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Duke lacrosse bracing its way

The once-disbanded Blue Devils team is now No. 1, and rape charges have been dropped, but underlying resentment remains. McFadyen admits mistake, tells of 'American Psycho' reference.

By David Wharton, Times Staff Writer

SAN DIEGO — The Duke lacrosse players clamber off their bus, upbeat, joking, spilling into the chilly evening for a late practice.

Television crews record their arrival, cameras tracking each shoe that gets laced, each helmet strapped on. Only a few players notice — the constant scrutiny feels normal.

"As normal as it's going to get," senior Casey Carroll said. "There's always that extra aura surrounding our games."

Even in Southern California, where lacrosse seems as foreign as an ice storm, where four teams have come for a weekend tournament, Duke expects to be watched.

The players have been big news since last spring, when an exotic dancer they hired for a party claimed she was brutally raped.

With national media characterizing the incident as proof that college sports had spun out of control, the team was disbanded at midseason and the coach resigned. In Durham, N.C., tensions flared between the elite university and its less-affluent surrounding community.

"We had to stick together," senior Matt Danowski said. "It was tough."

Recent developments have eased the pressure, the alleged victim changing her story and the local district attorney removing himself amid allegations of unethical behavior. Rape charges against three team members have been dropped as state officials review the case.

But the players who got off the bus in San Diego, and their new coach, are still seeking solid ground.

"We're trying to be very pragmatic about it," said John Danowski — Matt's father — brought in from Hofstra to lead the program. "One day at a time."

Duke has started 4-0 and is ranked No. 1 for the first time in school history. The Blue Devils play Loyola (Md.) tonight in the First 4 Invitational at the University of San Diego.

Meanwhile, back home, the criminal case proceeds with more plot twists than a bad TV drama.

Soon after the alleged victim came forward, Durham County Dist. Atty. Mike Nifong went on the attack, referencing the team's previous legal brushes, branding the players as "hooligans."

Saying he was convinced a rape had occurred, Nifong charged Reade Seligmann, Collin Finnerty and David Evans with that crime as well as sexual offense and kidnapping.

But as months passed, the players maintaining innocence, numerous revelations cast doubt on the prosecution's case.

The alleged victim offered differing accounts of key events that night. Forty-six players submitted

DNA samples but none matched genetic material found on her body and underwear.

In December, Nifong dropped the rape charges. The next month, he turned the case over to state prosecutors.

By that time, the North Carolina state bar had leveled charges against him for, among other things, making inflammatory statements and withholding key evidence from defense attorneys.

State prosecutors have yet to announce if they will proceed with the remaining criminal charges

A year ago, John Danowski was like any other parent of a Duke lacrosse player, anguishing from afar.

"Listen, you can watch your child have a bad day; they can miss a shot or lose a game," he said. "For people to question their character, that was extremely painful."

When Duke reinstated the program in June, Danowski accepted the job because he believed it would be unlike anything in his 25 years of coaching.

To his surprise, every player — save for those charged — showed up, as did three of seven freshman recruits. The first team meeting was marked by excitement but also a palpable tension.

"The temptation is always there for us to try and prove ourselves on every play, in every game," Matt Danowski said.

So John Danowski has repeated a simple message: *Just play*. While his players made a pact — no parties, no drunken nights — the coach watched over them like a father.

"We kid around about hugging," Danowski recalled. "I'd say, 'Come over here. Gimme a hug.' "

Tall, with a straightforward manner, Ryan McFadyen does not come across as an emblem for the ills of college sports.

But shortly after the infamous party, he sent an e-mail to teammates suggesting they hire more strippers, kill them and skin them. Leaked to the national media, it was the final straw prompting coach Mike Pressler's resignation and the cancellation of the season.

"Obviously I made a mistake," McFadyen now says. "A juvenile thing to do."

Speaking publicly for the first time, the junior described the e-mail as a dark joke referencing a movie, "American Psycho," he and his teammates had seen.

It was also the worst thing to write at the worst possible moment.

"An experience I would not wish on anyone," he said. "It's something you look back on and say I hope it made me a better person, helped me mature at a time when I needed to."

The Duke players, who avoided interviews at first, have made a point of speaking to reporters the last few weeks. How else to show who they are?

But McFadyen has hung back, reticent.

"I'm a kid and obviously I had feelings of 'Why me?' " he said. "But you have to realize you made a mistake and take responsibility for your actions."

Last spring, City Councilman Eugene Brown spoke out about the so-called "lacrosse house," a tatty rental near school where the party took place. He described a neighborhood grown weary of loud parties and players urinating in adjacent yards.

Now, he says, public opinion has swung.

"I think most people are realizing that there's not much of a case," Brown said. "The focus has shifted more on the district attorney and how he screwed up."

An unusually large crowd of 6,485 attended Duke's season opener last month, evidence of growing support for the team, Brown and others said. Still, resentment persists.

Although few students believe the charges against the three players, "there are very divided opinions" on the campus, said Elliott Wolf, the student government president.

In the incident's aftermath, university President Richard H. Brodhead formed several committees, one of which recently submitted the "Campus Culture Initiative," calling for tougher admissions standards for athletes, an effort to curb drinking on campus and a mandatory course on racial and class differences in the United States.

"There are people who feel the underlying issues are just as pertinent now as they were a year ago," Wolf said.

Before the season, Sue Pressler — the former coach's wife — addressed the team, telling them it was time to get the monkey off their backs. The talk helped, but the past year is not so easily dismissed.

At a recent road game against Maryland, fans heckled the bench and flashed a sign: "No means no." With three teammates still facing prosecution, the players wear blue wristbands bearing the inscription: "Innocent!"

"We're always going to wonder how people see us," Matt Danowski said.

John Danowski refuses to think in terms of "always." The coach did not put credence in early, negative reports; nor does he believe the prosecution's recent stumbles have settled the matter.

"There was never any middle ground in this," he said. "Let's just wait and find out the facts."

For now, Danowski asks his players to focus on something more certain, something they can trust.

The simple act of lacing on shoes. Strapping on helmets. Playing a game they love.