

**Being Seen, Being Present, Being Consistent:  
Exploring Instagram's Visibility, Popularity, Engagement and Influence on High School  
Sports**

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A Thesis  
presented to  
the Faculty of the Graduate School  
at the University of Missouri-Columbia

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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by  
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled **Being Seen, Being Present, Being Consistent: Exploring Instagram's Visibility, Popularity, Community Engagement and Influence on High School Sports** presented by Zeke Fuhrman, a candidate for the degree of Master of Journalism, and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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Professor Jim Flink, Chair

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## **DEDICATION**

Thank you to my family for sharing me with Mizzou for the last three years. To Mandy, Esme and Judah. Dad doesn't have any more homework to do.

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## INTRODUCTION

The first high school basketball game I remember watching was on TV. It was March of 1995 and my hometown Staples-Motley Cardinals, which had a population of 3,021 at the time, was in the state boys' basketball championship game (Biggest US Cities, nd). The championship game was televised statewide, and every household in the area was tuned in to the broadcast in anticipation of the Cardinals winning their first-ever state basketball championship. I didn't know it at the time, but this game would have a lasting impact on me, and what I would want to pursue for a career.

Prior to the 1994-95 season, the Minnesota State High School League had decided to do a trial Sweet Sixteen bracket for the state tournament, which would have the eight small Class A schools in the same state tournament as the eight large Class AA schools to compete for one Minnesota State Championship instead of the traditional championships in a separated Class A and Class AA (Staples-Motley Chamber, 2023). It was the first time since moving to a two-class system in 1969 that there would be one grand state champion (Minnesota State High School League, 2022). The league would split into a four-class system for the 1996-97 season, a system that is still used today.

The Cardinals, with local legends Blaine Joerger, Cy Bestland, Erik Kelly, Chris Heier, Dan Otteson and Minnesota Basketball Hall of Fame coach Lynn Peterson, were 25-2 that season, won the Section 6A championship to advance to the state tournament, and had a Hoosiers-esk run to the State Championship Game that would pit them against the 30-0 Class AA Minneapolis North Polars. (Staples Motley Chamber, 2023) The Polars, led by NCAA Division I commits Khalid El-Amin, Chris Rainey, Jabbar Washington and Ozzie Lockhart, were the favorites in a literal David vs Goliath matchup.

In what is considered by many to be one of the greatest games in the history of the Minnesota boy's state basketball tournament, the Cardinals and Polars battled down to the wire, with the deciding basket coming off an offensive put-back by North's Kavon Westbury for a 54-52 Minneapolis North win. (Staples Motley Chamber, 2023)

I remember I was crushed. The town was crushed. But I also remember the welcome home parade and pep rally the following day: cars and fans backed up for miles...standing room only, if you were lucky enough to get it, in the gymnasium for the post-tournament pep rally.

Today, few people outside of the Staples city limits know who Erik Kelly or Dan Otteson are...unless they hit a three-pointer over your outstretched arms in high school. But to me, and to a lot of other second-graders at the time, those guys were my idols. I would attend games in person, I would listen to broadcasts on the radio. I couldn't get enough of the small-town sports landscape and what it means to so many residents of these communities.

Fast forward about 15 years and, after covering college sports for the student newspapers at Central Lakes College and Anoka-Ramsey Community College, as well as working as Sports Director for WVOE Radio at the University of Northwestern-St. Paul, I began working covering high school sports for Detroit Lakes High School with Leighton Broadcasting and KDLM radio with the determination to provide the best high school sports coverage in the region...not only to highlight the accomplishments of the athletes, but to provide news and information to the approximately 12,000 Laker fans in the city.

Even after starting at KDLM radio in 2013, the landscape of high school sports has been dramatically transformed by the growing influence of social media platforms. Traditional modes of communication and engagement like television, radio and even newspaper within high school sports communities have evolved with platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and others

emerging as easy-access channels for displaying talent, fostering community engagement, and amplifying the visibility of athletes and teams.

But how has social media, particularly Instagram, affected the visibility, popularity, and community engagement of high school sports programs within their local communities and beyond? Additionally, how do high school sports content creators and consumers perceive Instagram's effectiveness as a platform for disseminating and engaging with local sports content, and what strategies or content types are most successful in leveraging each platform for community engagement in the context of high school sports, ultimately examining the impact of Instagram on the reach, engagement, and overall visibility of local high school content and its influence on audience interaction with sports-related content at the community level?

# THE ROLE OF INSTAGRAM IN HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS

## VISIBILITY

Instagram serves as a powerful tool for enhancing the visibility of high school sports events, athletes, and teams through various mediums, especially when it comes to athletes' peers on Instagram. Its visual nature, Stories feature, and integration with other social media platforms have contributed to its popularity among younger demographics. Teenagers often use Instagram for various purposes including sharing photos and videos, connecting with friends, following influencers and celebrities, exploring interests through hashtags, and engaging with content through likes, comments, and direct messages (Pew Research Center, 2022).

Instagram has been widely popular among teenagers aged 13-17 in the United States. According to a report by Pew Research Center, as of 2021, 81% of teenagers in that age range in the United States reported using social media platforms. In a report from 2020, Pew found that 71% of American teenagers use Instagram, including 67% of those teenagers using the app for an average of 53 minutes daily (Mohsim, 2023). Another study concluded that that 34% of U.S. teenagers aged 13 to 17 reported using Instagram almost constantly. (Common Sense Media, 2023).

In August 2023, Instagram secured its position as the second most frequented social media platform in the United States, garnering 15.85 percent of all social media visits across desktop, mobile, and tablet devices (Dixon, 2023). Despite Instagram's considerable popularity, Facebook keeps its dominance as the leading social media platform in the U.S., commanding nearly 50 percent of all social media visits. Following Facebook and Instagram, Pinterest, and X/Twitter claimed the third and fourth positions in visit rankings, each capturing close to 14.7 percent of visits (Dixon, 2023).

“We are finding that there are fewer and fewer parents in particular, and like almost no students that are engaging with our posts on Twitter like they used to,” said DIII’s University of Northwestern-St. Paul baseball coach Luke Widbin, who also runs the team’s social media platforms (personal communication, February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2024). “It seems to have become less popular, and Instagram's become more popular, especially with the student demographic. I learned quickly that it’s used much differently than Twitter. It's not about game updates. Its more content driven. More photo sharing, more covering the evolving story.”

The global ascent of Instagram shows no signs of slowing down. In January 2023, India boasted the largest Instagram audience, boasting 229 million users, while the United States ranked second with 143 million users (Dixon, 2023). As of October 2023, Instagram clinched the fourth spot as the most popular social network worldwide, boasting an impressive two billion monthly active users (Dixon, 2023).

“Instagram is where that group between Facebook and TikTok live,” says Dan Seeman, VP/Regional Manager for Hubbard Broadcasting in Minneapolis, which runs three radio stations in the Twin Cities Market in Hot AC station KS95, MyTalk 107.1 and sports talk Skor North, as well as the ABC television affiliate KSTP and independent KSTC-45 (personal communication, February 8, 2024). “It got to the point where when your grandmother is on Facebook, it's probably time to get off Facebook. Instagram is where we reach that demographic. It's our fastest growing platform for all of our brands. And it's because it's where most of the millennials and older Zs are living.”

Instagram has consistently ranked among the top social media platforms for Gen Z globally. As of January 2024, individuals aged 18 to 24 years accounted for 26.6 percent of total Instagram users, slightly behind the 28.4 percent total of 25- to 34-year-olds (Dixon, 2024).

Those between 35 and 44 years made up 19.5 percent (Dixon, 2024). Conversely, the age group least represented on Instagram was those above 65 years, constituting only 5.7 percent of the user base (Dixon, 2024).

“For Instagram...that's our kind of social media,” says Detroit Lakes High School senior Elle Bettcher (personal communication, February 23, 2024). “It’s where we keep up with people our age. People will post their prom pictures and their anniversaries of stuff and there, even just their vacations and day-to-day stuff. My account is private, so I can control who sees what I post and who can’t. I follow a lot of different sports pages and some other like interests of mine, like college and professional teams, and then also like the ESPN accounts, the USA Olympic teams...I just like following all that stuff because it's really cool to keep up with everything.”

“MyTalk has an Instagram page, but, you know, their bread and butter is really on Facebook.” says Seeman. “It's a little bit older woman, while KS95, their primary audience is living on Instagram. And then you look at Skor North and we put most of our energy into X or Twitter or whatever you want to call it. It doesn't mean we don't post content on all of them. We do, depending on the demo, get better results out of different platforms.”

Instagram and high school sports coverage go hand in hand thanks to three key features: visual appeal, audience engagement, and storytelling opportunities. Instagram's visual nature allows high school sports events, athletes, and teams to highlight images and videos, attracting audience attention more effectively than text-based platforms like Twitter (Pew Research Center, 2022). Visual content receives higher engagement rates across social media platforms, making Instagram an ideal platform for highlighting the excitement and intensity of high school sports events (Pew Research Center, 2022).

“I would say the biggest difference between Instagram and the other big social media platforms, in terms of performance is not necessarily in the graphics,” says Daniel Galarneau, who runs the social media pages for the University of Minnesota Gopher Men’s Hockey and Men’s Basketball teams (direct communication, February 14, 2024). “It’s more in like the Instagram reels where that like will take an Instagram. If you use an Instagram song or a song from their like database, for whatever reason, Instagram, if they perform better, Instagram will boost them silently. You can post just a highlight or a video of whatever. It doesn’t even need to be an athletic performance. It can just be like an athlete doing something silly with their teammate or like them just getting off the bus. And like put if you put like a music like music behind it, it can like blow up and be shared across all sorts of things. Another big advantage is collaboration on posts. That’s been a new feature that we’ve really tried to hammer on this year in terms of like everything we post, just throw collaboration requests out to the different. Like for hockey, for example, if I’m posting a highlight, I’m always going to include Big Ten hockey and NCAA Hockey as like collaborators on it. If they choose to accept those, then it will appear on their platform as well. And then we get like a whole new set of eyes on it that we wouldn’t if we had just posted to our platform. So that’s the biggest thing is sort of stuff can blow up easier,”

Instagram’s Stories feature enables high school sports programs to tell dynamic and immersive stories in real-time, offering followers behind-the-scenes glimpses into athletes’ lives, team dynamics, and game-day experiences (Pew Research Center, 2022).

“I think just the variety of things you can do on that platform with photos and videos and stories and reels and all that is great,” says Heather Rule, who is an in-game social media coordinator for the Minnesota Twins, as well as a freelance high school sports journalist (personal communication, January 30<sup>th</sup>, 2024). “Instagram is so visual and you can choose how

you want to do that. If you want to post photos on your feed or post photos on Stories, share other content on stories, or do videos on stories or make reels, which can be shared to Facebook. Social media is so much more visual now than maybe it used to be with, whether it's videos or photos. Even podcasts now. The big thing is to kind of have the video element with the podcast and show that on the Instagram reel. Show the people talking on the podcast to establish that connection. There are a lot of great ways you can share sports content on Instagram and connect with people that way.”

Instagram's Stories feature has revolutionized real-time coverage of high school sports events, offering a dynamic way to share highlights, updates, and insights with followers. From live game coverage to behind-the-scenes glimpses into locker room pep talks, Stories enable athletes and teams to provide immersive, interactive experiences that resonate with fans and followers on a personal level.

Rob Nielsen was hired as Activities Director at Detroit Lakes High School in west central Minnesota in 2017 and has been leading the way the district's activities and athletics departments distribute information and content on social media.

“We have tons of awesome stuff that happens in our buildings every single day,” Nielsen said (personal communication, January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2024). “And I think it's important to share those. You know, education doesn't always get the best rap right now in our world, and if we aren't promoting the cool stuff we're doing, nobody's going to. Our kids are going out and doing internships and capstone projects. Social media gives us an easy tool to promote that stuff in a fast way.”

In addition to all the activities at DLHS, Detroit Lakes, with a district enrollment of 2,805 students, is also the smallest school in Minnesota to offer 27 varsity sports (Detroit Lakes High School, n.d.).

"There's a lot of awesome stuff going on. How do we promote that?" asks Nielsen. "I think the easiest, fastest way is social media because that's just the reality of how people get their information today. I think there's a lot of people that use it to keep up with what's going on, especially former athletes that played on these teams. And I've had a few people come up to me and say 'Hey, the boys are really having a great season. I've seen it three or four times. And hey, we'll get out and go to a game.' I think it maybe brings in a few outliers that maybe aren't as tied as closely to the school and see some stuff going on and make an effort to get out and see things."

Detroit Lakes has had a lot to promote over the past couple of years. In 2018, residents of Detroit Lakes gave their approval to allocate close to \$50 million towards enhancements within the school district, notably earmarking funds for a new fieldhouse at the local high school (Millea, 2022). As part of this initiative, Lakeshirts, a homegrown apparel company, generously contributed \$1 million towards school improvement endeavors not addressed by the bond referendum. In recognition of their significant contribution, Lakeshirts was granted the naming rights to what is currently celebrated as Lakeshirts Fieldhouse (Millea, 2022).

The Lakeshirts Fieldhouse, a 2,500 seat, \$27-million-dollar gymnasium complex, hosted its first game on January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2022 (Fuhrman, 2022). The facility features three basketball courts, an indoor walking track, an athletic trainer room, five video boards, and a golf simulator room (Fuhrman, 2022). When The Fieldhouse opened, it received a lot of social media coverage and

DLHS used the opening as a springboard for its own social media pages to enhance visibility and connect with students, parents, alumni, and the broader community.

“Our architects did a great job of coming up with ideas,” Nielsen told the Detroit Lakes Tribune prior to the opening. “You’re not going to find another facility like this in a community this size anywhere else in the state. When the electronics crew flew in from Atlanta to do the installation or the video boards, they said they haven't done an install like this anywhere in the country (Rubato, 2022).”

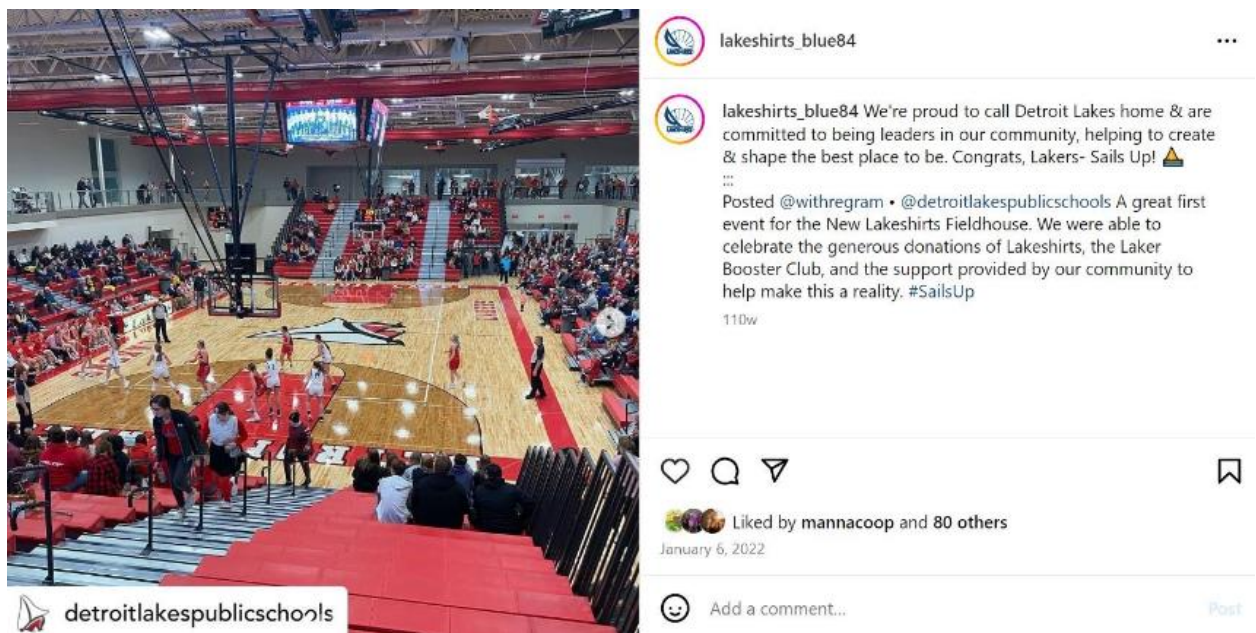


Figure 1: Lakeshirts shares an Instagram photo from opening night of the Lakeshirts Fieldhouse in January 2023.

The Detroit Lakes High School Activities social media accounts began posting sneak-peak photos and videos as construction wrapped up as a way for curious community members to see what was going on inside, along with adding a couple of details about the area that was being promoted. While local news organizations like KDLM Radio and the Detroit Lakes Tribune provided updates on Facebook and Twitter, DLHS focused their promotion on Instagram. Larger news organizations in the Fargo-Moorhead and Twin Cities metro areas, as well as local business pages, began sharing the videos, and they went viral as high school sports fans across the state

began watching and sharing the videos. Nielsen says while the goal was to showcase the new facility that is used for Laker home events, he says a special part of their launch campaign was to let other schools in the area know that the Lakeshirts Fieldhouse was also an amazing facility to rent for neutral-site competitions.

“You look at a town like Alexandria that hosts section football championship games on their turf field, and you realize that each one of those games brings in about 1,000 people that wouldn't be in your town for that night,” Nielsen told the Detroit Lakes Tribune in 2022. “A lot of those people stop to get gas or get a bite to eat. Some of them might even stay the night. We benefit a lot from being centrally located. If you have a section that runs from Brainerd to Moorhead to Bemidji and down to Buffalo, suddenly, you become a central place for those teams. If Bemidji and Alexandria play in a section championship basketball game, we are now a good place to host that. The same goes for a lot of the schools in smaller sections (Rubado, 2022).”

The campaign worked and, the two years following the opening of the Lakeshirts Fieldhouse, the facility hosted boys' and girls' basketball Section 8AA semifinal and championship games, as well as a neutral site option for the Section 8AAA semifinals and finals in 2024.

“These are games that don't include (Class AAA school) Detroit Lakes,” said Nielsen. “We had over 2,000 people in our community over those four nights that normally wouldn't be in our community. They're buying gas, they're eating, and spending money in other places while they're in town. It's awesome to be able to host these events at the Lakeshirts Fieldhouse. Having this facility here is a huge benefit to our community and we are extremely grateful to

have it. People are climbing to try and get here and host their events because of what we have (Fuhrman, 2023).”

## **INSTAGRAM’S CONTRIBUTION TO THE POPULARITY OF HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS**

Instagram plays a significant role in shaping the popularity and fan base of high school sports by providing a platform for athletes, teams, and fans to connect, share, and engage with content. Its visual-centric nature allows high school athletes and teams to share photos and videos of their games, practices, and behind-the-scenes moments.

“I think Instagram is great for the promotion of high school sports as a whole. The benefits from the variety of things you can do on that platform with photos and videos and stories and reels and all that,” says Rule. “Everyone kind of copies each other a little bit, but I think Instagram is so visual that it has a little bit of a leg up on the competition. If you want to post photos on your feed or post photos on Stories, share other content on Stories, or, you know, do videos on Stories or make Reels which can be shared to Facebook. And to me, Reels are so much like TikTok too. It's kind of a combination of everything, but I think it's kind of one of those platforms that a lot of people are on, like if they're on TikTok they're also on Instagram, or maybe some people are on Twitter they're also on Instagram. I feel like it's kind of a good overlap for people.”

Instagram's emphasis on visual content makes it an ideal platform for showcasing high school sports events, athletes, and team dynamics. By sharing captivating images and videos, teams can engage fans and attract new followers, thereby boosting the overall popularity of high school sports. It’s a strategy that baseball coach Luke Widbin uses at the University of Northwestern-St. Paul.

"The more that I can put the guys out there on social media and make feel like they're popular, the better," says Widbin. "Northwestern is a small DIII school in one of the smallest athletic conferences in the country... it's smaller than some Twin Cities high schools, but you can tell when stuff happens where they're put in some engaging, professional looking posts that there's a feeling of legitimacy to it. There are a lot of schools our size that don't engage like this. I think it would be really hard for me to fly in and do that for another school or organization that isn't something I'm really connected to. I've always told people that the reason I'm successful with any of this is because I spend time with them and know who they are. And like, it's just an advantage being in the dugout that another person wouldn't get and that's what I try to bring to our social channels. Regardless of what your talent is or how our season is going, we want you to know that we're having a good time here. And we want our fans to be part of the good time."

Establishing authentic, behind-the-scenes content and passing on relevant team information are two big ways that schools can grow their following through Instagram.

"There are a lot of schools that I follow that make my job so much easier as a journalist," says Rule. "The Warroad hockey teams keep their social accounts very updated...schedules, scores, rosters, team news, videos, line charts, player profiles, ticket information...it's all there. You can find some of that other info on the school website or something, but it's great when it's all in one spot and it's personalized by the team. A big one that I see with a lot of high school accounts is game day reminders, a link to get tickets if they're online only, that kind of thing. It all depends on what's workable for them. If they have someone in the athletic department that can do a better job of it, then go that route."

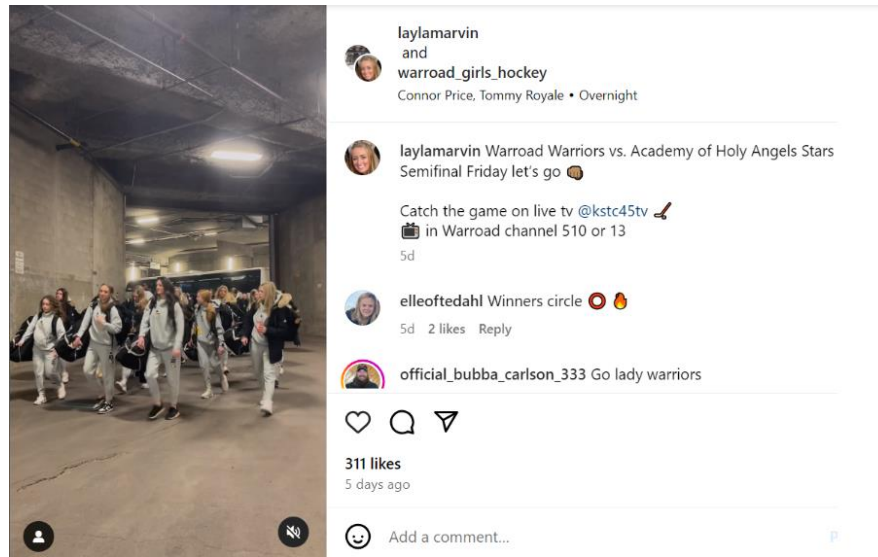


Figure 2: The Warroad Warriors Girls Hockey team shares a behind-the-scenes photo of the team arriving at the 2024 Minnesota State High School League Girls Hockey Tournament

The rise of social media holds significance for high school activities directors across the country, as they unveil a more effective means of reaching a broader audience and being able to distribute information quickly and directly to athletes, parents and fans. Unlike traditional press outlets that offer nonpartisan, fact-based coverage, using social media allows administrators to have greater control over their messaging (Perry, 2020).

“It goes back forever that if you don't put out the message or control the message, someone else will,” said Nielsen. “And you see that happen in news surrounding high schools. Media coverage of high school sports isn't always favorable. The complete story isn't always told, so as athletic directors, we need to ensure we are conveying our narratives to the community, showing the achievements of our coaches and student-athletes daily. I think sometimes high schools and education get a bad reputation. We want to portray the Laker P.R.I.D.E and the good stuff going on. We have tons of awesome stuff that happens in our buildings every day. And I think it's important to share those things. If we aren't promoting the cool stuff we're going to do, nobody's going to.”

Detroit Lakes has one main social media handle, Detroit Lakes Public Schools, with smaller accounts surrounding it. On the main page, Kayla Thompson's main focus is to highlight all aspects of what's going on in the district...not just athletics.

"The main purpose of social media is to carry out the DLPS mission is to fill all our sails with Laker Pride," says Thompson (personal communication, January 25, 2024) " The goal of our social media team is to spread Laker P.R.I.D.E: purpose, relationships, innovation, development, and equity. The staff, students, and community want to see Lakers succeed and engage with posts that demonstrate those principles. My focus is to make sure I am giving followers the full picture of DLPS. Post from all our school buildings and a variety of classes and activities, trying as best as I can to represent everyone."

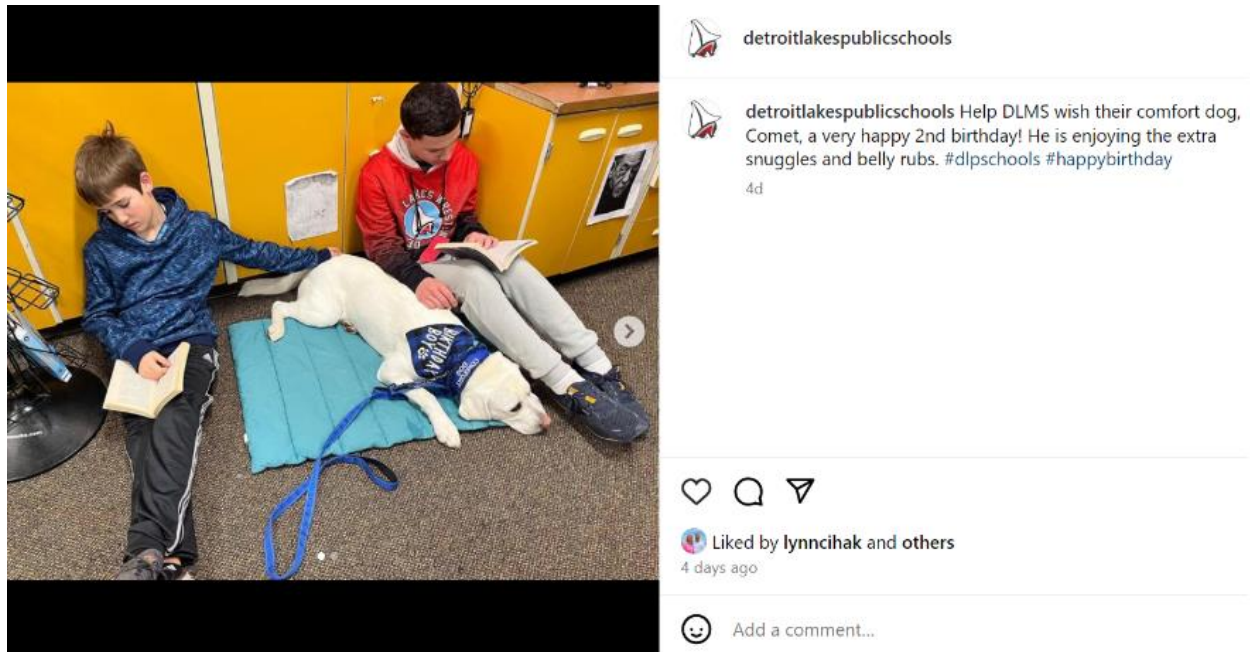


Figure 3: A photo shared on the Detroit Lakes Public Schools Instagram promotes Comet the Comfort Dog's second birthday

For Detroit Lakes Public Schools, the promotion of the other varsity sports, clubs and programs falls under the jurisdiction of the respective teacher or coach in charge of the program.

“We have 27 varsity sports here, and even more activities and clubs plus all of the district information that we distribute on social media...weather delays and closings, job recruitment, miscellaneous announcements and things like that,” says Nielsen. “If we tried to put all of that information on one page, it would get kind of bogged down. A couple of our team-specific social pages do well. Football is one of them. Boys' basketball does a great job. Our Laker Dance team has a great social media team. The coaches either do it, or they find a player or manager that wants to take that project on.”

“The most important thing for high schools to make their mark on Instagram is to be consistent,” says Rule. “As a reporter, I'll look around to see if a team has a Twitter account. And sometimes you can tell that maybe they did a couple years ago, but now they haven't updated in a while, or the bio says it's for the 2022-23 school year or something. Making sure that you have someone who's going to be consistently updating content and finding a platform that works for you and audience.”

High school athletics directors have increasingly turned to Instagram as a versatile tool to promote their schools' sports programs and communicate essential information, such as schedule changes, to students, parents, and the community.

“I think it's more about communication for the people who are active and already following you than it is about drawing new people in,” said Nielsen. “Does it draw some new people in? Yeah, some. But I think it's more of a communication tool with the people that are genuinely already interested.”

## BUILDING COMMUNITY THROUGH INSTAGRAM

Social media has become a pivotal platform for fostering community engagement among athletes, fans, coaches, media and alumni of high school sports programs. Its visual-centric approach, with features like stories, live videos, and direct messaging, creates a dynamic environment where different stakeholders can interact, share, and celebrate the world of high school sports.

Instagram's core lies in visual storytelling, enabling athletes to share their journeys, achievements, and challenges. Through photos and videos, high school athletes can document their training sessions, game-day experiences, and behind-the-scenes moments. This transparency and authenticity often resonate with followers, including fans and alumni, creating a sense of connection and community. Studies have suggested that visual content can significantly enhance engagement rates, making Instagram an effective platform for athletes to connect with their audience (Hu, Manikonda, & Kambhampati, 2014). The platform's features, such as stories and live videos, allow for real-time updates and interactions. Coaches can use these features to share team announcements, game highlights, and motivational content, creating an inclusive and engaging environment for fans and team members alike. This immediacy fosters a sense of belonging among the community members and keeps them informed and involved in the team's activities and successes. The key, however, is to stay interactive with the audience.

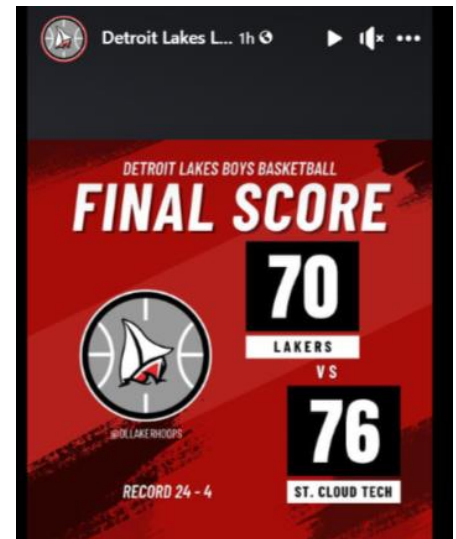


Figure 4: The Detroit Lakes Boys Basketball team shared this score update on Facebook Stories

“I would say the biggest challenge is just I always like when people if you are looking for like sort of a secret science to social media,” says Galarneau. “It's not something we can control. We can only control as much as we can control. It all boils down to the buzz around the team and obviously social media can aid that. But if the team's playing well, stuff will do better. It's just how it is. And if they aren't like there's not really much you can do in terms of promoting. But I would say it's more of the timeliness. You have to know when to strike on like certain moments during the season. I'll use Gopher men's hoops, for example. We were not good last year. Last in the Big Ten, one of our worst seasons ever. So, there was nothing we could do in terms of promoting that would like work or perform well or, you know, create any extra buzz just because it is what it is. But like this year when we won, we beat Northwestern and Michigan State a couple of weeks ago. We put out as much content as we could afterwards in terms of whether that be ticket pushes or just any sort of video we had. Crowd stuff, thanking the crowd. And taking advantage of the timeliness of when our teams are performing well. If your team's not playing well, it's trying to fill the gaps of like ‘what can we post that doesn't make us look bad’. Because if your team's not playing well and you're posting like silly stuff, it isn't going to go over well with not only your fan base, but from your coaching staff, I think as well.”

Another key to staying engaged with the community is to make sure the social media accounts are active.

“Having a presence is such a big deal,” says Rule. “Because it can be pretty obvious if you look at an account and you see they're not really engaged. They're not following many, they don't have any followers. They don't post a lot, or they haven't posted since like last year. It's all about being seen and interacting with people and finding people in the community to follow. Follow the athletes, follow the coaches, follow local businesses on the platforms that they're on.

If they're sharing some content to a team account, or sometimes I've seen schools have one big account for the athletic department, they'll kind of share all this stuff, if it's not team specific. You don't have to be super detailed, but post something after each game, or something once a week, or share content from the athletes or interact with fans who've interacted with the team. Sharing accounts, sharing news stories about the team. I think it's all just about being seen, being present and being consistent.”

Instagram also plays a significant role in engaging alumni, allowing them to stay connected with their high school sports programs. Alumni can follow current team progress, take part in fundraising events, and attend games, fostering a continuous and supportive relationship with the program. This engagement not only strengthens the community but can also provide financial and moral support to the sports programs (Stoldt, Dittmore, & Branvold, 2012).

“When fans, parents, alumni, whoever has questions, it's important to acknowledge that,” says Galarneau. “You don't have to publicly respond to them. Just like DM them and make sure they're all set so that people feel like they're connected, and they are appreciated as a fan.”

Social media offers high school sports programs opportunities to raise funds and secure sponsorships from local businesses, alumni, and supporters (Geysler, 2017). By promoting fundraising events, merchandise sales, and sponsorship packages through social channels, schools can generate revenue to support their athletic programs and facilities (Geysler, 2017).

Some high schools are fortunate enough to have prestigious or famous alumni that are willing to partner with programs, specifically on social media, as an influencer partnership, which collaborations between brands and individuals with significant followings (Geysler, 2017). These partnerships use the influencer's credibility, reach, and engagement with their audience to promote products, services, or campaigns on behalf of the brand (Geysler, 2017).

Detroit Lakes High School is one such beneficiary with 2008 DLHS graduate and NFL Pro Bowl wide receiver Adam Thielen, who spent the first 10 years of his NFL career with his home state Minnesota Vikings. In 2019, Thielen established the Thielen Foundation, an organization based out of the Twin Cities with a mission of empowering youth to achieve their full potential (Thielen Foundation, nd).

One of the ways the Thielen Foundation carries out their mission is by donating equipment to local high schools. In 2020, the Thielen Foundation launched its first big social media campaign with the #ChangeThruSport campaign, which was created to address the needs of underserved youth across Minnesota (Thielen Foundation, nd). The program gives financial aid and essential sports gear to support youth sports activities. In July 2021, the Thielen Foundation partnered with Detroit Lakes High School and donated new uniforms to the football team (Fuhrman, 2021). Using the hashtag #ChangeThruSport, the Thielen Foundation kicked off their giving campaign on social media channels with Laker football players modeling the new uniforms.

To date, the Thielen Foundation has contributed over \$200,000 to various youth athletic teams, high schools, and organizations struggling to support their programs amidst the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic (Thielen Foundation, nd). This funding ensures consistent training, fosters discipline, and promotes positive character development through coaching. The #ChangeThruSport campaign has had three successful large fundraising campaigns: upgrading Brooklyn Center High School's stadium lights, enhancing team uniforms and equipment for three inner-city football programs, and revitalizing three weight rooms (“Brooklyn Center Lights | Thielen Foundation”), and also remodeling the high school weight rooms at Detroit Lakes High

School and the neighboring Red Lake Nation (“Thielen Foundation Funds New Red Lake Weight Room”).

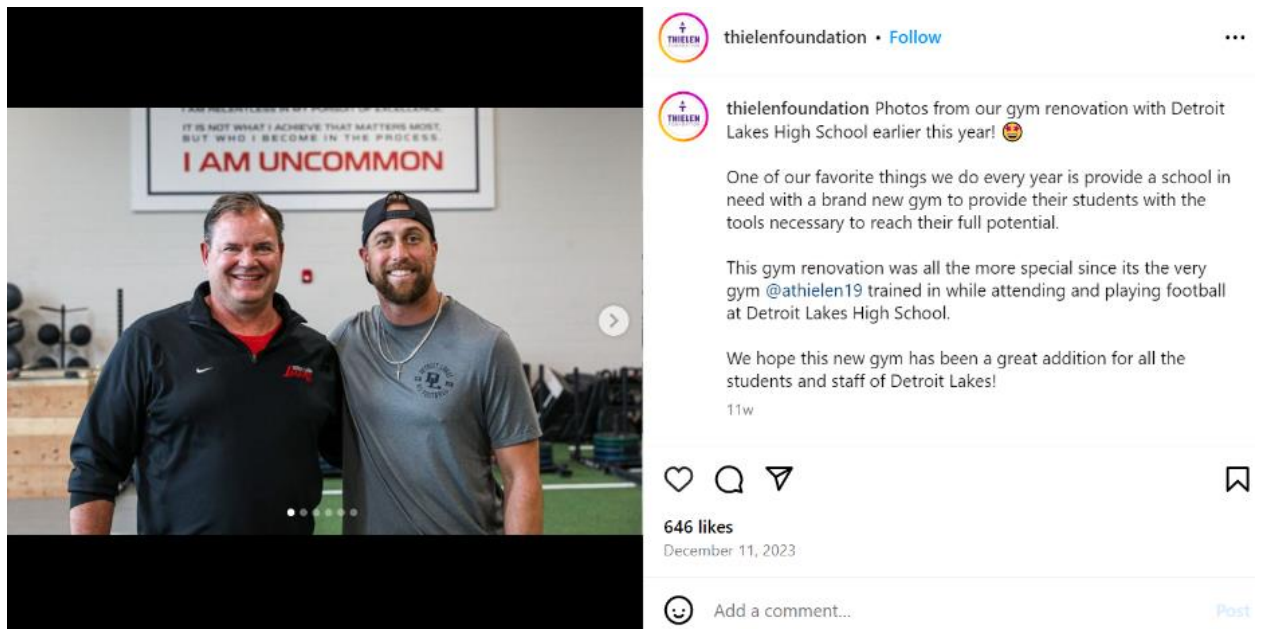


Figure 5: Detroit Lakes Activities Director Rob Nielsen (left) and Adam Thielen pose for a photo in the new DLHS weightroom that the Thielen Foundation funded

Overall, influencer partnerships on Instagram offer brands a powerful way to reach and engage with their target audience authentically, using the influence and creativity of trusted individuals within the platform's vibrant community.

Viral trends, challenges, and hashtags can significantly contribute to the popularity of high school sports content on Instagram by encouraging participation, sparking conversations, and amplifying reach.



Figure 6: A Gopher Men's Hockey graphic posted on Instagram by Daniel Galarneau uses the hashtag *Pride On Ice*

"An important part of social media is developing an identity and connection with the community," says Galarneau. "If you have like a high school team, I would work with the staff or the school or like this just hypothetically just create sort of a brand identity is the main story behind it. And one easy way to do that is just have a hashtag that you use on like every single one of your posts...like a team slogan. Our men's hockey team has had the slogan 'Pride on Ice' for, like, the past hundred years. We always hit Pride on Ice, hashtag pride on ice and add that to pretty much every post that doesn't include like a link. That's usually where I would put it. And then we put it on like graphics and different stuff. It's got to be kind of unique and personal to the program. It's not necessarily something you can force, but it's just as simple as like a hashtag or like an emoji that you attribute to it. And you keep using it over and over, so people see that, and they recognize it and say, hey, that's they just attribute that sort of slogan and emoji to your program. And it just sticks in their mind easier."

Detroit Lakes uses the team slogan on social posts, utilizing #SailsUp and #ChampionsInLife, which is a phrase that Rob Nielsen helped implement when he took over as activities director.

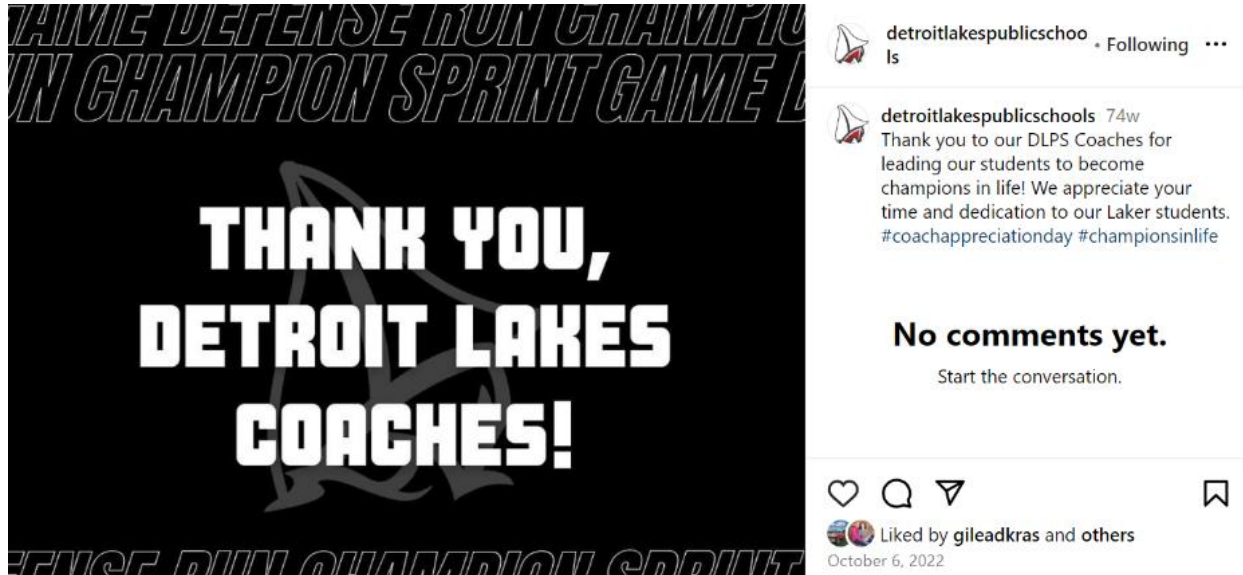


Figure 7: A Detroit Lakes Public Schools Instagram post uses the hashtag *ChampionsInLife*

“Champions in Life kind of started when I took over as AD in 2017. I tried not to rock the boat too much, you know, make some changes, some little things in that, but not, it kind of became clear through that first year that we didn't really have a direction or a mission statement or whatever you want to call it, something to hang our hat on as an athletic department. The summer after my first year, we met with six or eight coaches that. I just put out ‘who wants to be a part of this, we need to have some kind of a vision or whatever for what we're doing here.’ And it's got to be a lot more than just sports because we know this is a terminal experience for 97% of our kids. Most of them aren't going to get any money to play. They're just going to play because they want to play, you know? And so, what is our role? Because I think one of the things some people thought is that high school sports are a feeder program for college. We're supposed to be developing college athletes. No, that's not the goal of high school sports or education-based athletics. It's to provide opportunities for kids to grow and learn through sports. And so, we sat

down and came up with this idea of ‘Champions in Life’ and that, you know, we want to develop respectful, responsible teammates. You know, and then beyond teammates when they're here, people are going to be respectful, responsible spouses, employees, community members, learning things that will help them be successful for the rest of their lives. I don't know exactly where the phrase ‘Champions in Life’ came from. I know it was kind of shaped a little bit from a visit to Minnesota State University – Moorhead. They didn't use champions in life, but it was something similar to that I kind of borrowed it and tweaked for myself. Basically, the same premise that we've got to pull these kids up, so they have something when they leave here because they're likely not going from MSUM to the NFL. So, what is the value of this program? And Coach Jeff Laqua over there does a pretty good job with that.”

With the Champions in Life motto, Nielsen puts a lot of emphasis on the team game versus individual achievements.



Figure 8: The Detroit Lakes Laker Dance Team posts regularly to let fans know when and where the team will be competing

“Overall, on the main district page, I try to not single out individual kids and stuff,” Nielsen says. “I told my coaches if they want to point out individual participants, that’s great. But we've tried to get away from that as a district page and focus a little bit more on team stuff.

So, they'll post-game day stuff and always feature a kid on there. Then I'll share that to the district page. I think all the kids and all the parents look forward to 'hey, today was my day, that's cool', and share it around and those kind things. They'll post about big games and college commitments."

"That kind of recognition drives athletes to work even harder when it what gets posted on social media," says Detroit Lakes senior Mason Carrier (personal communication, February 22, 2024) "All these people who follow Lakers sports sees who's really doing all that stuff. And it blows up. It encourages younger kids to be like the upperclassmen: to work hard and do what they can do. And overall, as an athlete, seeing your accomplishments posted everywhere and people following you and watching you succeed and one wanting to watch you exceed in life is special."



Figure 9: A Detroit Lakes Lakers Boys Basketball team Instagram post congratulating Mason Carrier on breaking the school's all-time rebounding record.

"Another way I would say is also the just promoting the athletes or team with as much like I know high school teams don't get a lot of like content in terms of like pictures during the game or team video or anything like that," says Galarneau. "So like cell phone stuff really, it doesn't matter necessarily based on performance and outreach, whether it's like a professional

photographer taking it or obviously during action shots that would matter. But like I'm saying, like for team events or like bus travel, getting off the bus, like a cell phone video, any little stuff like that goes a long way for high school teams, just because they want to see, they want to see the athletes, they want to see their personalities. They just want to see as much as possible. And that obviously grows all the way to the professional level where you have like features and them doing games. Even the smallest people just want to feel connected. So, the easiest way you can sort of show the personality, show the identity of your team that has the biggest impact on the smallest level.

Another part of the battle with social media, and any community setting, is how to address negativity when things aren't going well or if something controversial happens. Addressing negative comments on social media posts can be a delicate but essential task for high schools aiming to keep a positive and supportive online environment.

"It really depends on what sort of post it is," says Galarneau. "If we lose, it's going to be a lot of negative comments. If we win, it's going to be a lot of positive comments. It's just a lot of emotional responses centered around the team's performance. Sometimes people go overboard, and others feed off of that. If it gets really bad, we'll hide the post and repeat offenders can get blocked. We have a clear set of social media guidelines. We understand that people need to vent, but there is a limit on what is acceptable."

When negative comments arise, it's essential for the school to respond promptly and professionally. Publicly addressing the issue shows that the school takes concerns seriously and is committed to keeping a respectful online community. Responses should be polite, empathetic, and focused on resolving the issue constructively.

# THE IMPACT OF INSTAGRAM ON HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETES AND RECRUITING

In the competitive realm of high school sports, the path to college athletics is a journey filled with determination, skill, and strategic choices. Instagram has emerged as a key platform for college recruiting, offering a visually engaging way for users to chronicle their athletic journey through photos and videos ("How to Use Instagram for College Recruiting"). Essentially serving as a digital sports portfolio, Instagram enables athletes to share their achievements and experiences, while also connecting with friends, family, celebrities, and professional athletes ("How to Use Instagram for College Recruiting").

Coaches are increasingly turning to Instagram to gain insights into a recruit's personality, online representation, and athletic development. Coaches view Instagram as a tool to delve deeper into a recruit's persona and track their progress as an athlete—monitoring skill development, game wins, personal achievements, as well as conduct off the field.

A regularly updated Instagram account provides coaches with a convenient means to stay updated on a recruit's journey, as well as give fans an inside look at who you are ("How to Use Instagram for College Recruiting").

"I think the number one thing about social media is it can kind of add character and color to who a student-athlete is, but coaches do not just troll Instagram and Twitter for high-level athletes," says Daniel Koenig, Recruiting Coordinator with Highlands Ranch Aquatics Club and a former Division I swim coach (direct communication, March 8, 2024). "It's ineffective. There are too many. It's hard to find them. You don't know what you're looking at. You don't know what graduate year. You don't know what that kid's grades are, right? He might be a highlight reel, you know, but it doesn't matter if they're not going to be into your school."

Athletes should adopt a professional and strategic approach when using Instagram for recruiting: use your real name so that it is consistent across all social platforms, use a clear image for your profile photo where your face is visible, include key information in your bio details such as the sports you play, position, school name, graduation year, hometown and even your GPA so coaches are able to easily identify you.

Coaches are allowed to send direct messages to recruits for introductions or to extend good wishes ahead of significant games, as long as they are within NCAA-mandated recruiting periods. Social media platforms serve as a vital tool for coaches aiming to discern the personalities and characters of potential recruits. This allows the coaching staff to connect with, assess, and gather pertinent details about prospective athletes directly without the travel costs. Some coaches create anonymous accounts so that they can discreetly analyze student-athletes and their social media behaviors (“How to Use Instagram for College Recruiting”).

A survey conducted by Cornerstone Reputation revealed that 83% of college coaches reported their teams engaged in online research on recruits. Among these, 88% used Facebook, 82% engaged with Twitter, and 54% browsed Instagram to get a deeper understanding of a recruit's character (“How to Use Instagram for College Recruiting”).

To gain deeper insights into the impact of college recruiting on Instagram, I talked to six students at Detroit Lakes High School. DLHS has been a hub for college scouts looking for talent for their programs. This year's senior class has helped lead Laker varsity team sports have made State tournament appearances in girls' basketball, volleyball, girls track and field, boys track and field, dance, and gymnastics, plus individual appearances in wrestling, swim and dive, downhill skiing and trapshooting (Detroit Lakes Athletics Foundation, nd) and are led by standout athletes in all varsity sports.

Each Laker athlete I talked to has successfully navigated the college recruitment process through various social media platforms. Through interviews conducted with these athletes, we talked about their individual recruitment journeys, the role of social media in their experiences, and the advice they offer to fellow high school students aspiring to compete collegially.

Mason Carrier, a senior at DLHS and a committed athlete to the University of Minnesota, is one of the most decorated athletes in Detroit Lakes school history. Carrier excelled on the football field as a Laker, scoring 33 total touchdowns and amassing 221 career tackles and was named Defensive MVP of the Minnesota High School Football All-Star Game, which earned him a three-star recruiting status and started gaining some state-wide attention when he was ranked the #2 football recruit in the state of Minnesota for the Class of 2024 (Schad, 2023). Carrier also holds the Laker boys' basketball records in both points scored and rebounds and was also a part of the school's record-holding 4x100 meter relay team in track his junior year (Detroit Lakes Athletics Foundation, nd).

Mason's dedication to his sports is clear, and that is evident through his social media channels which boast his highlight tape, stats, training sessions, and work in the community with his teammates. His decision to commit to playing football at the University of Minnesota was influenced by a direct and heartfelt connection to the institution, a dream that has been with him throughout his life.

“My recruitment was definitely different than a lot of athletes,” said Carrier. “My parents both went to Minnesota. My older brother, Ethan, committed to playing football at the U the same day I did. He just finished his freshman season. Mine was pretty short. I went to a few local camps with Ethan. He got recognized by his film after his junior season from one of the recruiting staff members at the University of Minnesota, and he received a junior day invite to go

down there. And I was also asked to go along with them to go on the tour. We both went down there, Ethan went on his official visit, and then after a camp, we were both invited to Coach (PJ) Fleck's office. Ethan got a preferred walk on-offer and I received a full ride scholarship. And both of us knowing this is where we wanted to play our entire lives, it was a pretty easy decision to make. It was my first offer and was the only offer I would ever consider."

Mason's commitment to the University of Minnesota remained steadfast, even in the face of coaching changes and the evolving landscape of college sports, including discussions around name-image-likeness (NIL).

"There is a lot of talk about NIL and money affects recruiting these days," said Carrier. "All these athletes want to make money in college. But to me, being committed to a school, the money shouldn't matter. It should be how you feel there, how you fit in. This is your future. This is what's going to turn you into a man and help you forge your way in life. When I chose University of Minnesota, it was different because I didn't want to visit any other schools. It was exactly what I was looking for. Even after (defensive coordinator Joe) Rossi left the Gophers to coach at Michigan State. It didn't matter what other schools offered me in the future. I could have gotten offers from all over the country that I know of, and it wouldn't have mattered to me because I knew where I wanted to play my whole life, and that's just your hometown kid. You've always wanted to play for that big town university."

When asked about the effectiveness of social media in college recruitment, Carrier highlighted Twitter as a critical platform for athletes. According to him, Twitter offers a professional space for athletes to connect with coaches, share achievements, and gain visibility among various college programs. However, he says it's important to watch what you do or say

on any social platform, because coaches and your fans are watching...especially when you're as highly touted of a prospect as he is.

“You want to stay pretty locked in on colleges and not like other random stuff and having your opinions out there on touchy subjects,” Carrier said. “You want to keep a level head and a pretty neutral base on stuff because that can affect how they see you. Opinions are great to have, but when it comes to college recruitment, you want to keep yourself neutral. Post your film, post what you need to get out there, post family stuff, and just keep a straight line of where you want it to be.”

Carrier's Twitter account is also full of retweets from classmates about their college commitments, too.

Coach Koenig backs up Carrier's statement, saying that parents can help by monitoring their child's social media and to be on the lookout for anything that may scare coaches or recruiters away.

“I've heard a lot of stories where a coach will stop recruiting an athlete because of what they have posted online,” says Koenig. “That is a hundred percent a fact. So, if you're a parent, tell your kid to be careful what they're doing. Monitor their Twitter page, watch their Instagram. Again, that one post can be the difference between a college coach offering him a scholarship, offering him a roster spot, and saying, nope, we're moving on to the next kid. Yep, a lot of kids



Figure 10: A Twitter post from Mason Carrier reaffirming his commitment to the University of Minnesota went viral after a number of defensive coaches left the program following the 2023 season

out there and a lot of kids with similar profiles academically and athletically. You give one coach a reason to not recruit you, they're going to take that. They don't want to risk it. That's their program, that's their job on the line. When there's scholarships involved, they don't screw around with it. So just something to pay attention to.”



Figure 11: Mason Carrier shares a team photo following a rivalry win against Perham

I also talked with Jacee Hauser, a 2023 graduate of Detroit Lakes High School, who is now a walk-on thrower for the track and field team at the Naval Academy. Hauser's high school sports career was marked by perseverance. She was named team captain of the basketball team her junior and senior year and helped lead the Lakers to the state tournament during her junior season and helped the Laker track team reach the True Team State Tournament in back-to-back seasons as a thrower. Despite a season-ending foot injury during her senior basketball season, Hauser kept her commitment to getting her film and accomplishments out to college recruiters.

“I started early,” remembered Hauser (personal communication, February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2024). “Freshman and sophomore years when I started getting meaningful varsity basketball minutes, I put some highlights and stats up on Twitter. That is where I got a lot of coaches to reach out to me. And I also noticed that a lot of really good athletes spent a lot of time on Twitter to showcase their skills. I got this bad mindset that if a coach wants me, they'll find me, which is not the case because it's so competitive. You need to put yourself out there and start the conversation sometimes. It shows that you care and want to go to the next level in college sports. I kind of regret not doing it my junior and senior year.”

Hauser also emphasized the importance of proactive engagement, encouraging students to initiate conversations with college coaches and express genuine interest in their programs. Moreover, Hauser also stressed the significance of maintaining a professional and authentic online presence, as social media serves as a window into athletes' personalities and interests.

"Don't be afraid to reach out and say 'hey, I'm really interested in your program. I really like what you're building.' It shows that you care. It's a really big deal to be able to reach out to college folks and tell them you want to be on their team. A lot of people do it. You may not know that they do it, but a lot of people do that to get exposure. Show your personality, too. You can tell by someone's social media, and what they post their highlights and stuff and how they post and how it shows their character. I've seen friends and teammates get recruited off of social media and what they've posted. It's a really good way to get yourself out there, and it shows colleges that you really care.”

“Coaches can follow kids, they can like tweets,” says Koenig. “You'll see that sort of in the same vein of the text messages where they'll kind of kiss up to you if they tweet out your new highlight video and they like it, but again, they're only following you, they're only doing that

once you've been processed along with recruiting and you've gotten to the step where they've identified you, evaluated you, and again are using that as a way to kind of get and kind of kiss up to you a little bit. And pay attention to that stuff, right? Because that means they're paying attention to you. You can set up a social media account specifically for your sport, right? Share those things with coaches. If they can't contact you, they may want to know what you're doing, they may want to see maybe some of your training regimes, any of that's good, right? Just to kind of show again, I'm really involved in the sport, I care enough about this to broadcast it to the world, and they will follow some of that stuff. And if they do follow you, if they do like your stuff, take that as a good faith that they know about you, and they're pretty interested in what they're doing. I wouldn't waste time like that on social media if I wasn't genuinely interested as a coach. And return the favor, follow them back, like their stuff. Pay attention to what they're posting about their program. They're going to send updates about the accolades they've got or what they're doing, so it's also a great platform for you to learn about that program and continue to keep updates.”

Social media served as a pivotal tool in Hauser's recruitment process. Platforms like Instagram and Twitter eased direct communication with college coaches, enabling her to express interest in specific programs and showcase her athletic abilities.

Ellie Bettcher, who has committed to compete in track and field for Bemidji State University, was a sophomore starter on the Laker basketball team that



Figure 7: Elle Bettcher announces her commitment to Bemidji State University via Twitter

went to the state tournament in 2022 and, like Hauser, was a thrower on the track and field team that made back-to-back True Team State appearances and will lead the team on a quest for a three-peat this spring. Bettcher was also a stand-out goalie for the Laker soccer team, setting the program record for most career saves. For a long time, she thought that soccer would be the sport she would get recruited for the most.

“I was originally more interested in getting recruited for soccer because I thought I was a lot better at that than my other sports and I really like soccer,” said Bettcher. “So, I, as a sophomore, started going to some camps and putting highlight tape on Twitter and like was kind of getting recruited for that once coaches were able to start talking to me. And then I had a pretty good junior year in track and people started reaching out to me to maybe do track in college and I had never really considered that until last summer because I didn't think it was a possibility with my abilities, but then I started improving a lot and I was like, oh this actually might be something I really want to do.”

Social media, particularly Instagram, serves as a pivotal tool for Bettcher to engage with peers, share experiences, and connect with her athletic interests. Through platforms like Instagram, she encountered recruitment-related content, received inquiries from coaches, and engaged in dialogue about potential opportunities. Moreover, social media enabled Bettcher to amplify her presence, share achievements, and broaden her network within the collegiate sports community.

“If you're serious about it, put your stuff out, especially when you're from a smaller town. Instagram and social media levels the playing field. As I know for soccer especially, a lot of recruitment happens at big club tournaments, not particularly in high school soccer. But the closest competitive club team to us is maybe Fargo? But the most competitive ones are all the

way down the Twin Cities. That's a three-and-a-half-hour drive...you can't be doing that for practice. You're kind of at a disadvantage, depending on where you are. But for social media, if you like, put your highlight tape out there, put stuff out there that you've done, then that's, that opens the doorway for a lot more people to even like know you exist, because they can't really recruit you when they don't know you.”

Social media emerged as a catalyst for Bettcher's recruitment process, facilitating direct communication with college coaches and providing insights into collegiate programs. Through platforms like Instagram, Bettcher encountered recruitment-related content, received inquiries from coaches, and engaged in dialogue about potential opportunities.

“The college Instagram accounts I follow post a lot of their special camps and all that, like all the links, so people can sign up for that and go to those. But coaches would follow me on Instagram. I'd let them follow me so they can see like everything that I post and then because I'm a private account, so I let them follow me so they can see what I post and then follow them back. Following coaches and programs from schools you're interested in is a great way to start a connection. And not just the head coach...strength and conditioning coaches, trainers, and current athletes, too. Some coaches would then reach out over message and like we'd just talk through there. They'll usually ask for an e-mail to an easier way to send lots of information my way.”

“I think for the most part what I use social media as a for a college coach was to market my program,” says Koenig. “Whether that was my time at North Dakota, Iona, or Vassar I wanted to project who we were, what our culture was about, some of the cool things we were doing, you know, training trips to Florida, etc. to get those student-athletes in which I was interested a better understanding of what we were doing because, again, I'm not trying to sell a

false product. I want them to know exactly what our program is about and the best way for me to do that was on social media, just kind of on the fly.”

Ryan Erickson is another Laker athlete with extended post-season experience. His dedication to swimming has yielded notable achievements, back-to-back individual appearances at state in the 100-yard freestyle, and berth with the boys 200-yard freestyle relay...a relay team that set the new school record at the 2024 State Swim and Dive Meet. Erickson is also a distance runner for the 2023 Section Champion Boys Track and Field Team that competed in the State meet that season. Erickson is committed to swim for the University of Minnesota-Morris next fall, but is still being actively recruited to run for their cross-country team as well...a sport he has never competed in.

“It was kind of weird,” said Erickson (personal communication, February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2024). “I compete in sprinting events in swimming, and distance events in track. I had committed to Morris for swimming, then the cross-country coach reached out and said he saw my times in the 1600 meter run online and wanted to talk to me about competing in college cross country. He got my contact info from my track coach and the conversation is still ongoing. I have a lot of colleges show off like their Instagram page kind of like show them their achievements. When colleges e-mailed me, they’d send a link to their Insta. There are a lot of good recruiting tools on there.”

In terms of social media usage, Erickson maintains active profiles on Instagram and TikTok, which he mainly uses for entertainment and social connectivity. He acknowledges the prevalence of colleges showcasing their achievements and recruiting efforts through Instagram, providing prospective student-athletes like himself with valuable insights into collegiate swimming programs. While Erickson has not received direct messages from college recruiters on

Instagram, he acknowledges the significance of colleges using social media platforms to reach out to potential recruits.

“That is why you follow them and make sure that they have, you as the athlete, have a pretty good understanding of what's happening with that program,” says Koenig. “Majority of days too, I mean, you have, you know, the program has a Twitter handle, the head coach has a Twitter handle, the assistant coaches all have Twitter handles, right? So again, follow them all. If it's a school that you're interested in, if you've had some communication with them, don't just follow the head coach or the program. Try to expand that reach to as many of the coaches on the staff as possible. It's about visibility at the end of the day. The more people that know who you are, the better.”

Will Martin's football career began a little bit later than his peers, starting football in middle school, and he fell in love with the game. By his senior year, Martin had been named both All-Conference and All-Section on both sides of the ball playing primarily fullback, offensive line and linebacker.

“I knew I wanted to play college football since probably my freshman and sophomore year,” said Martin (personal communication, March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2024).

“Actually, one of our old coaches, Dylan Surface, told us younger guys if we wanted to get recruited, that we should download Twitter and get an account set up. The way Coach Surf described it was



Figure 8: Will Martin announced his commitment to the Minnesota State University-Moorhead via Twitter

to sell ourselves as if we're a business. We have to promote ourselves the best way we can. So, from there, it kind of just took off. Me and a bunch of other guys in our grade kind of just helped each other along, helped each other build our bases on Twitter up, do something that could be presentable, and other coaches could look at us and assess us.”

“Kids these days are very well-versed in social media,” says Koenig. “However, slip-ups can occur. And when it does, it can be very bad. I’ve seen athletes lose scholarships and interest from programs overall if they are a distraction on social media. There are a lot of things athletes, and probably everybody in general, can do to avoid this. Don’t use inappropriate or discriminatory language, don’t promote anything illegal, keep your emotions in check, don’t bad-mouth your coaches, teammates or program, and don’t let your friends post as you from your account. Remember: Everything you post online is accessible to college coaches. Even if your account is private or a coach doesn’t follow you on every platform, your followers can share and take screenshots of your content. One way or another, college coaches will get their eyes on it. Think twice before you post.”

Despite its benefits, Martin voiced concerns about the impact of social media on athletes' self-perception and mental health. The distinction between platforms like Twitter for professional showcasing and Instagram or TikTok for personal content underscores the delicate balance athletes must maintain in their digital personas.

“A lot of my buddies talk about this,” says Martin. “One thing we always kind of decided was, my parents helped me with this a lot too, was don't compare yourself to others on social media. It's so easy to do that when everyone's posting their best pictures, their best videos, their best stats or their best numbers. It's hard not to look at yourself and compare yourself. And it really can tear yourself down a little bit when you can't compare yourself to others because it will

discourage you more than it will help you. Another thing I learned: a coach at a football camp I went to taught me this. He told a whole group this actually, and the thing he was saying is a lot of guys have the mentality D1 or bust, meaning if they don't end up playing on the D1 level, they're not going to play at all, which is really a horrible mentality to have because, I mean, I'm going to be honest, I had that mentality for a while too, but then I realized that it's about me, what's best for me, and D1 is not always best for everyone. So, I'm going to Division II, and that's definitely what's best for me.”

## CONCLUSION

Social media platforms have become integral components of modern society, serving as hubs for communication, information dissemination, and community building. Among these platforms, Instagram has emerged as a leading force in the realm of high school sports, offering a visually compelling and interactive medium for athletes, fans, coaches, and communities to connect and engage with one another.

Instagram's appeal lies in its user-friendly interface, visual-centric design, and diverse array of features tailored to suit the needs of sports enthusiasts. Through the platform's photo and video-sharing capabilities, high school athletes and teams can showcase their performances, achievements, and behind-the-scenes moments to their communities.

“Social media is really important and it’s definitely not going anywhere,” says Seeman. “It does a bunch of things for us. It certainly is a great promotion platform, but I think the most important thing it does is it extends the conversation. Radio is a linear world. There's 24 hours in a day. There's 60 minutes in an hour. And when the show's over, when the game is over, it's linear. It's over, but we get to extend conversations. We get to extend content. We get to extend relationships into platforms like social media that give us another level of relationship building with our listeners and fans.”

The influence of social media, epitomized by platforms like Instagram, has revolutionized the landscape of high school sports in profound ways. From amplifying visibility and popularity to fostering community engagement and interaction, Instagram has become an indispensable tool for athletes, fans, coaches, and communities to connect, celebrate, and share the joys and triumphs of high school sports culture. As social media continues to evolve and

shape the future of sports communication and engagement, it is imperative for stakeholders to embrace these platforms responsibly and ethically, using their power to inspire, unite, and empower the next generation of athletes and sports enthusiasts.

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## CHRONOLOGICAL FIELD NOTES

Week of January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2024

E-mail correspondence with Jim Flink and Kat Lucchesi:

*Hey Jim and Kat! Alrighty, I've mapped out my deadline schedule for the next couple of months:*

*Friday, January 19<sup>th</sup> - Finalize and reach out to Media Pros and ADs for interviews. The following have all been e-mailed or messaged:*

*ADs: Josh Lee (Staples-Motley), Rob Nielsen (Detroit Lakes)*

*Pros: Dan Seeman (VP/Region Manager Hubbard Broadcasting/Minnesota), Heather Rule (In-game social media manager/Minnesota Twins), Ellie Bruesewitz (social media coordinator/University of Northwestern-St. Paul), Devon Reagan (social media strategist/Minnesota Wild), Daniel Galarneau (U of Minnesota social media for MBB and MHKY)*

*I'll start with those seven and add more from my proposal if needed.*

*Wednesday, January 24<sup>th</sup> - Deadline to schedule Pros/ADs interviews*

*Friday, January 26<sup>th</sup> - Begin scheduling student-athlete interviews*

*Confirmed interest:*

*Ethan Carrier (Football/U of Minnesota)*

*Mason Carrier (future football U of Minnesota)*

*Will Martin (future MSUM football) contact on Twitter*

*Jordan Tucker (Baseball/Hutchinson College)*

*Jacee Hauser (Track and Field/Navy)*

*Ryan Erickson (future swimming/U of M-Morris)*

*Elle Bettcher (future Track and Field/BSU)*

*Ashley Robben (Track and Field/MSUM)*

*Aften Robinson (Track and Field/UMD)*

*I'll start with those eight and add more from my proposal if needed.*

*Monday, January 29<sup>th</sup> thru Friday, February 23<sup>rd</sup> - Conduct and transcribe interviews, compile research*

*Friday, February 23<sup>rd</sup> - Conclude interviews, continue compiling research*

*Friday, March 8<sup>th</sup> - Complete and submit Rough Draft*

*Sunday, March 24<sup>th</sup> - submit final project (my 37<sup>th</sup> birthday...happy birthday to me, graduate school is done!) Continue working into April if needed.*

#### Week of January 21st, 2024

E-mail correspondence with Jim Flink and Kat Lucchesi:

*Good evening, everyone. Here's a quick update on how stuff went this week:*

*I had a nice chat with activities director Rob Nielsen today...about 20 minutes with a lot of great stuff. I'll work on transcribing that conversation this weekend. I'm working on setting up an interview with Heather Rule of the Minnesota Twins sometime next week. I have also heard back from Daniel Galarneau of the University of Minnesota. I haven't heard back on any of my other inquiries yet but will follow up on them tonight here. My top two targets from that group are Ellie from the University of Northwestern social media team and Dan, the VP of Digital at Hubbard Broadcasting. I think I got enough from my conversation with Rob where I could forego the other AD. If I can re-connect with Daniel, Ellie and Dan, that would be my five.*

*Rob also mentioned to me that a good interview would be with Garrett Raboin of Augustana University in South Dakota. Two years ago, Raboin was hired as the head coach of the Augustana Men's Hockey team...a team that didn't exist. He had two years to start the program from scratch. The team, in its inaugural season, features players from each province in Canada, as well as several international players from overseas. I'm curious to see how social media impacted building that team. Raboin was on a Fargo sports radio show yesterday. Rob sent me the audio: [Hot Mic with Dom Izzo \(inforum.com\)](https://www.inforum.com) I'll give it a listen this weekend.*

*After my conversation with Rob, I'm making a list of questions to add to my list specifically for the HS students. I'll reach out to the first couple of students tomorrow (they're playing games tonight). Mason Carrier and Elle Bettcher are the first two I'd like to connect with, then go from there.*

Week of February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2024

E-mail correspondence with Jim Flink and Kat Lucchesi:

*Hi, everyone.*

*I interviewed Heather Rule, the in-game social media coordinator for the Minnesota Twins last Tuesday. Turns out she also covers high school sports as a freelance journalist, so she also had a lot of input on high school social media and how it affects covering teams. It was a very good interview.*

*I've got a meeting with Dan Seeman, the VP of Marketing with Hubbard Broadcasting, on Thursday afternoon. I think that is where I will get the bulk of the interview information for this project. I'm very excited about that opportunity.*

*I have also reached out to Garrett Raboin, the head coach of Augustana Men's Hockey. He was hired as the team's first head coach two years ago and has spent that time building up the roster for the inaugural season. He has players from nine states, five Canadian provinces, and two countries overseas.*

*I'm still working on setting up interviews with the University of Minnesota's Men's Basketball team, and the University of Northwestern-St. Paul's social media managers. I received a response to my initial request from the U of M but have not heard back from UNW. I have a friend who runs the baseball account for them, so I may reach out to him to get me introduced.*

*I have narrowed down my list of high school students to five and have confirmed interviews with them. I will be interviewing Mason Carrier (University of Minnesota/Football), Elle Bettcher (Bemidji State/Track and Field), Jacee Hauser (Navy/Track and Field), Will Martin (Moorhead State/Football), and Jordan Tucker (Hutchinson Community College/Baseball).*

*I'll send an update on Friday letting you know how my interview with Hubbard Broadcasting goes.*

Week of February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2024

E-mail correspondence with Jim Flink and Kat Lucchesi:

*Hey, everyone. Just checking in and giving a quick update on my progress.*

*I've had two interviews since my last e-mail, one with Hubbard Broadcasting Marketing VP Dan Seeman and with Daniel Galarneau, a social media coordinator with the University of Minnesota. My interview with Mr. Seeman was a great look at the landscape of social media.*

*Mr. Galarneau had a lot of great Instagram insight as well as some advice for high school programs and some things to focus on with their posting. Tonight, one of the kids I'm planning on interviewing (Mason Carrier) passed NFL player Adam Thielen for second place on our school's boys basketball scoring list and social media is buzzing. I may use those numbers in my research. He is also one rebound away from setting the school record there, too.*

*I'm still working on nailing down Garrett Raboin, the head coach of men's hockey at Augustana. We had talked about connecting this week, but the week got away from us.*

*This week, in addition to connecting with Coach Raboin, I'm planning on starting to layout my introduction and my interview field notes. After that is complete, I'll schedule my interview with the students. Those interviews will focus more on the examination of social implications Instagram has on HS sports related to self-esteem, performance pressure, exposure, etc.*

#### *Week of February 26th, 2024*

*E-mail correspondence with Jim Flink and Kat Lucchesi:*

*Good evening, everyone! Just checking in to let you know how the week went. I got all my interviews done by my February 23<sup>rd</sup> deadline but do have some flexibility to add some more.*

*This week, I talked to three of my HS students in Mason Carrier, Jacee Hauser and Elle Bettcher as well as baseball coach/social media coordinator Luke Widbin with the University of Northwestern-St. Paul. I never did get a return e-mail from Garrett Raboin, but Luke was on my list as a back-up. I still have some flexibility to add him if he's still interested. I got some very good answers from the high school kids too and will only need three, but I can add my fourth if I need to. Are only three HS interviews going to be enough? I am finishing up my transcripts*

tonight. I have my introduction done and will break down the rest of my research into four other categories: Instagram's role in HS sports visibility, it's contribution to the popularity of high school sports and activities, engagement with the HS community on Insta, it's impact on college recruiting, and future directions and recommendations for high school media managers.

The goal is to have the paper done by March 9th. Once it's done, do I send it to you guys for feedback, or is there a third-party I should send my rough draft to?

March 8th, 2024

*E-mail correspondence with Jim Flink and Kat Lucchesi:*

*Good afternoon, everybody! Another quick update here.*

*I wrapped up my interviews this week. I wasn't able to connect with Coach Raboin at Augustana, but in my research I read some stuff by Dan Koenig, who is a former DI and DII swim coach and currently works as a recruiting coordinator for a swim and dive program in Colorado. I tracked him down on LinkedIn and connected with him for an interview yesterday morning. He had some GREAT insight on social media and recruitment that really filled in a lot of gaps I had in my research that I didn't know I had. The interview was quick, but I think it will pull the recruitment chapter of my paper together. I also talked to another HS senior Will Martin this afternoon who also offered some great insight with his recruitment experiences.*

*Overall, I've talked to one activities director, two coaches, three social media professionals and five high school students.*

*My original goal was to have my rough draft finished by tomorrow, and I think I can still make it happen. I've categorized my project into six sections: My introductions, The Role of Instagram in High School Sports Visibility, Instagram's Contribution of the Popularity of High*

*School Sports, Building Sports Community Through Instagram, The Impact of Instagram on High School Athletes and College Recruiting, and Recommendations for High School Social Media Coordinators. I'll add my interview with Will to my Recruiting chapter...then the only other chapter I'll have is my Recommendations chapter and conclusion left.*

## Appendix A

### Original Project Proposal

**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this research project using the *uses and gratifications method* will involve studying how and why people use media and communication technologies to satisfy their needs and desires. This method is commonly used in media and communication studies to understand the motivations behind media consumption, in this case, Instagram content consumption of high school sports via social media.

### INTRODUCTION:

The dynamic realm of social media and sports entertainment are in constant flux. Consequently, sports journalists have been compelled to pivot in their coverage, not only in their reporting style but also in the substance of their news coverage. Within the sphere of sports media, a fundamental question arises: how has the introduction of non-traditional media impacted the way that journalists have changed their approach to covering high school sports.

Professional and collegiate sports teams have been at the forefront at information sharing and content generation via social media, and their fans are used to having an influx of knowledge, content and reporting at their fingertips. With the importance of high school athletics in communities across the country, media outlets covering these specific teams are sitting on a proverbial goldmine of clicks and content as a way to boost non-traditional channels.

A lot of high school programs have built a strong following for their various programs and Activity Pages on Facebook and Twitter, which are the two sites that a majority of parents and grandparents use. My hypothesis is, while some high school athletes have Facebook and Twitter, they don't use them regularly. How can schools reach their student body via social media on a more consistent basis?

The purpose of this research is to devise a step-by-step plan to help are high school athletic directors increase publicity, revenue and engagement for their programs via social media that the younger generation is using, specifically Instagram.

In today's culture, enthusiastic use of social media for entertainment purposes, particularly among the younger demographic, is widely accepted. Social platforms in sports are increasingly becoming primary sources for team news and updates, behind-the-scenes content and player profiles while at the same time sharing promotions and contest, providing opportunities for fan engagement and sponsorship activation, charitable initiatives, live streaming and ticket sales/revenue generation (i.e., jersey and merchandise sales). This is something that high school teams should absolutely be taking advantage of, regardless of the size of the program. (Perry, 2020).

Social media has seen nothing by exponential growth since becoming popular in the mid-2000s. Instagram launched as a photo-sharing site in 2010, and added video to compete with the now-defunct Vine in 2013 (Iqbal, 2023). Real growth for the platform came in 2016 after the platform added Instagram Stories, which helped boost platform numbers to 500 million active users in 2018 (Iqbal, 2023).

The rise of social media holds significance for high school activities directors across the country, as they unveil a more effective means of reaching a broader audience and being able to distribute information quickly and directly to athletes, parents and fans. Unlike traditional press outlets that offer nonpartisan, fact-based coverage, leveraging social media allows administrators to have greater control over their messaging (Perry, 2020).

Scott Garvis, athletic director at Ankeny Centennial High School in Iowa, added, "Media coverage of sports isn't always favorable. The complete story isn't always told, so as athletic

directors, we need to ensure we are conveying our narratives to the community, showcasing the remarkable achievements of our coaches and student-athletes on a daily basis. (Perry, 2020).”

"Where we're situated in Glenwood, Iowa, we have just one newspaper that publishes weekly, and no local media in town," explained Jeff Bissen, athletic director at Glenwood High School. "So, many people don't find out about our game results until the following week or have to search online. Through social media, we're able to share our story and keep people informed (Perry, 2020)."

In this rapidly evolving landscape of journalism, addressing the shifting dynamics, misinformation challenges, and global crises requires a keen understanding of the news habits of Americans aged 40 and below—soon to dominate the news consumer demographic. A comprehensive analysis by the Media Insight Project, a collaboration between The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research and the American Press Institute, delves into the preferences and interactions of Millennials and Generation Z regarding critical information affecting both their personal lives and societal functioning (The Media Insight Project).

Data from an August 2022 survey encompassing nearly 6,000 individuals aged 16 to 40 reveals that this demographic actively engages with a diverse array of topics sourced from traditional news outlets and individual influencers (The Media Insight Project). The subjects span not only "lifestyle" content like celebrities and sports but also encompass "hard news" and "news you can use." Given the current challenges to democracy, the COVID-19 pandemic, pervasive misinformation, and other crises, understanding how this age group navigates and processes news, especially in the categories of "hard news" and "news you can use," is crucial for contemporary news organizations.

A diverse mix of Gen Z and Millennials closely follow popular topics, including crime and public safety, COVID-19 information, health and mental health, and details about traffic, transportation, and weather (The Media Insight Project). The audience for these topics reflects the overall demographic makeup of individuals aged 16 to 40, indicating broad appeal across age, gender, race, ethnicity, community type, and education level (The Media Insight Project). However, distinct generational differences emerge in the audiences for national politics and social issues, with national politics attracting older Millennials and social issues resonating more with Gen Z (The Media Insight Project). Despite these variations, neither audience is dominated by a specific age group.

Educational attainment influences the frequency of topic followings, particularly evident in the preference for crime and public safety among those without a college degree. Facebook remains the predominant social media platform for the most-followed topics, yet its dominance varies across categories. Local news media, especially local TV stations and newspapers, play a crucial role in providing information on crime, COVID-19, and traffic and weather for Gen Z and Millennials. Notably, preferences for certain topics, such as national politics, correlate with a higher likelihood of paying for news, emphasizing the diverse engagement patterns within this demographic.

Social media today also plays a huge role in the everyday lives of teenagers. A study done by the AACAP in March of 2018 showed that 90% of teenagers between the ages of 13-17 use social media, 75% have multiple social media accounts with 51% saying they check their social media at least once per day. In addition, nearly 66% of respondents said they have their own mobile device with internet access (Social Media and Teens, 2018).

My research for this project will consist of in-depth interviews with athletic directors and content creators and to devise a step-by-step game plan to be utilized by other AD's to promote their high school athletes and programs, specifically through Instagram.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In her 2017 University of Missouri Graduate project 'HOW SPORTS AUDIENCE BUILD PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH FANS: A SOCIAL MEDIA CASE STUDY' (Holman, 2017), Abigail Holman explores how social media coverage has changed over the last handful of years to its current format that benefits heavily on audience engagement.

Holman's hypothesis tests the relationship between fans' team identification and their engagement with a sports team's social media. High team identification is expected to lead to greater loyalty and consistent social media interaction, while low team identification may result in reduced engagement with the team's online content. The study involves a content analysis of the team's social media platforms to assess the level of fan identification and the types of content that foster stronger identification (Holman, 2017). By addressing the gap in knowledge, this research provides valuable insights for sports organizations to enhance their social media strategies and build stronger fan-brand relationships (Holman, 2017).

Holman points out that the traditional media landscape, including television, newspapers, magazines, and radio, has historically provided fans with coverage of their favorite teams and athletes. However, the emergence of social networking sites (SNS) has transformed the way fans access real-time sports information. Research has explored the motivations and usage patterns of SNS platforms and their perceived advantages and disadvantages. While no distinct demographic factors strongly correlate with media platform usage, it is noted that media use often aligns with the athletes who generate the content. The interactive and non-linear nature of social platforms

has led fans to shift away from traditional media, altering their interaction with sports content and athletes (Holman, 2017).

Holman's research also asks one crucial question is: who are the fans? Research involving college football fans, primarily affluent season ticket holders over the age of 40, both alumni and non-alumni, highlights the importance of tailoring messages for these demographics (Holman, 2017). It is suggested that integrating less-known media, such as Twitter and podcasts, into popular social networking sites like Facebook and YouTube could effectively reach different segments of the fan base. Additionally, age demographics may influence comfort with specific platforms, as older individuals may be less confident with platforms like Twitter, while younger generations may not be as familiar with talk radio, emphasizing the significance of platform familiarity over content comfort (Holman, 2017). However, it's important to note that social media engagement has evolved over time, with active users across various platforms increasing as of October 18, 2016 (Holman, 2017).

Social platforms enable a level of engagement and interaction that traditional media cannot provide, fundamentally altering the way people communicate. The evolution of social media and changing consumer expectations have given rise to expectations of brand interaction on social networking sites, reshaping the one-way communication structure of parasocial relationships (Holman, 2017). Although two-way communication is possible between brands and customers on social media, it is suggested that parasocial interactions on these platforms tend to be more one-sided due to the scripted and constrained nature of brand responses (Holman, 2017).

## THEORY

The Uses and Gratification Theory is attributed to Jay G Blumler and Elihu Katz in 1974 (Gordon, 2022). Their theory focuses on the needs and motives of media users and why consumers gravitate towards certain forms of media and content. (Gordon, 2022). However, the theory originated with Harold Laswell in the 1940s, who theorized that media has four primary functions: surveillance, correlation, entertainment, and cultural transmission (Gordon, 2022). Laswell also stated that society is made up of small parts and the purpose of these sub-systems is to meet the primary needs of the groups. The groups are active participants and are motivated in selecting the media that they choose to consume (Gordon, 2022). The theory also operates based on two key principles: media users actively choose which forms of media to consume, and they are conscious of the reasons guiding their selection of specific media options over others.

Bloomer and Katz tweaked Laswell's theory a little bit, expanding on his four uses of media. The first combines diversion and entertainment, which consumer use to get away from everyday problems (Vinney, 2019). The second function involves personal relationships, where consumers form emotional connections with media as a substitute for real interpersonal interaction. The third relates to personal identity, as consumers associate with characters in texts and TV programs, acquiring new behaviors and values. The fourth is surveillance, which satisfies the consumer's need for information (Vinney, 2019).

Uses and Gratifications also focuses on five core elements, as presented by Blumler and Katz (Sridharan, 2022):

- Media use is perceived to be goal-directed. We know exactly where to find the information we need. The audience is fully aware of the type of media it is looking for (Sridharan, 2022).

- The audience is responsible for linking the type of media to fit their mass communication needs. The media itself doesn't look for an audience; instead, the audience chooses the media types that fulfill its needs (Sridharan, 2022).
- Media competes with other sources for needs satisfaction. There are multiple ways to satisfy an audience's needs (Sridharan, 2022).
- Modern media competes with more traditional media (Sridharan, 2022).
- Audience has a sense of self-awareness of its motives and needs that allows it to share its media experiences as active media users (Sridharan, 2022).

The research shows that people want to know what is going on in their communities. My thesis will answer the following questions:

RQ1) How has the use of social media impacted the visibility and popularity of high school sports programs within their local communities and beyond?

RQ2) How do high school sports content creators and consumers perceive the effectiveness of Instagram as a platform for disseminating and engaging with local sports content, and what strategies or content types are most successful in leveraging each platform for community engagement in the context of high school sports?

RQ3) What is the impact of Instagram on the reach, engagement and overall visibility of local high school content and how do these platforms influence the audience's interaction with sports-related content at the community level?

#### METHOD OVERVIEW:

The primary qualitative method I will be using for my information gathering is a series of in-depth interview discuss what participants prioritize in their non-traditional media sports coverage. In-depth one-on-one research interviews offer several benefits in various fields of

research. Some of the benefits of this research will include recording rich and detailed data directly from the participant, establishing a personal connection that can lead to more candid and honest responses, the ability to explore experiences, allows a more tailored approach to the questions and establishes trust and rapport with participants.

While one-on-one research interviews offer numerous advantages, they also come with challenges, such as time and resource intensiveness, potential interviewer bias, and the need for skilled interviewers. Researchers must carefully plan and execute interviews to maximize their benefits and mitigate potential drawbacks.

*DESIGN AND PARTICIPANTS:* My series of interviews would consist of eight interviews with Athletic Directors and/or high school coaches, as well as content creators that currently cover pro, college and/or high school sports.

The interviews would have a mix of genders and a representative from a varying market size or school district size. I would conduct the interviews to ensure I gather the most information possible, using open-ended questions to help guide a discussion of thoughts. The audio of the discussion would be recorded for transcription and reference.

*SAMPLING:* Ideal interviewees would be broken down into two groups: Content Creators/Media Professionals/High School Activities Directors and high school seniors/college freshman who are committed to or are currently competing for a collegiate program.

*DATA COLLECTION/CODING PROCEDURES:* The discussion in the interview will focus on social media strategy and the impact that covering sports has on a community. The interview will be broken down into two parts, general social media questions, followed by a series of questions specifically about Instagram. Questions will include, but are not limited to:

#### SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGER/ACTIVITY DIRECTOR QUESTIONS

1. How has the use of social media impacted the visibility and popularity of high school sports programs within their local communities and beyond?
2. What are the primary motivations and goals of high school sports programs in using social media, and how do these objectives align with the expectations and interests of their target audience, including students, parents, alumni, and community members?
3. What role does social media play in enhancing communication and collaboration among high school sports stakeholders, including coaches, athletes, parents, and school administrators?
4. What strategies and best practices do successful high school sports programs employ in their social media efforts, and how can these be adapted and implemented by other schools?
5. To what extent does the engagement with social media platforms influence the attendance and support for high school sports events, and how does this relate to the overall school spirit and sense of belonging among students and the community?
6. What are the future trends and potential developments in the use of social media for high school sports, and how can schools prepare and adapt to maximize the benefits while mitigating risks?
7. How has Instagram changed the landscape of promoting high school sports compared to traditional methods?
8. What advantages do Instagram have over other new media?
9. What types of content perform well on those platforms, and do you have any examples of successful engagement strategies or campaigns?

10. What challenges do social media professionals face when promoting high school sports on Instagram and how do you overcome these challenges to ensure effective promotion and engagement?
11. Do you find that certain demographics or age groups prefer one platform over the other when it comes to engaging sports content?
12. How do social media users typically interact with sports content and how does this interaction contribute to promotion efforts?
13. How do you leverage social media to build a sense of community around high school sports and what role do these platforms play in fostering a strong connection between the audience and the teams?

Questions for Student Interviews:

1. How do you currently use social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter, or TikTok?
2. Have you ever encountered college recruitment content or messages from coaches or universities on social media?
3. What types of content do you find most effective or engaging when it comes to college recruitment on social media?
4. Do you actively follow or engage with college sports teams or athletes on social media platforms?
5. How do you feel about the role of social media in the college recruitment process for student-athletes?
6. Have you ever considered using social media to showcase your athletic abilities or achievements to college recruiters?

7. What concerns or reservations do you have about engaged with college recruitment efforts on social media?
8. Do you think social media has changed the way college recruiters discover and evaluate potential student-athletes?
9. How do you balance your personal use of social media with the potential for it to impact your college recruitment prospects?
10. In your opinion, what advice would you give to other high school students navigating the college recruitment process through social media?
11. How does the use of Instagram impact the self-esteem of high school athletes, particularly in comparison to their peers?
12. What role does Instagram play in shaping the performance pressure experienced by high school athletes, and how does it influence their psychological well-being?
13. In what ways do high school athletes engage in social comparison on Instagram, and how does this affect their mental health and sense of self-worth?
14. How does the democratization of high school sports coverage through Instagram contribute to the recognition and exposure of athletes outside of traditional media channels?
15. What are the psychological benefits and drawbacks associated with high school athletes showcasing their talent on Instagram, and how does it impact their sense of identity?

#### RESEARCHER'S ROLE:

The role of the researcher in qualitative research is to delve into the thoughts and feelings of the interview participants. It is beneficial for the researcher to actively guide the interview process, thus enabling a more substantial accumulation of data.

#### RESEARCH MATERIALS:

For my interviews, I am putting together a list of six to eight potential candidates ranging from small high school Athletic Directors and SIDs, collegiate SIDs, radio and print professionals, and collegiate and professional sports team social media coordinators. So far, my potential list of candidates is as follows:

- Heather Rule, in-game social media coordinator Minnesota Twins
- Jason Groth, Sports Information Director of Perham High School (enrollment 1,581)
- Rob Nielsen, Activities Director at Detroit Lakes High School (enrollment 2,805)
- Dr. Matt Hill, Director of Athletics at University of Northwestern-St. Paul
- Dave Cresap, coach at Minnesota State-Fergus Falls, former head boys coach at Perham
- Daniel Galarneau, Social Media Strategist for University of Minnesota Men's Basketball and Men's Hockey
- Mills Armbruster, Assistant AD and Marketing for University of Minnesota Football
- Sonya Goergen, Director of Marketing at North Dakota State University
- Dan Seeman, VP at Hubbard Broadcasting, Minneapolis division
- Kelli Frieler, Digital Content Strategist at Leighton Media
- Devon Reagan, Digital Content Coordinator for Minnesota Wild

I will also interview six to eight high school athletes or recent high school graduates that have committed to compete or are currently competing in athletics at the collegiate level to see how social media, specifically Instagram, has influenced their recruitment options. I will also interview a few of their parents as well. My list is as follows:

- Mason Carrier, Detroit Lakes High School (committed to play football for University of Minnesota)

- Ethan Carrier, Detroit Lakes (currently a freshman on the University of Minnesota football team)
- Matthew Carrier (father of Ethan Carrier and Mason Carrier)
- Jaden Hackel, Perham (committed to participate in Track and Field at UW-LaCrosse)
- Marcus Belka, Perham (currently freshman golfer for MSU-Mankato)
- Anna Cihak, Detroit Lakes (currently golfing for MSU-Mankato)
- Elle Bettcher, Detroit Lakes (uncommitted, receiving offers to play soccer)
- Isaac Cariveau, Detroit Lakes (committed to play football at University of North Dakota)
- Jayden Gunderson, Detroit Lakes (current freshman volleyball player at University of New Orleans)
- Ryan Erickson, Detroit Lakes (uncommitted, receiving offers to swim)
- Grace Gunderson, Detroit Lakes (uncommitted, reigning state champion in high jump)
- Bjorn Anderson, Perham (uncommitted, one of the top XC runners in MN)
- Abby Larson, Detroit Lakes (currently a freshman at the University of North Dakota, competing in Track and Field)
- Jerzie Horner, Detroit Lakes (state gymnastics champion, current Track and Field freshman at University of North Dakota)
- Ava Jones, Detroit Lakes (committed to volleyball at UM-Duluth)
- Finn Diggins, Perham (currently plays football for North Dakota State)
- Levi Richter, Perham (currently plays football for University of Minnesota)

The potential list will continue to expand, specifically as I look for larger high schools to participate in. All interviews would occur between January and March of 2024 either in-person or via Zoom.

While there are a variety of research methods that can be used when researching social and emerging media, I chose Uses and Gratification based on the specific research objectives, questions and context of study. My key takeaways from the Uses and Gratifications method are that the method characterizes people as active and motivated in selecting the media they choose to consume (Vinney, 2019), the theory that users are aware of their reasons for selecting different media options (Vinney, 2019), and that expanded choice brought about by new media has opened up new avenues of uses and gratifications research that has led to the discovery of new gratifications, especially in regards to social media (Vinney, 2019).

Uses and Gratification is well-suited for my project due to its focus on understanding how individuals use media to satisfy their needs and desires, specifically in the realm of high school athletics and activities. Uses and Gratification focuses on a number of criteria that I think would benefit my research. A User-Centric Perspective aims to understand how individuals engage with and use social platforms (Uses and Gratification Theory, 2010), studies users social media habits and how it influences their behavior such as content sharing, interaction and consumption (Uses and Gratification Theory, 2010), studies the diverse gratifications that social media offers including social information, information-seeking, entertainment and self-expression (Uses and Gratification Theory, 2010), and explores the individual differences between uses that looks at unique motivations and preferences in social media use (Uses and Gratification Theory, 2010).

### RESEARCH STEPS

Uses and Gratification involves a series of steps to understand why people use media to fulfill their needs and desires. The steps of my research would include the following steps: Define research objectives, finish determining my sample of participants, conduct in-depth one-

on-one interviews to gain a deeper understanding of participants' media strategy and motivation, collect data and confirm that it is well-documented (all interview will be recorded) and identify themes and patterns in my data, summarize my findings and conduct my final review on how to implement my findings.

#### CONCLUSION:

In summary, the Uses and Gratifications Theory provides a valuable framework for answering research questions related to media consumption, motivations, and effects. It offers insights into the active role of individuals in selecting and using media to satisfy their needs and desires, which is essential for understanding the complex dynamics of media in society.

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## **APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS**

*Interview with Rob Nielsen, Activities Director at Detroit Lakes High School*

*January 25, 2024*

ZF: Talking to Rob Nielsen, the activities director at Detroit Lakes Public Schools in Detroit Lakes, Minnesota. Rob, thanks for the time today.

RN: You bet, happy to help.

ZF: Rob, jumping right in here. You do a lot of posting for the activities and athletics side of social media at DLHS. How do you think that social media has impacted visibility and popularity of programs at DLHS?

RN: How is it impacted visibility and popularity? I don't know if it necessarily impacted popularity. I think there's a lot of people that maybe keeps up with what's going on, that maybe Art doesn't know. And I've had a few people that go, hey, the boys are really having a great season. I've seen it three or four times. And hey, we'll get out and go to a game. But I think it maybe brings in a few outliers that maybe aren't as tied as close to the school and see some stuff going on and make an effort to get out and see things. Sure.

ZF: Do you think that's impacted by each of the sports having their own dedicated social media page? Like boys' basketball posts pretty regularly. I know the dance team posts pretty regularly. Football, I know Reed (Hefta) is pretty active there as well. Does that have any kind of impact based on, I don't know, outreach? At least marginally.

RN: You know, to be honest, just between you and I, I think the impact is marginal. I think it's more about a communication thing for the people who are active and following you as it is about, you know, drawing new people in. Does it draw some new people in? Yeah. But I think it's more of a communication tool with the people that are genuinely already interested. You know, and

unfortunately, I think, maybe unfortunately it is the wrong word, but I think on some levels it's become a necessary evil. You know, one of the things I struggle with is, you know, I try to not online single out individual kids and stuff. Like what I post on that high school one, and I told my coaches, you know, if you guys want to point out, but, you know, kind of what we've done with our champions in life is we've tried to get away from that and focus a little bit more on team stuff and things. And so, you know, but I think even just like the little things where he puts up the game day stuff and always features a kid on there. You know, I think all the kids and all the parents look forward to, hey, today was my day, that's cool, and share it around and those kinds of things. But, you know, I think it keeps some alumni probably engaged with what's going on that maybe wouldn't keep up if they weren't home, especially the younger kids, you know, that probably graduated in the last five to 10 years since social media has been a thing. Probably keep up with how we're doing there. Based off of that, that, you know, 10 years ago, they would have had no idea.

ZF: Tell me about the Champions In Life campaign and how that started.

RN: Well, it kind of started that first year that I came in (2017) I just kind of, I kind of tried not to rock the boat too much, you know, make some changes, some little things in that, but not, it kind of became clear through that first year that we didn't really have a direction or a mission statement or whatever you want to call it, something to hang our hat on as an athletic department that we all kind of agreed on and believed in. And so, you know, that summer after my first year, we met with I think six or eight coaches that, you know, I just put out 'who wants to be a part of this, we need to have some kind of a vision or whatever for what we're doing here.' And it's got to be a lot more than just sports because we know, hey, this is a terminal experience for 97% of our kids and probably 99% of our kids, even if they do play, aren't going to get any money to

play. They're just going to play because they want to play, you know? And so what is our role? Because I think one of the things where some people thought, well, like we're a feeder program, we're supposed to be developing college athletes. It's like, no, that's not the goal of high school sports or education-based athletics. It's to provide opportunities for kids to grow and learn through sports. And so, you know, we kind of sat down and came up with this idea of 'champions in life' and that, you know, we want to develop respectful, responsible teammates. You know, and then beyond teammates when they're here, people are going to be respectful, responsible spouses, employees, community members, you know, all of those things that is here that will help them be successful for the rest of their lives. And so that's kind of where that came from. And I'll be honest, I don't know exactly where the champions in life, where we came up with that from. I know I had been one of the things that had kind of shaped a little bit of that was there was a point where I was at Moorhead State (Minnesota) for something, and they didn't use champions in life, but it was something very similar to that I kind of stole and tweaked for myself. Basically the same kind of thing is, you know, we've got to pull these kids up so they have something when they leave here because they're not going from M-State to the NFL. So what is the value of this program? And Coach Jeff Laqua over there does a pretty good job with that. So that was kind of stolen from based on something they had done with their kids.

ZF: Emailing back and forth with Kayla a little bit, she told me about some of the DL Public Schools social media mission statement stuff. One of those is the guiding principles of Laker Pride, purpose, relationships, innovation, development, and equality, and how that not only relates just to athletics but also district-wide, whether that's in the Rossman Building or the Roosevelt Building, or whether that's for one-act play or kind of a big blanket statement.

ZF: Tell us about the Laker Pride principles when it comes to social media.

RN: Well, you know, I just think we're trying to, you know, it's the whole thing, and it goes back forever that, you know, if you don't put out the message or control the message, someone else will. And you see that happen. I mean, just like this whole The Lunch thing that blew up here, what, a week ago or whatever. The whole narrative was, oh, God, it's terrible, this, that, and, well... It's not. I've never seen or heard anything just jumped on. So I think it's that idea that, hey, we want to portray the Laker Pride and the good stuff that's going on, and, you know, anybody can focus on, oh, this kid went and got in trouble, or this happened at the school, or, you know, you look at some of the issues that the West Fargo and Fargo principals have had here in the last year. And, yeah, we can focus on those kind of one-off things, and obviously those are very serious things. But we have tons of awesome stuff that happens in our buildings every single day. And I think it's important to share those. You know, education doesn't get always the best shape right now in our world, and if we aren't promoting the cool stuff we're going to do, nobody's going to. And, you know, I think where it's really kind of hit home for me is when we've done, you know, we've had these class reunions and things come back, and we've done tours of the building, and how many people go, God, this is so awesome. I wish we had this when I was in high school. And, you know, we don't always do a good job of promoting that, but when you hear these people just go, you know, this is amazing. But, you know, and so we've got to show people those things that we're doing, you know, our kids that are going out and doing internships and these capstone projects. And, sure, there's a lot of them that are crap, but there's some really awesome ones that have done amazing things for high school students, you know. And so it is a good way to promote that stuff in a fast way. You know, I think if you read the paper here enough, our paper is dying, maybe not even a slow death. And, you know, we're not getting much mileage there anymore, to be honest. And then even the stuff that they're doing, how much

of it's actually being viewed in print, or it's almost all being viewed, I bet, through their social media posts. You know, and, I mean, that's just how people get their information now. And it's bad because it's not all these good information that they get, but that's where people are getting their information now. And like I said, ultimately, if we don't control the narrative or the message at some point, somebody's going to post something negative, and you know how fast the people pile on to that. And I think people, you know, unfortunately don't pile on to the good as fast as they pile on to the bad. But I think it still gets that message out there of, hey, you know what? They're doing cool things. High school kids are doing good stuff. You know, there's still some bad raps on high school kids, too, that, oh, they're this, they're that. No, 95% of our kids are awesome and do great things, and that's what we should be focusing on. You know? I mean, we get enough of the negative on the news every night and all that, and I get it. That's part of their job and whatever, but there's a lot of awesome stuff going on, too, that how do we promote that? And I think the easiest, fastest way is social media because that's just, it's the reality of how people get their information today. And good, bad, or indifferent, it's the reality. And if you're not using it for your good, it's going to bite you on the other side, I really believe, because there's just enough people out there that want to post negative things and do that. If you don't use it for good, it's going to get you for bad. Sure.

ZF: Last one here. With that negative connotation of social media, do you see more of that negative stuff posted from the Facebook side, or do you get some of that on the Instagram side, too? Does it maybe tie in to maybe some of the demographics where Facebook trends a little bit older where Instagram is kind of the millennials and younger use that one more than Facebook or Twitter?

RN: No, I would agree with that. I think most of the negative stuff is pretty much tied to Facebook, and unfortunately, I'm one of those older people. So that's where I've spent most of my time. I've begrudgingly come along on the Instagram and that kind of stuff, but that's where our kids are, at least for now, until something different or better comes along. Probably they're on TikTok, I would guess, is where they're spending most of their time. And maybe something I don't even know about yet. I'll be honest, I think that's one of the challenges for me, too, with this whole thing. And I think it's been a challenge for all of our people. People are so used to having things just handed to them. That, you know, I didn't know that. Well, geez, let's see, we had it on Facebook, Instagram, the radio, the newspaper. Well, but it wasn't on TikTok or whichever one. I think that's really been a little bit of a challenge. You can't cover all of these platforms, and I know there's ways you can do that, but it just seems like there's always a hole and somebody's left out. And it's like, you know, there's only so many places we can do this. And, you know, we've hit the major ones and most of them. But that becomes a challenge, too, is the expectation of information now. Well, geez, you didn't post this until... Yeah, well, I posted it 10 minutes after I got the information. I don't know how much faster I could have posted it. And so it does create some challenges that way of that expectation that, boy, we should know everything right now. And even, like, when I... You know, it's amazing, like, we had this change with Wadena canceling and then we picked up Jamestown for boys hockey. That all happened in about a three-hour window, and I swear people knew about it before I did almost. You know, and it's like, how do you... And, oh, when is this or when... I've been worried, you know, and they don't understand that on our world, you know, we've got other things going on, and it might be three or four emails back and forth over a couple-hour window to get everything settled in and completed and transportation and officials. And, you know, people don't look at all that other stuff that goes

along with the game that you've got to have in place. You've got to have workers. You've got to have officials, you know. And so all of that stuff takes time, and not everybody's instantaneous when they're answering that. You know, I send to officials it might be an hour, it might be two hours before they get back from somebody, especially when it's a week away, and he goes, oh, I can take care of this, I know I can do that later today, blah, blah, blah. But they've already heard about it, so then the expectation is, well, what time's the game at? I don't know. And so it does create some challenges that way, as it seems like people know about stuff before you've even had a chance to deal with whatever that thing might be, you know. And sometimes things grow legs of their own because of that, because it's like the old telephone game too, not everybody has all the information. And so, but, you know, I think it's, I call it a necessary evil, and that's probably not the right way to do it, but, you know, and I think overall it's good, it reaches people that you maybe wouldn't reach and keeps them a little more engaged and a little tied to what you're doing. I mean, I know from a personal standpoint, I mean, it does keep me tied to friends and people that I don't see on a regular basis, but I still have a good connection with, you know, whether I graduate from high school or college or whatever.

And I think, you know, that's what some of our former athletes are getting to is, hey, I'm still tied to Laker basketball a little bit, you at least know what's going on every week, and I see, hey, they won, they're 12-3 now or whatever, and I see all that stuff, and so I feel like I'm still kind of part of it. And I think that's where it just gives you a connection, I think, is the big thing that I see with it. That's one of the things that, you know, I think that's one of the things that's just been overblown with this too is the blessed to be, blah, blah, blah, you know. And, you know, I get it, it's a big deal and whatever, but I just think that's become almost cliché, like, to me, that, you know, you're making this announcement and all of that stuff. Right. And so to me it's kind of

gotten to the point where it doesn't have a lot of meaning. And it's just like, oh, yeah, you had to post that, and so everybody's kind of the same. But, you know, and they all have to do it because the colleges all want to repost that. And so that kind of gets us on our end too as well. We've got to get these pictures and we've got to do this and do that. And not that it's a big deal, but it's just like, okay, who's this for? And it's interesting just how different kids interpret it and use it and leverage it. And it's kind of a little bit of a psychology project just to watch how the different families and people use it.

*Interview with Heather Rule, Freelance sports journalist and in-game social media coordinator with the Minnesota Twins*

*January 30, 2024*

ZF: All right. So yeah, just, just to start off, just, just tell me a little bit about you and what you do and, and, and, and your connection to social media.

HR: Okay. Yeah. So, I'm a freelance sports reporter and also social media coordinator during the season in game for the Minnesota Twins. The freelance sports reporting is kind of all year round more, you know, during the winter and fall seasons with hockey and a lot of high school sports and all that. But, during the Twins season, it's mostly Twitter is what I've been responsible for during games and just a little bit with Instagram kind of postgame too.

ZF: What advantages do you think Instagram has over other new media, if any?

HR: I think just the variety of things you can do on that platform with photos and videos and stories and reels and all that. So, I mean, to me, it's like, there's the social media platforms kind of copy each other in a lot of different ways. And I think a lot of times when they come out with, with updates, like, oh, you can do stories on, like, I think even LinkedIn at one point started

doing stories. They might've gotten rid of that because they realized people were using it or maybe they still have it. I just don't use it. So everyone kind of copies each other a little bit, but I think Instagram is so visual and you can choose how you want to do that. If you want to post photos on your feed or post photos on stories, share other content on stories, or, you know, do videos on stories or, you know, make reels, which can be shared to Facebook. And to me, reels is so much like TikTok too. So it's kind of a combination of everything, but I think it's kind of one of those platforms that a lot of people are on, like if they're, you know, maybe they're on TikTok, but they're also on Instagram, or maybe some people are on Twitter, but they're also on Instagram. So it's, I feel like it's kind of a good overlap for people, like they're, they're on Instagram, but they're on other platforms as well. But there's just, yeah, there's just so many different things you can do visually.

And I think that's a lot of where I see, I mean, social media is so much more visual now than maybe it used to be with, whether it's videos or photos. Or even the, you know, even podcasts now, the big thing is to kind of have the video element with the podcast and show that on, you know, like a TikTok or Instagram reel is to show, you know, the people talking on the podcast. So I just, I think there's just a bunch of different ways you can share content on Instagram, and they make it pretty easy too with connecting with people, like with messages and being able to connect that way as well.

ZF: How do social media users typically interact with sports content and how does that interaction contribute to promotion efforts, whether that's for freelance stuff, high school sports or with the Minnesota Twins?

HR: Yeah, I mean, for me, the sports content is so much about real time in a lot of ways, unless, I mean, there's other content sometimes, so they'll maybe kind of take off in the algorithm and

kind of go sort of viral a little bit and people can engage with it. You know, hours later as it kind of gets shared more and more, but that's, I mean, working with Twitter, which is multi-way with the Twins and even, you know, with sports reporting too, like as other platforms have come, like there's Threads and Blue Sky and, you know, I don't think those have taken off yet because the audiences are still on Twitter. Like as much as I think some people have gotten away from it and there's kind of been the different controversies about the platform and the changes that have been made, but I think there's still a huge audience for sports on Twitter for kind of those real time updates and real time conversations that people have. For me, Twitter is always kind of in that place where it's kind of like a sports bar online. I mean, you feel like you're having conversations with people as you're all watching a game at the same time and you can, you know, reply back to people and connect with people and see what they're saying about a certain play that just happened. It's kind of about that real time conversation and as a sports reporter, kind of the real time updates too of letting people know kind of what's going on and, you know, different things you can share about the game that way. I think it's kind of that conversation and I think people like on Instagram too, and while I see it on TikTok, people are always kind of looking for that engagement back from a team account too. Like they want to, you know, they want to be the first to comment on a post or they want to see if the, you know, team responds to them or likes their comments. I think they like that interaction and engagement with teams. And I think just share it, like on Instagram too, just sharing the content and stories is sort of similar to like that real time piece of Twitter, like posting during the game. It's a little different because you never know when people are kind of viewing the stories. So it's not quite as real time. I think people like engaging with the accounts too. And, you know, if they get a reply back or something, it seems to be fun for fans.

ZF: Do the Twins do a lot of in-game stuff with Instagram or is it just you on that team and then kind of following up on Instagram after the factor? Or how big is the Twins in-game social media team?

HR: Yeah, so there's usually a couple other people too that will handle like Instagram and Facebook. So, for the most part, I mean, they're like stories that turn into a bigger focus than like posting in feed on Instagram. But they kind of vary it up to make sure that they're posting in feed. But a lot of times stuff, you know, content might work better for stories too than it will in feed. So it just kind of depends on the content and the photos or videos they have. Like for sure, like videos, they're probably going to post out on stories.

ZF: How would you leverage social media to build the sense of community around high school sports? And what roles do these platforms play in fostering a strong connection between the audience and those teams?

HR: I guess what I thought of for this one is just kind of being present and updated on social with high school sports, like when it comes to teams or schools. Because I know sometimes like I'll look around Twitter and I'll try to see if a team has a Twitter account. And, you know, sometimes you can tell like, well, maybe they did a couple years ago, but now like this, you know, they haven't updated it or they might even say specifically, like in the bio, like, oh, this is, you know, for your 2022-23 team or something. So I think that's the biggest thing is just having a consistent presence, first of all, and making sure that, you know, you have someone who's going to be consistently updating content and finding a platform that works for you in the audience. Like I said, I still think Twitter is, you know, especially for news and stuff, it's a good place. And Instagram stories, because I know, and well, and TikTok too. But I mean, it's about what you can do. Like, you know, I don't know who would be managing it if they have someone, you know, on

the team who's going to be managing it. But just to make sure that, you know, because I've seen teams that are very detailed and like hockey teams post their line charts, which as a reporter is like super helpful for me if I'm just seeing a team like once out of a, you know, out of their 25-game season. And, you know, then they'll like post scoring updates, like after every goal or whatever. So like, that's awesome if teams want to do that, but just to make sure that you're being consistent. So like, you don't have to be super detailed, but, you know, if you just want to post like something after each game or something once a week, or, you know, sharing, I mean, it can be even, you know, sharing content from the athletes or, you know, interacting with fans who've interacted with the team. You know, sharing the account, sharing news stories about the team. Because I think just having a presence is still such a big deal, because it can be pretty obvious sometimes if you look at an account, you see all their work not really engaged. You know, they're not following many, they don't have any followers. They don't post a lot, or they haven't posted since like last year. You know, because it's kind of all about being seen and interacting with people and, you know, finding people in the community to follow and, you know, following the athletes, you know, on the platforms that they're on. And, you know, if they're sharing some content, you know, kind of sharing that to like a team account, or sometimes I've seen even just like schools, you know, have a, you know, they'll share, it'll kind of be one account for like the athletic department, they'll kind of share all this stuff, if it's not team specific. So, yeah, I think it's all just about being seen, being present and being consistent.

ZF: Do you have any good examples of a really active high school social media page, whether that's hockey or basketball or just someone I can go check out?

HR: Um, yeah, let me double check because I know the, let's see. Yeah, the Orono Girls hockey, I know it's one that is pretty updated. I think the Warroad hockey teams too, keep their accounts,

well, and that's just, I'm looking specifically on Twitter, but yeah, I think they keep those pretty updated. I know last year too, they had like, they for sure had game updates. But I think they do line charts and kind of let people know when the games are too. That's a big one that I see with a lot of high school accounts is like, hey, it's game day, like, here's our game time, or here's how you can get tickets, that kind of thing.

ZF: As a reporter, do you think it's more beneficial for a high school program to have social media pages for each individual sport and let them update it that way? Or do you think it should kind of be under one big athletics umbrella? Which is more beneficial for you?

HR: For me, I think team specific, if they can update that way. But, you know, again, it depends on like, what's feasible for them to like, if it's not going to be feasible for each team to, to update. And if they have someone in the athletic department that can do a better job of it, then go that route. But for me, it is easier, because especially when I'm searching on Twitter to kind of look, okay, does this team have a Twitter account and kind of look it up that way.

*Interview with Dan Seeman, VP of Marketing with Hubbard Broadcasting/Minneapolis*

*February 8, 2024*

ZF: Have you seen from Hubbard's standpoint maybe some advantages that Instagram has over some other new media like Facebook or Twitter?

DS: Well, it's, you know, in that, I mean, Instagram is where that group between Facebook and TikTok live, you know, for the, I don't even know what age one would say 18 to 34 year olds, maybe, you know, it got to the point where, you know, Facebook became, when your grandmother is on Facebook, it's probably time to off of Facebook and Instagram is where we

reach, it's our fastest growing platform for all of our brands. And it's because it's where most of the millennials and older Zs are living. Sure.

ZF: Do you see with those numbers talking to just about Hubbard stations now, do you see any amount of higher or faster growth from station to station based on demographics, maybe a MyTalk versus a Skor North versus a KS95?

DS: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. 100%. I mean, you know, MyTalk has an Instagram page, but, you know, their bread and butter is really on Facebook. It's a little bit older woman, whereas KS95, you know, their primary audience is living on Instagram. And then you look at Skor North and we put most of our energy into X or Twitter or whatever you want to call it. It doesn't mean we don't, you know, it doesn't mean we don't post content on all of them. We do, but, you know, depending on the demo, you get better results out of different platforms.

ZF: Do you have any examples of a really well performing Instagram campaign or strategy that you've that you've done down there?

DS: Well, I mean, we use it all the time here. Let me... just I'm going to bring up Instagram so that will spur my memory. But, you know, we use it just to communicate everything, you know, we're doing. And, you know, I think the most recent one would be you know, when Moon died, KS95's personality Moon died, we posted a lot of information and a lot of our tributes on Instagram because we knew that's where we were going to reach a lot of the pictures. So, you know, if I look at the, you know, if I look at the last dozen posts from KS, half of them were Moon related. You know, where it's, you know, it's a promotional platform primarily for KS95. We're not creating a lot of content that is Instagram, unique to Instagram, you know, like we're not doing a lot of vertical videos. MyTalk does more of that, honestly. But for KS95, it's primarily, you know, it's a promotional extension to what we do, whether it be, you know,

Moon's Miracle Fight for MS or Teacher of the Week. I'm looking at too, you know, just needy or greedy is all over this, our new big contest right now.

ZF: What is the level of interaction on Instagram versus maybe of Facebook or Twitter? Do we see a lot more interaction with Insta or is it kind of the other two leading the way there yet?

DS: No, I think the engagement, again, it depends on where it is, but the engagement, you know, we put a lot of focus and engagement on Instagram for KS95. But the, you know, the vast majority of engagement on Skor is definitely on X. You know, that's where we're living based on, you know, the 40-year-old guys we're trying to reach because that's where they are. And, you know, X is just more of a news, sports, content-rich site. So, it just makes sense. And, you know, I mean, we still get a lot of engagement on Facebook on all of them, but Insta, you know, Insta is where we put our most energy to grow the last two years has been Instagram just based on its usage.

ZF: 10 years down the road, what do you think that the landscape of social media looks like just based on what's out there right now, pending anything new coming up? What do you think is the biggest of these, of the social platforms we have now?

DS: My God, 10 years from now?

ZF: Five, 10 years from now. Yeah.

DS: I can't even imagine.

ZF: One year from now.

DS: One year from now. I mean, you know, TikTok's going to continue to grow. You know, my wife is on TikTok now and we are creating a lot of TikTok content on MyTalk right now. Um, you know, I think Facebook will get older and I think. We don't do anything with Snapchat. I don't quite understand its value to be honest with you.

ZF: More of a communication tool versus getting information out?

DS: Yeah. Um, but I just, I think we're going to see just more and more interaction with video, um, which we're already seeing, but I think that will continue to grow. We're going to see more and more, I, I think where we're going in one to two to five to 10 years is to be more, um, echo chambers, sadly, and that we're all going to find ourselves in social media, just as we're finding ourselves with friends and neighborhoods and states, frankly, and we're going to become aligned with like-minded people. And I'm not sure that's a good thing, but I just think that's where it's going and will continue to go. So last one, I'm talking about, uh, finding that, that community with, with like-minded people.

ZF: How do you kind of maybe leverage social media too, to build that sense of community and take advantage of that with, with those groups?

DS: Oh, we do it. I mean, I think it's a social media is really important. It does a, does a bunch of things for us. It certainly is a great promotion platform, but I think the most important thing it does is it extends the conversation. Radio is a linear world, um, that there's 24 hours in a day. There's 60 minutes in an hour. And when the, when the show's over, it's, it's linear. It's over, but we get to extend conversations. We get to extend content. We get to extend relationships into platforms like social media that give us another level of relationship building with (13:04) our listeners and fans.

*Interview with Daniel Galarneau, Social Media Strategist with University of Minnesota*

*Athletics*

*February 14, 2024*

ZF: All right, so just to start, Daniel, introduce yourself and just kind of give a background of what you do.

DG: Yeah, obviously Daniel Galarneau. I, right now, kind of a chaotic time of the year in terms of...Right now I run our, or I should say for the U, my title is social media strategist, but it's me and one other person kind of overseeing our athletic department's social media and sort of the overview and keeping track. We don't control or run every account. We just, I specifically run and work with and like travel with men's basketball and men's hockey. But the reason why I say it was a chaotic time was the SID, the person that was the main communications person for women's hockey left, and that was my previous role before this one. So I've been kind of filling in with that. But yeah, so primarily I help oversee our social media with my coworker, Victoria, who's the other social media strategist. She's like pretty much just football. And then we both kind of handle the overall Gopher Sports, like the main athletic department account. And then, yeah, and then we kind of help out our other SIDs. They kind of run the other specific sports on a day-to-day basis, but we're in charge of like all our graphic packages. We don't create them necessarily. It's more of just like we work with our creative team that creates all those and kind of guide our SIDs, which to use or if they need anything. But, yeah, so it's kind all hands on deck with men's hockey and men's hoops. And then the rest of them just kind of let them, our SIDs work and kind of offer guidance when needed.

ZF: With a lot of immersion in social media with collegiate sports, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram. Instagram, a very visual medium, you talk about some of those graphic packages and things like that. What kind of advantages do you see with Instagram over, say, Facebook or Twitter?

DG: I mean, I would say the biggest difference between Instagram and the other two in terms of sort of performance is not necessarily in the graphics. It's more like the Instagram reels where

that like will take an Instagram. If you use an Instagram song or a song from their like database, it for whatever reason, Instagram, if they perform better, Instagram will boost them silently. So, you can post just a highlight or a video of whatever. It doesn't even need to be a one or like an athletic performance. It can just be like an athlete doing something silly with their teammate or like them just getting off the bus or like whatever it is. And like put if you put like a music like music behind it, it can like blow up and be shared across all sorts of things. Another big advantage is collaboration on posts. That's been a new feature that we've really tried to hammer on this year in terms of like everything we post, just throw collaboration requests out to the different. Like for hockey, for example, if I'm posting a highlight, I'm always going to include Big Ten hockey and NCAA Hockey as like collaborators on it. So that's if they choose to accept those, then they it will appear on their platform as well. And then we get like a whole new set of eyes on it that we wouldn't if we had just posted to our platform. So the biggest thing is that sort of stuff can blow up easier, I would say, than Twitter and Facebook. Twitter still can just in a different way. Instagram is way easier, whereas like Twitter, you're like retweeting stuff. So it's not necessarily going to your page is like a like looking like your post or whatever, whereas Instagram would. But I would say just the ability to for content to reach new people or like kind of blow up in terms of like capturing audiences that you wouldn't normally see.

ZF: What challenges do social media professionals face when promoting sports on Instagram and how do you overcome some of those challenges?

DG: I would say the biggest challenge is just I always like when people if you are looking for like sort of a secret science to social media, that's like not it's not something we can control. We can only control as much as we can control. Like if the team isn't it all boils down to the buzz around the team and obviously social media can aid that. But if the team's playing well, stuff will

do better. It's just how it is. And if they aren't like there's not really much you can do in terms of promoting. But I would say it's more of the timeliness. You have to know when to strike on like certain moments during the season. Like I'll use the men's hoops, for example, like we were not good last year. Last in the Big Ten, like one of our worst seasons ever. So there was nothing we could do in terms of promoting that would like work or perform well or, you know, create any extra buzz just because it is what it is. But like this year when we won, we beat Northwestern and Michigan State a couple weeks ago. We put out as much content as we could afterwards in terms of whether that be ticket pushes or just any sort of video we had. Crowd stuff, thanking the crowd. And just like taking advantage of the timeliness of when our teams are performing well. So I would say the biggest challenge is, you know, if your team's not playing well, it's trying to fill the gaps of like 'what can we post that doesn't make us look bad'. Because if your team's not playing well and you're posting like silly stuff, it isn't going to go over well with not only your fan base, but from your coaching staff, I think as well, depending on who they are. But I would say, yeah, it's sort of when things are down in terms of program, it's trying to be creative and promoting them in any way you can. But sometimes it's just, you know, not possible.

ZF: How do you think the use of social media has impacted the visibility of Gopher Sports as a whole?

DS: I mean, the more you post and say the more the more eyeballs around it. I think the more recent example that I can think of is we've dropped a couple of new uniforms like throwbacks and like a black uniform. So, both of those we collaborated with Uni Swag, which like a lot of different programs and people around the country follow. So, both of them, they accepted our collaboration and even did their own posts about them. So, I think that when people see other like third party social media is like not necessarily affiliated with the specific team, like your

bleacher report type of thing, post about your program that just like you put it in the back of your mind, like, hey, that program's got good uniforms or like you just like file that away. So, the more eyeballs that you can get on your school or team or whatever, people like remember that. And it just when you pop up again, people remember what they saw before. So, it's just trying to establish like a known brand to people that don't aren't already familiar with you.

And that happens really slowly. You can't just like, you know, be forefront in people's minds when you didn't exist before. But it's just sort of keep reminding people that you're there. And then the people that aren't interested in like what you do will end up sort of sticking around in terms of following and keeping or paying attention to the program.

ZF: Let's talk interaction here a little bit. How do social media users typically interact with your content? And how does that interaction contribute to promotion efforts?

DG: I mean; it really depends on what sort of is the post. Like, if we lose, it's going to be a lot of negative comments. If we win, it's going to be a lot of positive comments. It's just a lot of emotional responses, I would say, are centered around sort of the performance of the team. But it's not only that, but when fans have like on the week to week stuff, when fans have questions, like when we put like a preview out for a series or we do a ticket package or like release TV information or something like that, and the fans have questions, it's important to like just whether you don't have to publicly respond to them or just like DM them and make sure they're all set so that people feel like they're connected and they are appreciated as a fan. So that they will keep coming back and liking what you're doing and that kind of thing. And then you can also kind of use past examples of like, say, year after year, like we're really busy in the fall and the winter and spring and stuff. But when the summer hits, it's kind of our time to reset and evaluate what worked and what didn't. So kind of either keeping a file or like mentally keeping a file of the

way people respond to certain types of promotion efforts, certain ticket packages, certain whatever. Could be anything. And just saying, hey, that worked, that didn't and building on it for the next year.

ZF: Do you see a big rise in attendance after a big ticket push on social media? Do you attribute that to the exposure you have on socials or to the team winning or kind of a combination of both of those two things?

DG: I mean, there's never a one thing that does it. But helping from what we've heard from our ticket office is like anytime we put ticket links on social posts, people click on them. Like we have a sort of a website where we can shorten hyperlinks and that within that website, you can see which you can see every link that you've created and what it was to and then how many clicks it was on. So if I like look back at a specific like ticket link, for example, I can see how many people actually clicked on it. And that's, you know, that's it's huge to see that like if they're already just getting more eyeballs on the tickets. But like team performance is going to be the end. As many ticket links as I want to put on there, like if the team's not playing well or tickets are too expensive or if the game time sucks or the opponent isn't interesting necessarily, then, you know, that's also the huge fat like impact on it. But when you do like the ticket stuff like this, as much as you can, it's just more eyeballs on it. And they have seen upticks like when we have done it. So we keep on hitting it and hope that the combination of stuff works and people keep coming.

ZF: What advice would you give a high school social media coordinator of something simple they could apply to their work that kind of mirrors what colleges are doing right now?

DG: I would just say that if this is about high school. Sort of social media and sort of developing an identity and connection with the community, I would say. If you have like a high school team,

I would work with like the staff or the school or like this just hypothetically just create sort of a brand identity is the main story behind it. And one easy way to do that is like just have like a hashtag that you use on like every single one of your like a team slogan. Like our men's hockey team has had 'Pride On Ice' like the past hundred years. So we always hit like Pride on Ice, hashtag pride on ice and like a lot of like pretty much every post that doesn't include like a link. That's usually where I would put it. And then we put it on like graphics and different stuff. So it kind of as long as it's not like one that you see, it's got to be kind of unique and personal to the program. And you can't, it's not necessarily something you can force, but it's just as simple as like a hashtag or like an emoji that you attribute to it. And you keep using over and over so people see that and they recognize it and say, hey, that's they just attribute that sort of slogan and emoji to your program. And it just sticks in their mind easier. Another way I would say is also the just promoting the athletes or team with as much like I know high school teams don't get a lot of like content in terms of like pictures during the game or team video or anything like that. So like cell phone stuff really, it doesn't matter necessarily based on performance and outreach, whether it's like a professional photographer taking it or obviously during action shots that would matter. But like I'm saying, like for team events or like bus travel, getting off the bus, like a cell phone video, any little stuff like that goes a long way for high school teams, just because they want to see, they want to see the athletes, they want to see their personalities. They just want to see as much as possible. And that obviously grows all the way to the professional level where you have like features and them doing games and stuff. Even the smallest people just want to feel connected. So, the easiest way you can sort of show the personality, show the identity of your team that has the biggest impact on the smallest level.

*Interview with Luke Widbin, assistant coach and social media coordinator for University of Northwestern-St. Paul baseball*

2/23/24

ZF: Tell me about your role with the UNW Baseball team and the implications of being both a coach and social media guy for the team.

LW: I do think about the implications of it. I think we've gained this many people as a result, you know? I try and make it fun to follow us. That's what I'm after. Although I will say not to, not to jump ahead of the questioning, but I am, uh, heavily, uh, transitioning to Instagram as Twitter continues to devolve, get older. People are leaving it. Throughout kind of the last couple of years, I've noticed one of the main reasons that I even got on Twitter and was using it the way that I was originally was just to keep people updated on how the team was doing during our spring games in Florida in particular, because there was no live stream. There were no live stats at that point. As more and more schools and like Northwestern has one of the best outdoor camera setups, like live stream setups that exist, it's called Musco vision. But as more and more schools get some sort of product like this, the need for like a blow-by-blow description of the game just isn't what it used to be. I mean, I would get what I would call some like power followers. So like parents who are at work that couldn't just like have it up, but they want it. They love the blow by blow. But it's so much work for me to do to even like be a semblance of a coach, but just be like constantly, you know, going nuts on, on Twitter or X now, whatever. It takes me out of the game a little bit as someone who's not technically just like a social media employee, but also trying to coach at the same time. This season, it's going to be a little bit more like, uh, inning recaps than what it used to be.

ZF: With less attention on Twitter, is that going result in more pre and post-game content on Insta for UNW baseball?

LW: Partially. There are fewer and fewer parents in particular, and like almost no students that are engaging with the posts on X, like they used to just as it's become less popular and Instagram's become more popular, especially with the student demographic. I made the decision in 2022 to check out Instagram. I learned quickly that it's used much differently than Twitter. It's not about game updates. It's more content driven. More photo sharing, more covering the evolving story. I didn't have my own Instagram account ever, and I still don't. So, I kind of learned this on the fly. And one of the first things I did was like, I followed the St. Louis Cardinals. I followed the Minnesota Twins. I followed the St. Louis Blues just to kind of see how pro-sports teams use it. And I had to use it at the level I was at a little bit differently than they do, but I've gotten a lot of good tips from that. Like, you know, how to use some of the editing programs that I have to like be attention grabbing, like to have like title slides, you know, right now the big thing is that you don't just post a video, you post like this cover photo telling people what it is and you swipe over, right? So like, that's something that I'm probably going to keep doing with what people are, people are moving so fast on it right now, um, that they don't ever really visit your profile. What they do is they just swipe through the stories. So I used to think about even just on Instagram, right? Like, you know, what's a great post I can do, but the post itself really doesn't matter. It's how engaging is your story and how can you get people to click on your post to actually get them to see your profile. And so, and I'm still kind of playing around, like what does that?

ZF: Why take on the challenge of being both a coach and the team's social media guy?

LW: I call myself a self-aware narcissist, but it's like, eh, I think that's really just what an entertainer is, right? But even as I get older and mature a little bit I feel like it became had, it can be less about me and more about the actual guys because my goal in doing extra is that, yes, it's a creative outlet for me, but the more that I can put them out there and feel like they're popular, I guess, because I mean, Northwestern is a small DIII school in one of the smallest athletic conferences in the country, but you can tell like when stuff happens where they're put in some engaging, even like professional looking posts that there's a feeling of legitimacy to it that I think a lot of schools our size don't have that don't engage like this. I was asked actually by an area town ball team to do their social media for a summer. They're like, we really love what you do on UNW baseball. It's hilarious. And I thought about it for a second and I ended up turning them down, not just because like, you know, I wanted my summer, but yeah, what, what makes my content good is that I really know who the guys are, you know? Like you're just around for those moments where you see what their talents are, you see what, you know, they think is funny, you, you know, it would be really hard for me to fly in and do that for a school or organization that isn't something I'm really connected to. And so in some ways, like at the professional level, I think it can be easier because that's someone's full job. But for a college to have like a sports information director do what I'm doing would be extremely difficult because how do you know if, you know, a player would be like, think the joke is funny or be like offended by the joke or they don't want to be part of it. So, I've always told people that, like, the reason I'm successful with any of this is because I spend time with them and know who they are. And like, it's just an advantage being in the dugout that another person wouldn't get.

ZF: Do you ever utilize some of that relationship building to kind of show personality of the guys and maybe help connect to the fans in that way where they can see, you know, what jokes

these kids think are funny, what they, what they like to eat, what their pregame routines are, any of that stuff?

LW: Yeah. I started to go down that road and then I went on a different rabbit trail. We did this little Q and A feature called 'In The Bin with Coach Widbin' to really highlight who they are. These are funny interviews where I go like super off topic. Like I would have like one or maybe two questions I knew I was going to ask, but everything from there is just read and react. And so even though it had my name attached to it and I would be in all of them, the idea was to like really be like, you know, here's this kid whose super quiet, but I'm going to put them in a weird spot and see what he says. I think everybody, including me would learn more about them in those situations, like just the stories that they would tell and all of that. And so what I kind of realized doing that sort of thing is that, you know, they really do like it when they kind of get to be a feature when they kind of get to be a star, like regardless of how they perform on the field, sometimes the funniest guys are the ones that have to sit in the dugout and almost entertain themselves during the games. You can read recaps of the game on the Northwestern athletic website...you can see that Bryce Crabbe is always playing shortstop and pitching and hitting lead off. And, you know, this guy's hitting all the home runs, but the guy who never pitches can be, you know, never plays, can be one of the best teammates on a number of levels from the team. And that's the kind of stuff that I like to highlight on our page, like obviously paying attention to what's going on in the stats, but I think what makes how I run UNW baseball engaging is that it shows how much fun we have. And I really hope that prospects see that because I think what it shows is not only do we have a legitimate baseball field, do we have legitimate jerseys, we have legitimate streaming, but regardless of what your talent is, you're going to have a good time here. And I kind of want our fans to be part of the good time.

ZF: Do you see a lot of engagement from high school aged prospective students and athletes] on your Instagram feed?

LW: It's harder to track on Instagram than it was on Twitter because I would call them fake profiles. Like the thing, and its still kind of a thing is that athletes will create Twitter profiles that only highlight like, here's my athletic highlight tape and here's, you know, I did this and did this. But like, if you look at the rest of their timeline, like it's not a real Twitter account for them because they don't have a real Twitter account for the most part. Like, this is a recruiting tool that they set up, that they follow the teams that they're interested in, or some of them just find like every school and follow them and, you know, do stuff like that on Instagram. We still get like the high school baseball followers. But what I've noticed recently where we just had our first...I'll call it viral...story. It's not necessarily viral in the real sense of the word, but I mean, it's still climbing. It's at 356,000 plays. Like we've picked up probably 60, 70 followers from that real alone. And I would say anecdotally, probably half of them appear to be high school baseball players. So if you hit the right, I guess, viral, like for how the algorithms work, like if they've got a special account that doesn't look like it's athletic specific as Twitter is, but if they've got enough baseball content on there, where it's even just their profile, I think it all goes into, you know, the content that they see. I mean, you only have to click on one before it starts to figure it out and gives you the rest of them.

ZF: What do you think is the primary goal with Instagram when it comes to UNW baseball's social media feeds?

LW: Man, good question. Sometimes I want to say primary goal is to highlight our players. Like that's kind of how I always view of it is it's like I said to give them a like quasi professional experience, right. That sort of mimics these things that I'm seeing on all these accounts. But I

mean, as far as like community engagement, I think I'm just looking to highlight the fun, right? Cause again, like Northwestern is in one of the most saturated college markets in the entire United States. Like I think per capita or something The Twin Cities has the most colleges in the entire country for like a Metro area. And so, and like all these other schools are technically more popular than Northwestern. Like you've got like the MIAC Ivy league, basically, you know, how people feel about their MIAC schools, like, you know, St. John's, St. Thomas, which I know they're not MIAC anymore, but traditionally, even Bethel has more of like a, like snooty base, I guess that we do. We're known in like, you know, our niche, right? But we're not known for sports. We're known for Bible. Obviously, the volleyball team is making a name on a national level for themselves here in the last, you know, five to eight years that they've done final four appearances. They did have an elite eight last year. The basketball teams had super sustained success, but baseball has just been pretty middling outside of the last couple of years we had with our guy that went D1. It was easy and it was fun to put out a lot of content when we were crushing people in 2021 and then 2022, and now that we're not doing that anymore, in fact, we even missed the 14-team postseason last year. I think it's still been okay. Well, let's show people that it's not only fun when we're winning. Let's show people that it's fun because we like being around each other. And I would like to hope that when people see that they realize that, okay, there is something different about, you know, this is not a program that's all about success. I mean, if I didn't enjoy doing it, I wouldn't do it. So like, again, like there is a good creative outlet for me and a good comedy outlet for me, and it's an audience that I couldn't gather on my own. So it's kind of fun to have a built-in microphone, no matter how small it is.

ZF: Tell me about a successful engagement campaign that you've had on Instagram, that, that viral video. Tell me more about that.

LW: So, 'This Is UNW Baseball' was far more successful than my last one, which was 'In the Bin with Widbin' simply because they're shorter videos and they're not as weird. I mean, they are scripted, which, but they're all kind of written with like a, a team joke in mind, or at least just highlighting people who are entertaining. And so I didn't actually think the one that got super popular was my best script, but I knew, you know, it was like, I just kind of sat down and like modeled them after the 'This Is SportsCenter' campaign, which obviously was successful in its own right, where you've got athletes in full uniform in like everyday situations. So, I kind of started thinking, okay, well we can do some out on the field and then we can do some in like the classroom to sort of have like this sort of a proven campaign that's worked. Like, I don't want to literally like take their jokes and put our uniforms in it, but I did kind of use the template. So, I kind of have two versions of scripts. One is like a college baseball player type joke, and the other is name puns. So the first one I put out there, like, you know, I'm still filming them actively, but I tried to, you know, have a few in the can before I'm releasing them. I actually do this every year because February we're in season, but we almost never play games except we have our first game tomorrow. Cause this is the weirdest winter ever. So to me, it's about warming up your audience for when you do start playing games. So, the last couple of years I've been thinking about, you know, basically February content, like how do I get people to start looking at our page again? And that's why, that's why I do this in February the way I do, because I'm not going to be doing this once we start playing games because the games are the content. It's really about warming up your audience to remember you exist. It's also just something to do when you're in the gym every day for practice, instead of out on the field, which again, we've been on the field, so it's been a little bit weird this year. I knew two of our players were in choir last year so I said, Hey, would you want to like, it's a dumb joke where...it's just literally the joke is that you don't know the

signs and you think he says, sing away instead of swing away. Like, would you be willing to do that and not be embarrassed that I can post it online. And they were both like, yeah, like we'll do it. And so then the person who really needed convincing was the third base coach. Um, this guy's it's like, okay, it'll be funny. And like he even said, like, you know, I wasn't quite sure when I read it, but like, yeah, it, it, it came out pretty good. So, and it's kind of a nightmare for Instagram to film anything because it's all up and down. That's any film editor's worst nightmare, but they've actually gotten pretty sophisticated with the quality and like editing you can do within the Instagram app. That's been really nice. You can do a lot of things in there that you can't do. And even some of the more like iMovie, right? I would love it if iMovie was really kind to editing in that format, which there's a way you can do it, but it's almost easier these days just to go through Instagram.

ZF: Any other keys to making a successful Insta campaign?

LW: The key is short. I'm trying to keep them all around the 40-second mark and even still like what I can see, um, I'll even read it for you. Let me, because they give you pretty good insight statistics now. So the average, did you do the average watch time is 28 seconds on my 47 second video that got really popular. So, and that's the average. So, I mean, some people are watching it all the way through. Some people are probably just like thumbing through it instantly. And I don't know how long it takes to actually make an impression that it counts. If people stop at 28 seconds, they don't even really get to the joke. That even shows you that, I mean, not breaking news here, but you got to get to the point pretty quick, which I've always struggled with. Cause I like to set up the joke, right? But that's the world we're in now. Like you got to hit them hard. Like they're not going to sit there and listen to a whole recruit pitch. (26:19) Like it's got to be quick. That's what Reels can do. This video reached 872 followers and 258,615 non followers.

So like it's still reached all those people and it doesn't actually mean follows for us. I mean, that's just kind of how Instagram is. It's a consumer tool and very rarely do people follow. And so again, it's kind of like when you talk about its role in recruitment, it's still kind of an unknown to me, right? Like people will laugh, but even if they don't follow you, I guess you hope that it drives you to your page or something.

*Interview with Danny Koenig, Recruiting Coordinator with Highlands Ranch Aquatics Club Inc  
March 8, 2024*

ZF: Let's jump in coach. Talking about social media and college recruiting. It's a tool that I think student-athletes think can be more impactful than it actually is to get seen. So again it could be something that you can use to get things out there but isn't going to be the solution for you getting recruited.

DK: Nope, that's not the social platform that you want. I think the number one thing about social media is it can kind of add character and color to who a student-athlete is but coaches do not just troll Instagram and Twitter for high-level athletes. It's ineffective. There are way too many. It's hard to find them. You don't know what you're looking at. You don't know what grad year. You don't know what that kid's grades are, right? He might be a highlight reel, you know, but it doesn't matter if they're not going to be into your school. I think for the most part what I use social media as a for a college coach was to market my program. I wanted to project who we were, what our culture was about, some of the cool things we were doing, you know, training trips to Florida, etc. to get those student-athletes in which I was interested a better understanding of what we were doing because, again, I'm not trying to sell a false product. I want them to know exactly what our program is about and the best way for me to do that was on social media, just

kind of on the fly, but on the flip side of it for student-athletes, for families, that you know, you can't just start an Instagram and say, hey, my highlight tapes are here. College coaches don't see that, right? So more than anything you need a legitimate online place for your information to be. You can add, hey, here's my Twitter handle, right? Keep that professional. You can have a personal one on the side, fine. Maybe leave that private, but you know, if you want coaches to know about you, put that in there. Here's my Twitter, here's my Instagram, but keep that professional to show them who you are and how involved in your sport you are. I think that would be the primary one.

ZF: You want to have that information available for coaches and you need to be professional with that. There are stories where college coaches stop recruiting a kid because of something they posted on social media.

DK: A lot of stories. That is a hundred percent a fact. So if you're a parent, tell your kid to be careful what they're doing. Monitor their Twitter page, watch their Instagram. Again, that one post can be the difference between a college coach offering him a scholarship, offering him a roster spot, and saying, nope, we're moving on to the next kid. Yep, a lot of kids out there and a lot of kids with very similar profiles academically and athletically. You give one coach a reason to not recruit you, they're going to take that. They don't want to risk it. That's their program, that's their job on the line. When there's scholarships involved, they don't screw around with it. So just something to pay attention to. Coaches can follow kids; they can like tweets. I mean, you'll see that sort of in the same vein of the text messages where they'll kind of kiss up to you if they tweet out your new highlight video and they like it, but again, they're only following you, they're only doing that once you've been processed along with recruiting and you've gotten to the step where they've identified you, evaluated you, and again are using that as a way to kind of get

and kind of kiss up to you a little bit. And pay attention to that stuff, right? Because that means they're paying attention to you. Set most of your accounts to public unless you got a private one that you really just don't want anybody to see. You can set up a social media account specifically for your sport, right? Share those things with coaches, that's okay, right? If they can't contact you, they may want to know what you're doing, they may want to see maybe some of your training regimes, any of that's good, right? Just to kind of show again, I'm really involved in the sport, I care enough about this to broadcast it to the world, and they will follow some of that stuff. And if they do follow you, if they do like your stuff, take that as a good faith that they know about you and they're pretty interested in what they're doing. I wouldn't waste time like that on social media if I wasn't genuinely interested as a coach. And return the favor, follow them back, like their stuff. Pay attention to what they're posting about their program. They're going to send updates about the accolades they've got or what they're doing, so it's also a great platform for you to learn about that program and continue to keep updates. So then if you do get on the phone with that coach, hey coach, I saw on Twitter you guys did this. Again, that shows that awareness, that shows that attentiveness that you are paying attention to their program and you're genuinely interested and not just wasting that coach's time.

ZF: But not all about the coach, right? If that coach is projecting something about their program that you don't really like, that's okay too, right?

DK: That is why you follow them and make sure that they have, you as the athlete, have a pretty good understanding of what's happening with that program. Majority of days too, I mean, you have, you know, the program has a Twitter handle, the head coach has a Twitter handle, the assistant coaches all have Twitter handles, right? So again, follow them all. If it's a school that you're interested in, if you've had some communication with them, don't just follow the head

coach or the program. Try to expand that reach to as many of the coaches on the staff as possible. It's about visibility at the end of the day. The more people that know who you are, the better.

*Interview with Jacee Hauser, track and field athlete with Navy, 2023 Detroit Lakes High School graduate*

*February 21, 2024*

ZF: So to start out, just introduce yourself and talk about your high school sports career a little bit.

JH: Okay. Sounds good. Jacee Hauser from Detroit Lakes, Minnesota, and I played basketball and track. I started track in seventh grade on the varsity team through my senior year. My freshman year I was on varsity through senior year for basketball. I was lucky enough to play a little bit my freshman year after I broke my ankle in basketball. Sophomore year I started for basketball. Junior year I played. Senior year I got to play a little bit, and I had a foot injury during senior year. Lucky enough to go to state my junior year. I was team captain junior, senior year basketball. All-conference junior year, honorable mention sophomore and senior year.

ZF: Tell me about track a little bit too.

JH: So I actually throw at the Naval Academy. So for track I lettered all six years. I threw shot put and discus. Was lucky enough to get all-conference sophomore, junior, and senior year. We went to true team state as a team junior and senior year. And then I got to walk on here as a thrower at Navy. So right now we just started. We finished indoor season, and now we're starting outdoor season. And our first outdoor meet is going to be in San Diego, California So I get to fly out there soon.

ZF: College recruitment out of high school, messages, contact from coaches or university on social media or where was most of the recruiting done?

JH: I would say I've had contact through Insta DMs, Facebook Messenger, and Twitter. And then letters in the mail was the majority of it. I will say, though, Twitter I think was like the main recruitment for me.

ZF: Was that how Navy got a hold of you, or why did you pick Navy?

JH: I wanted to go to Navy, and I was lucky enough to get to talk to the coach later on, and he took me in. So he never reached out to me. I reached out.

ZF: Perfect. And current social platforms you're on?

JH: I'm on Instagram, and I'm on Twitter. I have not had TikTok since, like, junior year of high school, just because it hasn't been really beneficial to me. Because I kind of am a sports guru so the majority of my time on Insta and Twitter is legit just looking at sports. I will say Twitter is, like, solely sports, and then Insta is, like, half and half.

ZF: So you follow a lot of college sports teams and athletes on social media platforms, then?

JH: Yes. It's actually funny, a lot of my friends on my track team. That's all we really do, on Insta especially. Mostly look at people's sports pages. We just saw (Colorado State thrower) Maya Lesnar. She's got the number one shot put mark in the NCAA right now, which is cool because she's from Alexandria, Minnesota. I competed against her in high school. So stuff like that we like to keep track of. We just watch a lot of videos of throwers. I also love basketball, so I obviously love to watch, like Caitlin Clark and all that. I just keep up with what's going on in basketball and track usually.

ZF: Have you ever used social media to display your abilities or achievements to college or college recruiters?

JH: Yes. I think in my early, like, freshman and sophomore years, I kind of started doing that for basketball on Twitter. At that Twitter is where I got a lot of my coaches to reach out to me. And I also noticed that a lot of really good athletes spent a lot of time on Twitter to display their skills. I will say I did that for a little bit, but then I got this really bad mindset of if a coach wants me, then they'll find me, which is not the case nowadays because it's so competitive. And I feel like putting yourself out there is needed almost. I feel like it just shows that you care and that you really want to go to the next level in college sports. I kind of regret not doing it my junior and senior year, but it was good. I did it a little bit, so that was nice.

ZF: So going to the next one, do you think social media has changed the way that college recruiters discover and evaluate student athletes?

JH: Yeah, I think so. I think it has a lot, actually. I feel like without social media, like, obviously I've, like, always grown up with social media, but it's been really influential for a lot of my friends especially. I've seen them get recruited off of social media and what they've posted. And I feel like it's a really good way to get yourself out there, and it shows colleges that you really care. And I feel like you can't do what I did. I kind of regret, like – I was just like, oh, if they want me, they can find me. But, like, it's just a different way to, like, put more effort in and show that you're different than everyone else. And also show your personality too. You can tell by someone's social media, and what they post about, like, their highlights and stuff and how they post and how it shows their character. So it's, like, also another reason I feel like what, like, colleges look at.

ZF: Tied into that same thing, any advice you would have for high school juniors and seniors looking to make a name for themselves on social media to get to that next level and compete collegially?

JH: Oh, that's a really good question. I will say don't be afraid to reach out and say, hey, I'm really interested in your program. I really like what you're building and stuff. It shows that you care. And also, like, it just means – like, it's a really big deal to be able to reach out to college folks and be like, hey, I want to be on your team. A lot of people do it. You may not know that they do it, but a lot of people do that to get exposure. And I feel like having a very, like – people don't think that people look at your socials, but, like, having, like – what's the word? Socials that are appropriate and, like, college coaches look at that and, like, notice, like, what you post. I always posted about basketball because that was, like, what my passion was. So just, like, posting what your passion is, it just shows that, like, you really want to go to the next level and it shows how much you care, which is a really big deal for college coaches.

*Interview with Mason Carrier, University of Minnesota Football commit, 2024 Detroit Lakes High School graduate*

ZF: Let's start out by introducing yourself and tell me a little bit, a little bit about your high school background here.

MC: My name is Mason Carrier. I'm a senior at Detroit Lakes High School. I'm a three-sport athlete, uh, football, basketball and track. I've been a three-year varsity letter award for each of them. I'm committed to play football at the University of Minnesota

ZF: Perfect. Let's start with your recruitment journey because it's a little bit different than a lot of people where some people like to weigh their options here and there, but you knew where you wanted to go to as soon as it was offered, uh, you, you leapt at the chance to become a Gopher. Tell us about your recruiting experience in high school.

MC: So mine is definitely different from a lot of other people that usually involves a lot of steps. And mine was pretty, pretty short. What I did, I went to a few local camps and Ethan, my older brother who plays (at the U of M) right now was there with me at those camps and he got recognized by his film after his junior season from one of the recruiting staff members at the University of Minnesota, and he received a junior day invite to go down there. And I was also asked to go along with them to go on the tour. Over time, I got messages from the University of North Dakota, North Dakota State and some other schools, but nothing really big from anywhere, to be honest. After my sophomore season, we both went down there, Ethan went on his official visit, and then after a camp, we were both invited to Coach Fleck's office. Ethan got a preferred walk on-offer and I received a full ride scholarship. And both of us knowing this is where we wanted to play our entire lives.

There wasn't much hesitation towards the offer that was given to us. Ethan did receive, was going to receive I should say, a full ride scholarship to UND, and he thought about that for a little bit, but he knew where he wanted to play, and we both, we both knew what coach Fleck was doing there. We thought it was great. And for my decision, I knew I wanted to play there. It didn't matter what other schools offered me in the future. I could have got offers from all over the country that I know of, and it wouldn't have mattered to me because I knew where I wanted to play my whole life, and that's just your hometown kid. You've always wanted to play for that big town university.

ZF: You've kind of led the way for this 2024 recruiting class. You were the first recruit to commit and you committed early. I know there's, there's been some coaching changes and some, some things here and there, but you haven't wavered in your commitment. Tell us a little bit about some of the things that you've done for the University of Minnesota here in high school. I

know you had the tweets reaffirming your commitment when (defensive coordinator) Coach Rossi left (for Michigan State) as well as some other things on socials that blowing up for.

MC: So the way it works is there is a lot of talk about NIL (name-image-likeness) and money and stuff and how all these athletes want to make money in college. But to me, being committed to a school, the money shouldn't matter. It should be how you feel there, how you fit in. This is your future. This is what's going to turn you into a man, create your own life. And I think that like throughout the process, when I chose University of Minnesota, it was different because I didn't want to visit any other schools. It was exactly what I was looking for. What is it, what was exactly there? Like it was, it was a perfect fit and it didn't matter like what, if a coach left, when Rossi left, yeah, that, that stung me a bit, but I knew whoever Fleck was going to bring in next was going to be just as ready to go and stepped up in the game plan that he had ready for all the players. It bummed me a little bit, but it didn't throw me off track at all. And throughout the other schools, how schools, uh, recruit other players through money, it, that wouldn't matter to me at all. And I knew, I just knew where I wanted to be.

ZF: What types of contact do you find the most effective or engaging when it comes to college recruitment on social media?

MC: Yeah, that's, that's one of my favorite questions. It's absolutely, to me, it's going to have to be Twitter because I think all the coaches sit there on Twitter. It's more of a professional way of connecting like with other people, like other than Instagram and stuff like that, like younger people use those apps and like, it's more, there's a more variety of people, but on Twitter, it's more of a business type thing. I see it in my eyes as a high school athlete and just putting out your film out there and getting your stats down and your height and weight and all this stuff. And when you receive invites to other camps or schools or people message you, you want to post that.

So other schools can see that like on your Twitter and they will realize that, wow, the school talks to him about, well, we're going to start talking to him now. And then this just moves on and on and goes up to FCS, FBS, Division three to division one, and it gets all the coaches talking and knowing who you are picturing in their system.

ZF: I think Detroit Lakes High School does a really good job showcasing their athletes. I think as a whole the school district page tackles it from kind of a district wide standpoint, but then each individual team is kind of responsible for recognizing different individual players, like when Devin Berg set the school assist record, there was a shout out to him...when you passed Adam (Thielen) on the all-time scoring list a couple of weeks ago...when you set the school rebound record the other night as well...what kind of impact do you see from, from the individual pages giving shout outs to athletes like that?

MC: Absolutely. And this, this only drives athletes like younger athletes to work even harder to see, like when it gets posted on social media, all these people who follow Lakers sports, you don't know, they follow Lakers sports when they see who's really doing all that stuff. And it blows up kind of like how great your athletes are that you have it, that people don't really know about. And it encourages younger kids to be like the upperclassmen: to work hard and do what they can do. And overall, as an athlete, personally, seeing your accomplishments being posted everywhere and people following you and tracking you and watching you succeed and one wanting to watch you exceed in life is pretty special.

ZF: What advice would you give to other high school students navigating that college recruiting, the college recruiting process through social media?

MC: Yeah, absolutely. So within your account, you want to stay pretty, pretty locked in on colleges and not like other random stuff and having your opinions out there on touchy subjects,

you want to keep a pretty neutral base on stuff because that can effect on how they see you. Opinions are great to have. But when it comes to college recruitment, you want to keep yourself pretty neutral. So all colleges would be able to look at you and you want to stay true to yourself and just post your film, post what you need to get out there, post family stuff, and just keep a straight line of where you want it to be.

*Interview with Elle Bettcher, Bemidji State University track and field commit, 2024 Detroit Lakes High School graduate*

*2/23/24*

ZF: First off, if you just want to introduce yourself and give a little bit about your high school background and some of your accomplishments it would be great.

EB: Okay, I'm Ellie Bettcher. I'm a senior at Detroit Lakes High School. I'm in three sports and in a bunch of clubs and activities. I'm in basketball, soccer, and track, and then student council, Business Professionals of Academy Ambassadors, and I'm a part of Laker production and band and drumline. And I'm committed to Bemidji State University for track and field for throwing.

ZF: Awesome, tell me about your track career.

EB: My track career, I started in seventh grade. I started right away like learning how to throw when varsity started instead of like middle school track starts a little bit later. So, a couple of us girls and I started with the high schoolers early to learn how to throw and then I kind of stuck with it because I was picking it up and competed at most of the varsity meets that year that weren't like unlimited because I think I ended up being like fourth or fifth top thrower for DL. So, if any meets were limited entries to like three or four, then I wouldn't go, but otherwise I would go throw at the varsity meets as a seventh grader. And then I also started hurdling at the

middle school meets and there weren't many high school hurdlers. So, for sections, I competed in hurdles as one of like the top three. And then eighth grade was COVID year, so we didn't have a spring track season. And then ninth grade and on, I've been doing, I've been competing in track for just, I think freshman year, I maybe did a little bit of hurdles, but then I just kind of stopped doing that so I could focus on throwing because I liked it more and I was better at it. Discus is my favorite event, so I really like doing that over shot.

ZF: Awesome. First question here, how do you currently use social media platforms like Instagram?

EB: For Instagram, I usually follow like, that's more, a lot of my age uses that to keep up, like that's our kind of social media wherever, like my age, like where we keep, like people will post their prom pictures and like their, like their anniversaries of stuff and there, like even just their like vacations and day-to-day stuff...like that's kind of how I keep up with like people my age. But I also follow a lot of like different sports pages and some other like interests of mine, but a lot of mine is like some sports teams, like college and professional, and then also like the ESPN accounts and like for, and a lot of the official like USA Olympic teams and stuff because I just like following all that stuff because it's really cool to keep up with all that stuff. So, my Instagram is mainly people my age and then the other half of it is just sports stuff.

ZF: Tell me about your college recruitment and why you decided to go to BSU.

EB: I was originally more interested in getting recruited for soccer because I thought I was a lot better at that than my other sports and I really like soccer. So, I, as a sophomore, started going to some camps and putting highlight tape on Twitter, but like no one else I really know does that except for like the football guys like to get recruited for football, that's kind of what they did. So, like I posted a highlight tape for soccer on Twitter and like was kind of getting recruited for that

too once coaches were able to start talking to me. And then I had a pretty good junior year in track and people started reaching out to me to maybe do track in college and I had never really considered that until last summer because I just, I didn't think it was a possibility with my abilities, but then I started improving a lot and I was like, oh this like, this actually might be something I really want to do. And so BSU was at one of my track meets last year and we talked a bit and this year we stayed in touch. Also, this past season, we had a soccer match on the Bemidji college field. So, I took the day and toured there, and I really loved their program and their school and their business program, which is what I'm going to major in. So, I visited a few other places for soccer too and, like, for soccer and track for some other places, but then I just found myself always just comparing it back to like BSU. Like, oh well, BSU had this and this place doesn't, so I don't know if I like, so I was like, that's kind of where I want to be and when they offered me, I was like, this is really a place that I can see myself and want to compete and I would take a lot of pride in competing for that school.

ZFL: Awesome, so you'll just do track at BSU, not soccer then?

EB: Yes.

ZF: Before you committed to BSU, had you met college recruitment through social media, specifically through Instagram?

EB: Yeah, so like content-wise, some of the accounts I followed, they posted a lot of their special camps and all that, like all the links and stuff, so people can sign up for that and go to those, but then I also like, coaches would follow me on Instagram and like, I'd let them follow me so they can see like everything that I post and then because I'm a private account, so I let them follow me so they can see what I post and then follow them back. Some would reach out over message and like we'd just talk through there or I'd get an email to send me more information and we just like,

a lot of, like some people like I just didn't even know about, like they reached out through Instagram.

ZF: Perfect. I talked to one of your former Laker teammates in Jacee Hauser on Wednesday, I think, for this project and she had mentioned that she got a lot of letters through the mail. Is that something that you've gotten to or is it more through social media and email and stuff that you got most of your recruitment through?

EB: I'd say we get a lot of like general admissions, like I get a ton of college mail, but sports wise, I do get some letters, but most of those, even if they do send you a hard copy, they also will email it to you if they have your email. So, like I'd get double copies of like invites to like some soccer camps and some other like track stuff. Usually, they also send a copy through like email or something, but I'd say it's more through social media and emailing too.

ZF: What advice do you have for other high school students navigating the college recruitment process through social media?

EB: If they're really serious about it, definitely put your stuff out, especially when you're from a smaller town, right? Like I know for soccer especially, a lot of recruitment happens, like these big club tournaments, like a lot of recruitment happens in club soccer, not high school soccer, but to be like, to be on a competitive club team, like the closest one to us is maybe Fargo? But like the most competitive ones are all the way down the Twin Cities. Well, that's a three and a half hour drive, you can't be doing that for practices and stuff, so it's kind of, you're kind of at a disadvantage, depending on where you are, but for social media, if you like, put your highlight tape out there, put stuff out there that you've done, then that's, that opens the doorway for a lot more people to even like know you exist, because they can't really recruit what you don't know

you, they know that you're good, so you just kind of got to put yourself out there if you actually are serious about it.

*Interview with Ryan Erickson, University of Minnesota-Morris swimming commit, 2024 Detroit Lakes High School graduate*

2/27/24

ZF: Let's start out with you by introducing yourself and then tell me about your swimming career.

RE: Okay, so I'm Ryan Erickson, and I started swimming when I was in eighth grade. I'm a senior now and I plan on swimming next year hopefully.

ZF: Where at?

RE: I'm thinking U of M Morris

ZF: Okay, perfect. What events do you compete in?

RE: Right now, I kind of compete in mostly sprinting. I do 100 free and 50 free

ZF: Cool and tell me about postseason successes and state last year and back to state this year. What events have those been in?

RE: Um, it's the same events as I was last year. I was really close this year though for the 50-free. I was 0.01 seconds away in third place. So, I was really close within this year. We are sending a relay down. So that'd be exciting

ZF: Awesome. All right. Let's start with these questions. What social media platforms do you currently use?

RE: I have Instagram, Facebook and TikTok. I guess I use them for entertainment purposes, I guess I really don't use Facebook at all. Mostly Instagram and TikTok.

ZF: Okay, has anyone ever reached out to you on Instagram college recruiters get messages from coaches' universities that kind of thing?

RE: No, but they have I have a lot of colleges like to like to show off like their Instagram page kind of like show them their achievements like they'll send me their...like when colleges email me about swimming stuff, they'll send me their Instagram page. They can like look at and stuff

ZF: Okay, what kind of pages do you follow on Instagram?

RE: I follow a lot of like swimming pages. I don't really follow many colleges, but I follow a lot of like just swimming pages and like just friends.

ZF: Perfect. Have you ever considered using social media to highlight? Your swimming tapes or your achievements to college recruiters?

RE: Uh, no. Not a whole lot. I thought about it, but I just didn't seem as interested in it.

ZF: Sure, do they reach out to coaches to see that stuff? Are they more interested in times or just they just reach out directly?

RE: They'll reach out like to me through email. I was kind of recruited for other sports too like track and field. You know, I had somebody email something to our track coach from a Chicago area college wanting to recruit runners from our entire team. But I really didn't get emails directly from them. That's kind of about it.

ZF: Okay, are you about running in college too?

RE: Oh, yeah, hopefully I do cross-country also, too.

ZF: In your opinion, what advice would you give to other high school students navigating college recruitment through using social media?

RE: Try to follow as many pages as you can, try to post a lot of like stuff you want to for like the sport and definitely try to reach out to colleges, so they know you exist.

*Interview with Will Martin, Minnesota State University – Moorhead football commit, 2024*

*Detroit Lakes High School graduate*

*3/8/24*

ZF: Alright, Will. Tell me a little bit about yourself and your football career so far.

WM: Alright. Will Martin. I'm a senior at Detroit Lakes High School. I'll kind of go back to the start of my football career which my parents never let me play offensive football because they didn't think it would be very good for me health-wise. So, I started middle school football in seventh grade when the school started hosting it. So, at that point, I knew nothing about it at all. So, then I just kind of fell in love with it through middle school and enjoyed doing it with teammates. So, then COVID rolled around, giving me a chance to put on some weight. So, freshman year, a couple of our guys were able to make the varsity squad as freshmen, so we found our roles in special teams and stuff. And then in sophomore year, I was able to get a role on offense and defense. Junior year, same story. Senior year, kind of same story there. But I've been very happy to be on the program. It's treated me very well. I'm in a great group of people, I think. And then I knew I wanted to play college football since probably my freshman and sophomore year. Actually, one of our old coaches, Dylan Surface, told us younger guys, hey, if you want to get recruited, you should download the app called Twitter and get an account set up. (4:21) The way he described it was to sell ourselves as if we're a business. So, we're a business, and we have to promote ourselves the best way we can. So, from there, it's kind of just took off.

So, me and a bunch of other guys in our grade kind of just helped each other along, helped each other build our bases on Twitter up, do something that could be presentable, and other coaches could look at us and assess us.

ZF: Yeah, I know journalists appreciate that wave as well, because I know it's you and Cody and Mason and Vu, and I feel like every senior on that team has some kind of Twitter something. And it makes it a lot easier for us, too, when something big happens, whether it's a recruitment announcement or somebody goes on a college visit or something, boom, it's right there for not just us media guys to see it, but also for other coaches and teammates to react to, because that's another cool thing that you guys do is when Cody, I think he committed to Gustavus or something, and there was like five, six, or seven retweets from the class of 24 at DLHS kind of congratulated him on that big decision.

WM: Yeah, we're definitely a tight-knit group. Do you want me to kind of expand on my recruitment?

ZF: Yeah, absolutely.

WM: Coming into your junior year, you get these things called Junior Day Visits, and they happen in the spring of your junior year. So, I got many of those invitations from two Division I schools and many Division II schools. So, my dad and I kind of had, for a couple months there, we had weekend trips all around South Dakota, North Dakota, Minnesota, driving to all these schools. And those really helped me get a good idea of what the schools were all about. And the programs do a really good job of wherever they want to show you, they will show you on that tour or that little visit they have for you. So that was a big part of my recruitment there was the Junior Day Visits my spring of my junior year. And after that was my last, I call it my last season of camps, which is the summer of my going into my senior year. So, I went to many, many

football camps that spring, to colleges to kind of show them what I'm all about, all the work I've put in all season, and show them, try to prove to them that I can play for your program. So, I spent a lot of time in the spring and summer going around to football camps and meeting coaches and just kind of once again trying to promote my business while I was running and trying to sell myself as an athlete. And then I ended up going to MSUM football camp, I think it was July, and I got offered a few days after that. And then I ended up making a commitment to MSUM after a decision of a couple schools, I think it was end of October is when I decided to commit to Moorhead.

ZF: Before you committed, did you meet any college recruitment content or messages from coaches or universities on social media?

WM: Yes, I have. In my opinion, social media is really the only way to go about recruitment nowadays with just how advanced things have gotten. I really don't know what it was in the past, but I'm assuming e-mails, letters, stuff like that. Our phones nowadays, it's so easy to get in touch with coaches and just see what all the athletes are producing out there on social media. I think it's also the future. I think it's going to stick around. I don't see a reason for it to go anywhere, how well it's working. And also, I think coaches prefer it too just for how simple it is and how they can cover a lot of ground in terms of seeing a lot of different athletes in a short amount of time. But then later on, I do believe coaches, at least from what I've experienced, they like to do text messages through a phone number or whatever, but that's later down the road.

ZFL What concerns or reservations do you have about engaging with college recruitment efforts on social media?

WM: Oh, yeah, that's a good one. I would say probably the biggest thing that I've noticed, not necessarily for me but for the general group of high school boys doing this, is there's a time and a

place for entertainment and for, like, your business, which is yourself. So, I think Twitter is what I use for, like, Twitter is my business. Whenever I think of Twitter, I think of football, I think of business. If I want to think of recreational or personal stuff, I think of Instagram or TikTok or something like that. So on Twitter, you've got to kind of keep yourself, you've got to kind of, it sounds bad, but put your best self forward in a way of, like, you're focused on your sport, you're trying to protect yourself.

ZF: In your opinion, what advice would you give to other high school students navigating the college recruitment process for social media?

WM: This is something that me, especially, and a lot of my buddies kind of talk about this a little bit. One thing we always kind of decided was, my parents helped me with this a lot too, was don't compare yourself to others on social media. It's so easy to do that when everyone's posting their best pictures, their best videos, their best stats or their best numbers. It's hard not to look at yourself and compare yourself. And it really can tear yourself down a little bit when you can't compare yourself to others because it will discourage you more than it will help you. Another thing is just don't be afraid to reach out to anybody. You're not going to get any attention if you don't reach out in some way. Like for every ten messages you might send to ten different coaches, you might get one or maybe two responses. So the response rate isn't always the best, but it's just you've got to keep pushing yourself out there. Another thing is check everything out. If a coach reaches out to you from a school you don't really necessarily like or never have thought about, just run through the process, go on that visit, have that phone call, and just make sure that that place is not for you or just make sure because it might actually be for you. You don't know that by the cover of the program. A coach at a football camp taught me this. He told a whole group this actually, and the thing he was saying is a lot of guys have the mentality D1 or

bust, meaning if they don't end up playing on the D1 level, they're not going to play at all, which is really a horrible mentality to have because, I mean, I'm going to be honest, I had that mentality for a while too, but then I realized that it's about me, what's best for me, and D1 is not always best for everyone. So I'm going to Division II, and that's definitely what's best for me. Division I was not for me I don't think, so Division II is where I fit better.

ZF: Kind of piggy-backing off that, how does using Instagram affect the self-esteem of high school athletes, particularly in comparison to their peers?

WM: That just kind of goes back to the thing I said earlier about it's very easy to compare yourself to others, and if you do compare yourself to others, it can really hurt you, so that's basically it for that one. This is kind of a goes off the question, but how do you currently use social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok? For me, Instagram is my personal account, so, I mean, I got nothing behind my social media, but my personal stuff is definitely Instagram, so if I go on vacation or something or just more personal things, I'll post them on Instagram. TikTok, I usually use TikTok for more fun things entertainment-wise, and Twitter, or they call it X, I suppose, but that's definitely my football account, so I run like a business, kind of more serious.