

The suspected suicide of James Dungy, the 18-year-old son of [Indianapolis Colts coach Tony Dungy](#), two weeks ago shocked the nation. But it was hardly an isolated case. Suicide is the ninth-leading cause of death in the [U.S.](#), but it is the third-leading cause among people aged 15 to 24. In 2001, the latest year for which the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) has statistics, 3,971 people in the 15-to-24 age group committed suicide, and 86% of them were male. While little is definitively known about the link between athletic participation and adolescent suicide, preliminary data show that young people who are highly involved in athletics are less likely to consider or attempt suicide than nonathletes, but they are far more likely than nonathletes to either kill themselves or be seriously injured if they do attempt it. In short, an emotionally troubled athlete is more dangerous to himself than an emotionally troubled nonathlete. □ No community in [America](#) knows this better than Winthrop, [Maine](#), a small town that has become a focal point in the study of adolescent suicide and its relationship to athletics. As the townspeople enter 2006, they are still searching for answers as they work through their grief.

The first suicide was the most puzzling. Jason Marston, a bubbly 15-year-old, loyal to his friends and popular with his teammates, became distraught after he had an argument with his girlfriend of nine months. After school that day he stayed in his room with the door shut, and when his father, Brian, went to wake him the next morning, Jason was gone. Seeing footprints in the snowbank below the bedroom window, Brian assumed Jason had sneaked over to a friend's house. It was Jason's 12-year-old sister who found him in the backyard. He'd taken a .22 pistol from the garage--he and his father had used it often for target practice--and killed himself with a shot to the head. It was April 10, 2003.

Jason had a stable family life, no history of depression and no problem with drugs or alcohol. By any traditional measure he was not "at risk," though suicide experts say that the younger the victim, the less likely there will be obvious warning signs. "Younger kids are very impulsive by nature," says Sue O'Halloran, a suicide-prevention educator for the state of [Maine](#) who lives in Jason's hometown of Winthrop. "These are snap decisions: 'I'm mad at the world.' 'I'll show her.' As we mature, suicide becomes less impulsive."

Brian Marston says his son had a streak of daredevil in him. He cites the time that Jason, at age 11, jumped off a railway trestle some 30 feet into Maranacook Lake, a rite of passage in Winthrop. "But he wasn't foolish crazy," Brian says. "Maybe he wanted to bring himself right next to suicide to see how it felt when he put that gun to his head, and something startled him. We'll never know. Maybe it was brought on by the dismalness of winter. [Maine's](#) long winters have an effect on all of us."

Winthrop is, by most measures, a wonderful place to live. It's a relatively crime-free, middle-class town set amid lakes and ponds in the rolling hills of central [Maine](#), six miles west of the state capital, [Augusta](#). Many grow up there and never leave. At Jason's funeral, in Winthrop's Catholic church, Brian gave the eulogy while wearing his son's NUMBER 12 Winthrop High football jersey. The next season team members wore NUMBER 12 stickers on their helmets, and Brian watched the games wearing Jason's jersey. Jason had been an undersized safety and wide receiver and seldom played in games, but "football was special to him," Brian says. "He was proud to be a member of that team. He had a good relationship with the coach."

The second suicide, 10 months later, on Feb. 17, 2004, really shook the town. Twenty-year-old Lee St. Hilaire, probably the best high school football player ever to come out of Winthrop, shot himself in the belly with a shotgun in [Bangor](#), where he shared an apartment with his longtime girlfriend. It made the front page of [Augusta's](#) newspaper, The Kennebec Journal. [Maine](#) loves its high school football, and St. Hilaire had quarterbacked the Winthrop Ramblers to a 35-6 record as a starter between 1998 and 2001, leading them to the Class C (fewer than 500 students) state championship in 2000.

St. Hilaire was also the alltime leading scorer on the Ramblers' hockey team, but Winthrop was, at its core, a football town. Its fiercest rivalries--with Jay, [Lisbon](#), Livermore Falls and Boothbay--dated to before World War II. Grandfathers, fathers and sons had all played against the same schools on the same fields. People came from all over central [Maine](#) to see St. Hilaire play, as many as 4,000 people at some games, an extraordinary

number for a town with a population of 6,238. St. Hilaire was a classic pocket passer, throwing for 8,272 yards and 90 touchdowns in his career. In 2001 he became the first Class C football player to win the James Fitzpatrick Trophy, which goes to the best high school football player in [Maine](#).

"They called him the Silent General because he never spoke very much," says Norm Thombs, Winthrop's coach during the St. Hilaire years. "He had a pro football arm--he once completed a pass that went 72 yards in the air--but not a pro football body. Lee was only 6 feet tall and wasn't fast. A lot of people in town didn't think he'd make it at the next level, and he may have thought he had something to prove."

St. Hilaire's parents divorced when he was in 4th grade, and while he was never in serious trouble, he was an undisciplined child. In high school St. Hilaire moved in with the family of his girlfriend, Tia Pomerleau. His friends note that, although he wore a constant smile, he was defensive about the way he was perceived in the community. "There are still some people who think I'm going to fail," he said in a newspaper profile. "I want to go to college and do something with my life. I want to prove those people wrong."

St. Hilaire won a football scholarship to [Maine](#) and was redshirted his freshman year. It wasn't long before he became disenchanted. Division I sports were too structured for him. He didn't like curfews and being told when he couldn't go home. "We talked every couple of weeks, and [Maine](#) just wasn't a good fit," says Thombs, who's the executive director of a United Methodist Church camp and retreat center. "I tried to convince him to stay, but he hated living on campus. He wanted to get back to where football was fun."

St. Hilaire abruptly gave up his scholarship in late October 2001. He returned to Winthrop and worked as an assistant to Thombs. The next year St. Hilaire transferred to Husson College in [Bangor](#), which was starting a football program. With him at quarterback, the team went 0-7 in '03 and was outscored 265-60. "He'd call me after every game," recalls Thombs, "and even though they were getting their butts handed to them, he loved it. I did notice, in our last few conversations, he kept asking himself, What's next? What am I going to do with the next part of my life? But he seemed to be doing well and was talking about a coaching internship. No one saw [the suicide] coming. I know what the red flags are, and I never saw any."

Joel Stoneton, 31, who was an assistant to Thombs and is now the football coach at Winthrop, also talked frequently to St. Hilaire. "He was frustrated with losing because he was a very competitive person," Stoneton says. "Two days before he took his life, he told me he was going to finish the semester and then come home to coach. He'd have been an extraordinary coach. He was awesome with kids."

More than 1,000 people turned up at St. Hilaire's memorial service, which was held in the old Winthrop High gym. There was a wreath of green and white flowers--the school colors--in the shape of his number, 11, which had been retired when he graduated. Many of his Ramblers teammates sat together in the bleachers in their state championship jackets, listening to the tributes in stunned silence. The entire town was in mourning. Seeing the outpouring of sorrow, Chad Garwood, who'd been one of St. Hilaire's favorite receivers and was the football captain the year after the quarterback graduated, said to Thombs, "I don't understand how anyone could do this to his friends and family."

The next two suicides came so close together that the pattern was now unmistakable. On Jan. 8, 2005, almost 11 months after St. Hilaire's death, Bryant (Mox) Donovan, 19, hanged himself. He, too, had played football for Winthrop. Three days later Troy Ellis, 24, a former lineman for the Ramblers, also hanged himself. Both suicides occurred in [Augusta](#), but people began to wonder: What was going on with the Winthrop football team?

Closer examination showed that the two young men barely knew each other, having been five years apart in school. And they were very different. Ellis had a history of depression, and police learned that he'd attempted suicide twice before, once by carbon dioxide poisoning and once by taking an overdose of pills. One of his

grandmothers had committed suicide. Ellis had fathered a child and, according to the [Augusta](#) police, was \$2,000 in arrears in child support.

Donovan had been St. Hilaire's backup, and police found a number of clippings about St. Hilaire on the walls in his room. He'd been drinking the night he hanged himself, and there was an open bottle of whiskey beside him in the attic. "Mox idolized Lee," Thombs says. "He was completely devastated by Lee's death and talked about it a lot. Did suicide become more of an option since his idol had chosen that option? His family life had deteriorated too. His parents had divorced during his freshman year, and he had a really hard time with that. I had to kick him off the team his senior year for breaking team rules."

Suicide contagion is real; suicide experts call it "clustering." Technically the Winthrop players' suicides couldn't be categorized as a cluster because two of them occurred in [Augusta](#) and one in [Bangor](#). "The suicides were all independently done, and done for separate reasons," notes Winthrop police chief Joe Young. "All these individuals had different things going on in their lives." Still, Young acknowledges, "I'm like anyone else. I'm asking myself, What's wrong?"

Stoneton, a lifelong Winthrop resident who took over as football coach in 2003 after Thombs left to spend more time with his wife and kids, was equally frustrated. By all accounts the Winthrop coaches treated team members like family. "We deal with all sorts of problems in the locker room: stealing, drugs, [parents'] separation," says Stoneton. "We tell the players, 'If you've got a problem, come home. There's nothing in this world so bad that we can't deal with it.' We've tried to give these kids the tools to deal with adversity. I had some great conversations with Mox Donovan when his parents were splitting up because I, too, came from a broken home. [The suicides are] devastating because you have these incredible moments with these kids, and you don't know why they can't draw from them. After I went to Mox's funeral and saw him lying there, I turned around and said to a group of players, 'I'm done burying my boys. Any of you ever feel like doing something like this, you call me. You come home.' And they all said, 'Yep, we will, Coach.'"

" [Chad](#) said it, too."

For Chad Garwood, Donovan's suicide came at a time of particular vulnerability. A month earlier [Chad's](#) mother, Michelle, and father, Steve, had separated, breaking up what had been perceived in the community as a perfect family. "Then when Mox hung himself, it was a double blow."

Garwood was one of those young men who seemed to have everything going for him. He starred on both the football and the basketball teams and was a top student. He was admitted to Colby, one of the most selective colleges in [Maine](#). At 6'1" and 200 pounds, he had the size to play at the next level, too. "In addition to being a great receiver, he was by far the best free safety I ever coached," says Art Van Wart, who was an assistant at Winthrop for 13 years. "You couldn't ask for a better kid to coach. He was very methodical and low-key, not at all impulsive. He didn't jump around on defense hooting and hollering, but he took care of business out there, and he made up for the mistakes and weaknesses of others."

As it turned out, Colby was too difficult academically for Garwood. While he made the football team his freshman year, he struggled with his grades and was not invited back for his sophomore year. "That bothered [Chad](#) more than any of us knew," says Van Wart, "and he was heartbroken over his parents' [separation]. I got a call from the school nurse, Jackie Kempton, whose husband had been on the Winthrop coaching staff, suggesting I give [Chad](#) a call. We talked for a long time, and he gave me the assurance he could handle things."

Coach Thombs, too, talked to Garwood. "We were all worried about him," Thombs says. "He was definitely a hurting kid. He didn't share his emotions much. He was always concerned with other people, but if you tried to turn the subject to him, he'd clam right up. By that time I was asking questions as point-blank as you can, and on the way to one of his sister's basketball games, I said to him, 'If you ever think about hurting yourself,

promise me you'll call me.' He looked me in the eye and said, 'Don't worry, Coach. I'm not going to do something like that.'"

Suicide experts note that "hurting yourself" is the wrong euphemism to use with a person who's at risk. "Killing yourself is about getting away from the pain," says Loren Coleman, author of two books on the subject, *Suicide Clusters* and *The Copycat Effect*. "They want to live, but they don't want to live in pain. So they can talk about not hurting themselves, because in their minds [suicide is] about stopping the hurt."

Garwood seemed more concerned about his father than about himself. "He'd call me and say, 'Don't do anything stupid, Dad,'" Steve recalls. "I was the one everyone was focused on. And I'd say the same thing back to him because he never sounded happy. There's a misconception that you can stop someone who's considering suicide by convincing him of the trail of devastation he'll leave behind. My son recognized the trail of devastation at every funeral he attended, but that didn't stop him."

[Chad](#) had enrolled at the University of Southern Maine, which didn't have a football team. He told his father he'd moved on and didn't care about football, but his Winthrop coaches sensed he wasn't ready to end his athletic career. Steve noticed that [Chad](#), who was a model of good behavior in high school, had been drinking heavily since Christmas. [Chad](#) rented an apartment in [Portland](#) with some pals and got a job at Boater's World. After finishing work the night of June 10, he and some friends went to a party, where he drank a six-pack of beer.

"At 1:30 a.m. a friend drove him back to the house," Steve says. "He was joking and seemed his normal self. No one else was home, and he called his girlfriend to ask if he could go over to her place, but she had to be up early the next day. It wasn't a serious relationship. The next day when his roommate came home, he found [Chad](#) hanging in the closet. He'd used his belt, putting his head through the loop and twisting himself around so many times the police said it cut into his neck. His feet were actually touching the ground. He had us all fooled."

It was the third suicide of 2005 by a recent Winthrop graduate, and the fifth in 26 months by a Ramblers football player under the age of 24. The statistical likelihood of that happening in such a small pool of young men is infinitesimal. In [Maine](#), which has a higher-than-average suicide rate, about 20 to 25 young people between ages 15 and 24--about one per 6,600--commit suicide in a typical year. Winthrop's high school had only 340 students, and fewer than 50 of them played football.

But statistics are meaningless when it comes to suicide clusters. In February 1986 the small town of Spencer, Mass. (pop. 11,000), was gripped by a suicide contagion and, according to *The Copycat Effect*, in the next two months 18 high school students made a total of 25 attempts on their own lives, resulting in one death and five hospitalizations. The one fatality, perhaps not coincidentally, was a football player.

"Males tend to think about something and then do it," says Coleman, citing statistics from the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control showing that while females attempt suicide three times as often as males, men actually die by suicide four times as often as women. "Football players may be exactly the pool of young men who wouldn't talk about suicide, they'd just do it. They're action oriented."

Jason Marston, Lee St. Hilaire, Mox Donovan, Troy Ellis and now Chad Garwood. What no one knew--what still isn't known--is whether the epidemic had run its course.

Through the summer and into the fall, Winthrop was in crisis mode. "This community is grieving," says Terry Despres, who became the town's superintendent of schools last July. "I coached basketball and soccer for 15 years, and you like to think that sports help young men deal with adversity, keep things in perspective. Those are the things you want sports to do."

A June 23 article in the Kennebec Morning Sentinel described Winthrop as "a town where [football] is king--victories are frequent and the green-and-white clad Ramblers play before unusually large and adoring crowds.... The popularity of football here has led to speculation that the pressure of fan expectations was a hidden factor in the five deaths." Pressure of fan expectations? No one knew what to believe. Focus groups were formed, and suicide prevention personnel were consulted to determine the best course of action.

"No one has definitive answers about how to stop it," says O'Halloran, who helped organize the focus groups, "but exposure to repeated suicide is not a good thing for kids. It does increase the risk. 'Oh, you're from Winthrop. What's the matter with you folks?' It adds to their angst."

"I compare it to a fire started by a spark," says Brian Marston, who gave his mobile phone number to members of the football team so they could call him if they wanted to talk about any problem that cropped up--breakups with girlfriends, speeding tickets, grades. "Jason's suicide was the spark, and that spark will ignite anything around that's so dry it will burn. The fire continues until you put it out, or until there's nothing left that will burn. So when do you say it's over? That's what's hard."

Rumors began to circulate about what may have been going on behind the scenes on the football team. One letter to the editor of a newspaper suggested that steroids were behind the epidemic, since one side effect of steroid use can be depression.

"It was like being kicked when you're down," says Winthrop High athletic director [Eric Turner](#). "If you saw our football team, there's not a lot of Barry Bonds out there. People in this town aren't overly indulgent when it comes to our football team. We have an academic-eligibility rule. They like to see their kids do well, but I don't see this as a pressure cooker."

Others, however, saw the criticism of Winthrop's athletic culture as long overdue. "We have an obsession with sports in Winthrop that's unhealthy at times," says one former member of the Winthrop school board, Maureen Calcagni, who runs a fitness center in town. "I once suggested that we cut back on the football program to save money, and the then superintendent told me if I ever proposed that again, I'd have to be escorted home by the police. You had some good athletes in town who were idolized to the point that it must have seemed they'd reached the pinnacle of their lives at 17. We write articles about them and put their pictures and plaques on the wall, but when they're not the star players anymore and start to develop family problems and other problems, they can't cope."

Big fish leaves small pond: It happens all the time in [America](#), but suicide prevention experts don't consider that a particular risk. "If someone feels they're not living up to their own or others' expectations, that can be a warning sign," O'Halloran says, "but kids from all over this country who come from rural towns struggle through that."

Still, the stress induced by failure is one of the risk factors suicide prevention experts look for, and it is generally true that the bigger they are, the harder they fall. "Two groups of people are most at risk for suicide clusters: overachievers and underachievers," says Coleman. "We've made our high school athletes into celebrities. And celebrities--movie stars, musicians, athletes--are perhaps more at risk than the general population. If our big local hero can [kill himself], it puts the thought of the act in someone else's head who may have never considered suicide before. And if you romanticize suicide by having services in the gym or the high school auditorium, the copycats just roll in. There's a difference between glorifying a death and grieving. Having young classmates come into that gym and look at the casket is just horrific."

Officials now acknowledge that some big mistakes were made after the first two suicides. By allowing St. Hilaire's memorial service to be held in the gym and by putting Jason Marston's NUMBER 12 on the team helmets, the town was unwittingly glorifying the self-inflicted deaths. "The risk is some kids will remember it as the event of the decade," says O'Halloran. "That's extremely frightening."

The Wall of Fame--Coach Stoneton's Peg-Board of clippings, letters and photos remembering football players who'd died young, not just by suicide but in traffic accidents and while serving in uniform--has been removed from the locker room and relocated to the coach's office. "They shouldn't be made into martyrs," says Van Wart, who resigned from the coaching staff this fall when school officials forbade coaches to discuss the suicides with reporters. "They're high school football players. The game's played all over [America](#). It's part of growing up. Someone who takes his own life shouldn't be given recognition, especially in the locker room--no matter how good he was."

Offers to purchase memorials for some of the victims have been politely declined by the school. "The relatives want to leave something behind, some lasting memory," says Despres, "but are you leaving a message that might lead someone else to see suicide as an option? Those are the questions we're asking."

Mercifully, one question they've stopped asking is whether Winthrop's football coaches were somehow at fault. "I've found [they] are an extraordinarily sensitive group of people--very special men who would have been there if those kids had reached out to them," says O'Halloran. Anyone who's talked to Thombs, Van Wart and Stoneton cannot help but be moved by their pain and their anguish over the lack of answers. Even after their players graduated, the coaches mentored them and counseled them through difficult times. But the coaches couldn't stop five of them from taking their own lives.

"They have such a strong support system when they're on the team," says Thombs. "Coaches call them wanting to know where they are at night, why they failed some test, why they didn't show up on time. The team becomes a family for so many of these kids, and suddenly that family's not there."

He shakes his head, awash in sadness. "I've heard people try to pin this on football, how it's a metaphor for a life-and-death struggle. But football's about teamwork. It's about working hard and practicing. You need to be selfless to be a good football player, and suicide is a selfish act."

Thombs has started to feel anger at his former players for taking their own lives, a healthy step in his healing process. It's as if all those pep talks he gave after tough losses--about overcoming adversity, never giving up, believing in yourself and your teammates--had never been heard. He doesn't understand it. None of the coaches do. "I'd have hoped an athlete would have been better prepared for life situations than other kids," says Thombs.

That, according to Coleman, is a myth. "Sports do not have a magical potion that helps kids cope with depression," he says. "Coping with stress can be learned in many venues besides the athletic field. Running a grocery store can teach you as much about life."

Says Thombs, "One thing I've learned is, we're not alone. This state and this nation have a big problem with suicide for males between 17 and 24. I wish I could give other coaches some secret so they'd never have to go through something like this. I guess it's to talk about these issues. To talk to players about looking out for each other."

On Oct. 10 a 21-year-old running back at the [University of Pennsylvania](#), Kyle Ambroggi, killed himself just two days after scoring two touchdowns during [Penn](#)'s 53-7 rout of Bucknell--one of the best days of his college career. Ambroggi, according to his family, had been suffering from depression. [Penn](#) coach Al Bagnoli referred to Ambroggi as "one of our shining lights." He was "a true scholar-athlete, an ambassador for [Penn](#), a tremendous teammate and leader on and off the field." But depression is a patient foe, and the relief Ambroggi felt from his successes on the football field was only temporary.

"Depression comes at you like a wave," says Steve Garwood, who suffers from it himself. "It's not anything you see coming. You can't plan for it. You just have to ride it out." He rejects the assertion that [Chad](#)'s suicide had anything to do with football or with Winthrop's keen interest in sports. "My son loved his team and his

coaches," he says. "His best years were in football. If there's any connection, it may be that you have to have no fear to play football ... or to commit suicide."

Experts worry that the macho culture of football might not only muffle a healthy sense of self-preservation in youths but also discourage at-risk players from seeking professional counseling when they're depressed. The vernacular common to the football field--"Suck it up ... shake it off ... play through the pain"--sends a dangerous message if the pain is emotional.

"We have to pay attention to the emotional needs of players too," says Turner, Winthrop's AD. "Don't stereotype them. We've told the kids, 'If you know of a teammate, or anyone, who's struggling with emotional problems, break the code of silence. Give him the number of the help hotline. Reach out to an adult.'"

To help prepare high school athletes for life beyond their small pond, Stoneton has started a program called Beyond the Cheers, in which once a year a former Winthrop player who's succeeded in a field outside of sports returns to talk about his experiences after football. "Owners of insurance companies and car dealerships," Stoneton says. "They can talk about how life gets harder after high school."

In its grief and search for answers, the Winthrop community has pulled together. Most people in town still strongly support the high school football team, which this season went 5-4. They are talking, teaching and trying to learn as much as they can about one of the most complex and tragic forms of human behavior. "Suicide is not a virus," says O'Halloran. "It can't be stopped by a vaccine. But suicide prevention does work, and talking can be therapeutic."

Still, cruelly, tragedy continues to plague Winthrop and its football team. On Nov. 5 a one-car automobile accident took the life of another former Ramblers star, Jason (Bub) Ruman, an all-conference defensive end in 2003 and a former teammate of Chad Garwood's. Ruman had been drinking and was driving at high speed when his car flipped over and struck a utility pole. Two female passengers in the car survived the crash.

So Winthrop is grieving again. It will be months, perhaps years, before some residents can look to the future without a measure of dread. "Every time the phone rings, I worry," says Van Wart. "I've talked to some of [Chad's](#) and Mox's and Lee's teammates, and they say, 'This is enough. I'm not going to any more funerals.' There's an air of anger and disgust at the way they say it, too. They're 22 years old, and people who know them are looking at them like they might commit suicide. They're sick of it."

The National Suicide Prevention Initiative's hotline is 1-800-273-TALK. The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention's website is www.afsp.org.

What Went Wrong in Winthrop

Read the article and answer the questions on a separate piece of paper.

1. How many people between the ages of 15-24 committed suicide in 2001? What percentage was male?
2. While student athletes are less likely to commit suicide, what interesting fact applies to those that do compared to non-athletes?
3. According to Sue O'Halloran, why is it more difficult to prevent suicide in younger people?
4. What is "clustering" or "suicide contagion"? Why can't the suicides of the Winthrop players be considered a cluster?
5. According to suicide experts, why is the term "hurting yourself", the wrong one to use when talking about committing suicide?
6. Why does Chad Garwood's father claim that you can't talk someone out of committing suicide by showing them the trail of devastation they'd be leaving behind?
7. What was one theory posed by the *Kennebec Morning Sentinel* as to what was causing the suicides?
8. What is the problem with putting players' numbers on helmets or holding memorial services in the gym?
9. What is one of the concerns experts have with the "macho culture" of football? How might this attribute to some of the suicides of football players?
10. What is Beyond the Cheers? What is its purpose?
11. What tragedy struck Winthrop on November 5th? How has this affected the players and former players of the town?