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COLLEGES; A Team's Troubles Shock Few At Duke

By WARREN ST. JOHN AND JOE DRAPE
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It was supposed to be Duke's year. The men's lacrosse team lost to Johns Hopkins by a goal in the national championship game last year. The Blue Devils returned most of their starters, including every member of their high-scoring attack unit. Mike Pressler, the coach for the past 15 seasons, was also back. Duke was a preseason favorite to win the national title.

Instead, the Blue Devils' season has been suspended indefinitely after a black woman from a nearby college who was hired by team members to dance at an off-campus party on March 13 said she was derided with racial epithets and sexually assaulted by three white players. Team members have admitted to underage drinking at the party and to hiring the dancers, but they denied the woman's allegations of sexual assault.

The police collected DNA samples from 46 of the team's 47 members; no charges have been filed. Tests on the DNA samples are expected to be completed early next week.

It is not clear what happened in the house on North Buchanan Boulevard on the first night of spring break, and the police are continuing their investigation. But students, professors and members of the Duke community said they were not surprised to hear that trouble had found the lacrosse team, a clubby, hard-partying outfit with roots in the elite prep schools of the Northeast.

Their defenders said that because of their backgrounds and high profile on campus, lacrosse players at Duke were targets, and are now being made to answer for a host of complex social issues that have little to do with the team.

But others say lacrosse players have operated with a sense of entitlement that stood out at the \$43,000-a-year university, and surely brought the trouble on themselves.

"A lot of people are saying, 'That's awful, but not a complete shock,' " said Mike Van Pelt, the sports editor of The Chronicle, Duke's student newspaper. "They go out a lot, drink a lot. Rowdy party behavior is not uncharacteristic."

Since the incident in the early hours of March 14, some of that rowdy behavior has come to light. The News and Observer of Raleigh, N.C., citing documents from Durham County Court records, reported this week that 15 of the lacrosse team's 47 members had been cited in the past for misdemeanors like underage drinking and open-container violations.

No one disputes that underage drinking took place at the players' party, or that exotic dancers were hired to perform, conduct the team captains apologized for on a Duke sports Web site.

But at Shooters Saloon, a bar where young women dance in a cage above the dance floor, Kenny Morrison, a junior from Kentucky, said the lacrosse players were being treated unfairly.

"The media has been used as a weapon against these guys," said Morrison, who said he was friends with several of the team members. "I understand it because there are so many dynamics involved, like race, sex, affluence and athletics. It's like every problem we've ever had is put on top of those guys."

At Duke, a university in the South with many students from the North, lacrosse is as much a social pursuit as an athletic one. Though basketball is the most popular sport, students tailgate at lacrosse matches and players are generally recognized on campus, Van Pelt said, and even revered for their athleticism.

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Peter H. Wood, a history professor who played lacrosse at Harvard and was captain of the team at Oxford, said that lacrosse players on campus stood out for their aggression, which he said was in some ways endemic to the game they played. Lacrosse was invented by Native Americans, who called it the little brother of war and played it violently, town against town, with hundreds on the field at a time. It was popularized in 20th century in the prep schools of the Northeast.

"The football players here are often rural white boys with baseball caps or hard-working black students who are proud to be at Duke," Wood said.

"Basketball players are held at a higher level and are more tightly controlled. Too often, there seems to be a surliness about some lacrosse players' individual demeanor. They seem hostile, and there is this group mentality."

The team members and Pressler, the coach, have not spoken publicly about the incident or anything that has happened since.

Fraternities once attracted many lacrosse players at Duke, and they connected through their sport and their similar socio-economic backgrounds. In recent years, though, the team has banded together outside the fraternity system. Students at Duke are required to live on campus for their first three years; only seniors may live off campus. Several students said that the house where the party was held had served as a de facto fraternity house for the team.

The players are also regulars at Charlie's Pub & Grille, a sports bar near campus, where patrons seemed sympathetic to the players and expressed dismay with how they had been portrayed in the news media.

"It's like they've already been convicted," said Matt Myers, a contractor. "If they're guilty, full extent of the law. But if they're not, don't ruin their lives."

Last Saturday, as protests were being held around campus, including a candlelight vigil at the captains' house, Jill Hopman said she saw about 20 team members at Charlie's. Hopman, who graduated from Duke last year and is a law student at the University of North Carolina, said the players were drinking and breaking into chants of "Duke lacrosse." She said she was nauseated by the display and wrote an opinion piece for The Chronicle.

"It was just sitting there knowing that a candlelight vigil was held at their house, while they are slamming down the shots on the bar," Hopman said Friday.

"I don't know if they are guilty or not. I'm all for due process. But I love Duke, and they were under a microscope and were representing us. Forget all the issues about race and affluence and our relationship with the town. The one thing we all have in common is Duke."

Employees at Charlie's would not comment on whether the players were at the bar last Saturday.

Wood, who teaches Native American history, said that over the years he had taught many lacrosse players who were interested in learning about the culture behind their sport. He said that in his experience, the players had become haughtier in recent years, though he could not say why. He said it frustrated him because he remained passionate about the sport.

"It's gotten noticeably worse in the last four or five years," he said of the players' attitudes. "They've gotten more aggressive."

Wood said the athletic department was partly to blame. Two years ago, before the Blue Devils were to play the perennial power Virginia, several players told him that they were going to miss a Friday morning class. They had played poorly the game before, and Pressler had scheduled an extra practice.

Wood said he told the players that he could not excuse their absence and contacted the athletic department to object. Still, they skipped the class.

"To me, that is beyond the pale," said Wood, who has taught at Duke for more than 30 years. "You don't do that at Duke."

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