

Paterno Was A Multi-Sided Coach, Man

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By Vinny Pezzimenti Olean Times Herald

The day following the release of the Louis Freeh report, Donald Gilliland, the fine investigative reporter for the Harrisburg-Patriot News and formerly a managing editor for the Potter Leader Enterprise, tweeted 74 characters that struck a chord: “write critical story of Joe Paterno one day, get vicious hate mail from Penn Staters the next.”

Such was a fact of life I had come to know well -- though on a far lesser scale -- during three seasons (2008-2010) of writing about Penn State football for the Centre Daily Times in State College.

The mere mention of Paterno – good, bad or otherwise – in a story would almost always elicit one or two reader emails. Writing about Paterno in any in-depth manner required certain care, for fear that one’s inbox would be stuffed the next day with exasperating correspondence.

That lesson was learned early.

DURING THE 2008 season, when a physically ailing Paterno was confined to a coaches’ box for a handful of games, I suggested in a column that Paterno’s chief motive for hanging on as coach at his age was ego related, in that he desired to maintain the title as Division I-A’s all-time wins king. (At the time, he had only a few more victories than Bobby Bowden, who hadn’t yet retired from Florida State).

The piece was greeted with hordes of mail that expressed vigorous support for Paterno, not to mention a few unkind judgments.

Among the criticisms: one emailer simply yawned; another told me I was too young and unwordly to offer an opinion of a legend such as Paterno; and another insisted the same because I had no Penn State affiliation (i.e. diploma from the school).

Thus, began my view of Paterno in two dimensions.

From afar, Paterno was simply a noted football coach, mentor and educator. Up close, in the heart of Centre County, JoePa – stated with only a small hint of exaggeration — was a god.

WHEN APPROACHING State College from the north on Interstate 99, Beaver Stadium begins as a small blip amid an expansive valley. Fifteen quick expressway miles later, it feels almost literally as if the monstrous structure is on top of you.

How big is football at Penn State?

All you have to do is look up for the answer.

The 107,000-seat stadium towers over University Park and State College like a cathedral. And for so many years that’s what it was. Worshipers poured in from around the state on fall Saturdays to pray at the altar of Saint Joe and his gridiron disciples.

How big was Paterno at Penn State?

All you had to do was look around.

Paterno’s deity status among the people was best characterized by the 7-foot, 900-pound bronze statue of the man that stood tall outside the

stadium. Visitors flocked to it and posed for photos with it in a way that suggested it was the Eighth Wonder of the World. Some prayed, others cried and a few gentlemen even proposed marriage under its shadow.

BUT PATERNO'S power extended well beyond just the stadium gates.

There was Paterno Library, the Peachy Paterno ice cream flavor, and a restaurant called Joegies. There were the many book and apparel stores in State College that sold life-sized Paterno cardboard cut-outs, as well as T-shirts featuring his name and likeness.

On a grander platform, Paterno had been nominated for the prestigious Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor.

Paterno was held up as some sort of divine spirit. He embraced such standing. But he also was just a regular Joe.

The Paternos lived among the people, at 830 McKee St., three blocks from campus, in a raised ranch they purchased in 1969.

Paterno walked to work most days. The home phone number was listed in the Centre County white pages under his name.

The Paternos donated multiple millions of dollars toward academics and other worthy causes at Penn State. Paterno worked for a meager salary compared to most big-time college coaches.

INDEED, Paterno was simple, modest, generous and devoted. But he was also complex, demanding, obstinate and guarded.

His evasive and stubborn approach to the media was well known beyond State College. Not only did he keep an arm's length from scribes, he often stiff-armed them.

Practices were always closed. Access to players was limited.

P.R. flacks constantly hovered. The message was always controlled and veiled in a layer of secrecy.

THIS PENN STATE way was no more evident than during Rose Bowl week in 2008. Access was only granted to Paterno and Penn State players during stuffy media sessions with a hundred or so reporters fighting for a hundred different stories. The Rose Bowl required that team locker rooms be open to media following the game. In an expected development, Penn State's was locked up like Fort Knox after Southern California trounced the Nittany Lions in the big game.

Meanwhile, USC's practices were transparent under coach Pete Carroll. A reporter could easily grab an interview with Carroll or any USC player as they trotted off the field after practice. The Trojans were boisterous and outspoken.

Penn State, like its coach, was buttoned up and unresponsive.

Yet, Paterno managed to keep his enemies in the media close.

Each Friday night before Saturday road games, the Penn State athletic department hosted a gathering with food and beverages at the team hotel for traveling beat reporters. Paterno was almost always there, nursing a Jack Daniels and shooting the bull with the reporters he terrorized during the week.

In this off-the-record setting, Paterno was free to be candid about topics other than the current state of the Nittany Lions.

One of the coach's anecdotes stands out now.

It was the 1970s and Paterno, who was Penn State's athletic director at the time, was looking for a men's basketball coach. One of his first calls was to fellow Brooklyn native Al McGuire, who showed no interest in the job. Paterno saved the punchline for last, supplying a nasally-toned imitation of McGuire's unreserved rejection: "Joey," McGuire had said, "State College ain't big enough for the both of us."

THE SAME writers who desired to wrap their hands around Paterno's neck only days earlier suddenly roared with delight at the story, and the lines of demarcation quickly faded.

Paterno was charismatic and funny, wise and loyal — characteristics that helped him build national prominence for the university and his football program. He was also stern and selfish, underhanded and loyal to a fault.

It turns out that Paterno was a lot of things. He was a man of many more than two dimensions. He was good and bad, and everything in between.

He was a fabulous mentor to countless young men, a noted philanthropist and a figure of inspiration for so many. He was also, as the Freeh report concluded, a stunning enabler of Jerry Sandusky, scheming to conceal the child sex abuse allegations against his assistant coach.

In the end, Joe Paterno was not a god. He was a mortal human being like the rest of us, complete with faults and misgivings.

(Vinny Pezzimenti, a former Times Herald sports writer, has rejoined the TH staff on a part-time basis while pursuing his masters.)