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Colorado's Football Scandal: Can *Gatsby* Help?

by Rushworth M. Kidder

"They were careless people, Tom and Daisy -- they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness ... and let other people clean up the mess they had made...."

I was reminded of those words, from the end of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby,* by last week's news about the University of Colorado football team. More on *Gatsby* in a moment. First, the details.

After years of rumors about sexual assaults by players and about alcohol and sex being used as recruiting tools, the scandal broke into the open following an interview with a former place-kicker, Katie Hnida. She told **Sports Illustrated** that she had been raped by a teammate while playing for Colorado. When head coach Gary Barnett seemed to imply in a press conference that Hnida had it coming -- because her teammates didn't respect her, since "she was not only a girl, she was terrible" -- University President Elizabeth Hoffman put him on paid leave and opened an investigation.

She was right to do so. But the investigation needs to go beyond allegations of rape that six other women also have leveled at Colorado football players. It must ask why these issues persist.

- Is there, at Colorado and elsewhere, an athletes' subculture that fosters one set of morals for football players and another for everyone else?
- Do these schools' recruiting methods instill a cavalier disrespect for women, setting teamwide standards for treating them as mere objects?
- Has today's high-dollar, high-swagger college athletics outlived any logical connection to the purposes of higher education, and should amateur sports find other institutional sponsors?

These are large questions. Universities exude prestige and lend it to whatever they support, including big-time sports. If the behavior of some students is widely known to be morally repugnant -- and if universities condone that behavior by turning a blind eye -- they graduate into society individuals with serious moral deficiencies. They also risk equating, in the public's mind, the terms "major university" and "institutional hypocrisy."

But there's another tragedy here, involving the players themselves. What's to become of them? For that, go back to *Gatsby*. Sports provides a significant theme for this 1925 novel. Among Fitzgerald's smaller characters is the fictional Meyer Wolfsheim, whom Gatsby describes as "the man who fixed the World Series back in 1919." Then there's Tom Buchanan himself, "one of the most powerful ends that ever played football at New Haven" and "a national figure in a way." Though he is also "enormously wealthy" -- and married to the fascinating and beautiful Daisy, with whom Gatsby is hopelessly infatuated -- Tom is "one of those men who reach such an acute limited excellence at twenty-one that everything afterward savors of anticlimax." Restless, demanding, and brutish, he is having an affair with Myrtle, wife of a local Long Island garage owner. When she annoys him, he simply reaches out and breaks her nose with "a short deft

movement" of his open hand. By the end of the book, he and Daisy, careless as ever, have been instrumental in causing the deaths of Myrtle and her husband, as well as of Gatsby himself.

Sex, violence, ego, moral vacuity, unfulfilled lives: For Fitzgerald, sports was part of this mix. That's not to say the formula is universal: Most college athletes escape that mold. But there's just enough truth in Fitzgerald's characterizations to make us uncomfortable -- particularly today and particularly at the professional level. Los Angeles Lakers basketball star Kobe Bryant is currently on trial for sexual assault in, coincidentally, Colorado. In addition, a number of athletes appear to have used an illegal steroid, THG, created by a California laboratory indicted earlier this month by the U.S. Department of Justice. And former slugger and Cincinnati Reds coach Pete Rose has admitted to gambling on baseball, an offense considered particularly heinous ever since eight teammates at the Chicago White Sox conspired to throw the 1919 World Series (in fact, as well as in Fitzgerald's novel) to the Cincinnati Reds.

The remarkable nature of good fiction is that it goes beneath the facts to get at timeless issues of character and ethics. The remarkable nature of good reporting is that it keeps turning up uncanny examples of these issues. If *Gatsby* and the current news tell us anything about the Tom Buchanans of this world, it is, "Don't go there. Don't become that kind of person. And don't be the kind of school that creates more of them." Perhaps the University of Colorado's well-regarded English department does, after all, have something to say to its scandal-drenched football program.