

Remembering an Italian-American Legend: Joe Paterno

Natasha Lardera (January 23, 2012)



Penn State's legendary football coach died of cancer shortly after the university's Board of Trustees voted to fire him. Under his leadership, the Nittany Lions won two national championships, went undefeated five times and finished in the top 25 national rankings 35 times, according to his official Penn State biography

Thick, smoky-lens glasses, rolled up khakis, jet-black sneakers, blue windbreaker... Joe Paterno was easy to spot on the sidelines. The sidelines he worked on for 61 years.

Joe Paterno, the longtime Penn State coach who won more games than anyone in major college football, died yesterday morning at the age of 85 due to lung cancer that was originally diagnosed in 2001. He passed away at 9:25 am at Mount Nittany Medical Center (Pennsylvania), where he was admitted back on January 13 for observation for what his family had called minor complications from his cancer treatments.

His death comes after just a few months after his firing due to a child sex abuse scandal that tarnished his reputation

According to an article published on NPR "Paterno failed to go to the police in 2002 when told a



young boy was molested inside the football complex. 'I didn't know which way to go,' he said in the Post interview. Jerry Sandusky, the former defensive coordinator expected to succeed Paterno before retiring in 1999, was charged with sexually assaulting 10 boys over 15 years. Two university officials stepped down after they were charged with perjury following a grand jury investigation of Sandusky. But attention quickly focused on an alleged rape that took place in a shower in the football building, witnessed by Mike McQueary, a graduate assistant at the time.

McQueary testified that he had seen Sandusky attacking the child and that he had told Paterno, who waited a day before alerting school authorities. Police were never called and the state's top cop later said Paterno failed to execute his moral responsibility by not contacting police. 'You know, (McQueary) didn't want to get specific,' Paterno said in the Post interview. 'And to be frank with you I don't know that it would have done any good, because I never heard of, of, rape and a man. So I just did what I thought was best. I talked to people that I thought would be, if there was a problem, that would be following up on it.'

On the morning of Nov. 9, Paterno said he would retire following the 2011 season. He also said he was 'absolutely devastated' by the abuse case. 'This is a tragedy,' the coach said. 'It is one of the great sorrows of my life. With the benefit of hindsight, I wish I had done more.' But the university trustees faced a crisis, and in an emergency meeting that night, they fired Paterno, effective immediately."

Many of his admirers want to set the record straight. A Penn State student, Isaac Luber, writes in his [blog](#) [2] "Now Joe Paterno is gone, and some say his legacy has been tarnished, or at least damaged. I say it hasn't. If you actually look at the facts, and see how Joe Paterno, if anything, is the least to blame in this scandal, along with everything he has done for this University and for many people in and out of the University, you will know that his legacy should not, and will not be tarnished. While some people, who may be uninformed or blinded by hatred and lies, may attack Joe Paterno and his legacy, those who knew him, were affected by him, or knew the truth, know that his legacy is not even scratched."

The man known as "JoePa" won 409 games and took the Nittany Lions to 37 bowl games and two national championships. More than 250 of the players he coached went on to the NFL was substituted by one of his assistants, Tom Bradley, who said Paterno "will go down in history as one of the greatest men, who maybe most of you know as a great football coach."

Penn State erected a statue in his honor in front of Beaver Stadium and, as of yesterday, it is surrounded by flowers, candles and prayers from current students, alumni and fans. The family is grateful and has released a statement to announce his death: "His loss leaves a void in our lives that will never be filled."

"He died as he lived," the statement said. "He fought hard until the end, stayed positive, thought only of others and constantly reminded everyone of how blessed his life had been. His ambitions were far reaching, but he never believed he had to leave this Happy Valley to achieve them. He was a man devoted to his family, his university, his players and his community." "As the last 61 years have shown, Joe made an incredible impact," the statement from the family continued. "That impact has been felt and appreciated by our family in the form of thousands of letters and well wishes along with countless acts of kindness from people whose lives he touched. It is evident also in the thousands of successful student athletes who have gone on to multiply that impact as they spread out across the country."

Paterno was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1926. His father was an Italian brick layer who studied law at the age of 40. His mother was Italian as well and, as most Italian moms, she was a great cook. Paterno often reminisced about long talks at the dinner table with his neighborhood friends who enjoyed eating at the Paterno household.

Paterno played quarterback and cornerback for Brown University and set a defensive record with 14 career interceptions, a distinction he boasted about to his teams all the way into his 80s. He graduated in 1950 with plans to go to law school. He said his father hoped he would someday be president.



When he was 23, a former coach at Brown, Rip Engle, was moving to Penn State to become the head coach and persuaded Paterno to come with him as an assistant. He was not excited to leave Brooklyn for a "hick town."

In 1963, he was offered a job as general manager and coach of the AFL's Oakland Raiders. His salary would have tripled but he refused. Rip Engle retired as Penn State head coach three years later, and Paterno took over.

At the time, the Lions were considered "Eastern football" inferior and Paterno courted newspaper coverage to raise the team's profile. In 1967, PSU began a 30-0-1 streak.

But Penn State couldn't get to the top of the polls. The Lions finished second in 1968 and 1969 despite perfect records. They went 12-0 in 1973 and finished fifth. Texas edged them in 1969 after President Richard Nixon, impressed with the Longhorns' bowl performance, declared them No. 1. A national title finally came in 1982, in a 27-23 win over Georgia at the Sugar Bowl. Penn State won another in 1986 after the Lions picked off Vinny Testaverde five times and beat Miami 14-10 in the Fiesta Bowl.

They have made several title runs since then, including a 2005 run to the Orange Bowl and an 11-1 campaign in 2008 that earned them a berth in the Rose Bowl, where they lost 37-23 to Southern California.

His last game as head coach was on October 29, 2011 when they beat Illinois 10-7. That was his 409th victory. "The fact that we've won a lot of games is that the good Lord kept me healthy, not because I'm better than anybody else," Paterno said two days before he won this game and passed Eddie Robinson of Grambling State for the most in Division I. "It's because I've been around a lot longer than anybody else." Just a few days later he was fired.

Paterno believed success was not measured entirely on the field. From his idealistic early days, he had implemented what he called a "grand experiment" to graduate more players while maintaining success on the field.

President Ronald Reagan said "Paterno never forgot his role as a teacher, who prepared his students not just for the game season but for life."

"He teaches us about really just growing up and being a man," former linebacker Paul Posluszny, now with the NFL's Jacksonville Jaguars, once said. "Besides the football, he's preparing us to be good men in life."

Paterno is survived by wife, Sue, five children and numerous grandchildren. And to conclude we quote Isaac Luber: "Not only is he the winning-est coach in college football history, the greatest college football coach of all time, have the most bowl appearances and bowl wins, but he has won in life as well. He has won with the hearts of all who he has affected."

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