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ADAPTING, OVERCOMING, AND CONNECTING: HOW COLLEGE SPORTS SOCIAL
MEDIA RESPONDED TO COVID-19

by
Jackson Sepko

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

Oxford
November 2021

Approved by

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ABSTRACT

JACKSON SEPKO: Adapting, Overcoming, and Connecting: How College Sports Social Media Responded to COVID-19
(Under the direction of Debbie Hall)

This project, inspired by the researcher's own experience as a digital media marketing assistant for Ole Miss Athletics, investigates how certain NCAA team accounts grew their social media engagement in the 2020-21 seasons despite the challenges and interruptions of COVID-19. First, metrics from data analytics firm SkullSparks were analyzed to determine which accounts increased their engagement metrics the most or performed strongly compared to their peers. Then, those accounts' posts were analyzed using CrowdTangle, a Facebook-owned data analytics tool, and using Twitter's advanced search features to see which posts overperformed compared to each account's average posts.

From there, with an understanding of which content types performed best on each account, athletic department personnel behind each account were interviewed. Interviews were conducted with the individuals managing accounts for the baseball and football teams at the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss), the University of Arkansas' football and men's basketball programs, the University of Kentucky's men's basketball team, the University of Alabama's football program, and the football team at the University of Southern California (USC). This thesis compiles the results from this process. These schools illustrate the importance of understanding their audience and mission, which they do by remaining flexible, having a content distribution plan, and optimizing and understanding each social media platform.

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Topic Introduction and Research Process

The novel coronavirus caused the cancelation of the spring 2020 NCAA sports season and interrupted and impacted the 2020-21 fall, winter, and spring seasons. Teams faced delayed starts, shortened seasons, and canceled games. For fans, COVID-19 protocols reduced stadium capacities and canceled activities like tailgating, band performances, and pregame television and radio shows with spectator audiences.

These changes made the role of social media even more important than it already was. Team accounts keep followers informed, help them build connections with players and coaches, and take them behind the scenes of the programs they love. The University of Alabama's football program, for instance, attracts a large and devoted fan following. The team's Instagram (@AlabamaFBL), Twitter (@AlabamaFTBL), and Facebook ("Alabama Football") accounts each boast over one million followers. Drew Claassen is the Director of Digital Strategy for Alabama Athletics. "You have more people using their social media accounts as a second [television] screen," Claassen said of increased reliance on social media.

That "second screen" became a valued source of factual, up-to-date information, as 139 regular season games were canceled or postponed due to COVID-19 (Cobb, et al.). It also became a lifeline connecting fans, many of whom were used to being in the stands but found themselves stuck at home, to their teams.

Indeed, a study published by consumer data firm Statista shows that average daily social media use in the United States increased from 56 minutes in 2019 to 65 minutes in 2020 – a much sharper increase than the two-minute rise from 2018 to 2019 (Statista Research

Department). While social media became vitally important in the 2020-21 college sports season, maintaining a consistent, engaging, and analytically successful digital presence was understandably more challenging than ever. This work aims to investigate how several sports programs grew or sustained their social media presence during this COVID-19-impacted season.

SkullSparks, an analytics firm that partners with over 160 NCAA athletic departments, produces reports on social media interactions across all of college sports (“About SkullSparks”). The group compiles data on interactions from CrowdTangle and Opendorse, two other companies dealing with social media and branding (“SkullSparks Analytics FAQs”). Thus, SkullSparks defines interactions as CrowdTangle and Opendorse do: likes and retweets on Twitter; likes and comments on Instagram; and reactions (e.g. like, love, laughing, etc.), comments, and shares on Facebook (“SkullSparks Analytics FAQs”). Additionally, SkullSparks uses the term “interactions,” while CrowdTangle sometimes uses the term “engagements” to refer to the same metric (“About Us”). This research also uses the two terms interchangeably. Additionally, SkullSparks only measures interactions for original posts, not content that team accounts share or retweet (“SkullSparks Analytics FAQs”).

SkullSparks’ analytics reports were consulted to identify team accounts that grew their interactions the most despite the challenges presented by COVID-19. Additionally, SkullSparks’ reports show that large, established brands like Oklahoma and Michigan in football and North Carolina and Duke in men’s basketball, saw their interactions fall substantially in 2020 (“All 130 FBS”; “Top 150 NCAA”). Such large brands can attract more casual fans, who may not have a deep emotional investment in the teams they follow. It is therefore conceivable that such fans became less interested in following sports due to pandemic disruptions. Thus, historically established brands that generated a very large number of raw interactions and saw year-over-year

growth (or comparatively modest decline) in interactions were also consulted. Their inclusion allows this research to cover a broader cross-section of college athletics by surveying historic powers and up-and-coming brands alike. It should also be noted that final inclusion of schools in this project was limited by which schools returned requests for contact.

Then, those teams' accounts were analyzed using CrowdTangle and Twitter's advanced search functions to find their most successful posts and establish some understanding of their voice and strategy. Users can create lists to sort different accounts on CrowdTangle and then analyze which posts are over-performing – that is, generating disproportionately more interactions – compared to the others in the list. This feature sorts posts by how strongly they overperformed compared to the average post over a selected date range. For this research, each account analyzed was placed in a list of its own, allowing CrowdTangle to analyze which posts on each individual account performed the best compared to the rest of that account's content. Instagram metrics were analyzed in this way. Since CrowdTangle only analyzes Instagram and Facebook data, Twitter metrics were analyzed using advanced search features that identify tweets with a certain number of likes.

While SkullSparks produces data on a calendar year basis, not all sports seasons fit into a calendar year. Thus, the posts analyzed come from March 2020 to March 2021, capturing a full year of COVID-19-impacted content. The endpoint of March 2021 also coincides with the conclusion of basketball season – the very popular NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament, dubbed March Madness.

Additionally, SkullSparks' data shows that most interactions come from Instagram and Twitter and that some schools do not use or emphasize Facebook (“All 130 FBS”; “Top 130 College Baseball”; “150 NCAA Men's”). Moreover, the shared functionality of Instagram and

Facebook allows Instagram posts to be posted directly to Facebook. Thus, this research focuses on Instagram and Twitter data.

Having identified accounts that saw success in the COVID-19-impacted 2020-21 season and analyzed their content to gain familiarity with their strategy, athletic department officials managing these accounts were then interviewed. These interviews, paired with examples of content from each account, led to a series of case studies. From there, the research concludes with best practices observed from these successful accounts. There is no one right way to perform such creative work as social media marketing, but these professionals and the accounts they run present strong blueprints for successfully engaging fans in a difficult and unusual time.

Ole Miss Baseball

When COVID-19 first struck the United States on a large scale, the 2020 college baseball season was just rounding into its second month. At Ole Miss, a high-flying offense and elite pitching staff lofted the Rebels to as high as third nationally by the time the season was cut short (“Collegiate Baseball Div 1 Poll”).

Having a dream season deferred was devastating for players and fans alike. It also gave the school’s social media marketing efforts a unique challenge – filling the void in which a season should be taking place. “Our biggest strategy was finding ways for people to still come together on social media, since we’re all at home,” Ole Miss Associate Director for Digital Strategy and Fan Experience Janice Rubbert said of this time.

Ole Miss managed to stay connected with its fans – and actually saw substantial growth in its social media metrics. In the calendar year 2020, engagements rose by over 414,000 compared to 2019 – the highest total increase in the country and a growth rate of 44% (“Top 130 College Baseball”).

One of the most successful connection points Ole Miss found during the COVID-19 shutdown came from pulling on fans’ heartstrings. About three weeks into the shutdown, Ole Miss released a video tribute to its 2020 team



Fig. 1

narrated by beloved Dean of Students Emeritus Sparky Reardon (*Fig. 1*). The video's title, "The Love Will Never Be Gone," is a nod to Ole Miss' fifth inning tradition of playing "Love is Gone" by David Guetta and Chris Willis. The video garnered over 2,600 likes, making it the account's third-most liked tweet of the study, and it generated over 177,000 views (*Fig. 1*).

The video, written as a heartfelt show of appreciation from a fan's perspective, helped give voice to what fans were feeling in a time of both disappointment and uncertainty. Rubbert said the strategy for content like this piece was talking directly to fans. With messages like "we miss you" and "we'll be back soon," Ole Miss' baseball social media presence was designed not just to connect with fans in a period of isolation, but to be a "beacon of hope," she said.

Additionally, Ole Miss strove to build human relationships through longform content. Instagram Live features with coaches and players during the shutdown were not the highest-performing content items because they attracted a more niche, highly dedicated audience, but they did help fans establish a connection with the team, Rubbert said.

She also credited *The Season*, Ole Miss' in-house behind-the-scenes production that follows the Rebels' teams, as "the thing that creates such a big relationship with our players and our fans and gets fans from all over the country to be a part of our program." Indeed, from Henry Ullrich – a young boy from Illinois battling Duchene muscular dystrophy who grew into a beloved Ole Miss superfan – to starting pitcher Derek Diamond – a California native – many important Ole Miss figures credit the production with establishing some of their first connections to the school ("Super Henry"; "California RHP"). The program airs weekly on ESPNU, regional and local affiliates, YouTube, and Facebook, allowing a wide reach ("About – The Season").

"I don't think you can always calculate the quality and the impact of a piece of content just based off of engagement numbers," Rubbert added. In addition to helping attract people to

Ole Miss, *The Season* also helps establish players' personalities, making them more relatable – and thus easier for fans to connect with. For instance, baseball outfielder and football quarterback-turned-receiver John Rhys Plumlee is a fan favorite in Oxford due to his outgoing personality, which shines through the production. In June 2020, a lighthearted Instagram video of him eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich in the dugout generated 1.5 times more engagements



Fig. 2

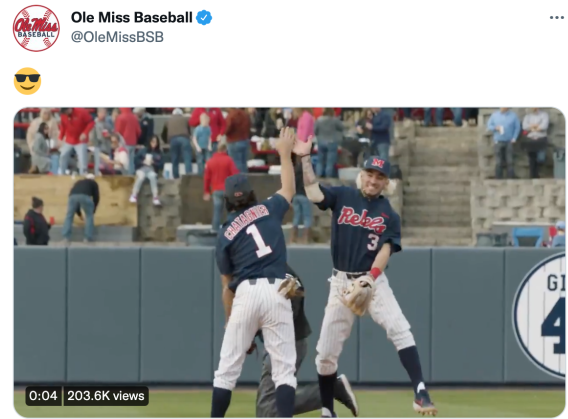
than the account's average post during the study (*Fig. 2*; CrowdTangle Team).

When discussing branding a social media presence around a team, Rubbert said Ole Miss found what “makes them unique and what connects with our fans . . . and then [have] kind of taken and ran with it – like baseball's a lot more goofy, a lot more fun, a little bit more lighthearted [and] family-like.” As longform content like *The Season* and Instagram Live videos helps expose fans to players' personalities, shorter content – whether it be in-game posts or offseason “filler” content like the Plumlee video – can mirror the personality of the teams.

Such filler content became increasingly important with a lengthened offseason and people being stuck at home with little outside entertainment. Moreover, Ole Miss' baseball social media presence made successful connections with fans before the shutdown, allowing them to address the challenge of a shortened season from a position of strength. That success came from being timely and being mindful of when and how others spend time on social media. “You're hot on whatever social media for a certain amount of time, like a game day,” Rubbert said. She also

noted, “Your caption is kind of like a teaser to the rest of your content. People aren't [on social media] to read an entire novel or a news article.” Thus, Ole Miss succeeded both by being timely and respecting users’ time.

Take Ole Miss’ second-most-liked tweet of the study for example (*Fig. 3*). In the opening weekend of the season, the Rebels came back from an opening night defeat to win two consecutive games to clinch a series win over top-ranked Louisville. The team account posted a video of two Rebel infielders celebrating with a



From OMSP
Fig. 3

choreographed jumping high-five, captioned with just a single emoji (*Fig. 3*). The post was timely, simple, and representative of the team’s fun personality; therefore it performed well.

Building a successful social media presence during the shortened season also allowed Ole Miss to more effectively reach fans during the team’s return to play in 2021. Ole Miss led the nation in attendance as fans returned to stadiums, and fans also set a school record for weekend attendance (“Spring 2022 forecast”; “33,423 fans”). Such large attendance figures give baseball – not traditionally a revenue sport for universities – a chance to break even or turn a profit at Ole Miss (Dellenger). While these numbers are certainly not owed solely to a successful social media presence, fans are naturally more likely to stay at home if they become disengaged from the team. Thus, Ole Miss’ social media efforts helped the program stay connected with its supporters, building fan support heading into a more normal 2021 season.

Ole Miss Football

Just across the street from Swayze Field, Ole Miss' baseball stadium, sits Vaught-Hemingway Stadium, where the Rebels play football. A new head coach graced the sidelines during the COVID-19-impacted 2020 season, as Lane Kiffin took over the program in December 2019. Introducing a new head coach to fans and embracing the personality he gave to the team added both a challenge and an opportunity to Ole Miss' 2020 football social media strategy. The Rebels grew their engagements by 90% year-over-year, the 14th-highest increase nationally ("All 130 FBS").

Ole Miss Associate Director for Digital Strategy and Fan Experience Janice Rubbert also addressed the department's philosophy for football. With fan attendance capped at 25% for all Ole Miss home games and the fabled Grove closed to tailgaters, she said pregame content became more important in 2020. For example, Ole Miss' ninth-most overperforming Instagram post of the study featured a photo and video of



Fig. 4

Kiffin arriving at the stadium wearing the professional jersey of record-setting former Rebel receiver A.J. Brown (*Fig. 4*; CrowdTangle Team). Rubbert said more in-game content was also a focus. With the goal of generating more content across all phases of the game, Ole Miss provided more opportunities for fans to connect with the program while physically away from games. For instance, in pursuit of this goal, Ole Miss posted to Instagram 16 times the day of the program's win in the 2021 Outback Bowl.

Ole Miss' social media presence also undoubtedly benefited from the association with Kiffin. He boasts over 500,000 Twitter followers (@Lane_Kiffin) and also became an active Instagram user (@TheRealLaneKiffin) around the start of the 2021 season. "A lot of it came with Kiffin," Rubbert said of the team's social media strategy. She credited his personality with inspiring an "edgy" and "fun" approach, which she said has a "party" aesthetic. She noted, "There's obviously a very fine line, but the more edgy, the better." The marketing team's embrace of Kiffin's personality creates a unified front and allows fans to feel like they are part of the program Kiffin is building by communicating to them in his language and style.

Ole Miss' most-liked tweet of this study, with over 31,000 likes, was also one of its edgiest (Fig. 6). Penn State's football account tweeted a graphic reading, "A Penn Stater has appeared in every Super Bowl," in large letters, with "except for five since 1967" in very small type underneath (Fig. 5). Online mockery ensued (Gatto). Ole Miss joined with a response reading, "An Ole Miss Rebel has won every Super Bowl," in large type and "except for the ones they didn't" in small lettering underneath (Fig. 6). Ole Miss and Penn State do not share any history or rivalry, yet Ole Miss took the opportunity to participate in a trending conversation, further engaging with the college football audience. This response – and, indeed, even having a response – showed how Ole Miss embraced its head coach's online persona.



Fig. 5

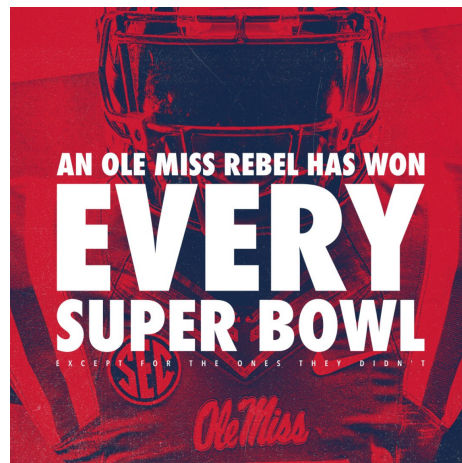


Fig. 6

Having a sense of humor and self-deprecation is almost mandatory when taking this approach, however. Ole Miss’ actions during the 2021 season, which followed this interview with Rubbert, demonstrate that. Kiffin quipped, “Get your popcorn ready,” in his interview before the Rebels’ game at Alabama, but Ole Miss did not score until the third quarter, generating plenty of mockery (Gastelum). Accordingly, Ole Miss passed out popcorn to the first 5,000 fans at the team’s next home game, announcing the promotion with a graphic featuring a



Fig. 7

dejected-looking Kiffin holding a bucket of popcorn (*Fig. 7*).

Indeed, Kiffin is central to Ole Miss’ branding. Rubbert said that when footage of his arrival to his first game as head coach overperformed, it became apparent that “people clearly care about what’s going on with him.” From that point onward, Ole Miss emphasized its coach even more in its online communication. Much of that effort came with help from Kiffin’s own branding savvy. For instance, Kiffin coached wearing masks printed with the names and numbers of popular former Ole Miss players on them, an idea he had on his own (*Fig. 8*). “It’s all him,” Rubbert said of



Fig. 8

spontaneous decisions like that. “He is fun, and it’s an easy way to brand him.”

Embracing their quick-witted coach requires plenty of preparatory work on the part of the Rebels’ social media team, though. “Coming up with those things ahead of time [is so important]

because the biggest thing on social media is being timely,” Rubbert said. Immediately after defeating South Carolina, for example, Ole Miss posted a video of B-roll footage of players dancing that was set to Darude’s “Sandstorm” (*Fig. 9*). The techno anthem is a hit in stadiums across the country, but it is an institution at South Carolina.

Ironically, the song became a Gamecocks tradition in a 2009 victory over an Ole Miss football team ranked in the top five. ESPN’s David Wilson provides an oral history: With Ole Miss down six points with 1:39 left in the game, the Gamecocks sacked the Rebels’ quarterback on third down and 12 (Wilson).



Fig. 9

“Sandstorm” played; the stadium was whipped into a frenzy; and

Ole Miss, jarred by the scene, committed a penalty and then turned the ball over on downs on the next play (Wilson). The Rebels exacted their revenge 11 years later, and Rubbert credits the post’s success – over 800 likes and 67,000 views – to its timeliness: “That wouldn’t hit if you posted it Monday.”

Overall, Rubbert attributed Ole Miss’ social media success to “being more creative and edgy, being more timely with our content, and utilizing a lot more of our content.” A post that encapsulates all of these qualities is an edited image of Kiffin holding the Golden Egg – the trophy given annually to the winner of the Ole Miss-Mississippi State football game – with “Damn Right,” written below it (*Fig. 10*). This statement references Ole Miss’ school cheer, the Hotty Toddy: It begins, “Are you ready?,” to which the response is, “Hell yeah, damn right!”

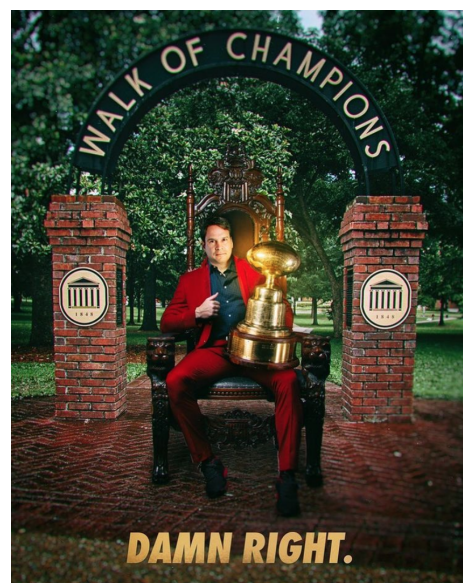


Fig. 10

The post was edgy, unique, and timely, as it was posted right after the game ended. On Instagram, it generated 4.1 times as many engagements as the average post from the Ole Miss football team account during the study (CrowdTangle Team). Creating this type of content helped Ole Miss stay engaged with its core fan group, re-engage with those on the periphery of the fan base after a few difficult seasons, and expand its reach.

Arkansas Football

At the University of Arkansas, the football team also faced the challenge and opportunity of introducing a new head coach, Sam Pittman, all while responding to the difficulties of a season affected by COVID-19 . This confluence of changes gave Arkansas a “blank slate,” said Rachael Harris, Director of Digital Strategy for Arkansas Athletics. Arkansas’ engagement on its football team accounts grew by 84% from 2019 to 2020, according to SkullSparks, the 17th-largest percentage increase nationally (“All 130 FBS”).

The social media strategy is “driven by the head coach, their personality, and their coaching staff,” Harris said. Pittman had been an assistant coach at Arkansas before and grew fond of the place then (Forde). “Pittman is an Arkansas guy, so it makes it pretty easy to figure out what the tone is for that account for sure,” Harris noted. She added that “most of the people that have hands on that account” are also from Arkansas, so “we all really have a significant understanding of who we’re representing.” With seemingly everyone spending more time on social media, authentic content more effectively broke through the “noise.” On Instagram, the second-highest performing post of 2020 was an image of Pittman captioned, “Sam Pittman. Like if you agree” (“Sam Pittman”). It generated 5.1 times the engagements of the average post on the account that year (CrowdTangle Team). A graphic of Pittman’s speech to his team after



Fig. 11

defeating Ole Miss generated 4.2 times the interactions of the account’s average post, making it the account’s fourth-highest performing post of the study (*Fig. 11*; CrowdTangle Team).

Like Ole Miss, Arkansas also created some edgy content. In a tradition started by former player Tony Fein, Ole Miss refers to its defense as the “Landsharks” (“Landshark”). When Arkansas’s defense recorded six interceptions and a fumble recovery en route to a victory over Ole Miss, the Razorbacks were quick to post a *Jaws* spoof graphic (*Fig. 12*). This post produced 3.8 times the average interactions of Arkansas’ Instagram posts in the study (CrowdTangle Team).



Fig. 12

Arkansas also knocked off Mississippi State in 2020. MSU head coach Mike Leach is known for his eccentric, long-running obsession with pirates (Schlabach). Accordingly, Arkansas posted a graphic depicting Pittman as a pirate (*Fig. 13*). The post generated over 8,700 likes on Twitter, the account’s third-most liked post of the study (*Fig. 13*). Harris claimed the key to the success of this content is prior preparation.



Fig. 13

“We’re going to be ready to capitalize on any opportunity that comes our way,” she added. “And so it was just a lot of preparation on the front end that we all really bought into.”

“This is about Sam Pittman, and he's our coach,” Harris said of the content itself. “We’re defined by this personality. So within that we decided to make sure that all of that stuff was stemming from a place of celebrating who we are, celebrating who our head coach was, and celebrating the success that our team was having.”

How, then, does poking fun at other schools celebrate who Arkansas is? Harris pointed to coaching searches at Arkansas and its Southeastern Conference rivals to explain. Ole Miss, Arkansas, and Mississippi State each dismissed their coaches after losing campaigns in 2019, and many of the same candidates were linked to each of those jobs (Holt). Ole Miss and Mississippi State landed nationally notable names in Lane Kiffin and Leach, respectively. Arkansas ended up hiring a comparatively unheralded then-assistant coach in Pittman – and then beat Ole Miss and Mississippi State in 2020. That Pittman is an “Arkansas guy,” as Harris described him earlier in the interview, certainly helped him rebuild the culture of Arkansas’ football team, giving Razorback fans reason to be proud after several underachieving years.

To create successful content that helps connect fans with the culture of the team, Harris said, “Having a really close relationship with the team is critical.” She specifically cited Brooks Cockrell, Assistant Director of Football Video and Creative Media, as integral to her department’s relationship with the team. Having strong relationships inside the program certainly helped in gathering and creating content, as COVID-19 restrictions kept teams largely isolated from individuals not directly associated with the program (“COVID-19 Guidance”). By embracing its identity with edginess, pride, and timeliness, Arkansas was able to both strengthen connections and reconnect with fans, even though not many could actually attend games. This success allowed the Razorbacks enter 2021 in a position of strength – both on the field and in their fan engagement efforts.

Arkansas Men's Basketball

Arkansas' football program was not the school's only team to stand out in 2020. The Razorbacks' men's basketball team advanced to the quarterfinal round – commonly known as the Elite Eight – of the 68-team NCAA Tournament, which took place in a COVID-19-safe “bubble” (Borzello). Arkansas made strides in its social media engagement as well. In the 2020 calendar year, Arkansas generated nearly 1.4 million more engagements than it did in 2019, per SkullSparks (“150 NCAA Men's”). SkullSparks' data also shows that Arkansas' Instagram engagements ranked among the top 25 in the nation during the 2020-21 season (“Instagram Strategy”). Rachael Harris, Director of Digital Strategy for Arkansas Athletics, also discussed Arkansas' approach to men's basketball social media.

The 2020-21 campaign marked Eric Musselman's second season as head coach of the Razorbacks. “[Musselman] is very into social media, so I think because of that, it allows us to kind of match his energy,” Harris said.

“His big thing is energy, effort and enthusiasm, so we bring energy, effort and enthusiasm to social media,” Harris also noted of Musselman. His personal use of social media – he has amassed over 100,000 Twitter followers (@EricPMusselman) – made him quite amenable to Arkansas' enthusiastic branding efforts, Harris stated.

Arkansas' 2020-21 season also involved the unique challenge of the NCAA Tournament bubble. Teams and team-related personnel were put in a secluded environment to minimize virus risk during the tournament (Borzello). One game – a first round matchup between Oregon and Virginia Commonwealth (VCU) – was declared a no-contest, with VCU bowing out due to

COVID-19 protocols and Oregon advancing (Borzello). Despite that unfortunate end to VCU's season, the bubble did its job health-wise, although it inherently made social media managers' jobs more difficult.

When referencing general keys to creating successful content, Harris said, "It's great if you get all these assets and everything, but content is meaningless without a distribution plan because no one's going to see it." Teams were only allowed two media staffers in the bubble, Harris said, and fan attendance was limited. Thus, having a distribution plan was perhaps never more critical – yet also more logistically challenging – than during the 2021 NCAA Tournament.

Adding another challenge to content distribution was the NCAA's media policy, Harris noted. With few exceptions, schools are not allowed to capture or post any content in the on-court area and may only post video highlights that the NCAA or its broadcast partners have already posted themselves ("MBB Policy"). "Focus on the practices, focus on the post-game, focus on the walk-arounds, use the stuff that we're allowed to use," was Harris' her advice to her videographer and photographer inside the bubble.

A video of the players dousing Musselman and one another with water in celebration after a win in the tournament generated 4.1 times the engagements of the average post on the team's Instagram account during the 2020-21 season (*Fig. 14*; CrowdTangle Team). On Twitter, an image of a celebratory post-game embrace after the Razorbacks advanced to the Elite Eight was the account's second-most liked post of the season (*Fig. 15*). Using these resources, Arkansas' content team was able to capture key moments of the basketball team's historic run, even with the COVID-19-related limitations on in-person staffing and content usage. "There was a lot of communication between me and our boots on the ground," Harris said.



Fig. 14



Fig. 15

Indeed, back home in Fayetteville, Harris and her team created additional content, a process that involved ample preparation. After beating Texas Tech to advance to the Sweet 16, the team account posted an edited *Spongebob Squarepants* scene in which Spongebob tries to board a bus, but the bus passes him by (*Fig. 16*). Spongebob is adorned with a Texas Tech logo, and the bus is labeled the “Muss Bus,” a popular nickname for the program after Musselman’s name. The post generated 2.1 times as many interactions as the account’s average post in the study.



Fig. 16

(CrowdTangle Team). “All the graphics and all the collateral and all that extra stuff that we did, again, that was [us] being prepared and being ready for us to win the whole time,” Harris said.

The strong effort of Arkansas’ social media team during the NCAA Tournament run shone through, as the Instagram account’s eight most overperforming posts all came during the tournament (CrowdTangle Team). With such well thought-out content, fan enthusiasm reached new levels, despite the inability to gather at full capacity as a physical audience.

Kentucky Men's Basketball

Also in the SEC, national powerhouse Kentucky, one of the most famed brands in basketball, recorded a rare absence from the NCAA Tournament in 2021. In the calendar year 2020, the Wildcats' accounts recorded over 11.7 million social media engagements ("150 NCAA Men's"). This number was the second-most in the country, but a drop of 9% from 2019, per SkullSparks ("150 NCAA Men's"). However, fellow major brands Virginia, Indiana, Michigan, North Carolina, and Duke all saw drops ranging from 33% to 51% ("150 NCAA Men's"). Moreover, despite the difficulties of COVID-19 and their struggles on the court – 9-16 overall, 8-9 in the SEC – the Wildcats held serve among the top 25 programs in Instagram engagements for the 2020-21 season and had the fourth-most interactions per post ("Instagram Strategy").

Kentucky Athletics Brand and Content Analyst Jacob Most discussed the overall strategy of Kentucky's men's basketball social media presence and adjustments made due to COVID-19. Most said the Wildcats' strategy remained consistent other than some logistical adjustments due to virus protocols.

Most broke down the strategy of the account into three primary goals: "Telling the team's story in the players and coaches' voice by accessing and leveraging the trust and access we have with the team"; "serving our fans with that access by providing media content they crave in their fandom"; and "showing how our program is cool [and] showcasing our elite atmosphere and the fun of being part of the Kentucky basketball team."

For example, former Wildcat and current New York Knick Immanuel Quickley was asked about playing in Madison Square Garden, the Knicks' storied arena. In a video reposted to

Kentucky's basketball team account, he responded that he was used to playing in front of large crowds at Rupp Arena, Kentucky's home ("I went to"). With over 4,200 likes, the tweet was Kentucky's fourth-most liked of the season. Here, the account is telling a story through a player's perspective, highlighting the game day environment, and praising the school's fans – fulfilling multiple of Most's objectives.

The goal of using behind-the-scenes access to serve fans required the largest number of logistical adjustments due to COVID-19. Most cited the example of Kentucky's new "Door to Door" series. Instead of conducting sit-down indoor interviews, the Wildcats' social media team conducted outdoor interviews with the players during their walks from on-campus housing to the team facility. Here, an interviewer asks guard/forward Zan Payne some amusing introductory questions (*Fig. 17*). These adjustments were needed because players and "Tier 1" personnel were subject to regular COVID-19 testing to make team events like practices, film studies, and games logistically feasible, and Tier 1 classification was kept as small as possible ("COVID-19 Guidance"). In Kentucky's case, they leveraged that restriction into creative new content.



Fig. 17

Beyond the pandemic, Kentucky's on-court results posed another challenge to its content team. "We always want to acknowledge reality in the good times and bad," Most said. Kentucky's second-most liked tweet of the 2020-21 season was a score graphic from a win that broke a long losing streak. Accompanied by a slightly self-deprecating caption, it garnered over 4,600 likes (*Fig. 18*). Most also noted that the Wildcats have found value in "showing the team

getting back to work following a loss.” Indeed, Kentucky’s highest-performing Instagram post – 5.8 times the engagements of the team’s average post during the 2020-21 season – was a behind-the-scenes video of a film study following a loss (*Fig. 19*; CrowdTangle Team).



Fig. 18

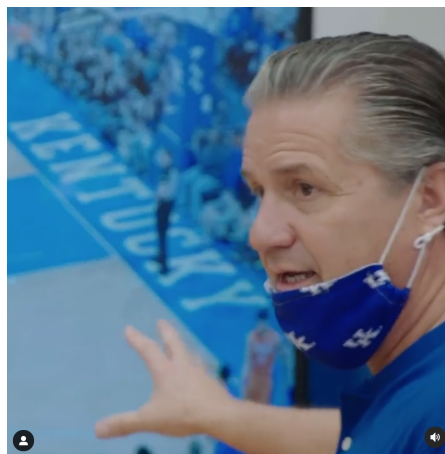


Fig. 19

The score graphic and the behind-the-scenes video also illustrate Kentucky’s different approaches to Twitter and Instagram. Twitter is “more conversational” and a “breaking news feed,” while Kentucky’s approach to Instagram involves “much more attempting to engage brand aesthetics,” Most said. “Elite” and “fun” are both desired aesthetics according to Most, and engaging with fans and celebrating successful alumni are added goals.

Having a famous coach with a strong social media presence also aids Kentucky’s efforts, Most said, especially as COVID-19 shutdowns and attendance limitations increased social media’s role in fan engagement. Head coach John Calipari boasts over 1.5 million Twitter followers (@UKCoachCalipari) and is an active user of the site. “He can grow our footprint when we engage. He also is so full of ideas that he's so great to work with on the creative and content management front,” Most noted. “[There is] never a dull day, and [he] makes it easy to keep the content calendar full.”

The way Most and his team use Calipari is further indicative of how they use different platforms. On Twitter, a GIF of Calipari modeled after the “Deal With It” meme garnered over 2,400 likes (*Fig. 20*). On Instagram, meanwhile, a video of Calipari’s emotional FaceTime call with former Wildcat Nick Richards after his selection in the 2020 NBA Draft generated 3.7 times the interactions of the account’s average post during the study, per CrowdTangle (*Fig. 21*; CrowdTangle Team). The tweet is quick, fun, and biting; while the Instagram post is longer and more emotional.

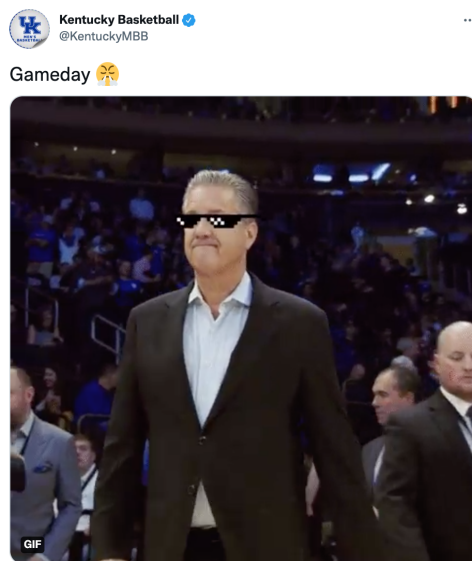


Fig. 20



Fig. 21

Ultimately, it seems clear that having a strong brand built through years of success, a consistent identity optimized for different platforms, and an engaging and social media savvy head coach helped Kentucky overcome challenges on and off the court in 2020-21.

Alabama Football

Still in the SEC – but back on the gridiron – the University of Alabama’s football program is one of the most established and respected brands in the sport. With a schedule and game day atmosphere altered by COVID-19, the Crimson Tide recorded an undefeated season and won the national championship in 2020. Despite already having a very sizable social media following, they still managed to increase their engagements by 7%, per SkullSparks (“All 130 FBS”). While 7% growth is modest, Alabama recorded 15.4 million interactions in 2020, the fourth-highest in the country (“All 130 FBS”). It should also be noted that the College Football Playoff – the sport’s four-team championship tournament – occurred in January 2021, so those numbers do not include the content surrounding Alabama’s national title victory.

Branding a dynastic program entails a different process than branding an up-and-coming program. Drew Claassen, Director of Strategic Marketing for Alabama Athletics, discussed Alabama’s social media efforts. “We make sure to always have a positive outlook on things . . . We never poke at our opponent or take shots at them,” he said. “It’s really just kind of focusing on talking about our program overall.”

The Heisman Trophy is given annually to the most outstanding player – almost always an offensive player on a winning team – in college football (“Heisman Trophy”). An Instagram post of Alabama wide receiver DeVonta Smith and quarterback Mac Jones at the Heisman Trophy

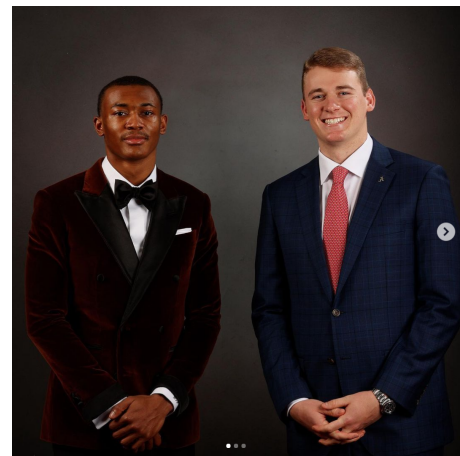


Fig. 22

ceremony generated 3.8 times more interactions than the average post on the team’s Instagram account in the study (*Fig. 22*; CrowdTangle Team). Smith received the Heisman and Jones was a fellow finalist. The post encapsulates Claassen’s strategy well: Having two Heisman finalists on the same roster is a testament to the incredible recruiting and coaching acumen of Alabama’s staff. This clean, simple post subtly says, “We’re the best,” without actually saying it.

Much of Alabama’s content follows that strategy. “We are trying different things or new strategies all the time. It may not be as risk-taking as some will be because you almost don't have to [take risks] as much when you've got that big of a following,” Claassen said. With such a large following, he noted, “We have a lot more eyeballs on us, [so] people are quick to jump on our mistakes or things that don't go right.”

Even when Alabama breaks the mold of clean, crisp, and simple content, its content still maintains that aesthetic – just with a twist or two. Take this cartoon graphic celebrating quarterback Tua Tagovailoa’s selection by the Miami Dolphins in the NFL Draft for example (*Fig. 23*). It still maintains the same brand aesthetics as much of Alabama’s content, but the cartoon technique makes it stand out more than a traditional image. Indeed, it



Fig. 23

generated 3.2 times as many interactions as the average post on the team’s Instagram account during the study (CrowdTangle Team).

“You're already an established brand and so you just kind of keep feeding the beast and it rolls along,” Claassen said of Alabama’s strategy. Yet, even “beasts” like Alabama had to adjust when COVID-19 hit. An Instagram PSA from head coach Nick Saban at the start of the

shutdown captioned “#StayHomeStaySafe” generated 4.0 times as many engagements as Alabama’s average post in the study (“A Special Message”; CrowdTangle Team). Alabama used the popularity and influence of Saban to get public health messaging across. At the same time, Claassen said Alabama did not want to “alienate fans” with too much non-football content.

However, Alabama did find ways to connect football to the rapid changes to everyday life brought about by COVID-19. Early in the COVID-19 shutdown, Alabama posted longform IGTV videos, like cooking tutorials, for a series entitled “#BamaToTheHouse” (Fig. 24). Claassen said that while these videos were not Alabama’s highest performing content items, they were not “just about the entertainment value.” Rather, they served to offer “a different perspective of the types of things that we’re able to offer the student athletes,” he said. In this case, the videos



Fig. 24

were made in Alabama’s new dining center, so they highlighted that benefit of the program, he added.

Claassen said that the football staff cares about recruiting, while marketing-wise, he “cares about the fans and trying to sell tickets and put butts in seats,” so his team is seeking a balance. For instance, an Instagram video commemorating National Signing Day spliced together videos of prominent Alabama alumni announcing their commitment to the Crimson Tide with footage of some of their most memorable plays at Alabama (Fig. 25). (National Signing Day is the day on which high school players sign letters of intent, binding themselves to a college team (“National Letter”).) The video generated 5.2 times as many interactions as Alabama’s average Instagram post during the study, the team’s second-best performing

Instagram post of the year (CrowdTangle Team). This type of content shows recruits the legends in whose footsteps they can follow and reminds fans of the quality talent they get to watch perform on Saturdays.



Fig. 25



Fig. 26

The NFL’s relationship with college programs offers Alabama even more recruiting content. “We’re blessed because the NFL has had an increase in distributing content to teams,” Claassen said. For example, Alabama used content to which the NFL held ownership rights when it posted the professional highlights of former Crimson Tide safety Minkah Fitzpatrick (*Fig. 26*). This content item, part of the NFL’s countdown of the league’s top 100 players, generated 3.1 times as many engagements as Alabama’s average Instagram post in the study (CrowdTangle Team).

This focus on recruiting helps Alabama maintain its competitive advantage over its peers. College recruits are assigned star ratings by groups like 247Sports (owned by CBS Sports), Rivals (a Yahoo! property), and ESPN. According to the 247Sports talent index, which analyzes the average star rating of every player on a roster across those three rating services, Alabama boasts the most talented roster in college football (“2021 College Football”).

In addition to the recruiting angle, Claassen said Alabama’s focus is building a connection between the team and fans, something that became even more important as

COVID-19 kept many fans away from stadiums and altered the game day experience. “It’s just about getting people closer to the action or behind the scenes content,” he noted. When Alabama won its semifinal game in the College Football Playoff, the social media team gave the players phones with “selfie sticks,” which they used to record first-person videos of the on-field celebrations (*Fig. 27*). A compilation of those videos generated 4.9 times the interactions of Alabama’s average Instagram post in the study (CrowdTangle Team).



Fig. 27

Content like that video helps to humanize the players and bring the fans closer to the action. It also serves a marketing purpose. “It’s just giving people a perspective and it’s creating a fear of missing out, so that the next time they’re like, ‘Man, I wish I’d gone to that game,’” Claassen said. “But then you also have this fan in California that can’t ever go. And so what you want to do is treat them like, ‘I went to this game or I knew what happened around the game even though I wasn’t able to [attend] physically.’”

That type of connection leads to conversion opportunities as fans identify with the brand Alabama has crafted. For example, Alabama partners with a company called Fanatics to sell officially licensed team gear. Claassen said the Crimson Tide “had one of the most successful years in Fanatics history for a college team.” He credited the success to not only the national championship, but also to the extra money many fans had from not buying tickets.

Having such a large brand also allows revenue opportunities in the form of sponsored content. Claassen called sponsored content “more of a tag-along rather than the main driver or the main focus,” adding that sponsors are “just kind of along for the ride to take advantage of

[the brand].” For instance, Alabama’s final score graphic from the national championship was its fourth-most liked tweet of the study (*Fig. 28*).

This celebratory moment that was shared far and wide contained the logo of a sponsor, Hibbett City Gear, in the bottom right, allowing Alabama to earn revenue from the large number of interactions and impressions generated.

Ultimately, even though 2020 presented many unique challenges, Alabama was able to continue “feeding the beast” and had a successful season on the field and off of it.



Fig. 28

USC Football

The final program surveyed is the University of Southern California (USC), another storied college football brand – albeit one without the recent success of Alabama. Santino Stancato – Head of Creative and Brand Strategy for J1S, a marketing agency with which USC is contracting – discussed the Trojans’ social media approach. He previously worked for Georgia Tech’s football program and now heads up some of USC’s digital efforts remotely through this third-party role. USC’s football social media engagements rose by 187% from 2019 to 2020, the largest increase in the country by percentage, per SkullSparks (“All 130 FBS”).

Prior to 2019, USC used its main athletics account – a social media account dedicated to general coverage of all of the school’s teams – to promote its football team, Stancato said. The school then started football-only accounts, and he said that “engagement was pretty low” before the football staff partnered with J1S. That partnership involved building a brand called BLVD Studios to help football players capitalize on new marketing opportunities (“USC Football and J1S”). After several states passed laws granting college athletes the power to market their own names, images, and likenesses (NIL) – a power previously reserved for the schools, the NCAA, and their partners – the NCAA officially moved in June 2021 to allow this type of third-party financial compensation for players (“NCAA adopts interim”).

USC says that education on personal branding and financial literacy, tracking of social media analytics data, a brand management program, and a “big picture approach” to “brand narrative” are the pillars of its NIL plan (“USC Football and J1S”). Recruiting athletes to the

media-rich environment of Los Angeles is clearly at the forefront of this mission. Accordingly, USC and JIS developed the recruiting hashtag, “#BLVDBound,” which is “a nod to the pageantry and symbolism of the famous boulevards that define Los Angeles as the epicenter of opportunity and entertainment, possibility and imagination,” (“USC Football and JIS”).

The #BLVDBound branding initiative drives much of USC football’s social media content, which JIS and Stancato are helping to grow. Stancato cited the relative newness of the Instagram account as a contributing factor to USC’s large increase in engagement. However, due to the Pacific-12 Conference’s cancellation of the 2020 season and subsequent reversal of that decision, USC only played six total games and did not start its season until November, making that growth more notable in context (West).

Given the recruiting-driven relationship between USC and JIS, Stancato unsurprisingly says, “I will always be recruiting-first.” This philosophy poses a challenge, though, as content that appeals to recruits might not necessarily appeal to fans. Stancato noted that fans often “don’t truly understand the intricacies of what it takes to recruit a top 25, top 10 class.” Nonetheless, he said, “Recruit first, and then everything follows suit.” Since these accounts are relatively new, it will be of interest to calculate how this strategy impacts fan interaction over time.

While USC’s content may be more geared toward a younger, more social media savvy demographic than that of the average fan, much of it should still be appealing to fans. “We like to take a lifestyle approach to the type of content that we create and really show the atmosphere and the players’ personalities,” Stancato said. Fans are part of that atmosphere and culture of course, and content that makes players more relatable to fans will also help boost the players’ own brands. Thus, it is possible to cater to fans and recruits with the same content.

For instance, USC created a National Signing Day video for a recruit in which a fan opens an ESPN alert about a player’s signing, leading him to an article about how the recruit will impact the program’s culture (*Fig. 29*). This type of content integrates fans into the messaging surrounding recruiting and shows them that they are a valued part of the program, too. This Instagram feature generated 2.5 times as many interactions as the average post to USC’s Instagram account during the study (CrowdTangle Team).



Fig. 29

Recruiting well also helps achieve marketing objectives. “In reality, winning is what is going to drive those ticket sales and that revenue. So in order to win, you need recruits,” Stancato remarked. Recruiting now extends to a coach’s own roster, too. In April 2021, the NCAA adopted a one-time penalty-free transfer rule, allowing players to enter the so-called “transfer portal,” from which they can be signed by another program and compete for that school immediately (“D1 council adopts”). Previously, undergraduate players who transferred were required to sit out for one year before playing at their new school, while players who had graduated early could transfer elsewhere and play immediately (“One-time transfer”).

“Once you have the recruits, now with the way the transfer portal is, you have to massage and keep them there and stay true to the word you recruited them on,” Stancato said. Schools can keep players happy by creating content centered around them, he added. USC dismissed Helton and launched a search for a new head coach in September 2021 (after this interview), so this objective will be pivotal for USC’s content team in navigating this transition.

Because recruiting well – and keeping current players happy – naturally improves a team’s chances of winning, Stancato stated, “If you create for the betterment of the team, your

content is going to do very, very well.” He also added that it is important to “take care of everybody” and “make sure everybody feels loved,” not just the most prominent players.

Making content that stands out when a team plays no games until two months into the season and cannot play in front of fans is a challenge, though. In 2019, Louisiana State University (LSU) football became a standard-setter for its social media video production, with visually appealing videos narrated by the likes of Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson telling the story of their national championship season (Scott). USC hired one of the creative minds behind those videos, Stancato said, and even after that individual left, USC still used a strategy similar to LSU’s to create appealing content.

For example, USC released a hype video for its crosstown matchup with UCLA that mixed cinematic shots of Los Angeles with videos of the players singing the song to which the video is set (*Fig. 30*). The video produced 2.5 times as many engagements as the average post on USC’s Instagram during the study (CrowdTangle Team).



Fig. 30

Stancato said the keys to creating videos like this one are “knowing your [creative] team,” “empowering your creatives to do what they do best,” and “building cadences around their strengths.” He also noted that each creative is different and that the school changes its strategy slightly when the department undergoes personnel changes. Ultimately, through embracing creative talent and the Hollywood mystique that its location offers, USC was able to create engaging social media content to reach fans and recruits alike during a volatile time.

Conclusion

There is no one way to create engaging social media content or to deal with a crisis like COVID-19 – much less to do both at the same time. Thus, these studies do not contain every right answer. However, they do lend themselves to a key theme: understand the audience and the mission.

Risk-taking shows how schools understand who their core audience is and what those fans want. For example, as one of football's most famous brands, Alabama may take fewer risks with its content. Conversely, programs like Ole Miss and Arkansas that have established brands but lack Alabama's powerhouse status, may be earlier adopters of edgy or trendy content than Alabama might be. Some programs toe the line, too, proverbially speaking. For example, USC has a rich history but lacks Alabama's recent success. That history has led them to adopt a slightly more conservative approach, Santino Stancato of J1S, a marketing agency contracting with USC, said. However, because of its relative lack of recent on-field success, USC needed a bit of a branding breakthrough to maintain notoriety in the saturated Los Angeles media market. It embraced edgier, trendier content by leaning into its Hollywood roots with cinematic video productions and other content tailored around a Southern California lifestyle.

Additionally, COVID-19 complicated schools' mission of using behind-the-scenes content to reach fans and humanize players. Thus, schools must be flexible always – especially in times of crisis or disruption. Kentucky's "Door to Door" series provides an example of a safe, practical adjustment – moving sit-down introductory interviews with players outdoors and

interviewing them on the walk from their dorms to the team's facility. This content item allowed Kentucky's social media team and basketball players to better protect themselves from COVID-19 and provided a more visually interesting backdrop for an interview than that of a studio sit-down.

Schools can also overcome the difficulties of COVID-19 by having a distribution plan. Arkansas' Rachael Harris especially emphasized this point because of her unique experience with the NCAA Tournament bubble. The Razorbacks faced restrictions on staffing due to the small number of individuals allowed in the bubble and NCAA limitations on using in-game content. Overcoming those obstacles took great coordination between staff on the ground and back at home, and it inarguably worked: Arkansas' eight highest-performing Instagram posts of the 2020-21 season came during the tournament, according to CrowdTangle (CrowdTangle Team).

Furthermore, with social media becoming a more important connection point between teams and fans, schools had to have a plan to optimize each platform. Ole Miss' Janice Rubbert said, "Social media isn't one size fits all." She added that, therefore, teams cannot make the same exact post on different platforms and expect each post to perform well. Kentucky's Jacob Most echoed that sentiment, and Kentucky's content shows how teams can adapt to different platforms. Twitter is more conversational and current, while Instagram is more grounded in visual aesthetics. Kentucky utilizes head coach John Calipari across both platforms. On Twitter, a popular post used a humorous GIF of him to celebrate the arrival of Kentucky's first game of the season. On Instagram, an overperforming post involving Calipari was a longer, heartwarming video of his FaceTime call with a player who had just been drafted into the NBA. These

adaptations show how teams can build out different aspects of a person or team's personality on different platforms.

Social media's increased importance also means schools must understand how each platform drives content to users. Rubbert discussed the importance of layering content on Instagram – for example, posting a photo and then a video in an Instagram post containing multiple pieces of media. Doing so draws users in with an aesthetically pleasing photo, and then they swipe to see the video. With the video appearing first, it may automatically begin playing even if the user is not yet actively engaged with it. This technique “almost tricks the algorithm” because it prefers diversified content, Rubbert said. She also added a tip from Daniel Zewde, Ole Miss' Assistant Athletic Director for Digital Strategy and Analytics. Zewde noted that Instagram's algorithm seems to prefer diverse content across a feed. Therefore, teams should post a mixture of photos, videos, longform IGTV videos, reels (short videos modeled after popular, relatively new platform TikTok), and galleries with multiple pieces of media.

Ultimately, a common theme among each of these schools and each of these best practices is understanding what makes content successful – or unsuccessful – at a given place, then embracing those keys to success. These schools certainly adapted to COVID-19 – and to other changes, like the hiring of a new head coach or the team's posting a rare losing record – but they did not completely reinvent the underlying core tenets of their strategies. Even schools that took risks with edgy content items did so from a place of understanding the schools' identities and what made their content successful. Thus, each of these schools was able to maintain – and in many cases, grow – its connections with fans, recruits, and even those with a mere passing interest despite the tremendous obstacles of 2020-21.

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