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Months later, unanswered questions haunt Duke

insider By **Jon Pessah**
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There are no trucks in the visitors' parking lot of Cameron Indoor Stadium, no reporters shoving to get near the students as they head to summer school classes. In the Hall of Fame Room, where Duke is about to introduce its new lacrosse coach, John Danowski, on this late-July afternoon, there are no network camera crews readying feeds, no national newsmen eager to take notes.

Three men walk in and sit at a table that faces maybe a dozen local reporters and a handful of coaches, officials and players who stand in the back. Art Chase, the tall, balding sports information director, lays out the plan: a statement by athletic director Joe Alleva, one by Danowski, then a question-and-answer session. "And a gentle reminder," he says. "We are here today to discuss the appointment of Coach Danowski and nothing else."

Alleva is next. "Today is all about moving forward," he says, "not looking backward." He has more reasons than most to put the last year at Duke, his eighth as AD, in the rearview. The scandal that led to the forced resignation of the lacrosse coach and the indictment of three of his players last spring left Alleva badly scarred. More recently, a boating accident, in which his son, a former Duke baseball player, ran the family's speedboat into a jetty while allegedly under the influence, left the AD with 42 stitches in his forehead and his future even more in doubt.

Alleva thanks the search committee for finding the right man, thanks Duke's president, Dick Brodhead, for his support and thanks the lacrosse players for staying with the program. "Not one player decided to transfer," he says. "I think that says it all." Not exactly. Left unsaid is the unwillingness of other schools to welcome Duke players who may have wanted to leave. And how many of those players and their parents still blame Duke for abandoning them and turning a bad situation into a disaster.

Finally, it's the new coach's turn. "I am humbled and honored," says Danowski, sitting bolt upright between Chase and Alleva. "The first time I stepped on the campus, in 1999, I felt the sense of excellence and pride everywhere you turned. That has not changed."

Danowski is a big man with a big voice, his manner more how-ya-doing than in-your-face. He fills a room, something the eight members of the search committee had noticed right away. He convinced them that he understood that the job was more about winning hearts and minds than games and titles. And he told them that in 21 years at Hofstra, he'd learned that kids this age can't always tell right from wrong and that it was his responsibility to teach them the difference.

The committee didn't have to ask if he realized what he was up against. As the parent of a Duke student, Danowski had watched the media carve up a university he'd loved since the day it had first recruited his son, Matt, now a rising senior. The national spotlight had laid bare an undergrad lifestyle that shocked baby boomer parents and infuriated professors. And it characterized a sense of entitlement ingrained in the student body, which many of the school's African-American faculty and 600-plus black students call insensitive at best, racist at worst.

As the parent of a Duke athlete, Danowski knew what had been lost on the night of March 13 and how hard it would be to get it back. Once -- was it only four months ago? -- being an athlete at Duke brought respect, celebrity and job offers at graduation. Now it meant having to answer for whatever had happened at 610 N. Buchanan.

And as the parent of a Duke lacrosse player, he worried that the team was being held accountable for all that was wrong about the school, imagined or real. This could be the toughest hurdle of all.

Now he had just been introduced as the guy who could turn it all around. At 52, Danowski was stepping into a dream job, but not quite out of a nightmare. An old friend had been forced out of the position he'd just taken. Two of his players and a graduated senior he'd known for years stood accused of crimes that could put them in jail for 50 years. Thirty-three players on his new team could be called to testify at their trials. No, this was no normal job. "If it were," admits Danowski, "it wouldn't have been open."

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So he talks about healing old wounds, learning from mistakes and providing counseling. It's going to be tough, but it's going to be fun, too, and it's time to go to work. Duke is the place where they did it right, and would again soon.

Then again, whether Duke has ever done it right depends on who's talking - and what they're talking about.

We're in the kid business, and sometimes kids make bad decisions.

Isn't that what Duke women's lacrosse coach Kerstin Kimel was always telling her assistants? Isn't that what she heard growing up outside of Philadelphia, where her father, Mike Manning, had coached high school basketball for 25 years? It was surely what she learned the night her father walked in the door and looked right through her, having come from a hospital where his star player lay near death. The teen, who'd been drinking and drag racing, had crashed into a light pole. He'd be paralyzed for life.

Sometimes kids make bad decisions.

Kimel starred on the lacrosse field at Maryland and knew she wanted to coach when she graduated in 1993. She came to Duke in January 1995, to start a program from scratch. It didn't take long for her to build a contender and decide she never wanted to leave. Eleven years later, as she sat alone in her kitchen just before midnight in late March, her two young children asleep upstairs and her husband away on business, her dad's lesson resonated more than ever. Over the previous two tumultuous weeks, she'd come to terms with the fact that the men's lacrosse players had made some bad decisions -- underage drinking, hiring strippers. Very bad decisions.

It was Sexual Assault Awareness Week on campus. Activist students made speeches on the quad. Departments organized sit-ins and marches. Several of the lacrosse players had been surrounded by schoolmates who shouted, "Tell the truth!" On March 28, Brodhead suspended the team's season.

"Sports have their time and place," he told the press, "but when an issue of this gravity is in question, it is not the time to be playing games." Angry students confronted him after the press conference, and one asked how he intended to keep her "safe from the lacrosse team."

Kimel understood the town/gown friction that framed the administration's response. She'd seen the resentment locals had for the drunken student parties held in their neighborhoods, and heard the students talk of fearing the crime that sometimes spilled from Durham onto East or Central Campus. One of her players once had to chase off a burglar with a lacrosse stick.

No one had to tell her why it was mostly women who were speaking out in those first few days. You don't teach and travel with 31 girls for years without learning about their world. The 35-year-old coach knew this generation had come to see date rape as an all-too-frequent consequence of binge drinking and a hookup culture. She knew young women, even young women athletes, were reluctant to step forward when something happened to them. The events of March 13, she felt, would just make it all worse.

But that night in her kitchen, she wondered why no one at Duke was looking out for the players. This was not a Duke that Kimel recognized, not the one she fell in love with more than a decade ago, not the one that gave coaches the resources to build elite programs. Certainly not the one she told parents about while she sat in their living rooms. "You're not joining a team," she'd say. "You're joining the Duke family."

The two lacrosse teams played, ate and hung together. One of Kimel's former players had recently married a men's lacrosse player; another pair of Devils is engaged. What was happening on campus wasn't just about the men's team, it was about hers, too. Hell, it was about every athlete at Duke.

She'd been troubled by some of the e-mails she'd received from her players. She called one up on her laptop: "One of my teachers knows there are six male lacrosse players in the class and said some things that were very out of line this morning. The boys ended up leaving, which made me rather emotional. It just makes me so sad. I feel like the boys are going to feel unsafe in this class from here on out."

Kimel decided to reach out to Bob Thompson, the dean of undergraduates, a longtime Duke administrator who she felt would share her concern. She pasted in her player's complaint and mentioned another e-mail in which a player told of a professor calling lacrosse players "animals." The accused, their friends, girlfriends, etc., are being harassed and fear for their safety -- and no one seems to care about their well-being, Kimel wrote, then closed with a plea for support. For the sake of the young men who have been accused and for the entire student population so they learn that in life it is wrong to rush to judgment -- especially in a case where the stakes are so high.

After she hit the send button, she went back to work. Her team, ranked No. 2 in the country, had a game against No. 4 Virginia to worry about.

Orin Starn had never met lacrosse coach Mike Pressler. In fact, he'd never met any coach in the 15 years he'd taught anthropology at Duke. But suddenly, his field of study had come to life on his campus. And eastern North Carolina's largest newspaper wanted him to put it in perspective.

Starn had been at the vigil at 610 N. Buchanan the night the story broke about three men's lacrosse players allegedly having raped an exotic dancer at a party. He'd held a candle and wondered what had happened inside. He

hadn't been convinced the boys had done it, despite the DA's pronouncements, but the drinking, the strippers and the racial slurs he was hearing about -- especially the slurs -- spoke to something.

But what? That was the question Starn had offered to address for The News & Observer in early April. Sitting at his laptop in his bedroom, Starn was certain it wasn't about lacrosse. If he wanted to address the issue, he'd have to aim higher.

Is it time for Duke and Coach K to -- gasp -- part ways?

Starn knew people would think him the pointy-headed prof who hated sports for writing that, and the thought made him smile. His wife complained that he watched too much "SportsCenter" and spent too much time studying box scores. He played golf at Haverford and soccer at Chicago, and he hit Duke's championship-caliber course as often as his creaky, 44-year-old back allowed.

His courses, particularly Anthropology of Sports, were popular with Duke athletes, and he enjoyed having them in class, especially the football players, whom he usually found to be energetic if not always as prepared as other, often more affluent, students. He knew that many athletes took his 8:30 a.m. classes because they had practice from 3 to 6 p.m., and it amazed him when football players told him that they got up at 5:30 a.m. to lift for an hour before class. It concerned him, too.

Sports have assumed a grotesquely gigantic, high-stakes, big-business role in university life. Competing at the Division I level drains so much time and energy that athletes cannot do their best in the classroom ... Even "minor" sports require three hours a day or more of practice, film study and conditioning.

Like most everyone at Duke, Starn loved going to Cameron to watch the Blue Devils play basketball. Wasn't winning a big part of what Duke stood for? The games were far more enjoyable than fretting about the entitlement and isolation that can afflict a college athlete who travels the country while peers back home celebrate his success and bemoan his failures.

But the lacrosse scandal was a wake-up call for everyone, including professors who discovered that they were out of touch with the lives led by their students. If there was ever a time for reevaluation at Duke, this was it.

As heretical as it may sound, I think the cult of basketball at Duke is a major liability. A university should not be attracting students by virtue of their interest in spending long hours camping out for tickets and screaming regimented game rally chants.

Starn knew the e-mails would fly when his column ran six days later. Duke without basketball? Are you crazy? He was fully aware of how much money Mike Krzyzewski brought in, how many students enrolled because of the basketball culture, how Coach K's profile as Olympic coach just added to the allure. And he got why the coach had kept silent amid the firestorm, even as it had some questioning his leadership. Coach K, as he said himself three months later, was just a basketball coach.

But if you were going to address the role of big-time athletics in this crisis, you couldn't ignore the elephant in the room. So Starn wrote of the dangers of placing basketball-like demands on student-athletes in sports such as lacrosse. He wrote about the need to mainstream athletes into campus life. He questioned the spending of millions for "shiny, high-tech facilities." And he talked about priorities.

Duke without great basketball?

It's worth thinking about.

Wahneema Lubiano leaned forward in her office chair and pored over the copy for the full-page ad one more time. What Does a Social Disaster Sound Like? the headline read.

It was just minutes before the copy deadline for the April 6 issue of The Chronicle, Duke's daily student newspaper. Lubiano had taught literature and African and African-American studies for 10 years, and her campus activism on race and gender issues cast her in a comforting light for many of her students. She'd heard them describe a campus culture dominated by a small but powerful class of rich, white students who led a privileged life many white kids at Duke took for granted. She'd heard accounts of a few brutal rapes on campus and about the far more pervasive trend of date rape.

As March turned to April, Lubiano felt her students' frustration rising again, fueled by the feeling that in the wake of the scandal, no one was listening to them. The head of her department had charged her with giving African-American students a voice. Theirs were the dozen quotes that appeared on the page she was getting ready to submit.

"We want the absence of terror. But we don't really know what that means ... That's why we're so silent."

"I was talking to a white woman student who was asking me, 'Why do people' -- and she meant black people -- 'make race such a big issue?' ... They just don't see it."

Lubiano thought back to the last week of March, to the night she'd first heard those words. About 75 students had crowded into a second-floor conference room at the John Hope Franklin Center, named for one of the most prominent African-American professors in school history. They were there for a forum on black masculinity, but the focus had changed to reflect

the sordid drama playing out on campus. Tensions were high as the space filled. There were two white women in the room, Lubiano remembered, a few Latino and Asian students and a couple of white faculty members. Everyone else was black.

One professor thundered about having no confidence in an administration that considered canceling games a proper response to sexual assault and racial slurs. He called for the players to be expelled and the program to be shut down. Lubiano was taken aback by the level of her colleague's anger, which put him out of step with the rest of her peers. Yes, the lacrosse team had sparked the crisis. But there was more to it, much more. One by one, the students spoke of their unhappiness with their life at Duke.

"This is not a different experience for us here at Duke University. We go to class with racist classmates, we go to gym with people who are racists ... It's part of the experience."

Devon Sherwood, the lone African-American on the lacrosse team, was in attendance, completing a class assignment. So, too, were a handful of black football players. They sat quietly, though one did say that the situation would be playing out differently if the accused were black and the accuser white. He spoke not with anger but resignation -- and some confusion. As on every college campus, Duke athletes belonged to the dominant social class. But now, being a black athlete meant juggling competing allegiances.

Like many of the black faculty, Lubiano had heard for years about the poor reputation of the lacrosse team, heard some of her students call them racists. A Facebook photo of a male student in blackface, believed to be a lacrosse player, had been e-mailed around before and after the alleged rape. Two weeks after the incident, Lubiano had attended a meeting of about 200 agitated faculty members. A senior professor stood and berated the team, saying the school needed to flush it down the drain and start over.

Lubiano knew what it was like to be verbally attacked. Just before the lacrosse case exploded on campus, conservative commentator David Horowitz had spoken there. He told students that some of their departments and professors did not belong at the elite college, mentioning Lubiano, among others, by name. Duke administrators responded with silence then, and Lubiano believed they were far too quiet about the lacrosse incident as well. So she read for one final time the words she wrote to express what her students, and the 88 Duke professors who'd signed the ad, wanted to say.

The students know this disaster didn't begin on March 13 and won't end with what the police say or the court decides. Like all disasters, this one has a history. And what lies beneath what we're hearing from our students are questions about the future.

Lubiano knew some would see the ad as a stake through the collective heart of the lacrosse team. But if the black faculty couldn't speak for black students now, could it ever?

Yani Newton always knew she'd play sports at Duke, from the time she came to the Gothic-style campus for a summer camp after ninth grade. And for most of her first two years, it had been everything she could have wanted. But this spring, the only African-American on the women's lacrosse team had other choices to make.

That had been made clear by the black students she knew on campus. She was wearing her blue-and-white No. 8 one day when a black student passed by. "Just been bitched out by the little white girl in the red T-shirt," the woman said, not knowing that the white girl, a vocal supporter of the lacrosse team, was one of Newton's friends. Newton was friends with a lot of white girls, many in the Core Four sororities, the ones Rolling Stone would soon hold up to ridicule.

In early April, she sat on the cold floor of the lacrosse team's meeting room, listening to her coach after all hell had broken loose again. An e-mail written by a lacrosse player and sent to many of his teammates a few hours after their party in March had made it into the newspapers. "Tomorrow night, after tonight's show, I've decided to have some strippers over to Edens 2C," it read in part. "All are welcome, however, there will be no nudity. I plan on killing the bitches as soon as they walk in and proceed to cut their skin off ... All in ... please respond."

Newton caught the reference to the cult film "American Psycho" and recognized the often-twisted sense of humor of her friend and classmate Ryan McFadyen. What she couldn't understand was the school's response: forcing Coach Pressler's resignation, suspending McFadyen, canceling the rest of the men's lacrosse season. Guilty before proven innocent. That's what she was thinking as she sat in front of her coach. That's what a lot of athletes were thinking.

Newton saw Kimel was clearly upset. The coach told her players to think back to last fall, when she'd instructed them to take down any pictures they'd uploaded to Facebook and Webshots. "You never know how things can be twisted and come back to haunt you," she'd said. The girls took the photos down, but they weren't happy about it.

"Now do you get it?" Kimel asked. "You do not want to do something that could get me fired. What the boys did was stupid and wrong. Now they feel responsible for getting their coach fired. But as bad as they feel, they'll feel a lot worse when they have jobs and families. Then they'll really know what this all means."

Newton hadn't posted any pictures, but she heard what her coach was saying. And she wondered if every coach at Duke was feeling that what had

happened to Pressler could happen to them. When Kimel shifted gears and told them there was a game to prepare for, a big game, Newton was relieved. Lacrosse was something they could all feel good about. "We can be the bright spot," Kimel told them. "It's the best thing we can do for the boys and the school."

Newton and her teammates came out flying against top-ranked Northwestern the next night, funneling all that emotion and anger at the Wildcats, blowing them away. The field was one place -- maybe the only place -- to forget about what was going on, to reclaim what life had been like before March 13.

But many of Newton's friends didn't have that release, or a coach to lean on. Whenever she returned to her room after another three-hour practice, she'd find her dormmates in front of TVs, or scanning the Web, or reading the local papers. They were all stunned when the boys lost their season and rocked when the DA said he was convinced that a rape had occurred even after the DNA tests were negative. They often stayed up late to talk about the events that had changed everything.

Newton had grown tight with midfielder Reade Seligmann during freshman year, eating wings late at night at Rick's on West Campus. He was big and funny, a guy who'd give her a hug when she'd had a bad day. All semester, they'd been meeting for breakfast before an 8:30 class they shared.

On April 17, news came that the grand jury had handed down sealed indictments for two players. If only because they'd rented the house, two of the three senior captains who lived at 610 figured to be the accused. But the next day on TV, Newton saw a police car door open and a large figure emerge. She recognized Reade instantly, his hands pinned behind his body. Soon, mug shots of Seligmann and another sophomore, Collin Finnerty, appeared. Her two friends, one 20 like her, the other 19, stood accused of pulling a woman into a bathroom, holding her down, beating her and penetrating her vaginally, anally and orally for 30 minutes.

There would be no more breakfasts with Reade, only more problems. Newton's father, Lloyd, called Duke police from Baltimore, demanding they keep his daughter safe amid the protests. A local newspaper story appeared before the women's lacrosse team's trip to Boston for the Final Four in late May, turning the team's preliminary plan to wear wristbands in support of the accused into another national feeding frenzy.

Their season ended two days later in a thrilling overtime loss to Northwestern. Newton spent the first month of summer at home with a boot on her right foot to protect a stress fracture she'd played with all spring. She got word that she was one of nine Duke women's lacrosse players to make the All-ACC Academic team. But mostly she answered questions from childhood friends about what had gone wrong at the school that always did it right.

She returned to Duke in late July to be a counselor at Kimel's camp. Although summers in Durham are hot and humid, the job was a chance to keep sharp. Camps like this exist at many schools, but Duke being Duke, this one means a bit more. Just not this year. A young camper told Newton that when she informed friends about where she was headed, they said, "Oh, you're going to be one of those people."

Newton heard about a meeting being planned by the athletic department, a big rally on Sept. 11 designed to make athletes proud again to wear the blue-and-white. She also heard there'd be a new code of conduct. She realized that once school started, everyone would be dissecting everything they did again.

One afternoon toward the end of camp, she watched the girls during drills, thinking that some of them might play at Duke one day. At least, Newton thought, they won't know what they missed.

On the first day of August, Matt Zash stands on an elementary school field on the east end of Long Island, schooling 30 or so 6-year-old lacrosse players on how they used to do it at Duke. "Take your lane, read the defense and react," he says as he cuts to the goal. Most of the kids appear to be listening despite the day's near-100° heat.

Zash used to think he knew all about how they did things at Duke. For almost four years, he was a stellar midfielder who got good grades and still found time to enjoy himself. Then one of his roommates at 610 N. Buchanan, Dan Flannery, made a call to an escort service, and the other one, David Evans, wound up under indictment for crimes they all swear never took place. In between, he felt, the school he once adored had left him and his 'mates to fend for themselves.

He'd told his story to the national media in early June: about being rousted from bed two days after the party to find half a dozen policemen yelling for him to get his hands up, about having his cheek swabbed for DNA and his reputation ripped to shreds.

He'd been following orders from the defense team that, from the beginning, had spent much energy countering the bad press. And for the most part, the strategy had worked. As President Brodhead wrote in an open letter on July 25: After many weeks of media stories that made it seem almost self-evidently true that a rape had occurred, recent stories have offered extensive evidence exonerating the indicted students and questioning the legitimacy of the case.

But real damage had been done. And just as Brodhead surely understands that he and the school remain at risk from situations he can't control, so too does the 22-year-old Zash. That was one of the lessons of the spring. Hadn't the DA taken Zash's statement, then accused the entire team of not

cooperating? Didn't the media pick apart their lives, then turn their legal problems into entertainment for the entire nation?

Zash still can't grasp how it got so out of hand. Did he and his teammates party hard? Yes. Did they drink before they were 21? Yes, like so many others did before football games and at the big drinkfest on the last day of spring classes. Did they make stupid mistakes? Yes. Does that make them capable of gang rape? How, he wonders every day, can anyone at Duke think the answer to that is yes?

Now he lives at home with his parents on Long Island and wonders what will happen next. This isn't over for any of them. On Aug. 25, just days before classes were to start, The New York Times published a front-page story based on a review of the prosecution's previously undisclosed case file. The piece added some new elements and rehashed many others, including some embarrassing details about Zash that seemed gratuitous because they didn't connect him to any wrongdoing. A trial, with all the attendant sensationalism, could start as soon as late fall.

"No one can know what we've gone through," Zash's mother, Nina, says. "No one should ever know."

Zash used to think he'd follow many of his former teammates to Wall Street, but now he's decided to become a college coach. He's talked about a job with Pressler, who recently signed on at Bryant University, a Division II school in Rhode Island, but doesn't know if the timing is right. Bryant doesn't offer a graduate degree in education, and Zash wants to get a master's. Still, if Pressler can't find anyone else, Zash will go.

Loyalty. He used to think that was what Duke was about. Now he thinks about all the coaches, and wonders how secure they feel. He thinks about all the athletes, and how they'll cope with the revised rules. He thinks most about his former teammates, the ones who'll be returning to campus, and wonders how they'll be treated.

All of which saddens Zash. He wants to remember Duke for what he thought it was, not for what he and the others feel it's become. He wants things to return to normal, but he's no longer sure what normal is. "I never thought anything like this could ever happen at Duke," he says. "I never thought we could be treated this way. How can I look at Duke the same way?"

How can anyone?

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