

My Thoughts on the Football Circumstances

August 17, 2012

Hi guys, I'm just a teenager from Upstate New York (Syracuse county) and my family and friends have roots in the area and are avid Penn State football fans.

A lot of what I wrote is probably controversial and this may not be the best place for it, and it took me a long time to have the courage to copy it off my personal Facebook and make it public, but I really felt someone should hear me, and I really hope at least somebody cares and agrees with me (if you have the time to read it). In fact, it would be best if there were some way I could get some PSU officials to read this for themselves.

Like or dislike, I don't want to be called names and criticized for what some may consider bad information and/or my age and thoughts, but this is how I feel, and it would be helpful if people respected my opinion. Thanks.

This is pretty long, but to help make peace with myself and the circumstances, I had to write out all of my thoughts (well, at least most of them).

A young version of myself sat on the couch, next to his mother, and watched the football game. She was into it. Cheering, yelling, fist shaking, and a little bit of cussing filled the room. Things calmed down during a commercial break, and before the game resumed play, the television camera zoomed off into the stands, at a trio of shirtless college kids with blue and white torsos jumping up and down. Beneath them, zip-tied to the balcony of the Beaver Stadium mezzanine, was a wide, black banner with the words in the plainest white Times New Roman script: "JoePa." The little me turned to his mother, who was glued to the screen and oblivious of her son's inquiring face, and asked, "Mom, what does JoePa mean?"

When he expected a chuckle and a nod, as was the usual when he asked stupid kid questions that everyone knew the answer to, he got instead a look of obnoxious, followed by the answer in a "this is obvious" tone: Joe Paterno. And later on that day, when the Nittany Lions won the game, that man was hoisted above the crowd, and he gave a modest wave before sinking into the shuffle of the press and giving a quick "good job" speech incomprehensible over the noise of rejoice and the ridiculously thick Brooklyn accent mixed with the quiet, humble tone. From that day on, with my house already full of blue and white, and my family from the area, I began to grow more and more fond of the proud university and the man responsible for the success. As the years went on, and I took an interest in the football team myself, I collected my fair share of trinkets: Matchbox cars, key chains, playing cards, and other souvenirs. I also did quite a bit of research on the college, the football program, and the great man at the center of it all. I loved Penn State. And if you were me, you would have quickly known you weren't the only one.

About a half an hour south of Penn State University, there's a small, long-forgotten city from the golden age of railroad called Altoona. Secluded on many sides by mountains, it's undecidable to wonder how people even get in and out. It was here, over 150 years ago, that my family settled from the Old Country and made their home. It was here, where my mother, her parents, their parents, and so on were born, raised and loved Penn State. Many in my family even went to Penn State, and others studied at their local Penn State campus.

When you go to Altoona, there are really only two roads in, and most of the shopping centers and stores are on these roads. If you turn into any parking lot, literally any parking lot, and just drive down the line of cars, you can't look to your right or left without seeing old blue and white. License plates and covers, bumper stickers, window stickers, flags, antenna toppers, anything you could imagine, had the words "I love JoePa," "I love Penn State," "I bleed blue and white," and so on printed on it. And mind you, this is on nearly every car. And when you go inside the building, pick any one you want, you see shirts, sweatshirts (even in summer), hats, pants, and yes, even underwear on most shoppers (and probably all of the male shoppers), and especially if you're in a local clothing store. From lollipops to pom-poms, wherever you go in the vicinity of State College, you can buy just about anything you can imagine with his picture and/or the Penn State logo on it. And trust me, this is nothing like the Syracuse shop in the mall or the Carrier Dome gift shop, this is everywhere. In fact, it has been known to me that when cars parked in the area that have stickers from other colleges, they are in serious danger of vandalism. Now, I obviously don't condone this, as most people who support Penn State wouldn't, but this and incidents like the flipping over of the news van in University Park are the incidents that greasy reporters take and turn around to make the situation look far worse than it is.

Every college has its extremists. There are always the people who fight in bars after they lose the game, riots outside the dorms, brawls in the stadium parking lot, etc. But Penn State, voted the number two "party college," has gotten pretty out of control at times, and football did grow to become a bit of an obsession over many years. Now, the press, who are mostly from New York and California, don't really know a whole lot about what goes on near Mt. Nittany, much like the general public. And the press portray themselves as "regular people" who do "regular things" and are "professional reporters," as this makes them seem more believable. Now, I can't speak for them, because I don't know everything and I'm not going to point fingers with no proof to back me up, but I can guarantee that at least some, if not many of these reporters are money-hungry rich people who will do anything for a good story, and they got the perfect one in late 2011.

Any person can root for a college; any one they want. They can just pick one and say "I'm a fan" and follow the scores. I don't know about many colleges, with the exception of Syracuse and Penn State. But the average die-hard football fan, who knew that Penn State was one of the best teams out there, could just claim "fanship" if they so chose. I don't think there is anything wrong with this, but the drawback of this is that this fan doesn't understand the incredible pride and honor that is weaved into the culture and everyday life of Central Pennsylvania (honor was one of JoePa's crucial points in his success). And really, on Penn State game day, you have to see it to believe it. The streets are lined with cars for miles, and you don't want to be there if they lose. I've been to Syracuse football games, and while things have gotten intense, nothing quite like what happens down in Happy Valley happens outside the Dome, that's for sure.

There's always just been something that sets Penn State apart from other universities. Many say that something was Joe Paterno, and I agree to a point, but I think there's something else; I don't know what. Anybody who's not familiar with Penn State would never (and could never) understand this. I know that the many people out there who have blamed the scandal on JoePa, and called him such despicable names, have absolutely no idea how he devoted his entire adult life to that university. They have no idea whatsoever the anger and sadness that has been going on in State College. They have no idea how it feels to be a true fan, and bleed blue and white, despite whether they say they liked Penn State football or not. If you didn't like JoePa, then I'm sorry and no offense, but I have to say that it is unlikely you could have been a fan as dedicated as myself and my family. That's just the way it is. And that may sound a little arrogant and "braggy," but JoePa was synonymous with Penn State, and there's just no way you could have been attached without being attached to him, too.

When AUGUST 2011 rolled around, it was game time again, like it was every year. My mother called the cable company and ordered the sports package (otherwise we wouldn't get coverage of the games). I remember in the preseason watching a special on JoePa getting ready for the season. A reporter was riding around with the frail old man in his signature thick glasses, khakis, and windbreaker with a shirt and blue and white tie, in a golf cart. He was injured. The reporter asked him what he did, and he said he injured his pelvis while getting hurt on the sidelines at practice. This was not the first time, either. In his 80s, mind you, he still coached football, which he was born to do. It was all he did from the time he graduated from playing in college himself. And it hurts to think that in August, just two months before all this happened, everything was normal. He was the winningest coach in football history; the way it should have been. And if you say he didn't earn it, maybe you should take a look at his medical records. A man of his build, health, and age was so devoted that he coached football for almost 50 years with no plans of retiring. And I guarantee, had he not been fired, he would have died doing it. That was the way it was, and nobody had a problem with it.

The news broke of the scandal in what I believe was September. It was mid-morning when I got up (I believe it was a weekend), and my mother told me something about an old guy she'd never heard of that worked for Paterno a long while ago, and how they believe he may have sexually assaulted a young boy. His name was Something Sandusky, spelled like the town from Ohio. I had never heard of Something Sandusky, either, and it didn't take long for me to never have wanted to. It wasn't long after, maybe even the next day, my mother read in the paper of rumors circulating of firing JoePa and making him dismissible. I was appalled, and without even thinking, I immediately dismissed the idea as complete garbage. "That would be a stupid decision. He didn't even do anything. I highly doubt they would think about firing him after all that he's done and all that he means to everybody," I never imagined I could have been wrong, but much to my surprise, my mother didn't completely agree with me, and she felt there was a chance it could have been possible.

In October, I was already shaken and saddened by the death of Steve Jobs, another one of my idols. Meanwhile, the situation got out of control with the scandal. Not only was it being covered nationally, but it was being covered locally in Syracuse, too, which annoyed me because most people in Syracuse don't know anything about Penn State and the way things were, and how important JoePa was to us fans. I soon began to see that things shifted away from Sandusky after they had found out he did these horrible things, and media coverage tightened more on JoePa himself, and the media was claiming he covered up the entire thing. However, this was not the case by many other sources.

What they actually claimed happened, was that while Sandusky was engaging in these acts, another employee, Mike McQueary, witnessed it. Joe found out about it, but the university officials instructed him not to go to the police, and to just do his job. Meanwhile, after an internal investigation, the university fired Sandusky. The part that surprised me the most was how long ago it had happened, and that they were still so concerned about it. Now, I obviously think Sandusky deserved what he got, and I in no way justify such a horrific event by anyone ever (not even if Joe had done it himself), and JoePa didn't exactly do the right thing, but being such a fan and looking up to him as a humble, hard-working, religious, and generous man, I in no way found it possible that he purposely covered the situation up for his own benefit. He may not have done what exactly he should have, but he did what he was told, and justice was still served. He was not a bad person. In fact, I don't see how covering it up would have benefited him anyway. I feel that the media saw they could take advantage of an otherwise untarnished and top-notch reputation, and blow the situation out of proportion into a scandal just because they could.

The last game Joe Paterno coached, on October 29, 2011, they won (even though the win was vacated). They lost every game after that except for one. When he was fired, I could not describe to you how upset I was, and I could not believe that not long before he was a legend, and he had been reduced to some old creep. I was sick. I didn't watch a single game or the news for the rest of the season. I had already asked my mom for a few Penn State T-shirts for Christmas, which I did get, but I didn't want to wear them, or even look at them. The only shirt I wore was a JoePa shirt. I didn't look or watch anything about the scandal again. Until January 21.

January 21 and 22, 2012, was one of the worst weekends in my entire life. After just coming home from a late night trip out, my iPod beeped, with a message from my news app: Joe Paterno, former Penn State legend, dead at 85. I ran out to tell my mother, who was in shock, but had anticipated it. The official cause of death I guess was lung cancer, but my mother said he died from a broken heart. I believed her. But that was not all. Late that night, we all sat around watching "The Middle" (recorded on DVR as we missed it that week), and I had fixed myself some ALDI brand microwave popcorn. My mother had an unusual call on her cell phone in the kitchen, from my aunt. My cousin's husband and old friend of the family had a heart attack and passed away that afternoon. This made us even more distraught, as he was obviously far more closer to us. It felt like the world as we knew it was crumbling.

The next morning, I was absolutely disgusted to hear that JoePa had just died that morning, and that the news report sent out the night before saying that he was dead was false. It felt worse hearing it for the second time. We left later that week to pay our respects to my cousin in that little railroad city of Altoona, and before we left I asked a special request of my parents, one which I would have never thought I would have to make.

We stopped at Beaver Stadium, and for the first time in what seemed like ages, I put on one of my Penn State shirts. I then walked into the brick mid-morning air, and paid my respects to Joe Paterno at his now absent statue. It was a little comforting, because I was not alone. When I thought I was in a world where everyone hated the man I adored, and everywhere I turned there were Facebook hate pages and blog and newspaper column rants, I felt like home surrounded by people mourning just as I did. Flowers, candies, old tickets, autographed pictures given to fans, and memorabilia were all given back at the foot of that statue. And when I thought I had come a long way just to do this, I smiled when I heard from behind me some amazing words. The news reporter from WTAU (the same people that got their van flipped over) was interviewing a sharply dressed man, who said he had come all the way from Illinois without sleeping just to do this. I was proud, and I knew Joe would have been, too.

That was the last I heard of the situation, with the occasional news stories with updates on Sandusky and more horrible comments about JoePa saying he did such terrible things. I haven't been in the area since January, and I really feel it's a good thing, because I can't imagine what all the real fans are feeling, while the people that claim to be fans aren't losing any sleep over it. When the so-called "punishment" was announced for Penn State, I was angry, but for a lot of reasons. First off, I don't understand why Penn State itself is being punished. The people involved were already punished enough. Sandusky won't hurt anybody anymore, and Paterno, who was a good person despite what they all say now, is dead, and I think that fact is being used against him because he can't defend himself. He is an easy target. Now, I am alright with the fine. It's money, and they overcharge thousands of kids to go to their college every year, so I'm not worried about it. The probation I am not overly upset about; it's not a huge deal. The vacated wins, I feel, were completely unnecessary. The lost wins of hard-working young adults for almost 15 years does not help to solve anything. It does not help the victims, it does not hurt JoePa, and it does not hurt the university. It only hurts the guys that put in the effort under the guidance of Joe Paterno over all those years and rightfully and honorably earned those victories. Victory was never put before the well-being of the children, as Joe Paterno preached that nothing was more important than honor, and success was nothing without it. He was a religious man, and a man with values, and it's unfortunate that media big shots can't see that, and the general public is believing them.

The removal of the statue, which was not a punishment, but rather a decision by the university, gave me a mixed reaction. While I feel that it should not have been removed because he was a good man and not the pervert these ignorant know-it-alls say he was, but at the same time, it probably would have been vandalized and destroyed by the people that hold him responsible, and I think it was classier to discreetly remove it, rather than intensify the already ridiculous amount of biased news coverage.

I've read some pretty harsh news articles, some even saying "the statue should have stayed and a plaque should have been added saying 'I shield rapists from the law.'" I've seen articles stating Paterno and Sandusky were good friends, which is not the case, either. It is just so upsetting to myself and the hundreds of thousands of others who feel that justice was not properly served. His name was not taken off the library (which he paid for, by the way), which helps ease the pain a little, but the only thing that helps me sleep at night is knowing that he's gone now, and doesn't have to see this happening to him. I can only imagine how his family feels, and I think they should sue the university for defamation of character, though I know they won't. They're too good of people and love the college too much, despite all that they've gone through. I know the majority of people will continue on with their lives thinking he's a disgusting pig obsessed with his accomplishments, and nothing I or anybody else will say can change their minds, but it is comforting to know that the real Penn State fans, at least most of them, are still JoePa fans at heart. In fact, this was the best article I've found and one of the few that agrees with me, but unfortunately it was written when Paterno was still alive, and it is too late now:

<http://tominpaine.blogspot.com/2011/11/why-joe-paterno-should-sue-for-libel.html>

On the other side of things, there has recently been a significant amount of people who have come together at Penn State to mention that the university is more than its football team, which is true and I understand this. However, I don't think it's right to make it look like Penn State was never, can never be again, and should not be a university with a top-of-the-line athletics program, and the outstanding accomplishments by these outstanding young men (who were also academics, mind you) should not be taken away. Yes, Penn State has other priorities besides football, and this is easily forgotten sometimes, but it is true. However, this does not have to mean that Penn State cannot be a "football school." They should be proud of what has been done over the years, and this should just be a small wound to be patched over with time. We can all move on from this, and we truly need to be ashamed of the football team, but rather the people truly responsible for these terrible crimes. It was announced that the names of the players are going back on the jerseys. It's obvious now that they're doing this just to prove a point. It's a shame what they're doing; now even breaking a long-standing and good-hearted tradition to prove a point. I try to comment on things like this, but they're always washed away in the sea of other comments. That's why I just hope somebody important sees this note someday. If we live on in respectment, nothing will ever be solved, though the damage is already done and things may never be solved anyway. Avoiding the situation and putting it under a rug will not help, either. We can admit it. We made our mistakes, we received the consequences, no matter how unnecessary, and now we must go on. While the terrible events that happened will always be in the back of our minds, we should not be defined by it (though neither should Joe Paterno). I was upset not long ago when I read a post on the Penn State home Facebook page that asked incoming freshmen to the campus what they wanted to see. As you can imagine, an outpouring of cries for justice and the statue came from plenty. But you know what the operators of the Facebook page did? They deleted all of the comments. Removing freedom of press and speech; taking away thoughts of others they deemed unsuitable; denying the past. It's sick.

And now, as it stands, there's really nothing else to say or do that will change things. The lack of class, the lack of taste, and the lack of better judgment in people today sickens me, but we live in a cruel, unfair world. As for refusing to support Penn State, I was all for it at first, feeling that it was their fault for what happened, when really it was that of Sandusky and the media, and the ignorant people that listen to the media. I always knew they bent the truth, but until it impacted me personally in such a way, I never realized how much it must hurt others. Meanwhile, Penn State is fumbling to pick up the pieces of what was ruined. But one thing I've learned from being a true fan for so long is that you never give up on your team, no matter what. The circumstances for me and others are awkward now, but I have sympathy for the Paterno family, and sympathy for the victims of this terrible crime, as well. But I can't go on hating everyone for something that can never change. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em. So, I'll just go back to sitting on my couch with my mother and my game day shirt, watching the game like always. And hopefully, just hopefully, that JoePa banner will still be there, and the blue and white guys will still be behind it, cheering on the team as they always have. Because statue or no statue, bowl games or no bowl games, wins or no wins, and JoePa or no JoePa, he'll always be with us, no matter what happened and no matter what will happen.

We are, and always will be, Penn State.

« WE WILL ALWAYS BE PENN STATE — Response to University Affairs (Canada) article »