

WOLVERINES

# UM's baseball coach is hot on TikTok. Welcome to a new era for college athletics

**Owen McCarthy** The Detroit News

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As text flashes across the screen, University of Michigan baseball coach Tracy Smith nonchalantly plays catch in the infield of his team's home ballpark, fielding questions for a TikTok Q&A.

One asks how his players will "react" to his joining the popular social media platform. "They know I try to stay up. I'm hip. I'm good," responds Smith, catching the ball and seamlessly transferring it from mitt to throwing hand. "They're not going to be surprised at all."

Swiping up on Smith's TikTok profile reveals dozens more videos of the charismatic coach ranging from demos of pitching drills and advice to prospective college players to, most recently, a paid advertisement for an energy drink. The videos — which are produced by the NIL marketing agency Article 41 — often rack up numerous views and likes: He has 207.8K likes on the platform in total and 13.8K followers.

On Instagram, his following is even higher, at 21.3K. College coaches are rarely so invested in their social media presence, college sports researchers said. So why is Smith?

He and the founder of the marketing agency that produces his content say he's laying the foundation for UM baseball's "media ecosystem," which will pave the way for his players to grow their own social profiles, attract sponsors and cash in on the

UM baseball brand. That, they hope, will make Ann Arbor a desirable destination for the country's top baseball talent as new NCAA rules coming next month promise to upend the financial structure of college athletics.

A Detroit News analysis found that no other Big Ten baseball coach comes close to the social media presence of UM's Smith. His closest competitor: University of Washington head baseball coach Eddie Smith, who has 3.6K Instagram followers — less than 20% of Tracy Smith's audience.

"In researching NIL ... I haven't seen a coach develop an NIL presence to the extent (Smith) has," said Michael LeRoy, a law professor at the University of Illinois. "It could be a window to the future, but I don't know of a precedent that matches it."

Smith's strategy comes at an inflection point for college athletics. Last month, the NCAA settled a landmark antitrust suit, bringing new rules that allow universities to pay student-athletes directly. But players of sports that don't drive revenue to athletic programs like football and basketball — the so-called "non-revenue sports" — are likely to miss out.

With those changes, set to take effect July 1, Vickie Segar, founder of Article 41, and Smith insist that UM baseball is ahead of the curve with its strategy of making a baseball coach a part-time social media influencer. Athletic programs that move aggressively to grow their commercial value using social media will be college sports' winners, Segar said:

"Being an early adopter on social media is critical. Every month that passes that universities are not investing, they're really missing opportunities. And this is a race, like this is a red flag, screaming 'do this now,' type of situation."

But that prospect doesn't excite everyone. Critics complain that college sports' continued commercialization, exemplified by the new NIL rules, strips them of their authenticity.

"Personally, I'm turned off by it," said LeRoy, the Illinois law professor who studies NIL. "I would prefer a baseball coach be a baseball coach."

## **A TikTok coach**

The most significant change set to take effect in July from the House v. NCAA settlement is "revenue sharing." The system sets a \$20.5 million salary cap for athletic programs, allowing them to pay student athletes directly from funds generated by broadcasting deals and ticket sales.

The catch is that schools will have discretion over exactly which athletes they pay. And it's widely accepted that universities will share a large proportion of their revenue with players on the teams that deliver the most money, namely, football, as well as men's and women's basketball.

Smith expects UM — with its powerhouse football team — won't share any revenue with his baseball team. He has no issue with that, saying it's important for the university to invest in the football program: Ticket sales to the Big House are the "juice that drives all of us."

Furthermore, Smith acknowledged it's unlikely UM baseball will be able to compete with how many scholarships rival programs give out to players, even though the House settlement removes a limit on such incentives.

That's why Smith has to find other ways to ensure baseball players at UM can make money. From that recognition came his work with Article 41. Smith said he was introduced to Segar through a mutual friend, who made her pitch to him early this year, saying Article 41 had a plan to help teams "get ahead" of the then-imminent NCAA rule changes.

Segar visited campus and met UM baseball players to offer advice on building their social profiles, providing sample content they could incorporate, and offering one-on-one consultations with players.

Segar's pitch excited Smith, she said, to the point where he immediately downloaded TikTok and posted a handful of videos on his own — without the direction or production of Article 41.

In his second video, Smith records what's called a "duet" on TikTok, where users can record themselves atop an existing video. In the clip, one of his players saunters and dances poolside without a shirt, lip-syncing to a hip-hop song as Smith looks on befuddled, touching his hand to his forehead and closing the video with a laugh.

But following those seemingly non-choreographed videos, since February, there's been a steady stream of well-produced, high-energy clips posted to both his Instagram and TikTok accounts. In one, he teaches viewers how to "master the long-hop," referencing the footwork required of an outfielder when heaving a ball into a base to tag a runner out. In another, he addresses coaches, instructing them how to improve their accuracy when hitting ground balls to their infielders at practice.

Several videos are aimed at college baseball "recruits," where Smith tells prospective players what scouts want, at times incorporating his players into the videos to demonstrate proper technique. Smith said he's gotten messages from several high school ball players hoping to play at UM who reference such videos on his account. Aside from the primary goal of growing UM baseball's "brand" and increasing its NIL value, Smith said his social media serves as a helpful recruiting tool.

Smith said he's encountered skeptical coaches who think the TikTok creation distracts from the team's practices. He insists that's not the case: Article 41 sends one of its interns to the ball field on a day when schedules line up. Smith comes up with a video idea on the spot, they film it, and the intern edits the video before posting it.

John Holden, a professor of business at the University of Indiana, said Smith's strategy comes as "a lot of people are trying to differentiate themselves and show

that they can bring athletes value. This is a new approach, but one that is likely to be replicated if it proves successful."

## The 'system at work'

Segar is no newcomer to social media influencer marketing. In 2013, she founded Village Marketing, a company that develops "brand and performance-based influencer campaigns" for clients including Netflix, Spotify and Nike. Village Marketing was the company behind the 2020 social media influencer campaign of former President Joe Biden, and the unsuccessful 2024 campaign of Kamala Harris.

Much of Article 41's work so far has been at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, of which Segar is a graduate. According to a New York Times profile of the company's work there, UNC allowed Article 41 to help shape its nearly 850 student athletes into money-making influencers.

But at UM, Article 41's work has been limited to the baseball program, though Segar alluded to other "conversations" with UM Athletics. She also said her company plans to make a push next season to encourage more baseball players to follow Smith's lead and grow their social media following "and start to monetize that." Three UM baseball players are listed on Article 41's [website](#) as "sample talent."

The first examples of such monetization in UM baseball appeared last weekend. Both Smith and UM pitcher Wyatt Novara posted advertisements for the energy drink C4 to their respective social media accounts, where they tout the beverage's benefits from a batting cage. Spliced into their testimony are clips of them taking swigs from the neon yellow can, and swinging the bat in slow motion.

"Summer ball's in full swing, long, hot days of playing and training," said Novara in his video. "To keep up with that, I've got C4 performance energy in my hand to keep my body and my mind sharp."

Of the advertisements, Smith said, "that's the system at work." He added that he hopes it is "greater in the future," expressing hope that more of his players get in on

the concept. He and Novara will receive direct compensation for the videos, he said. Segar said Article 41 takes a 20% cut of earnings from sponsored posts.

In a statement to The News, Novara said he and other UM baseball players have been "encouraged" to "build their own personal brands" on social media, "especially considering the lack of in-house NIL/revenue sharing focus geared towards baseball at U of M."

"At the end of the day, I'm doing it for fun as well," he said. "Not too worried about where it takes me, but it's a cool side of the collegiate athletics that allows me to connect with lots of new people and share my journey as an athlete while still keeping baseball as my primary focus."

Both Novara and Smith are wearing plain, gray and black athletic clothes in their video, and no UM iconography can be seen anywhere in it, despite that imagery being displayed prominently across their accounts otherwise.

That's because rules in UM Athletics' contracts with its official sports marketing partner, Learfield, preclude student athletes or coaches from "promoting something unless it is through a Learfield partner/deal," UM athletics spokesperson Sarah VanMetre said.

Segar and Smith hope that can change, as content that includes UM imagery would likely garner more traction: "We want the school to get paid, we want the athletes to get paid, and we want the brands to have the best content," Segar said. "And so, for that to happen, it is ideal that marks are leveraged across the board, and then, it is a win-win-win."

## **Student-athletes as brands**

In recent years, there have been some wild success stories of college athletes doubling as influencers. Chief among them: Livvy Dunne, the former LSU gymnast who propelled her team to a national championship in 2024 and who has amassed

millions from NIL deals, advertising on social media for companies, including Target, Body Armor and Nautica.

But Dunne also exemplifies how — despite Article 41's view that anyone in college athletics can grow their brand — paths to social media success might be within reach for some more than others.

For one, Dunne is a woman, a demographic group that Segar said has overwhelmingly dominated the influencer economy. On social media, Segar said, "Men follow women, and women follow men, but we don't always see as many women following men."

And, Dunne, who is known, among other things, for her appearances (she recently made the cover of Sports Illustrated magazine's "swimsuit issue"), raises the question of how important looks are in influencer marketing.

Segar rejects the idea, though, that one must be attractive to make it as an influencer: "The New York Times asked me, 'Do you have to be conventionally good-looking to be a creator?'" Segar said, referencing the newspaper's profile of her company. "Nope, there's certainly enough examples out there where that is not the case."

Smith and Segar's vision is that the UM baseball team's players will make their own efforts at influencing, though both acknowledged encountering student-athletes who can't be sold on the idea.

"You kind of get out of life what you put into it," Smith said. "So I think the (players) that lean in more, there's probably more opportunity. But going back to the original premise of this, I think this is going to lead to things for the entire team, and that's the way (Segar) is setting it up."

But Andrew Zimbalist, a sports economist at Smith College, said it's worth tempering expectations for what Smith's strategy could do for the program, especially the hope that it could drive top talent to the team. He noted that

"publicity value of college players at the moment is focused overwhelmingly in football, and men's basketball, and then subsequently women's basketball."

And, top high school players will generally be more drawn to play college ball in the South, where they can count on practicing outdoors year-round: "I would think that location would have a lot more to do with my decision than whether or not the coach had some TikTok instruction videos up."

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