

Tailgating gives officials headache

Drinking alums undermine schools' anti-alcohol push

By BOB WILLIAMS
STAFF WRITER

Although he's not old enough to drink legally, Rick Rodgers recently found himself working the door at one of the longest-running parties at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The 20-year-old sophomore from Buies Creek was manning the gate at the Rams Head parking lot outside Kenan Stadium as the university's top athletics boosters started rolling in for the annual UNC-N.C. State football game.

He simply smiled when asked about a letter UNC-CH Chancellor Michael Hooker sent to season ticket holders this past summer warning that the university was cracking down on public drinking before football games.

"You tell me how it's working out," he said, pointing toward the parking lot

packed with tailgating alumni a full hour and a half before the noon kickoff. Some discreetly sipped cocktails from plastic cups while others pounded down beers straight from the can, but most were openly drinking some form of alcohol.

"The only difference I can see is that the cops are hassling the students they catch drinking more than they used to," he said. "The part that stinks is that the cops will then just walk right by a group of alumni doing the same thing."

The scene emphasizes one of the thorniest problems faced by administrators at colleges and universities trying to get a handle on excessive drinking: how to convince students that they need to drink more responsibly while alumni openly drink in public before football games and other big events on campus.

"It's really a tough issue for administrators, no question," said Wesley Perkins, a sociology professor at Hobart and William Smith College in Geneva, N.Y., who does research on alcohol abuse among college students. "It's very easy for them to send a double message."

Hooker has received both praise and criticism for his letter, which stated that excessive alcohol consumption by tailgating fans was "providing students with a poor — and very public — example." It went on to request that season ticket

**under
the
influence**

The campus drinking debate



N.C. State graduate Gerald White partakes at a tailgate party featuring wine and cheese before this year's NCSU-Duke football game at Carter-Finley Stadium in Raleigh.

STAFF PHOTO BY MEL NATHANSON

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holders obey university and state laws that prohibit alcohol consumption in public places.

The head of a statewide group that fights alcohol and drug abuse thinks Hooker showed remarkable courage with his letter. Tony Mulvihill, who is executive director of the Alcohol/Drug Council of North Carolina, also thinks other top college administrators should follow Hooker's lead.

"What Hooker did was a very positive step — alumni, faculty and staff have to try and set an example on this," Mulvihill said. "Students aren't going to listen to anyone about drinking if the alumni are coming back every football weekend and getting drunk before the game."

He said drinking is perceived by most people as an integral part of the culture of football, but that it shouldn't go unchallenged by university administrators.

"It is an ingrained part of the culture of football, but that doesn't mean the administrations at these schools should just accept that," he said. "They should be trying to change things if they can."

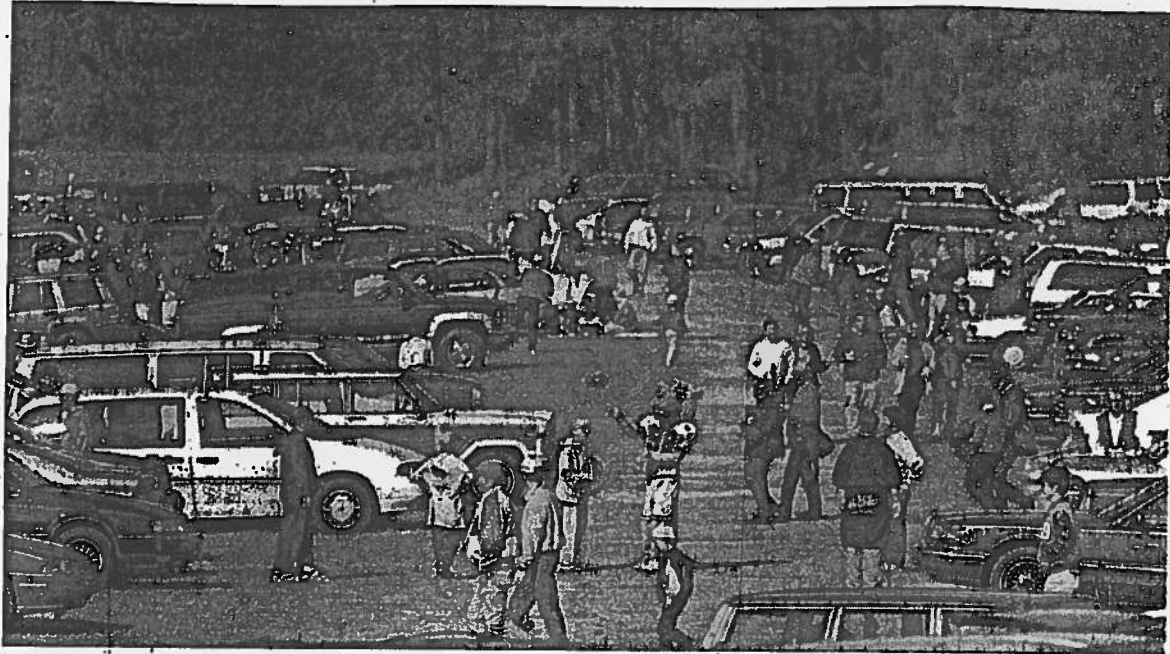
Others aren't so sure.

Sue Wasiolek, assistant vice president for student affairs at Duke University, thinks tailgating alumni often provide positive role models for students.

"In a way, it's healthy for students to see alumni tailgating, because it's a social activity that includes drinking, but isn't exclusively centered around the consumption of alcohol," she said. "There's food and friends and it's all centered around a sporting event. That's different than a lot of student social events, where drinking is often the focal point."

But the issue goes beyond just tailgating, according to Janine Atkinson, who has worked as a substance abuse counselor at both Duke and N.C. State.

"There are lots of social events that draw alumni back to campus, particularly Greek events," she said. "A lot of alumni expect to have alcohol flowing freely at the social events when they come back to campus, just like when they were in school. There's been times when that's caused problems, no question."



The scene in the parking lot of NCSU's Carter-Finley Stadium before a recent football game. Beer and wine can be consumed legally outside the stadium, creating a temptation for underage guests at tailgate parties.

STAFF PHOTO BY MEL NATHANSON

For their part, public safety officials at the area's largest universities — including UNC-CH — point out that tailgating alumni rarely get out of hand.

At UNC-CH, police issued 46 warnings at the Tar Heels' first home game against Clemson and wrote 19 citations for public consumption of alcohol at the next game against Georgia Tech. Those numbers steadily declined as the season wore on, to the point that just two citations were issued at UNC-CH's final home game against Louisville.

"The problem varies on each campus, and, because of that, each university has to decide for itself what's the best way to deal with it," said Don Gold, head of public safety at UNC-CH. "There are some universities that are arresting dozens of people before games, but we didn't feel we needed anything nearly that drastic."

At N.C. State University, where beer and wine can be consumed legally outside Carter-Finley Stadium, public safety officials say they are constantly on the lookout for underage drinkers.

"One of biggest problems is high school kids who come out and tailgate with everyone else," said Terry Wright, deputy chief of public safety at

NCSU. "We deal with that as best we can, but it's a balancing act. You have to have a pretty good reason to approach someone."

Many tailgaters said they think today's students and alumni drink far less before games and other big events than they used to.

"I know I don't drink as much as I did as a student, but there are a lot of things I don't do as much as when I was in college," said Gordon Berkstesser, a 1953 NCSU graduate who teaches textiles management at the university. "I also think the current students drink a lot less than I did when I was here."

Derring Phillips, 53, an NCSU alumni who is an insurance agent in Wilson, said he thinks tailgating sometimes is blamed unfairly when people act up at football games.

"I drink a few beers before the game, just like most of the people that come out here," he said as he and a friend tailgated before a recent NCSU-Duke football game in Raleigh. "But it's not some drunken brawl. Nobody goes crazy out in the parking lot."

Brett Clark, who graduated from UNC-CH a couple of years ago, said she never tailgated when she was in

college. She thinks UNC students drink just as much today as they did in the past; they just don't do it in public.

"When you're in school, you get together before the game and drink at someone's apartment or a frat house," said Clark, as she tailgated with three friends before the UNC-NCSU game. "I drank before games, but I never tailgated when I was a student. Most people only start doing that after they graduate."

Perkins, the alcohol researcher, agrees.

"You probably don't see it in the parking lots like you used to because many schools have felt a lot of pressure to tighten up, in part because of liability concerns," he said. Perkins said students are still drinking a lot — possibly more than they used to — but they just aren't doing it in public as much. And in a way, he said, that's probably worse.

"There's probably more binge drinking going on behind closed doors than there's ever been, although the alumni probably don't see it," he said. "That makes it harder to deal with, because people often don't think there's a problem because they can't see it."