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C3 Final Paper
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January 21, 2007

Text Messaging and College Football Recruiting

On Monday, January 8, 2007 the University of Florida won the college football BCS National Championship. Amidst the celebration after the game (which ended around midnight) the Gators' second-year head coach Urban Meyer could be already found sending text messages to the prospective student-athletes he is recruiting.¹ By this action, Coach Meyer is not breaking any NCAA rules and is merely attempting to keep up with his recruiting competition. This occurrence is a great example of one of the major debates being contested not only in college football but in all of collegiate athletics: Has the use of text messaging in college recruiting gone too far?

Sending text messages to prospective student-athletes has created many educational, ethical and financial concerns. Text messaging is very popular with recruiters for a variety of reasons. To understand these reasons a basic understanding of the rules of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) must be established. In order to protect the privacy and integrity of potential student athletes the NCAA has set limitations on the amount of contact a recruiter may have with a recruit.² These rules set standards for verbal, written and personal contact. The NCAA has established a rule for all sports that a recruiter may not contact a potential student-athlete on the telephone prior to July 1 after their junior year of high school. After which one phone call is allowed per

¹ Mike Bianchi. "Rest of State Should Hate Florida Gators." *Orlando Sentinel Online*. 14 January 2007. 20 January 2007 <www.orlandosentinel.com/sports/college/orl-bianchi1407jan14,0,1740862.column?coll=orl-sports-headlines-college>.

² John Barr and Lindsay Rovegno. "Outside the Lines: Text Appeal." *ESPN Online*. 31 May 2006. 20 January 2007 <sports.espn.go.com/ncaa/news/story?id=2461072>.

week.³ For college football there is one slight modification of these rules. A recruiter is allowed to make one call during the month of May during their target's junior year.⁴ No limitation was placed on when or the amount of times a recruit may call a recruiter.

The NCAA only enforces this limitation on what it classifies as “electronically transmitted human voice exchange.”⁵ Any communication that does not require voice exchange is not limited by this ruling. Until April, 2005 this was not the case. Text messaging was considered to be synonymous with phone calls. At this time the NCAA adopted bylaw 13.4.1.2, which allowed for all “electronic transmissions” to be considered the same as general correspondence.⁶ This moved text messaging out of the same category as phone calls and into the national spotlight. The NCAA justifies this decision by stating that text messages “are not viewed as intrusive.”⁷

Text messaging has become a debated topic because many feel that the practice has adversely affected the lives of both recruits and recruiters alike. One aspect in which a negative influence has been observed is in the realm of education, as well as in overall quality of life. For each prospect that is being recruited there are 120 Division I-A football playing institutions that can request his services. That number is increased when Divisions I-AA, II and III are added to consideration. These statistics are relevant because they reflect the immense volume of communication that is involved in college recruiting. Every recruiter is scouring the nation to find the best players for their school,

³ National Collegiate Athletic Association. 2006-07 Division I Manual, (Indianapolis, IN, 2006). 89.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 85.

⁶ Ibid., 104.

⁷ Ken Gordon. Coaches Turn to Text Messages to Stay in Touch with High-School Players. *The . Coulmbus Dispatch*. 22 January 2006. 20 January 2007
<www.buckeyeplanet.com/forum/archive/index.php/t-18520.html>.

while each student-athlete is evaluating each school that contacts them. This give-and-take makes the recruiting process exhausting.⁸

For the potential student-athletes being recruited the constant access and attention that text messaging allows can become overbearing and distracting. Recruiters in favor of text messaging claim that a phone call is distracting and a text message is not.

Although, the rate and timing that these texts are sent at can have a profound effect on the educational productivity of the prospect. Even some of the most highly touted recruits in the nation complain about the amount of attention that they receive. A statement by Louisiana State's Jai Eugene effectively summarizes the concerns of educators, "[The messages] were like a nonstop thing, all day everyday... I'd try to be focused on my homework and I'd be getting text messages."⁹ Many recruiters are also sending text messages at odd hours. Many recruits have complained about texts that they have received at bedtime and during the middle of the night.¹⁰ These texts can prove disruptive to normal sleep patterns.

The distraction of text messaging is often not limited to out-of-school activities. Messaging during school hours can prove distracting to not only the recruit that the text is intended for but also for the classroom setting. Examples of teachers having to interrupt lessons to reprimand a student whose incoming text disrupted class are widespread. During his recruitment the University of Maryland's Adrian Cannon described how he would become annoyed with the texts he received during school and choose to not

⁸ Patrick Dorsey. Recruiting Tech-niques. *Daily Northwestern*. 4 November 2005. 20 January 2007 <www.buckeyeplanet.com/forum/archive/index.php/t-18520.html>.

⁹ Robin Buckson and Angeliue S. Chengelis. Text Messages Sent to Woo Players. *The Detroit News*. <www.buckeyeplanet.com/forum/archive/index.php/t-18520.html>.

¹⁰ Sam Mellinger. Texting A Key Tool For Coaches. *Double-A Zone*. 20 January 2007 <www.doubleazone.com/Texting%20a%20key%20tool%20tool%20for%20coaches.htm>.

respond to them.¹¹ Cannon's decision to not respond to the texts should be commended and respected. The issue with text messaging is that many recruiters do not accept anything but a hasty reply. Many recruits are intimidated into feeling that they must respond immediately or run the risk of falling out of favor with the coach that is recruiting them.¹²

The Digital Divide also comes into consideration when discussing the use of text messaging in college recruiting. Many student-athletes who have the potential to compete in college athletics can be left out of the recruiting process because of the cost of text messaging. The prospects who can afford to run up large cell phone bills or who have a plan with unlimited text have a distinct advantage.¹³ There have been some instances where a recruit's phone bill have reached totals of \$800 a month.¹⁴ Coaches are interested in recruiting players that they can get immediate feedback from. The more frequent contact there is between the recruit and the recruiter they develop a better relationship and better chance the recruit has of enrolling at that particular institution.

There are ethical components to the debate over text messaging as well. Coaches often exploit the use of text messaging to find a way around the limitations placed on telephone communication. Coaches are only allowed one phone call per week to a recruit but recruits are allowed unlimited calls to their recruiting coach. Text messaging has been exploited here by recruiters who send a text to their target saying something like

¹¹ Buckson, Woo.

¹² Mike Knobler. Text Messaging Recruits a Cause for NCAA Concern. *Atlanta Constitution Journal Online*. 5 January 2007. 20 January 2007 <www.ajc.com/sports/content/shared-blogs/ajc/cfbrecruit/entries/2007/01/05/text_messaging.html>.

¹³ Buckson, Woo.

¹⁴ Charles Durrenberger. UA Coaches Now Recruit by Text Messages. *Arizona Daily Star Online*. 29 December 2005. 20 January 2007 <www.azstarnet.com/sports/109054>.

“call me.”¹⁵ Technically, since the coach is not initiating phone contact he is doing nothing wrong but the text basically acts as a phone call.

Ethical concerns also arise from the feeling that recruiters need to keep up with their competition. Many coaches do not care when they contact their recruits. They will text them during school, early in the morning, late at night, during dates or family time and any other time. Other coaches refuse to overly interfere with the lives of their targets. Wesley McGriff, the recruiting coordinator at Baylor University, considers contact during these times “way out of line” and “too personal.”¹⁶ Other coaches feel the strong to become deeply entrenched in the daily lives of their recruits. Urban Meyer of Florida is one of these coaches. His players have commented on how special establishing a relationship with him was during the recruiting process.¹⁷

These two usages of text messaging can be considered unethical use of the technology. Even though sending a text to say “call me” is not illegal by NCAA standards it can be used to initiate phone conversations with recruits who have already been contacted or who are still high school juniors.¹⁸ Coaches worried about crossing the line have a difficult time rationalizing sending a text to start a phone conversation or during a time that might be considered inappropriate. These coaches want the NCAA to enact rulings that will make a uniform decision for what the correct role of text

¹⁵ Bob Wieneke. Recruits Getting the Message. *Irish Sports Report Online*. 4 September 2005. 20 January 2007 <old.irishsports.com/stories/subscription/2005/09/04/isr_recruiting.20050904-isr-TRIB-SS7-Recruits_getting_the.fff.sto>.

¹⁶ Todd Willis. Texting Helps Coaches, Recruits Connect. *Dallas Morning News Online*. 25 January 2006. 20 January 2007 <<http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/dn/latestnews/stories/012506dnspohstextmessages.120ebdac.html>>.

¹⁷ Bianchi, Rest.

¹⁸ Barr, Outside.

messaging is. This would eliminate some of the seemingly unfair competition that has arisen by making recruits available all of the time.¹⁹

Another way in which recruiters often act unethical, and actually break NCAA rules, is by having student assistants, secretaries or other non-authorized personnel create and send the texts in lieu of having the actual recruiting coach compose the messages. This is a direct violation of NCAA bylaw 13.1.3.4.1, which states that only the head coach, assistant coaches and graduate assistant coaches may contact recruits.²⁰ Even though this act violates NCAA rules it is almost impossible to enforce. Even without direct proof many coaches throughout the country are suspicious that this rule is being broken. Eric Johnson, the recruiting coordinator at the University of Iowa, is on of the coaches suspicious about possible violations. He commented on an article he read about the multitude of recruits who claim to be receiving messages every day from Charlie Weis, the head coach at the University of Notre Dame by claiming that he believes that Notre Dame has student assistants sending the texts.²¹

There are many different opinions on how to solve this dilemma; ranging from banning text messaging outright to leaving the current system in place. The Ivy League has presented a proposal that would place a ban on all electronic communication.²² However, this proposal likely has little chance to pass. Additionally, an NCAA committee has suggested limiting the times that text messages could be sent to 4 p.m. to 8

¹⁹ Tyson Wirth. College Recruiting Gets Textual. *The Daily Iowan Online*. 24 January 2006. 20 January 2007 <<http://media.www.dailyiowan.com/media/storage/paper599/news/2006/01/24/Sports/College.Recruiting.Gets.Textual1502463.shtml?sourcedomain=www.dailyiowan.com&MIHHost=media.collegepublisher.com>>.

²⁰ NCAA, Manual, 91.

²¹ Wirth. College.

²² Jeremy Crabtree. Recruiting Changes Discussed at AFCA Convention. 9 January 2007. 20 January 2007 <footballrecruiting.rivals.com/content.asp?cid=627765>.

p.m. on weekdays and 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. on weekends. This proposal has already been rejected earlier this month.²³

The best resource to utilize when determining how to set a policy on text messaging should be current collegiate student-athletes. They have been through the recruiting process already and have selected an institution based on how that experience went. ESPN asked a sample panel of eight current Division I athletes their views on text messaging. Their answers varied but there was one consensus opinion: some limits must be placed on the amount of text messages that can be sent in order to protect the privacy and individuality of the student-athlete.²⁴ Some of the student-athletes polled are totally against text messaging, while others accept the practice as long as there are limitations placed on it. Either way, this study should act as a clarion call to the NCAA that the current system needs to be changed.

Ultimately, all of the evidence points to the need for a limitation to be placed on text messaging. Technology has allowed recruiting to become easier and more convenient. Some individuals are abusing this technology and making the entire process difficult for student-athletes and coaches alike. The NCAA's rejection of the time limit proposal on texts is disappointing. This type of scenario is the ideal compromise. The NCAA will probably not revisit the old rule of treating text messages the same as phone calls either. The Ivy League's proposal will be rejected very soon as well. This leaves the entire industry of college football looking for a new answer.

One solution that has not been brought up yet is placing a cap of the number of text messages that can be sent to a recruit. For example, if the NCAA dictates that only

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ ESPN. ESPNU Campus Call: Should Coaches Be Allowed to Text Message Recruits?. 17 November 2006. 20 January 1007 <sports.espn.go.com/ncaa/news/story?id=2655717>.

one text can be sent to a recruit per day coaches can stay in daily contact with those recruits and not interfere into their lives at a substantial level. This would be a proper compromise. Unfortunately, the issue is polarized into camps at this point and as time progresses this dilemma will be revisited. Hopefully, all sides will be able to come to a conclusion that is equitable for all student-athletes.

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