

Happy Valley

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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Documentary film can be one of the most effective forms of journalism when done right. "Happy Valley" directed by Amir Bar-Lev is an impressive, haunting, and powerful example of documentary at its very best. The subject on its surface is the Jerry Sandusky child abuse scandal at Penn State University. Bar-Lev follows the story from the first revelations of November 2011 through the cascading fallout over the next year.

Beyond the chronicle of events "Happy Valley" offers some insight into the dynamics of child abuse, the power of human emotion to overwhelm individual perception and distort judgment, and the grip that college football has on its fans and its orchestrators. It is both chilling and instructive. After watching the film I was left depressed and deeply saddened by the feeling that this is a story that could happen on any campus in the country, or for that matter in any organization where the commitment to human values is trumped by the felt need to protect the organization.

The film opens with a wide view of the hilly Pennsylvania landscape as cars and RV's slowly make their way up a winding road toward the camera. It quickly becomes clear that this is part of a pilgrimage of fans making their way to Happy Valley on a football Saturday. The train of cars is replaced by a stream of people, some preparing to tailgate while others make their way to the stadium. Interspersed into this is an interview with Joe Paterno who reflects almost wistfully on the place of this ritual of American life: "College football is something special, and it is, it really is. Hopefully we'll never lose sight of that or screw it up." It is a powerful scene, and would be even if you didn't know what lay ahead.

The scene shifts as the opening credits roll over a gathering of reporters and fans in front of the courthouse where the case against Jerry Sandusky is ending and this large crowd awaits the verdict. It is "guilty" on 45 charges of child abuse. The crowd roars its approval.

Driving the narrative are several of those attached in various ways to the scandal. Members of the Paterno family

maintain that the scandal is about Jerry Sandusky, not Penn State, not the culture of Happy Valley, and certainly not about Joe Paterno. The career of the coach receives some attention and the reverence with which he is regarded is explored. When he is fired the reaction in the Penn State community is shock and anger, and Bar-Lev's cameras capture that reaction in all of its nuances. All of this is seen within the context of its implications for the Penn State football season which comes to its conclusion in shambles. At about the same time Joe Paterno is diagnosed with lung cancer, quickly deteriorates and dies in late January.

Matt Sandusky, the adopted son of Jerry Sandusky, is another focal point driving the narrative. Matt's descriptions of his relationship with Jerry are fascinating, as is his struggle to decide if he should come forward with charges of abuse. Within this portion of the film Jerry Sandusky's reputation and role within the Penn State community is detailed. Matt at one point offers the view that Jerry helped the boys 90 percent of the time. The scenes involving Jerry Sandusky, the praise for him and a scene from his "Second Mile" summer camp for troubled boys is chilling.

Joe Posnanski, reporter and biographer of Joe Paterno, explains the rise of the mythos surrounding the coach and the emergence of the references to him as "St. Joe." This is, in many ways, a key section of the film and goes a long way to explain the reactions to all of the events that occurred in the year following the breaking of the Jerry Sandusky revelations.

Other voices of interest are the lawyers for the victims one of whom, Andrew Shubin, offers thoughtful comment and analysis on the scandal and on the world that is Penn State. Another is a student, segments of whose interview are shown at various points in the film. He makes it clear that he believes justice must be served, but at the same time he cannot abide the interference of the scandal with Penn State football.

There are powerful visuals and events surrounding the Paterno statue and the Penn State Mural on the wall of a building in the city. At the center of the mural is Joe Paterno. At one point Sandusky is painted out of the mural by the artist, and at another Paterno is given a halo which

is later removed. Events surrounding the statue and its removal are instructive.

Two reports offer differing views of the affair and both are analyzed. The Freeh Report by the former FBI director and commissioned by Penn State offers a very different set of conclusions than the Clemente Report ordered by the Paterno family. Discussions of the latter include appearances on Katie Couric's talk show by members of the family and by Mr. Clemente.

All of this flows quite smoothly, while mood swings created by the varying points of view are quite effective. The pacing is slow and deliberate resulting in a great deal of tension. It is gripping material.

Happy Valley ends where it began on a football Saturday one year after the first revelations. It is the opening of the first football season without Joe Paterno at the helm. Amir Bar-Lev's focus here is on the state of football at Penn State and particularly on the football culture. For the Penn State football community all is well as the pre-game includes a moment of silence for the abstract victims of child abuse, followed by the roar of the crowd under the theme of 409 forever, a reference to the number of Joe Paterno's victories stricken from the record by the NCAA.

Had a new era of Penn State Football begun? Yes and no. It was new in that there was a new coach. It was not, in that the power of football seemed as great as it ever was. Football was doing well in Happy Valley and it seemed to some that a cloud was being lifted from the stadium. However a moment of silence could not match the several hours of cheering from those who continued to shout "We are Penn State" without any thought of how that might be interpreted.

This is a very good piece of film-making that succeeds at every level. It presents many points of view, it offers many of those involved an opportunity to be heard, and it provokes both emotion and thought throughout its 90 plus minutes.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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"Happy Valley" is available for purchase for educational use from Good Docs at www.gooddocs.net and at present is in limited theater release.