

How social media behavior of high school athletes can negatively impact NCAA recruiting:

CLEVELAND, Ohio – Back on March 14, Oklahoma State assistant football coach Jemal Singleton gave his Twitter followers a recruiting update. It wasn't what most were expecting.

“Had to unfollow/stop recruiting a young man this evening. Still amazed by what recruits tweet/retweet/ College coaches are watching.”

Three months later, Penn State assistant football coach Herb Hand Tweeted about a similar experience.

“Dropped another prospect this AM due to his social media presence ... Actually glad I got to see the ‘real’ person before we offered him.”

Combined, the Tweets by Singleton and Hand have been Retweeted more than 11,000 times. That's a lot of people trying to get the message through to teenage high school athletes:

Friends aren't the only ones with access to your social media accounts.

Social media has become an integral part of the college recruiting process, providing coaches with easy, almost unlimited access to potential recruits. Coaches can't make contact via social media until, in most cases, an athlete's junior year. But they can check a social media profile long before that.

The access can provide an unfiltered view of an athlete's character, maturity and demeanor. It isn't always positive.

Posted Monday: How social media, NCAA recruiting go hand-in-hand, from first contact through National Signing Day.

“What you put out there is your brand and how you want to be perceived,” said Avon football coach Mike Elder. “Recruiters want to see what kind of person you are because they're making a major investment in you. If you're putting the wrong things out there, I can promise you, that recruiting will end.”

Perhaps the most well-known case of this involves former Don Bosco Prep (N.J.) football player **Yuri Wright, who, in 2012, was expelled after a series of graphic Tweets.** Highly ranked by recruiting services, Wright was sought by such schools as Michigan and Rutgers before the expulsion, but was soon dropped. He eventually landed at Colorado.

“Was social media the sole reason he didn’t get recruited? Probably not,” said Sam Carnahan, founder of Varsity Monitor, a social media education service for athletes, coaches and administrators. “But getting kicked out of school had a huge impact, and that was due to social media.”

And it’s not just recruiting consequences an athlete can face.

Social media mistakes

In New Hampshire, **a boys basketball player was stripped of his player of the year award in 2014** after a profanity-laced Tweet about an opponent.

In Bellville, Ohio, **a Clear Fork boys soccer player was suspended from the team in 2014** after Retweeting a post about marijuana.

In Avon Lake, **five baseball players were benched in 2013** for their participation in what school officials considered an obscene "Harlem Shake" video.

“We don’t want to take away their right to express themselves, but we tell them all the time, you’re representing yourself, your team, your school, your own family,” said **Aurora** football coach Bob Mihalik. “So whether it’s social media, the way you’re acting in the lunch room or at the local movie theater, just try to keep that in mind. And I think that goes for a lot of aspects of life, not just social media.”

Taking precaution

Social media policies at high schools are rare. Most will address discipline under an athletic code of conduct policy, or general rules outlined in a student handbook. Some disciplinary actions stemming from social media behavior have led to lawsuits over free speech.

While more and more high school coaches find their way to Twitter and Instagram, not all follow their players. Instead, that task often falls to an assistant coach, who monitors what the players are posting.

At **St. Edward**, football coach Rick Finotti has had questionable Tweets displayed and discussed with players during meetings. At **Hudson**, football coach Ron Wright has a social media specialist talk to his players.

At **Garfield Heights**, boys basketball coach Sonny Johnson reminds his players that college coaches look at Twitter as a background check.

“No matter what a college coach says to you, he really doesn’t know you,” said Johnson. “How is he going to know you by only spending a little time with you or watching a couple of your games? That’s why it’s important for these kids to watch what they’re posting at all times.”

As Carnahan points out, college coaches aren’t the only ones who could find inappropriate Tweets. Future prospective employers could as well.

“That stuff might still be online,” said Carnahan. “It probably will still be online.”

The privileged few

The Tweets by Singleton and Hand **received a lot of attention from the media**. Since then, other coaches – **such as Georgia football coach Mark Richt** – have admitted to dropping recruits due to social media behavior.

But not everybody is convinced. After all, even Wright, despite his transgressions, found a taker in Colorado.

“I think it’s for show. I still can’t point to one kid and say he was dropped because he was a jerk on Twitter,” said Steve Wiltfong, national recruiting director for 247Sports. “If you’re really good, they’re still going to recruit you. You’re just 17. They can mold you into a man. That’s their job.

“If you’re a good athlete, you get more privileges. If you’re really smart or really good-looking, you get more privileges. It’s just the way of the world.”

Carnahan agrees, to a point. While coaches might sit down with a four- or five-star recruit and explain their concerns, it’s a different matter for sports other than football and basketball, or smaller Division I or Division II colleges that target a more plentiful talent pool.

“There are a lot of people recruited to a lot of different sports who are certainly being weeded out based on the character displayed on their social media postings,” said Carnahan. “Coaches don’t have the time to sit down with you. They have 10 other kids here with similar (stats). I’m going to talk with these other 10 kids here who don’t post explicit photos on social media.”

Education helps

In many cases, young people first use social media in junior high. Then, as a sophomore or junior, their popularity changes due to sports. But their behaviors haven’t, said Carnahan. Some states have looked into social media education for its students. In New Jersey, a bill was passed in 2014 requiring schools to teach junior high students how to use social media responsibly.

“I kind of feel for kids nowadays,” said Finotti. “(Social media) has created such an impulsive generation.”

Of course, there are precautions athletes can take. If being on social media is a must, having a protected social media account can limit who sees it. Carnahan suggests focusing on positives. Don't Tweet about how much you hate school, show the community service you did with your team.

Maybe then, a potential scholarship won't hang in the balance from an inappropriate post. And so many athletes won't become part of what is a loud minority.

"More and more high school coaches and college coaches try to tell these kids not to be clowns on Twitter. And, honestly, most of them aren't," said Wiltfong. "(Coaches) try to make them aware of their brand at a younger age, and most of them are responsible about that.

"And then there will be some that are just not self-aware about stuff like that."

Until it's too late.



Alex Scarborough, ESPN Staff Writer

HOOVER, Ala. -- Going back to the words of his former boss at Iowa, Hayden Fry, Arkansas coach Bret Bielema told reporters at SEC media days on Wednesday that you "recruit your own problems." That means looking into every angle of a prospect, he said, including his social media presence.

"If you have a social media nickname or something on your Twitter account that makes me sick, I'm not going to recruit you. I've turned down players based on their Twitter handles. I've turned down players based on Twitter pictures."

Bret Bielema

"We have a social media background screening that you've got to go through," he said, "and if you have a social media nickname or something on your Twitter account that makes me sick, I'm not going to recruit you. I've turned down players based on their Twitter handles. I've turned down players based on Twitter pictures. It's just that's how I choose to run our program.

"It's the things that [athletic director] Jeff Long and our fans hold me accountable to. I'm never going to waver in that."

Bielema entered the SEC in late 2012 after seven seasons as the head coach at Wisconsin.

Arkansas went 7-6 last season after posting a 3-9 record the year before.

"If you want to recruit somebody of high character and value, somebody you can trust to not only watch your house, but your children, someone you can count on to share carries of 1,000 yards each rather than trying to get 1,800 for one, now you're going to build something that matters," Bielema said.

"It's a bunch of we, not me, and I can't stress enough that, just because you're a great player in the United States of America, doesn't mean Arkansas is going to recruit you."