

Penn State

9-11-2011

Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

 Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), [Journalism Studies Commons](#), [Other History Commons](#), [Sports Management Commons](#), and the [Sports Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Penn State" (2011). *On Sport and Society*. 44.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/44>

This Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by the Public History at STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in On Sport and Society by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact lee.dotson@ucf.edu.

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE

November 9, 2011

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.

Anyone who has dealt with an athletic department on a university campus where sport is a top priority knows all of this. I doubt that anyone with experience in this world is really shocked by what has been revealed thus far concerning the charges being made at Penn State University. Many years ago I sat across from a head football coach in an athletic committee meeting and listened to him lie in response to a question I had asked. It was not a serious issue at all, but he saw the faculty as the enemy, and rather than open up on even the most trivial of questions, he offered a gratuitous lie. If this was his mode of operation on small issues, what might happen on bigger issues? Unfortunately the university later found out that there were few limits, and his time there ended in a scandal.

Certainly the charges being brought against the former defensive coordinator at Penn State are shocking if true, but what is not a surprise is how they were dealt with by the university hierarchy. The desire not to know, to be able to maintain deniability, is one of the major defense mechanisms in this bureaucratic structure. Head coaches want to be able to claim ignorance of misbehavior, athletic directors don't want to hear the bad news from below, and university presidents would prefer that the worst news be kept at a lower level. We have seen several examples of this in the last few months, and multiple examples over the decades. "Had we only known" is one of the most important phrases in any administrative handbook for those dealing with intercollegiate athletics.

When a crack develops in the wall of isolation and bad news reaches the public press, "full investigations" are announced. Full faith in top administrators and major figures on campus is proclaimed by those at the top of the administrative structure.

The hope is, that will be the end of it. In very serious cases, such as those at Penn State, the end does not come. As more questions are asked and more is learned, the issue of the culpability of those at the top receives more attention. Who knew what? When did they know it? And what did they do about it? Positions erode and public backtracking begins. New fallback positions are offered for public consumption.

The Penn State scandal seems to be at about this stage as I write. Inevitably, the possibility of a cover up is raised. When that happens heads are about to roll, which heads and how many heads, remains to be seen. Will Joe Paterno survive? Will the university president, Graham Spanier, survive? By the time you read this you may already know the answers to these questions, and more nastiness may have landed in the public arena.

Another interesting aspect of this case, and others preceding it, is the degree to which law enforcement agencies were informed, and the degree to which they pursued the case. It can be no surprise that local law enforcement personnel, who are often also great supporters of intercollegiate athletics, have a protective approach in these cases. It has long been assumed that the Irish Catholic police detectives of New York City protected St. John's University during the investigation into the charges of the fixing of college basketball games in the late 1940s and early 1950s. It is not an unusual practice for local police to turn over athletes to their coaches rather than the courts. Public scandal is avoided, the program is protected, and a few good tickets to games may be forthcoming.

Over the past month on this listserv of the Sport Literature Association there has been a rather lengthily, and at times heated, discussion about the corruption of universities by the excesses of intercollegiate athletics. Much of the discussion centered on the student athlete and academic integrity and how much the integrity of the university is compromised by the presence of athletes who care nothing about education or who are not prepared to benefit from the opportunity for a college education.

Certainly this is a matter of concern, but what is happening at Penn State this past week, and what has happened across the United States in the past decades points in another direction.

The corruption of academic standards by "student athletes" is not the most important issue in the world of intercollegiate athletics. The conduct of university presidents, athletic directors and their assistants, coaches and assistant coaches, public relations wonks, athletic boosters, faculty members, law enforcement officials, and all those adults who are responsible for setting and maintaining standards, is the major issue surrounding the corruption of the university. What has become the monster force of intercollegiate athletics rolls on as the money rolls in and careers are built on the backs of young men and women.

This is the sobering news out of Penn State, where what was seen as an ideal football program in the idyllic atmosphere of Happy Valley, has turned into a muddy bog in the mountains of western Pennsylvania.

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.

Copyright 2011 by Richard C. Crepeau