The good and bad of Twitter and college athletes

Nicole Auerbach, USA TODAY Sports *9:22 p.m. EST January 10, 2013*

(Photo: Mark Zerof, USA TODAY Sports)

A tweet is just a tweet until it's newsworthy, Heisman trophy winner Johnny Manziel learned this week. Sending out a photo of yourself partying at a club or with a wad of cash at a casino might seem like no big deal, because it's technically legal.

But when you're 20 years old, the face of college football and broadcasting it to 250,000 people, it creates headlines.

"It's tough knowing that everything you do is watched pretty closely because I'm doing the same stuff I've always done," Manziel said Sunday. "It's just now people actually care what I do.

"It's hard to watch some of the stuff that people say to you when you take a picture or you do some stuff or you're at these games or whatever. It's tough to sit back, and you can't really defend yourself."

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Some may argue that Manziel brought the criticism upon himself by voluntarily posting the photos. But he's not the only student-athlete hearing the chirps of negativity – whether it's related to casinos, something they've said or even a poor performance in a game. And they keep hearing about it, over and over again, thanks to Twitter and the kind of power anonymity and distance give to fans in the social media landscape.

Kentucky men's basketball players learned that lesson the hard way last month. They knew they'd lost two games in a row, and they were certainly aware that they'd fallen out of the top 25 polls. But college basketball fans kept hounding them about it.

All the negativity prompted freshman Willie Cauley-Stein to delete his Twitter account entirely.

"It happens, I guess, but I don't want to look at it no more," Cauley-Stein said after Kentucky lost to Baylor in early December. "Nothing good comes out of it, really, if you really think about it. You can't say what you want to say on it anyways, because it's all monitored, so you might as well not even have it."

Though he has since reactivated his account, the way Cauley-Stein reacted to criticism on Twitter isn't unusual, according to research published this winter in the International Journal of Sport Communication.

Assistant professors Blair Browning of Baylor and Jimmy Sanderson of Clemson found that student-athletes dealt with critical tweets in one or more of the following ways: 1) Ignoring it; 2) Using it as motivation; 3) Blocking users sending nasty tweets; or 4) Responding to critics or tweeting a general response about working harder (or "subtweeting" – not directly responding to a Twitter user but responding to the subject matter in general).

Since rejoining Twitter, Cauley-Stein has retweeted supportive messages from fans and answered others criticizing his missed free throws by explaining the pressure of playing in front of more than 20,000 fans.

"Of course, the (Kentucky players) were attentive to what (negative things) were being said," Browning said. "Though hate mail has always been around, it was a lot harder to get it to people in the past. Now with the immediacy of Twitter, it's immediately in front of their eyeballs."

Browning and Sanderson began their research after they observed that when high-profile athletes at their schools performed poorly, they still rushed to check Twitter and see what people were saying about them during and after games.

"It made me realize these guys are drawn to it, and it's become so ingrained in them to want to know what people say," Browning said. "These guys now have the avenue to look up directly what people are saying. What Twitter has opened up is what people saying to them.

"People spew some pretty vitriolic things to these players."

Browning interviewed 20 athletes (10 football players, five men's basketball players, three women's basketball players and two baseball players) to collect qualitative information for the study. Only two of the 20 kept their accounts private, which prevented them from the onslaught of positive and/or negative fan tweets.

The researchers said they weren't surprised with the coping techniques student-athletes told them they employed when dealing with criticism.

"What did surprise me was the fact that they said, 'It didn't bother me,' yet they acknowledged that they would still check Twitter to see what was being said about them," Sanderson said. "For many of them, they put on this front that it doesn't bother them but it clearly does.

"They are the conversation. People are actually talking about them, and as an 18-, 19-, 20-year-old kid, you're very invested in what people are saying about you."

Not everyone. Georgetown forwards Otto Porter and Nate Lubick say they have Twitter accounts but aren't very active. Porter keeps his account private; he has 2,880 followers and only tweets a couple of times a week.

"A lot of kids are searching their names and get caught up in stuff, like whenever there's an article written about them," Lubick said. "I never, ever read any of that stuff. Did I at the beginning (of my career)? Yeah, absolutely. But as you go on, you learn to stop."

Besides avoiding game coverage and social media, is there a solution for student-athletes dealing with nasty, hyper-critical tweets after poor performances?

Browning and Sanderson say yes: Education. They believe major universities should teach student-athletes how to manage messages they send and receive before they start tweeting as college athletes. Most schools are not proactive, and they monitor social media use as it happens, according to the researchers.

"(Twitter) can be a really constructive, positive tool but we need to train and educate our student-athletes instead of putting all this money toward being watchdogs," Browning said. "Just train on the front-end, instead of being reactionary."

Texas A&M quarterback has offered fans a peek into his world with his Twitter posts since winning the Heisman Trophy in December, but in doing so he has shown that he's not used to being a public figure.*(Photo: John David Mercer, USA TODAY Sports)*

Virginia Commonwealth's Ed McLaughlin and Florida Atlantic's Patrick Chun are two athletic directors who understand that. Both said they meet with individual teams prior to the season to discuss the dangers of careless social media use. McLaughlin said that topic is even covered in VCU's student-athlete code of conduct. VCU also brings in a consultant to talk to teams that meet with media often to talk about branding.

"Everyone's watching you all the time, and things you put and say on social media is all part of your personal brand," McLaughlin said. "Johnny Manziel is going through that right now, isn't he?"

McLaughlin and his staff are mostly worried about obvious no-nos, like photos of underage athletes drinking. With more minor transgressions – such as tweeting something they probably shouldn't have in the heat of the moment after a game – McLaughlin said VCU deals with them on a case-by-case basis to hopefully catch the mistake quickly and not let it turn into something bigger. If administrators and coaches follow their athletes on Twitter, they're able to find these "teachable moments," as McLaughlin calls them, faster.

"We tell them all the time when you put something on the Internet, it is forever," McLaughlin said. "Our athletics communications folks work with them, and we also ask our coaches to make sure they monitor it, too.

"We try to stress the things that could be inappropriate, things that could be harmful or embarrassing for you, your family or your team. We try to stress those things and teach them about them so when they get in the working world – whether it's work as a professional athlete or work as a doctor or whatever – they don't make a tragic mistake that's really, really going to hurt them."

Chun's message to athletes at FAU is the same; he said he and his staff stress social media's risks and rewards with "constant reaffirmation and constant re-education."

"It's what's called a virtual tattoo," Chun said. "You tweet something or Facebook something, and it could be there forever. You have to be smart about it."

Even when a player is receiving negative comments or someone is trying to provoke him or her into saying something.

"We haven't had an incident like that per se on our campus yet, but it could happen," Chun said. "We've got to keep reminding our kids to take the high road and be real vigilant about the things you say or sometimes you don't say, which could be more important. … You don't know what's going to trigger a negative thing, but you just have to remind kids that everything (they) say does have an impact."

Even handled strategically with smarts and some restraint, social media tends not to be a place for sympathy in sports, regardless of an athlete's age or experience level. When his players were being berated by Wildcat fans for losing, Kentucky coach John Calipari hit that point home.

"I told our fans: If you want to be angry at somebody, be angry at me," Calipari said. "If you want to Twitter something -- or whatever we want to call it -- to me, do it. If you want to hit my Facebook and say I'm the worst coach in the world, do it. But let these kids grow. They're young kids."

Some fans don't have that kind of patience. They draft 140 characters and press send, not knowing or caring how it will make the recipient feel.

Kyle Tucker of the Louisville Courier-Journal contributed to this report.