The Palm Beach Post
SPORTS

Social networking sites aren't supposed to be recruiting grounds -- but they are

By BEN VOLIN

Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Saturday, January 24, 2009

GAINESVILLE — Andre DeBose, a five-star football prospect from Orlando, committed three weeks ago to play for the Florida Gators this fall.

Drew Degraauw, born and raised in Baton Rouge, La., and a 2003 graduate of LSU, figures he has a little more than a week until the Feb. 4 national signing day to sway DeBose to his beloved Tigers.

"LSU is where it's at," Degraauw, 28, recently wrote on DeBose's Facebook page. "You'd be the man in Baton Rouge!"

Degraauw, an attorney in Albuquerque, N.M., doesn't know DeBose, but wrote on his wall three times in the past two weeks. Degraauw sees it as harmless fun.

"I don't think one of these kids is going to get a Facebook message from a random guy and have that influence his recruiting," he said. "It's more just for kicks."

Innocent as his intentions may be, Degraauw was unwittingly committing a secondary recruiting violation. The NCAA considers Degraauw, an alumnus, as a "representative" of his school's athletic interests, and his contact with DeBose through his Facebook wall is prohibited by the NCAA.

"I know there's a big gray line there," Degraauw said. "I don't think it's unethical, and I'm not too worried about it. How would you enforce it?"

That is a problem the NCAA has been trying to solve for almost three years, with little success.

Degraauw hardly is the only person committing such violations on social networking Web sites like Facebook and MySpace.

Check out a Facebook page of a four- or five-star recruit - especially those who have not yet committed - and you will find dozens of wall postings from fans trying to sway their decision.

"It's real crazy," said Orson Charles, an uncommitted tight end prospect from Tampa Plant who has fans of Florida, Tennessee, FSU and Georgia posting on his Facebook wall almost daily. "It's fun. You just enjoy this while it lasts."

It may be fun and harmless, but against NCAA bylaws.

According to rules created in 2006 and updated each of the past two years, "any communication via message boards, chat rooms, walls, comments, blogs, IM, etc. is not permissible."

Phone, e-mail and faxing are the only acceptable forms of direct communication with recruits, with restrictions placed on how many times a school representative can initiate the contact.

Coaches are allowed to have Facebook pages, but can only use the e-mail function to talk with recruits, and the number of e-mails is limited.

And the NCAA uses a broad definition of "representatives of a university" - in addition to coaches and athletics staff, it also includes boosters, season-ticket holders, alumni, donors and even current students, according to Stacey Osburn, the NCAA's director for media relations.

It is the responsibility of the schools to self-police these kinds of infractions. The student-athletes don't get in trouble, but the fans could, in theory, have their fan privileges revoked - prevented from buying tickets or donating money to the program.

Osburn said no major violations ever have been reported to the NCAA, and the NCAA does not publicly announce minor infractions. But even if violations aren't reported, they certainly do happen.

"It's almost impossible to monitor," said Brian Battle, compliance director at Florida State. "There is no possible way that somebody could go online and check every day to see who is contacting these kids."

Kent State University went as far as banning all student-athletes from using social networking sites for three months in 2006. Officials relaxed the ban following a student uproar.

The problem came to a head later that year, when Kentucky basketball fans overwhelmed the MySpace page of prized recruit Patrick Patterson, who eventually chose the Wildcats. The school self-reported the minor violations, and did not suffer any penalties.

"It's a new era, and the NCAA is still trying to figure out how to handle this from a rules and regulations standpoint," Battle said.

Many recruits, though, encourage the behavior from rabid fans. The athletes revel in their newfound celebrity and will "accept" the friendship of pretty much anyone who requests it.

As of Wednesday evening, Auburn recruit Philip Lutzenkirchen has 1,473 friends on Facebook. Florida recruit Dee Finley has 949 friends, while DeBose has 442.

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"I just kind of select anybody, I guess," said Jon Bostic, a Palm Beach Central graduate who has a MySpace page and will play linebacker at Florida. "I didn't think it was too overwhelming. I just sat back and enjoyed it. Some of it was pretty funny."

The NCAA doesn't think it is so funny. The organization had to completely ban text messaging as a form of communication in 2007, because it got so overwhelming. A similar tactic may have to be made on social networking sites if the problem continues.

"How can you stop Joe Student? You can't, unless you want to get into a whole lot of IP tracking," said Bill Smith, assistant athletics director of new media at the University of Arkansas. "Or you just ban all forms of electronic communication."

Facebook is a powerful recruiting tool even without direct communication.

Last year, almost 4,600 Ohio State fans joined a Facebook group to try to entice quarterback prospect Terrelle Pryor to the Buckeyes, which he eventually did. Also formed were groups called, "Make Terrelle Pryor an Oregon Duck" (2,496 members), "Terrelle Pryor PENN STATE WANTS YOU!!!!!" (1,834 members), "Wolverines for Terrelle Pryor" (1,639 members) and "Terrelle Pryor to West Virginia" (542 members).

Penn State officials asked two students to shut down the group.

"They're just overzealous fans, and you just tell them to stop, because they don't know the rules," Battle said.

Florida State and Miami send out pamphlets to season-ticket holders detailing what is and is not acceptable in terms of talking with recruits, but "we can't educate everybody on the rules," Battle said.

It's not just Facebook and MySpace that has the NCAA concerned. Now recruits can be contacted through mediums like Twitter, Skype, message boards, disposable cell phones and G-chat, which are relatively new and similarly impossible to monitor.

"One of our coaches came to us this year to talk about Skype, and I'm like, 'What's Skype?' " Battle said. "If you want to contact a recruit, you can find a way to do it."

And by the time the NCAA gets a handle on Facebook recruiting, Facebook may be outdated altogether.

"How fast this has changed since last year's signing period is mind-boggling," said Smith of Arkansas. "Who knows where we'll be in a year from now?"

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