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## Spotlight blitzes Clausen

JEFF CARROLL

About a year ago, Notre Dame quarterback Jimmy Clausen was cited in South Bend for an obscure alcohol violation – transporting alcohol by a minor. So obscure was the law, in fact, that everyone from the most gregarious party animals to the most ardent teetotalers were unaware of its very existence.

And yet there was a lesson to be gleaned about manning the quarterback spot at Notre Dame. In his first chat with the media upon the opening of fall 2007 camp, the then-freshman said he had absorbed it.

“All eyes,” Clausen said then, “are watching you.”

The lesson, apparently, did not take as well as it should have.

On Monday, the often controversial, always rambunctious Internet site, The Big Lead, ran two photos of what appears to be a quartet of Notre Dame football players, including Clausen and two other underage sophomores-to-be, taking part in an organized beer-drinking activity. In one photo, all four are wearing red jackets, red caps and red T-shirts and posing for a photo. In the other the players, still dressed in all red, candidly interact with fellow party-goers.

They are the kind of photos that, five years ago, would have been snapped, developed at the local CVS or Wal-Mart a few days later and then pinned to the house bulletin board and/or slid into photo albums. By the standards of the My Space era, they are quite tame. No one is vomiting, no one is passed out. Everyone is fully clothed.

When viewed in comparison to some of the troublesome recent goings-on in other major college football programs, such as Penn State, the photos are more than mild.

But at a school that prides itself in the intellectual ability of its student body and student-athletes, the trio of under-aged players who seem to be pictured, Clausen, running back Armando Allen and starting linebacker Brian Smith, didn't act too intelligently in this situation. (Running back James Aldridge, also pictured, turned 21 in early July).

Put simply, going to college today is different than it was 10 or even five years ago. Social networking Web sites, particularly the wildly popular Facebook, are today's bulletin boards. And through these sites, despite privacy controls that attempt to protect users, photos of people at their least flattering moments can spread like California wild fires.

Athletes from many schools, including San Diego State, LSU, Colorado and Northwestern, have gotten themselves into varying degrees of trouble for shots that have appeared on sites like Facebook and My Space. Some have even had their scholarships pulled.

Now, there is no evidence that the photos of Clausen and Co. were taken from a social networking site and leaked to The Big Lead. That just seems the most likely path the images traveled. What is not in question is the prevalence today of cameras that can quickly disseminate what were supposed to be private moments among friends. Just 10 years ago, a college student in possession of a mere cell phone was a rarity. Today, it is rare for anybody, college students included, to own a cell phone that does not also double as a camera. Many college coaches today are loathe to even sip a beer in public, ever watchful of the eyes of the new amateur paparazzi.

You wonder when players are going to catch on, as well.

It will be interesting to see how Irish head coach Charlie Weis handles this situation. The ND football office issued a simple "no comment" on Monday, and none of the players were available for comment.

The guess here is that Weis will deal with everything internally, hopefully with some strongly worded lectures about the pitfalls of modern college celebrity.

He should reserve his strongest words for his quarterback.

Clausen, who will turn 21 on Sept. 21, has been under a mega-powered microscope since he was an L.A.-area high school phenom and the No. 1 recruit in the nation as a senior. Again and again in his two years at Notre Dame, he has talked about how he understands and embraces the scrutiny that comes with playing quarterback for the Irish.

And now this.

As tame as the photos are, a stickler for the rules, seeing this as a second offense, could choose to throw the Notre Dame student handbook at Clausen. Like all such handbooks, ND's "du Lac" subjects to disciplinary suspension students who engage in underage drinking. None of the Notre Dame players are captured actually downing beverages, but they appear to be in the presence of alcohol, and participating in the proceedings.

It is a shame that college students today, particularly those who have attained celebrity status, can't enjoy themselves without evidence of the good time hitting the Internet.

But this is the world they live in, and it's probably about time they get used to it.

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