

**From Stats to Social: How College Athletics Communications
Offices are Pivoting in the Digital Age**

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Abstract

College athletics has exploded in popularity in the United States, primarily due to the growth of “March Madness” and college football. The multi-billion-dollar industry has turned sports into a promotional vehicle for colleges and universities across the country. Watkins and Lee (2016) have called athletics the “de facto front porch” for maintaining a positive brand image for universities. The industry designed to publicize the success of these student-athletes is known as sports information or athletics communications. Originally, the industry was meant to garner traditional media attention for programs, but as this paper will explore, the field has transitioned into a more social media-centric approach. That social media approach has led to crossover between athletics communications and marketing since social media is often touted as a low-cost marketing tool. As a result, branding and creating brand awareness for the department proves to be the main way for schools to use social media and digital media to their highest potential by generating engagement among the target audience.

From Stats to Social: How College Athletics Communications Offices are Pivoting in the Digital Age

Every March since 1939, aside from this past March due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Division I NCAA men's basketball players have participated in the NCAA tournament (Wilco, 2020). This event has been described as "competition in its finest sense," as 68 teams battle against each other over a three-week period to decide a national champion (Gigot, 2015). *Sports Illustrated* writer Frank Deford (2011) has commented on the single-elimination competition by writing that "the finality of the NCAAs is as vicarious for us watching as it is terminal for the losers." For three weeks in March, college basketball sits at the center of the sports world. Its cultural significance, however, is not strictly limited to the competition on the hardwood. The impact of a certain team winning or losing can create viral moments for those fanbases since that feeling is so visceral. In recent years, imagery of a band member for a losing school playing through tears while watching her team lose a late lead can sweep the internet (Gigot, 2015).

As Steinberg (2016) put it, March Madness, as the 68-team Division I men's basketball tournament is now widely known, has "morphed into a communal event which transfixes America and is second to the Super Bowl in impact." Americans flock to their televisions and computers by the millions to support their colleges and universities. It does not matter if someone went to a school just recently or graduated 30 years ago because his passion rings true just the same and he will follow every game enthusiastically (*March Madness*, 2019). Since so many people stream the national tournament games online, internet speeds actually slow down every March (*March Madness*, 2019). Many people watch online during work hours; Steinberg (2016) noted that corporations lost an estimated \$1.9 billion in 2015 due to unproductive workers.

College basketball is not the only college sport with this kind of societal impact. The passion for college football runs rampant, as well. Tepper (2014) compared that passion to professional sports by noting that 26 million people watched Florida State defeat Auburn in the 2014 Bowl Championship Series National Championship Game, a substantial increase from the 18 million viewers who watched the Miami Heat win the 2013 National Basketball Association Finals and the 15 million viewers who saw the Boston Red Sox win the 2013 Major League Baseball World Series. Tepper (2014) also explained that professional sports leagues such as NBA and MLB are restricted to 30 major metropolitan markets while college football programs are spread all around the country and exist anywhere that a college does. The 2014 season opener between two ranked schools – University of South Carolina and Texas A&M – drew over 80,000 fans despite the town of Columbia, South Carolina having only a slightly larger population of 135,000 (Tepper, 2014).

According to the National Football Foundation, college football ranked as the nation's second-most popular sport with 47 million fans attending games in 2018 (*2018-19 Report*, 2019). In addition to stadium attendance, demand for televised games was also high. Three hundred and sixty-six regular season telecasts were watched by more than 163 million fans (*2018-19 Report*, 2019). A Gallup poll found that 56 percent of U.S. adults identified themselves as college football fans, a number higher than professional baseball, basketball, hockey, and soccer (*2018-19 Report*, 2019).

As previously mentioned, the fact that college football programs exist all over the country in all kinds of markets allows for a wider spectrum of fans. Tepper (2014) explained that highly successful programs such as Boise State University in Boise, Idaho, can often be the only game in the college town and therefore becomes the pride of the entire town. Sometimes that passion,

however, becomes more than just cheering and supporting a team. Mississippi State University faced a lawsuit when a fan received a four-inch laceration in his head from a fight with a fan from a rival school (Lee, Love, Eddy, and Young, 2018). This is, unfortunately, an issue with all sports due to the incredible passion of sports fans. That pride helped college football attendance grow 25 percent over the last 20 years with 14 schools averaging over 80,000 fans per home game (*2018-19 Report*, 2019).

Although college basketball players and college football players are currently not paid for their athletic abilities, college athletics has ballooned into a multi-billion-dollar industry. And that growth is not strictly limited to revenue from ticket sales, which is growing over the last 20 years. Revenue from television advertising during the 2018 NCAA Division-I men's basketball tournament exceeded \$1.32 billion and over 97 million people watched the tournament (*March Madness*, 2019). Competing in tournament bracket pools is commonplace across the country. Betting on the tournament is big business as well, and the American Gaming Association estimated over \$9 billion would be bet on games in the 2016 NCAA tournament (Steinberg, 2016). Steinberg (2016) also discussed the figures for broadcasting rights to the NCAA tournament, revealing that the \$10.8 billion spent by CBS/Turner Broadcasting for the 2011-24 TV rights is an increase of 4,535% since 1986. Looking at the economic impact of college football, the 2019 Allstate Sugar Bowl netted over \$280 million for the host city, New Orleans (*2018-19 Report*, 2019). Bowl games in different cities are not the only beneficiaries of this economic boom as the college football coach is the highest-paid public employee in 27 states (Tepper, 2014).

This data denotes the cultural relevance of college athletics in America. Television rights costs are through the roof, illustrating a ravenous hunger for college athletics content. For die-

hard fans, legacy media such as television and radio are simply not enough. This is where social media comes into play. Backstage behind-the-scenes content of a college sports team on social media allows for a transparency that traditional media cannot give fans (Hipke and Hachtmann, 2014). The most passionate fans are looking for more information on their favorite teams, and athletic departments can use social media to give them that information. As Watkins and Lee (2016) put it, athletics can serve as a “de facto front porch” for showcasing a positive brand image for colleges and universities, and by interacting with sports brands online, brand loyalty and positive brand associations can be better developed.

Social media is a powerful tool with a wide reach. On a daily basis, 3.8 billion people use social media (Enoch, 2020). According to the Pew Research Center, Facebook (69 percent) and YouTube (73 percent) are the most widely used platforms among U.S. adults (Perrin and Anderson, 2019). Although Instagram is slightly lower at 37 percent, use among U.S. adults has been steadily growing since 2012 and has a strong foothold in the young adult demographic, which encompasses age 18-29 (Perrin and Anderson, 2019). While it is clear people use social media, this paper will explore how athletic departments use social media to reach their fans and engage them.

In this era, what Williams, Critten, Keo, and McCarty (2012) call “Web 2.0,” users nicknamed “digital natives” are no longer passively communicating on the internet. These “digital natives” create active communities on social media to participate in discussions with each other (Williams et al., 2012). As Enoch (2020) said, social media provides athletic departments with a chance “to seamlessly connect and engage with their adoring fan base at any given time,” which makes it an important sports marketing tool to help the departments reach their target audience. Through the use of social media, that target audience can not only engage

with its favorite team, but also engage with other fans which creates a sense of community among the fan base (Swarm, 2018). Holt (2016) shared the same sentiment, echoing the fact that social media can allow sports fans to create rich communities. This sense of community fits into the idea that “digital natives” use social media to engage with each other and create active communities to discuss shared interests.

When a fan decides to follow his favorite college sports team on Twitter, he has made an active decision to join his fellow fans and become a part of the community. But who is responsible for running these social media accounts? For college athletic departments, that responsibility falls on an office commonly referred to as “athletics communications.” This office has several tasks, but in 2020, a primary responsibility is to monitor social media for the department and the teams within that department. This paper will explore how the field of athletics communications has evolved from its beginnings in the 1960s and 1970s to its current state.

The Advent of Sports Information

Athletics communications as an industry was founded in the 1960s and 1970s when college athletics started to grow in popularity (Buhler, 2014). At the time, the industry was called “sports information” and referred to those individuals who maintained statistics, created media guides, and handled media requests (Buhler, 2014). As time went on, administrators remained steadfastly focused on garnering media attention for their respective programs and fostering relationships with local media outlets (Minkoff, 2018). Those in the industry today still hold these job responsibilities, but the name of the field has changed to more accurately reflect the totality of the job. The term “Sports Information Director” and its acronym “SID” persist mainly due to convenience.

As Angst (2018) stated, SIDs “document and publicize the accomplishments of athletes and teams” and work as a liaison between the school and media. Brett Rybak, the assistant director of athletics communication at Ohio State University, put it this way: “You’re kind of the intermediary between the media and the team,” (Thigpen, 2012). Coaches and players remain focused on the games and practices while SIDs serve as a buffer or separation from the media (Thigpen, 2012). Working with the media can take different forms. In addition to merely setting up interviews, SIDs release statistics to the media that might indicate trends worthy of a news story, or they might pitch specific stories directly to the media (Angst, 2018). By drumming up media coverage, SIDs can create more interest in the community about the athletic department (Angst, 2018).

As mentioned previously, the term “sports information director” suggests that the duties of the job are limited to statistics and record-keeping. As a result, this could lead to SIDs feeling underestimated and unappreciated since that is not all their job entails (*Guide*, 2019). The more prevalent roles are social media and media producer (*Guide*, 2019). Social media is a relatively new addition to the athletics communications portfolio, but even in a decade ago, athletic departments understood the importance of it. In 2011, Mario Mercurio, Xavier University men’s basketball director of basketball administration, understood the value of social media and the impact it might have on his men’s basketball program, which can serve as a microcosm for the impact it might have on athletic departments at large:

“The access that fans get to your program in 2011 is unprecedented. Using social media in partnership through television and radio is so imperative. It's what everyone is moving towards and you have to be where your fans are, you have to be easily accessible,” (Talty, 2011).

College Athletics as a Brand

The department that has the most interaction with the surrounding community is the athletic department (*Guide*, 2019). That image can be cultivated any way the athletic department likes thanks to social media and other forms of digital media. In fact, traditional marketing departments within college athletics have seen an expansion through new job positions as a result of social media growth (Dixon, Martinez, and Martin, 2015). Generally speaking, the primary goal of sports marketers is to generate revenue and increase sales by building consumer loyalty, growing brand equity, engaging with fans, and creating brand ambassadors (Popp, McAvoy, and Watanabe, 2017). Athletic directors and those involved with marketing hold the belief that social media is the best marketing tool to reach the goals previously noted (Popp et al. 2017). Allagui and Breslow (2016) built on this premise, as their research revealed that 87% of marketers are under the impression that the goal of social media is to increase brand awareness. In the same vein as traditional marketing, Arli's research (2017) on the effect of social media on consumer attitude concluded that brand awareness is more impactful than merely brand loyalty on potential purchases.

Brand awareness, as a concept, can be extrapolated from traditional marketing and employed in college athletic departments as well. As a result, departments should put emphasis on creating awareness through social media, which in turn helps fans better identify with the team or school (Dixon et al., 2015). Fan loyalty and brand awareness are mutually beneficial. Hipke and Hachtmann (2014) described this process as "building fan loyalty organically." The idea is that by increasing engagement with fans there will be a trickle-down effect which will increase merchandise and ticket sales (Hipke and Hachtmann, 2014).

Watkins and Lee (2016) summarized this by saying that positive brand associations and higher levels of brand loyalty can be developed through online interactions with sports brands. Social media gives teams and departments a unique chance to “seamlessly connect and engage” with a fan base at any time (Enoch, 2020). In Enoch’s (2020) opinion, this ease and convenience alone has made social media the most important marketing tool in sports. In the past, marketers working in college athletics would have to call people or send large amounts of mail to promote ticket deals or to share general department news (Talty, 2011). This is simply not the case anymore. Social media allows for departments to continuously remain engaged with fans or alumni (Talty, 2011).

The folks put in charge of social media communication are the SIDs. With SIDs as the “gatekeepers,” information is guaranteed to remain consistent and professional which is important when trying to build and uphold a brand for the entire athletic department (Hipke and Hachtmann, 2014). Blaszk, Cianfrone, and Walsh (2018) called brand protection “crucial.” SIDs make sure all messaging on social media is aligned with university ideals while remaining real and consistent in tone (Blaszka et al., 2018). Todd Ziedler, director of communications at Gonzaga University, remarked on a “digital arms race” to publicize his programs, emphasizing that there is a great opportunity to see a college’s name associated with a sport so his department must have a good online presence (Buhler, 2014). The next section of this paper will further analyze this “digital arms race” to uncover how different schools approach the concept.

The New and Improved Athletics Communications

The “digital arms race” has forced communicators to adjust their messaging. As Minkoff (2018) said, what was once called publicity is now called branding and the internet reigns as the most influential medium to push that brand. A recent survey of 283 SIDs in NCAA Division III

athletic departments found four main areas of priority in order to be a successful director: statistics inputting, social media, writing, and Photoshop (*Guide*, 2019). Looking at these priorities, one sees the blend of old responsibilities and new tasks. Writing and statistics are still important but being able to design graphics and effectively use social media are new skills. The 2012 survey of this same group found priorities more aligned with responsibilities such as media guides and game programs while the most recent survey found tasks such as social media, livestreaming, and website management to be more important (*Guide*, 2019).

New platforms offer the information that fans desire in a more concise format. By using social media, fans are better engaged and can quickly access information (Dixon et al., 2015). All of this information being the responsibility for athletics communications departments results in their becoming their own news source (Blaskza et al., 2018). Ziedler from Gonzaga University also noted that departments do not have to sit and wait for local media to cover their programs because departments can incorporate social media and the athletic website to develop their own news (Buhler, 2014). Brian Hennessy, senior associate director of athletic communications at Clemson University, put it this way: “Our job was, and still is, to serve the media. But now we’re our own outlet” (Smith, 2017). This sentiment is shared across the industry.

But how does this sentiment come through in the mission statements of athletics communications departments across various levels of college athletics? On many athletic websites, there is a section dedicated to the athletics communications office that details media policies, credential protocols, and usually will include a general mission statement of the department. This mission statement describes what the department perceives as their main priorities. A brief analysis of 10 different college athletic websites follows.

Per this analysis, the statements generally fall into two categories: old-school (focusing on media relations, press releases, and history) and new-school (mentioning social media or the evolving nature of the industry in some way). For Central Methodist University, that mission statement falls into the former category, highlighting that the department is “responsible for writing press releases, coordinating media relations and gameday staffing for home events, oversight of CMUEagles.com, creating special publications, providing statistical and historical information, and coordinating video and photography efforts” (Central Methodist University, 2020). Youngstown State University, which is a smaller Division-I institution, cites handling “publicity” for its teams and “produces literature about the teams, maintains the official website and coordinates all interview requests for players, coaches and staff” (Youngstown State University, 2020). For Franklin & Marshall College, a Division-III school, the mission statement exclusively references the media relations aspect of the industry, citing that the office “disseminates information to local and national media outlets for the College's 27 intercollegiate sports” (Franklin & Marshall College, 2020).

Divison I George Washington University uses its mission statement to highlight that its website has all the information any media might need, such as statistics and biographical information, and called its office a “liaison between the Department of Athletics and the media inside and outside the University community” (George Washington University Athletics, 2020). Fellow Divison I school Georgetown University describes its communications office as “the intermediary between GU’s 29 programs and local, regional, national and international media outlets,” but also proclaimed to showcase the success of its student-athletes (Georgetown University Athletics, 2020). All five of those schools squarely emphasized the information aspect of the industry with the purpose of aiding the media.

The next five schools were more “new-school” in their approaches by mentioning social media explicitly in their mission statements, or by noting the evolving nature of the industry. Division I University of Notre Dame had a thorough section on its website regarding athletics communications, citing its goal is “to provide the best possible media coverage of Notre Dame Athletics” by offering “an expanding range of services to meet the ever-growing needs of the media” (The University of Notre Dame, 2020). Division I Clemson University, which will be examined later in the paper, is similar to the University of Notre Dame by saying its office aims to provide information about its teams through “various media” (*Clemson*, 2020).

Division III University of Chicago does not specify the media in its mission, calling its office the link between the department and “the general public” (The University of Chicago, 2020). University of Chicago also directly states that its office is responsible for social media which was one of nine different responsibilities listed on their website (The University of Chicago, 2020). Fellow Division III institution Plymouth State University touched on all aspects of the industry in its mission, calling its office a “liaison” to the media while also clarifying its responsibility for social media and live-streaming of home contests (*Plymouth State*, 2020). Perhaps the most forward-looking mission statement of this entire analysis belonged to Division I American University. Here is the beginning of its statement:

“The mission of American University's Office of Athletics Communications is to develop and distribute positive messaging through various channels to publicize, promote, inform and increase visibility about AU's intercollegiate programs locally, regionally, nationally and internationally” (*Office*, 2020).”

This statement does not specifically mention the media, instead opting for the phrase “various channels.” Those channels include “legacy media,” but also includes the athletic website and

social media accounts (*Office, 2020*). American University also touches on the concept of being its own news source, much like Gonzaga University and Clemson University, citing its goal is “to identify messages and stories inside the department and to ‘be our own media’ in terms of producing and distributing those stories” (*Office, 2020*).

By being their own source of content and communicating directly with fans, athletic departments can better control their image without the influence of journalists (Hutchins, 2011). Swarm (2018) echoed this by writing that “while sports journalism is still a prominent field, leagues, teams, and players are now equipped with an open line of communication directly to their publics.” All of this is not to say journalism and traditional media are not valuable. It illustrates that the transition to a more digital-centric environment is changing where and how sports are consumed (Hutchins, 2011).

How Organizations Use Social Media as a Tool

Social media is powerful, but it is only as powerful as the user. Katie Mosier, the director of digital communications at the University of Nebraska, said she uses social media for fan engagement to help those fans who spend time and money feel a part of the family (Twiford, 2018). Hutchins (2011) suggests that “cultural distance is momentarily erased” because social media posts can illustrate common experiences between fans and athletes. Social media helps departments show what students and coaches are truly like by building that relationship between fans and the department (Talty, 2011). Morgyn Seigfried, the assistant athletic director for digital media at Temple University, shared her philosophy which is aided by the use of social media:

“We want to humanize our student-athletes and display their incredible personalities, because we truly believe we have some of the best kids in the

country here at Temple, and their accomplishments are bigger than just their success on the field.” (*Experts*, 2018).

To reach these goals, athletics communications offices must actively work to create engagement and discussions within their communities, which is often easier said than done (Akcura, Altinkemar, and Chen, 2018). Brandon Harrison, the social media manager at the University of Wisconsin, articulated that he wants his content shared onto his followers’ personal social networks (*Experts*, 2018). Hipke and Hachtmann (2014) called this concept “friend-to-friend engagement.” For example, one person will retweet a post onto his own timeline, gets seen by one of his followers and garners another retweet from that second person. Tim Lutz, the sports information director at Auburn University of Montgomery, proposed that he looks inward and finds the most success with engagement when his student-athletes share posts where they are featured (Twiford, 2018). Holt (2016) noted that professional soccer teams such as FC Barcelona and Real Madrid are far more popular than even the biggest brands like Nike because the teams can appeal to the rich communities that follow by incorporating cultural branding to relate to that community. The power of social media makes sports consumption a group activity, thus becoming even further ingrained in people’s lives on a daily basis (Swarm, 2018). Social media provides a great way for teams and athletic departments to meet their audience where they are. Moore and Carlson (2013) explained that the new technology is a way to reach audiences quicker and more directly.

The goal for all digital content creators, which includes athletics communications professionals, should be to utilize digital storytelling in a way that is immersive, since immersion and engagement go hand-in-hand (Allagui and Breslow, 2016). Allagui and Breslow (2016) elaborated further by clarifying the focus should be on communicating with the target audience

and not simply marketing to them. These conclusions stem from a case study of four successful public relations campaigns. One was Oreo's "Dunk in the Dark" campaign during the 2013 Super Bowl blackout (Allagui and Breslow, 2016). Within minutes of the blackout, the official Oreo social media accounts posted a simple graphic featuring an Oreo and the words "You can still dunk in the dark." This post was designed to be shared by its target audience and garnered over 525 million earned media impressions, being dubbed by some as the best ad of that particular Super Bowl (Allagui and Breslow, 2016). Despite its hard-to-replicate spontaneity, the main concept behind the post can be duplicated by remaining true to the target audience with content that does not stand out as being purely marketing materials.

Knowing the target audience and the content that they might appreciate can be a difficult task. For example, as a more text-based app, Twitter is generally reserved for more "information hungry" groups (Hipke and Hachtmann, 2014). Andrew Lentz, the associate athletic director for branding and creative services at Baylor University, argued that the ever-evolving nature of the different platforms serves as an exciting challenge to make viewers of content feel like they are a part of it (*Experts*, 2018). Despite the difficulty in identifying the audience for different platforms, one common theme is to keep the number of posts low and the quality of posts high so that fans don't feel like their feed is being spammed (Hipke and Hachtmann, 2014). In the same vein as Allagui and Breslow's research, Arli (2017) advocated that entertainment should be a main feature for social media promotion.

Watkins and Lee (2016) conducted a thorough analysis on how collegiate athletic departments incorporated branding into Twitter and Instagram posts. This research concluded that visual-based social media, such as Instagram, that include team logos and colors are better for communicating brand identity (Watkins and Lee, 2016). Despite not being as good for

creating brand associations, Watkins and Lee (2016) conceded Twitter is better for connecting with fans. That connection can be created by highlighting star players so that fans can better connect names and faces (Watkins and Lee, 2016). All of this research serves as an important backdrop for the next section which will showcase some examples of organizations successfully leveraging social media.

The New Age of Social Media in Action

Before delving fully into how college athletic departments have embraced social media by showcasing examples, this paper will take a brief look at three non-college athletics related social media campaigns to see how they used the platform. The first case involves USA Wrestling which is the national governing body for the sport of wrestling in the United States. Burch, Giannoulakis, and Brgoch (2016) conducted a case study on how the organization used social media during the 2014 NCAA Division I Wrestling Championships, which is the premier non-Olympic wrestling event in the United States. The organization's web traffic doubles during this event and by trying to create engaging and exciting visual content, paired with traditional information sharing (i.e. results), USA Wrestling utilizes an inexpensive way to enhance their own brand awareness, find more fans, and maintain public interest during a non-Olympic period (Burch et al., 2016).

Another interesting social media campaign to examine involved a company called Gold Eagle. Del Rowe (2017) assessed an influencer-led campaign for Gold Eagle car care products that utilized 900 social media influencers engaging their networks with before-and-after photos showing how the products work. The 10-week campaign netted significant returns with over 11,000 generated pieces of content, 6,400 tweets with the designated hashtag (#CarsLove303), and a 30-fold increase in brand mentions (Del Rowe, 2017). Although spending money for an

influencer-led social media campaign is not necessarily possible for most athletic departments, having star players and prominent alumni creating content and engaging with the department as a whole is a feasible way to capitalize on the lessons learned from the Gold Eagle study.

The final social media campaign to study gave tips on how to incorporate social video for maximum benefit. Lehoczky (2017) specifically looked at a small building-restoration company called Hays and Sons that generally struggled to break through the algorithm on Twitter and Facebook. However, when the company posted a social video of a town destroyed by a tornado, they garnered almost 10,000 views (Lehoczky, 2017). The term “social video” is akin to cell phone video, meaning it does not require a big budget and is more personalized (Lehoczky, 2017). Social video can be a way to stand out from competition and have an impact with specific audiences since it provides a unique perspective directly from the user’s point-of-view (Lehoczky, 2017).

Standing out from competition is crucial in college athletics. Departments are now looking to use social media and visual content in many areas such as recruiting, fundraising, and communications (Twiford, 2018). To truly stand out and break through a densely saturated media landscape, departments and brands can turn toward unconventional content (Williams et al., 2012).

The University of Arkansas football program has taken this approach to heart. Cody Vincent, the assistant director of recruiting for the Arkansas football team, stated that in this modern era of college football “you have to have some type of presence on social media and someone that’s able to visually get your brand out there” (Litman, 2019). Vincent works directly with graphic designers in helping to create personalized graphics for prospective recruits (Litman, 2019). One example of these personalized graphics stemmed from a recruit who said he

was not a huge fan of graphics in general but did enjoy the show *The Office*. For this highly sought-after tight end recruit, the team concocted a mashup with the recruit's face on main character Michael Scott's body next to a personalized mug that said "World's Best TE" instead of "World's Best Boss" as it appears in the show (Litman, 2019). Although this type of content requires an investment of time and money, the results of standing out from other programs that otherwise might be equal is priceless.

Katie Mattie, the social media program manager at the University of Notre Dame, shared her mantra with the goal of being unique in a crowded space: "Our philosophy in Notre Dame Athletics is to meet great moments with great content" (Twiford, 2018). Those "great moments" can be few and far between, as they are often the result of the game on the field, which is out of the SID's control. But it is important to be ready when those spontaneous moments occur. For Gonzaga University and its director of communications, Todd Ziedler, it was his department's prerogative to foster creativity in order to further immortalize those moments when the team succeeds to really make that moment "sing" (Buhler, 2014).

As previously mentioned, having content that sings and strikes a chord with the audience requires an investment of time and money. Clemson University football, in addition to finding success on the field in the last five years or so, has spent \$200,000 to improve its digital team and build the brand on social media (Smith, 2017). Joe Galbraith, associate athletic director for athletic communications at Clemson University, declared, "Let's be honest, the spotlight is on us because we continue to win, but we're also putting better content out there than anybody else" (Smith, 2017). The return on investment for Clemson University does not come from sponsorships on those social media posts but from the branding, fan engagement and recruiting boosts that the content has provided the program (Smith, 2017).

With so many resources at hand, Clemson football was able to provide fans and recruits with unprecedented access to the team. Several different photographers and videographers shoot from angles all over the field to create dynamic content for use across all social media platforms (Smith, 2017). It helped that Clemson's coaches were 100 percent on board with the digital team's goals. The coaching staff, including head coach Dabo Swinney, was "convinced that the social media presence has created a recruiting advantage" (Smith, 2017). When coaches talk to kids and they know about Clemson's social media presence and the videos produced by the digital team, coaches know that the investment in digital media has made a difference on their ability to recruit new talent (Smith, 2017).

It would appear that Clemson University football had an advantage on the "digital arms race," as Ziedler from Gonzaga University termed the social media boom in college athletics. But Clemson University was far from the only national championship-caliber football program in the South to make its presence felt through social media and video production. Louisiana State University (LSU), the reigning College Football Playoff National Champions, made additional waves during its recent 15-0 season due to the weekly hype videos released on the LSU football Twitter account (Caron, 2020). Similar to Clemson University, this influx of energy was new, as the university didn't have a dedicated social team in athletics or video prior to the 2019 season when the strategy was shifted to focus specifically on social media content (Caron, 2020).

A lot of little things went into the immense growth and engagement experienced by the LSU football social media accounts. Things even as small as the caption, argued LSU coordinator of creative and digital content Matt Tornquist, played a role as people are more likely to share something with a funny or clever caption (Caron, 2020). Tornquist also said that

knowing proper timing and having the right people involved played an important role in the success of the content (Caron, 2020).

On a more macro-level, LSU's social media strategy consisted of three main components: culture, celebrity connections, and making sure the content gets quickly turned around so that it felt "live" on social media (Caron, 2020). LSU wanted to showcase the culture around Louisiana, New Orleans, and Cajun influences to enhance the branding, which sometimes included cameos by famous alumni and Louisiana natives such as professional basketball legend Shaquille O'Neil and famous actor Anthony Mackie to voiceover the weekly hype videos (Caron, 2020). In addition to these efforts resulting in over 400,000 new followers, the most-viewed video of the season was seen over 24 million times and recorded over 543,000 engagements across Twitter and Instagram (Caron, 2020). As Caron (2020) eloquently wrote, "every highlight, every heroic act by Baton Rouge's sudden savior [2019 Heisman Trophy winner Joe Burrow], every moment of history made, was amplified by another dominant LSU team: the Tigers' small social media squad."

The Future of Athletics Communication

Clearly, not every school finds the amount of success on the field as Clemson University or LSU. Meeting "great moments with great content," as Katie Mattie from the University of Notre Dame tries to do, is much easier to do when a team is winning 15 games in a row on its way to a national championship (Caron, 2020). Many schools also do not have the resources to spend \$200,000 on a digital media team. But this does not mean that programs with small staffs and limited budgets cannot successfully brand their departments on social media. Mason (2018) understood that matching a larger school's social media output can appear daunting, but by taking time to set goals and understand what can be accomplished, a plan for growth will take

shape. Things such as cleaning up account handles so that they all follow the same format can go a long way toward promoting growth (Mason, 2018). Mason (2018) advised that smaller schools should work to use other resources on campus to collaborate and empower student-athletes to be a part of the department's social media plan.

The social media landscape can be overwhelming with new platforms like Snapchat and TikTok seemingly popping up daily. But DeShazo (2015) had a simple message for athletics communications departments: "Be great on a few platforms, not average on many." DeShazo (2015) also argued that rather than creating an identity from scratch, many departments should simply "clarify their identity" by promoting consistency on social media posts (i.e. filters or color scheme), creating a branding standards document, and keeping a detailed content calendar that would keep everyone in the department on the same page.

With college athletics as popular as ever – evidenced by the ratings and attendance figures for March Madness and college football – publicizing these teams as best as possible should be the goal for all athletics communications offices, big or small. This includes the more traditional tasks that fall under the old-school model of sports information, such as statistics and media relations, but also includes a growing emphasis on branding and social media. Building a brand through graphics and video production have been shown to have an impact on broader department goals such as recruiting and fan engagement in schools such as Clemson University, LSU, and University of Arkansas. Although that model is hard to replicate in smaller and less successful athletic departments, SIDs should use every tool in their toolbox to create content that both informs, and resonates with, their target audiences.

Despite the major investment seen in some big-time Division I athletics communications offices, there is not a universal boom in the industry. At Vanderbilt University, the school

recently decided to merge the athletics communications department with the university's marketing team resulting in layoffs for the entire department (*Vanderbilt*, 2020). At the Division III level, athletics communications offices are often staffed by only one full-time professional with demands on time growing and resources not following suit (*Guide*, 2019). A 2018 survey of Division III SIDs found that 78 percent work 50 or more hours weekly (*Guide*, 2019).

These figures can appear grim on the surface level. Although the industry appears to be shrinking on some levels, for those who are fortunate enough to have jobs, the access SIDs have to the teams they work with is access that many find rewarding (Angst, 2018). Working in social media provides a challenge in how constantly the environment is changing (Talty, 2011). As Talty (2011) said, "Only a half-decade ago MySpace ruled the world and now the Web site sits as a wasteland for spammers and bands seeking attention."

One possible evolution of social media in college athletics is the concept of student-athletes becoming social media influencers and making money through advertising on their personal social media accounts (Planos, 2020). The University of Nebraska, in response to looming legislation by the NCAA that would allow college athletes to make money off of their own name, image, and likeness, has already enlisted the help of an organization called Opendorse and the Ready Now Program to help their student-athletes brand themselves as influencers (Planos, 2020). The program would tell students the potential earning power of their accounts and would also offer tips on how to increase engagement on their platforms (Planos, 2020). For instance, by using the University of Nebraska's five-time national champion women's volleyball team as a model, Opendorse has estimated that the average women's volleyball player would make \$5,747 per year as a social media influencer (Planos, 2020). The University of

Nebraska has already promoted these possible incentives to recruits to entice them into attending school in Lincoln (Planos, 2020).

Tim Miles, a former Nebraska head men's basketball coach and current Big Ten Network analyst, said that he believes a new job could be in the works to help with this venture called a "director of development" (Planos, 2020). This possibility could inspire the next generation of athletics communications professionals and spawn additional research on the logistics of student-athletes becoming social media influencers. Will the industry of athletics communications industry evolve into helping student-athletes market themselves? Despite the fact that there have been sweeping changes in the industry over the years, by evolving from a strictly information-based profession to a more social media-based profession, some things will never change. The athletics communications staff will still be the point of reference for interview requests and will still be the last people in the arena after a game ends. And that is the way SIDs would want it to be.

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