

Student warned over Facebook site wooing prospect

April 11 2009, By JUSTIN POPE , AP Education Writer

(AP) -- College sports fans, be careful of the company you keep on Facebook. You might get yourself - and the program you support - in trouble.

That was the lesson this week for Taylor Moseley, a North Carolina State freshman who expressed a common-enough opinion on campus when he started the Facebook group called "John Wall PLEASE come to NC STATE!!!!"

More than 700 people signed up for the group encouraging Wall - a local standout and the nation's No. 1 basketball recruit - to pick the Wolfpack by national signing day next week.

But the NCAA says such sites, and dozens more like them wooing Wall and other top recruits, violate its rules. More than just cheerleading boards, the NCAA says the sites are an attempt to influence the college choice of a recruit.

Moseley got a cease and desist letter from N.C. State's compliance director, Michelle Lee, warning of "further action" if he failed to comply. In an interview Friday, Lee said that people who act as boosters but fail to follow recruiting guidelines could face penalties such as being denied tickets or even being formally "disassociated" from the athletic program.

Adam Kissel, director of the Individual Rights Defense Program at the

Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, said the NCAA can impose rules on its member colleges. But universities - especially public ones - can't enforce them if it means punishing students in any way for expressing an opinion.

"A student doesn't lose First Amendment rights because of a contract the university signs with (the NCAA)," he said.

Moseley, the student, didn't respond to a request for comment, but the group has been renamed "Bring a National Title back to NC STATE!" and features a photo of Wall.

Though Lee sent Moseley the tough warning, even she finds the rule exasperating. The NCAA, she says, simply isn't keeping up with the technology reality.

"I think nationally the NCAA needs to address further Facebook and how these groups play a part in recruiting," she said. "Is it realistic for us to be able to monitor them? What harm is a group like this causing? But as the legislation stands right now, this is the position we have to take."

NCAA spokesman Erik Christianson said the group considers its rules "technology neutral." A Facebook page is simply a high-tech way to try to influence recruits.

The NCAA's concern is "intrusions into a high school student's life when they're trying to decide where to go to college," he said. He said the NCAA is keeping up with technology, noting new rules on text-messaging from coaches.

Christianson said the NCAA expects institutions to act as N.C. State did, reaching out to the creators of such groups to "educate" them about the rules. He added he was not aware the NCAA had ever initiated any

action related to a Facebook group or notified an institution about one.

But dozens of Facebook groups are still up in plain site for current recruits, including Wall, and other top undecided basketball players such as Xavier Henry and Lance Stephenson.

Wall, a 6-4 playmaker, averaged 21 points, seven rebounds and nine assists for Raleigh Word of God this past season. He's the No. 1-ranked recruit in the country by both Rivals.com and Scout.com, and among the last top players yet to commit. A Facebook search reveals groups including "Bring John Wall to Baylor," "John Wall Belongs at UNC" and "John Wall, come to DUKE!!"

There are at least four groups encouraging Wall to pick Kentucky. Through an athletic department spokesman, UK head of compliance Sandy Bell declined to comment on whether the department has taken any action in response to such groups.

[Facebook](#) did not respond to an e-mailed request for comment.

Kissel, of the education rights group, and Aden Fine of the American Civil Liberties Union, said that while the NCAA - a private entity - could pursue sanctions against a student like Moseley (such as denying him access to an entirely NCAA-run event), it was troubling that the letter and threatened sanction came from the university.

"The school is potentially finding themselves in a tricky situation, because of the NCAA rules, but that doesn't mean public universities can censor lawful speech," Fine said.

Christianson dismissed the free speech argument, saying courts have upheld the NCAA's right to set recruiting rules for members.

"We don't see it as a free speech issue. What we do see it as is a recruiting issue," he said. "We want to be sure that we limit that level of intrusion that comes into their lives."

On the Net:

<http://www.ncaa.org>

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