Duke Lacrosse: Ethical Reflections

Written by Rusty Wright

The Duke lacrosse story has multiple ingredients for explosive media coverage: sex, race, politics, criminal charges, sports, class, a prestigious institution the list goes on.

Like many Duke alumni, I have personal convictions about the scandal. My Duke experience was and remains positive. So I'm biased. But I'm also realistic. Houston, we have a problem.

As much of the civilized world knows, a hired African-American stripper alleged some white players raped her at a lacrosse party. The accuser attended nearby North Carolina Central University. The accused maintain their innocence. The lacrosse coach resigned. Duke cancelled the season.

During basketball season, it was often "All Duke, all the time" on America's sports pages. Through much of the Spring, it became "All Duke, all the time" on the front pages.

Nowadays at Duke, quips one professor, historical calendars are not reckoned "BC" and "AD" but "BLC" and "ALC." "Before the Lacrosse Crisis" and "After the Lacrosse Crisis."

I'm glad Duke President Richard Broadhead emphasizes the presumption of innocence in criminal law. Travels in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have exposed me to chilling stories about presuming guilt.

At an April reunion, I found the campus buzzing with controversy. Some students conveyed deep personal pain about race and gender issues. At their national tournament in May, Duke women lacrosse players wore wristbands and headbands supporting the men's team.

Broadhead commissioned an ongoing Campus Culture Initiative emphasizing responsibility and respect. In my view, he's handled a difficult situation with exceptional grace, dignity, and transparency.

What ethical lessons might come from this episode? Of course, if rape occurred, punishment should ensue.

But setting aside the rape allegations, what about the ethics of hiring a stripper? What principles should determine how we act in life?

When I was an undergraduate, a friend from the fraternity next door excitedly told me the dean had just given his fraternity permission to host a topless dancer at their Saturday night party in university housing.

Fast forward to 2006. On one television program, a woman argued that her own stripping had paid her college bills, and besides, it allowed her to exercise power over men.

Suppose you were a Duke student. Should you host or attend such a party? Hiring a stripper broke no laws. Both the players and the young woman could claim benefit. What's the harm?

A pragmatist might maintain, "In retrospect, it was more trouble than it was worth." A libertarian might assert, "Stripping's OK, if no one gets hurt." Some absolutists might say, "No. Never." Feminists could argue either side. Stripping exploits women as sex objects, a negative cultural influence. Yet a woman needs to earn a living.

Duke ethicist Elizabeth Kiss, soon to become Agnes Scott College president, recommends a starting point for answering the classic question, "How should I act?" She notes that the "Golden Rule" appears in various forms in different faith traditions.

Good point. Jesus said, “In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you.”

The Jewish Talmud says, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor.”

Muhammad said, “Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself.”

On Duke’s main quadrangle sits a plaque containing the first article of the university’s bylaws. The statement promotes truth, scholarship, freedom, tolerance, and service. It begins as follows:

“The aims of Duke University are to assert a faith in the eternal union of knowledge and religion set forth in the teachings and character of Jesus Christ, the Son of God….”

Hmmm. An ethical guideline worth considering?

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Athlete Ranks New Life

Greater Than Olympic Gold

Suppose you had a chance to win a medal at the Athens Olympics. Could anything make you turn it down?

Olympic success can bring fame, lifetime honor and lucrative endorsement contracts. Olympic games usually bring many inspiring stories of victory through determination and achievement despite adversity. Stars are born and careers receive quantum boosts.

Consider British hurdler Tasha Danvers-Smith. She has been ranked sixth in the world in her event. Her Olympic prospects looked bright.

But her ticket to the Athens track was never punched. It wasn't injury or defeat that kept her from competing in the games. It was her personal choice.

Tasha Danvers married her coach, Darrell Smith, in November 2003. In early 2004, she was in excellent physical shape and keenly focused on her training. Then, as she told the Telegraph newspaper, she felt tired all the time, feeling flat for no reason.

In the spring, a home pregnancy test showed positive and she learned she was nine weeks pregnant. "I was in shock, reports Danvers-Smith. I only took the test because I wanted to stop myself worrying about it. Not for one minute did I think it would be positive. The couple had not planned to start a family until after the Olympics.

Having a baby in December would eliminate her chances of competing in Athens in August. It would increase their expenses and mean lean times. They did not own a home and were living with her husband's parents. She – through her athletic competition – was the main source of income.

As she put it, When my body is my business, then if my body is not functioning, there is no business.

Feeling devastated, the couple considered an abortion. It would seem a simple solution to an inconvenient problem, a comparatively easy way to eliminate an obstacle to the success and recognition she sought.

The thought [of an abortion] did cross our minds as an option," recalls Danvers-Smith. But this line from the Scriptures kept coming into my head: 'For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?

She tried to convince herself that she should terminate her pregnancy but struggled through her tears with an alternative she could not accept: "For me, the whole wide world was the Olympics. At the same time, I felt I would be losing my soul. It just wouldn't fit well. It would be a forced decision . . . something that wasn't going to make me happy at all.

Aiming now for the 2008 games, she seems happy with her choice and philosophical about her mixed metaphor situation: Life throws you curve balls and you just have to roll with the punches."

Abortion is, of course, one of today's most controversial issues. But regardless of one's views on this emotionally explosive topic, it seems appropriate to admire the dedication of a woman who wrestled with an agonizing decision and made her choice to bear her child and postpone possible future glory and fortune.

Regardless of what success eventually comes her way, might that choice become Danvers-Smith's lifetime golden moment?

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