How to teach student-athletes about Responsible Online Social Networking

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THE NEUMANN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE for Sport, Spirituality and Character Development®
Why social media?

At the Neumann University Institute for Sport, Spirituality and Character Development, we recognize that student-athletes in any educational setting are placed in a unique spotlight, and thus also have unique challenges and opportunities as community figures. In our work with student-athletes, we strive to develop a greater awareness of self and others so students are able to develop and strengthen their leadership, communication, and team-building skills.

As we see continuing examples of the consequences of irresponsible online social networking by both professional and student-athletes, we have identified social media training as an important element in developing these skills.

In keeping with the mission of the Institute, we hope this guide will be useful to you as a coach, administrator, parent, chaplain, mentor, or anyone invested in sports. We intend for it to serve you with key messages and activities you can use to teach your youth athletes about the opportunities that come with effective online media use.
Social media offer great opportunities for student-athletes to develop character, connect and encourage others, and learn Internet etiquette that can help them in their academic and professional pursuits. Unfortunately, most athletic programs making headlines for social media are doing so in the context of damage control. Our attention is too often called to athletes’ social profiles when they have posted inappropriate remarks or media or have, in some form, embarrassed themselves or their teams.

While some discourage social media use for this reason, we should hold no misconceptions about online social networking among student-athletes. Like their peers, athletes are using social media heavily and frequently. But, unlike some of their peers, student-athletes are placed in an ever-increasing spotlight as they ascend through levels of competition. It is not uncommon for college players in large and/or nationally-ranked programs to amass thousands of followers. But even for the local athletes whose social followings are more modest, the wrong message can break a team or even an athlete’s career.
For this reason we must be cognizant about highlighting the good that can be accomplished through social media rather than simply responding to the latest athletic scandal to break via Twitter or Instagram. By shifting the focus away from the reactive consequences of irresponsible social media practices and instead illuminating the opportunities athletes may find via social networking — including team promotion and even landing jobs — we may be able to adjust the way our student-athletes approach social media.

To that end, this eBook frames social networks as tools rather than mere pastimes. This mindset is intended to help student-athletes recognize their privileged positions within their schools and leverage the spotlight to support their teams, communities, and personal brands.

Use this guide for ideas, inspiration, and key messaging points when talking to your student-athletes about social media. Additionally, this guide contains several discussion and programming ideas to help your student-athletes think about effective social media skills rather than only considering those skills if they have made a consequential error.
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1 Trends in Social Media Use
Unsure if social media is relevant among your student-athletes, or which networks and online behaviors you should address? Updated trends from Fieldhouse Media, which released 2015 survey results on the use of social media among collegiate student-athletes, can help focus our attention.

The survey found that 73% of student-athletes have Twitter accounts, 81% use Instagram, and 94% use Facebook. While Facebook appears to be the clear victor in users, the survey shows that most students who do use Facebook spend less time on it now than they did one year ago. Conversely, Twitter, Instagram, and some other smaller media tools like Snapchat, a smartphone messaging app, have grown significantly in users.

Unfortunately, of those Twitter users surveyed, 20% claimed they had posted something inappropriate (such as profanity, alcohol or drugs) and 22% had responded to hateful tweets from fans. A staggering 41% said they posted something inappropriate on Snapchat.

Overall, 37% of student-athletes in Fieldhouse Media’s 2015 survey say they’ve posted something on social media which they later regretted.
The statistics are worrisome, and, given self-reporting, it’s likely that fewer student-athletes are admitting to inappropriate posting than have actually engaged in it. Further, social media privacy settings only go so far in actually protecting a user’s posts. Screenshots of seemingly ephemeral posts or a simple copy-and-paste of a “protected” tweet makes any message a potential time bomb. It is important to recognize that once something is uploaded to the Internet – including all social media posts, whether protected or not – it lives on the Internet for good. That data is “out there” forever, and could potentially come back to haunt its creator.

That could be a big problem, as Fieldhouse found 37% of respondents overall posted something on social media that they regret, and 45% say they’ve received no social media training. In your role as a coach or administrator, you’re in a perfect position to change that!
2 A Crash Course on Social Networks
If you are not well-versed in new media lingo, this section is for you. Here, we present an overview of some of the major social networks along with the typical use cases for each network.

Why is this important to you as a coach, administrator, or mentor?

Because knowing the networks on which your student-athletes are most likely participating can help you understand their online behaviors along with the unique responsibilities and opportunities they have on those networks!

For example, student-athletes who use Twitter are more likely than those only on Facebook to have their content publicly found. Why? Content and messages shared on Facebook are (usually, though not always) limited to “friends” as defined by the user. A majority of Twitter accounts, on the other hand, are “unlocked,” meaning anyone on Twitter can view a user’s messages.

This is why social media firestorms tend to ignite on Twitter and other networks where information is publicly accessible. Your student-athletes should understand the audiences who do or do not view their content on each platform, as well as the effects of messages on those networks.

*Note that this section presents only a brief and broad overview of some of the top networks your student-athletes are likely using. Some general knowledge about these platforms can help you discuss challenges and opportunities with your student-athletes.
Facebook has long been considered the reigning king of social media and has been around longer than the other networks presented in this guide. It also touts the greatest volume of users, with recent numbers showing more than one billion active users worldwide. People generally use Facebook for keeping in touch with their personal networks and sharing pictures or other multimedia from their lives.

Data shows that current and emerging teens, however, are using Facebook less heavily, as the network has begun to shift towards older demographics who have adopted the network en masse. Despite that shift, Facebook still remains the most widely-used social media platform and continues its attempts to solidify social media dominance by adopting many of the same tools as other networks, such as hashtags, which originated on Twitter and allow users to quickly find content on a certain topic.
Though its active user base is reportedly only about a quarter of the size of Facebook’s population, Twitter has become a major hot spot for online discussions and social media interactions. Posts (tweets) on Twitter are limited to a maximum of 140 characters, meaning that the network promotes brevity. Given the potential volume of tweets in a user’s feed and the speed at which tweets can become buried by new posts, Twitter by nature also encourages more frequent posting than most any other network.

On Twitter, users are free to follow anyone with “unlocked” accounts, which make up the vast majority of users. Anyone can likewise follow your own account as long as it is unlocked (that is, not protected by a privacy control). As such, the reach of a tweet can be very broad. On the other hand, many tweets go unnoticed given the ephemeral nature of the platform.

Twitter continues a slow but steady climb in its number of worldwide users. It is one of the most heavily-used networks for the purposes of networking and transparent communication. It is also used heavily by those in the sports world, often for the efficiency it offers in sharing information. The platform is designed to promote discoverability, and hashtags are used heavily, meaning posts are easily searchable based on key terms created and followed by users.
Twitter has also been the medium on which many controversies (in the sports world and otherwise) have arisen, based in no small part on the public nature of almost every user’s posts.

Other networks that emphasize visuals and brevity include Instagram and Pinterest, which are both based entirely on images but combine the same focus on sharing and searchability as Twitter. These networks continue to grow given the increasing emphasis on visual content on the Internet. There is, notably, a definite skew towards female users on Pinterest and some other image-centric networks.

Other niche networks and apps come and go over time. Snapchat, for instance, skyrocketed to great popularity in 2014. Its simple premise allows users to send each other images which auto-destruct (self-delete) after just a few seconds of viewing. Unlike some of their predecessors (like Facebook), Snapchat and other similar apps make social networking an “on the fly,” easy activity. Of course, that ease of use has its merits and potential dangers.
How students use social media

With this new media knowledge in mind, it is also helpful to understand what student-athletes are posting. More so than older or professional users, youth often use social networks as daily logs without significant long-term goals for those media platforms. Particularly on Twitter and Facebook, but in visual form as well on Instagram and other networks, youth tend to track their frustrations, joys, accomplishments, rants, and social commentaries online.

A key piece of the puzzle missing from most youth social networking is the concept of serving the future. Kids and teens rarely consider how their social activities will serve their personal and professional brands later in life the same way that adults and working professionals often do. Instead, their social media accounts tend to reflect their day-to-day lives. (This is not inherently a bad thing, but does leave open the vulnerability of a misguided post that does not consider the world beyond the moment or outside of one’s immediate feelings.)
Consider the differences between a working professional’s social media account and that of a teenager. While a professional, who, for example, is a public accountant, is likely to post finance content, the teenager is much more likely to post about his or her classes, sports practices, frustrations with friends or family, day-to-day musings and other similar “in-the-moment” content.

The key difference is that while the former’s media accounts are more likely to reflect a thoughtful and professional style with goals and a clear identity, the teen’s account is more likely to build an identity around a daily log that may or may not look favorable to an employer five or ten years down the line.

Of course, just because kids and teens use social networks does not mean they are doing so irresponsibly. Those who are using online networks in a similar way as the professional example just described may be conscious of their visibility online and may actively work to cultivate a positive personal image. Either way, it is useful to understand the mindset with which many young athletes approach new media.
3 The Consequences of Irresponsible Social Networking
As with anything, use your best judgment and knowledge of your players when deciding to what extent you need to discuss potential consequences of inappropriate social media use. Though these points can be powerful and do illustrate the effects of irresponsible social networking, they might be unnecessary for some teams and players.

With or without specific examples, it may be worth pointing out the behaviors that contribute to inappropriate online etiquette, which largely mirrors real-life etiquette. As such, the following behaviors on social media are always inappropriate:

- **complaining**
- **talking negatively about teammates, competitors, coaches, teachers, etc.**
- **making derogatory remarks towards an individual or group**
- **cursing or other foul comments**
- **bullying**
- **posting confidential information**
- **posting emotional outbursts**
- **posting inappropriate images or videos**
Why are these behaviors dangerous online? Ask your students to consider their in-person interactions with peers, coaches, and their families. Would these behaviors be acceptable to those individuals?

Since the answer is “no,” and those same individuals participate on social networks, you should help your student-athletes understand that there is no longer a disconnect between our online and offline worlds. What would be inappropriate offline is just as inappropriate online. (The days of catchy yet anonymous screen names, behind which people could hide online, are over.)

Parents, coaches, teachers, and, in the future, even potential employers can see anything an individual posts on the Internet. Therefore, student-athletes’ online behavior can play a large part in the way others view them on the playing field. In some cases, poor online behavior can even prohibit them from playing.
Because the veil of online anonymity is an illusion, ask your student-athletes to consider several consequences about the negative behaviors listed on page 17, including:

- Anyone can see your posts (even if they are ‘locked’ or ‘protected’)
- They are unattractive in their portrayal of you as an individual
- They can hurt your teammates
- They can hurt your school or your team
- You could face disciplinary or even legal consequences
- Your comments can be seen forever, even if you delete them (student-athletes must consider college and beyond)
There have been numerous documented stories in which student-athletes’ inappropriate posts have cost them starting spots on teams, membership on their teams altogether, and even suspensions from their schools. (See the Additional Resources section at the end of this guide for some examples of social media consequences for student-athletes.)

Social media are public, and what may seem to be a slight slip-up can have big consequences. This is why it is so important for student-athletes to responsibly represent themselves and their teams, families, and schools.
Opportunities Gained Through Effective Social Media Practices
For all the potential pitfalls of irresponsible social media use, there are even more opportunities. Many collegiate, semi-pro and professional athletes have amassed huge followings across the major social networks not just for their physical talents but also for their work away from competition. Some of the best social media all-star athletes build their brands by:

- Posting motivational quotes or media
- Encouraging their teammates or other athletes
- Promoting upcoming games or their teams in general
- Promoting worthy causes or charities they support

Student-athletes can similarly use social media to drive community development and even attendance at their games by effectively promoting their athletic brands. Perhaps most importantly, teaching student-athletes effective social media practices will help them in two key areas: reputation management and personal branding. These efforts will help them in both athletic and academic pursuits and may even help them land a job in the future.
When talking to your student-athletes about the impetus for responsible social networking, these are some of the many opportunities you can help them understand:

- **Responsible social media activity can help student-athletes land a job one day. Employers often search the web and use the data and messages they find on candidates to help inform their hiring decisions.**
- **Effective social networking can help establish oneself as a leader in his or her community.**
- **Social networking can help individuals connect with mentors, role models, and sometimes even professional athletes!**
- **Responsible social networking can help student-athletes discover resources and motivational items that are valuable for personal and team development.**
- **Effective social media use can help team members stay in touch and grow closer and more committed to each other as teammates.**
4 Program Ideas
The previous sections offer powerful talking points to help your student-athletes develop a positive and proactive approach to their personal social media brands. If you’d like to implement more formal teaching programs, the ideas presented in this section can help. They may be completed on a small scale with your individual team, or on a larger scale with your entire athletic program.
Younger social media users may need to learn effective practices by example. By providing that example you can help develop a supportive, rather than punitive environment for your team while also demonstrating the responsible way to use their favorite networks.

1. Ask your student-athletes to follow you on your network of choice (Twitter is a good option). If you have a Twitter account that you use for other purposes (e.g. connecting with friends or colleagues, developing professional expertise, sharing content, following news, etc.), you might opt to create a new profile dedicated solely to your role as a coach.
2. Post useful or inspirational content for student-athletes to read.
3. Demonstrate support for your team and individual athletes. Promote upcoming games, congratulate the team on a job well done, and give shout-outs (note: avoid naming young athletes – those who are still minors – for privacy reasons). We have provided some examples here:

**Congrats [@yourteam] on a great win tonight! Thanks [@rivalteam] for a tough game.**

**Join [@yourteam] this coming Saturday at 12pm as we take on [@rivalteam] in the first round of divisional playoffs – we need your support!**

**Team looks great at practice today. Pushing through drills tomorrow, then on to the challenge this weekend! #teamwork #dedication**
Because a student-athlete’s social following is often composed heavily of friends and classmates, using his or her profile to promote upcoming games can actually drive attendance and foster community at your school. More importantly, encouraging positive social media practices can position student-athletes as conscious brand-builders who learn to actively manage their reputations. They will learn that social media is not something to be hidden for fear of punishment but, rather, is a tool that can be used for positive purposes.

How you ask your student-athletes to accomplish this task is a matter of choice. Some may find it useful to offer students a pre-written note or promotional item, while others might find it equally effective to defer to students for messages that would best resonate with their friends and/or followers.
3. Talk with your student-athletes about other athletes (collegiate, semi-pro, or professional) they follow on their social networks

This is an opportunity to bring reality to the points you may have already discussed with your student-athletes. For the athletes your team identifies, lead a conversation with the following questions:

- Why do you follow these athletes?
- Do you think they are effective at using social media? Why or why not?
- Have you learned anything from following these athletes?
- Is there anything that you do with your social media profiles that is similar to what your favorite athletes do?
- Who do you think has the best social media profile? Why?
4. Ask your student-athletes to consider how they would react to different scenarios

Your student-athletes may understand the points you discuss about responsible social networking, but might not consciously put their knowledge to use if a real-life situation arises. To test their social media savvy, pose some potentially problematic scenarios to your students and see how they respond. Here are some examples:

• You just lost by 1 to your division rival, due in part to several un-officiated trips and shoves by your opponent. It’s a frustrating loss and one that your team feels was unfair. How should you respond on social media?

• Your team has started the season with a string of consecutive losses. Some players are becoming frustrated and posting negative comments on Facebook (e.g. “the season is over,” “everyone is playing like losers”). Ask your athletes to consider what is wrong with this response and what a more appropriate response might be.

• The start of the season has been a difficult one in terms of team unity. Some players aren’t getting along and your team is struggling with on-field chemistry. Ask your student-athletes to consider that one or two individuals have posted some negative comments on Twitter that specifically target teammates. What is wrong with doing this? How can it hurt the team? What do your athletes think could be the long-term consequences of using social media this way?
Many students do not think about social media with a long-term perspective, nor do many consciously consider the opportunities that can come with effective social media use. That being the case, it may be helpful to design a brief, mandatory presentation for all athletes at your school or within your recreation league. It may include much of the content in this guide and might, in fact, follow the same progression of information. Here are some key points:

- **The topic of your presentation – social media – is one that will immediately resonate with most youth. Use this to your advantage and begin your presentation in broad terms that affirm student-athletes’ use of social media.**
- **Do not demonize social media or suggest there is something inherently wrong with social networks themselves.**
- **Highlight some trends in social media (which can be found earlier in this guide or through many other sources online).**
- **Don’t underestimate the power of a narrative. While student-athletes may understand the points you make, they may have a much greater impact when translated into real-life anecdotes. A list of useful stories about social media and athletes is provided at the end of this guide (see Additional Resources).**
6. Institute a team contract

This program idea calls for your student-athletes to create a contract designating appropriate behavior among team members. It may be specific to online behavior or may be part of an overall code of conduct for the team. For either option, there are several key behaviors that should be included in the contract. In the below points, they are discussed specifically in terms of social networking.

- **Respect**: Do your student-athletes’ posts demonstrate respect for themselves and others? Name calling or complaining on social networks shows a lack of respect for self and others, and can hurt the team as a family and as a member of the community.

- **Reflection**: Are your student-athletes putting their best foot forward? Emphasize the need to think before they act online. Students should reflect on what they can do to help, not hurt, themselves and their teammates.

- **Positivity**: There is rarely a circumstance where negativity is justified online. Especially in social media, negativity can be amplified and is harmful to your team's efforts to be a positive community influence. Committing to a positive attitude online should be a key part of a team contract.

- **Community**: Though this point is reflected in all the above, positive community development should be reflected in all social networking practices.
5 Review
We hope this guide equips you as a coach, mentor, administrator or parent to effectively talk with your student-athletes about responsible social media use.

Keep in mind that your student-athletes are digital natives. They have grown up with technology and social media and already feel proficient with it. More importantly, their attention spans are relatively short and they will, in most cases, be non-receptive to long lectures. In fact, the more you harp on social media, the more you might lose them.

Instead, understand that teaching effective social networking skills is an ongoing conversation, not a one-and-done soapbox speech. Hit students’ short attention spans, in much the same way as they consume information online. Regularly check in with them and use some of the tools presented in this guide as ongoing conversation-starters. As you do so, remember several key messages:

- **For all the potential pitfalls, don't mistake social media as a negative thing. It is a positive tool, as long as it is used responsibly!**
- **Students must respect themselves and their teammates by setting a positive example online (and, of course, in every aspect of their lives!)**
- **Student-athletes should remember that anyone can see their social media profiles. Ask them: If your Twitter account was your resume, would you get the job?**
We hope this guide helps you develop a positive, healthy knowledge of responsible and effective social networking among your student-athletes!

The Neumann University Institute for Sport, Spirituality and Character Development believes that sport possesses an inescapable spiritual and ethical dimension that merits academic exploration and practical application. Through research and practice, the Institute commits to offering opportunities for reflection and dialogue on the power of good inherent in sport while inspiring behavior that reflects an awareness to God's presence in our lives.

www.isscd.org

Follow the Institute online for inspirational stories, leadership tips, athlete reflections, and more on the intersection of sports, spirituality and character development.

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Additional Resources

About youth social media use:
• Why teens prefer Twitter to Facebook
• Social media use of student-athletes: 2015 survey results

Social media trends and advice:
• The 10 Commandments of smart social media
• Social media revolution 2015

Stories of athletes and social media:
• Fury erupts over racially-charged tweets after Westchester high school basketball game
• Facebook photo featuring Syracuse quarterback Terrel Hunt is latest social media hiccup for university
• USF Strength & Conditioning Coach suspended for tweet made during NFL draft
• Miami Dolphins must educate on social media
• Simon Cvijanovic an example of how social media gives voice to student-athletes

Additional recommended reading:
• 10 professional athletes who are social media all-stars
• How Rashard Mendenhall’s retirement announcement can teach student-athletes about responsible social media use
• How social media can hide signs of trouble among student-athletes
• Top 5 issues getting student-athletes in trouble on social media
• NFL players find extra scrutiny in the era of social media
• Where the pictures are the story: Instagram becomes a go-to social media choice for teams, fans at events