



THE PLOT SICKENS

One of the legendary coaches in the annals of college football has been toppled by allegations that one of his former assistant coaches sexually abused children. Did Joe Paterno know enough to stop it from happening?

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Sounds of struggle could be heard from inside the shower room in the Penn State football locker room that Saturday evening in 2002. By happenstance, graduate assistant Mike McQueary was passing through the area and wandered over to investigate. What he came upon was a scene that was so horrific, so unspeakably repulsive that it would haunt him for years: inside the shower room, Jerry Sandusky, the then 58-year-old former defensive coordinator under legendary head coach Joe Paterno, stood performing anal intercourse on a 10-year-old boy, whose hands were pinned against the wall. What the 28-year-old McQueary then did was inexplicable: instead of stopping the assault and phoning the police, he left and called his father. The following day, McQueary reported the incident to Paterno, who passed it up the chain of command. Paterno told the athletic

director, who told another administrator, who in turn told the university president.

By now, there can be no one who does not know what came of this incident: no one followed up on what McQueary saw, reported it to the police or tried to identify the boy. In fact, nothing was done until Pennsylvania attorney general Linda Kelly and state police commissioner Frank Noonan filed a 23-page grand jury report on 4 November 2011 that alleged that between 1994 and 2009, Sandusky sexually assaulted eight boys – including the boy McQueary had seen attacked in 2002. Charged with 40 counts of child sexual abuse, the now 67-year-old Sandusky faces 800 years in prison. In a stunning interview with American television personality Bob Costas – even more incredible that his defence attorney would permit him to do it – Sandusky proclaimed his innocence and denied that he was a paedophile, yet conceded that he had ‘horsed around’ with boys, hugged them and showered with them.

No scandal that has erupted on the American sports scene has been so appalling since former football star OJ Simpson slashed the throat of his ex-wife and an innocent bystander in Los Angeles in the 1990s. But this is even worse, given the young age of the victims

involved and the cover up that Penn State contrived to protect the ‘brand’ that has become Nittany Lions football. Charged with perjury and failure to report alleged child abuse were Tim Curly, the athletic director, and Gary Schulz, the senior vice-president for finance and business who was in charge of the campus police. With the public outrage at a pitch, the Penn State board of trustees removed university president Graham Spanier and did what would have been the unthinkable only a week before: they fired 84-year-old Joe Paterno – the legendary Joe Pa – who had been told of what McQueary had witnessed that day in March 2002 and did not act upon what he had been told. Contritely, Paterno said upon his dismissal: ‘I wish I had done more.’

As I have observed in this space before, college sports in the United States has become a cesspool. Far removed from the days when it was an unassuming alternative to pro sports, it has become big business with a capital B. College football and basketball coaches are paid exorbitant sums to bring in a winner, and their programmes circumvent the by-laws of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) with disregard for the spirit of fair play. At Ohio State, Miami and elsewhere, scandals have undercut the integrity of the athletic programmes, which have been upended by allegations of under-the-table payments to players and other acts of corruption.

But that was not perceived to be the case at Penn State under Paterno, even if that assumption seemed to overlook the fact that between 2002 and 2008, 46 of his players had been charged with 163 crimes. The Nittany Lions prided themselves on ‘Success with Honor’ – that was their motto. Paterno ran a programme that was old school, unadorned with flair: the players wore plain white helmets and blue jerseys without their names on the back. Even with the unsavoury off-field behaviour that was occurring, which involved an array of charges from public urination to murder, Paterno held himself and his programme to a higher standard than his peers. Asked at one point years ago when he planned to retire, Paterno said he could not leave college football to ‘the Barry Switzers and Jack Sherrills’, two high-profile coaches whose programmes were steeped in NCAA violations. Paterno won a record 409 games, two national championships, and still graduated 89% of his players. ►

Jerry Sandusky in handcuffs as he's escorted by Pennsylvania state police and an attorney general's official to the office of the centre county magisterial district judge

What no one was aware of but would come to discover is that this was purely artifice. Jerry Sandusky lurked in the shadows, the embodiment of an evil so vile that it is hard to fully grasp. As far back as 2002 – and quite likely even before – Paterno had known that Sandusky was engaging in this foul behaviour. McQueary had told him. Paterno could have stopped Sandusky with one phone call – and spared the degradation of who knows how many young victims. But Paterno looked the other way, perhaps afraid that doing otherwise would undermine the legacy that he had so assiduously crafted. Paterno had performed many fine deeds, donated huge sums to charitable endeavours – his fans called him ‘Saint Joe’. But as a journalist I know observed (correctly, I think): ‘The only chance he had to do something really meaningful, he fucked it up.’ What remains hard for even his ardent supporters to understand is why he did not take action.

Inconspicuous until they strike, paedophiles do not stand out in a crowd. They do not wear trench coats and have a two-day stubble of beard. Outwardly, they appear to be upstanding citizens – your neighbour perhaps. In the case of Sandusky – who had a wife and six adopted children – the State College, Pennsylvania, community looked upon him as a man worthy of their surpassing esteem. Penn State had become known as ‘Linebacker U’ because of his work with the defensive unit through the years. Even more impressive, he founded a charitable organisation in 1977 called The Second Mile, the ostensible aim of which had been to provide a sanctuary for children from challenged backgrounds. What we now know is that instead of being a sanctuary, The Second Mile was a trap. Sandusky found his victims there, boys who looked up to him as he showered them with attention. One of the boys accompanied him to a Penn State bowl game. Others accompanied him to team meetings. No one in a million years would have dreamed what Sandusky was doing with them.

Or did they?

Hindsight is always 20-20, but it should have told us something when Sandusky announced his retirement in 1998. He was only 55 – in the prime of his career – but he said he wanted to devote himself fully to his work with The Second Mile. One of the explanations that circulated was that Paterno had told him that he would not succeed him. For years that had seemed a

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foregone conclusion. But no other college approached Sandusky either once he ‘retired’ – unthinkable, given the pedigree he had. What appears likely is that Paterno forced Sandusky out on the heels of an incident that occurred in 1998. The mother of an 11-year-old boy reported Sandusky to university police when her son told her that the coach had bear-hugged him in the shower. When the mother confronted Sandusky on the phone, police investigators listened in on the conversation with her permission and heard an apologetic Sandusky say: ‘I was wrong ... I wish I were dead.’ No charges were filed.

Given the stature that Paterno had, it is inconceivable that he had not known of this development. Chances are others did too, and that word of it spread to other potential employers, who would have jumped at the chance to hire Sandusky. State College is a small community, a place where a secret is hard to keep once it gains some traction. Former Oklahoma coach Barry Switzer, who Paterno once insulted and who apparently has a long memory, contended that it was ‘a secret that was kept a secret’. He added, ‘Everyone on that coaching staff had to know, the ones who had been around

a long time.’ Incredibly, Sandusky was bestowed with emeritus status and allowed to have an office in the athletic facility, which he continued to show off to the boys he found at The Second Mile. Only when McQueary reported the 2002 incident to Paterno and it was sent up the chain of command was any administrative action taken. Sandusky was told not to bring the boys on campus again, which any reasonable person would conclude was another way of saying: do it somewhere else.

Ordinarily, the victims in cases such as these live in quiet shame, so horrified by what has been enacted upon them by a trusting adult that they become swept under by fear. But one such victim did come forward in 2009, and it led to the ►

Joe Paterno in discussion with former graduate assistant coach Mike McQueary, who became the team’s offensive assistant coach



investigation of Sandusky, who in 2002 had become a volunteer football coach at Central Mountain High School. One of the boys who attended the school had come to know Sandusky at The Second Mile. When the boy began asking his mother odd questions about 'sex weirdos', she reported what she had been told to the school. The principal called the boy in for a talk. Bravely, the boy said that Sandusky had been sexually assaulting him. In a meeting with the principal and a guidance counsellor, the mother told CNN that she asked them three times to call the police, only to be told by the principal, 'No, you have to consider the ramifications of what would happen if I did that.' Outraged, the mother contacted the authorities herself, which set in motion four investigations of Sandusky and led to his arrest. He is free on \$100 000 bail, oddly low given the gravity of the charges.

CNN anchor Anderson Cooper asked the mother what she hoped would happen to Sandusky.

The mother replied, 'I hope he goes to jail for the rest of his life.'

It has not been lost on many that the events that transpired at Penn State were reminiscent of the sex scandals that have engulfed the Catholic Church. Both environments existed behind a wall of secrecy, and possessed the essential characters of a cult. In an effort to seal itself off from the prying eyes of the outside world, Penn State even won a protracted court battle that permitted them to become exempt from the commonwealth public records law, which allowed Paterno to keep his salary secret. On the HBO show *Real Time with Bill Maher*, Andrew Sullivan, a columnist for *The Sunday Times* of London, observed: 'Joe Paterno was the leader of a cult. The first thing you need to know about cults is that someone is going to get buggered, normally by the guy in charge or someone close to him, and no one is going to tell.' Secrecy continues to reign in State College, as administrators and others hide behind prepared statements.

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Regrettably, Penn State chose to continue playing football this season. Instead of observing a genuine period of reflection over what has occurred – indeed mourning – it has forged ahead with participating in games that seem so hollow. Interim head coach Tom Bradley is fielding pointless football questions again at pointless press conferences and has let it be known that, sure, he would like to be appointed to the job on a permanent basis. But with sales of Penn State merchandise off 40%, the feeling is that the school administration will be forced to clean house entirely to restore some sense of order – which is to say, get sales booming again. To that end, Penn State appointed former FBI director Louis Freeh to do a sweeping investigation.

Students rallied behind Paterno, staging a riotous protest in the wake of his dismissal. It was a shameful spectacle that left me contemplating the values of the young men and women who engaged in the affair. Paterno spoke to them that evening in his front yard, and asked them to say a prayer for the victims. Given his negligence, this request

Artist Michael Pilato paints over the portion of his mural that shows Sandusky in downtown State College, Pennsylvania

seemed dreadfully inadequate. At that point, he turned to go inside, followed by his wife. She waved to the crowd and closed the door.

Whatever glorious legacy Paterno had aspired to is gone. He has come under scrutiny for how he conducted the football programme. *The Wall Street Journal* reported that Paterno had blocked attempts to expose his players to the same disciplinary standards as other students and quoted an internal memo from a Penn State official that stated: 'Coach Paterno would rather we *not* inform the public when a football player is found responsible for committing a serious violation of the law and/or our student code ...' I suspect that was precisely how he handled the information he had on Sandusky – by keeping it 'in house'. It will be how he is remembered, not for any of his victories or for the good he did but for how his inaction allowed evil to roam the world. ■

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