

Punishment

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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After the Freeh Report was issued there was an outcry demanding that the NCAA do something to punish Penn State University. Many called for the death penalty. Others complained about the failure of the NCAA to act immediately. Then on Monday morning when the NCAA President, Mark Emmert, announced the judgment and punishment of Penn State the outcry was that the NCAA acted too quickly. It was a rush to judgment by Emmert and his colleagues. What happened to due process?

For the most part these contradictory objections came from different people and different constituencies, although not in every case. Both objections have legitimacy and are worth serious consideration when trying to gauge the punishments meted out on Monday.

I am not willing or able to try to pass judgment on the NCAA from either direction. What troubles me is not the lack of the death penalty or what might be considered the severity of the punishment.

What bothers me most is that the discussion has centered on the ramifications of the punishment for Penn State football.

Will Penn State players transfer? Will the reduction of football scholarships (such a troublesome term) severely impact the quality of play? Will the NCAA action make Penn State a non-factor on the national stage? How long will it take before Penn State can regain its national prominence in college football?

These are all the wrong questions concerning the wrong subject.

The real area of concern should not be what the NCAA action will do to Penn State's national football profile. The area of concern, as spelled out in the Freeh Report and as it was addressed on Monday by the NCAA, is what both Freeh and the NCAA referred to as the "Athletic Culture."

Will this punishment and the requirements put on the Penn State administrators do anything to change the athletic culture in Happy Valley, or anywhere else? Is there

anything in Monday's action by the NCAA that goes to this concern, the real heart of the matter? Is there any indication in the reactions of Penn State students, alumni, or trustees that indicate they comprehend the most important meaning of this entire scandal?

Unless you have been on a college campus and seen the power of intercollegiate athletics close up, it is difficult to fully grasp what is meant by the "Athletic Culture" or the "Football Culture." It is in fact a powerful force at times akin to the sweep of a hurricane or the full blast of a tornado. It is also a force that is set apart from the ordinary functions of the campus having little relationship to matters outside the athletic domain.

The cult of personality surrounding the celebrity coach is reminiscent of those mindless mobs devoted to dictators across the globe. It is a world of slogans and praise chants. The public is familiar with the obvious examples of the celebrity coach such as Urban Meyer, Bobby Bowden, or Nick Saban, or those from an earlier age such as Woody Hayes or Lou Holtz. What is not so well known is the power of the lesser known celebrity coaches at small and mid-level schools. They have a winning record or offer a promise to lead an athletic program to the promised land of national rankings. In their own small world they cast a spell similar to that of the Meyer's and Saban's.

What they all have in common is a lack of accountability within the university, and their immunity from the normal rules of the campus. Where there is an "Athletic Culture" celebrity coaches and athletic directors are more powerful than the university president, and more powerful than anyone else in university administration. If they are questioned they either ignore the question or they silence the questioner.

The power of the celebrity coach is felt not just at the top of the campus structure, but it moves downward through the faculty and the staff. Everyone comes to understand that it is not a good idea to raise questions and issues relating to the athletic program or the celebrity coaches, no matter how wide or narrow the circle of celebrity might be.

Maybe the most telling example of this within the Freeh Report concerns the janitor who saw Sandusky administering

oral sex to a young boy in the locker room at Penn State. The same day another janitor saw Sandusky showering with a young boy. The two janitors discussed what they had seen with one another but told no one because they knew, or at least thought, "We can't report this, because we'll get fired." They knew they could not challenge or penetrate the "Athletic Culture."

On countless campuses across the country this same atmosphere prevails, and it is not confined to major transgressions like those perpetrated by Jerry Sandusky. How many assaults, sexual or otherwise are reported on campus and never reach public awareness? How many athletes picked up for DUI or public disorder never get beyond the arresting officer? How many coaches whose conduct on or off campus leave everything to be desired, are never called to account for their actions? How much physical abuse can be visited on an athlete by a coach before it rises to the level of concern?

In my forty years on a campus that has moved from a small and highly successful athletic program at Division II, to a mediocre level at Division I, I have seen many small and some more serious transgressions escape punishment or public scrutiny. I have seen faculty members try to offer some sort of oversight to intercollegiate athletic programs, only to be shunted aside, and dismissed as someone who is anti-intercollegiate athletics or a fuzzy headed intellectual softie.

In the "Athletic Culture" there is no room for serious oversight, questions, or criticism of the conduct of the athletic program, at least until something goes terribly wrong and criminal cases and law suits follow.

Will this change? I doubt it.

The reaction by press and public which is more concerned with Penn State's won-loss record and the rebuilding of the football program, than any serious examination of the "Athletic Culture," offers early evidence that my pessimism is not simply a product of my cynicism.

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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