



Social media 101 for coaches



It's no secret that many coaches view social media as an unwelcome distraction. In a world where a single thoughtless tweet could spill a training secret or expose the team to negative media attention, is it possible to use social media to help your coaching career? Absolutely!

With a little planning and thought, social media can become another tool in your coaching arsenal. In this module, we'll discuss how to avoid social media pitfalls and harness social media's power to help you improve team chemistry, interact with other coaches, athletes and more.

What will you find in Module 24:

1. [How to establish online boundaries with my athletes.](#)
2. [How to encourage my athletes to use social media properly.](#)
3. [Should I monitor my athletes social media profiles?](#)
4. [How to use social media to further my coaching career.](#)
5. [How to use social media for team building.](#)

1. How do I establish online boundaries with my athletes?



You're checking your email when suddenly, a Facebook friend request from an athlete pops up in your inbox. On one hand, you've friended a few other athletes to make it easier to coordinate travel to competition. On the other hand, however, this athlete is a minor. Do you friend the athlete or

leave him or her in your friend queue and make up some excuse about how you don't go on Facebook anymore? Or maybe you throw your computer out the window and never look back?

Setting boundaries with your athletes on social media can be awkward, but it doesn't have to be. To avoid hurt feelings, it's important to address the issue head on long before that first friend request reaches your inbox. The decision of whether to interact with your athletes on social media is a personal one, but is contingent upon the following factors:

- **How old are your athletes?** Most experts in risk management recommend that coaches do not interact with minor athletes on social media. If you do, make sure to keep all communication public and only use group chats (rather than one-on-one messages).
- **What is your coaching pedagogy?** Do you want to be seen as your athletes' friend? How does social media impact your ability to be seen as an authority figure? Is it important to you to keep your coaching persona active in all interactions with your athletes?
- **What are your reasons for interacting with the athlete via social media?** Do you want to check up on your athletes or coordinate logistics through Facebook messenger?

You have four options when it comes to interacting with athletes online:



Of the four options, the least-used one is creating distinct social media profiles for your professional career. Doing so, however, is often an elegant solution, since it allows you to extend your coaching persona to the virtual space and creates a strong distinction between your private and personal life. Which option you choose is entirely a personal choice. As long as you are consistent and communicate your choice in advance to your athletes, you will avoid hurt feelings or accusations to favouritism.

2. How do I encourage my athletes to use social media properly?



It's no secret that growing up under the 24-7 spotlight of social media is challenging for any young adult. Young high-performance athletes carry an additional burden because they are expected to represent their team/sport/club and may be subject to media attention. Ironically, the best way to help your athletes successfully navigate the online world is to take the conversation offline.

Often, when coaches talk to their teams about social media, they treat it as a new entity requiring a distinct set of rules. Studies show, however, that this approach can actually worsen online behaviour, since it encourages your athletes to see social media as a being fundamentally different than real-world communication. One of the reasons online bullying is so prevalent is that people don't see the person they're interacting with online as "real" and may feel that they're "playing a game where the rules of the real world don't apply." This dissociation can be problematic.

Instead, have a conversation with your athletes about proper team conduct that encompasses all forms of communication, including social media. By involving your athletes in creating the team conduct policy, you will help them feel ownership over the rules, increasing the likelihood that they'll follow them.



Talking directly to your athletes will also give you a better idea of what online communications issues your athletes actually face. Chances are high that your athletes are more social media savvy than you are, and they may be using social media platforms that you're unfamiliar with. Until you ask your athletes what conflicts they've encountered online, you may not know that an athlete is feeling left out because her teammates are not including her in their Snapchats.

Here are some questions to get the conversation started:

- How should we treat each other as teammates?
- What principles should our team be guided by? (Fairness, respect, etc).
- How will we deal with conflict within our team?
- How will we deal with winning and losing?
- How do we want outsiders to see our team?
- What communication problems have you encountered? What could prevent these problems from happening?
- Is there information that we would like to keep private as a team? (Injuries, new training techniques, etc).

Use your athletes' answers to draft a team conduct policy that all athletes must sign. When issues do occur, you will have a reference point for enforcing proper behaviour. It's up to you whether you want to include disciplinary actions for those who break the rules, or if you want to deal with infractions on a case-by-case basis.

3. Should I monitor my athletes social media profiles?



Recently, National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) coaches and administrators made the news for requesting that student athletes offer up their social media passwords so that their accounts could be monitored. Some universities even ban their student-athletes from using social media.

The question of whether an employer or coach should be able to monitor their employee/athlete's social media presence is a hot-button issue...and a legal grey area. In the USA, many legal experts believe that this practice violates the athlete's right to free speech and could be unconstitutional.

Instead of monitoring your athletes' social media use, it's probably better to take a proactive approach and educate them on proper social media conduct. If a problem does occur, deal with it in the context of your larger team policy. After all, experts like media lawyer and former Ohio University hockey player Jonathan Peters say that social media problems usually have their root in real-world frustrations. For example, that athlete complaining about his training partner on Twitter is probably also exhibiting negative behaviours in his training environment.

4. How do I use social media to further my coaching career?

When done well, social media can help you connect with other coaches, learn about advancements in sports science, and discover grants, coaching clinics, seminars and more. How invested you want to be in social media depends on a number of factors, including:

- How much time do I have to devote to social media?
- What are my social media goals?
- What sites will help me achieve those goals?
- Do I want to create professional social media accounts?

Remember: social media works best as a conversation, not a monologue, so make sure that you follow the 80/20 rule. Only 20% of your content should be self-promoting, while 80% should be meaningful interactions with other people.

To help you get the most out of your social media efforts, we've assembled best practices for coaches broken down by social media site:

LinkedIn



Many LinkedIn users report that the site has lots of “noise” and self-promotion, making meaningful conversations difficult. To cut through the chatter, make sure to:

- Interact with other coaches by ‘connecting’ with them. Remember: only send connection requests to coaches you already know.
- Join groups to meet other coaches around the world. When joining groups, look for those with active, thoughtful comments.
- Find groups by investigating what groups your colleagues have joined.
- Help your fellow coaches by recommending and endorsing them. They’ll probably return the favour and endorse you back.
- Fill out your profile thoroughly but succinctly. If you’re looking for employment, make sure to research popular keywords for your industry.

Twitter



Many coaches who use Twitter claim that it’s the best site to connect with people outside of your sphere of influence. Make sure to:

- Follow other coaches, National sport organizations (NSO), provincial sport organizations (PSO), coaching institutes, sports science organizations, etc. for interesting conversations and articles.
- Use Twitter lists to create lists of your favourite coaching accounts and check them to make sure you don’t miss out on an interesting tweet.
- Respond promptly to all interactions.
- For more Twitter best practices, check out our module: [Twitter 101 for sports organizations.](#)

Blogging

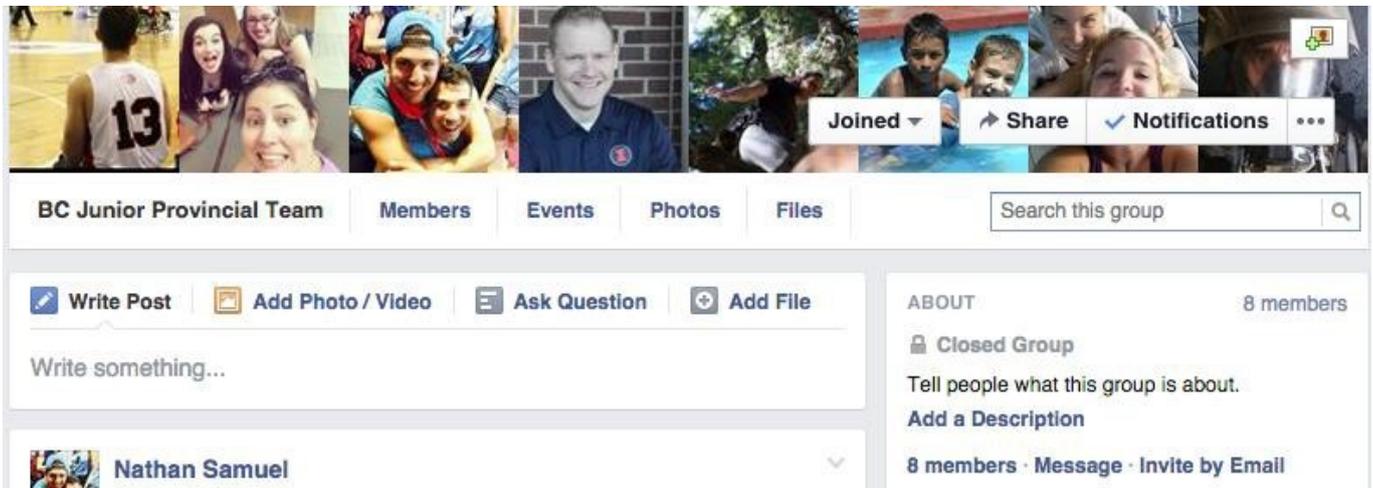
Blogging is an excellent way to establish yourself as an expert in your field and even get media attention, since members of the media will often do a Google search to find experts to appear on talk shows and news programs.

- If you have strong writing skills, try a traditional blog. If you’re not confident in your writing skills, try a video blog or podcast.
- You can set up your own blog through platforms like Blogger, or you can blog through your NSO or PSO. Choosing to blog through another organization increases your audience, since you can draw on that organization’s social media presence.
- Remember to promote your blog through your social media channels.

For more blogging tips, check out our blogging module: [Blogging for sport organizations: Your questions answered.](#)

5. How do I use social media for team building?

Social media can help you stay connected to your team outside of practices, manage team logistics and even encourage your athletes to maintain healthy habits that will give them an edge in the upcoming season. Before you decide to integrate social media into your team-building strategy, however, you must ensure that everyone on your team can be included. If some athletes don't have access to (or aren't permitted to use) social media or a computer, you should avoid it.

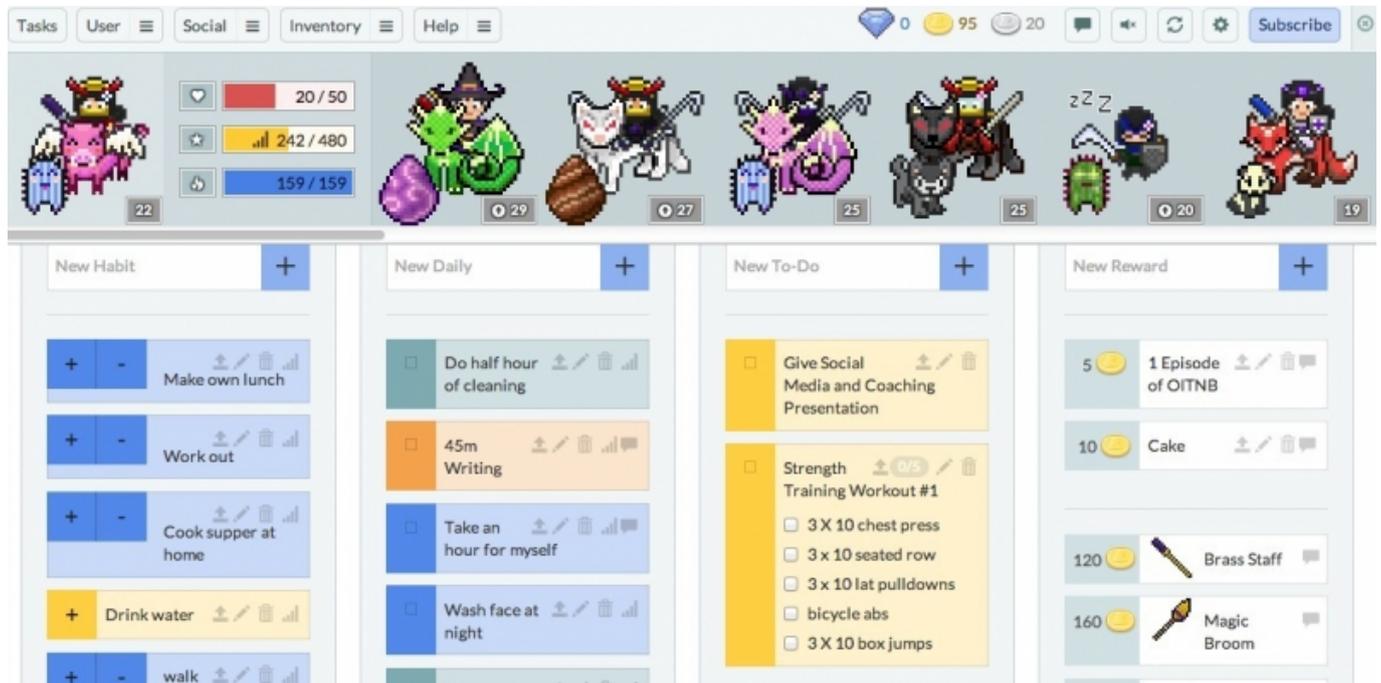


Facebook groups are one of the best tools for team building, since they were designed with this purpose in mind. Unlike a Facebook page (which is for external communications), a Facebook group is for internal communications.

When using Facebook groups, make sure to note the following:

- They can be set as private so only team members have access to the group.
- They allow you to upload files like weekly workouts.
- They have a 'question' function that is perfect for organizing team logistics, like setting up a team dinner.
- Have similar features to a Facebook page, such as a wall where athletes can post questions, comments, photos and videos, and an 'event' tool where athletes can invite friends and family to upcoming competitions.

If you want to take your team building off Facebook, (since younger athletes may not be permitted to have a Facebook account), and give your athletes a fun way to stay motivated, you might try one of the many new social media platforms aimed at habit formation, such as [HabitRPG](#) (seen below).



HabitRPG is a free habit-forming tool based on role playing games. Each 'player' gets an avatar, then sets up habits they'd like to form (i.e. drinking 8 glasses of water a day) or break (ie. eating junk food), daily tasks (i.e. clean the house for 3 minutes) and a To-Do list. When you complete tasks or maintain healthy habits, you get incentives like gold coins that can be used to buy outfits and equipment for your character. Avatars can even grow 'pets,' cast spells and buy potions.

HabitRPG has a 'party' mode perfect for sports teams and other groups. As a coach, you can assign tasks to your athletes (i.e. a strength-training workout) and send your entire team on quests where they can complete their daily tasks and habits for more incentives. Everyone on the team can monitor each others' progress, increasing accountability and adding an element of competition. Team members can also chat with one another.

On the surface, HabitRPG seems like a silly game. However, several studies have shown, that small virtual incentives actually help people achieve their goals. One 2006 study, for example, found that participants whose pedometers were attached to a device that made a virtual fish grow when they walked lost more weight than those with regular pedometers. If HabitRPG can make your athletes eat a little less junk food or get in an additional workout, it's worth the effort.

Have a question about coaching and social media? Have a tip not mentioned here? Get in the conversation by contacting arley@bcwheelchairsports.com or tweeting

@arley_mcneney.

Sources:

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To learn more, check out our Social Media Toolkit, found [here](#).



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