

# Reflections On The First Mass School Shooting in American History... 19 Years Later

OP



In the fall of 1999, ESPN sent me to Littleton, Colorado, to chronicle the aftermath of what was, at the time, the worst high school shooting in American history. Just five months had passed since twelve students and a teacher lost their lives, and I was supposed to be covering the inspirational return of Columbine's football team.

Instead, I found a community so desperate to recover its idyllicism — not idealism; that was already lost — that it rushed its kids back into a new school year even as cleaning crews were, literally and figuratively, still mopping up. For those who want to see how little has changed in the last 19 years, I'm sharing the first draft of the story I wrote back in September 1999, when a mass school shooting was still a unique event in American life.

\*\*\*\*\*

By Shaun Assael

Pit dweller takes a long drag on his Camel Red and drains the smoke through the holes of the cyclone fence, into the eyes of a stranger on the other side. "You a tourist?" he wonders, loudly enough to draw his friends near. "Nah," he says, curling his lip into a sneer. "Worse. Media."

His friends grab the links of the fence, aping a gang. But amid the rolling lawns and baseball fields that spread out on all sides of Littleton, Colorado, it's hard to really feel menaced.

That is, until you remember that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold have made Columbine High School a picture stop on the American historic registry of madness. A principal from Los Angeles who wants a tour has to be turned away when he shows up unannounced. A picnic for school's seniors turns sullen when tourists start snapping pictures from the street. Camera crews are a fixture on Rebel Hill, the nearby peak that offers a panoramic view of country club Denver.

"Lemme guess," pit dweller says. "You want to know where we were during all the shooting, right?" He turns his back and walks back toward the school. "We get that a lot."

The pit, a fenced-in patch of grass behind Columbine, is a sanctuary for the so-called outsiders: the smokers and skaters and geeks. But Klebold and Harris, its most troubled outsiders, were strangers even to the pit. By the end of their lives "they didn't want to be associated with anybody," says football coach Andy Lowry, and their rampage proved it. They created a martyr for everyone: Isaiah Shoels, the 4-foot-11 cornerback, was slain because he was black; Cassie Bernall because she said she believed in God; Dave Sanders because he was a teacher trying to herd student's out of harm's way.

Yet of all the things the two teens said as they sprayed fire through its hallways, none has haunted Columbine more the phrase Harris uttered in its now infamous library: "All Jocks stand up."

In the weeks that followed, the national press began nosing around Columbine with a fury that Lowry says "no one could hold up to." It found kids complaining about bullies in the hallways, a headstrong wrestling champ with a rap sheet, and ethnic slurs scrawled in the bathrooms. But the group that was singled out above all others was The Rebels, Columbine's varsity football team.

Now, as their new season begins, the Rebels find themselves in the middle of a game being played out on several levels.

In big-picture terms, it's a struggle to separate the rhetoric from the reality as Littleton is used as a metaphor for everything from gun violence to malevolent video games.

In local terms, it's a battle to do what Principal Frank DeAngelis calls "the toughest job I've ever faced: keeping this community together."

It's after school in Columbine's cafeteria, and the first meeting of the Diversity Club is coming to order. The meeting consists of two girls in braces, a soccer mom, and the only African American on the faculty, history teacher Ivory Morris. As the girls munch chewy chip cookies, and the Rebel Poms cheerleaders prance in rhythm a few feet away, Morris can't hide his disappointment at the turnout. But he can't dwell on it either. He only has a half an hour before Rebel football practice starts.

The poor turnout for the Diversity Club is emblematic of the frustrations Columbine is having as it tries to prove it's just your average American high school. Before classes started, the school district asked a diversity guru from Northeastern University to talk to 20 football coaches. But when the press was invited to watch, the coaches sat in silent, fuming protest, feeling singled-out and humiliated. (The speaker hasn't been back since.)

Columbine is also cracking down on student behavior thanks to a torrent of true confessions in the local papers from kids who say its teachers let their hallways become a hazing house of horrors. The school isn't talking about how many suspensions have been meted out since classes started on August 16. But staff with walki-talkies follow students tagged as troublemakers through the halls. And one girl has filed a lawsuit because she says she was expelled when an overheard remark was twisted out of context. Eavesdropping has become easier since the blood-stained carpets were been taken up. Conversations travel better down bare linoleum floors.

The whole thing is starting to strike the kids as creepy. "A friend of mine was nearly suspended for flippin' the bird," a skateboarder says. "It's getting so you always feel watched."

Of course, no one is more watched than the Rebels. After the shooting, students told reporters that they were afraid of certain ones known for drinking and fighting, especially a two-time state wrestling champ who was suspended for directing slurs at a Jewish student and dutifully helping friends ransack the home of a man they'd fought with. Before he graduated in the spring of 1998, he was said to have swaggered through Columbine's halls like he owned them.

Though he'd been out of school for a year when Harris and Klebold snapped, all of Columbine's football players became fair game. The team's star running back, found his break-up with a girlfriend (she'd taken up with another guy) turned into a local scandal after she said he threw things at her at school, then followed her home, looking into her windows and pounded on her door until a deputy arrived. He furrows his surfboard straight eyebrows when he says, "It rained for two straight weeks after the shootings. I'd go to the park or the memorials and ask why, but there weren't any answers. People who were

looking for an excuse blamed the jocks, and I got caught in it. It was a helpless feeling. I wondered what people were thinking about me, what they were saying.”

If that made him think twice before he whispered about other kids, he wasn't alone. A number of Rebels talk about walking away from fights, or thinking twice about trash talking. “I've been more open with other people since I realized that day I could have died,” says Rebel quarterback Justin Feldman. “You know, open yourself up because you never know what can happen tomorrow.” His teammate, Daane Reinking, stares at the jungle gyms and rocking horses in the children's playground where they sit. “I'm a lot quicker to back off,” says the linebacker. “It's not worth it for the trouble it causes.” A cynic might think those words self-serving. But if Coach Lowry is right, and the only thing that can be compared to what these kids saw is the Vietnam War, then it's also possible that these are the vestiges of post-traumatic jock disorder — when pushing a spindly freshman into a locker becomes distinctly less hilarious.

The Rebels are pouring into the field of All City Stadium for their first game of the new season on September 3. It's an early game, four in the afternoon, but the Columbine bleachers are surprisingly full. The Today Show is there. So is a crew from Sports Center.

As the referee whistles the game against Denver East to a start, Ryan Barrett, a 16-year-old who lost his best friend, isn't ready to forget what happened. Maybe it's because he aims to be a journalist and is comfortable with self-examination. Or maybe it's because it's the only way he can hold onto his friend. But he's not letting go. “They want to make it a big secret by putting [new] lockers up,” Barrett says. “But I don't think sealing it off will help anything. I don't try to shut it out. I don't want to.”

Barrett and Matt Kechter were in the library when the shooting began. The boys, friends since the seventh grade, hid beneath desks to shield themselves. While Kechter lay dying from bullet wounds, Barrett hurdled over a counter, hiding behind it until the fusillade ended. Then he ran out of the school onto a football field covered with helicopter ambulances and police cars, one of which whisked him to safety.

“You know when you wake up dreading something?” Barrett starts. “It was like that all the time after it happened. For two months, it was constant dread. It felt like the world was closing in on me. I wasn't sure whether I could come back. I mean, it's still eerie for me...” His eyes, warm before, grow distant. “But I get through by talking to Matt. I talk to him every night. Things I can't tell anyone else, I tell him. A couple of weeks ago, it was lightening real hard. I

figured it was just Matt sitting up there in the clouds, going zap, zap, zap, letting me know he was listening.”

If there's one constant from Barrett to Hoffschneider, it's that the Rebels want absolution. They want it for Columbine. And, if Columbine is supposed to be typical of suburban schools everywhere, they want it for high school sports. But that may not be possible now that the kids of Columbine find themselves being tossed around like a political football.

So many people want to poke and prod them, principal DeAngelis turned down an offer to be part of a study by the National Centers for Disease Control. An irked member of the school board, who hadn't been consulted beforehand, railed: “If it's something that we can do to help our nation, I think we should participate.”

And so it goes.

On June 2, after classes ended and parents were allowed into the school to gather their kids' belongings, an African-American mother walked into the girls' bathroom and found this written above the sink: “I wonder why the niggers and Mexicans don't go back where they come from, on the other side of the rock.” It's exactly why Isaiah Shoels' father says he's filed a \$250 million suit against the Jefferson County school district, and parents of Klebold and the Harris. The whole thing has gotten so Geraldo, they've hired the attorney who defended Jack Kevorkian, aka Dr. Death.

And so it goes.

In this toxic environment, Lowry, a man who persuades more than he punishes, is trying to protect his kids by keeping them above reproach. So when he's asked about reports that one of his players had to be suspended in the pre-season for using an ethnic slur, his shoulders sag and the breath drains from his lungs. Uneasily acknowledging that he can't talk about juvenile disciplinary matters, he spreads his arms to frame the baseball fields and tennis courts and rolling hills past the picnic table where he sits. “Is this different than anywhere else?” he asks. “No. These are good kids. And some need a little work, like kids anywhere.”

But it's not anywhere. The slightest scandal at Columbine will be front-page news. Lowry knows that. So he is turning his Rebels into the most politically correct high school football team in the nation. After driving rains force an early and merciful end to the game against Denver East, he bans reporters from the locker room, then sends his kids out to form a high-five line. He probably would have done the same if network cameras weren't there. But after four months of constant attack, he isn't about to pass up positive symbolism.

White hands clasp black up and down a long receiving line.  
In the distance, lightening bolts slice through a sky that's the color of static.  
And as Barrett boards a school bus for the trip home, he steals a long look, no  
doubt imagining it's Kechter slapping him on the back for the win.

"People tell me that we should be moving on," says DeAngelis, the principal.  
"But I have to ask them, 'Who are you talking about?' We have a lot of kids in  
different stages.

Some were outside when it happened, some were hiding inside, some are  
carrying horrible images from the library that we can only imagine."

Barrett says he doesn't want to forget. Like the rest of the Rebels, and the rest  
of Columbine's kids, he probably won't have a choice.