Athletes link to their own 'Truth' on the Internet

From Bryant to Woods to an ex-major leaguer in Japan, sports stars use the medium to reach fans on their terms. Website pros and marketers say it can work, if the athletes know what they're doing.

By Jonathan Abrams, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
August 6, 2007

The conflicting reports came from all media, often from Kobe Bryant himself. Was the Lakers star demanding a trade or wasn't he?

In order to set the record straight -- or perhaps to spin it in the most favorable light -- Bryant turned to using the "Truth" blog on his kb24.com personal website.

"I'm sure you guys have been hearing all this and that and are not sure what to think or believe," wrote Bryant, who updated the site frequently to discuss his mixed feelings about the Lakers during the fracas. "The Truth section was created for times such as these."

As the MySpace generation reaches professional sports, many athletes are maintaining website profiles and blogs. Along with providing a direct link to fans, these personalized Internet entries serve as an excuse to limit interviews with mainstream media while also offering the ability to deliver unfettered messages.

Bryant used his site to acknowledge it would be tough to leave the Lakers -- but he would if it meant playing on a winning team. Other reports are purely personal. Tiger Woods announced the birth of his daughter. And Greg Oden discussed the pain of having his tonsils taken out.

"They come off good if the athletes know what they are doing," said Will Leitch, editor of deadspin.com, a website that often links to players' websites. "The mistake is when you see people that still have their college MySpace profile up and all of a sudden they are in the NFL or MLB."

Indeed, while posting messages is often intended to clear controversy, it occasionally causes it.

Philadelphia Phillies pitcher J.D. Durbin apologized for crudely announcing his fondness for female body parts on his MySpace page. Texas Rangers pitcher C.J. Wilson did the same after posting a racially offensive photo on teammate Brandon McCarthy's page. And Washington Wizards guard Gilbert Arenas drew the ire of NBA officials after same after posting a racially offensive photo on teammate Brandon McCarthy's page.

NBA officials fined Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban for criticizing referees on his blog. And NFL quarterback Donovan McNabb was left defending his mother, Wilma, after she wrote that it was "bittersweet" to watch backup Jeff Garcia succeed in leading the Philadelphia Eagles while her son recuperated from an injury.

"There's a fine line between being candid and getting yourself in trouble, and it depends a lot on what your image is," said Nancy Baym, an associate professor of communication studies at the University of Kansas. "There is a reason professionals usually handle that stuff."

C.J. Nitkowski, a former big league baseball player who now pitches professionally in Japan, was a pioneer among athlete bloggers. He started his website, Cjbaseball.com, a decade ago.

"The advantages are clearing up misquotes, controlling a story that may be important, and the chance to interact with fans directly," he said. "[But] also having complete unedited access to the world needs to be treated carefully. Speaking your mind is a nice freedom, but sometimes it's not always a good thing."

Arenas' marketing representative, Paisley Benaza, admits "concern" about her
basketball-playing client -- who she says only recently learned what a blog was -- so eagerly awaiting each opportunity he has to post on his increasingly popular NBA.com blog.

The flip side: "I know he always wants to speak for himself and that's how it is," Benaza said. "We try not to filter it because that is what makes him Gilbert Arenas. He's an honest, genuine person that loves his fans."

Arenas, charismatic and engaging, draws readers across the world with his candid approach. He has written about dropping his baby girl -- "it was either both of us stumble down the stairs, or drop her. So I had to drop her. She's OK. She dropped on her butt first" -- and a no-holds-barred rant blasting Duke Coach Mike Krzyzewski for dropping him from the U.S. national team.

"If I have the chance to go back to college, I'll give up one NBA season to play against Duke," Arenas wrote. "One college game, that's five fouls, right? 40-minute game at Duke[,] they got soft rims[,] I'd probably score 84 or 85."

"I wouldn't pass the ball. I wouldn't even think about passing it. It would be like a NBA Live or an NBA 2K7 game, you just shoot with one person."

Pat Neshek, a relief pitcher for the Minnesota Twins, used his blog to try to rally support that he hoped would land him in this year's Major League Baseball All-Star game.

An avid autograph collector, Neshek started his blog in 2004 to converse with other signature hounds, but there he was a few weeks ago, using the blog to plead his case to be the final American League player on the roster -- a choice made by fans in online voting. (He lost out to Boston's Hideki Okajima.)

"If you talk about on-field performance, fans don't tend to like that stuff and you sound self-absorbtent," Neshek later said. "The better blogs are ones that are off topic, never-knowing-what-you-will-get-type write-ups. And the media will eat you up if you talk about other players or on-field things."

Sometimes, athletes choose to speak exclusively through their website.

That's what happened two years ago when San Francisco Giants slugger Barry Bonds stopped granting interviews while he was recovering from a knee injury.

These days, Bonds still has a strained relationship with reporters but writes an occasional diary and answers selected questions from fans on his website. But you won't find any insight about controversial topics.

"I got a kick out of pitching to the kids and seeing how much fun they had running the bases," Bonds wrote in a recent posting about a recent Giants family photo day and softball game. In another section, he lists Allen Iverson as his favorite athlete to watch, his favorite food as Chinese and favorite dessert as homemade peach cobbler.

The Bonds site has this in common with those of other mega-athletes: a sales tie-in.

Anyone looking for an authenticated Bonds signed photograph, or a basketball signed by Bryant can do so directly from their websites -- for a steep price.

Instead of promoting, David Carter, executive director of the USC Sports Business Institute, said blogs should prominently show off the athlete's personality.

"It's a chance to see a complete package, not just the athlete," he said. "In doing so, it has to be done very authentically. We all learned the lesson of saying something we shouldn't have said in a blog format that can come off more unpolished."

Leitch offers simpler advice.

"We are going further and further away from the idea that your e-mail life is different from your real life," he said. "It isn't."

"If you are really concerned about it, then don't have a website."

jonathan.abrams@latimes.com