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Sandusky prosecutor gets in his face, defense urges jurors to be true to their school

BELLEFRONTE, Pa. — Lead prosecutor Joseph McGettigan seemed to be stumbling his way through the end of his closing statement, repeatedly consulting his notes to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything, and mumbling that he thought

Former Penn State University assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky leaves the Centre County Courthouse in Bellefonte, Pa., Wednesday, June 20, 2012. Sandusky is charged with 48 counts of child sexual abuse involving 10 boys over a period of 15 years. (Gene J. Puskar - AP) he was just about done.

So it was all the more powerful when his meandering ended and, standing directly behind a suddenly alarmed-looking Jerry Sandusky, he abruptly stepped so close to the accused child molester that some in the courtroom gasped. Looking right at the former Penn State football coach, McGettigan said, "He knows he did" all he's charged with doing it — molesting 10 young boys over a period of 15 years. "You know he did," too, he told the jury evenly, so "acknowledge it and give them justice."

That was before the news that Matt Sandusky, an adopted son of the defendant, has also accused him of sexual abuse, and had been prepared to testify for the state.

Sandusky has quite a pleasant default expression, and during a break earlier in the day, he'd been laughing so hard he had to cover his face with both his hands to muffle the sound. But he blanched at the unexpected incursion from the prosecutor, and after the jury left the courtroom to begin deliberating the 48 charges against him, he looked uncharacteristically shaken, shrugging at one of his lawyers. When his wife, Dottie, approached him as the courtroom emptied, her eyes were red and filled with tears, and neither looked at the other.

The jury has not, of course, heard the accusation of the coach's own adopted son. And despite days of heartbreaking testimony and this kapow of a close, I can't agree with those who argue that the jury will have no choice but to convict Sandusky.

That's because defense attorney Joe Amendola also earned his pay on Thursday, essentially appealing to the eight of 12 jurors with close ties to Penn State to be true to their school.

Every one of the dozen or so locals I talked to about the case volunteered that even if Sandusky is guilty, others at nearby Penn State are not, and the school as a whole has been unfairly blamed for its handling of the case. "I'd be offended when it would come on the news about 'the Penn State scandal,' because it wasn't Penn State; it was Jerry Sandusky" and Jerry Sandusky alone, said alumna Vicki Shepherd, a middle school social studies teacher.

There is a strong sense that the school and community as a whole are on trial, and Amendola urged the jury to find themselves not guilty.

"If you believed this happened," he argued, "you have to believe there's responsibility elsewhere" — in other words, implicating beloved longtime football coach Joe Paterno, whose recent death is generally felt here to have been hastened by the scandal involving his defensive coordinator.

Instead, Amendola said, "I submit this stuff didn't happen" at all.

If Paterno had really been told his defensive coach had been caught in an intimate position with a 10-year-old in the locker room, "wouldn't he have called 911?" Turning all evidence that makes Penn State look bad on its head, Amendola said it was just too much of a stretch to believe that five top school officials heard what Sandusky had been accused of and turned a blind eye.

In the alternative narrative put forward by Amendola, who at a couple of junctures seemed on the brink of tears, the police, the prosecutors and "the system" conspired to bring down a powerful and, if anything, excessively noble man, with or without credible evidence: Greedy lawyers ran after equally money-grubbing kids, who fabricated stories because they saw dollar signs, and in the process ruined Sandusky's life.

For one thing, the coach was too busy to have done all the molesting he's accused of, his lawyer said. And in the one statement few would dispute, Amendola said it defies belief that Sandusky's wife Dottie, who testified that she never knew of any inappropriate behavior, would have been able to avoid seeing and hearing plenty if the victims were telling Dottie Sandusky, the wife of Jerry

Sandusky, arrives the at the Centre County Courthouse, in Bellefonte, Pa. Tuesday, June 19, 2012, for Jerry Sandusky's sexual abuse trial. (Nabil K. Mark - AP) the truth.

Eight young men testified that when they were kids, in many cases trying to make their way in the world without a father, Sandusky wooed and then sexually abused them in various ways.

There is so much local pressure to hold Penn State blameless, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, that the vice chairman of the school's board of trustees apologized this week for even suggesting, in an interview with the Associated Press, that school officials might have been involved in a coverup.

A local woman sitting beside me in the courtroom said the closing statement by Amendola convinced her that Sandusky wasn't guilty after all: "It does seem queer after all the thousands of kids he's worked with" that he would turn out to be a predator at the age of 68, said Elizabeth Pennock, who used to work for Penn State, where her husband was also employed. "It doesn't make sense," she said, echoing the defense attorney's refrain throughout his closing.

But if the jury agrees, it will only assure that Sandusky — and by extension, Penn State — will go on trial all over again, because the coach's adopted son isn't the only other accuser whose testimony has yet to be heard. Court filings include a document in which the defense team asked for discovery relating to alleged victims 11-20, said **Tom Kline**, the attorney representing the young man known as Victim 5, which he interpreted to mean that the state has at least that many accusers at the ready. "It's no secret there are additional potential charges and claimants," he said. He interpreted the court filings to mean that there are at least nine more claimants the state could bring forward if it has to retry the case.