

Penn State Scandal

3-22-2016

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Penn State Scandal" (2016). *On Sport and Society*. 99.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/99>

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One of the biggest shocks to hit sportsworld in the past few years came in the form of the Jerry Sandusky scandal at Penn State University that led to the firing of Joe Paterno as head football coach. In addition, the University President Graham Spanier, Athletic Director Tim Curley, and VP of Business and Finance Gary Schultz were all removed from their positions on the Penn State campus and all three were indicted on various charges connected to the scandal.

No major college athletic program had a comparable impeccable reputation and no football program and football coach was more admired and praised for "doing it the right way" than Joe Paterno and the Nittany Lions. The name "Happy Valley" was conferred on the home of Penn State, where football was king and Joe Paterno reigned over both the Valley and the University.

The events elicited a hasty investigation commissioned by the Penn State Board of Trustees and conducted by former FBI Director Louis Freeh. This was followed up by the NCAA who accepted the Freeh Report as their basis for punishing the university, something they were prepared to do even before the Freeh Report was made public.

One of the major questions arising from the scandal was "How could such a thing happen, especially at Penn State?" Much has been written and much has been said since the story broke. The people and institutions involved have been condemned and defended and much of this material has shed more heat than light.

Now comes Ron Smith's Wounded Lions: Joe Paterno, Jerry Sandusky, and the Crisis in Penn State Athletics from the

University of Illinois Press. Ronald A. Smith, is professor emeritus at Penn State and a Sport Historian whose expertise is Intercollegiate Athletics. Expectations for this work have been high and for the most part they have been met. For those well acquainted with Intercollegiate Athletics or for the casual fan this meticulous history will be a revelation.

Smith has laid out in considerable detail the history of Penn State athletics from its origins in the 19th century through the painful days of scandal in the early 21st century. The scope of the work may be too much for some, but to understand what happened at Penn State and what could happen at any university or college where sport has taken on the aura of the sacred, it is necessary to lay out, layer upon layer, the history of the university and its commitment to sport and especially football.

The first chapter begins in a quiet and lyrical fashion as Smith recounts his arrival in Happy Valley in the early 1960s. It is a beautiful piece of writing that given what is to come has undertones of melancholy. Playing in the background while I read it was Dvorak's "American Quartet," that has those same qualities. It was an eerie coincidence. The chapter also has a short history of the term "Happy Valley" which only serves to intensify these feelings.

From this haunting start Smith goes on into the heart of the matter. His technique is to repeatedly move back and forth in time revealing how and why this or that could happen. Some might find this a bit difficult to follow but in Smith's skilled hands the whole flows along smoothly.

Smith is careful to stress the positive at Penn State, as well as the negative consequences that flowed out of the

administrative culture of the university. He makes the point several times that Penn State had a "clean" athletic culture and Joe Paterno had a strong commitment to that culture.

What went wrong is in many ways quite simple. Football became isolated from the academic side of the university and Joe Paterno did all that he could to create and perpetuate that isolation. Those who worshipped at the altar of Penn State football or who feared the power of Paterno bought into the resulting culture and structure.

One of the most distracting aspects in the narrative is the repetition of incidents, events and quotations. Revisiting these can be useful to underline a point, but at times it can be irritating or distracting.

Beyond the story within the university Smith is highly critical of the NCAA and its hypocrisy, a quality that it has cultivated over the decades of its power. The Freeh Report comes in for its share of criticism as well, as do many other lesser personages.

In the end what Ron Smith has done is produce a detailed indictment of an isolated administrative and athletic culture that left the institution and its representatives unable "to do the right thing," when faced with a crisis. The result was a cascading scandal that engulfed Happy Valley.

This is more than a mere cautionary tale and should give pause to anyone associated in any way with a university that has come to worship its athletic culture over and above its academic culture. Unfortunately the number of these institutions is staggering.

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.