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NCAA reacts to social media reality

The explosion of social media has dramatically altered the way in which we communicate in both our professional and personal lives. Virtually every industry has been affected by the digital age in one way or another. Recruiting top athletes in the NCAA is no exception. College recruiting has taken on a life of its own and has become increasingly dependent on technology. Entire websites are devoted to player statistics and projecting the futures of teenage athletes.

Similarly, a coach's ability to instigate with prospects across vast distances is much different than just a few years ago. In apparent recognition of the way in which player communication has evolved, the NCAA recently deregulated text and telephone calls between college basketball coaches and recruits.

Prior to this change, NCAA rules restricted coaches to one phone call a month from June 15, after a recruit's sophomore year, to July 31, after a recruit's junior year. After Aug. 1 of a recruit's junior year, a coach was allowed two phone calls a week. There were no restrictions on the number of calls a prospect could make to a coach. Texting, on the other hand, was prohibited.

Some criticized the old rule as unworkable and archaic, noting that NCAA rules lagged behind the dynamics of current social media dynamics. Prohibiting text coaches from communicating with a student population that has become increasingly dependent on that form of communication. Others argued that monitoring and tracking telephone calls was too burdensome and invited situations where coaches with no ill intentions technically had violated the

rules. Some teams hired independent vendors whose sole job was to assist in tracking communications. Coaches were constantly required to look at phone logs to see whether they communicated with the recruit or his or her family in a particular month.

Still others complained that while coaches had their hands tied, interested third parties were communicating with recruits more easily than ever. Efforts to get to recruits or their parents through indirect means brought the NCAA's restrictions into question and raised obvious concerns about the effectiveness and enforceability of the rule. The chairman of the Division 1 Leadership Council that approved the NCAA's rule change was quoted as saying "It appeared that we had previously regulated ourselves away from that relationship-building with these young people, unintentionally allowing third parties greater access than our coaches."

Over the years, several coaches were reprimanded in high-profile disciplinary cases for violating the rules. For example, former Indiana University and University of Oklahoma head basketball coach, Kelvin Sampson, was fired for violating the rules that were recently repealed. Ohio State University was forced to self-report a secondary recruiting violation to the NCAA because new head football coach Urban Meyer had texted "good luck" to a recruit before a big game. Recently, Baylor's basketball program came under NCAA scrutiny for excessive phone calls and texts to recruits. There, nearly 900,000 texts and phone calls were reviewed as part of the NCAA's investigation into the

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violations. In the end, the NCAA placed Baylor on probation because it found 738 impermissible text messages and 528 impermissible phone calls over a two-year period.

The new rule was made official on June 15. Specifically, it places no limitations on calls or texts to recruit prospects and applies only to basketball. The new rule is applicable only after a recruit has finished his or her sophomore year of high school. Coaches are now also allowed unlimited social media contacts

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with recruits as long as they are privately made to the recruit and not published on public message boards.

Generally speaking, the NCAA's change has been applauded. Some commentators note that deregulation provides players with the respect they deserve. The goal underlying

recruiting is both proper vetting and relationship development to which communication plays a key part. Athletes and their families now can make decisions about whether a school and a coach represent the right fit with the benefit of unrestricted dialogue. Some even have suggested that the amount of college transfers will be reduced as a result.

Some players and coaches also have predicted that communication will be "self-regulated" even absent a NCAA prohibition. Smart coaches will know that excessive communication and pestering could undermine efforts to recruit certain players. Locally, Simeon High School basketball star Jabari Parker is considered by some to be the nation's top recruit, but Parker's parents are prohibiting any coach from contacting him directly. Apparently, all such calls and texts are to be filtered through Parker's parents.

Time will tell as to whether the old rule was serving a valid purpose or whether it needed a common sense update.

Certain questions still must be answered. For example, will the rules applicable to college football recruiting remain? Football allows for unlimited calls during a contact period that occurs during the recruit's senior season. Others wonder whether these changes are reflective

of some future changes that will enhance the rights of players, such as whether they will be able to sell memorabilia or whether all players will be permitted to keep their game-worn jerseys. Those discussions imply that the NCAA's task of managing its many interests may become a little trickier.