By CHRIS SYME

Broaching the subject of student-athletes on social media is liable to cause many institutional leaders, communications officers, and athletics directors to reach for the antacid. The speed and reach of social media, particularly Twitter, combined with the youth and bravado of student-athletes can damage reputations and tarnish university brands within seconds of clicking "send."

An example: In October 2012, a third-string quarterback on The Ohio State University's football team complained via Twitter about having to attend classes, adding that they're "pointless" and take time away from playing football. He deleted the tweet soon afterward, as well as his Twitter account, but not before the media captured the message and turned it into a news story that didn't help the reputation of a program that had recently been penalized for NCAA violations.

Situations like this have led some university athletics departments to require that athletes' social media accounts be monitored with special (and controversial) software programs such as Varsity Monitor and UDiligence; a number of coaches have banned their athletes from tweeting during the competitive season or altogether. If sports are the front porch of a university, how can an institution protect its student-athletes as well as its brand?

ASSESSING THE FIELD
More than 450 members of the College Sports Information Directors of America were surveyed last fall, in partnership with CKSyme.org, about social media education for student-athletes, with a focus on training methods and athletics department policies. Some

findings were distressing but not surprising. Among the results:

• Nearly 56 percent of institutions don't provide social media training for student-athletes.

• Only 23 percent provide social media training for coaches and/or athletics staff.

• Approximately 6 percent have sports teams that aren't allowed to use social media by request of either a coach or the athletics department. The majority of these respondents are NCAA Division I teams from the major college football conferences.

• Fifty-five percent monitor student-athletes on social media, with sports information directors and coaches doing most of the monitoring.

• Almost 67 percent don't have a social media policy for student-athletes.

• More than 50 percent of respondents have asked a coach or student-athlete to remove a social media post within the previous year; about 10 percent have done it 10 or more times.

The fact that the majority of respondents don't train student-athletes to use social media responsibly should raise a red flag. Among the university athletics departments that do offer training, respondents said that it mostly consists of do's and don'ts with no particular attention paid to brand protection of the student-athletes or the institution or NCAA compliance issues.

The status quo raises several questions: If university employees who use social media receive training on how to represent themselves and their institution on these communication channels, shouldn't student-athletes as well? Should institutions charged with educating young minds be responsible for helping

TACKLING SO

Educating student-athletes about using these channels responsibly

these campus ambassadors learn how to use social media responsibly? Do student-athletes have an obligation to protect the university's brand? How can athletics departments and campus communicators join forces to harness the brand power of student-athletes for the good of the institution?

BE PREPARED

A breaking news story can send communicators scrambling—even if they have a solid communications plan. In the early morning hours of Feb. 15, 2012, 15 students at Texas Christian University were arrested on suspicion of dealing drugs. Four TCU football players were among the group. One player alleged to an undercover police officer that most of the football team had failed a mandatory drug test ordered by the head coach earlier in the month. The news traveled fast on both traditional and social media channels.

The university released a statement from the chancellor on TCU's website regarding the arrests by 7:30 a.m.; the athletics department announced via email and social media that there would be a news conference at 9:30 a.m., promising live tweets during the event. After making strong statements, including expressions of shame and anger, and publicly announcing

CIAL MEDIA

can protect reputations—theirs and the institution's

consequences for the accused players, athletics director Chris Del Conte and head football coach Gary Patterson were praised for their immediate actions, and TCU received high marks for its handling of the crisis. However, questions surrounding the failed drug tests lingered, particularly after the chancellor's statement the next day that the results would not be released.

"Like it or not, we all live in glass houses nowadays thanks to social media," says Tracy Syler-Jones, TCU's vice chancellor for marketing and communication. "But because student-athletes have a much higher profile, their pictures or comments can have tremendous repercussions for a university, its athletic program, as well as the individual student-athlete."

Administrators often default to the "we hope it will go away soon" school of thought when a social media crisis occurs, says Teresa Valerio Parrot, principal of TVP Communications, a Colorado-based communications consultancy that specializes in crisis management for higher education institutions.

"I've found the leaders of most institutions are afraid of facing a crisis exacerbated by social media, and some of our industry's strongest communicators recognize social media response as the weakest point of their crisis planning," Valerio Parrot says. "We cannot allow the fear of opening Pandora's box or moving outside of the toolbox of tactics we know best to cripple our crisis responses. Our crisis communications plans must specifically address social media crises or they are fatally flawed."

According to *Using Social Media in a Crisis: Higher Education Results,* a February 2012 report by CASE and CKSyme.org based on a survey of 219 higher education institutions, 85 percent of institutions have a crisis communications policy. Of them, however, only 59 percent address the use of social media.

When it comes to preparing for crises, Valerio Parrot says institutions' crisis communications plans need to be proactive and strategic. However, they often make several common mistakes, such as not providing talking points to frontline communicators, including receptionists, fundraisers, and admissions staff; not including social media in the plan; not using cabinets, presidents, and board members as resources; not building good relationships with the media in advance; and not learning from others' mistakes.

Universities that have done crisis planning in advance weather controversy much better, according to Valerio Parrot, because:

• they have already identified the institution's audiences, resources, response strategies, and spokespeople without the pressure of deadlines or the duress of a real-time crisis;

• people know what their roles are and aren't during a crisis; and

• there are clear indicators for when and how to engage with audiences via social media, including a triage plan for responses to help guide and protect social media managers from making poor decisions.

BE COMMUNITY-MINDED

It's tempting for an institution to allow the athletics department to exist in its own silo. However, campus collaboration can be an important part of social media success, especially when it comes to managing brand reputation. TCU's structure ensures that the campus's communications and athletics departments are on the same page.

"Athletics has its own marketing and communications staff, but [all our communications] efforts are coordinated through the [university's] director of communications, who acts as a liaison with athletics," Syler-Jones says. "TCU's situation is unique in that one of our social media specialists is a dual report between athletics and the university, which allows us to quickly and easily manage crisis messages across athletics' social media platforms."

TCU also has a campuswide marketing task force that helps build and maintain positive working relationships with all campus entities, ensuring that the athletics department remains firmly within the fold.

BUYER BEWARE

Unless a user locks down his or her account, Twitter is a publicly searchable medium. Fieldhouse Media, an Oklahoma company that offers social media monitoring services, uses this search functionality to monitor the student-athletes of its university athletics department clients.

However, many higher education institutions are outsourcing the monitoring of student-athletes on social media to firms such as Varsity Monitor and UDiligence that use proprietary software. Such programs require student-athletes to verify their social media usernames and passwords and/or install monitoring software directly onto their personal accounts or devices. This controversial practice is under legal fire. U.S. courts have not definitively decided whether this practice violates the privacy of social media account holders, but the list of states enacting legislation to ban it is growing, with California, Michigan, Delaware, and New Jersey being the latest examples.

The bottom line is that institutions should proceed with caution and bring campus counsel into the loop before employing an outside company to monitor student-athletes on social media.—CS

Valerio Parrot cautions against separating athletics from the campus fabric: "I've been approached by leaders who are trying to distance their institutions from athletics-based crises. That approach would make Don Quixote proud. It is an impossible dream to remove the responsibility for athletics from institutional leaders' purview. Athletics departments deserve support when times are good and bad. And it is naive to think that crisis repercussions, including firings, are isolated to the field or court."

The *Using Social Media in a Crisis* report identifies some campuswide communications best practices that institutions should consider to help protect against a social media controversy:
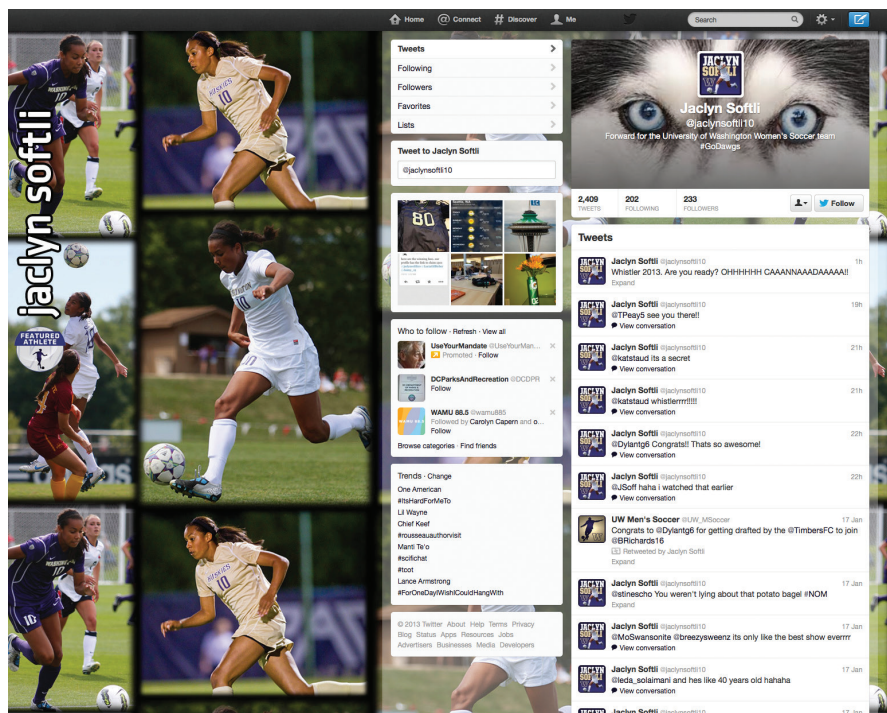
• Implement a system to monitor conversations about the brand and identify early warning signs.

• Develop a campuswide social media policy and put it into action.

• Use a social media management system to post and monitor social media accounts.

• Establish a database of registered and affiliated campus social media accounts.

• Institute a community manager for campus social media.

EDUCATE, THEN MONITOR

While there's much discussion about the negatives of student-athletes on social media, the University of Washington has been focusing on the benefits of having its student-athletes use social media well. The Huskies have a social media policy that stresses best practices and rewards athletes who excel on social channels through its Featured Athletes program. According to Daniel Hour, manager of new media and recruiting services for athletic communications, the department bestows preferred status on athletes who are social media savvy by highlighting them in the social media directory, giving them a customized Twitter icon and special background, and promoting them heavily online and on the *@UWAthletics* Twitter account with the hashtag #FeaturedAthletes.

"This benefits UW because it allows an administrator like myself to come into a student-athlete meeting with something to actually offer the athlete instead of a 30-minute lecture on what not to do," Hour says. "In turn, they actually listen and respond."

In developing its program, UW athletics believed that, when used properly, social media could be an advantage in recruiting, marketing, building team chemistry, and enhancing student-athletes' personal brands. Hour says they wanted an alternative to the practices they saw many institutions engaging in, such as simply giving student-athletes a list of do's and don'ts or prohibiting them from being on Twitter altogether. As a result, he speaks to athletes on a team-by-team basis and presents real examples of how acting irresponsibly on social media has adversely affected student-athletes, including damaging their reputations, losing endorsement deals, and being banned from competition.

UW is on the right track, according to "The Positives and Negatives of Twitter: Exploring How Student-Athletes Use Twitter and Respond to Critical Tweets." The article, published last December in the *International Journal of Sport Communication,* concludes that "education is a more optimal solution than surveillance" and advises athletics departments to be "proactive in helping student-athletes use Twitter strategically."

"We understand that 18- to 22-year-olds will make mistakes," UW's Hour says. "It's our job to educate them so that they are able to learn from those mistakes." C

Chris Syme is a principal at CKSyme.org, a crisis and reputation management communications firm in Bozeman, Mont.

SOCIAL SWAY: The University of Washington's athletics department promotes student-athletes who use social media responsibly through its Featured Athletes program. Perks include having a customized Twitter icon and background (above).