

Dissecting Columbine's Cult of the Athlete

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LITTLETON, Colo.

The state wrestling champ was regularly permitted to park his \$100,000 Hummer all day in a 15-minute space. A football player was allowed to tease a girl about her breasts in class without fear of retribution by his teacher, also the boy's coach. The sports trophies were showcased in the front hall -- the artwork, down a back corridor.

Columbine High School is a culture where initiation rituals meant upperclass wrestlers twisted the nipples of freshman wrestlers until they turned purple and tennis players sent hard volleys to younger teammates' backsides. Sports pages in the yearbook were in color, a national debating team and other clubs in black and white. The homecoming king was a football player on probation for burglary.

All of it angered and oppressed Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, leading to the April day when they staged their murderous rampage here, killing 13 and wounding 21.

Columbine may be no different from thousands of high schools in glorifying athletes. But in the weeks since one of the worst school shootings in history, every aspect of what had seemed "normal" is now being reexamined. Increasingly, as parents and students replay images of life at Columbine, they are freeze-framing on injustices suffered at the hands of athletes, wondering aloud why almost no one -- not teachers, not administrators, not coaches, not most students, not parents -- took the problem seriously.

No one thinks the high tolerance for athletic mischief explains away or excuses the two boys' horrific actions. But some parents and students believe a schoolwide indulgence of certain jocks -- their criminal convictions, physical abuse, sexual and racial bullying -- intensified the killers' feelings of powerlessness and galvanized their fantasies of revenge.

It was clear in the first hours after the shootings that vengeance against athletes was a preoccupation of the two killers. Harris and Klebold began firing with the words "All the jocks stand up." They barked that "anybody with a white hat or a shirt with a sports emblem on it is dead."

But in the two months since that day, as pundits and politicians searched for an explanation of why, the national conversation moved away from those words, and even outside the walls of the school completely. It turned to the boys' families, where

no clues have surfaced, to the mental illness of Harris -- he was on antidepressants -- to video games, to violent movies, to guns, which currently preoccupy Congress.

While the rest of the country looks elsewhere for explanations, the community here has resisted easy answers. Through their mourning and anguish, many parents and students have made a more difficult turn inward, to the culture of Columbine and the aspects of it that may have provoked two angry boys to such aggression. In the past two weeks, a task force has been formed to examine that atmosphere, and several of its members say that discipline, harassment and special treatment for athletes must be dissected without defensiveness.

"I don't think any one thing drove them to this," said member Joyce Hooker, a parent of two Columbine students. "But I think we need to say, 'Whoa. Why did they focus on athletes?'"

Their perspective is adolescent and simplistic, but dozens of interviews and a review of court records suggest that Harris's and Klebold's rage began with the injustices of jocks. The pair knew of instances where athletes convicted of crimes went without suspension from games or expulsion from school. They witnessed instances of athletes tormenting others while school authorities looked the other way. They believed that high-profile athletes could finagle their way out of jail.

In one episode, they saw state wrestling champion Rocky Wayne Hoffschneider shoving his girlfriend into a locker, in front of a teacher, who did nothing, according to a close friend. "We used to talk about Rocky a lot," said the friend, who asked not to be identified. "We'd say things like 'He should be in jail for the stuff he does.'" Another friend of Klebold's, Andrew Beard, remembers distinctly Klebold's rage at four football players' "getting off" after destroying a man's apartment last year.

Hoffschneider, who graduated last year and works in the Denver area at a construction company, declined to answer detailed questions. But he said in a brief interview that he never knew the killers and that any suggestion he escaped punishment for his misdeeds was erroneous.

Harris and Klebold were preoccupied with Hoffschneider, who became for many at Columbine a symbol of athletes' runaway sovereignty. On his Web site, Harris singled out Hoffschneider in the following passage: "LIARS!!!OH GAWWWWWWD I HATE LIARS. . . . Why must people lie so much! Especially about stupid things! Like . . . my brand new hummer just broke down on the highway when I was going 250mph.'" "

Athletes' torment of Harris and Klebold personally also was a factor. This past year, they and friend Brooks Brown were outside school when a carload of athletes, wearing their trademark white caps, threw a bottle at them, which shattered at their feet. Brown recalled Klebold saying, "Don't worry, man, it happens all the time."

Recalling many conversations with Harris and Klebold over the three years he knew them, Brown now feels the shooting "had to do with the injustice in our society and in the school."

"We all hated it -- hated the fact we were outcasts just simply because we weren't in sports," Brown said. "It's insane when you think about it, but it's real."

To some athletes and parents, this is guilt-induced revisionism. They point out that athletes moved in and out of a variety of cliques. Some were scholars, the majority well-behaved. These parents and students experienced a Columbine where camaraderie was strong, discipline evenhanded and harassment minimal. To say otherwise, they say, is to validate the mind-set of murdering madmen.

"They had no school spirit and they wanted to be different," Randy Thurmon, parent of a wrestler and football player, said of the killers. "Anyone who shows any kind of school spirit, any pride in the school, they're accepted."

The new introspection also has been resisted by Columbine school officials, who ignored the task force's invitation to their first meeting, members said. Coaches, teachers and principal Frank DeAngelis denied requests for interviews, according to Jefferson County schools spokesman Rick Kaufman. Kaufman said he would answer written questions, but then did not. He broke an appointment for a scheduled interview Thursday. Messages left for coaches, teachers and administrators at home went unanswered.

But one school official who serves on the board overseeing all Jefferson County schools believes that these issues cannot be dismissed so quickly.

"I do believe that in all of our schools athletes can appear to have a different status. I think it's okay if kids are working hard and they're good role models," said Jefferson County School Board member David DiGiacomo. "But to give them special privileges, I think we have to be careful."

With the first media bulletins of the shootings, Stephen Greene was on his car phone, calling a school hotline about his son's safety. He got voice mail and screamed out a message: "I knew something like this in this school could happen."

Greene's sense of foreboding dates to 1996, the year Hoffschneider transferred to Columbine after being expelled from a private school for fighting. He had other blemishes on his record -- a 1992 arrest for criminal mischief and a 1995 arrest relating to a "missing person." As juvenile cases, their outcomes were sealed.

The summer before Hoffschneider entered Columbine, his girlfriend's parents alleged in court papers that Hoffschneider's mother and sister kicked in their door one morning. Edmund Lemieux, the girl's father, said the Hoffschneider family "was abusive and physical towards us."

"It was a serious situation at the school," he said. Lemieux said he and his wife kept three of their children from attending Columbine when they learned that Hoffschneider -- a 215-pound football player who would go on to become a two-time state champion in wrestling -- had transferred to their children's school. Calls to the Hoffschneider family were not returned.

Within a month of school opening in the fall of 1996, Hoffschneider and another football player were teasing Stephen Greene's son Jonathan, who is Jewish. Their favorite gambit was singing about Hitler when he made a basket in gym class, Greene recalls. The gym teacher, Craig Place, who was also Hoffschneider's wrestling coach, did nothing, Greene said.

"They pinned him on the ground and did 'body twisters,' " Greene said. "He got bruises all over his body. Then the threats began -- about setting him on fire and burning him."

Greene went to Place, DeAngelis and his son's guidance counselor. "They said, 'This stuff can happen.' They looked at me like I was a problem," he said. Greene called the school board, which notified the police. Hoffschneider and the other athlete were charged with harassment, kicking and striking, court records show, and sentenced to probation. But Hoffschneider was allowed to continue his football and wrestling.

He also attracted a following. "He created a tough little group of guys -- probably seven or eight boys that were involved in sports, mostly football, wrestling, who began to take control of the school," said parent Cecelia Buckner. "They all wore white hats."

One of the group was Anthony A. Pyne, a 230-pound football player with a tribal band tattoo on his left arm. (Pyne's mother said her son would not comment, on the advice of his attorney.) After Christmas, Pyne began to tease Aundrea Harwick in English class about her breasts. Harwick went to the teacher, Tom Tonelli, who was

also a Columbine football and wrestling coach. He suggested she move to a different seat.

A similar event happened at a Columbine wrestling match at Arvada High School. Pyne, "in front of everyone," said Harwick, broadcast to all within earshot: " 'Her breasts are getting bigger.' They're laughing -- the jocks were." She told Coach Place; he told her to sit on the other side of the gym.

She then went to a woman at a concession stand, who called the Arvada police. The officer issued Pyne a ticket. Because he was a juvenile, court records are not available, but Harwick said he pleaded guilty and paid a \$50 fine.

The next day at school, administrator Rich Long, trying to persuade the girl to drop the charges, told Harwick and her mother that "by her going and getting the police, she's ruining his possibilities of playing on the football team," Elissa Harwick recalled. Pyne played football anyway.

Views of the Greene and Harwick stories differ. Football player Christopher Meier, who was a sophomore at the time, said, "I'm not defending him" but that administrators treated Hoffschneider fairly. Friends of Harris and Klebold noticed something else. "He always got things that we never could get," said Tad Boles -- "respect."

In Harris and Klebold's junior year, an unlikely challenge arose to the jocks' unchecked power -- from Columbine's social underclass. "All of us outcasts got jealous," recalled junior Pauline Colby.

Just as jocks wore an unofficial uniform to school -- white baseball caps -- the outcasts donned black, most noticeably trench coats. When jocks branded them "the Trenchcoat Mafia," they embraced the name.

In line at registration for new classes that year, football players pushed a 4-foot-9 freshman and called her dirty because she dressed like a hippie. On another occasion a boy called "Little Joey Stair," one of the wraithlike Trenchcoaters who was friends with Harris and Klebold, looked up in a hallway to see three football players shoving him into a locker, saying, "Fag, what are you looking at?" remembered classmate Mikala Scrodin.

"Last year there was a group of seniors who picked on everyone, not just the lowest people. Pretty much everyone was scared to take them on; if anyone said anything, they'd come after you, too. I don't think teachers realized it was serious, they just saw it as kids joking around," said Kevin Hofstra, a Yale-bound soccer team captain.

Hoffschneider's circle -- known as "the steroid poster boys" -- had their cafeteria table. On the other side of the room, shy skinny boys -- among them Harris and Klebold -- claimed a table, too. The athletes threw Skittles candy at them, said senior John Savage. Once, athletes threw a bagel close to the table, and the cafeteria emptied for fear of a fight. In the boys' bathrooms, a graffiti war broke out -- "Jocks rule!" Came the rejoinder: "Jocks suck!"

In the halls, body slams were common. Trenchcoat students got pushed more than most. "A football player reached out and stepped on the cord of one of these girls' Walkmen and it ripped out and fell and broke," remembered Melissa Snow, who graduated in 1998. "She just didn't say anything. For those kinds of kids it's really hard to stand up to a bunch of football players, who are all standing around thinking it's really funny what this guy did to you."

Harris and Klebold absorbed it all. As the year went by, they drifted closer to the Trenchcoaters, but unlike most students, they seemed to take the taunting to heart. "They just let the jocks get to them," Colby said. "I think they were taunted to their limits."

That January, during one of their nocturnal pranks, Harris and Klebold were arrested on juvenile charges of felony burglary for stealing from a van. They got the lightest sentence available: a diversion program, with the charges expunged after 10 months of counseling and community service. In fact, their own light sentence has provoked questions among some parents that school officials were lax not only toward athletes, but toward all sorts of student misbehavior.

Days later, on April 6, Hoffschneider and four other star athletes were arrested for ransacking the Denver apartment of a 22-year-old man, according to court records. The arrests made the papers. Within days, the athletes were back at school. Nine months later they pleaded guilty and got probation.

Something had changed by Harris and Klebold's senior year. What began as rage -- held inside -- turned into a vicious plan of revenge. But if it started with athletes, as it evolved, it morphed into a plot to destroy the entire school.

On April 20, some of the jocks who had tormented Klebold and Harris had already graduated. Hoffschneider had, though his brother was in the cafeteria that day. Among those who died, six were athletes, but none of them was considered among Klebold's or Harris's chief taunters, or among Hoffschneider's crowd. Whether the killers even recognized them as athletes is difficult to know.

Researcher Alice Crites contributed to this report.