

THE MORNING CALL

ESPN documentary on Joe Paterno's legacy doesn't take sides, but may rekindle plenty of emotion

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APR 17, 2022 AT 7:11 AM

Those seeking resolution for one of the most complex legacies in sports history won't find it in ESPN's E60 look at "The Paterno Legacy."

The hourlong show, which premieres at 8 p.m. Monday is compelling, riveting, and thought-provoking. It will elicit plenty of emotion from those who remember quite well the incredibly fast-moving events of November 2011, when Penn State's iconic football coach, Joe Paterno, went from being one of America's most beloved figures and most successful college leaders to being fired and, in the minds of many, tainted forever by scandal.

Those who feel Paterno did everything he could do and followed the proper protocols when learning of the abuses of assistant coach Jerry Sandusky won't get the exoneration they are looking for.

Neither will the others who want a full indictment of a man who in their minds put his legacy and the squeaky-clean image of Penn State football ahead of protecting innocent children from a convicted predator such as Sandusky.

ESPN makes it clear that Paterno had more of an impact on one college campus and one athletic program than perhaps any other coach in the history of collegiate athletics.

Interviews of people in the parking lot at Penn State's pregame tailgates and throughout the State College community reveal that Paterno's legacy among the mobile home crowd remains firmly intact.

"Just from growing up here, the legacy is still really strong," said Brian Mehalick, a 1997 Penn State graduate.

“I still think Joe did a lot of really great things in this town and this town wouldn’t be what it is without his diligence, his effort, the way he taught people how to live their life,” said State College resident Mike Hughes.

“What’s JoePa’s legacy? ... [look at] the house that Joe built, that’s his legacy,” said 2001 Penn State grad Christy Miller standing in a Beaver Stadium parking lot. “You cannot deny that guy didn’t bring this crowd, this stadium, this fan base. Everybody’s here for Joe.”

The documentary didn’t dismiss the notion of Paterno’s “grand experiment,” which was based on the idea that college football players should actually go to class, graduate, and become productive citizens — and if they also became outstanding football players in the process, so be it.

“It wasn’t just like he wanted to build players on the field, but he wanted them off the field and into their careers after sports,” said Mike Wallace, a cornerback on Paterno’s last teams, from 2009-11.

“He was one of the most admirable people in all of sports,” said Hall of Fame broadcaster Bob Costas. “Success with honor. ... the money raised for non-athletic purposes for the university. ... turning down overtures to go elsewhere for more money. ... there was a lot to respect and admire.”

Those comments came in what might be described as the feel-good portion of the documentary, which also included clips of him passing Alabama’s Paul “Bear” Bryant as the winningest coach in FBS football history and eventually getting win No. 409 on Oct. 29, 2011, the victory that enabled Paterno to pass Eddie Robinson as the winningest coach in NCAA Division I history.

Little did anyone know that the depth of the Sandusky scandal would come to light in the days that followed that historic win over Illinois and that Paterno had coached his last game, albeit from the press box.

The documentary goes quickly through all of the emotionally wrenching events the Sandusky scandal caused, including the bizarre nature of the first game without Paterno coaching, memorable scenes that took place outside Paterno’s ranch home just a few blocks from campus, the student demonstrations throughout downtown State College that came after Paterno’s firing, and the all-too-real reality show that played out on national television as a once-unthinkable demise occurred.

Paterno’s death just 74 days after his firing and his funeral also received their share of airtime, and there was the revelation that Paterno had to lay down flat

in the back of a vehicle when taken to the hospital for his cancer treatment to avoid being detected by a considerable number of media members who had camped outside his house.

A considerable portion of the show was devoted to the Paterno statue just outside Beaver Stadium that was taken down unceremoniously in the dark of night. The statue came to symbolize the Paterno legacy, and when it was taken down and stored in a disclosed location, the anger of the pro-Paterno crowd reached its apex.

There were interviews with Graham Spanier, the former Penn State University president, and Gary Schultz, the school's ex-senior vice-president of finance and business, both of whom were convicted of misdemeanors for crime endangerment and given two months in jail.

"My biggest regret is that we didn't turn [Sandusky's abuse] in for the department of welfare to investigate it," Schultz said. "I think, you know, that's what we should have done."

Spanier agreed, saying: "If we had known it was more, of course, it would have been responsible to notify anybody and everybody who might have intervened."

Spanier, interestingly, called the removal of Paterno's statue a big mistake.

"That is rewriting history," he said. "They even went through the trouble of re-landscaping the area where it was so that nobody can tell where it was or that it was ever there. That's just wrong."

There were poignant interviews with Paterno's son and assistant coach, Jay Paterno, and Aaron Fisher, who was Sandusky's first victim.

There was also an attempted interview by ESPN reporter John Barr of current Penn State coach James Franklin, who with arms folded, declined to make any comment about Paterno's legacy and said he only wanted to talk about the current team and the upcoming game.

Barr did get some comments from Sandusky himself in a phone interview in which Sandusky, who was originally charged with 52 counts of [sexual abuse](#) of boys over a 15-year period from 1994 to 2009, proclaimed his innocence.

Sandusky, who wants a retrial and maintains that not everything was brought out in the first trial, was asked about Paterno's legacy. He said the best way for Paterno to be exonerated was for him to be exonerated himself.

In the end, the questions of what did Paterno know and when did he know it are not fully explored and certainly not answered. The documentary did mention Paterno's own statement on the matter in an interview with the Washington Post conducted between his firing and his death, when he said: "I had never had to deal with something like that and I didn't feel adequate. I didn't know exactly how to handle it. In hindsight, I wish I had done more."

The documentary concludes with a look at the current Penn State campus, which has little mention of Paterno except for his name being on the library and the comments of several students, who say the Paterno saga has little bearing on their lives more than a decade later.

There was an interesting look at the tiles of a colorful mosaic on Fraser Street in State College, "a memorial in plain sight" Barr describes it.

The 409 tiles represent the colors of the teams Paterno's squad defeated in his career.

No plaque, sign, or any other mention of Paterno draws attention to the tribute.

In the end, the legacy of Paterno is as difficult to discern as the meaning of the tiles on the Fraser Street building.

"The lessons I've learned from Joe will stay with me forever and they've already been passed on to my kids and their kids," former Whitehall High, Penn State, and NFL star Matt Millen said. "So, he's alive and well. I watched the man work. I watched his life. Was he flawed? Sure he was. But I'll take the best of Joe Paterno and put it up against the best of whoever you got."

"It has become saint or sinner and Joe was neither," said **Tom Kline**, an attorney for one of Sandusky's victims. "He was a man who was flawed. He should have been able to recognize the seriousness and significance of what was presented to him. Had he done so, then this blemish wouldn't be on his record."