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## Lacrosse culture crisis: Play hard, party hard

**insider**



By **Greg Garber**  
ESPN.com  
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A year after graduating from Dartmouth College, Andrew Goldstein remains understandably proud of his accomplishments as an All-American goalie for the lacrosse team. Recently, Goldstein discovered that not everyone cherishes the sport as much as he does.

Goldstein, wearing a Dartmouth lacrosse T-shirt, was walking along Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco when a stranger approached him and stridently asked, "You're still willing to wear that shirt in public?"

Taken aback, Goldstein said he believes that the decisions of a few do not represent an entire sport.

"What happened at Duke has reinforced how people view lacrosse players as the elite," says Goldstein, who will play Major League Lacrosse this summer for the Long Island Lizards. "It's completely unfair to pin all these things on the sport."

Yet, setting aside for a moment the allegation of rape at a team lacrosse party just off campus in Durham, N.C., on March 13, critics continue to suggest that the self-acknowledged behavior of the Duke athletes fits with the culture of lacrosse. And more than a dozen ESPN.com interviews with those involved in the game at the college level indicate that the general party atmosphere that surrounded the Duke team is consistent with that generally found in the sport.



AP Photo/Miles Kennedy

**A year ago, Johns Hopkins beat Duke and celebrated a national lacrosse championship.**

The infamous party 10 weeks ago spawned three arrests on charges of rape, as well as allegations of racism and the perception of a program out of control. The Duke team that lost to Johns Hopkins in last year's Division I championship withdrew from competition midway through the season, and its status for next year remains uncertain. In the wake of the scandal, and only one year after a nine-page valentine to the sport appeared in Sports Illustrated, lacrosse -- heading into the NCAA men's tournament semifinals and finals this weekend in Philadelphia -- is under siege.

"The sport of lacrosse is taking a beating," says Dom Starsia, head coach of the No. 1-ranked, 15-0 Virginia Cavaliers, who will meet Syracuse Saturday in one of two national semifinals at Lincoln Financial Field. "For coaches and administrators, this is our absolute worst nightmare. The college game is such a fragile little animal, anyway. If Duke doesn't bring the team back, I don't know where we're going to be."

Says Yale University lacrosse coach Andy Shay, "That's the prevailing fear among college coaches. When 99 percent of the country's first exposure to lacrosse is this incident, well, first impressions are the most important thing. It's certainly not something that we're all proud of. It's not indicative of the culture, but it's the first thing people are pointing to."

In June, when the national board of U.S. Lacrosse meets in Baltimore, the issue of culture will vault to the top of the discussion agenda. As the current five-year strategic plan designed to elevate lacrosse into the mainstream -- which, arguably, has happened -- comes to a close, members will work to craft a new course of action that will reposition the sport. Before the Duke incident occurred, the organization committed \$4.5 million to programs that focus on character and the sport's Native American roots.

"As in any tragedy, these circumstances will certainly be a catalyst for even

### LACROSSE SCANDAL AT DUKE

An alleged sexual assault involving the Duke University men's lacrosse team has sparked controversy among students, the school's administration and the Durham community.



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greater reflection on the sport's healthy development," says Steve Stenersen, U.S. Lacrosse's executive director. "I feel that the depiction of lacrosse in such a narrow way in the media as solely an elite, exclusive sport is not only inaccurate but almost irresponsible.

"Without dismissing the circumstances in Durham, it's our goal to more accurately depict where the sport is today."

After the story broke in Durham, it was reported that about one-third of Duke's men's lacrosse team -- 15 players -- had faced prior charges that included underage alcohol

possession, creating a disturbance and public urination. Well before the March party, the university, hearing a stream of complaints from neighbors, purchased the house at 610 Buchanan Blvd., which had been leased for the 2005-06 academic year by three lacrosse players. Later, one of three players charged with the rape, 19-year-old Collin Finnerty, was ordered to stand trial for a previous assault charge. Finnerty and two friends allegedly punched a man in a Washington, D.C., suburb after the man had told them, according to court documents, to "stop calling him gay and other derogatory names." Before he was charged in the Duke incident, the assault charge was to have been dismissed once Finnerty completed 25 hours of community service.

"Drawing the line at sexual assault, I've seen stuff like this with our team and other teams at my school," said one Ivy League lacrosse player who, fearing the wrath of his coach, asked for anonymity. "The problem is, when alcohol becomes involved -- and it always does in college -- it impairs judgment.

"You get 40 juiced guys and two girls, and it's a time bomb."

Shay, the Yale coach, said the Duke story prompted many far-ranging discussions among coaches and players.

Could it have happened at his school? Shea paused, and sighed.

"Yes," he said. "It could have happened to any of us. It's scary. What we know has happened, it could have happened on any college campus, Division I, II or III. It just so happened to happen at a phenomenal academic institution, the ivory tower."

### The culture

On the day Duke coach Mike Pressler resigned, university president Richard Brodhead announced the formation of five committees to investigate different facets of the scandal. Law professor James Coleman chaired a seven-member committee looking into the history of the lacrosse team's behavior. Less than a month later, on May 1, the report was made public.

Brodhead summarized the 17-page report in two sentences: "The Coleman committee's report tells of a close-knit team that did well academically and excelled athletically but that was irresponsible in its repeated abuse of alcohol. The committee did not, however, find a pattern of racist behavior or sexual abuse."

A detailed chronology of the disciplinary record of the lacrosse team revealed that:

- There were 56 lacrosse players involved in 36 separate incidents over the past three academic years, most of them involving alcohol.
- While lacrosse players comprise .75 percent of the Duke undergraduate population of 6,244, they were responsible for 33 percent of the open container cases, 25 percent of the disorderly conduct cases and 21 percent of the alcohol-unsafe behavior cases.
- In the 2004-05 academic year, the Office of Judicial Affairs handled 97 non-academic misconduct cases, and 11 of them (just over 11 percent) involved lacrosse players.

According to the report, sophomores were largely responsible for lacrosse's poor behavior record; and by all measures, the disciplinary record of the team was noticeably worse than any other Duke team. Only two members of the school's soccer team and four baseball players were arrested in the same three-year span. But the nature of the incidents, the report noted, was not significantly different.

"Bad alcohol-related behavior seems to be reinforced rather than mitigated by the group," the report stated. "Responsible senior leadership seems to have been too often missing.

"The negative aspects of lacrosse cohesion is a serious problem that requires resolution."

Athletic director Joe Alleva warned Pressler last year that the players were

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**Coach Mike Pressler took the Blue Devils to the title game last year, but resigned in the wake of this spring's scandal.**

out of control, that his team was "under the microscope" and that he needed "to get them in line."

The report concluded, "Although the pattern of misconduct in recent years by the lacrosse team is alarming, the evidence reviewed ... does not warrant suspension of the sport."

More than half of the players, coaches and administrators interviewed for this story used the phrase "play hard, party hard" to describe the culture of college lacrosse.

"Fearless or reckless," Starsia says. "Yes, those are words that can both apply. They can be guilty of sowing wild oats a bit in college -- that may be accurate. Lax [lacrosse] has always had a play-hard, party-hard description.

"I've always felt like lax guys are the most engaging guys in the whole world. Maybe they drink too much on weekends, but you can slap them around on Mondays -- they will listen to you."

According to the Harvard School of Public Health's highly regarded college alcohol survey, two of the greatest predictors of heavy drinking are participation in fraternities or sororities and intercollegiate athletics.

The 1999 study, which defined binge drinking as five or more drinks consumed in a row at least once in a two-week period, found that 29 percent of athletes were frequent binge drinkers, compared to 22 percent of non-athletes. Frequent binge drinkers, according to the study, are up to five times more likely to experience a range of problems, including antisocial behavior.



AP Photo/Sara D. Davis

**Did Duke's Collin Finnerty, right, appearing in court with his father, step over the behavior line?**

Goldstein argues that lacrosse is no different from hockey or football -- or even biochemistry.

"After a three-hour exam, a bunch of us in my fraternity were involved in drinking games. ... They felt the same pressure building up and wanted to let it out," he said.

College athletics, with its driven and aggressive personalities, can be a difficult arena. More than a dozen teams recently have come under scrutiny for alleged hazing incidents after BadJocks.com posted pictures on its Web site. The Northwestern University women's soccer team was suspended indefinitely earlier this month. The 2004 University of California at Santa Barbara women's lacrosse team, the 2006 Catholic University women's lacrosse team and the 2003 and 2004 Michigan men's lacrosse teams also had alleged hazing incidents exposed by BadJocks.com. A recent Alfred University survey found that 80 percent of college athletes have been hazed.

While the numbers support the general impression that many college students abuse alcohol, the anonymous Ivy League player said that a serious commitment to Division I athletics, coupled with a challenging academic workload, creates enormous pressure.

"From my experience, the play-hard, party-hard label is true," he says. "But the whole deal is hard work. We're not taking Golf 101 at Florida State. You get up at 9 in the morning and go lift, eat breakfast, go watch film, go to class all day, practice for three hours, get dinner, do your homework and try to get to bed at a decent hour.

"In college, you're under constant pressure to hold your spot -- on the lacrosse team and academically, too. And after a big win on Saturday, you're ready to blow off some steam. You're there with your teammates, and everyone wants to be part of the fun."

Says Shay, "Personally, we're trying to recruit away from those party-hard players. You see it at some of the great tournaments in Lake Placid [N.Y.] or Ocean City [Md.]. College kids and post-college kids get together to relive old times. It's not just about the games, but the time spent in bars, too. That certainly doesn't help [in] calming the culture down.

"I don't know if you do."

### The empirical evidence

In the early 1990s, Northeastern University's Center for the Study of Sport in Society was an exciting place to be for those curious to learn about sports' place in the larger arena of life. Under the direction of Richard Lapchick, researchers Jeff Benedict and Todd Crosset examined the relationship between athletes and sexual assault.

From 1991-93, they reviewed 107 cases of sexual assault reported at 30 Division I schools. They discovered that athletes made up 3.3 percent of the student population, but accounted for 19 percent of the assaults and 35 percent of the domestic violence incidents.

While the study wasn't definitive -- the sample





was too small -- it is one of the few examples of scholarship available on the subject.

"Athletes are represented disproportionately. That was obvious," says Benedict, a lawyer and author of "[Public Heroes, Private Felons: Athletes and Crimes Against Women](#)." "It



**Dartmouth grad Andrew Goldstein doesn't want the Duke situation to tarnish the sport.**

was published in academic journals. We didn't go too far out on a limb to make it more than it was."

Today, Crosset is an associate professor in the University of Massachusetts' Department of Sports Management.

"I think what the Duke case points out, from the evidence we have, is the culture of the team. That's the biggest lesson we can pull out of all this research," Crosset says. "If there is peer support, you're more likely to [behave badly]. If someone feels comfortable shouting [racist and sexually charged remarks] at a stripper, that's a problem. If hatred on that level becomes fun for folks, they're more likely to engage in it."

Lapchick, now the director of the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport at the University of Central Florida as well as a regular commentator on issues of diversity in sport for ESPN.com, has studied the behavior of athletes for years.

"There is a mentality among athletes that 'We can get away with this, that no one is going to challenge us because we are student-athletes,'" Lapchick once said in response to the Benedict-Crosset study.

According to Lapchick, in recent years, there have been roughly 100 sexual assault cases each year involving college and professional athletes.

"Every week, on average, we read about two cases in the media, and that builds momentum in people's minds," Lapchick says. "But in a country where 3 million women are battered every year and there are some 800,000 rapes, even if you assume the athletes' incidents are underreported, even at 10 to 1, it's still a small number, relatively speaking.

"It's the phenomenon of men in America that has created this culture of license and feeling that somehow they can do things to women that are illegal and immoral. But in terms of athletes and this license, I would say there is not a direct correlation."

Stenersen, who played midfield on two national championship teams for North Carolina, says he is not aware of any empirical data that suggests lacrosse players are any more socially active or irresponsible than other athletes. Further, he rejects the notion that the social attitudes surrounding Duke lacrosse were consistent with other lacrosse programs.

"I don't know that," Stenersen says. "I don't think we should assume that. One culture does not define college men's lacrosse. I believe, honestly, that each program is different. There's a big difference between the lacrosse culture at Duke and what the overall culture is."

One recent study, published this year, was authored by Gordon B. Forbes, Alexis H. Pakalka and Kay B. White of Millikin University in Decatur, Ill., and Leah E. Adams-Curtis of Illinois Central College. The authors researched self-reported dating aggression and sexual coercion cases in 147 college men.

**"I never thought this sport was reckless or crazy. I think people are just grasping at things to throw at the sport. When the game is played the right way, it's pure and a pretty awesome spectacle."**

— Steve Koudelka, head coach at Lynchburg College

The conclusion: Men who participated in aggressive high school sports, as compared to other men, engaged in more physical and psychological aggression and sexual coercion toward their dating partners, were more accepting of violence, had more sexist attitudes and hostility toward women, were more accepting of rape myths and were less tolerant of homosexuality.

Derek Kreager of the Department of Sociology at the University of Washington notes in "Unnecessary Roughness? School Sports, Peer Networks and Male Adolescent Violence" that " ... masculinized sports are socially sanctioned stepping stones toward privilege and power, sites where coaches, peers and parents foster aggression as a means of achieving team success while simultaneously increasing the likelihood of off-the-field violence."

Crosset, citing the previous alcohol-related offenses of the Duke lacrosse players, says accountability is an important factor in the equation.

"There is an inherent hypocrisy in terms of meting out justice," Crosset says. "We have a young man [Finnerty] who has already been let off by a judge. It's interesting that he was allowed to play. Athletes should be responsible for their actions in a number of spheres."

Steve Koudelka, the men's lacrosse coach at Lynchburg College, a program ranked in the top 10 in Division III, said he doesn't understand the

perceived connection between his sport and off-the-field violence.

"I never thought this sport was reckless or crazy," Koudelka says. "I think people are just grasping at things to throw at the sport. When the game is played the right way, it's pure and a pretty awesome spectacle."

### A teachable moment

Lacrosse has produced many positive numbers, too.

According to U.S. Lacrosse's 2005 participation survey, there are more than 200,000 kids ages 15 and under playing the sport in America -- that's more than double the number in 2000. Overall, the sport has enjoyed 10 percent growth each year for the past decade, making it the fastest-growing sport in that time period.

Last year's Division I final between Johns Hopkins and Duke drew 44,920 spectators at Lincoln Financial Field, marking the second-largest crowd (to the Division I men's basketball title game) among all NCAA championships.

According to the NCAA, lacrosse registered the highest graduation success rate among all Division I intercollegiate sports: 89 percent for men and 94 percent for women.

The Duke lacrosse team, according to the school's internal report, graduated 100 percent of its players over the last five years. In 2005, 27 team members made the Atlantic Coast Conference's academic honor roll, more than any other ACC lacrosse team.

At the highest levels, college lacrosse is still dominated by players from privileged backgrounds. Reade Seligmann and Finnerty, two of the Duke players charged with rape, graduated from Delbarton School in Morristown, N.J., and Chaminade High School on Long Island, respectively; and both grew up in million-dollar homes. On May 15, a third player, co-captain David Evans, was charged with the same three offenses as his Duke teammates.



AP Photo/Gerry Broome

**Just after his arrest, Duke's David Evans stood up for himself and for his teammates.**

"I am innocent. Reade Seligmann is innocent. Collin Finnerty is innocent," Evans said outside the court house after his arrest. "Every member of the Duke University lacrosse team is innocent. You have all been told some fantastic lies and I look forward to seeing them unravel in the weeks to come."

On the Duke roster, there are five graduates each from Delbarton and from Landon School in Bethesda, Md., prestigious private schools. Other players attended similar institutions such as Georgetown Prep, Durham Academy and Potomac School.

Starsia was a public high school player before he matriculated to Brown University. He vehemently rejects the portrait of privilege painted in the media.

"That is a past-tense issue for our sport," says Starsia, whose Cavaliers won the national title in 1999 and 2003. "Those are tired generalizations that are easy to use because they serve the argument people are trying to make: rich versus poor, men versus women. More and more athletes are coming from the public schools."

The rising number of youths playing the game and the swift spread of lacrosse to the country's West and South regions suggests that this trend will continue. There is a general feeling that the Duke scandal will have little effect on the game's growth.

"I think it's hurt the perception of lacrosse," says Rich Heritage, president of the Connecticut-New York Youth Lacrosse Association. "But I don't know that it impacts the sport too dramatically at the youth level."

For Koudelka, the episode brings one positive aspect to the fore: It is, as college faculty like to say, a teachable moment.

"Every coach in America has sat down with his kids and talked about this," Koudelka says. "I think compared to the time I was in school -- I graduated from college in 1993 -- there's a lot more education with these student-athletes. This is definitely worthy of talking about and using it as an educational tool."

"A huge lesson that comes out of this for all college athletes is that when you take on responsibility and privilege, what you do reflects on all of the involved institutions, in this case both Duke and lacrosse," says A. Craig Brown, vice chair of the U.S. Lacrosse executive committee. "Kids need to take more responsibility for the consequences of bad behavior. I'm sure none of them thought whatever they did that Monday night would have this effect. It's a recipe for disaster."

*Greg Garber is a senior writer for ESPN.com.*



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