College Athletes Caught in Tangled Web

by Brent Schrotenboer

Four San Diego State students recently logged on to a computer and did what thousands of other college students do these days during their spare time.

They were having fun on MySpace.com, posting personal party pictures and commentaries about life in college. Some included references to drinking alcoholic beverages and snide remarks about recent soccer practices, according to a student colleague of the four. But because the four students were athletes - in this case women's soccer players - they suffered a penalty for it. When they didn't heed their coach's warning to stop posting on the site, they were suspended from the team. "Some people on the team were pretty upset," said Kristi Robusto, a former player on the team who was not among those suspended. "They said, 'Isn't it our right to put up what we want?'" were pretty upset," said Kristi Robusto, a former player on the team who was not among those suspended. "They said, 'Isn't it our right to put up what we want?'" Not if it violates team or university policy or has the potential to embarrass the university. College students across the country have been cited or disciplined for content they posted on social networking Web sites such as MySpace and Facebook, including such things as criticism of a student government candidate (at the University of Central Florida), complaints about the theater department (Cowley College in Kansas) or vulgar comments about a teaching assistant (Syracuse). "College administrators are very nervous about this huge new forum," said Greg Lukianoff, president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education. The most nervous of those might be coaches and athletic directors, whose student-athletes are under a more intense public spotlight than the general student body and who usually are required to adhere to more stringent policies and rules of conduct. One distasteful picture of a prominent football player on the Internet could be seen by anybody and might end up on the front page of a newspaper. It's why some athletic departments have stricter policies about such sites and restrict usage as part of individual team rules. San Diego State administrators have planned workshops and discussions with student leaders to try to educate the student body about two of the biggest concerns with the sites: that postings may embarrass students in the future or make them vulnerable to predators. Dean of Students Darlene Willis said SDSU stops short of restricting use of such sites among general students. "We believe in free speech," she said. "Our goal is to make sure students are informed of all sides." The SDSU athletic department is far less libertarian. Athletic Director Jeff Schemmel has let individual coaches decide how they want to regulate such sites, and they can ban them if they choose, hence the soccer suspensions. "Our head coaches are all monitoring those sites," Schemmel said. "That's happening every day."Just add it to all the other responsibilities colleges coaches have these days. "Yes, it's one more thing to worry about," said Dale Walker, SDSU's director of golf operations. "But it's a damn important thing to worry about. Not only are we coaches, we're educators. You're dealing with young people who act young at times, and it's our job to educate them on what's right or wrong." Walker, 49, said his two sons, ages 17 and 12, had MySpace accounts before he knew it existed. "The technology is getting so far past people of our age," he said. "I would think with every school it's like plowing new ground. The administration can't tell you exactly how to deal with it because there's no handbook on it. ... I'm just trying to figure out how to Google, for crying out loud." SDSU's athletic department is not alone in trying to get a handle on this. Utah and Colorado have prohibited some of these sites in student labs at their athletic academic centers. No such restrictions at those schools are in place for general students at general-use computers. Scores of other universities have addressed the issues with coaches and players, telling them to be careful after a rash of recent news reports involving various schools. In the past few weeks, athletic departments discovered a glut of racy team hazing photos from Webshots.com, a Web site where people post and share photos. Northwestern recently suspended its women's soccer team after such pictures ended up on a Web site called BadJocks.com. Last year, two LSU swimmers were kicked off the team after being connected to negative comments about the coaches on Facebook. At Loyola University Chicago, a private school, Athletic Director John Planek has banned his athletes from using Facebook. Violating the policy could cost an athlete his scholarship. Planek said such a policy does not exist for general students. "Putting people up in compromising positions is something we don't want to see done," Planek said. "We don't play around with that stuff." At SDSU, Schemmel called a department meeting last month as concerns grew about postings from players on the softball and women's soccer teams. Women's soccer coach Mike Giuliano suspended the four players for a few days during the offseason after the players didn't heed his

warnings to stop posting on MySpace.com, Robusto said. Two of the suspended players declined comment, and Giuliano did not return messages about the matter. In an e-mail to student-athletes last month, Schemmel wrote, "Don't forget that whatever information you put up on these sites is available for the world to see. If information or pictures that you put on these sites is a violation of team rules, university policies, or could be an embarrassment to your team, ... it will be dealt with the same as any other such violation or inappropriate behavior." Schemmel also wrote, "I would never demand that you not get involved in these sites. You are individuals and you are free to do this as you wish, on your own time, and subject to your team rules."The NCAA does not regulate postings on such sites unless it involves commercial activity. "At this point, it's an individual institution's issue and decision," NCAA spokeswoman Jennifer Kearns said. "The athletics administration on each campus sets their own rules." Schools who have restricted their athletes' use of such sites generally justify it as part of the price of playing on their teams. After all, players must agree to be drug-tested and adhere to a code of conduct with potential penalty of dismissal. Some schools, such as Florida State, are writing guidelines involving such sites in their codes of conduct. But where free speech is concerned, such policies can be a controversial issue for students at public institutions. Chris Hansen, an attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union, said the fairness of regulating such expression would depend in part on what rules the students agreed to beforehand, how clear the rules were and what was being prohibited. "When the coach is setting rules of limiting speech, he's pushing the outer limits of his authority," Hansen said. "I can imagine some speech restrictions a coach can impose, like you can't yell in a coach's ear when he's trying to call plays. But the notion that you can ban criticism strikes me as difficult to reconcile with the First Amendment." Meanwhile, such sites keep chugging along, benefiting from the attention and eager to provide cover for their customers. Facebook boasts that it is the seventh-most trafficked site on the Internet and has 7.3 million registered users. MySpace claims to be second in page views only to Yahoo and has more than 78 million members. "The idea of banning college athletes from the site is insane," Facebook spokesman Chris Hughes said. "It's like banning students from using e-mail or Instant messenger - these are essential technologies for the modern college student. "If students themselves don't want to make their profile - or any single part of it - available to everyone in their collegiate community, they can choose to change their privacy settings. ... We're interested in giving our users the maximum control over what information they share about themselves and who they share it with." Copley News Service

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