



More athletes get media training to protect team image

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Recently reported scandals involving student-athletes at Duke and Northwestern reminded TCU administrators that the Internet is a venue for publicizing information that could damage the university's reputation.

Three Duke lacrosse players were accused of sexually assaulting an exotic dancer during a team-sponsored party March 13, and two months later, images found on Webshots, a photo sharing Web site, exposed hazing rituals of the Northwestern University women's soccer team.

Due to the prominence of social networking Web sites such as Facebook and MySpace, these incidents have grabbed the attention of TCU administrators.

"There's no policy against having an account on Facebook or MySpace, but coaches and operations directors monitor it," said Mark Cohen, director of athletics media relations at TCU. "We have a duty to make sure there's nothing that's embarrassing or putting students in personal danger."

While Cohen said social networking Web sites are a liability, he also said he opposes banning them, as many schools have done, on the grounds that it would be unfair to disrupt the lives of student athletes.

"Besides being a full time student, they're out there practicing and playing at the highest level of collegiate athletics," Cohen said. "They have to have time to study and be a regular person."

Rather than imposing strict rules, the athletic department has focused on providing student athletes with training on dealing with the media, Cohen said.

In 2000, TCU hired a company called The Speaking Specialists, a husband and wife operation consisting of media veterans Randy Minkoff and Sue Castorino, who travel the country training professional and collegiate sports teams in public speaking, interviewing and conducting themselves in front of reporters.

Every year, sports become a bigger part of TCU's identity, and the media coverage of university athletics is becoming more important to admissions, sponsorship, recruiting and the school's community.

"I think schools finally came to the realization that these student-athletes are representing

the school and are usually the best recruiters, not only for the university but for their individual teams," Minkoff said.

The enormous amount of publicity the Duke and Northwestern scandals have received emphasizes the importance in having student athletes that are responsible and aware of the media.

"It has made school administrations realize that it is beyond just being interviewed," Minkoff said. "If you put something on MySpace or Facebook, it's like talking to a reporter. It's public information and it has implications."