

The Fly in Paterno's Perfume

Written by Bill Perkins

Few men have fallen as far and as fast as Joe Paterno. I suspect that's because few men have risen to the heights he achieved. If you include his years as an assistant at Penn State he coached there for 62 years. He holds the record for most victories by a FBS (Football Bowl Subdivision) coach with 409 and is the only FBS coach to reach 400 victories. He coached five undefeated teams, won two national championships and in 2007 was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame.

A Profoundly Decent Life

Author, Joe Posnanski, who is writing a book about Paterno, has talked with hundreds of people about him and read 25-30 books that detail his life. He notes that Paterno is complicated but concludes: "Joe Paterno has lived a profoundly decent life."¹ He writes, "Joe Paterno has lived a whole life. He has improved the lives of countless people. I know--I've talked to hundreds of them. Almost every day I walk by the library that he and his wife, Sue, built.

I walk by the religious center that tries to bring people together, and his name is on the list of major donors. I hear the stories, the countless stories, of the kindnesses that came naturally to him, of the way he stuck with people in their worst moments, of the belief he had that everybody could do a little bit better--as a football player, as a student, as a human being. I'm not going to tell you these stories now, because you can't hear them. Nobody can hear them in the howling."

The Greatest Tragedy

Of course, the greatest tragedy of this horrific story, isn't Paterno's fall from grace, it's the lives of young boys who have been forever scarred ... whose souls have been corrupted ... whose minds carry memories worse than any nightmare and more lingering. Many of these boys would have been spared if the ever devout coach had done the right thing right away upon hearing about it ... and who knows for sure when he first knew.

The time line goes back to the first reported victim in 1994.² We do know that on March 2, 2002 a graduate assistant visited Coach Paterno at his home and reported what he had seen the day before in the locker room. That is the day Paterno should have used his whistle to summon the police. Because he didn't, how many more boys were raped?

The Sub-Plot of His Life

And so I return to the coach's fall from grace. In the second paragraph above I noted some of his accomplishments. Of course, he's done much more good than could be listed in so few words. Books have been written about the man. But all those accomplishments will serve as the sub-plot to his life.

The light will not shine on his face revealing the details. It will shine from behind allowing us to only see a dark silhouette. The 84 year old coach will be remembered for the decade he valued his tenure and Penn State's reputation above the welfare of a boy ... many boys.

Dead Flies in Perfume

As I considered this tragedy, I remembered the words of Solomon. In Ecclesiastes 10:1 he wrote, "As dead flies give perfume a bad smell, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor." It takes wisdom to build a great football program over a half-a-century. Nobody else has done it. I suspect nobody will do it again. Until a little over a week ago Joe Paterno's life had the perfumed fragrance of greatness. Now it stinks. And once the flies of folly have ruined the perfume, there is no pulling them out and restoring what was.