

Session: **New trends in management and marketing I.**

Abstract nr: **EASM-0166**

Elite sports and Twitter

L. van Daal¹, W. de Graaf¹, J. Janssens¹

¹Hogeschool van Amsterdam university of applied sciences, Sports management and business, Amsterdam, Netherlands

"To all twitterers, if u c me n public come say hi, we r not the same we r from twitteronia, we connect"

In February 2009 this message was tweeted by basketball pro Shaquille O'Neal. At that time his Twitter feed attracted approximately one million followers. A couple of months later cycling champion Lance Armstrong personally informed almost as many fans about the extension of his family: "Wassup, world? My name is Max Armstrong and I just arrived. My Mommy is healthy and so am I!" Last year Armstrong not only got a son, he also sampled more than 1.5 million new followers on the Internet. And nowadays the popular tweets of 'The Real Shaq' reach nearly three million sports fans.

Twitter provides a fast, simple tool for communication through which users can update their web audience with frequent messages of 140 characters or less. Last year it was worldwide the fastest-growing social network. In April 2010 approximately 105 million users were registered, a number which was growing further with 300,000 people per day. The world of sport also has discovered the microblogging tool. Elite sportsmen and women in particular make more and more use of Twitter.

But what exactly are the meaning and significance of Twitter for top athletes and sports organizations. Who, why and how do take advantage of this social network to communicate with fans, members and, leads? And what are the implications of the Twitter connections? Is it, as the quoted tweets suggest, above all a nice way to strengthen the bonds with the fans, or is it more a smart marketing tool? Is Twitter an alternative, and thus a threat to the communication through traditional media, or is it a welcome addition? These and other questions are central in a study on the application of Twitter in sports circles.

The research project was started in the fall of 2009 and has been concluded recently. The study is limited to the meaning and significance of Twitter for the Dutch top-class sport, but in view of the worldwide popularisation of this social network and the global nature of top-class sport, the acquired knowledge and insights will probably have a wider validity.

Several methods of research were used. We started studying the existing literature on the development of internet, the arising of social networks and the role of Twitter within these social networks. Twitter is a quite new phenomenon, so there has not been conducted much research in this particular field. According to our knowledge the relationship between Twitter and sport has not been object of research before. Because of this our empirical research was of an exploratory and descriptive nature.

To get an image of the significance of Twitter for athletes we made an inventory of top athletes active on Twitter. All Dutch athletes competing in Olympics, European and World Championships and the top ten of the Dutch Championships were listed and included in our desk research. With this list of nearly 2,000 athletes, and the search engine of Twitter we have identified the Dutch top athletes micro blogging on Twitter. We found that approximately 1 out of 8 top athletes in the Netherlands is posting tweets, men more than women, individual athletes more than team athletes. The communication on Twitter of all these athletes was examined and analysed. Among other things it became apparent that men have more followers than women, and that they communicate more about sport than about private or news issues.

Nine athletes active on Twitter were engaged in supplementary face-to-face in depth interviews. Out of these interviews we concluded that athletes predominantly use Twitter as a handy tool for communication and marketing. They consider Twitter to be complementary to the traditional media. It is not an alternative.

Finally a websurvey was carried out among the followers of top athletes on Twitter. Through various social networks we invited them to participate in our websurvey. During one month we have on a daily basis been calling for participation at several sport related subpages on Twitter and we have posted a similar call on the bulletin boards and forums of nearly 40 different sport related communities on popular social media sites like Hyves and LinkedIn. The final response was limited. Only 116 people participated in our survey. Because it is unclear to what extent this small sample reflects the total population of fans following athletes on Twitter, the results of this survey cannot be generalised. But they do give an indication of their characteristics, activities, and motives. Male sport fans seem to be much more active on Twitter than females. People with higher educational levels seem over-represented. The interest of the followers seem to focus on sport specific content, although women also appear to be interested in the private life of the athletes. An important reason for following specific athletes on Twitter seems to be the limited attention given to these athletes in the traditional media. Although the most famous athletes are also most followed on Twitter, this implies that Twitter might be a suitable tool for communication with fans also for athletes less frequently in the spotlights.