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Be cautious about social media

 By Mark Lewis
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Society today is finally embracing something that college recruiting locked onto years ago. Suddenly we're living in the "attention age" and everybody knows everything about everyone else.

Unfortunately

the attention that friends, family and society seek isn't always something that's in the best interest of a student-athlete going through the recruiting process.

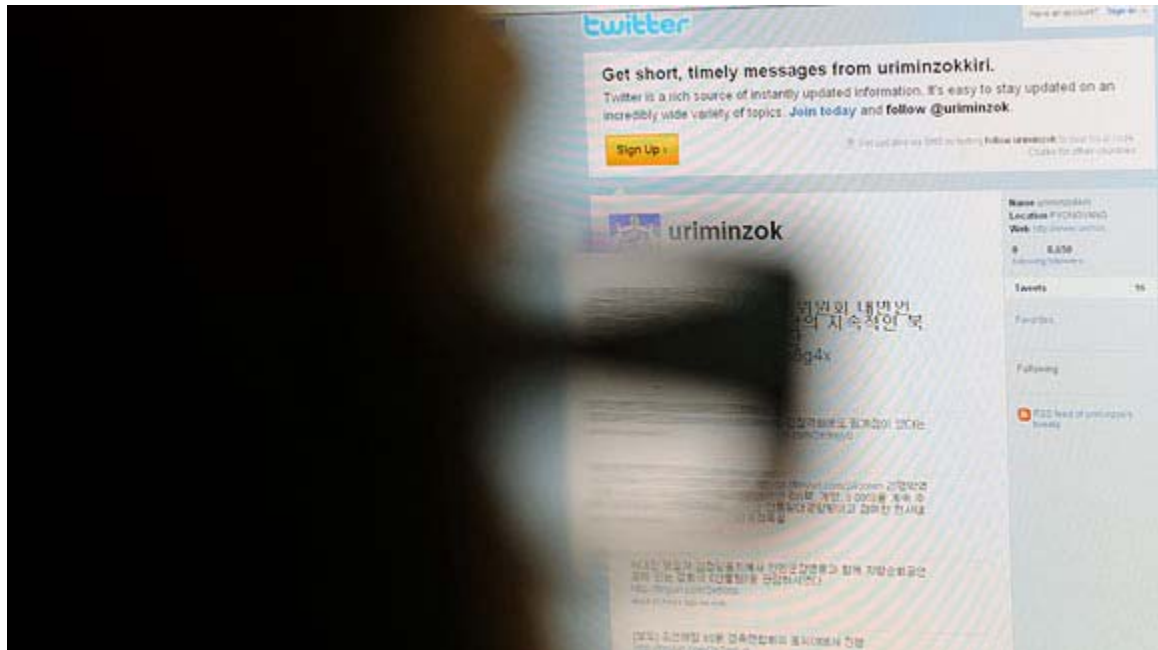
Long ago what coaches knew about athletes and their personal lives was predominantly the result of their weekly telephone conversations and the insight offered by the athlete's club and high-school coaches. As technology evolved and fax machines, cell phones, email and the Internet came into play, coaches embraced and exploited the opportunity to expand the communication between themselves and their recruits. We went through the instant-messaging craze and survived the overwhelming use of texting until the NCAA pulled their respective plugs.

MySpace, Facebook and Twitter have jumped into the picture and social media are contributing forums for recruiting information emulating from both college coaches and athletes alike. The real questions are how much is too much and just where you should draw a line?

There's a whole other conversation about college programs and their coaches' self-promoting use of all these tools in the recruiting process. We'll save that for another time. For the purposes of this discussion let's take a look at the prospect's side of things and the use of social media by an athlete being actively recruited.

Coaches search web for intangibles

When coaches are giving thought to offering four years' worth of educational and basketball



Sites like Twitter have world-wide appeal. Be careful what you post.

opportunities to a recruit, they generally want to know as much as possible about the person. Teams, players and coaches use the word "represent" left and right these days and, despite its overuse, every college program is looking for the player who can do just that, both on and off the court. Of course recently with the out-of-control early offers and the ever-increasing job pressure that comes with today's coaching salaries the bar seems to be set much lower for those qualities beyond the court. Regardless of what standard they ultimately hold, they're still going to be looking at all the intangibles that an athlete brings to the table.

No matter what form of social media you might be using these days, coaching staffs are going to be doing their homework and checking out whatever it is you might be putting out there for the world to see. They're going to read your posts, check out just who your friends might be, and you can absolutely bet they're looking at the pictures you're sharing.

Now, logic says that shouldn't be a problem, but we're talking about teenagers and the recruiting process. Logic seldom applies in either case. The kind of thoughts, activities, information and photos that seem to find their way onto these sites is amazing considering that the posting individual knows it's a public forum.

I'm not going to get on a soapbox and preach a sermon about what should or should not be going on in the personal life of a high school athlete. That's not my place nor is it the intent of this column. Once a coach is convinced they want a player in their program, they then have to be sure they want that person in their program as well. Reading about the wild party last weekend, who hooked up with whom, or seeing empty beer cans in the background of a photo of you isn't going to convince a recruiter that you're what they're looking for. Your posts may be innocent and those may be things that just went on around you, but you can bet some questions will be coming your way and most explanations will be met with some level of skepticism.

Take care with what is revealed

It's not just your social life either. Posting critical comments about your teammates, coaches or even opponents will cast a shadow on maturity, character and how you'll handle challenges. Even if recruiters don't see it themselves you would be amazed at the reach and extent of the recruiting network. Not too much gets by a good college coach regarding the prospects in which they're interested.

Going a step beyond recruiting, a young high-profile athlete can attract the attention of some of the less-than-honorable characters sitting at a keyboard. If you've got college coaches knocking on your door it's likely you're at least a minor celebrity in your own hometown. Be sure to use common sense in what you post and avoid people you're not familiar with, no matter how complimentary and friendly they might be. Keep your interactions and responses limited to individuals you actually know and never reveal any personal information, plans or travel arrangements.

The smartest move now, and down the road, is not to post anything that could raise questions about you or your personal life. It's an issue as well for college athletes as potential employers may scan social media as part of their hiring process. Even after arriving on campus or getting a job, the monitoring continues and the number of individuals digging themselves a hole because of their social media postings is staggering.

It's not a bad idea for athletes to set up separate accounts solely for recruiting purposes and kept them updated with their season and progress. Additionally, it's not a bad thought in the sense that you can limit it only to college coaches and the people actively involved in your recruiting. At the appropriate age it's an additional means of communication within NCAA guidelines and can centralize a lot of your

recruiting. Even then, if you still maintain a personal site, you still need to be conscious of what you post and how it might be interpreted.

Ultimately anything you post on any social network is a reflection of who you are and what you're all about. If a college program is trying to decide between you and another recruit and all things are pretty even on the floor they're going to look even closer at the intangibles. Coaches are constantly envisioning recruits in their uniforms and you don't want to give them an image in their mind that they can't shake or, worse yet, aren't interested in.

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