

The Unlikely Birthplace of College Social Media

If you're looking for an origin story for modern college social media, you probably don't start in Stillwater, Oklahoma but a message board launched there helped set the tone.

Mike Swartz didn't set out to build a national college media brand when he spun up a little message board from Stillwater in 2007. He said he mainly wanted a place for fraternity guys who liked tailgates, jam bands and inside jokes to talk to each other online.

That site, which the community eventually named Old Row, became an early example of how online communities tied to Oklahoma State University could grow beyond campus. Years later, OSU students and alumni would help run Barstool's campus and conference accounts and use anonymous fan pages like Okst Probs in ways that overlap with name, image and likeness money and university politics.

From walled-off forum to Old Row

When Swartz was a student, social media barely resembled today's feeds. Facebook was still gated, campus by campus, and early Twitter was "mostly used by like girls" and limited to a sentence or two of text with no photos or video, he said. If you wanted real conversation, he said, you built a forum.

Old Row started as that kind of message board: invite-only, self-policed and aimed at fraternity men on Southern campuses who shared a subculture of music, tailgates and road trips.

"It was kind of a walled garden, like outsiders couldn't access it," Swartz said.

Which he believes made people more willing to talk freely and trade campus traditions.

The community even named the site. A group of Alabama members suggested Old Row, a nod to Greek fraternity rows and the old-style of culture they were capturing.

At first the site ran on donations and a core group of users would kick in \$5 a month via a PayPal button to cover server bills. That changed when Swartz decided to offer co-branded koozies to forum members and used a Stillwater print shop to mock them up. He put a pre-order button online expecting to sell about 50.

"I woke up the next day and we had sold like around 500 of them and I was like, what the hell is going on?" Swartz said.

When he asked on the forum, another member told him he had dropped the link on Twitter. That was the moment Swartz said he realized the culture he'd been hosting in a quiet corner of the web could sustain a real business once it collided with social platforms.

Old Row slowly shifted from boards to feeds. Swartz began posting user content from the forum to Instagram and later Snapchat. Submissions that had once come in as Monday-morning email

dumps “oh, this crazy thing happened at our tailgate” started pouring in live over Snapchat. Using a jailbroken phone and a third-party app, he said he could save snaps that were supposed to disappear and repost them faster than competitors.

“That is the first time we leapfrogged all of our competition,” Swartz said.

By 2014, Swartz had incorporated Old Row, built out a merchandise business without taking loans or outside investment and watched the brand pick up social notoriety far beyond the original invite list.

In late 2016, Barstool Sports acquired Old Row, Swartz went full time, staying involved at a high level as the company launched campus-specific Old Row accounts, including one for Oklahoma State.

The original message board eventually went dark. Keeping the self-hosted software secure and moderating a free-speech free-for-all became too big a legal risk once Old Row sat under a larger corporate umbrella. In the spirit of not wanting to censor users Swartz shut down the platform.

The cradle of Big 12 Twitter

By the time Old Row joined Barstool, another Stillwater native was helping define Barstool’s version of college internet from inside Oklahoma State’s student section.

Will Fite grew up in Stillwater, graduated from Stillwater High School in 2015 and, after a short stint at Texas Tech, transferred back home to OSU in 2016. He studied history but his real education happened on Twitter.

Barstool Oklahoma State was still small when Fite slid into the account’s messages. It had about 2,000 followers at the time, mostly on brand recognition alone. Fite liked Twitter as a creative outlet and thought the account could do more.

“I kind of saw what Barstool was doing with the other school accounts. OSU’s wasn’t doing a lot,” Fite said.

Fite messaged the main Barstool operation and offered to help. Within a couple of day they handed him the keys.

Technically Fite wasn’t an employee but instead Barstool’s “viceroy” program treated campus account operators like unpaid interns with a coveted credential.

“You do not, at least in my day, you didn’t get anything. You just got the privilege of running the account and getting to say you did it,” Fite said.

The two other students who had been running the account faded into the background as Fite took over. Older than many of his peers and working as a bouncer at the Union, Fite saw what played in Stillwater’s bar and party scene. He leaned into that mix of campus culture and sports that Barstool wanted.

“When you’re running those accounts, your job is to talk about everything going on in Stillwater. Not just sports,” Fite said.

That meant hyping rugby one semester, pushing the Union during Barstool’s “Best Bar” competition and treating house parties and campus subcultures as content, not just background.

His work caught attention in New York. When Barstool opened summer internship interviews at headquarters, Fite said he bought his own flight, stayed in a Brooklyn hostel with other viceroys and pitched a new idea: conference-wide Barstool accounts.

Fite had noticed that emerging burner accounts and school Barstool feeds mostly talked along conference lines. OSU fans argued with Kansas and Oklahoma burners, not Alabama. Fite proposed Barstool Big 12, Barstool SEC and Barstool Big Ten as centralized hubs that could share content from campus accounts and give fans a place to follow an entire league’s online bickering.

“I needed something to kind of be like, hey, I want to be an intern, but I got this idea,” he said.

He didn’t get the internship. He did get the green light.

“I created all the conference ones... Barstool Big 12, Barstool SEC... I started them. It was my project,” Fite said.

He launched Barstool Big 12 in the summer, building hype through baseball and into football season. At its peak, Fite said, the account had about 11,000 followers, while Barstool SEC had about 9,000 and Barstool Big Ten roughly 6,000. Combined with Barstool OK State and several side projects, he was effectively steering more than 35,000 followers across college sports Twitter.

Fite later took over Okst Probs at the request of its original founder after the long-running burner was banned again. Probs had been around since about 2009 and Fite rebuilt the audience through 2019, then handed the account to Keaton Hargett when his own posts started drifting toward national politics and Fite moved into professional campaign and advocacy work.

What Fite learned in Stillwater carried over, using Barstool-style tactics fast clipping, coordinated flooding of replies, running networks of aligned accounts to grow the National Association for Gun Rights’ dormant Twitter following by about 150% in a quarter. In 2020 he stitched together Justin Amash supporters in different states into a makeshift viceroy program for a third-party presidential run.

“Oklahoma State has played a huge role in the modern way social media is,” Fite said.

“Stillwater was kind of the cradle of... Big 12 sports Twitter.”

Probs, NIL and the university's partner

If Swartz's Old Row showed in his telling, how campus culture could be packaged and sold without outside funding, and Fite's Barstool expansion helped teach students how to run social media like campaign operatives, Okst Probs turned those lessons into a permanent part of how OSU talks about itself and how it moves money.

Before he ever logged into Probs, Keaton Hargett was already hooked on social media.

Hargett grew up in Keller, Texas, and as a high school junior said he got tired of blurry flip-phone fight videos being texted around his district. He started an Instagram account called Keller Fights and had about 1,000 followers, including 500 in the first two weeks. His principal eventually called him into the office and outed him as the person behind the page.

"I became... social media like obsessed back then," Hargett said.

After stints at community college and running a Facebook Live sports show called KCH Sports Talk, he came to Oklahoma State to try the sports media program. A professor spooked him by warning that most people in the field don't make money until their 40s, so Hargett switched to sports management but kept chasing online audiences.

One night at Willie's, Hargett messaged the account saying it wasn't reaching its potential and offering to help. Barstool brought him into the viceroy program where he said staff would send him photos over group chats, email or direct messages and expect captions within 30 minutes. That constant, timed drill honed the quick-hit, always-on style he later used on Probs.

Hargett eventually clashed with Barstool over merchandising. Hargett didn't like pushing \$40 T-shirts he thought felt too corporate and eventually walked away. Around that time, the original creator of Okst Probs, Brendan and Fite came calling. Probs, a fixture of OSU Twitter since around 2009 had been banned again.

"They're like, we want you to... make a new one (Okst Probs). And I was like, all right, deal," Hargett said. "From there, I just kind of like took over."

Probs wasn't attached to any media company or university office. That made it freer and more volatile. Hargett leaned into speed and voice over polish, building graphics on Canva because he could do everything on his phone.

"Everything is like spur of the moment," he said. "I think people... like how organic I am."

He quickly realized there was value in the attention. At an Oktoberfest-type event in Grapevine, OSU fans recognized him and asked for a photo while he was with his mom.

"You're doing this, but you're broke," she told him afterward. "How are people taking photos of you? You don't have any money."

Hargett started handmaking “Fuck the NCAA” shirts around the time Cade Cunningham arrived on campus and the men’s basketball program was under a postseason ban. He sold them outside the arena and said coach Mike Boynton saved him a spot on the bench so the shirt would be visible on TV.

By 2021, the account was doing more than selling T-shirts. Hargett was already friendly with quarterback Spencer Sanders and other players. He used Probs to boost social posts for Willie’s, helping their Barstool Best Bar campaigns, and he launched the Probs Cast podcast as name, image and likeness rules took effect.

That same summer, Oklahoma State’s new NIL collective, Pokes With A Purpose, came to him for help. Board members from recommended him as the right person to run the collective’s digital marketing because he already had the audience,.

Name, image and likeness rules require athletes to perform an “active service” for any money they receive and across college sports the simplest version of that has often been a social media post thanking a collective or sponsor. Hargett said Pokes With A Purpose needed both a following and a way to promote players’ posts.

“What all the NIL collectives were doing was like... they pay [a quarterback] a million dollars,” Hargett said.

“He’s just going to post ‘thank you to the NIL collective’ on his social media story and that counts as an active service.”

Hargett ran the collective’s social accounts while continuing to use Probs to amplify their announcements. The relationship also made him more visible to university leadership. When he posted a knockoff Ollie Gordon jersey he had ordered from DHgate complete with a Big Ten patch OSU complained to the collective.

“The university went and contacted Pokes With A Purpose... ‘you can’t have him doing this,’” Hargett said.

Hargett pushed back, insisting that Probs remained independent.

“Y’all don’t control Probs,” he said he told them. “This is my... account. This is how I built it up and the reason you’ve wanted me is because of this... account.”

Hargett said the tension came to a head around a home game against Utah. About two and a half years into working with Pokes With A Purpose he said the collective asked him to post from its account “as if you’re Probs” to drive even more engagement.

He was already frustrated he hadn’t been offered a full-time position as their demands grew.

He went into the game, and tweeted “I’m not happy” from the Pokes With A Purpose account. Already angry about the team’s performance, some fans turned their frustration on him and the collective.

“It became mutual,” Hargett said of the eventual split. “They wanted Probs, but then... once they got the backlash that I’ll get from other people, they didn’t want me.”

The experience underscored for Hargett the double-edged nature of the brand he had built. He described times when running Probs made him feel like “a small-town celebrity,” walking into the Stillwater bars and being recognized everywhere.

When he returned for homecoming last fall Hargett spent the week giving talks in the business building about social media, then walked the Strip and saw signs at bars taking shots at his legal troubles.

“I feel like running the account, dude, it’s... sick,” Hargett said.

“I’ll do anything to help Oklahoma Stat but like ultimately, it’ll make you feel like a rock star. You just got to know how to handle it.”

An OSU-made playbook

Across nearly two decades, the three stories trace a line from a locked message board to a conference-wide social network to a single fan account that can nudge NIL campaigns.

From the outside, Oklahoma State’s social media scene might look like a jumble of meme accounts and burner arguments. Inside those feeds is a history of experimentation that according to the people who built it has helped shape how college sports, parties and even politics play out on timelines far beyond Stillwater

Jake Hernandez