

Sports go mad for online pastime Twitter

May 1 2009, By Jayda Evans

Yes, mark Washington Huskies basketball star Jon Brockman as one of the 69 "tweeters" keeping me from writing.

Incessantly chirping like a virtual episode of Hitchcock's classic film "The Birds," athletes and sports teams have turned a simple question -- "What are you doing?" -- into a modern-day pastime using the trendy micro-blogging, social networking site Twitter.com.

From Terrell Owens (@terrelleowens81) to Natalie Gulbis (@natalie_gulbis), athletes are "tweeting" about everything from their feelings on gay marriage to their favorite restaurants in Boston. All curious "followers" have to do to join in is establish an account, click follow, and the conversation begins. The addictive real-time updates provide access that would make fan-club sites drool.

Wondering how Phoenix Suns center Shaquille O'Neal (@THE_REAL_SHAQ) is spending his offseason? Well, if you'd had a "tweetup" with him at the Arizona Biltmore at 4 p.m. PDT on April 22, you could have swapped diet tips. But he cheated and had a Texas-sized honey bun.

Want to know how New Jersey Devils goaltender Kevin Weekes' (@kevinweekes) knees are doing during the playoffs? He tweeted that he's seeing the same doctors as Tiger Woods.

"People are starving for this," Washington athletic director Scott Woodward said of the technology where simply updating your status in

140 characters or less offers insight into your world. "They (fans) just love to be touched and communicated with."

Based in San Francisco, Twitter.com was launched in March 2006 on a \$55 million budget by three tech geniuses. Already popular in the corporate world and with the tech-savvy, the site boomed in the sports world during the past year. Overall, according to figures from comScore, the site jumped from 4.3 million visitors in February to 9.3 million in March.

Many credit O'Neal, who ranks eighth among top Twitter users (774,559 followers), for the sudden popularity among athletes. Other analysts peg mainstream media asking viewers, listeners and readers to send tweets, or messages, to their accounts. Then there's the struggling economy, which makes free sites like Twitter an ideal way to communicate globally.

"We talk so much about how inclusive we are, this really takes us to that next level," said Hilary Shaev, vice president of WNBA marketing.

For so-called niche leagues like the WNBA and Women's Professional Soccer, grass-roots movements can help build a community. Both of those leagues are trying to break into an overpopulated sports landscape without the mass coverage of traditional media.

Shaev, who launched the WNBA's Twitter site in February, speaks daily with the marketing and interactive services staffs of the D-League, NBA and WNBA to discuss the day's stories. She also follows fans of the leagues to keep a pulse on what piques interest. As the day progresses, her staff releases tweets.

The WNBA's 13 teams have accounts, as do many of the players, as they try to generate more buzz. The Detroit Shock gave tips on free-agent

signings before submitting news releases. And the Atlanta Dream held a contest to get 1,500 people to sign up for its Facebook fan page, giving free tickets to an exhibition game.

"We believe, as with many companies, that it's important to go where your fans are," said Shaev, who also has league president Donna Orender make random Twitter updates. "We haven't replaced anything (marketing-wise). It's five hours less sleep for me, focusing on digital and social media."

Not everyone is sold on the marketing benefits of Twitter or even Facebook, which now seems old school. The Seahawks joined the week of the NFL draft to counter rumors and reach fans, offering a heads-up on jersey changes like T.J. Duckett swapping No. 42 for No. 44. But don't expect to see the Mariners tweet anytime soon.

"I'm too old for that stuff," said Randy Adamack, the Mariners' vice president of communications. "We've got a few people who are actually discussing it. Once we're comfortable that we're doing the right thing and why we're doing it, we'll start marching down that road."

Still, it can draw trouble. NBA players were scolded for tweeting during halftime. Now, both pro basketball leagues are banned from tweeting during games, although Women's Professional Soccer permits it. Brockman tweeted a harassing Washington State fan's number to get Huskies fans to retaliate, which caused a stir.

And Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban, notorious for haggling with officials, was fined \$25,000 by NBA commissioner David Stern for tweeting his frustration at a ref not calling a technical foul during a game. Cuban added that it was the same crew that missed a late call earlier this season.

Cuban's Twitter response to the lost dough?

"Can't say no one makes money from twitter now. The nba does," he updated on March 29.

On March 31, he shared the humor in the situation, tweeting that "One of the refs saw me tweeting, laughed and wagged his finger at me. some refs are hysterical."

Seattle Storm forward Swin Cash created a hot topic on the site when her brother, Kevin Menifee, was injured during a confrontation with police outside a Pennsylvania bar this month. Cash streamed "McKeesport Police beat my 24yr old brother last night" and described his injuries as "face swollen, broken nose, one eye closed, needed stitches."

But Cash later deleted the posts and Police Chief Joe Pero told The Daily News, the McKeesport newspaper, that no one came forward with a complaint, noting Menifee did sustain a laceration on his forehead.

"You ride the emotional highs and lows with things," Cash said. "It (the tweets) did make me more sensitive to the fact that when you speak about things on Twitter, it's not just you you're speaking about."

"But I wanted people to see that athletes are human. We can have bad hair days and different stuff that's going on."

Cash joined "Twitternation" in March because her mobility was restricted following outpatient back surgery. Basically bedridden, she turned to the Internet. Now her 700-plus followers receive tweets about her dinners at Macaroni Grill and needing to have her hair styled.

"Did they burn you with the straightening comb?" was one of the

follower's responses.

Megan Hueter is the Washington, D.C.-based co-founder of WomenTalkSports.com, which aims to elevate exposure of women's sports.

"If there's a little more focus on everybody's individual story and telling that, we can start to generate more attention," she said. "It's a little different with the guys. They are so well followed. The trick (for women) isn't going to be quantities of numbers. But to get these women doing it themselves, having it be their own voice and be very genuine and transparent. That's where they're going to succeed."

And how do you know if you're following an athlete, it's really that athlete doing the tweeting? Brockman and Cuban joke that their grammar gives them away. Brendan Wilhide of Avon, Conn., doesn't even trust that.

He did find someone impersonating New York Giants quarterback Eli Manning, after all.

Wilhide, a freelance writer, developed a new hobby in February, authenticating sports Twitter accounts on Sportsin140.com. Wilhide previously worked in minor-league baseball public relations, using team PR staffs as a first reference. He also has a contact at Twitter headquarters and doesn't post an account as real on his Google spreadsheet link until it's completely verified.

"It's something I'm doing out of passion for sports and passion for technology," said Wilhide, who has noticed an influx of athletes the past month. "Somebody will see it and say I'm crazy, but it matters to me. If I were a Giants fan, I certainly wouldn't want to be reading these accounts and find out it wasn't Eli Manning."

Nor would you want to zip all over town, reading that free tickets are available only to discover it's a hoax. Don't worry, with O'Neal or Boston forward Paul Pierce, they're real and people receive courtside seats by shouting "Truth" or tapping the big man on his left shoulder in the mall.

"That type of marketing would never be possible without Twitter," Wilhide said. "What it does is give a direct connection between the player and fan."

It also gives NCAA compliance offices a headache.

While Washington coach Steve Sarkisian is tweeting to 2,700-plus followers _ with the help of assistant Jared Blank -- sending updates from practice and photos of Husky Stadium, the program has to be mindful of violating rules. Recruits can follow the coach, but he can't directly chat with them.

And those independent fan sites that try to lure a prospect to a university? Another no-no.

At Washington State, Steve Robertello, associate AD for NCAA compliance, said he uses message boards to help see what might need to be investigated on Twitter or Facebook. He met with coaches in April to discuss rules of Twitter. The entire Cougars football staff is tweeting.

"It's hard to legislate against technology," Robertello said. "You never know when a new one is going to pop up that's not addressed that we've all got to scramble and figure out how we're going to deal."

So far, though, Twitter is a hit. Even if Sarkisian is a little repetitive with his "Go Dawgs!" tagline.

"I like to get fired up," he said in defense. "It's a lot of the stuff that I

feel and if you were there, that's what I'd say to you."

Precisely. So, what are you doing?

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More on Twitter

Twittonary

It's hip to be a twit. Don't know what we're talking about? Here's a glossary of Twitter terms that will help you understand and start tweeting like a pro. This was compiled from use. Twitter.com does not offer an official list.

Twitternation: The millions of accounts that comprise Twitter.com.

Tweeps: People who tweet.

Followers: Those signed up to receive updates from an account.

Twitname: The username.

@: The symbol before the twitname to contact that account.

Tweet: The 140-character status update.

Tweeting: The act of writing a status update.

RT: Re-tweeting a status update from an account.

#: Symbol that designates tweet is part of larger conversation (i.e. [#sports](#), [#NASCAR](#)).

#FollowFriday: A list of accountants suggested for others to follow made weekly.

TweetDeck: A personal browser to stay in contact with Twitter and Facebook.

Tweetie: An iPhone application to handle Twitter accounts.

Tinyurl.com: Web site that condenses links to 25-characters to post on Twitter.

Twitpic: A separate server that provides a link to pictures.

Tweetup: Meet in public.

Dweet: A tweet sent while drunk.

LiveTwitting: Tweeting during a news conference, game, or other live event.

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