

Social Media:  
Influence on College Football Recruiting

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### **Abstract**

College football recruiting is a year round process that, along with the rest of the world, has continued to evolve with advances in technology and communication. Social media is at the forefront of this evolution lead by Twitter and Facebook. The ability to talk to a recruit is a development that coaches across the country have jumped on and begun to implement into everyday recruiting practices. The intention of this study was to find out more information about the way in which social media is used in this process, and whether or not it plays a role in the decision making process. Interviews were conducted with subjects who are involved and familiar with college football recruiting to learn more about this form of interaction between coaches and recruits. It became clear that social media is a part of the recruiting process that is used often, but it was not determined whether or not the frequency of the communication played any sort of role in the recruits' ultimate college decision.

### **Introduction**

The field of College Football Recruiting, like most everything else in the world, has been under a state of constant evolution. Just like much of the world's evolution, as of recently, this one saw and continues to see change spurred by advancement and change in media and technological communication. One particular form of this communication is social media, which is the focus of this study. Social media has become a form of communication that college football programs use to interact with their fans and potential recruits. It is important that society learn more about the way that social media and its use within the frame of college football recruiting can be influential in the college decision-making process. With the prevalence of social media in society, and the ease within which this communication can be used by college

football programs this study looks to analyze aspects of both recruiting and social media use and looks to make inferences about its possible effect on potential recruits.

### **Literature Review**

The article by Cary Caro (2012), “College Football Success: The Relationship Between Recruiting and Winning” shows that there is a significant relationship in regards to college football recruiting and winning percentages within conference play. The researcher presents information about the high-cost of recruiting to emphasize the importance of the process. Caro (2012) states “Technology and the national exposure of top recruits have largely influenced the way schools approach the recruiting process” (p.140). Social media is an example of one of these approaches. Winning and recruiting have importance to a school, more than just within football. College football is an industry that is responsible for millions of dollars, and because of this, the winning and losing of a football program spread to the athletic department as a whole. The study noted that conferences that do not have a program that could be considered a “traditional power” see less success in the recruiting process (Caro 2012, p. 149). The study concluded that between 63% and 80% of a program’s success is related to recruiting.

“Exploring the Factors Affecting Popularity in Social Media: A Case Study of Football Bowl Subdivision Head Coaches” by Jensen, Ervin and Dittmore (2014) researched into a possible tie between a head football coaches’ social media popularity, in this case Twitter, and a team’s success, along with the reason for coaches’ popularity. The introduction serves to establish use of social media in society and the way that the sports world is included in that. They researchers highlight the fact that Twitter is one of the major social media sites currently being used amongst the sports industry. Jensen, Ervin and Dittmore go further to say, “To

capitalize on the increasing popularity of social media, athletic department administrators, sports information personnel, coaches, and student-athletes are using Twitter to communicate with others in the university community.” (p. 262).

In their conclusion, they talk about some other underlying factors that may affect a coach’s social media popularity, some of which are not measurable. Jensen, Ervin and Dittmore go on to say:

A coach’s personality and willingness to engage fans may be the factor contributing to the large amount of unexplained variance in the coach’s followings on the social-media platform. Increased reach on social media, along with greater access to a coach’s personality and daily activities, may also pay dividends on the recruiting trail, the lifeblood of any FBS coach’s hopes for future success. (p. 274)

The researchers continue to support this by using the example of the University of Mississippi head football coach Hugh Freeze, and the way he, “has demonstrated a strategy inclusive of active socialization with fans, alumni, and recruits on social-platforms can help lead to greater success for his football program, both on and off the playing field.” (p. 274).

Yanity and Edmondson (2011) dealt with ethical issues involving the online journalism coverage of the recruitment of high school athletes. This was a study that digs into the way web-based media companies in particular are facilitating the societal demand for news about recruits in college football. It involved a survey, completed by college football players, coaches, and sports media professionals, that gave examples of situations common in college football and measured whether they were deemed ethical or unethical (p. 411). With this information Yanity and Edmondson would determine:

The demand for coverage of high school sports is huge and has subsequently transformed the coverage of recruiting into a big business. The demand though seems to have made

publishers, editors, and reporters forget that they are dealing with minors who are not media savvy and who are immature in years. (p. 417)

The authors, taking notice of issues in the field, suggest “a recruiting-coverage watchdog committee”, which would oversee this and bring the issues that occur to public attention (p. 418).

Klenosky, Templin, and Troutman, (2001) researched the factors that went into the decision-making process for college athletes, particularly Division I football players. They note the importance of the decision that these students are making and the surrounding pressure that can come from the recruiting process (p. 95). Accompanied by this is the importance of the recruiting process:

Recruiting is a key activity across all levels and NCAA divisions. It is a particular concern, however, at the NCAA Divisions I level where full scholarships are available for qualified student-athletes, especially those in revenue-generating sports (such as football). (p. 95)

They found a few situations where the factors correlated with each other. A school’s coaching staff, Klenosky, Templin, and Troutman found were key in providing comfort for an athlete, the chance to improve, and the opportunity to play (p. 104). This being said they discovered that, “the pattern of relationships that emerged suggest that athletic recruiting decisions reflect a number of diverse and simultaneous considerations.” (p. 104).

Browning and Sanderson (2012) conducted research dealing with student-athletes use of twitter, specifically looking at their response to tweets that were critical. They made a case about fan use of social media:

The blinders of fandom overpower the realization that the target of the attack is an amateur; nevertheless, given the propensity with which they use social media, it is plausible that student-athletes are quite cognizant of what is being said about them via social media. These aspersions can produce potentially negative emotional and psychological effects. Social media are not going away, and it is imperative that both

academic and industry personnel keep pace with the changing social-media landscape. (Browning & Sanderson, 2012, p. 505)

To follow this Browning and Sanderson mention that since this type of behavior occurs, that it is relative that we learn more about the way that they react to the communication (p. 506). For their study they interviewed 20 Division I athletes from a private institution in the United States. The athletes were attained for interviews by snowball sampling (p. 509). From this they were able to find several reasons for which they found that student-athletes used Twitter. The authors stated, “student-athletes shared that Twitter was a valuable and convenient resource to keep in contact with others” and that Twitter’s utility also extended to the friends and family from whom they were separated” (p. 510). Communicating and interacting with followers also was determined to be a reason for the use of Twitter along with the desire to gain information (p. 511).

From Browning and Sanderson’s study they were able to ascertain that Facebook, at least among most of the athletes that they interviewed, was not as popular as it was a few years ago when it came to the social-media world, noting that Twitter gave them an opportunity to check what they called the on-going “social “discussion”” of which they were the topic (p. 515). This type of interaction seems to have some significance due to the fact that according to Browning and Sanderson, “Twitter enables written word to linger on the profile, creating a perception of permanence” (p. 516).

These findings serve as a solid base for an overall understanding of college football recruiting and the use of social media amongst college athletes. It would seem that Twitter tends to be the leading form of social media used by college athletes. While there is little research done on recruiting and Twitter it would not be surprising to see some sort of relationship. Recruiting is a major key to success when it comes to FBS schools (Caro, 2012). The popularity

of Twitter and its prevalence in college football fandom suggest that using it for recruiting would make an impact on the recruiting process of a high school athlete, whether that is positive or negative is unknown and may differ on a case by case basis (Jensen, Ervin, & Dittmore, 2014). From Browning and Sanderson (2012) we understand that many of these athletes are very active on social media, whether it is by connecting with family, teammates, or fans. Nothing has been done to study a correlation between coaches' contact with prospective student-athletes and the final decision that the student-athlete makes on where they will go to college. I plan to conduct a survey among Division I student-athletes that will look to gauge both their attitudes towards social media when it comes to recruiting including the level of importance that they put on it, and whether it may have played a role in where they ultimately decided on going to school.

### **Method**

First and foremost, I wanted social media and its effect on recruiting to see if there is a way to better understand and improve the college football recruiting process. This study was done to take a closer look at the way social media interactions between collegiate football coaches and high school football recruits may play an important role in the college decision-making process. The question of whether or not a high school recruit that interacts more often or more effectively with certain coaches will help sway him to decide on that college. I also wanted to know whether there was a reverse of this where the social media interaction would deter a recruit from deciding on a certain school.

After finishing up the literature review I realized that some of the subjects of my interviews might be skeptical about answering questions related to a recruiting tactic used by their program. I figured this because of the Cary Caro (2012) article that linked recruiting to

winning. I was aware of the popularity of college football recruiting, seeing as there are websites specifically designed to cover this process. The pressure of this college decision that I read about led me to realize just how big of a deal this was to these athletes.

I had several assumptions going into this research. I assumed, and this may be because of my involvement with a Division I football program and my interest in the field of Media Studies, that the level of interaction between recruit and coach absolutely plays a huge role in the ultimate college decision. I did feel that players would have less awareness of the impact of these types of relationships, and that they would think more about the way in which it helped to begin the process with certain coaches. I felt that the coaches and staff member, being more experienced within the realm of college football would understand the importance of the social media relationship.

The interviews were conducted in a sit down environment with a desk or a table between the interviewee and myself. They had not been given the interview questions before this, but did know that the study involved the use of social media within recruiting a few days beforehand. I chose to do the two coach interviews first since their time was the most limited due to the business of their schedules which was a minor obstacle. I spent about ten minutes with each in their respective offices. The staff member I was able to do in the same day and this went very smoothly. I was able to spend about fifteen minutes with this person, in his respective office. The players proved to be a bit more difficult than I expected. It was not difficult to get them on board, but tracking them down on the day we had agreed upon was. However, I was able to catch both and spoke for about ten minutes with each at a table.

To start each interview, I informed them what my study was about and that they should feel free to go beyond the question asked if they wanted to. During each interview I presented the questions that I had planned for each group and let the interviewee take it from there. I thought that the players were the least reserved and answered the questions most comfortably.

### Results

The first coach that I interviewed was Josh Gattis, a Wide Receivers coach who has four years of Division I coaching experience. Being a younger coach he was comfortable and had experience with social media use. He informed me that he, along with the rest of the staff, use social media to recruit players. Specifically noting that they use it to "check in" on recruits whom they are interested in, but did not want to give any specific examples, as there were "many different ways" which depended on the personality of the recruit (J. Gattis, personal communication, April 3, 2015). To my next question as to whether it can enhance or diminish a relationship with a recruit he focused more on the way he uses it. He mentioned how it's "important to be positive" when interacting with a recruit, especially one who he has never met in person before. To my final question, he was very adamant that while social media is "important", it does not outweigh, "meeting a kid and his family in person", stating that is "the most important part". (J. Gattis, personal communication, April 3, 2015)

The second coach was Charles Huff, a Running Backs coach and Special Teams Coordinator, who has nine years of coaching experience. He is also younger and familiar with social media. Huff also noted that he did use social media as a recruiting tool, but used the phrases, "to see what they are up to that day", and, "to try and get them to campus". The last

phrase referring to recruits who he said "had yet to check out campus". (C. Huff, personal communication, April 3, 2015)

To the next question he answered similarly to Gattis talking more about his "positive" approach. The final question also coincided with Gattis, as Huff would say, "you have to meet the recruit in person, talk to him face to face" (C. Huff, personal communication, April 3, 2015).

The staff member I interviewed was Social Community Manager, Lauren Damone. While Damone is not active in recruiting players via social media, she is a Communications major from Penn State University and has experience with several social media platforms. Because she is not involved with recruiting directly her answers would mention that repeatedly. To my first question, she started with, "From an outside perspective", so I did not think that the answer had too much credibility. To my second question about relationship between coach and recruit she talked about the way, "any interaction between two minds", these being the coach and recruit, "will produce some sort of connection" (L. Damone, personal communication, April 3, 2015). The third question about whether or not it effects the decision making process, again, she mentioned, "is not really part of her job" (L. Damone, personal communication, April 3, 2015).

The players, who wished to remain anonymous, were both scholarship players. The first player, who I will identify as "Player A", said that social media, specifically Twitter was used in his recruiting process by "most coaches". Player A said coaches used this platform to, "check up" and to, "see when I was going to visit mostly." When asked if these social media relationships enhanced or deterred them from a school, he said that it, "definitely turned me off from a few schools.", because he was, "double, even triple messaged". The final question about it affecting the decision process, he answered by saying it was important, "just to start the

conversation", but "from there it was meeting them in-person that mattered most." (Player A, personal communication, April 3, 2015).

Player B also noted Twitter as the main source of his recruiting process when it came to social media. Player B said that coaches used Twitter to, "introduce themselves", and to, "gauge my interest in their school." To the question on whether or not they saw their relationships enhanced or deterred, he could not "think of any specific situations where that was the case." He also did not feel that social media played a role in his decision, referring to his, "official visit" that sold him (Player B, personal communication, April 3, 2015).

### **Discussion**

This data did not give me the kind of results that I was looking for. I think that this may have been because of the limited amount of data that I collected. I do think that based off of the interviews that using social media to do recruiting does play a role, but how important this role is it is difficult to truly gauge. The coaches seemed to focus more on the way they used the platform to recruit and weren't on the same page with what I was looking for. The players may have been too far removed from the recruiting process to recall their exact feelings from the time when it occurred. I do not think that anything significant can come from this study alone, and I think it is important to get a much larger pool of both coaches and recruits in the future.

### **Conclusion**

College football recruiting is only going to continue to grow as more and more fans of college football continue to emerge. More fans mean more pressure for success for football programs. With recruiting being closely linked to success, learning more about the way social media functions as a recruiting tool can be very important information for coaches and recruiters.

Recruits could also benefit from learning more about the way in which the social media interaction between themselves and coaches may impact their decision making process. That being said, it is a field that is relatively untapped that could hold useful and interesting information for both those involved in the process and fans of college sports in general.

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## Appendix

### **Interview Questions: Players**

1. Was social media used in your recruitment process? If so can you describe how it was used? Specify different types?
2. Did it at any time entice or deter you from wanting to have a relationship with a coach at all?
3. Do you think it social media relationships played any role in your decision making process?

### **Interview Questions: Coaches**

1. Do you use social media while recruiting players? If so can you describe, in general, how and what for?
2. Do you feel that it helps to enhance or diminish a relationship with a recruit?
3. Do you think it social media relationships plays a role in the decision making process? If so to what extent?

### **Interview Questions: Staff**

1. How important do you think social media is to recruiting prospects?
2. Do you think it has an impact on the relationship between coach and player? If so what kind?
3. Do you think that using social media to interact with recruits plays any part in the decision making process? If so what/how does it make an impact?

## Field Notes

J. Gattis

- Does use social media - Twitter
- Uses to check-in on guys they're interested in
- Say hello; just keep them thinking about Penn State
- Many ways of interacting
- Depends on player personality
- Being positive is most important thing to interacting with recruit, specifically one he hasn't met
- Most important part is meeting player and family

C. Huff

- Uses Twitter, thinks its important
- to see what's up, get to campus among other conversations
- Positive
- meeting recruit is more important than social media

L. Damone

- Doesn't think she is a good person for relationship questions
- Media interaction will result in some sort of relationship
- Connection between two minds
- not part of her job

Player A

- Twitter used by most coaches

- Check-up
- When he was going to visit
- Turned off from double, triple messages
- Social media used to start, meeting coaches, staff, players was key

#### Player B

- Coaches used Twitter to introduce
- Wanted to know about interest, "gauge"
- no situations that enhanced or deterred
- It was his visit that made his decision