

By Kevin Johnson
October 7, 2012



Sandusky begins grim transition to prison

In the moments immediately after a jury pronounced Jerry Sandusky guilty, the man who once ranked among the most admired figures in Pennsylvania and all of college football began an uncertain journey into the abyss of the nation's vast criminal justice system.

As a packed Bellefonte, Pa., courtroom was absorbing the news of his conviction on 45 counts of horrific child sex abuse, the 68-year-old former Penn State University assistant football coach was in a backroom under police guard emptying his pockets of a cellphone, spare change and the common accoutrements of the free world that he is all but certain to never see again.

Centre County, Pa., Sheriff Denny Nau, who helped escort the hand-cuffed prisoner through a gantlet of photographers and hissing spectators to a waiting squad car, said the moment was notable for Sandusky's silence.

"The guy didn't say a thing," Nau said.

Except in private meetings with his attorneys and family members, Sandusky has maintained that silence since arriving at the Centre County, Pa., Correctional Facility, where he awaits sentencing Tuesday. In a written response to USA TODAY, Sandusky declined to comment on the direction of his lawyers.

"Probably down the road, if you are still interested," Sandusky wrote.

Since his late-night arrival June 22 at the county jail, Sandusky's life has been largely directed by a 45-page inmate handbook, says his attorney, Joe Amendola. It is a detailed document that controls virtually every aspect of his grim life in transition — from when he can shave himself (between 8 and 10 a.m.) to how long he has to eat meals (15 minutes).

Meal trays are delivered to a sparsely appointed cell containing a bed, toilet and a desk. Visits are limited to one per week — a time usually spent talking with his wife of 45 years, Dottie, who continues to support him.

Other visitors, including some former Penn State football players whom Amendola declines to identify, also have made the trek to the low-slung county jail, a short ride from the stadium where Sandusky once patrolled the sidelines alongside head coach Joe Paterno.

Still, the visits are not without stark reminders that the once-revered former coach belongs to a different world:

He is subject to strip searches before and after each encounter. He spends much of his day, his attorney says, compiling notes from a failed defense and preparing a statement he wants to make at his sentencing.

"He is not going to apologize," Amendola says of the proposed statement. "He will not be asking for mercy. He's always said he is innocent; he firmly believes that, and he's hanging on to that."

Sandusky also is helping prepare an intended appeal, but even Amendola concedes that his client faces almost impossible odds and a maximum sentence of 442 years.

"Whatever the sentence, because of the number of offenses and Jerry's age, it is tantamount to life," Amendola said. "We've talked about the possibility of this from the very beginning. It's not going to be pleasant."

A prison target

Herbert Hoelter, a prison consultant, has helped prepare some of the country's most famous new felons — Bernard Madoff, Michael Vick and Martha Stewart to name a few — for lives in prison. Hoelter says none of them carried the risk that Sandusky brings with him as he approaches the state prison gates for the first time.

As a celebrity, a convicted sex offender with multiple child victims and the man ultimately responsible for the sanctions that gutted Penn State's beloved football program, Sandusky represents a uniquely dangerous convergence of vulnerability in one Pennsylvania inmate.

"I don't think there is any way — given what he represents — that he'll stay out of protected custody," Hoelter says. "He's likely looking at spending the rest of his life alone in solitary confinement just for his own safety."

Even the hated Madoff — the central figure in one of the largest financial frauds in U.S. history in which he swindled thousands of investors out of about \$20 billion — does not spark the visceral reaction that follows Sandusky and his crimes involving children, Hoelter says.

In federal prison serving a 150-year sentence, Madoff is destined to die in custody. At the same time, Hoelter says, his client is able to live among other prisoners and directs classes for inmates seeking their high school general equivalency diplomas.

"The work and interaction at least provide a way in which he can feel good about himself," Hoelter says of Madoff. "Sandusky is a much more difficult challenge. He's in for a tough, tough ride."

At trial, Pennsylvania prosecutor Joseph McGettigan referred to Sandusky as "the predator." In prison, says inmate safety consultant Larry Levine based in Los Angeles, the former coach will become "the prey."

The potential risk for sex offenders in general is very real, Levine says.

Four inmates have been killed in Pennsylvania prisons since 2010, including one sex offender. It is not known whether the slain inmate's rape conviction was the reason for the killing, Department of Corrections spokeswoman Susan McNaughton says.

In California, six sex offenders have been slain in state prison this year. The number includes the murders in May of at least three prisoners convicted of sex offenses involving children. California Department of Corrections spokeswoman Terry Thornton says it was not known whether all the inmate victims were targeted because of their offenses.

"But those inmates who have offended against children are targeted more often than not," she says.

In one of the highest profile killings involving a child sex offender, John Geoghan — a main figure in the Boston priest sex scandal — was killed in prison in 2003 by a fellow inmate who specifically targeted the priest.

Levine, who served a 10-year federal prison sentence for narcotics trafficking, weapons possession, obstruction of justice and securities fraud before he began teaching prospective inmates survival techniques, says child sex offenders are often more despised in prison than even informants.

Levine says he has counseled some sex offenders, routinely targeted for abuse and harassment, to create new identities in prison in which they claim credit for offenses unrelated to sex crimes.

"With all the information available on the Internet, that's even hard for people nobody has ever seen or heard of," Levine said. "Everybody knows who this guy (Sandusky) is."

Like Hoelter, Levine says he believes Sandusky is destined to spend the rest of his life in protective custody, where every regimented day is like the day before and the next.

"It's like living that movie Groundhog Day," he says. "I don't think there is anything you can do to prepare somebody for that."

McNaughton, the Pennsylvania corrections spokeswoman, says there are no extraordinary preparations taking place for Sandusky's expected arrival. She says the state has no special units for the 6,777 sex offenders scattered across the system's 26 prisons, which house 51,500 inmates.

After sentencing, McNaughton says, Sandusky will be transferred to the prison system's evaluation unit in Camp Hill, just southwest of Harrisburg. He will spend "several weeks to a couple of months" undergoing psychological screening, being evaluated for medical needs (his attorney says he is in good health) and potential security risks, before a more permanent assignment.

"He'll go through regular processing like any other inmate," McNaughton says.

Sandusky's swift fall

A year ago, Jerry Sandusky enjoyed all of the comforts that his status as a former Penn State assistant football coach allowed.

As recently as a week before charges against him were announced last November, he was mingling in the exclusive Nittany Lion Club at Penn State's Beaver Stadium on a Saturday when Paterno was recognized as the winningest big-time college football coach in history.

The victory over Illinois would be the last game Paterno, now deceased, coached before the charges against Sandusky prompted his removal. The win, as well as the record, would be wiped out in a subsequent cascade of NCAA sanctions vacating 111 school victories.

This football season, Sandusky has an obstructed view of Penn State football on a television near his isolation unit, only if he positions himself at a certain angle in his small cell. For some time, his attorney says, Sandusky was not allowed even a deck of playing cards to pass the time awaiting his sentencing out of fear that he might

use the cards' sharp edges to harm himself.

"He has never considered suicide," Amendola said.

To fight the numbing boredom, Amendola says, his client assembled a card deck of his own making, using slips of paper to play solitaire.

The attorney says Sandusky's state prison assignment will be up to corrections officials.

"I am confident that they will put him in the safest place they can," Amendola says. "They are not going to throw him to wolves."

Sandusky's victims do not share the lawyer's concern for his client.

An undisclosed number of victims are to make statements at the former coach's hearing, including a young man designated by the state grand jury as "Victim 5." The victim's attorney says his client is unmoved by Sandusky's claims of innocence.

"My client knows Sandusky is guilty," attorney Thomas Kline says. "We do not believe that it will be constructive for Mr. Sandusky to continue to maintain his innocence in the face of the overwhelming evidence on which he was convicted." ...