

Reader Submission: Turning Out the Lights

February 1, 2012

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ESPN.com

UNIVERSITY PARK, Pa. — Bob Bair drove the usual 41 miles into work on Friday morning, and when he was about six miles from State College, he saw the glow. The lights were from Beaver Stadium, where they'd been on all week in memory of Joe Paterno. Bair knew more about those lights than anyone in the world. He turned them on.

Bair has been an electrician at Penn State for 27 years — it will be 28 next month — and for the last 10, the stadium has been his office. Before that, he worked in a steel mill, and he looks like it. He's 60, and wears glasses on a cord around his neck. His hair is clipped into a neat brush cut, sharp and tight on the neck and above the ears. There's gray at his temples. Attached to his light brown coveralls are a clinking ring of keys on his right hip and a flashlight on his left.

This past Sunday, he was sitting at home when he saw the breaking news on his television. Coach Paterno had died. Not much later, while he was out picking up lunch for his family, the phone rang. It was his boss. They needed him to go in and do what he'd done hundreds of times: Turn the lights on, Bob. Not just the bowl lights that shine on the field. All of them. A game-day set up.

"He wanted the whole stadium lit up," he said. "I said it was a great honor."

Bair isn't an emotional guy. He doesn't cry at movies, for instance, but his voice cracked a little when he described telling his wife what he was about to do. His boss was upset giving the order. The symbolism wasn't lost on any of them, and Bair thought about Paterno that Sunday when he flipped the breakers. He rolled auxiliary lights out to the Paterno statue, where a crowd had already gathered, and when his work was done, he had his own private moment there. The last time a death affected him so much was when he lost his mother five years ago.

The stadium stayed on all week. At night, the strangest thing happened. The lights reflected off the clouds, which created the illusion that the glow was coming from the sky and not from a transformer. It looked exactly like the sky had opened above Beaver Stadium. Someone took a picture and sent it to Jay Paterno, Joe's son. Periodically during the past week, Jay would take his phone and pass around the image.

If he wanted to feel his father's presence, he needed only to walk to his back yard. He lives on a hill just outside of town, and down in the valley, he could see the illuminated stadium. He never said this, but anyone who has lost their father knows that as long as those lights stayed on, some part of his dad remained tangible, not here, exactly, but not completely gone, either. Through the visitation, burial and public memorial, the stadium glowed.

"It's been a pretty solemn week," Bair said.

On Friday morning, it was Bair's job to cut off those lights. Many were connected to an automatic timer, but there were also dozens of black switches in gray boxes all over the stadium. Bair cranked up his Polaris ATV. The fog he saw coming into town had settled into the bowl. The sun was down, and the sky was dark. It was around 7 a.m. when he opened the first breaker box. With two quick flips, he shut down the lights outside Gate A, where students camp out to get the best seats. Paternoville was dark.

Bair drove around the ramps. He thought about Paterno, who he saw alone in the stadium all the time. He remembered the Big Ten title in 2005, when with about five minutes left in the clinching game, he got a frantic radio message. Someone had dropped the championship trophy and broken it. As he repaired it with some epoxy, Paterno walked into the room, saw Bair and the trophy, and exclaimed, "What the hell?" Bair laughed about that on Friday.

He cut the power to Gate B. Then the west main concourse. He flipped a switch and the entire north end shut down with a series of clicks. His radio crackled.

"Bob," someone asked. "What time are the bowl lights set to go off?"

"7:30," he said.

"10/4," the man replied. "10/10."

Just a few minutes remained on the timers. The sun rose. The wind blew through the stadium. The fog thinned.

"The air is picking up," Bair said, "so it'll probably blow out pretty quick."

He drove to an open spot on the main concourse, overlooking the bowl. His mood changed. The place felt somber all of a sudden.

"We still got a couple of more lights to turn out," he said, "but if you don't mind, these are gonna go out at 7:30, and I'd kinda like to see that."

He parked and stepped into the cold. The fog was gone. The sky was blue. Across the way, in the bleachers behind the end zone, his supervisor stood watching. Both were still. At exactly 7:30, the banks of stadium lights clicked off, losing a row at a time. When the last bulb went dark, Bair shook his head and returned to work.

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