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Social Media and the Issue of Respect

There is a tendency for athletics departments to place stringent restrictions on the use of social media by student-athletes. On one hand, social media use should not be used to violate athletics department or institutional policies on such standard subjects as sexual harassment, bullying, respectful conduct, or conformance with NCAA or governance association rules. On the other hand, every student-athlete and staff member has a right to free speech. Thus, the athletics department should consider utilizing educational efforts as its primary mechanism to encourage responsible use of social media, emphasizing that every student-athlete and employee has a free speech right but that no social media posting can violate existing institutional, athletics department or team rules of conduct. Rather than creating new policy to control social media use, staff and student-athletes should be educated that existing policy also applies to social media use. Then, student-athletes and staff should be informed of the dangers of social media and encouraged to voluntarily exercise common sense in its use. Consider sending the following messages to staff and student-athletes.

No Policy Prohibition on Use of Social Media

The athletics department does not prohibit the use of social media (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, chat rooms, blogs, etc.) by staff or student-athletes or have policies that limit free speech. However, all student-athletes and staff members should be aware that team rules and employee rules of public conduct apply to online social media behaviors that may involve postings, photographs or video representations. For instance, department and institutional policy prohibits sexual harassment, bullying, drug use and other forms of misconduct. NCAA rules require that staff members report rules violations to the athletics department and limit contact with prospective student-athletes. Online postings cannot violate these staff and student-athlete policies.

Beware of Potentially Dangerous Individuals

The athletics program generates intense public interest. The media, parents, friends, donors, fans, prospective student-athletes and others constantly seek information. Some of these people may have questionable intentions and be stalkers, pedophiles or other potentially dangerous individuals. We should all assume that everything we post online, even if we utilize privacy restrictions, will become accessible beyond immediate friends and family. We need to protect ourselves and our teammates.

Respect the Privacy of Others

When you post photos or videos that include others or speak about other people, consider whether these individuals might not appreciate such use of their names or images. We often view embarrassing or compromising behaviors as funny at the moment such actions occur. They may not be funny in retrospect. Making fun of yourself is different than making fun of someone else.

Athletics Department Business

Please refrain from discussing injuries to yourself or others, intra-team communications, conversations with or between coaches or staff members, disciplinary actions or other similar information. Student-athlete health information is subject to federal privacy laws. Representatives of gambling interests are always seeking injury information. No student-athlete or staff member has the right to use the institutional logo or mascot for reasons other than official athletics department business.

Public Airing of Grievances

The media will immediately publish any information related to employee or student-athlete dissatisfaction. Generally, if any employee or student-athlete is concerned with any situation, you are encouraged to first use internal mechanisms to address these concerns. Public airing of grievances is a choice we all have. However, this should be a choice that comes after failure to resolve problems internally.

Lifetime of Posted Information or Images

Even if you delete information or images, this information continues to exist online somewhere. Once you post information, it can be accessed and used without your knowledge or permission and appear elsewhere online. It is wise to sign up for Google Alerts or other services to notify you when your name is used online.

Impaired Judgment

Often we post information online in response to an experience that may be joyful, fun, fascinating, different or appears to be any of these things because we may be acting under the influence of alcohol, in the midst of a fun party or involved in other emotional circumstances. It is a good general rule to wait a day before posting information on recent activities or consult with a trusted friend or family member before posting anything that makes you feel even slightly uneasy. At the very least, ask yourself what your parents, your current or future employer, a young person who views you as a role model or the person you most admire would think of your posting.

Personal Information

Never post personal information about yourself or others related to where you are or will be, telephone numbers, passwords, e-mail addresses, class schedules, or team schedules. What would a pedophile, thief, rapist or individual who might do harm do with this information? You should not put yourself or others in danger. Identity theft should always be a concern. Be careful about the information you

include in your social media “profile”. If you include your birthday or astrological sign, never indicate the year you were born.

Ammunition for Opponents

As enthusiastic as we all might be regarding winning our next competition or defeating an arch rival opponent, refrain from talking about your opponents online. Think about your comments being posted in an opponents’ locker room as field for their motivation to defeat your team.

Future Employment

Remember that prospective employers regularly search online as part of their review of employee applications. Similarly, one day in the future you may be applying for acceptance to graduate school or a scholarship or fellowship. What will those considering these applications find out about you? Consider the photographs you have posted and the grammar and spelling of what you have written. Would any of these items be embarrassing if the viewer was a future employer?

Accepting “Friends”

Be careful about who you accept as “friends” on social media sites such as Facebook. Be sure you know who these people are. There are many fans who will claim to be friends of the coach or your teammates who may be neither, just to get closer to learning more about you.

Privacy Settings

Common sense requires that all staff and student-athletes maximize the use of the privacy and security settings that are available on most social media sites.

Honesty, Respect, Integrity

Being truthful at all times is simply good advice. Whenever you speak, write or post online, be honest and respect others.

Help Your Teammates

Teammates should help each other exercise good judgment. Because friends frequently visit each other’s social media sites, be honest and forthcoming if you feel that a teammate’s postings are inappropriate.

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The above materials are excerpts from a prepublication manuscript due to be published in 2013: Lopiano, D.A. and Zotos, C. (Publication 2013) The Athletics Director’s Desk Reference. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

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