

Shotgun Offense

Who wins when football mania and heartland values collide?
The Grizzlies, of course.

By Jim Pittaway

BIG CHANGES ARE AFOOT in Grizzly country. The reintroduction of predators into our wilderness has reached a point where hunting season is no longer a one-way street. Hunters win most of the time, but the wildlife gets in more licks every year.

As goes the wilderness, so goes society up here. In a parallel of sublime but sad irony, the “Grizzlies” of the University of Montana and the “Bobcats” of Montana State are systematically introducing predatory humans into civil society—with eerily similar results. The difference is that the viciousness of bears and mountain cats is part of our heritage. The feral ferocity of these new human predators is something against which we have no defense.

This truth became clear when the bus bringing the ever victorious Montana Grizzlies football team back to Missoula was met by police who took into custody a running back, a defensive end, and a cornerback. Were they dealing pot out of their dorms? Steroids? Was it vandalism? Maybe a he-said-she-said frat party assault? These things happen around colleges. But this was no such crime.

Six automatic-weapon-toting men in ski masks had kicked in the door of a residence, duct taped, tasered, pistol whipped, and tortured the occupants before taking an undisclosed amount of cash and marijuana, trashing the place, and taking off. This was crime by Compton Rules, known as a “rip,” with an

emphasis on numbers, weaponry, brutality, and speed. In this trusting place, where people don’t lock doors and women leave purses in cars, the introduction of Compton Rules criminality promises significant changes to the way we live.

Liberal white guilt and sports mania have come together to create a perfect storm that may sweep away the innocence and overwhelm the bonds of trust and camaraderie that have made Missoula such a wonderful place to live. For this particular crime is hardly the first perpetrated by football players recruited out of a gang-banger culture that is alien to anything around here.

Of the six perpetrators, four have been arrested, along with a seventh, a white wannabe who apparently bought gloves and masks but did not attend the actual festivities. Two others are still at large, including a mysterious black male unknown except for his street name, “Dirty,” which I happen to believe. The other young man, another cornerback, is more familiar to local news watchers.

The fugitive Mr. Freeman came to prominence last summer, when he and another Griz cornerback, Mr. Wilson, were involved in an execution-style murder back home in LA, presumably after both had finished their exams and returned for a hard-earned vacation. At first, local news did not report that a starting cornerback on our lionized football team had been charged with murder. We would probably never have

heard about it had someone in the Missoula PD not blown the athletic department’s attempts to cover this all up after LAPD detectives came looking for Freeman. The gridiron star wasn’t formally charged and evidently stuck around, only to be charged a week later with assault outside a bar. The athletic department could do nothing to keep this incident out of the papers because he had become so well known. Those charges were later dropped after the complainant, perhaps recognizing—as I would—that the cops aren’t very good at getting a net around Mr. Freeman, decided to withdraw the allegation.

There are other reports of sexual assaults, pistol whippings, and armed robberies perpetrated by recruits playing by Compton Rules. The situation is arguably worse at Montana State, where late last year police busted a large and very violent drug cartel virtually run out of the athletic department. At MSU, they have actually had execution-style murders to go along with the home invasions, witness intimidation, beatings, and rapes. Bozeman is a much smaller town, more vulnerable than Missoula, and there is little evidence that the guys missed by the cops there, like Freeman and Dirty here, are not still hanging around.

At least MSU was forced to clean out its athletic department. The football coach and his staff were fired. This was probably because a white assistant

coach was caught running his own drug-dealing enterprise. At any rate, the contrast between MSU's response and what we are getting here is chilling. It's important too, because Missoula is by no means atypical of that more civil and, yes, innocent, heartland of America where the social pathologies of the Megalopolis are yet unknown. Nevertheless, athletic contests are wildly overvalued and foolish ideas have stripped the community of its defenses.

COPS, DA'S, AND JUDGES, NOT TO MENTION NEWSPAPERS AND TELEVISION STATIONS ARE ALL COMPLICIT, BELIEVING WE HAVE AN ALMOST TRANSCENDENT STAKE IN HAVING A WINNING FOOTBALL TEAM.

When I came home in 1994, I was looking forward to Griz games. The team had a brilliant coach, Don Read, who did for Division I-AA football what Bill Walsh had done for the pros: put an unstoppable offense on the field that placed a premium on smarts and skill. This approach gave Read's young men an edge over rivals, who often relied on pure speed and strength. But Griz-mania had an unsettling edge. Fans displayed an unseemly passion, an inappropriate over-identification with their team. This had nothing to do with love of the game or appreciation of athletic contests. (This year, the Griz began their season with five straight home games, most against lower division patsies. Have you, kind reader, ever heard of such a thing?) The spectacle has been great for the local economy but has cost the community its sense of perspective. And in communities, just as in individuals, loss of perspective is a harbinger of disturbing consequences.

My practice as a therapist and my professional grapevine have put me in contact with some of these consequences. It is regrettably common for patients to

show signs of trauma from beatings and sexual assaults they claim have been perpetrated by members of the UM football team. The athletic department's ability to squash the murder story is just an indication of its power. Having a beef with the Griz is an easy way to become unpopular. People find themselves subjected to all kinds of pressure to not make trouble for "student athletes," who are viewed as contributing something vitally, almost metaphysically, important

to this community. Medical and social service people understand that only the most egregious crimes can be pursued against team members. Griz stars get a pass on anything less than homicide, grand theft, or first-degree rape—and if you are going to take action, you'd better take care of your witnesses.

Cops, DA's, and judges, not to mention newspapers and television stations are all complicit, believing we have an almost transcendent stake in having a winning football team. As the steroid era dawned, the idea that it was a civic virtue to protect young men who public-health professionals knew were doping emerged as a serious public-security problem. It wasn't long before downtown Missoula on weekend nights became a dangerous place, especially if you look like a "hippie" or a "queer." We are told that the "gay bashing" problem in the downtown bars worsens year by year, but this has become code for increasingly frequent, brutal, and often fatal assaults that have far more to do with steroid-induced psychosis than bigotry.

The inability of our justice system to

do much about this may be related to the refusal of the police and sheriff departments to acknowledge the steroid problem in law enforcement. The police used to require a pre-employment drug test, but no longer do. City officials say the union won't allow it. If you were a local cop who was regularly expected to subdue buffed young men in the throes of violent psychotic breaks, wouldn't you be tempted to try to level the playing field just a bit? Denial of the steroid problem, which originates in a refusal to face the realities of modern athletics, now extends to the very people we depend on for protection. I doubt this dreadful cycle is at all peculiar to our community. Adding organized groups of heavily armed urbanized criminals to this small-town mix may well be stressing local law enforcement beyond its capacity to function. We are now being forced to find out.

This reckoning began in 2002, when the current Griz coach, Bobby Hauck, was brought in from the staff at the University of Washington. Like his boss in Seattle, the infamous Rick Neuheisel, Hauck is a brassy, loud, win-at-any-cost, scorched-earth type of guy, who quickly demonstrated that Read's complex system had fried the wiring of his brain. After Hauck's inept debut season, the Griz ranks were suddenly filled out with junior college transfers and "student athletes" who had gotten themselves booted out of Division I-A programs. That's how the Compton Rules crowd came to our town and found fresh meat.

We could probably deal with this were it not for the inane responses of our community leaders. Their first line of defense is the big lie. Of course everybody at the university was more shocked than Claude Raines when he discovered they were gambling at Rick's. Yet this line appears to be working with the Griz-maniacs, so why not just brazen out the lie, no matter how

preposterous? We are expected to believe that no one at the athletic department had any idea about the criminal histories and outstanding warrants on these new athletes. How could they? After all, Bobby Hauck worked his tail off so that this town could have a “championship caliber” football program. He supervises more than a 100 athletes. How is he supposed to know what every single one of them is doing at every given moment? And so on.

Then there are the minimizers. My favorite is George Dennison, president of the university and program-builder extraordinaire. As his personal “shock” and “pain” wear off, he comes up with the solution: get rid of the “bad apples,” he brays, but expand the “mentoring programs” to help the offenders “make better choices.” Apparently this educator believes that armed home invasion is a “poor behavioral choice” and mentoring is a suitable treatment plan for psy-

The local media, faced with the most important story since I have been in town, retreated into its customary shell, as it tends to do whenever a story has racial overtones. After the initial arrests and bail hearings and a spate of interviews with shocked people—who are responsible for this but couldn’t possibly have known or done anything—coverage was dropped. The concern shifted to how this mess broke out during rivalry week, with all praying that the players would be able to focus on what they needed to focus on, the Cats game on Saturday. Thank goodness Coach Hauck is strong and wise enough to keep their attention where it belongs.

People with the impiety to reflect on how they could have lived, worked, played, and traveled with automatic-weapon-toting homicidal maniacs without having a clue were not heard from. Nor can we raise the real questions: why,

are people who think having nests of armed psychopaths in our community is less important than having a winning football program. The majority pretend it isn’t really that disturbing—armed home invaders are “bad apples”—or reckon that this goes on everywhere anyway so why pick on the Griz? Many locals are ready to assassinate the character of anyone with the temerity to point out that young men raised by stressed grandmothers and violent video games, indoctrinated by antisocial rap lyrics and morally instructed by street gangs, are not likely to succeed in school or society.

This is a genuine controversy in our community, and those who live in reality and value peace and personal security are likely to lose the argument. To have leadership in higher education not only provide disingenuous and transparent justifications, but target support among the most irrational elements in the community in order to stifle criticism and evade responsibility amounts to nothing less than a betrayal of civilized society. It transcends the political failures so often noted by conservative critics.

“Bread and circuses” is a shopworn cliché, but evidence of this over-identification with sports teams, particularly football teams, is everywhere. We’re told that high-school football is a religion in Texas, and snigger when we hear of cheerleader moms murdering rivals. This “fantasy league” stuff pushed by all the networks must be pretty potent; they sure give it airtime. Does it make people feel like they’re actual participants, thus blurring the line between reality and fantasy even further? I can’t say that I’m entertained. I’ve found this football season, interesting as it has been, a somewhat rancid dish. ■

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chopaths. He sets a new standard for academic fools attempting to parse the real world. Or, perhaps, cynicism has gotten the better of him: he knows that, in the context of Griz-mania, the rubes will swallow just about anything as long as we beat the Cats. The chairlady of the Board of Regents takes the strawman route, bleating her great distress that the “bad apples” are sullyng the reputation of “the hundreds of fine student athletes in our system.” No one in the university system has seen fit to acknowledge the damage they have done to this community or the cavalier way they have jeopardized civil peace by introducing predators into our midst.

how, and by whom were those who did figure things out—I persist in believing there had to be some—deterred from bringing matters into the light of day? But that would bring us back to Bobby Hauck and his coaching staff. Doubting him, his motives, or his methods passes for heresy. Questions like that might cost us points in a football game.

It’s disturbing to see a substantial portion of the population of a sensible and civil place lose its perspective and sense of proportion to the extent we’ve seen here. Reality—who your neighbors are and how they behave—has been conflated with spectacle—a vicarious participation in a staged event. There really

Live Free or Die?

Many of the results from New Hampshire were surprising, but none was as disappointing as Ron Paul's fifth place showing. Coming off a decent 10-percent finish in

Iowa, where no one had expected Paul to do well, the campaign seemed poised to strike gold in a state filled with independent-minded, libertarian-leaning voters. Columnist Jim Pinkerton even hazarded a guess that Paul might win New Hampshire. Instead, he received just 8 percent of the vote.

In the end, Iowa rewarded the campaigns staffed by zealous activists, and New Hampshire punished those lacking careful preparation and professionalism. Where Paul won more votes with less effort and expenditure in Iowa than almost any other candidate, no other campaign missed a greater opportunity in the Granite State. In what should have been his natural constituency, Paul lagged behind every other competitive contender and was outpolled by the candidates for the nanny state (Huckabee) and the warfare state (Giuliani). Now Paul's grassroots rebellion seems stalled, flush with cash but bereft of electoral prospects.

Optimistic theories that pollsters were missing a mass of first-time voters turned out to be false. Instead, the home of the Free State Project and the birthplace of the "Constitutional President" opted for neither liberty nor the Constitution.

Some factors were frankly beyond the campaign's control. In a record-turnout primary, the impact of dissenting candidates in both parties was reduced. Two top-tier candidates attracted most of the independent voters in New Hampshire's open system, so there was more competition for these unaffiliated voters than

there had been in other cycles. Most frustrating for an antiwar conservative candidate, Paul only received the votes of 16 percent of those who disapproved of the war in Iraq, while a large number inexplicably went to John McCain, the most ardent advocate of the surge and a leading apologist for the disastrous war. In fact, four in ten McCain supporters had a favorable view of Ron Paul.

Where the other notable rebellious Republican candidate, Mike Huckabee, was able to tap into pre-existing networks of churches and homeschoolers to make up for his lack of organization and money, there are few ready-made support systems for antiwar constitutionalists. The idiosyncratic nature of Paul's campaign makes it an odd fit for most institutions and interest groups. Finally, FoxNews excluded Paul from its final debate on the Sunday before the election, which may have undermined his position among late-deciding voters.

This explains only so much. Paul's campaign infrastructure was poor, confirming the suspicion that a candidate who was an Internet sensation might not have the "ground game" needed to persuade and mobilize voters in a state famous for its tradition of retail politics. As *Reason's* Dave Weigel reported, Paul volunteers were late in coming to the state, and once there were slow to become effective campaigners. And in addition to a scatter-shot ad campaign, some of the Paul commercials were famously awful and amateurish. "Ron Paul, he's really catching on," a character in one ad asserted, as if he was

trying to convince himself as much as the audience.

The outlook for the campaign in the rest of the primary season is not encouraging. Paul won only 6 percent in Michigan, and polls just 5 percent in South Carolina. In state after state, he has some of the most unfavorable ratings of any Republican. While this is undoubtedly caused by relentless demonization in the Republican media, it also reflects the divide between roughly two-thirds of the party and Ron Paul on the war and foreign policy generally.

Still the campaign has the potential to be the start of a movement rather than an enthusiastic fad. Its mix of constitutionalism and cultural conservatism with hints of Jeffersonian populism is a powerful, appealing combination. It speaks to the 10-15 percent of Americans on the Right who are clamoring for representation, in addition to many more who have little confidence in our political system and have only recently learned of Paul's principles. In a hopeful sign for the future, Paul's support in New Hampshire, as in Iowa, came disproportionately from voters aged 18-29, among whom he finished third. In a generation that is turning away from the Republican Party in droves, Paul voters are among the young Americans moved in the other direction by a message of constitutional liberty. The principles of the Old Right are new again.

As a president from New Hampshire said in his Inaugural Address, "The great objects of our pursuit as a people are best to be attained by peace, and are entirely consistent with the tranquility and interests of the rest of mankind." As long as there are Americans who believe this, the Ron Paul Revolution will live on beyond 2008. ■