Social Media and Digital Communication Guidelines for Athletes

Introduction

This guide contains suggestions, not hard and fast rules. We encourage you to use social media, and we have no desire to control what you do online. But we can help you think about the possible advantages and pitfalls offered by social media as your career goes from strength to strength, and you find yourself becoming a more public figure.

If you read nothing else in this guide, bear the following two questions in mind when you post anything online:

1. **Would you say this in front of your parents or grandparents?**

2. **Would you say this to journalists at a press conference, sitting next to your coach?**

If the answer to either question is no, think very carefully before posting. Just about everything you say online could eventually be read by anyone, including your grandmother or the editors of tomorrow morning's tabloids.

Why do I need guidelines?

We want to help you think about how you, your coaches and **scottish**athletics staff can work together to build a great reputation for you and for your sport, both online and in real life - but we don't want to stop you enjoying social media, or eliminate your individualism and personality.

If you're used to using social media freely, it might seem unfair that you now have to think a little more before you post, but this is just one small part of the increased profile that comes with being a successful athlete. The great thing is that your increased profile will also bring you lots of new, excited followers, and you have the chance to talk directly to them. In turn, they will offer you positivity and support.

No such thing as privacy

It's important to review your privacy settings regularly on any social network. But it's also important to remember that it's possible that everything you send or post – even to your friends – could potentially become public. Once that has happened, it could be seen by *anyone and everyone, forever.*

Even if you are using Snapchat, or a private messaging service like WhatsApp or Viber, the people you are communicating with can take a screenshot of your message. Once that's done, the image/words/video you've sent are completely out of your control. It only takes your friend to send it to a friend of theirs, and your private message is in the hands of a stranger, who can post it anywhere they like.

Once something starts to spread on the internet, it's impossible to control it, even once you've deleted the original.

An ill-advised comment or photograph could still be popping up when someone searches for your name years from now – including potential sponsors, employers, etc.

So check your privacy settings regularly, but also bear in the back of your mind that you can never be completely sure that what you post online will remain private.

Ask yourself:

- Am I happy for what I am about to post to be seen by *anyone and everyone?*
- Am I happy for this post to be attached to my name and easily-searchable *forever*?
- If my post was to appear somewhere I never intended it to go, would I be happy about it?

Respect yourself

You have worked incredibly hard for many years to become who you are - a high performance athlete in a public sphere. This means that people will form their opinions based on your sporting performances, but also on other aspects of you that they see portrayed publically. Used well, social media has the potential to give you greater control of this than ever before, and to build a reputation for being dedicated, interesting, positive and inspiring.

Ask yourself….

- How do I wish to be portrayed?
- What messages do I want to get across?
- Will my post reflect negatively upon my "role model" status?
- What parts of my life do I want to keep private?
- Is what I am posting going to reflect negatively on my public profile?
- Is what I am posting going to affect future opportunities for my personal brand?
- Remember….You can still be humorous and have a personality online – just think before you post.

When you post, bear in mind the overall effect of what you've put online over time, not just the effect of a single post. For example, one tweet about how tough today's training was might offer a window on the world of an elite athlete; similar posts made every day might make it sound as if you're not up to it. Your rivals may be reading!

Respect your sport

In the same way that your actions while training and competing reflect on athletics in general, so do your actions online. As an athlete right at the top of your sport, you have rightly earned the respect of many others across the country, from grassroots competitors and club volunteers to elite coaches and other elite athletes.

You can use social media to build on their pride in you and in their sport. Don't comment negatively on others' professional performance, be they athletes, officials or coaches. When you post online, make sure your facts are accurate and don't swear or engage in insulting behaviour. Don't be afraid to be yourself, but do so respectfully.

Ask yourself…

- How will the people who have helped me progress in my sport (such as my coach, my family, my club) feel about me posting this?
- How will this post affect the way athletics is viewed in Scotland and further afield?
- If I am tempted to discuss a contentious issue within athletics, how important is it for me to have my say in public? Have I thought carefully about my opinion, rather than offering a knee-jerk reaction? Will this be a constructive contribution? Are there other ways I could pursue the matter (face to face, in a private email, or on the phone, for example)?
- Will what I am about to say undermine the hard work of those who came before me, or make life harder for those who come after?
- Could my post upset a current or potential sponsor for me or for the sport?
- Would I expect my own sporting heroes to post in this manner?

Respect your Audience

Social media offers a great way to connect with friends and family but the reality is that much of what you say to them on social media you also say to strangers, including fans and the media.

There may be many people out there who want to feel as though they know you and social media gives them the chance to engage with you on a new level. You may find yourself talking to strangers with a level of familiarity you would usually reserve for people who know you well. Remember that people who don't know you personally are less likely to pick up on the context of your comment, or to know when you're joking/being flippant. Never post anything that's rude, abusive or discriminatory.

Ask yourself…

- Who are my audience? Are they just friends and family? Are they fans? Are they media?
- Would I make this comment to this person face-to-face (for example, would I say this to someone I don't know, who has approached me in public?)
- Could this comment be misunderstood by someone who doesn't know me, or know my sense of humour?
- Would I be happy to see this comment in the newspapers tomorrow? Will my post create a negative news angle?

Social media and your performance

Although using social media often feels like a relaxing thing to do, being very active on it can take up a lot of time and energy. Be aware of the effect it has on your mental state and your performance, particularly around the time of major competitions.

Many performance athletes step away from social media completely in the approach to high-profile events so they can focus. It can be tempting to find out what people are saying at times of excitement, and to check and see if you have any good luck messages. But be aware that this might not help you make the most of all your training and turn in the best performance possible.

The media are also likely to be paying particularly close attention to what you say online during important events. If you have had a high-profile disappointment, it is a good idea to resist the temptation to go online straight afterwards. Wait until the strongest emotions have subsided so you can reflect, and post with a clear head.

Ask yourself

- Is the amount of time/attention I am spending online affecting my focus or performance?
- If I saw a negative comment about myself now, how would it affect me?
- Is my post really so important that it can't wait?
- Will I feel differently in a day or two, when my emotions have settled?

- Is this the best place to express my disappointment – could I pick up the phone to a friend/loved one instead?

Planned career events

Some of the most important events in your career could be of great interest to your fans and the media. These might include competition selection; change of coach, etc.

It is better for you and for **scottish**athletics that we plan the release of important information, rather than have it trickle out informally on social media.

When there are important changes afoot, we will talk to you about the best way to break the news, but if you are ever in doubt, you can contact Communications Manager Peter Jardine on peter.jardine@scottishathletics.org.uk or Digital Comms Officer Sue Gyford on sue.gyford@scottishathletics.org.uk and they will be happy to talk things through.

When things go badly

You can start by deleting your post and closing down your privacy settings as much as possible – bearing in mind that the damage may already be done if an image is already in the possession of others.

If you are receiving upsetting messages or replies, the best response is often no response. Tempting as it is to reply, that can add fuel on the fire and escalate the situation. Best to step away from your phone or computer and let off steam to a friend or family member instead.

Block and report anyone who abuses you, and if you're genuinely concerned, ask our advice on how to deal with the issue, using the contact details above.

If you're a member of an athletics club, your club will also have a designated welfare officer, who may be able to offer support and advice. You can also contact the **scottish**athletics welfare officer, Angus Macdonald, on welfare@scottishathletics.org.uk

Self responsibility

scottishathletics can provide advice and guidance on using social media, but at the end of the day it's up to you individually to take responsibility for your online reputation.

Make it clear that your posts are your own opinions, and not those of **scottish**athletics, and own what you say with pride.

If you want to know more about this you can check out our guidance for coaches and clubs when using social media and digital communication with young people on our website.

You are already a fantastic ambassador for your country and your sport.
By using social media well, you can amplify that and reach more people than ever before.