

Tragedy is replaced with triumph

State football title diverts thoughts for a short time

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For 60 minutes on Saturday, the Columbine High School community didn't have time to think about mass murder or school violence.

There was a football game at stake, and that focus led the Rebels to their first state football championship. No moments of silence occurred before the game. No clusters of students joined in prayer for the 12 classmates and one teacher who were gunned down in the spring. And no one talked about the slayings.

Saturday, it seemed, was about football.

Columbine's 21-14 win over Cherry Creek High School, which took place at Cherry Creek High before 8,000 fans and a live television audience, gave almost everyone something to cheer about. The victory may even help Columbine students, teachers, parents and athletes move beyond the terrible events of April 20.

"This game is saying we've risen above it," said Jason Hunter, a Columbine freshman.

"We've been under the microscope all year."

Still, subtle reminders of the crimes were everywhere. Students and parents painted blue ribbons on their faces to honor those killed or hurt in the shooting. Columbine football players wore a number 70 on the backs of their helmets to honor Matt J. Kechter, a teammate shot to death during the April rampage.

Kechter's 13-year-old brother, Adam, held the championship trophy after the game as his parents and media members looked on. There were collective chants of "MJK, MJK, MJK," as further tribute to Kechter's memory.

"His presence was felt today," said Columbine linebacker Ryan Barrett, one of Matt Kechter's best friends. "This would not be possible without him."

Though the score was close for most of the game, Columbine seemed to have something extra.

"I don't know where the help came from," said Columbine Coach Andy Lowry. "But if God's for us, I don't know who can be against us."

The Columbine energy seemed to grow before the game as hundreds of the school's fans packed the stands. The mood mounted as the game progressed, then broke into a frenzy when hundreds of Columbine students stormed the field to celebrate the victory.

Tears were as plentiful as smiles.

"Columbine has been through a tragedy and they deserve this," said a moist-eyed Tiffany Garcia, who graduated from the school near Littleton two years ago.

The sentiment was shared, in part, on the opposite side of the field.

The victory can't qualify as closure for those who lived through the April shooting, but it has galvanized the Littleton community and given it reason to move on.

"This is one of the many successes we have had since the year started," said Columbine Principal Frank D'Angelis. "It's amazing to see how people make it through the healing process. The scars will never go away, but we are learning to cope a little each day."