

Rebels' big game quieter this year

By **John Ingold**
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Dec. 1, 2000 - Nobody was watching as the Columbine High varsity football team trickled onto the practice field Thursday, just two days before the Rebels play in their second straight state championship game.

Unlike last year, when Columbine's preparations for the big game were national news, all was quiet Thursday as the players pulled on their blue helmets, helmets that still bear No. 70 patches on the back.

And that patch, in honor of fallen teammate Matt Kechter, isn't something they really tell others about anymore. It's just between them and Matt.

"Yes, we talk about it," said senior co-captain Dusty Hoffschneider. "It comes up every week, every day. Everybody thinks about Matt because, for us, he's still a part of the team." Kechter, a junior-varsity lineman, was one of the 12 students killed at Columbine High School in April 1999. When students returned to school in the fall, the football team dedicated its season to Kechter and went on to compile a 13-1 record.

This year, "it's probably one of those unspoken things," coach Andy Lowry said. "We wear No. 70 on the back of our helmets, and we all know what it's for."

Last year, the nation rooted for the Rebels. They were underdogs rebounding from tragedy. But time has dulled the team's pain and the nation's attention. This year, it's just a school football game.

The players like it that way.

"I just think it's about us playing for another state championship," said Hoffschneider, a defensive and offensive lineman.

"If we win, then the tragedy will be brought up in there somewhere, but for us it will be more about being a good football team. It gets kinda old with the tragedy always being brought up."

Victim's dad cheers players

Matt's dad, Joe Kechter, won't mind if the shootings aren't on everybody's mind this week. Or if the team doesn't make a big display of its memorial to Matt. He will still be watching from the stands on Saturday, cheering on the Rebels.

"They just wear his number," Kechter said. "They know what they're doing it for."

Principal Frank DeAngelis said if the team wins, the school will celebrate. But the school is trying to do everything the way it always has, and that means giving a state championship football game its due importance.

"I think what we have to do and what we've all learned from this is it's a game," DeAngelis said.

"I think we learned firsthand a very strong lesson on the meaning of life. It's a football game; it's just a game."

Even grumbles about an elite jock culture at the school have subsided somewhat this year. And while one student said athletes are still kings of the school, people aren't paying as much attention to them this year.



Lowry (J. Prieto)

Less hype this year

"There's not as much hype about the team this year as there was last year," said Columbine senior Amanda Stair.

"Last year was a pretty emotional game, and everybody wanted to win after what we went through," she said. "Now it's a whole year later, and all the attention is on getting back to normal."

But DeAngelis said he doesn't know if people will ever let a Columbine success mean something less than a triumph over tragedy. It's been 19 months since the shootings. Half of the students in the building that day have graduated.

Still, people think of tragedy when they think of Columbine, DeAngelis said.

And that's a shame, Lowry said.

"Columbine," he said, "has a lot more meaning than tragedy."