

PSU Report

7-13-2012

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "PSU Report" (2012). *On Sport and Society*. 6.
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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
July 13, 2012

After reading the summaries and commentaries on the Freeh Report detailing the elements of scandal at Penn State University, I am surprised that I am surprised by what has been revealed. My cynicism after nearly a half century of involvement with administrators at institutions of higher education and bloated athletic programs should have left me immune to both the surprise and disgust that this affair had evoked in me. What has not surprised me is the deviousness of the principal players in this scandal, the cynicism with which they approached the issues, and the continuing reaction to it all.

Going through Mr. Freeh's analysis it is certainly no longer possible to hold out hope that the beloved Penn State football coach, Joe Paterno, was an innocent in a den of iniquity. According to Freeh, the coach knew about the charges against Jerry Sandusky from the first complaints of a parent in 1998 to the final revelations. It is no longer appropriate to say that he did nothing about it. He followed the case closely and made no effort to confront Sandusky over his conduct.

In 2001 following the report to him that Sandusky was abusing a young boy in the shower at Penn State, Paterno was actively involved in the decision making process that resulted in a burial of the charges by the Penn State administration. In fact to quote Freeh, Paterno did nothing to stop Sandusky and was "an integral part of this active decision to conceal."

Then when the story began to unfold in public, Paterno denied any involvement in discussions of the case by university administrators and any knowledge of the extent of Sandusky's activities. When called before a grand jury Paterno repeated his denials while under oath. He was joined in this serial lying by the university president, a senior vice-president, and the athletic director who, it was generally assumed, spoke on behalf of Paterno.

At the top at Penn State there seemed to have never been any concern expressed for the victims of Mr. Sandusky. The only concern seemed to be the ramifications of the entire affair for Penn State. Containment and damage control to protect the university and the football program, and the

reputation of Joe Paterno, seemed to be the primary concerns at the top, as well as in the local police department. In all of what I have read thus far I have seen nothing that would indicate that the children were ever considered as a significant element in the affair.

Telling also is the section of the report that faults the Board of Trustees for its failure to oversee the actions of administrators on campus. Current trustees say they take full responsibility for that failure, although there is no indication that any action will follow. No trustees have resigned over their failure and it is clear that when the President of the University withheld information from them, the Trustees accepted his stonewalling. It is clear also that Joe Paterno could have told the Trustees that the sun would rise in the West and they would have been out there the following morning to witness the event.

Now in the wake of the Freeh Report the major concerns seem to be the impact on Joe Paterno's reputation and legacy, as well as the long term impact on the university and the football program.

Should the statue of Joe Paterno be removed from campus? Will this affair overshadow his legacy at Penn State? Will this mistake in judgment wipe out all the good he has done? Will this scandal hurt football recruitment? How much damage will it do to the reputation of the university? These are questions that arise, but there are much more important questions for Penn State and for universities with big time athletic programs and multi-millionaire coaches to consider.

The first and most important question is what can be done to change the culture of the campus?

A few weeks ago someone pointed out that when the scandal broke last fall the first action by the university should have been to cancel the remainder of the football season. That was not done, and indeed not a single game was missed. Following the season Penn State went to a bowl game, a lesser bowl but still a bowl game. That any of these things happened or didn't happen speaks volumes about the power of football at Penn State and about the distorted values of the university.

In the wake of the Freeh Report nothing less than the suspension of football, and perhaps all intercollegiate athletics at Penn State, is the minimum first action required. This would set a sober stage on which to consider meaningful change.

This will not happen, nor will it be considered. Instead the fate of the Paterno statue will occupy the campus until the next big game. At that point the fate of statue will be settled along with the fate of any significant change in the football culture at Penn State. This would be the case at any other university that is in the sport and entertainment business and thrives on the cult of personality surrounding its football coach.

Last November when I wrote about the scandal just after the first news was reported, I opened with these two paragraphs:

"The world of intercollegiate athletics, particularly the world of elite football and basketball programs, is a world unto itself. It has a connection to reality analogous to that of Disney World, and is shrouded in a veil of secrecy rivaling that of the CIA. Those who run these programs live in a paranoid environment that sustains a bunker mentality, while at the same time is invested with a sense that the rules, of any world beyond their offices, do not apply to them. They are vigilant in maintaining their splendid isolation in a vacuum of privilege.

"Any crisis, any problem, big or small, that might threaten to penetrate this world is dealt with swiftly and surely. It is generally dealt with by denial or by burying any evidence as quickly as possible. Accountability and compliance are operative slogans rather than policies."

Read the Freeh Report and weep, not for the university or for Joe Paterno, but for the children abused by Jerry Sandusky.

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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