

From Policies to Punishments: The Atlantic Coast Conference and Social Networking

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Abstract

This research paper examined the use of social networking sites by college athletes and how ACC schools are tackling this topic. Following the emergence of recent issues surrounding this subject, many schools had been compelled to form policies and educate athletes in a way that benefited the school, programs, coaches, teams and individuals. Through ten in-depth interviews, the author found that most ACC schools were dealing with social networking in similar ways. Athletic departments were beginning to inform and educate students on proper social networking use, the benefits and potential problems that could arise from using these sites.

I. Introduction

“To tweet or to play football???? That’s an easy decision.... Bye Bye twitter I am really gonna miss you guys....see you in about 3 months” (Walsh).

The aforementioned quote was a Twitter post by UNC quarterback T.J. Yates following the implementation of a new team policy that banned all players from using Twitter accounts during football season. While a Twitter ban may seem a bit extreme when dealing with college athletes, many athletic programs feel that drastic measures need to be taken in order to educate players on the importance of responsible social networking use. There have been a number of issues recently surrounding the topic of college athlete use of social networking sites, the two most popular being Facebook and Twitter. These issues have led to a number of athletic programs being scrutinized by the media and players being kicked off teams (Yanda). The Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) schools have stood out quite a bit recently in their attempts at dealing with issues surrounding this subject and efforts to regulate social networking among athletes.

This study looks at what many of the ACC athletic departments are doing in regards to athletes using social networking sites. Topics covered include individual school policies, opinions of these social networking sites and the future of these sites in the world of college athletics.

II. Literature Review

There is currently scarce scholarly research surrounding the topic of social networking use by college athletes. However, there is a wide variety of articles dealing with social media; some articles are broad and others are more specific as they focus on ideas such as how social media is impacting the world of sports. No matter how many articles are examined, there are four main topics that need to be discussed to prepare

readers on the subject of ACC athletes and social networking. These three topics include: social media; social networking, professional and college athlete use of social networking sites.

Social Media

Social media is “a term used to describe tools and platforms people use to produce, publish, and share online content and to interact with one another” (“Social Media Terms”). Social media tools include: blogs, wikis, videos, podcasts and more. While popular sites such as Twitter, Facebook and MySpace are part of the all encompassing social media world, they are also included in the narrower category of social networking sites.

Social Networking

Social networking sites are “web sites that host multiple communities comprising people with profiles who have similar interests. These sites offer a place where people can engage with one another online and share content” (“Social Media Terms”). Throughout this research, the term “social networking” will be used to refer to the various sites used by student-athletes, most commonly Facebook and Twitter. The term “social media” used by the interviewees throughout the findings section is referring to social networking sites.

“Social networking emerged with the rise of what is referred to as Web 2.0, free services that allow individuals to ‘connect’ with each other via the Internet” (Davies and Lee, 260). This new development of technology is different from Web 1.0 companies, such as Amazon, because they are “created and controlled by business entities, but the content is predominantly user driven” (260). Users have complete control over the content of Web 2.0 sites and that has had a huge impact on people of all ages.

“Social networking sites have become a preferred method of communication among many individuals in the last five years” (Marsico 967). This recent boom of social networking use has been guided by the three most widely used sites: MySpace, Facebook and Twitter. Even though these three sites have only been around since 2003, 2004 and 2006, respectively, social networking sites first entered the online community in 1996. However, they have only recently grown to an unprecedented level of popularity.

According to Kishner and Crescenti, “a recent study found that 73 percent of Americans regularly use social media, such as popular networking sites Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter.” (Kishner and Crescenti, 24) Social networking appeals to a huge population because of all the features each site offers. “Friend networking sites allow users to communicate with others utilizing flexible and varying features such as posting information about themselves on their profiles, posting pictures, leaving messages, and providing hyperlinks to other sites” (Bonds-Raacke and Raacke, 27).

While all of these features are attractive, social networking sites have evolved into much more over the past few years. These sites have become a way for individuals to create a dialogue and virtual relationship with people they may never otherwise get a chance to encounter. From movie stars to athletes to politicians, it seems that anybody and everybody is becoming a user of social networks. In fact, some of the most active users of these sites are professional athletes.

Professional Athlete Use

In their 2010 article, Kishner and Crescenti provide an overview of the rise of social networking in professional sports. Social networking has become so prominent in the sporting world that three of the top 10 most-discussed individuals on Twitter in 2009 were professional athletes: Kobe Bryant, Tiger Woods and Alex Rodriguez (Kishner and Crescenti, 24). Players, teams, organizations and the like are all jumping on the bandwagon. Everybody from the New York Yankees to Shaquille O’Neal to The National Basketball Association (NBA) is taking part in the new social networking craze (24). However, the sporting industry is quickly learning that social networking not only has the ability to be incredibly useful in areas such as free marketing, but it can also be a problem when not used properly and intelligently.

Kassing and Sanderson discuss how “internet technologies now provide fans with unprecedented access to professional athletes” (Kassing and Sanderson, 113). This access has led to trouble when athletes go too far with their comments. This has been seen in multiple instances, including a Washington Redskins player criticizing the team’s fans for lack of support via-Twitter to multiple football players expressing anger towards their coaches (Kishner and Crescenti, 24). “Finding the balance of what should and should not be shared can be difficult” for professional athletes (Kassing and Sanderson, 116).

These athletes are used to being in the spotlight, but that usually comes with the help of a publicist or agent. Social networking sites have given athletes their own personal outlet to share their thoughts, feelings and opinions 24/7. Sites like Facebook and Twitter give the world an unfiltered, raw look into the life and mind of professional athletes. There are no publicists censoring what is said on social networking sites. This unfiltered nature of these sites has led to recent policies being implemented by both franchises and organizations.

College Athlete Use

While professional athletes are held to high standards and continuously monitored by the media, fans and the rest of the world, they are not the only athletes recently being taught a tough lesson about the repercussions of using social networking sites. There has been a recent influx of college athletes being criticized in the news for their uncensored and excessive sharing on social networking sites. These issues have also led to the creation and implementation of policies dictating what student athletes can and cannot do on these sites. Since “the NCAA has not taken a formal stand on how much a university can monitor or restrict,” it is up to the individual schools to create and implement its own policies regarding social networking sites (Butts). It appears the most common practice is to monitor the athlete’s individual sites.

While monitoring is a good starting point for many college athletic programs, a number of schools have taken policies a step further and added a “social networking” section to its student-athlete handbooks. Student-athletes need to be aware that what they post on sites like Facebook and Twitter can be seen by everybody. Any material posted online “may be retained by Google’s online cache, even after the material is deleted” (Read and Young). This cache allows material to be viewed by anybody via a simple Google search. Student athletes need to understand that even if they want to be treated similar to regular students, they are “much more visible in the public domain representing the university” (Butts). One unfortunate tweet could lead to a whole set of issues for the athlete and the university as a whole.

One recent issue that seems to have gained an inordinate amount of publicity deals with UNC defensive tackle Marvin Austin. Austin “wanted to show off lavish expenditures in recent months,” including pictures of “a watch for his younger sister, a bag from an upscale sunglass store in Miami and a \$143 bill from the Cheesecake Factory” (Yanda). All of these controversial photos were uploaded to his Twitter account before it was disabled in July (Yanda).

Not only were these pictures inappropriate and unnecessary, but they also brought up an issue with compliance. Where was Austin getting all of this money to buy designer items and expensive dinners? These pictures, along with other postings, led to an investigation by the NCAA into “possible improper benefits provided to players by sports agents” (Yanda). Austin was eventually suspended indefinitely from the team. Even though his Twitter postings may not have been the sole reason for this investigation and ultimate release from the team, they did serve as “a contributing factor” (Yanda).

While the issue with UNC’s Marvin Austin was an extreme circumstance, there are a variety of minor reasons surrounding other coach’s decisions to implement policies and rules. Some coaches are simply taking action because they see social networking sites as pointless and distracting. Others are implementing policies and rules in order to avoid any issues in the future.

Recently, the N.C. State men’s basketball coach, Sydney Lowe, banned the team from Twitter for the remainder of the basketball season. Lowe felt that players were sharing too much information. “‘Who needs to know that you ate at McDonald’s last night?’ said Lowe” (Pickeral and Tysiac). Following along with Coach Lowe’s decision, the coach of the Maryland men’s basketball team also decided his team will be “taking a sabbatical from Twitter this season, deciding to err on the side of caution” and avoid potential problems in the future (Clarke).

III. Research Questions

This research will look at all aspects surrounding college athletes’ use of social networking sites. From policies to punishments, this research will take an in-depth look at the issues, policies and future of social networking use by college athletes. More specifically, this research will answer the following three questions:

RQ1: What issues have surfaced surrounding ACC athletes and social networking sites? Does it take a serious issue to force a school to implement a policy?

RQ2: What policies or other efforts have the individual schools of the ACC implemented when it

comes to social networking sites and why?

RQ3: Will (and should) all conferences and schools have to find ways to monitor and control social networking sites at some point in the future?

While there is an abundance of literature surrounding the topic of social networking, there is currently little research dealing specifically with athletes at the college level. This research will fill this gap by looking at how universities, specifically ACC schools, are dealing with student-athletes use of social networking sites, what the overall tone is and if there are any underlying themes among the schools.

The uniqueness of this topic can be seen by the lack of research currently completed about social networking and college athletes. However, this research is incredibly timely and is dealing with a subject that is being talked about more and more in the media, locker rooms and athletic offices around the country. The ACC schools, in particular, have made a splash in the news with recent issues and policies that are taking the college athletic world by storm.

While the fact that these schools are creating policies to deal with social networking may be news to some people, many of these schools have had policies for about four to five years. However, nobody paid attention to these policies until the rules started to be broken by players. Now it seems as if every day a new school is coming up with an up-to-date way to monitor or educate players on the use of social networking sites.

IV. Method

The best way to gain in-depth knowledge of what ACC schools are doing in regards to social networking sites was to conduct phone and email interviews with ACC school employees.

According to Patrick Dilley, "gathering and analyzing information about interview topics and subjects is an important first step in interview preparation" (Dilley 131). In following with this advice, research was conducted on each ACC school to see what current policies are in place and if the schools are dealing with any specific issues in the news. Research was also done on each school's staff directory to find a contact that would be suitable for this specific topic. Directors and associate directors at all 12 ACC schools in the compliance, media relations or general athletic departments were contacted via email.

These emails allowed for initial introductions to be made and a general idea of the research to be given to the contacts. One of the five secrets to getting great interviews is to establish trust and that was especially true for this topic (Newman 28). By creating an email relationship, the contacts were able to get a feel for the overall tone of the research. This can be a sensitive subject for many schools that are currently dealing with issues and it is easy for the ACC employees to be protective and defensive when it comes to their teams and athletes. However, it was good to show them that this was, in fact, research for an academic paper and not the media. This reassurance made the contacts more willing and open to participating in an interview.

These initial emails also allowed the contacts to decide whether or not they were interested in taking part or passing the task on to someone better suited for the topic. A couple questions were also included in the emails to get an idea of what the school's overall stance and current policies are regarding social networking use by student-athletes. By including questions in the initial emails, the contacts were able to decide whether or not they were willing to discuss this topic with a student or if the school would pass on the opportunity.

After receiving a response from a majority of the schools, follow-up emails were sent out about the possibility of conducting phone interviews or an additional email interview. After some back-and-forth emailing and phone calling, three phone interviews and ten email interviews were successfully conducted. Questions for these interviews focused on why the policies were created, what the policy's are about and where the school sees social networking in the future of college athletics. The information obtained in these interviews was then compiled and analyzed. Throughout the duration of communication, all of the interviewees had an understanding that their statements would be used as reference quotations in this research. This is excluding the phone interviews, which were promised anonymity.

Interviews were useful in getting a more in-depth look at what ACC schools are doing to make sure student-athletes do not go overboard with social networking sites. Interviews allowed for the knowledge

gained to go beyond what was written in the student-athlete handbooks and in the news. They also gave a more personal account of how schools feel about the topic. These interviews followed the general “rule of thumb,” which means for “interviewers to talk 20 percent of the time and listen 80 percent” (Dilley 134). This was useful in giving the interviewees the opportunity to guide and determine the direction of the interview. They had the power to decide how much or how little they were going to share. This was especially seen in the email interviews. Conducting interviews via email gave the interviewees a complete blank slate and many of them took full advantage of this open-ended style by sharing a plethora of information.

Overall, these interviews were helpful in receiving feedback and information from inside sources. These sources were reliable and able to give a firsthand account of what the ACC schools are doing to handle student-athlete use of social networking sites.

V. Findings

Findings on RQ1: What issues have surfaced surrounding ACC athletes and social networking sites? Does it take a serious issue to force a school to implement a policy?

While most of the schools interviewed opted out of mentioning any specific issues they have dealt with regarding social networking sites, some interviewees were willing to share general ideas of the types of problems they have faced. One school recently formed a social networking policy last year after student-athletes posted inappropriate pictures and used language that the school “didn’t feel was good” on their sites (Personal Communication, October 1, 2010). Many schools have taken these minor problems and used them to finally create or enforce a stricter policy regarding social networking sites.

There has been quite a bit of issues surrounding this topic, some bigger and more intense than others, but it does not always take a problem to drive coaches to recognize and deal with social networking sites. Multiple schools discussed how no specific issues led to the creation of their policies (Personal Communication, September 20, 2010). These schools made policies to simply keep up with recent technological trends and avoid problems in the future. Even if a school does not face an issue head on, the schools are realizing that it is important to take the appropriate steps to avoid future problems that could occur.

Findings on RQ2: What policies or other efforts have the individual schools of the ACC implemented when it comes to social networking sites and why?

After seeing how much of an impact social networking sites have had on the sports industry, many ACC coaches and athletic departments have begun to pioneer ways to deal with potential or existing problems. With the conference as a whole leaving the policies and rules to each individual program, each school has the liberty of creating, implementing and dealing with social networking in any way they see fit for their situation (Hirschman). Based on the interviews, there is no “one size fits all” policy or way to deal with this subject. That is apparent when looking at the various approaches taken by each ACC school.

Out of the ten ACC schools interviewed for this research, only four have written guidelines or policies regarding student-athlete use of social networking sites. These four schools include: University of North Carolina, Clemson, Wake Forest and Florida State.

All of the policies formed by these four schools have taken more of an educational approach, rather than disciplinary. Even the schools that have yet to create a written policy are focusing on educational approaches. One school mentioned that they have had to do a lot of education because the “student-athletes think [social networking sites] are some black hole and what they say can’t come back to bite them” (Personal Communication, September 20, 2010). According to John Lata, Director of Student Services at Florida State University, in regards to their stance on social networking, “primarily it is about education, awareness and safety, but it is also about representing their team, the department, the institution, but ultimately, about representing themselves and their families in the appropriate way” (Lata).

While athletic departments have a vested interest in the reputation of their school and program, they are also interested in making sure their players practice safe and smart social networking use. Once the “post” button is hit on Facebook or Twitter, any and all information that is shared will be on the Internet forever. Due to this permanent nature, some schools are trying to link social networking and real world education by teaching student-athletes about self-regulation. This can be used as an educational tool and a way to prepare student-athletes for life after college. Jon Jaudon, Associate Athletic Director for Administration at Virginia

Tech, mentioned that “learning how to regulate one’s post and site is a valuable opportunity just as learning how to engage in social settings without abusing privileges as an emerging adult is also a valuable learning opportunity (Jaudon). Jaudon also shared this valuable piece of advice: “Technology can be your best friend and your worst enemy in a matter of seconds” (Jaudon).

By educating student-athletes on how they can adversely portray themselves and their schools, athletic departments are hoping that athletes will begin to think more rationally and intelligently before posting questionable material to their sites. It is important to remember that not only will an inappropriate post hurt reputations, but it can also come back to haunt you in the future. Chris Cameron, Associate Athletic Director for Media Relations at Boston College, discussed how it is important to make sure student-athletes understand that “this is a far bigger issue than one affecting their athletic careers—irresponsible postings can lead to trouble later on throughout their lives” (Cameron).

Although all ten schools interviewed see education as the primary way to approach social networking sites, the six schools that currently have no written code of conduct are taking different and unique routes when confronting this topic. Some of these include: simply giving student-athlete’s the right to freely use the sites, educating them during preseason meetings, monitoring their sites and implementing general rules (no written guidelines).

In regards to giving student’s the right to use social networking sites however they want, Virginia Tech’s Jon Jaudon had this statement to share: “We do not want to infringe upon the individual rights of our students and their personal use of social media” (Jaudon). When asked whether or not Georgia Tech had a current policy dealing with this topic, Assistant Athletic Director/Media Relations, Dean Buchan mentioned this: “We want our student-athletes to be normal, young people and social media is sometimes a part of that” (Buchan).

Some schools have not only created and implemented a social networking policy, but they have taken advantage of preseason meetings to educate and inform all athletes at once. John Lata from FSU pointed out that “for the past four years we have done hazing and social media education at our squad meetings at the beginning of the year—every student-athlete is in attendance and signs a form stating that they understand the policy” (Lata). Incorporating social networking education into preseason rituals is a good way to teach student-athletes that this subject should be taken seriously.

Regardless of whether or not each school has a written policy, a majority of the schools interviewed have appointed a faculty member to monitor the social networking pages of student-athletes. Just because a school has a policy does not mean that everybody is following that policy word-for-word. Monitoring the pages adds a “cushion” to the policies and rules in place. One school mentioned that “when we hear about a party that is going on; we start checking Facebook and Twitter more intensely” (Personal Communication, October 1, 2010). The University of North Carolina even included a section about monitoring in its policy, stating: “Each team must identify at least one coach or administrator who is responsible for having access to and regularly monitoring the content of team members’ social networking sites and postings” (UNC Student-Athlete Handbook).

As seen throughout these findings, all ten schools interviewed are dealing with social networking in some way. While these specific ways may vary based on school, the overall view that social networking sites need to be recognized in some manner is consistent across the board.

Findings on RQ3: Will (and should) all conferences and schools have to find ways to monitor and control social networking sites at some point in the future?

Based on the ten interviews conducted with ACC schools, the results are fairly split when it comes to whether or not social networking sites are an actual problem that needs to be dealt with by all schools. David Reed, Assistant Athletic Director of Compliance, at the University of Miami feels that social networking “already is a problem throughout the country and has been for 4-5 years. Twitter has taken it to a whole new level” (Reed). When other schools were asked whether or not social networking sites were a problem, the most common answer was “absolutely.” Regardless of individual opinions, a majority of the ACC schools interviewed believe that all schools are beginning to deal with social networking sites in some way.

One comment on a social networking site can lead to many problems for the athlete and school. This intensity and ability to magnify into problems at such a fast speed are leading more athletic departments to view social networking as a problem that must be confronted. Dean Buchan from Georgia Tech slightly defended social networking sites with this statement: “No one knows how social media will evolve in the coming

years, but we don't look at social media being a "problem" in any way. That doesn't mean that every now and then student-athletes need to be reminded that their postings are somewhat permanent and can be read by more than just their friends and followers" (Buchan).

VI. Discussion

Based on the ten interviews conducted, it is clear that ACC schools are recognizing social networking sites and are figuring out ways to deal with this topic. While there is no "right" way to approach this subject, it appears that most ACC schools have taken an educational route. Educating student-athletes on the potential damage social networking sites can cause is a much more efficient and effective way to deal with this topic. Simply creating policies and enforcing consequences is a short-term, after-the-fact fix that is not getting to the root of the problem. The ACC schools recognize this and have decided to focus on teaching student-athletes how to responsibly utilize these sites in a way that can benefit them now and in the future.

While education is a key step to avoid any issues in the future, many ACC schools have also found policies and handouts to be useful. These efforts show the student-athletes that the school is making a valiant attempt to help them. This is a serious subject and can do a lot of harm. It is important to treat social networking sites this way and try to minimize future issues.

As mentioned in the findings, some schools wish to treat student-athletes like typical students. This may be a valid goal, but student-athletes are not typical students. They are in the media and their actions are watched much closer than a regular student. So while allowing student-athletes to act and partake in regular things is perfectly fine, schools need to remember that what an athlete does on the Internet is seen by hundreds (maybe even thousands) of people and all of their postings ultimately reflect back on the school, as well as the individual. In relation to this, the idea of student-athletes actions reflecting back to the school is part of the reason why many schools decided to form policies in the first place.

Overall, it seems the schools are finding ways to deal with this subject on their own terms. This is not an area that the conference will address anytime soon; each school must find ways to address social networking in their own way. Nobody can say for sure what will happen in the future regarding student-athlete use of social networking sites, but it is safe to say that these sites are here to stay and will continue to have both positive and negative effects on the athletic world. It is helpful for the athletic departments to try their best to educate student-athletes and try to make them understand how powerful social networking sites can be.

All past issues aside, it can unquestionably be said that these policies and efforts have been successful. There has been a slight dip in the amount of news focused on this topic. While there is no evidence that this decrease in news coverage is directly correlated to the efforts taken by the ACC schools, the interviewees were adamant in stating that the outcomes of their individual efforts have all been positive thus far.

VII. Conclusion

This study took an in-depth look at student-athlete use of social networking sites, specifically ACC athletes. As of now, there are no overarching policies that all student-athletes must follow. However, there are themes and commonalities arising among the ACC schools.

This study was limited because not all ACC schools were successfully contacted. The interviews conducted were not in-person and the information shared may have been censored or limited. It is also important to remember that some of the findings may be based on personal opinion and not a general consensus of the school's attitude toward this subject. While these findings cannot be generalized to the entire ACC, they do give a general idea and look at how ten of the ACC schools have chosen to confront social networking sites.

In order to further understand all of the details surrounding student-athlete use of social networking sites among ACC schools, more research should be conducted. It would be beneficial to follow-up with these schools as time progresses and social networking changes. This additional research would show how policies change over time, whether or not more schools begin to create and implement policies and if these policies are successful in the long run.

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