelly, the former Ole Miss Quarterback who came from East MS Community College.

them build relationships with student-athletes in their position. “It provides me with the ability to relate to them before they even tell me anything.” Relationships allow the execution of conversations about negative social media content to flow a lot smoother because a level of trust has been established within the staff member-student-athlete relationship. It no longer feels like an attack for the student-athlete but instead feels like someone who has been proven to actively care about them has seen a mistake they should fix. “I’ve had the conversations about negative social media with student-athletes plenty of times, and because of our relationship the content was taken down,” said Staff Member B.

Primary Research and Methodology

To augment the findings of the published literature discussed above, fifteen schools and universities, thirty athletes, and eight staff members were contacted to participate in interviews. Due to privacy concerns and school policies, 12 schools and universities declined to participate in an in-person interview, for a twenty percent response rate. As a result, five qualitative interviews were conducted among three groups of key constituents utilizing two different interview guides (Appendix A). Interviews conducted included the following three groups: high school students in the midst of the recruiting process, college freshmen student-athletes who had recently completed their recruitment process, and media relations/recruitment staff at South Eastern Conference (SEC) universities.

High school senior student-athletes in the midst of the recruiting process were selected to understand the impact they believe social media has on their overall effect on their recruitment process and marketability. Subjects were identified through their senior classification and active recruitment by Division I universities for an in-depth analysis of their unique experience through seven interview questions. Student-athletes were asked their number of social media followers and opinions of the impact of social media on their recruiting status. (Appendix A)

College freshmen student-athletes were also asked seven interview questions to understand their overall experience with social media and their recently completed recruitment processes. (Appendix A) Subjects were identified through their freshman classification and completed recruitment by Division I universities for an in-depth analysis of their unique experience through seven interview questions.

Media relations and recruitment staff members of collegiate athletic programs were asked ten questions (Appendix B) to measure and provide further understanding of the role of social

media in collegiate athletic recruitment in relation to their staff positions. Recruitment staff members were chosen based on their profession in the media relations and recruitment departments of their athletic program. Media relations and recruitment staff members were asked the title of their position within their athletic program at the beginning of the interview.

Interview questions for all three audiences can be found in the appendix section.

Findings

Interview responses were analyzed and key findings were identified among the three groups.

The findings are as follows:

1. **Social media was considered an advantage for student-athlete's careers, despite their inability to always control the message.**

Despite its power to create buzz and feedback, interviewed student-athletes always spoke of social media as “just social media”, a quote consistent amongst all student-athlete interviews. For the student-athlete who had entered their collegiate athletic program, branding was so instilled from the beginning of their time at their Division I program that they could not only recall it from memory, but they had a further understanding of why it was implemented. Though their athletic program did not have a social media policy, staff was known to reach out to student-athletes about removing inappropriate content. “I could understand how it could be perceived as censorship, but they’re really just looking out for us,” says Student Athlete C. Censorship was something that was an issue to the student-athlete, but it was also important to the athlete to know that people were on their side as they matured.

2. **For staff members it was important to always listen to the student-athletes no matter how escalated the situation was on social-media.**

“Recruit or current student-athlete, you have to get the facts to fully assess the situation,” said Staff Member A when asked about advocating for their prospective recruits and current student-athletes, even when publicity is negative. “Timing is everything,” said Staff Member B, who emphasized the importance of managing a situation so that everyone has a possibility of positively moving forward from negative press. Both staff members realized the power of social

media, but they also understood the power of working with the student-athlete to create the most effective message for the student-athlete and the athletic program.

3. Schools do, in fact, view their prospective and current student-athlete's social media.

“I check them often, some more than others,” said Staff Member B. When asked what factors determined which student-athlete's social media, Staff Member B said, “I check if there is something happening in terms of their environment or personal life.” When asked about asking players to remove inappropriate content, Staff Member B stressed that her department actively chooses not to force student-athletes to remove content, but it does, in fact, become a conversation for a staff member and student-athlete. Though their athletic program did not have a social media policy, staff was known to reach out to student-athletes about removing inappropriate content. “I could understand how it could be perceived as censorship, but they're really just looking out for us,” says Student Athlete C. Censorship was something that was an issue to the student-athlete, but it was also important to the athlete to know that people were on their side as they matured.

4. The concept of youth was a recurring idea across all interviews with collegiate athletic staff.

“They're young,” repeatedly came up in reference to student-athletes. Staff members were understandable to mistakes of student-athletes on social media and in regular life due their youth and lack of rationale. Staff members were open to understanding that recruits and student-athletes often have to adjust to their newfound fame.

Conclusion

Social media has had and continues to have large effect on the college athletic recruitment process in many forms, proving my thesis. Through student-athlete exposure, the transition from a coach-controlled recruitment process to a player-controlled recruitment process, student-athlete and collegiate athletic program reputation management and overall increased revenue we see the effects, both positive and negative, on a process that once only needed two components: a coach and a performing player. Social media has added many aspects to the process of recruitment that are constantly transforming as social media itself continues to evolve.

For further research, it is suggested to research more into the first year after a student-athlete has completed their recruitment process. The transition from high-school senior to college freshman can be hard, with emotions and feelings often arriving to social media. The first-year success or failure of a student-athlete determines the next years, and the aspect of social media added to this is something that should be researched and explored. It is also suggested to explore the collegiate to professional transition of student-athletes. Analysis of the recruitment process on the professional level for similarities and differences is something worth exploring, as the factors of youth, added fame and mistakes are also common in the professional process.

Appendix A

Student-Athlete Questions:

1. Can you tell me about your recruitment process so far?
2. What platforms of social media do you use and in what ways do you use them? When did you get your first contact with someone through social media?
3. As an athlete, do you feel like your exposure on social media places you at an advantage or disadvantage in comparison to other potential recruits? Why?
4. How often do you receive positive feedback on your social media?
 - a. How often do you receive negative feedback on your social media?
 - b. How does feedback affect your performance?
5. How do social media interactions with school alumni affect what school you attend or your thoughts on the school's image?
 - a. How aware are you that schools view all of your social media?
 - b. How does it make you feel knowing that in today's recruitment process, a school has more than likely looked at all of your social media (conversations with friends, photos outside of your sport, etc.)? Does it affect what you post?
6. (High School Recruits ONLY) What are the social media policies of the schools you are recruited by? How important are they to you?
 - a. If a school had a policy that allowed them to take and control all of your social media, how would that affect your decision? How would it feel going from being a social media influencer to being without it completely?
6. (College Student Athletes ONLY) Has your school ever reached out to you about removing something on your page?

- a. How do you feel about a school's ability to ask you to remove something?
 - b. Do you agree with monitoring your social media?
7. Everything is reported on social media, from injuries to behavior (bad attitudes, fights, etc.) to bad games. How do you feel knowing that people are going to report your biggest mistakes on social media?
- a. How does it feel knowing that it may affect getting recruited/drafted?
 - b. How has this affected the community around you?

Appendix B

Media Relations and Recruitment Staff Member Questions:

1. How has social media affected your job? How? Would you say social media is an asset or liability to the department?
2. By their senior year, athletes have gained thousands of followers from all around the world. Does this exposure play a factor when selecting someone for a team?
3. How far do you look into a recruit's/athlete's social media? What do you look for? How often do you identify prospects through social media?
4. Does talent on the field override an overall bad social media image (large amounts of profanity, explicit content, etc.)? Why or why not? How do you balance a great player with a negative social media platform with objectionable material?
5. How often do you review a current athlete's social media? To what extent do you control what is on an athlete's social media after they commit and attend? Are you looking to increase those controls?
6. When asking an athlete to remove something from their social media, do you consider this a form of censorship? (Universities are technically not compulsory, and are not completely federally funded.)
7. How do you decide who to showcase and promote on your social media? Does a player's likeness or standout talent affect how much you showcase them?
8. How has social media ever affected your school's sponsorships/recruitment? Explain.
9. The NCAA plays a large part in your job but is also starting to have a place on social media. How has social media shaped your views about them as a governing body, especially when there are things you can't control such as alumni interactions?

10. Every school has had their share of problems, and these issues often spill over into social media. What is your social media response when there is an athlete at the center? How important is the school's reputation in relation to an athlete's reputation?

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