Social Media and the Pressures of Elite High School Basketball Recruiting: A Case Study

Joshua Bowles, University of Tennessee
Cheryl Rode, University of Tennessee
Robin Hardin (Advisor), University of Tennessee

The popularity of recruiting in intercollegiate athletics has grown significantly in recent years as high school prospects have become more visible. The fans now have unprecedented access due to the advent of social media and they can now follow and interact with recruits on a daily basis (Sanderson, 2011). The prospective recruits update information about the day-to-day events of the recruiting process and the elimination of schools they are considering. This serves as a way for athletes to control the process without interference from the media (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010). The number of Twitter followers for high-profile recruits have reached into the tens of thousands. Prep basketball stars Andrew Wiggins and Jabari Parker even made the cover of Sports Illustrated while still in high school. Media who cover the Southeastern Conference picked a freshman (Julius Randle) as the preseason Player of the Year. Randle had not even played a collegiate basketball game. These teenagers have in many ways become celebrities who have their every move watched by complete strangers (Brown, Dickhaus & Long, 2012). An interesting phenomenon occurs when these high-profile recruits announce the university they plan to attend. Positive social media messages are directed at them from fans of the chosen school but that comes with negative social media messages from fans whose schools were not chosen.

The purpose of this study was to look at three distinct examples of how fans interact with elite, high-profile basketball recruits on social media. It primarily examines the individual Twitter and Instagram accounts of these three as they were the most-followed and included the majority of interactions with fans. Blogs, news articles, along with comments and media interviews from the players and coaches, were reviewed relating to each player's official announcement and signing. Thousands of posts and social media interactions were shared between recruits and fans. Tweets and other relevant comments were collected and examined for each recruit. During the examination of the interactions, various themes relating to sentiment and content were identified. Both NodeXL and “Incoming!” computer programs were used to collect and archive the social media interactions. The messages were then sorted, coded and themes were identified.

James Blackmon Jr., Trey Lyles, and Jaquan Lyle are three five-star basketball recruits (Rivals.com) from the state of Indiana in the 2014 high school class. They all share a complicated timeline since they began being recruited by schools around the country at a very young age. Transferring between high schools, switching AAU teams, and decommitting from verbal commitments have made for a whirlwind of emotions. Major college fan bases have been watching their every move since even before they entered high school. Their stories are full of twists and turns that would never happen to the “normal” student. All three also included rival schools in their final decisions, leading to examples of alienation between opposing fans and an overall increased attention on the entire recruitment process.

This study may serve as a warning for coaches and athletes on both the high school and collegiate level as to the types of issues that can occur when a recruit goes through adversity during the recruiting process. Each of these three cases, while unique, represents the convoluted nature of big-time college recruiting and the variables that affect the process. The types of comments these fans are sending to potential recruits could be detrimental to the school’s image and the possibility of landing that major commitment. It can also be looked at from the perspective of how negative messages are seen by friends and teammates of that recruit. Fans “recruiting” on social media is an NCAA violation. However, with so many comments being made, it is difficult for compliance departments to enforce the rules. The school’s brand and reputation could be harmed in the process and affect future recruiting success.

Ultimately, this study sought to examine the messages on social media during the recruiting process of these specific elite high school basketball players. Social media has played a pivotal role in allowing fans to be involved in the ups and downs of the saga that is college recruiting, and this insight is beneficial to both athletes and coaches.