

Athletes, Internet can stir problems

Colleges fret over risky content on social network sites

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Sometime in the near future, Brad Salem expects to get that phone call with the bad news.

Not to inform the Augustana football coach that one of his players has been hurt in an accident or arrested.

No, Salem assumes that he'll be notified of compromising photos of one of his players on the Internet.

"I'm concerned about it," he said. "A lot of our guys use Facebook and MySpace to stay in touch with friends. Some of them check those sites 10 times a day. But they need to be careful."

Salem's fears are becoming more common as college coaches and administrators consider the possible ill effects of social networking sites, of which Facebook and MySpace are the most popular. Since athletes are in the public spotlight, these personal sites - where users create a profile with words and photos and connect with friends - are more likely to be scrutinized for incriminating or embarrassing behavior.

"You've got to know that you have an eye on you at all times," said Augustana quarterback Luke Butler. "If a picture of a regular student drinking a beer pops up on MySpace, no one cares. But as a student-athlete, you have a responsibility to the program to put a good image out there."

To that end, many colleges across the nation have opted to more closely monitor - and in some cases prohibit - their athletes' use of social networking sites. The University of South Dakota is adding a section in its student-athlete handbook about inappropriate content, and violations could jeopardize scholarships.

South Dakota State instituted Internet-related guidelines last year for all student-athletes, and Jackrabbit coaches monitor sites for possible abuses.

"As a student-athlete, you're a representative of the university and in the public eye," said Kathy Heylens, SDSU's associate athletic director in charge of compliance. "For some students, these sites are a great tool. We just tell them if they're going to use them, exercise extreme caution. They need to know that anything they post online is available to anyone in the world."

Tracking behavior

Most South Dakota college administrators and coaches say they haven't uncovered Internet usage by their athletes that warranted serious discipline. But that doesn't mean that questionable content doesn't exist.

The Argus Leader performed a random search of about 80 area college athletes from various sports. While most

sites were set to private (meaning only authorized "friends" can access the content), 15 featured photos that depicted drinking, and several included homophobic language or sexual content.

"You definitely see pages where people have pictures up doing things that just aren't appropriate," said Annie Roche, a redshirt freshman on the USD women's basketball team. "You have to be careful."

On a national level, it's become almost common to see incriminating photos or video of athletes online. Less-than-flattering photos of NFL quarterbacks Matt Leinart and Vince Young have made their way to wide distribution, and two University of Nebraska wrestlers were suspended in August after their pictures appeared on a pornographic Web site. In South Dakota, there are signs that possible social networking problems hit close to home:

- One area female college athlete had a personal site started in tribute to her after someone found her attractive based on a profile photo. The site included numerous lewd sexual references. When the athlete contacted one of the group members and asked that they stop, her request was mocked on the site.

- More than one MySpace page visited by the Argus Leader contained photos of athletes playing "Edward Fortyhands," a drinking game in which a person tapes 40-ounce bottles of malt liquor to their hands and cannot remove them until both have been consumed.

- The MySpace pages of many other athletes contained photos that showed players drinking alcohol at parties. Some contained vulgar or offensive language written by the athlete. The pages had no privacy settings enabled, meaning they were available to be viewed by anyone.

But it's not just about what athletes put on their own pages. They also have to be mindful of what could appear on someone else's site. "Someone could put a picture of you on there and you wouldn't have any idea about it," said USD senior linebacker Blake Hojer. "That could work against you pretty negatively."

Schools crack down

The NCAA instituted "electronic transmission bylaws" in 2005 that dealt mostly with regulating recruiting through social networking sites. As far as monitoring Internet-related abuse by student-athletes, the NCAA leaves discipline in that area up to the individual schools.

"The NCAA trusts each member institution and employees, including coaches, will use all instructional methods at their disposal to inform their students of precautions they should take," said NCAA spokesperson Cameron Schuh.

In the spring of 2007, the University of Minnesota-Duluth made headlines by banning student-athletes from Facebook - a reaction to players posting photos depicting underage drinking and writing defaming comments about other students and coaches.

A few months later, the school lifted the ban and replaced it with a student-athlete conduct policy that athletes were required to sign. SDSU instituted its policy last year and shares it with student-athletes at the beginning of each school year, according to Heylens.

"Basically, it just says that student-athletes must be concerned with any behavior that might embarrass themselves, their teams or the school," she said. "This includes activities conducted online." USD is putting the finishing touches on its guidelines, which mirror some the rules other universities have recently adopted. The policy will specifically prohibit "offensive or inappropriate pictures" and "offensive or inappropriate comments" on student-athletes' sites.

University of Sioux Falls athletic director Willie Sanchez, while admitting he was only vaguely aware of social networking sites, said his school rigorously enforces its code of conduct, and that any inappropriate online behavior would be included in that.

Augustana dean of students Jim Bies calls himself a strong supporter of Facebook. He opposes censoring the sites, or instituting stricter standards of usage for athletes than regular students. "We have a policy for our entire student body, and we expect the same of all our students - athlete or not," Bies said. "We really don't like to develop a long set of rules for individuals who we think come from good families and have good character. I don't know if it's helpful to constantly remind them of what they shouldn't be doing."

Seeing the light

As more Internet ethics issues arise, some area athletes seem to be getting the picture. While social networking sites were once considered a place where students were free to be themselves in uncensored fashion, most now realize that even "personal" sites can be public.

When Augustana's Butler played at Idaho State, some of his teammates were disciplined because of compromising photos on a personal page. Butler immediately reviewed his own site and removed a few photos to be on the safe side. USD volleyball player Jenna Hatfield said that upperclassmen on the team have had to instruct younger teammates to remove things from their sites that could be considered objectionable.

"When Facebook first came out, people were not so aware of how dangerous it could actually be," said SDSU senior soccer player Vanessa Paswaters. "But over the last few years, we've learned to monitor it."

The schools themselves took a while to catch on. But as Facebook - initially only available to college students - gained in popularity, administrators and coaches found themselves scrambling to get acquainted with what was

happening. Still, Bies said Augustana does not actively police online behavior. He added that, as long as any material found was not threatening or harassing, the school wouldn't see a need to take action.

"Early on, we might have responded with more concern about certain things, but it's become so prevalent now, you could be talking about a picture that was taken two or three years ago," he said.

Facing the future

Of course, potentially embarrassing the school shouldn't be the only concern for college athletes. Administrators and coaches have tried to make students aware of how quickly the business world has caught up to social networking. Basically, anything found on a personal site could affect a student's ability to find employment after college.

"When administrators say something about Facebook, students tend to think the administration is against them, but really all they're trying to do is protect them," said USD football player Wayne Curry, who attended the NCAA National Student Athlete Leadership Development Conference, where social networks were discussed.

"What you're putting on there is what you're putting on your front door to future employers. That's what people will judge you by. It reflects your values." Curry, who took part in an NCAA public service announcement about social networks, said some employers have found ways to obtain access to sites that are set to private.

Augustana coach Salem said he is also aware of that practice.

"I just don't think (the athletes) are thinking about that," Salem said. "If you did something stupid with your friends, it's not just something stupid you did in your past now; it's forever on the Internet. It can affect you more than you realize." As social networks have become more widely known, most schools have caught up enough to educate their students on the risks involved - and also the potential benefits.

"It's a different world today, but the game is still the same," said USF's Sanchez. "Rules are rules. Kids know the difference between right and wrong, regardless of the medium. The mere fact that they are athletes makes them a target, and that will never change."

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