

With Shaq, tweets aren't always the ref's whistle

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In this photo provided by Elizabeth Kreutz, seven-time Tour de France Champion Lance Armstrong listens to Dr. Douglas Elenz before surgery on his broken right collarbone Wednesday, March 25 2009, in Austin, Texas. Armstrong broke his collarbone in the first stage of the Vuelta of Castillo cycling race in Spain, Monday March 23, 2009. (AP Photo/Elizabeth Kreutz)

(AP) -- Lance Armstrong was minutes away from surgery, but still took time to post a photo of himself in his hospital bed.

Charlie Villanueva and his team were told by their coach to step it up during halftime of a game, and the Milwaukee Bucks forward just had to tell his fans all about it before he went back on the court.

The [social networking](#) Web site [Twitter](#) was already big, but sports figures are quickly turning it into a way to entertain, interact with their

fans, share their news - and sometimes put their spin on a story.

"There's a lot of things that I can't do," Armstrong said recently. "I can't go over to Starbucks and sit there and have a coffee with 20 other people, although I do sometimes. I can't go down to the bar and drink beer with a hundred other guys. It doesn't work. It's a scene."

But he can connect with fans on Twitter - 140 characters at a time - and does so several times a day - even after his big comeback took a big step backward this week.

Armstrong's crash Monday in Spain put Twitter in the spotlight, as fans who follow the electronic feeds from members of his team were among the first to learn that the seven-time Tour de France champion had broken his collarbone.

He's just one of several high-profile athletes who are using Twitter. Fans have an insatiable appetite for access to their favorite players, and the stars want to boost their images while making an end run around the mainstream media.

They've found common ground at Twitter, which allows users to send text-message "[tweets](#)" to a [mass audience](#).

For Shaquille O'Neal, one of the site's most popular sports figures, the message is simple: I'm just like you.

"I'm a regular guy," O'Neal said in a recent interview. "I shop at Wal-Mart. I try to do the same things so-called regular people do. I know when they see some of my comments, they know that I'm as funny as I seem."

O'Neal uses Twitter to bring his fans closer - sometimes literally. He'll

hold impromptu scavenger hunts, tweeting his location and offering a free pair of tickets to the first person who finds him.

Armstrong, who has been unhappy at times with his portrayal in the media, now has the option of bypassing reporters entirely and making a direct connection with fans.

"I think some people see it and think, 'The guy's building a Pinewood Derby car with his son? That sounds awfully normal,'" Armstrong said recently. "Or, 'He's taking his kids to the church play or he's talking about the music he likes,' or, hell, whatever. I put everything on there."

Villanueva is so addicted that he couldn't stay away during halftime of the Bucks' March 15 victory over Boston, tweeting that he had to step it up. He got in some hot water with his coach, Scott Skiles. But he also became an overnight Web celebrity.

Twitter also is becoming a necessity for fans of sports that sometimes get don't get much attention from the mainstream media.

Cycling fans who care about riders beyond Armstrong can follow feeds from American standouts Christian Vande Velde, Levi Leipheimer, George Hincapie, Dave Zabriskie and others. Italian Ivan Basso tweets in his native language and broken English.

"We go eat sushi with my family!!" Basso posted Wednesday.

The new Women's Professional Soccer league is allowing players to tweet during Sunday's inaugural match between the Los Angeles Sol and the Washington Freedom.

Former White House press secretary Ari Fleischer, who does media consulting for sports clients, said athletes are smart to use sites such as

Twitter and Facebook to their advantage.

"You have the old geezers like me who read newspapers, and you have the future of the [fan base](#), young kids, who don't," Fleischer said. "They increasingly get their news and their information online and on social networks."

He wonders if Alex Rodriguez would have had an easier time navigating his recent drug scandal if he used social networks to rally supporters.

"The bottom line of social networking is, it helps athletes play both offense and defense," Fleischer said. "On offense, they directly communicate with their fan base, and they can make their fan base grow. Defense, for those times, for those few athletes where something goes wrong, it's helpful to have a fan base that rallies around you."

Fleischer doesn't advise athletes to ignore traditional reporters, who he says still hold significant - if waning - influence. But the Twitter trend has occasionally left scribes scrambling to keep up.

That was the case after Armstrong's crash.

While reporters were trying to get details, Astana team director Johan Bruyneel confirmed the injury through Twitter and Leipheimer posted a video link.

A few hours later, Armstrong was tweeting: "I'm alive!" On Wednesday, Armstrong posted a photo of himself in a hospital bed minutes before he was wheeled into surgery.

Armstrong regularly tweets insider tidbits and makes a point of noting when an anti-doping official shows up unannounced to administer a drug test. By doing so, he reinforces his long-held stance that he's the most

frequently tested athlete and hasn't failed a drug test.

"You talk about doping, and doping in sport, the most important thing is the whereabouts. All you've got to do is look at my Twitter. I mean, every hour you know exactly where I am," he said.

The same goes for O'Neal, who posts late-night photos of himself and tweets jokes when he isn't giving away tickets.

After Villanueva's halftime tweet, O'Neal decided to see if he could get away with it. "Attention all twitterers I'm a tweet at halftime and not get fined like vill a new wave a whteva his name is," he posted Saturday.

Sure enough, another post came through at the half: "Shhhhhhh."

Phoenix Suns coach Alvin Gentry joked that O'Neal can do whatever he wants as long as he's getting 25 points and 11 rebounds per game. But Shaq got a rise out of Villanueva, who sent a tweet to tweak O'Neal's college team: "the last name is spelled V-I-L-L-A-N-U-E-V-A... similar to how you spell LSU... L-O-S-T :)"

As of Wednesday, O'Neal had more than 414,000 followers, and Armstrong wasn't far behind. Part of their appeal is that they don't put out slick, milquetoast posts written by their public relations representatives.

"The athlete has to do it themselves," Fleischer said. "The PR department can't do it for them. It has to be genuine, it has to be real."

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