

Media training guide for university student-athletes

Introduction

Media attention is an integral part of the journey of a university student-athlete competing at an international level. Engaging with the media effectively can enhance students' reputation, build their personal brand and, simultaneously, contribute to improve the image of the institution represented. Therefore, **this guide aims to equip the student-athletes with the necessary skills to navigate through media interactions.**

Understanding media & its impact

Media plays a crucial role in promoting sports, athletes and competitions. Journalists and other media professionals aim to inform, entertain and get the audience's attention, so understanding their perspectives will help athletes and media relation professionals handling these interactions in the most positive way.

Writing news articles about any subject is often about how journalists write the stories, and athletes can contribute to this **storytelling** by providing authentic insights and by being the "characters" that are needed in the (sports) stories. By being present in the media for the "good reasons", athletes increase the chances of building a positive public image. However, it is important to note that, although it represents opportunities of promotion, it also means a bigger exposure to risks. This is where media training plays a significant role on how to minimize the risks.

These are some of the reasons why public and media relations professionals working at the universities need to be on top of this matter, together with the need to guarantee that the students that will represent their institutions do the best job promoting their integrity and values.

Different media formats

Regardless the type, media exposure can and often lead to audience attention and, consequently, sponsorships, scholarships and career opportunities. However, it is beneficial to know what different types of media coverage there are:

- Traditional media: television, radio, newspapers and magazines.
- Digital media: blogs, news websites and other platforms.
- Social media: Facebook, Instagram, X, TikTok, etc.

Different formats mean different approaches, both from the media producers and from the student-athletes.

The **traditional media** outlets are known for the deeper content – interviews with athletes, coaches, specialists, reporting sports events, etc. As it is consumed by older audiences, it requires an engagement in a more formal way.

Digital media is, many times, an adaptation of the content produced for the traditional media to the online platforms. These outlets allow the media channels to be faster, more immediate and interactive, both for fans and haters.

With the rise of **social media** platforms, the media role grew from “mandatory” to “beneficial” when student-athletes want to talk with the audiences. With social media, athletes can engage directly with the public and express opinions without the press filter – which can represent an even bigger risk sometimes. Despite the type of profile held by the athletes, it is important to keep in mind what are the career goals and what certain posts and opinions can bring.

It is also important to add, at this point, the **press conferences and others**, that can mix all the above mentioned at the same time. After major competitions or smaller competitions with big audience interest, athletes may be required to express opinions publicly and to answer questions.

Preparing for media engagements

It happens frequently that the media interactions are planned and can be prepared in advance. However, it is not rare the case when interviews are requested on the spot. Therefore, it is important that media relations professionals organize sessions where, for example, this guide is used as a base for some media training.

Taking that into consideration, **this media training guide is to be used to prepare student-athletes to major university sports competitions**. There are, initially, important steps to be advised:

- Identify two to three key messages the student-athletes want to convey about: themselves, their sport and the institution they represent.
- Keep a positive and consistent speech.
- Know the values that are more important to the institution to be shared.
- Try to anticipate common questions, for example: about the training, previous experiences, challenges and future aspirations.
- Be updated with the ongoing subjects in the “sports world”. Prepare responses for potentially challenging questions.
- Practice in front of a mirror or someone of trust. It can also help to self-record.

By preparing these first steps, student-athletes already are reducing the chances of being “caught” without the information that is expected from them. Also, by thinking about this and anticipating possible scenarios, student-athletes decrease the feeling of stress and nervousness, typically linked with the unknown.

Interviews

Journalists have many ways to conduct interviews and to publish them. Depending on which format the interview is going to be recorded and published, there are a few aspects to take into consideration:

- Appearance.
- Posture.
- Content.
- Speech.

Written interviews

When talking about written interviews, student-athletes do not have to worry about the appearance and posture, as the focus will be on the text.

In these cases, the focus stands on the content and way of developing a written speech, so it is a very good practice to read and re-read the answers before sending them to the interviewer. In case it is needed to also send pictures while practicing sports or a profile picture, pay attention to the details, such as clothes, posture and facial expressions. Getting counseling from the University PR in what regards to the answers and pictures to be send also decreases the chances of making mistakes.

Live and recording video interviews

If the interview is made with video – live or recording -, all the aspects must be taken care of:

Appearance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dress appropriately and follow the institution guidelines – use the university official clothes, properly washed and nit.• Avoid distracting patterns and excessive accessories.• Proper grooming.• If having long hair, take into consideration if the logos of the institution are hidden.
Posture	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sit or stand upright with shoulders back – projects a confident attitude.• Use natural hand gestures and pay attention to the positions of the hands when resting. Avoid crossing arms (which reminds of a defensive posture).• Be natural.• Avoid excessive gestures to don't be distractive.• Make eye contact.• Pay attention to facial expressions. Smiling causally promotes empathy with the audience.

Content & Speech	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Speak slowly and clearly.• Try to reduce filler words, such as “like”, “you know”, “hm”, etc.• Listen carefully.• Stay on-topic and avoid too long answers.
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At the end of the interview, is always good to express gratitude by thanking the interviewer for their time and opportunity granted to talk.

Radio and podcast interviews

Radio interviews are often seen, by the student-athletes, as easier interviews due to the fact that image won't be a clause to take into consideration. Despite the fact that the interview is not a video intended interview, **media relations professionals must advise the student-athletes or the student-athletes themselves should consider the increase of podcasts and radios that also record video to publish and broadcast live.**

Therefore, image should not be disregarded. Adding to the previous notes, it is vital, for the good result of the audio, to look upon the bracelets and necklaces used. If student-athletes wear bracelets that are loose and rest hands on a table, the chances are that those accessories will make noise and interfere in the quality of the sound recorded. Also, when wearing necklaces and a microphone attached to the clothes, it is likely that, at some point of the interview, the necklaces will touch the microphone and prejudice the result of the recording.

Social media management

Social media is, nowadays, almost a “most-have” in society, especially if athletes want to build a public image and promote their careers. Therefore, **it is fundamental to be careful with the posts made and community built.**

There are many books written about guidelines and precautions when the subject is social media for public figures or people with public figures aspirations, but the most important includes:

- Keep the profile clean, positive and professional. If needed, create a second account that remains private and restricted to close friends and family.
- Share professional achievements and progresses.
- Promote good values and interact in a responsible way with the community.
- Avoid controversial topics and heated discussions.
- Be cautious with written humor and sarcasm – not everyone thing in the same way.
- Think before posting.

After-competition responsibilities

Depending on the sport, the end of competitions can involve different types and quantity of press attention. Nevertheless, as mentioned before, it is positive to be prepared for it.

If the student-athletes are accompanied by a media relations professional invested in taking care of their interests, it is important that the students acknowledge their presence, trust their work and take advantage of their presence by consulting when in doubt.

When approached by the media – in any type –, **student-athletes should take their time to think about the questions made and the answers to be given**. In case it feels uncomfortable, it is a good strategy to use the **bridging technique**: in case of difficult questions, acknowledge and redirect (such as “That is an interesting question, but what’s most important is...”).

After winning or losing, acknowledge victories and defeats with grace. Show respect for the other teams and institutions. Highlight the effort of the team players and members – coach, physiotherapist, massagist, etc. Also, avoid blaming individuals or external factors to justify something – team mates, referees, weather, for example.

Crisis – what if?

As much as communication departments and student-athletes prepare for hypothetical communication crisis, they are always based on assumptions and suppositions that can never happen, or that can happen in ways no one has thought about. **This does not mean they should not be prepared, but instead that they should be as wide and adaptative as possible.**

However, **anticipating and preparing for communication crisis is not something that student-athletes can do by themselves**, especially due to lack of knowledge about media functionality, institution support and, above all, possible consequences.

Therefore, **it is fundamental that student-athletes seek for help** and count on the media relations of the institutions they represent, in order to get media training and advise for possible crisis.

How to deal with negative comments and publicity

As said earlier, more media attention results in better results, but also bigger risks. Facing negative media attention can happen, but it is crucial to remain calm and composed. There are some steps to take when facing communication crisis:

1	Assess the situation Gather as much information as possible about what is happening, what is the source of information and source of negativity.
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2	Consult Coaches, public relations/media relations: get the team to act and to set a strategy before making any statement.
3	Build a response, if needed If the team concludes that addressing the issue is necessary, be factual and informative.
4	Avoid emotions Emotions can lead to misinterpretations.
5	Redirect Negative acts must be acknowledged and excused, but no one should be dwelling on negativity. Instead, do not take too long to shift the topic to improvements, future goals.

In case apologies are needed

Sincere apologies are often required when mistakes are made. Often, those sincere apologies help rebuild trust and credibility. To take into consideration when apologizing:

- Take responsibility and do not blame others.
- Avoid long-winded explanations. Invest on genuine regret and corrective actions.
- Explain how it is planned to improve so it demonstrates growth. Actions speak louder than words, so engage in initiatives that show the explanation had a true meaning.

Social media canceling culture

Nowadays, social media is not only a place to share experiences, ideas and pictures, but also a place where criticism, negativity and hate grow. Therefore, it is important that student-athletes are well aware of the risks associated with having a social media presence. **To avoid the risk of being “cancelled”, there are some boundaries student-athletes can set:**

- Do not engage in arguments. Important discussions are addressed in professional ways and in appropriate places.
- Ignore unnecessary negativity.
- Correct misinformation calmly and choose the battles to be fought.
- Limit interactions, if necessary. Sometimes, disabling comments and filtering messages can help as a “crowd control procedure”.
- Seek professional advice.

Practical examples of communication crisis

Let's take the current international situation as an example to illustrate one way to react to questions from media. Nowadays, the world is facing multiple conflicts in different countries. Knowing that no one can ignore those political, geographical and economical conflicts, PR officers must prepare the student-athletes to answer possible questions. But what are the best answers to non-sports related questions?

As mentioned before, **it is always good to focus on the event and on the athlete's performance during the competition**. It is inevitable that everyone has an opinion, the difference is within showing it or not. The **bridging technique** is a good strategy to politely decline answering those questions that will position the students in one side of the "problem".

In case student-athletes do not manage to avoid the questions, it is a good option to always advocate for peace, dialogue and cooperation. Advocating for good values and positive attitudes from both sides is a way of showing respect for both parts involved and, at the same time, not letting any preferences be visible.

Conclusion

The success in the interactions between student-athletes and media is never only about how he/she behaves or how much star quality they have. Instead, it is about how well prepared they are for talking in public about their passion, their career, their goals and, in this specific case, the institution they represent. By preparing in advance, the positive exposure and protection of reputation are maximized.

Every media opportunity is a chance to share a story a inspire others, so let's use it that way!

Checklists in hand for student-athletes

Checklist 1: Preparing for an interview

	Know your key messages: what do you want to say?
	Research as much as possible: about the media, the interviewer, the style of approach that will be made, the social/world context, etc.
	Prepare possible questions and answers.
	Dress appropriately.
	Be mindful of your body language: posture, gestures, expressions and speech.
	Speak slowly and clearly, but naturally.
	Stay calm.
	Avoid controversial topics.
	Enjoy the moment and focus on your goals.

Checklist 2: Managing the social media of a student-athlete

	Be professional and authentic.
	Promote your good values.
	Engage with the audience in a respectful way.
	Avoid controversial topics and heated discussions.
	Think before you post.
	Focus on the achievements and milestones.
	Invest on good visuals – social media is about image.
	Review old posts and maintain only what is aligned with your strategy.
	Try to separate personal from professional accounts.
	Stay positive and avoid negativity.