

# SPORTS UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

How Social Media is Transforming the World of Sports



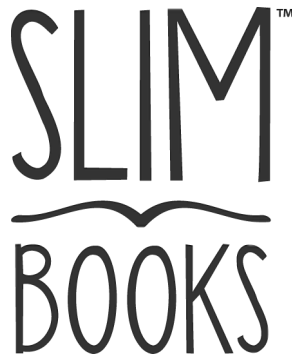
A SlimBook by Haddon Anderson

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# Sports Under the Microscope

*How Social Media has Transformed the Sporting World*

A SlimBook by **Haddon Anderson**



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# The Pre-Game Show

## *#Introduction*

*"I hate Twitter."*<sup>1</sup> –Ozzie Guillen

**O**n February 21, 2012, Kevin Durant (@KDTrey5), NBA superstar forward for the Oklahoma City Thunder, tweeted this: "Just had a bad dream, wish I could go sleep in my mommy bed but I forgot that im 23."<sup>2</sup>

This tweet is deeply revealing, not in regards to the apparent fact that Durant still gets scared in the middle of the night, but because this tweet signifies the depths of social media and how it has infiltrated the sports world.

Flashback: during my childhood, I remember waking up early in the morning and rumbling down the stairs to snag the Sports page from the Rockford Register Star (our local newspaper). I ripped the Sports section out from in between the Business and Local & State sections and flattened it on the kitchen table. I then began perusing scores, seeing if my team notched a victory, and reading how my favorite players fared statistically.

That was how I stayed connected to my favorite teams and players. I read about them and knew statistics such as batting average, points per game, and rushing yards. If I were lucky, I would catch some games on television and perhaps an occasional postgame interview. But for the most part, players were foreign and untouchable. There was really no way to learn much about their personality, hobbies, or convictions.

From the prime of my childhood until now (the brink of my adult life) there's been a remarkable change in the accessibility to the sporting world. How did we go from merely grazing the sports page to now knowing when athletes have bad dreams?

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cbssports.com/mlb/blog/eye-on-baseball/19082957/ozzie-guillen-says-he-hates-twitter-quits>

<sup>2</sup> <https://twitter.com/#!/KDTrey5/status/171910618197147649>

Welcome to the world of social media. It has transformed our culture. It's very likely revamped the way you do things, and it's undoubtedly revolutionized one's connection to the sporting world. Athletes are now under a microscope like they've never been before.

### **Social Media Hits a Home Run**

The social media boom has struck the sports world in a bevy of ways. For one, players are much more exposed to society. Some superstars tweet about anything and everything; often giving fans details they never needed to know. Some athletes are exclamation point-happy (i.e. Chris Paul (@CP3): 4 min left and we're down 2...let's go fellas!!!).<sup>3</sup> Others are hash tag savvy (i.e. Kurt Warner (@kurt13warner): ToFD: Failure is a part of life, it's not the end result... the end result is determined by what we do with r failure! #learn #fallback #fb).<sup>4</sup> And some are blatantly lacking in grammar and spelling (i.e. Stephen Jackson (@DaTrillStak5): Bak in Charlotte).<sup>5</sup>

Whatever the nuances, an immense amount of athletes have jumped into the pool of social media, making a big splash. They're soaking up the opportunity to have freedom to associate with thousands (sometimes millions) of followers on a daily, or even hourly, basis. Because of this, players are uniquely within reach, and we now have the capability to frequently learn what our favorite player had for lunch, or what tracks are thumping in his headphones.

Secondly, players have a new reason to play their respective sport and seek to achieve fame. If they find success, they'll likely be what is trending on Twitter, adding another layer to an athlete's public fame. In the craze of social media, athletes who find success generate exalted publicity.

And this dynamic is not limited only to pro athletes. It is true for amateur athletes as well. While a high school athlete will most likely never be

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<sup>3</sup> <https://twitter.com/CP3/status/227062567951011840>

<sup>4</sup> <https://twitter.com/kurt13warner/status/209878919824949248>

<sup>5</sup> <https://twitter.com/DaTrillStak5/status/228866508527398913>

what's trending on Twitter, they can embrace a heightened popularity through sports by means of social media, particularly Facebook. For example, envision a pimple-faced seventeen-year old who posts a subtly boastful Facebook status after a beastly high school hoops performance. Hundreds of his peers will likely read it, with dozens of friends and all the hottest cheerleaders commenting. Talk about a self-esteem booster. Because of social media, sports suddenly became way more fun for this young jock.

Lastly, social media has altered the sports landscape through the ways we interact as fans. This has likely been the most influential way social media has revolutionized sports. As fans, we no longer maintain a distant connection to the sporting world. Instead, we've been handed the reins to network with fellow fans and even players in an incredibly engaging manner. The tweeting, Facebook-ing, chat rooms, endless sports websites, and phone applications give our generation access to the sporting world that never could've been imagined in the early 1990's.

The reality about these new avenues is that they're fun; and it gives sports junkies the ability to chime in on whatever topic they want. We can even tweet at our favorite pro stars these days, and if they for some strange reason send a direct response, we will surely hop on Facebook and post something of the like: "Just got a direct response on Twitter from Drew Brees!!!!"

Social media has clearly hit a home run in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To use an overdone sports phrase: it's been a "game-changer."

### **Social Media is Neither Good, nor Bad**

At first glance, the development of social media looks entirely fine and dandy. There are handfuls of creative ways to enjoy sports through social media in healthy ways. However, social media is used in varying manners. On one day, a dedicated fan may laud his sports team, making his allegiance known to his social networks – no harm done here (unless, of course, he becomes one of the annoying fans who does this after every victory). The next day, this same fan may vent via social media by expressing his hatred towards a specific team or even a specific player. In this case, there will likely be blatant stereotypes and unwarranted

presuppositions. This fan will ultimately use social media to convince others that a particular player or team is shameful.

Is this acceptable?

Social media often becomes the vehicle for us to ridicule athletes. For some reason, we're content to place superstars under the microscope and rip apart every facet of who they are. It may stem from an in-game celebration that "rubbed us the wrong way," a postgame interview that featured an arrogant comment, or a lacking performance by a player who is "overpaid" in everyone's mind. These examples become the cue to unload thoughts to the social media world. The "vents" escalate, the hate-tweets accumulate, and the endless banter rolls off our fingers without second-thought.

The social media boom has struck gold in regards to "wooing" fans in, but the behaviors that it extracts can be detrimental. Can we agree that a line is often crossed in some of the written, abrasive garbage that people post?

Yet, the line is unclear. There are no social media rulebooks or etiquette classes, and there are surely incessant opinions on what is deemed appropriate to display via social media. Regardless of one's personal position on the matter, it's unquestionable that fan naiveté is exposed. Social media becomes the outlet for us to express our sentiments and act like we "know it all". However, on many occasions, we have no idea what we're talking about.

It's not just fans. It's the athletes as well. Twitter has become a place of uncensored thoughts, inevitably causing athletes to intentionally (and unintentionally) stir the pot.

To reiterate, social media is neither a good, nor bad thing. It's a constantly developing tool with no inherent value. Its uniqueness has inevitably brought much to the fore – both in the sporting world and in general. It's a bigger megaphone than we've ever had, and it therefore highlights humanity's strengths and weaknesses.



When it comes to sports, the truth is that fans have always been this passionate (sometimes to a fault), and athletes have always been this opinionated (sometimes in preposterous manners). Social media has simply enabled us the opportunity to witness, and even participate in, this firsthand, bringing the good, the bad, and the ugly.

The following chapters demonstrate how the social media boom has dramatically influenced the sporting world. Each of the athletes/instances discussed reveal this in a *different* way. Whether through increased accessibility, the speed by which they become what's trending on Twitter, or ill-advised self-expression, there are lessons to be learned.

Ladies and gentlemen, #startyourengines.

# Chapter 1: LeBron James

## *#LeBronJokes and A Life of Constant Scrutiny*

*"THE CLEVELAND CAVALIERS WILL WIN AN NBA CHAMPIONSHIP BEFORE THE SELF-TITLED FORMER 'KING' WINS ONE."*<sup>6</sup> –Dan Gilbert, Cleveland Cavaliers Majority Owner, Summer 2010

**A** matchup between the Cleveland Cavaliers and the Sacramento Kings is typically one that doesn't generate many viewers. But October 29, 2003 was different. On this day, LeBron James began his much-anticipated NBA career. The expectations for him were through the roof. He was viewed as a potential combination of Magic Johnson and Michael Jordan – two of the greatest players ever. Such expectations are simply too high to place on any rookie, in my opinion. Regardless, LeBron was under the microscope even before his sneakers hit the NBA court.

That particular game, he dazzled fans and widened the eyes of viewers across the nation. Believe it or not, he exceeded the expectations in merely one game as an eighteen year old, mesmerizing the NBA landscape by tallying 25 points, 9 assists, 6 rebounds, and 4 steals. At this time, there had been other hyped rookies who had made the leap from high school to the pros, but none made major headlines in their opening game. For instance, 14-time All-Star and five-time champion Kobe Bryant didn't even score in his NBA debut.

It didn't take long for James to put his name on the NBA map. After his performance on this late October evening, it was clear that James would be a sports icon for years into the future.

Approximately nine years later, James is the most scrutinized athlete in the sporting world. Quite frankly, he's likely the most scrutinized athlete in history, and this is largely due to the fact that his career has blossomed in the wake of the social media development. Currently, James is the most

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<sup>6</sup> <http://buswk.co/LnRXag>

popular American athlete on Twitter.<sup>7</sup> His Twitter follower tally is currently over six and a half million,<sup>8</sup> giving him approximately the same amount of Twitter followers as there are residents in the state of Indiana.<sup>9</sup> Social media has ultimately placed him under a microscope and analyzed his every maneuver.

James' career has received the brunt of this scrutiny within the past few years as he transitioned from a "franchise savior" in Cleveland to a "villain." He not only infuriated Cleveland fans with his momentous decision to join the Miami Heat, but also enraged just about every sports fan (other than those in Miami) with the way he made his decision.

Many fans will never forget LeBron's infamous television show that announced The Decision (yes, it's capitalized). LeBron declared to the world, "I'm going to take my talents to South Beach," and the majority of the sporting world groaned.<sup>10</sup>

And so, the bitterness towards the man nicknamed "King James" ensued. He was scorned for airing The Decision on television. He was questioned for "taking the easy way out" by joining up with other NBA superstars in Miami, something that Michael Jordan admitted he never would've done.<sup>11</sup> James was even blatantly rejected by the city of Cleveland, which was the neck of woods in which he grew up and spent the first seven seasons of his career.

To make matters worse, James, Dwyane Wade, and Chris Bosh had a welcome celebration in Miami that looked more like the introductions to a WCW wrestling event. The Heat's new motto was unveiled: "Yes. We. Did." Not only that, but James made the unquestionably foolish choice to voice that the Heat would win, "not two, not three, not four, not five, not six, not

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<sup>7</sup> Jenkins, Lee. "Meet the Rejuvenated, Revitalized LeBron." *Sports Illustrated* 30 Apr. 2012: 36-44.

<sup>8</sup> This was as of December 11, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> <http://voices.yahoo.com/population-state-2012-6509478.html>

<sup>10</sup> <http://es.pn/bu3hsO>

<sup>11</sup> <http://es.pn/946meA>

seven" titles.<sup>12</sup> What superstar has ever made this bold of a prediction without ever even winning a championship?

These maneuvers understandably rubbed people the wrong way. James came across as an arrogant, egotistic athlete who epitomized how pride can take hold of a person who seemingly "has it all."

Truthfully, it now seems that James realizes the foolishness of his decisions, and has even confessed that he'd do things differently if he had another chance. In early 2012, James stated this, "'If I had to go back on it, I probably would do it a little bit different. But I'm happy with the decision I made. There's always going to be a misunderstanding. I don't know what I would [have done], but I definitely would have changed it."<sup>13</sup> James' realization is respectable, but the unfortunate thing is that the bridge has already been burned. It's been burned because of the barrage of hate-filled social media that has been swirling around him over the past couple years.

Think about this: can you imagine how many hate-tweets James has received in the past couple years? Interestingly, according to an April 2012 *Sports Illustrated* article, James reads the replies to his tweets, even the ones that sting. He offered this reflection, "Twitter can be an angry place."<sup>14</sup>

The bitterness directed at LeBron in the past couple years could not have been possible twenty years ago. In the early 1990's, people may have scoffed at LeBron's decision to go to Miami, and there may have been a few aggressive sports writers who rattled off scathing articles. But nowadays, people from all over the world are voicing their opinions and many aren't showing restraint.

What's fascinating to consider in all of this is that James' status in society doesn't even appear enviable. Close to nine years ago, after his remarkable opening performance, James seemed to be on the rise towards one of the most wealthy and acclaimed figures in America. There was

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<sup>12</sup> <http://bit.ly/laDldy>

<sup>13</sup> <http://bit.ly/VMGZ4C>

<sup>14</sup> Jenkins, Lee. "Meet the Rejuvenated, Revitalized LeBron." *Sports Illustrated* 30 Apr. 2012: 36-44.

reason to want to be like him, just as there was reason to “want to be like Mike” in the 90’s.

Well, James’ wealth is surely there and his basketball skills are unquestioned, but he’s legitimately become one of the most beleaguered figures in America. He’ll always have a clique of fans who love him, but the overwhelming majority is anti-LeBron – rejoicing whenever he misses another shot at the end of a game, cracking #LeBronJokes about his receding hair line and fingers that were ring-less until June 2012, and bashing him for every little blunder he makes.

Even after winning his first NBA championship, there have still been continuing jabs at him. Now the jokes appear like this: “Lebron says, “Hey, Kobe. Why didn’t you answer my call?” Kobe replies, “Sorry, I only heard one ring.”<sup>15</sup>

James can’t avoid this. Whether it’s a hate-filled tweet or a comical knife at his heart, he’s targeted and attacked. Maybe his status in culture is not even desirable because of what social media has done. There’s so much bitterness, so much hatred, and so much analysis over *everything*.

LeBron has even re-tweeted some of the hatred spewed his way and gave this reason for sharing them: “I just want you guys to see it also. To see what type of words are said toward me and towards us as professional athletes. Everybody thinks it is a bed of roses and it’s not.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Can you imagine your life under a microscope with everybody peering in and thousands of people picking your life apart?**

LeBron James is one of the few people in the world who knows what this is like. There’s no denying that James has made some stupid statements, but social media amplifies everything about him. What’s more, everything admirable he does seems to get overlooked, such as when he organized a picture in support of the shooting of Trayvon Martin.<sup>17</sup> There are some

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<sup>15</sup> <http://bit.ly/MLlcSM>

<sup>16</sup> <http://lat.ms/aZaznl>

<sup>17</sup> <http://camp1.us/il4E>

commendable sides to “King James,” but those seem to be brushed under the rug.

James’ career epitomizes the effect of social media on sports. We’ve seen it in profound ways throughout his tenure in the NBA. His unique position, not only in the sporting world but also in American society, is not an easy one to say the least.

James will be remembered as a basketball legend; but years from now, he’ll likely also be remembered as the athlete who endured the initial tidal wave of social media. Players in the future will learn from his mistakes, but he inconveniently had nobody to learn from. He’s paving this new road and sometimes learning the hard way. Social media has taught LeBron a big lesson, and it serves as a warning for all future professional athletes: Scrutiny (and lots of it) is to be expected.

## Chapter 2: Brian Scalabrine

### *The Legend of the #WhiteMamba*

@BScalabrine24 (a parody account): *Today is #Fridaythe13th, AKA just another day of nightmares caused by panic from trying to guard me*<sup>18</sup>

**B**rian Scalabrine is fun, there's no denying that. If you're a Chicago Bulls fan, you've inevitably gotten excited the past couple years when the "White Mamba" has hopped up from the bench and checked into the game. There's something entertaining about rooting for the guy on the end of the bench, especially when he's the token white guy with red hair.

Before we analyze the legend of the White Mamba, let's briefly examine the stages of Scalabrine's hoops career. He went to the University of Southern California (USC), where he averaged at least 14 points per game over three seasons. In 1999-2000, he poured in 17.8 PPG (on 53.1 percent shooting, including a 40.3 percent mark from long-range), while also hauling in 6 rebounds per outing.

In 2001, the New Jersey Nets drafted him in the second round. Often times, second round picks don't even last a few seasons in the NBA, but Scalabrine's career has lasted longer than a decade. He has never come near being an All-Star caliber player, but he has shown plenty of flashes of why he's in the league, mainly in his stints with the New Jersey Nets and Boston Celtics (member of Boston's 2008 title team).

If I didn't know anything else about Scalabrine but these basic facts, I'd be impressed, just as I am with any professional basketball player. I personally played small school collegiate basketball and I've known plenty of extremely talented basketball players who have come *not even close* to sniffing the NBA hardwood. This has put into perspective how gifted *every* single player in the NBA truly is.

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<sup>18</sup> <http://bit.ly/T1QKHo>