

Twitter gives fans access to athletes' lives, so long as the tweets are real

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The tweet in question might have been one of the shortest did-he-really-say-that comments in a long line of sports figures saying dumb things.

The Twitter page purporting to belong to St. Louis Cardinals manager Tony La Russa included the post, "Lost 2 out of 3, but we made it out of Chicago without one drunk driving incident or dead pitcher."

Just one small problem.

Tony La Russa never wrote that - the page bearing his name belonged to an imposter. La Russa sued Twitter, and both sides agreed Friday to a settlement in which the social networking site made a donation to La Russa's foundation.

"Everyone wants to say what's on their mind and wants other people to know where they're coming from," said Yves Darbouze, CEO of pLot Multimedia, a firm that specialized in online communications. "In terms of inclusion - which is what all social networks are aiming for - Twitter is the most simple. What it doesn't let you do is be clear who is having the conversation. You have a lot of fake Twitter pages, a lot of different people making different claims. That can turn out to be a big problem."

Call it the Catch-22 of the tweet: As celebrities find ways like Twitter to reach out directly to their fans, they're stumbling into as many pitfalls as possibilities.

New Tennessee football coach Lane Kiffin may have violated NCAA recruiting rules when his Twitter page mentioned a recruit's name. Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban faced a \$25,000 fine for criticizing NBA referees on Twitter. And a whole host of pages bearing the names of athletes may or may not be the real deal.

Such can be the price for taking something as nuanced as communication and stripping it down to a permanent text message.

"I think what it does is reduce the language to its barest knowledge - something Hemingway would tell you in a short story is great," said Char Miller, professor of environmental analysis at Pomona College in Southern California. "But I'm not sure 140 characters is the best way to go."

"If all we get is the tweet - like a bird chirping, and how meaningful is a bird chirping? - then it's not our language. If this is going to become the sole way by which human beings interact, these social networking forms, we're in serious trouble."

This is uncharted territory for the rich and famous. Twenty years ago,

getting your message out meant talking to the right reporter or doing a sideline interview smoothly. Today, there are a slew of cyber options, with Twitter, a microblogging effort that allows users to send text-message-sized notes to their accounts for the world to follow, at the forefront.

"It allows real access to celebrities, so those that are using it as a 'what are you doing right now' device are doing what Twitter was based on," said Jared Roy, a social media expert and the president of Risdall Integration Group. "It lets you see into the lives of celebrities. Some are doing it well, some are not."

Who's doing it well and who's not? Judge for yourself.

Among the latest on Terrell Owens' purported page: @ my place watchin movies!!!

From Shaq's page: They said on around the horn that I'm playing when I say I want kobe to win his 4th ring, here it goes again I'm serious I want kobe to win.

Or a Mizzou athletic department tweet: When travel is said and done for the athletic year, more important work can take place, like updating our Twitter background.

Coming to you from Royals center fielder Coco Crisp: OK i officially have a new (baseball) disease called PPA (Piss Poor Aim). Everytime i hit a ball hard PPA kicks in. There has to be a cure.

Shakespeare it is not.

"It can never be an authority - it's just a loose conversation for people to have (with others)," Darbouze said. "As humans evolve, and you can see

this through all of our history, and our technology evolves and our tools evolve, we find these new conduits of expression are coming around. It's just new wiring for us to deliver human messages."

And like all human messages, things can go wrong.

In New York, NFL agent Alvin Keels stirred up some trouble when he posted tweets that updated contract talks between the Jets and his client, Leon Johnson. Kiffin's slip - naming a potential recruit in a post and later saying it was an error by a low-level employee - came with a nonsense response from the NCAA: Tweet or talk, Twitter or chatter, the rules are the rules.

"The bottom line is, when it comes to the social networking, we're not so much concerned with the avenue or the activity," said Stacey Osburn, associate director of public and media relations for the NCAA. "They still have general recruiting rules to follow, whether it's on the phone or Facebook or Twitter."

With all the tweeting trouble brewing online, maybe it's smart to imitate Kansas center Cole Aldrich: Get a page, secure it, and don't allow anyone _ particularly nosy reporters or opposing fans _ to have access.

Then there's the problem with what's true and what's a lie. Pretty easy to discern in person. Easier in the newspaper, on the radio or on television. Not so much on Twitter.

"Fact-checking, making sure people are honest, having a responsibility making sure what's going on Twitter is factual _ these things Twitter can't do," Darbouze said. "It's not the most accurate way to follow news because the journalistic responsibility isn't there. It's entertainment, but sometimes it gets mistaken for an authority."

La Russa learned that the hard way.

In 2002, Cardinals pitcher Darryl Kile died of a heart condition in his Chicago hotel room. In 2007, another pitcher - Josh Hancock - died in an auto accident while driving drunk. A month earlier, La Russa was arrested for DUI and later pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor charge.

So the tweet about getting out of Chicago without any dead pitchers or DUIs was, to say the least, not cool.

What followed was a lawsuit filed last month, a reminder to take your Twitter with a grain of salt and an understandably angry manager.

Yes, on [Twitter](#) you can find out Crisp loves role-playing games, that Owens recognizes his new neighbors may fear the drama he'll bring and that MU [football](#) coach Gary Pinkel thinks it's a beautiful day for a motorcycle ride.

As long, of course, as it's really them doing the communicating.

"At the heart of human communication," Miller said, "is trusting and verifying what you've just heard. And at this point, this doesn't seem terribly good."

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