

Athletes and Guns: The Jayson Williams Case

by Richard E. Lapchick

Many people were saddened recently to see the arrest of former NBA player Jayson Williams for manslaughter in the shooting death of limousine driver Costas Christofi. I was one of them.

Sad because a driver who probably thought it was a great night to be around so many celebrity athletes ended up dead.

Sad because of how routine guns have become in our society.

Sad because it is another mark against an individual athlete that is already resonating by raising questions about "all athletes" and their use of guns.

Sad because the athlete is Jayson Williams.

As the son of former St. John's coach, Joe Lapchick, I watched Jayson play each year in a tournament named after my father. I helped present the awards each year and I noticed that Jayson was the one of a handful who looked me in the eye and said "Thank you." That distinguished him right away from the so many of the players over almost two decades of tournaments.

It made me follow his career in the NBA where his hard work made him a star for the Nets. It did not surprise me that he devoted a great deal of time to the community along the way. The fact that he made a huge donation to his alma mater did not surprise me. The size of his gift to St. John's did: \$2.1 million, making it the second largest gift ever from a pro athlete to an institution of higher education.

He was that rare combination who drew the affection of his fellow players, fans and even the media. When an injury prematurely ended his career, the Nets offered to pay out his contract many years into the future. NBC jumped to hire him as an NBA studio commentator.

But now Steven Lember, acting prosecutor in the shooting, saw cause "that Williams did fire the shot and demonstrated recklessness" and made the formal charges.

Joseph Hayden, Williams' attorney, said that "The death of Mr. Christofi is a tragic accident, but it was still an accident ... We are confident that the evidence will show ... that Mr. Williams is innocent of any reckless or criminal conduct."

I sincerely hope that is the outcome. However, it is one more example of how having guns around can lead to tragedy. Guns in the home are a real risk to family and friends, tripling the risk of homicide in the home. Guns kept in the home for self-protection are 22 times more likely to kill a family member or friend than to kill in self-defense. It is clear that Jayson Williams was fascinated by guns and shooting them for sport. He has quoted about it and even wrote about it in his book.

He is not the first athlete to wind up with problems over the possession of a firearm. When Allen Iverson was stopped by police in 1997, they found a gun in his car. Coincidentally, a survey came out a week later that showed that one million high school and college students were carrying a weapon to school. If Iverson had not left Georgetown early, he would have been among the million. Because he was in the NBA, he was the one.

A rash of stories began to appear about athletes and guns. Yet the story about a million possessors disappeared quickly while stories written about Iverson even today sometimes refer to his problems with guns.

I received nine media requests in the two days after Jayson Williams was arrested, all inquiring about what his arrest said about "why athletes are so drawn to guns." I was not surprised by the questions. I tried to give them some of the context as to why this story is about "an athlete" and is not about "athletes."

America is obsessed with guns. While this is not new, experts say the numbers are even higher in wake of September 11th. According to Handgun Control, the organization chaired by James Brady, Americans own approximately 192 million firearms which are in an estimated 39 percent of our homes. Too many thought it was an urban phenomenon until school shootings in Pearl, Mississippi, Jonesboro, Arkansas, Bethel, Alaska, Littleton, Colorado and other places showed clearly that there were no geographic, racial, ethnic or economic boundaries for the spread of guns among children.

An average of 10 children die each day from handguns. More than 3,500 students were expelled in 1998-99 for bringing guns to school; 43 percent of these were in elementary or junior high school. These are our children. Between 1993 and 1997, an average of 1,621 murderers who had not reached their 18th birthdays took someone's life with a gun. I have been with parents who thank God if their child reaches the age of 18.

It shouldn't take the arrest of Jayson Williams or a school shooting to make us realize that guns make us, especially our children, so much more vulnerable.

In a recent year, firearms killed American children at 15 times the rate of children in 25 industrialized combined. The story of guns in America is more about the pro gun lobby's power. When the Consumer Product Safety Commission was created in 1972, guns were made exempt! The political power of the National Rifle Association is so enormous. That can happen when nearly 40 percent of our households have a gun. Thus we can easily be confused as a society.

The shootings at Columbine High School resulted in 13 deaths. When it was discovered that the shooters wore trench coats, the call was to ban trench coats! When will we understand that the gun lobby's extraordinary power enabled it to get the one product that is actually designed to cause death and injury exempt?

We are equally confused when we take the tragic death of Costas Christofi at the hands of an athlete who owned guns and try to make it a story about athletes and guns. Like too many other tragedies, it is a story about the accessibility of guns for too many Americans.

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