

The Penn State scandal and sports in America

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The scandal currently enveloping Pennsylvania State University's football program, involving alleged child abuse by a former coach at the school, has dominated the American media for the past week.

The episode has led to the arrest of the individual charged with sexually abusing eight young boys, Jerry Sandusky, as well as two university officials for allegedly failing to report—and subsequently lying about—incidents of abuse, and the firing of the university's president, Graham B. Spanier, and legendary football coach Joe Paterno.

Paterno, 84, had been head football coach at Penn State since 1966. He holds the record for most victories in Division I college football, 409, and won two national championships, in 1982 and 1986.

There is no cheerful side to this story. For the individuals most intimately involved, it is a tale of psychological torment and personal tragedy. The media in the US—geared toward simplifying reality, stupefying the public and whipping up the worst in its audience—is singularly ill-equipped to deal with the complexities of such a situation, as of course are the authorities at every level.

The American sports and popular cultural scene presents itself as a series of Frankenstein monsters. The media celebrates and blows up sports and entertainment figures and organizations out of all proportion, coining a fortune in the process, and then, at the appropriate and almost inevitable moment, revels in their self- or other form of destruction, again seeking to make a profit, this time out of the sensational denouement.

A number of unhealthy trends in American social life converge in this case: the efforts by major institutions to cover up alleged misdeeds committed by their officials or staff, which brings to mind the abuse scandal in the Catholic Church; the excessive importance given to sports in the US, including college football, a supposedly amateur sport; the absurdly elevated status of major college football and basketball coaches; the prurient fascination with sex in the media, on the one hand, and the hysterical reaction of the religious bigots to any mention of sexuality, on the other—two sides of the same coin.

Sandusky, if the allegations are true, was guilty of serious crimes over a period of 15 years. The football team's defensive coordinator for 23 years, he retired in 1999, but retained access

to Penn State athletic facilities and remained active in The Second Mile, a children's charity he founded in 1977. The organization's mandate was to help boys from absent or dysfunctional families.

As long ago as May 1998 Sandusky was investigated by university police for showering with an 11-year-old boy, although no charges were pursued. In a conversation on which police eavesdropped, Sandusky told the boy's mother that he had showered with other children and refused to promise not to do so in the future.

The episode should clearly have set off alarm bells. This was an individual in serious need of psychological treatment. Instead, it seems, Sandusky was simply pensioned off, but retained access to the boys involved with his charity.

In March 2002, a 28-year-old graduate assistant allegedly walked in on Sandusky engaged in a sexual act with a 10-year-old. The former notified Paterno, who, in turn, told Penn State Athletic Director Tim Curley.

Eventually, the university's senior vice president for business and finance, Gary Schultz, was also informed. Curley and Schultz allegedly told the graduate assistant they would look into the matter and decide on further action. The two officials have now been indicted on the grounds that they did nothing with the information and later perjured themselves.

Sandusky, if the charges are accurate, was out of control and engaged in pathological behavior. However, a major share of the responsibility for the continuation of the tragedy lies with the institution and its top officials, who, it appears, simply washed their hands of the affair. A good deal of human suffering apparently resulted from that callous decision.

The primary explanation for their inaction is mundane enough. College football in the US is big business. In 2010, the 68 richest programs collectively earned more than \$1 billion in profits for the first time, an 11 percent increase—in a generally contracting economy—over the year before.

The University of Texas football team, for example, had revenue in 2010 of \$93.9 million and profits of \$68.8 million; Penn State football, \$70.2 million in revenue and \$50.4 million in profits; the University of Michigan, \$68.7 million and \$44.3 million, respectively.

In numerous states, the head coach at the leading state university is by far the highest-paid public or quasi-public employee. In some cases, college coaches earn more than their

professional counterparts in the National Football League.

As of February 2011, the highest-paid college football coaches included Nick Saban at the University of Alabama, whose \$6.1 million annual salary made him the fourth highest paid football coach *at any level*, (by contrast, the governor of Alabama earned \$112,000 in 2009); Mack Brown, the University of Texas, \$5.2 million; and Bob Stoops, the University of Oklahoma, \$4.8 million. Paterno earned *only* \$1 million in total compensation at Penn State in 2009, some \$200,000 more than the university president, Spanier (\$813,000).

These figures are grotesque, especially when the relentless cutbacks and tuition increases at US state or state-related universities are taken into account. The current median income for a single-earner family in Pennsylvania is \$45,000.

The current crisis will cost Penn State millions of dollars in donations and support and likely lead to star high school athletes choosing to go elsewhere. As one senior quoted by the *New York Times* observed, “Penn State [football] is such a national brand, so when something like this happens, it’s terrible.”

Big-time sports in America at present has a “bread and circuses” character to it. Considerable efforts are made by the media and the sports and entertainment industries to appease and divert a deeply discontented but confused populace through spectacles of various kinds. In a country where the official political debate takes place entirely between corporate-backed figures who espouse various brands of right-wing politics, inevitably lending the discussion a scripted and unreal quality, sports and celebrity-watching fill an enormous vacuum, or are at least intended to.

This helps give sports in America its distorted and often dangerously warped quality. The athletes are paid enormous salaries—or, in the case of college football and basketball, the coaches earn fantastic amounts while the best players are entirely consumed by the prospect of playing “at the next level,” i.e., in the professional leagues. For many poor youth, sports scholarships are the only means of obtaining a college education. Only a tiny fraction of these will earn a living out of their activity, and all too many graduate semi-literate and unprepared for life.

In college sports, where the individual athletes play at most for four years (and often less), a virtual cult of personality surrounds a coach who enjoys great success. This was the case with Paterno, hence the riot by Penn State students when he was unceremoniously booted out last week. The backwardness encouraged for years backfired on the university and exploded in violence.

Sandusky, accused of serious crimes, is a sad and pathetic figure in his own right. From a modest background in Washington, Pennsylvania, his paternal grandparents Polish immigrants, the former defensive coordinator was until recently held up as an example of what hard work and perseverance can

bring you in America.

Sandusky’s autobiography treats family and country in the most conventional terms. It opens with his receiving a letter in 1990 from President George H. W. Bush recognizing The Second Mile charity as the 294th “point of light.” Pennsylvania’s ultra-right US senator, Rick Santorum, honored Sandusky with a “Congressional Angels in Adoption” award in 2002.

Now, of course, those same politicians would cross to the other side of the street if they saw Sandusky approaching. He is merely the latest in a series of individuals turned into monsters by the US media. Whatever combination of social and psychological circumstances produced his disorder, he is no doubt a tortured figure. He told the 11-year-old boy’s mother in 1998, “I wish I could get forgiveness. I know I won’t get it from you. I wish I were dead.”

How is any purpose served by demonizing Sandusky? Blather about his “lust” and accusations that he set up his charity simply so he could “prey” on the boys in question are easy enough, but they don’t contribute anything intelligent to an understanding of the horrifying events or the treatment of such psychological maladies.

Some special sub-circle of Hades should be reserved for American sportswriters. Mainstream journalism in the US as a whole is presently a disgrace, but the stupidity, opportunism and shallowness of the sportswriters elevate them to a category in itself. Armed with endless predictions, which are never checked against reality, full of inflated praise for this or that player or team, but ready to turn on a dime at the first sign of faltering, cynical and malicious to a fault, but maudlin and sentimental when immediate needs require it...

The sportswriters, who encourage blind, fanatical devotion to teams and events 99 percent of the time, take the opportunity on such occasions to moralize about how sports should be “put in perspective” and how football or basketball “is not important” in the face of these tragedies. So we get Mitch Albom in the *Detroit Free Press* writing: “This is not a football story. This is not a Joe Paterno story. This is a daily story, an American story, an international story, a human tragedy,” etc. Albom and the rest will be back to business as usual, the present disaster forgotten, within the week.

The dysfunction in the Penn State affair is not an individual matter, it is a symptom of a generalized disorder.



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