SUE PATERNO

FIGHTING FOR JOE

The widow of the Penn State coach aims to separate his legacy from the Sandusky child-abuse scandal

BY NICOLE WEISENSEE EGAN

"No one prepares you for this," says Sue (at home in State College, Pa.) of Joe's death. "There was a lot of collateral damage, which has made the journey harder."

MAKEUP: JACQUELINE MALOCU/ZENOBIA; INSET: GENE J. PUSKAR/AP

Photographs by CHRIS BUCK

1966
"The values we grew up with were honesty and hard work," says daughter Mary Kay Hort, now 48 (on her dad's lap the day he was named head coach at Penn State).

Sue Paterno's husband, storied Penn State football coach Joe Paterno, has been gone for just over a year. But while the university he served for 61 years has begun to minimize his legacy, stripping titles and removing a heroic statue of him, Paterno's presence still fills Sue's State College, Pa., home, where she and three of her five children sat for an exclusive interview with PEOPLE. "JoePa" is still there in the overflowing awards cabinet, in the angelic oil portrait given by friends after his death, and in the frequent stories she and their kids tell. "He wanted to learn to cook; I said, 'Not in my kitchen!' He leaves a mess! And he wanted to learn to use a computer," Sue says of her husband's plans for a retirement he didn't get to enjoy. In January 2012 he died at 85, two months after being fired amid suspicion that he concealed information about child-sex crimes committed by former assistant coach Jerry Sandusky.

In October Sandusky, 69, was sentenced to 30-60 years in prison on 45 counts of child sexual abuse involving 10 victims ages 8–13. On Feb. 8, as part of an attempt to reshape her husband's public memory, Sue issued an open letter to Paterno's former players, saying, "Joe was exactly the moral, disciplined and demanding man you knew him to be." She also released the findings of a six-month inquiry conducted by three legal and child-abuse experts that she funded personally as a response to the Freeh report, which examined Penn State's handling of Sandusky's crimes. Led by former FBI director Louis Freeh, the panel concluded that Paterno and other officials had shown "callous and shocking disregard for child victims."

By contrast, Sue's experts assert that the evidence doesn't prove Paterno knowingly did anything wrong. Says son Jay, 44, once a Penn State coach himself: "To know what was going on and cover it up, you'd have to be a vile human being. My dad was not."

This is not what Sue, at 73, expected her widowhood to be. Her husband spent 45 years becoming Division I football's winningest coach: one celebrated for valuing academics as much as athletics and demanding integrity from players. Alternately teary and outraged, she says her late husband did not spend his last days focused on his legacy: "He wasn't talking about clearing himself. Joe wanted the truth."

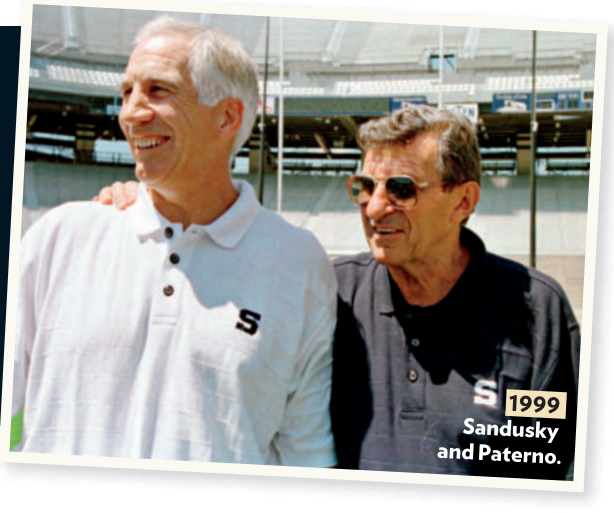
Some feel her efforts are misplaced. "The hurt feelings of the Paterno family over the Freeh report do not compare to the hurt inflicted on the victims," says Tom Kline, attorney for Sandusky victim No. 5. But Sue maintains that, despite evidence that he had some knowledge of incidents in 1998 (at the time Sandusky admitted to

PAUL VATHIS/AP(2)

A SANDUSKY COVER-UP?

The Freeh Report Says: "In order to avoid the consequences of bad publicity, the most powerful leaders at the University—Spanier, Schultz, Paterno and Curley—repeatedly concealed critical facts relating to Sandusky's child abuse."

Paterno Family's Report Says: "There is no direct evidence that Mr. Paterno was aware of the 1998 incident or the investigation that followed. Furthermore, there are no credible facts in the Freeh report to support its principal finding against Mr. Paterno—that he conspired with others to cover up the 2001 incident."



1999
Sandusky and Paterno.

“NO ONE CAN TAKE JOE AWAY FROM US. WE KNOW WHO HE WAS”

showering naked with a boy; Paterno testified he did not recall hearing about it) and 2001 (when a witness told Paterno that Sandusky “fondled” a boy in the shower), Joe did not grasp the extent of the crimes. “That’s why Joe said [in a statement after being fired], ‘With the benefit of hindsight, I wish I had done more.’ ”

Now Sue says she is spending “a lot of time” reading about pedophilia. “I want to know what we can do to try to prevent it.” She has not wanted to approach any of Sandusky’s 10 known victims while lawsuits are pending but plans to fund programs that raise awareness about sexual predators. “None of us were educated enough to see what [Sandusky] was doing,” she says. “It was right in front of us and we were blind.”

In 1958 Sue Pohland was a freshman Penn State English lit major—she still casually quotes Albert Camus—when she met Paterno, a 31-year-old assistant coach. She was dating one of his players, but they became friends. “I was recruited!” she says, laughing. They wed in 1962.

In 1969 Jerry Sandusky, who had played for Joe as a student, came on as a defensive coach. The men were not close, says Sue. But she did throw Dottie Sandusky a baby shower when she and Jerry adopted the first of their six children, and she and Joe admired the work of the Second Mile, a charity Sandusky founded to help at-risk kids. (The Second Mile is now closed, and Sue says she hasn’t spoken to Dottie since Jerry’s 2011 arrest.)

In February 2001 graduate-assistant coach Mike McQueary came to the Paternos’ home for a serious talk. “Joe said to me, ‘I don’t think you want to be in here,’ ” recalls Sue. “So I went outside and started weeding.” McQueary told Joe what he had seen the night before: Sandusky in the gym showers with a boy. McQueary would later testify that he witnessed a rape; Paterno testified—and McQueary confirmed—that the incident was described as “sexual.” Paterno told athletic director Tim Curley and a Penn State VP; Sandusky continued to access the gym. “He said, ‘I didn’t know how to handle it, so I reported it to people I thought were supposed to handle it,’ ” says Jay.

Sue says Joe never mentioned any of it to her. When the grand jury report detailed the crimes, she was horrified. “You don’t know how hard it was to accept that anyone would do that to a child.” She turns to her children: “I mean, you kids were in the pool with Jerry when you were little!”

Ten days after Paterno was fired from Penn State—via a phone call—he was diagnosed with lung cancer. Had he lived, findings in the Freeh report might have put him on trial too. In his absence his legacy will continue to be debated, but not in this home. “No one can take Joe away from us,” says Sue. “We knew who he was.” ●

“Joe wanted the truth, too, about Jerry,” says Sue (at their home, Feb. 1). Below: Paterno supporters rally after his funeral.

2012

INSET: GARY CAMERON/REUTERS