LINCOLN, Neb. — College coaches and administrators concerned about their tweeting athletes also should be wary of their tweeting fans.

Social media experts pointed to vitriolic messages directed at football players from Missouri and Nebraska last weekend as examples of why schools should counsel athletes on how to cope with criticism that crosses the line from heckling to hate.

“What I worry about is some of the psychological outcomes. Does it lead to decreased self-esteem? Does it lead to depression? Does it lead to guys not eating and sleeping right?” said Jimmy Sanderson, a Clemson researcher who collaborated on a 2012 study of how college athletes react to negative encounters with fans on social media.

College athletes have always been targets for criticism, whether through the mail, on radio...
shows or catcalls from the stands. Because of Twitter and other platforms, direct access to college and professional athletes has never been greater. Most interaction is positive. But the messages can get nasty when upset fans type words they surely wouldn’t say to an athlete’s face.

Last Saturday, after Missouri kicker Andrew Baggett missed a short field goal in overtime against South Carolina, he was accosted on Twitter. There were comments about his ability, homophobic slurs and one tweet that said “go kill yourself everyone in Missouri hates you.”

Baggett said this week that supportive tweets outnumbered the negative “20 fold.”

“Nobody’s comment made me feel worse than what I did on that field,” he said.

Nebraska’s Kenny Bell dropped a couple passes, including one in the end zone, during a loss to Minnesota. Like Baggett, Bell expressed appreciation for encouraging tweets, but he clearly was troubled by caustic ones. Especially disturbing was a tweet that played off the fact Bell’s dog had been hit by a car. That person later apologized on Twitter.

“Tonight was the first night that I have been truly bothered by the hateful comments by people,” Bell wrote in back-to-back tweets. “That being said.... It takes so much more effort to be mean an hateful than it is to be positive an supportive. I just don’t understand it.”

It would be unrealistic to cut off players from social media — though some coaches have tried — because online communication is ingrained in the culture and can be beneficial, Sanderson said. An athlete can use Twitter to build an online identity, which helps with networking, job searches and promoting the team and university.

Southern California last year began listing football players’ Twitter handles on online biographies and in weekly game previews available to fans and media.

“This is how people communicate today, especially those from the generation of our current student-athletes. Why not embrace it?” USC spokesman Tim Tessalone wrote in an email to The Associated Press. “It also helps our fans engage with our players and vice versa. Sure, there will be some mistakes, but that’s all part of the learning process for college kids.”

Tessalone said he’s not aware of any USC players having serious problems in interactions with fans.
'It can take a toll' – Fine line between heckling and hate for college fans using social media – The Washington Post