

columbine - tragedy and recovery

Mystery how team players became loners

By Kevin Simpson and Jason Blevins
Denver Post Staff Writers

April 23 - Just a few years ago, they were kids immersed in the national pastime - one a reluctant right fielder, the other a fireballing pitcher who hated to lose.

But earlier this week, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold set a grisly record for school violence, targeting athletes, devout Christians and people of color at Columbine High School and wreaking bloody havoc that left 15 bodies - including their own - as testament to a mystifying metamorphosis.

Harris, 18, played Little League baseball six years ago in Plattsburgh, N.Y. Childhood acquaintances remembered him Thursday as a player whose shyness crippled his ability.

"He was the shyest out of everybody when it came to just talking. And baseball is all about communicating," said Brenden LaPier, an 18-year-old senior at Plattsburgh High School and teammate of Harris in 1993.

A quiet boy

Another teammate remembered Harris as a reclusive 12-year-old who struggled to make friends while his father, decorated Air Force Maj. Wayne Harris, worked at the now-closed Plattsburgh Air Force Base from 1993-96. But the quiet boy in right field didn't match the chilling, televised description of a killer apparently motivated in part by race.

"That's not the kid I remember," said Mike Condo, 18, who played with Harris on Plattsburgh's Sun Foods Little League team. "I couldn't believe it when I heard it because his best friends back then were ... an Asian kid and ... a black kid. It's crazy."

Klebold, 17, also left a sporting legacy that puzzled those who knew him as a younger child.

"He was a pitcher and he threw harder than everybody on the team," said Rich Hoover, a Columbine sophomore who played baseball with Klebold in elementary and middle school. "He used to be pretty good. It was kind of weird when he quit, though. It was just, boom, Dylan's not playing any more."

"He's the kind of kid that, when he played, he had to win. Whenever he got pulled from a game, he'd come off and he'd actually cry."

Hoover, among the first to safely flee Columbine at the start of Tuesday's violence, said he didn't know Harris. But he said that during the high school's video announcements last Friday, Harris was shown acting in a skit in which he and other students engaged in a mock fight with a student from Columbine's chief sports rival, Chatfield High School.

At the skit's close, Harris feigned one last kick to his adversary, said Hoover, who now finds it a strange display of comic school spirit for someone who would days later seek out and kill Columbine athletes.

The Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold who roamed the halls on Tuesday, executing 12 students and one teacher and setting off many explosives, had been transformed. Once described as utterly normal, perhaps a little awkward, but mostly personable and intelligent, Harris and Klebold burst into the school cafeteria as vengeful representatives of a clique called the Trench Coat Mafia. In the ensuing days, classmates have struggled to understand such stark changes in the two young men, part-time cooks at a neighborhood Blackjack Pizza who at once embraced the image of outcasts and, ultimately, railed against those who put them down.

Eighteen-year-old Tiffany Typher dated Harris briefly four years ago, when the two were freshmen at Columbine, and he took her to homecoming. But he left her with one bizarre and lingering impression after she broke up with him. A mutual friend asked her to stop by the Harris house, where Typher remembers stepping into the backyard and seeing Harris sprawled on the ground by a large rock with blood splattered everywhere - as if he had bashed his head on the rock in a lovesick suicide.

"I knew it wasn't real, I could tell it was fake blood," she said. "I yelled, 'You guys are stupid!' and started running to a friend's house and crying, because it shook me up. He was doing that so maybe I'd come back to him and say I'm sorry."

They became friends again last year, but Typher says she already had seen a change in Harris. He'd started dressing differently, in all black. Harris seemed increasingly agitated by the abuse and disrespect from the school's athletes toward the Trench Coat Mafia.

"They hassled him, definitely," Typher said. "Everywhere they went, they were taunted and teased about how they dressed, about being gay. You could tell he'd get upset by it. Most of the people in that group, when people teased them, they walked off and didn't say anything." Germany a passion "But he seemed really fired up when he talked about the jocks. I had no idea his hate would drive him this far."

Typher said most of her contact with Harris was in German class from their freshman through junior years. Harris developed a preoccupation with a techno-rock group called Rammstein, whose lyrics he studied devoutly, and immersed himself in all things German.

"He said he felt he learned more from Rammstein than he did from the teacher," Typher said.

The Harrises moved to unincorporated Jefferson County in 1996 when Maj. Harris retired from the military. He had been stationed at bases in New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Michigan and Kansas.

Bill Konen, who lives next door to the Harris home on South Reed Street, remembers seeing Dylan Klebold's black BMW parked in front of the house all last weekend, including most of the day Monday. That afternoon, Konen heard a conversation coming over his fence.

"It sounded like two, maybe three people in the garage," he said. "Someone asked for a metal baseball bat. Then I heard repeated sounds of somebody breaking glass. I really didn't give it much thought then. I thought they were working on a class assignment or something."

Denver Post staff writer Jim Hughes contributed to this report.