

# A legacy worthy of the classics

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Joe Paterno, who died last week at the age of 85, wasn't just the winningest gridiron coach in Division I history. Nor was he a villain who tried to cover up a scandal that ultimately resulted in his dismissal as head of Penn State's football program.

Paterno was simply a human being who followed his heart into higher education and, with extraordinary effort, achieved a leg-



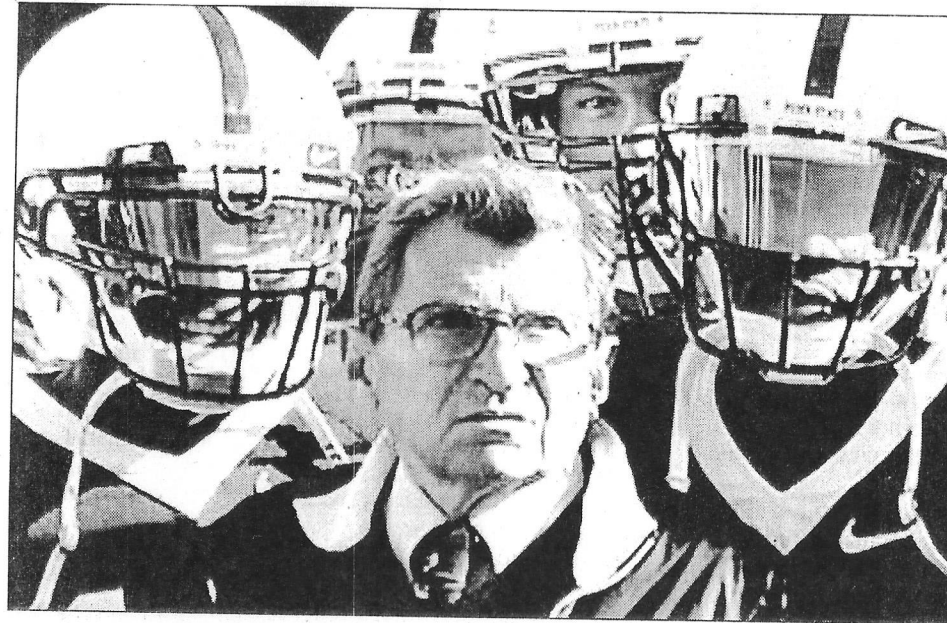
**Paterno**

acy worthy of the classics. It was, after all, Paterno's early fascination with Virgil's epic poem, *The Aeneid*, that shaped his life. He was introduced to the classical tale in

1943 by a Jesuit priest who taught Latin at Brooklyn Prep. Just 17 years old, the bookish youngster embraced the poem, using it as a blueprint for his life.

"I don't think anybody can get a handle on what makes me tick as a person without understanding what I learned from Virgil," Paterno wrote in a 1989 autobiography. "The *Aeneid* seeped into far corners of my mind, into my feelings about what is true and honorable and important. It helped shape everything I have since become."

Based on Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid* follows the ad-



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**Paterno with his Nittany Lions before an October 2007 game against Wisconsin. In 1973, Paterno almost left State College to become a head coach in the National Football League.**

ventures of Aeneas, a prince and highly moral warrior. When the Greeks overrun his native Troy, Aeneas has no choice but to build a new life elsewhere. He struggles with many obstacles in order to fulfill his destiny of leading men in a new home, the City of Rome.

Substitute "Paterno" for "Aeneas" and "Penn State" for "Rome," and the two odysseys are very similar.

Born on Dec. 21, 1926 in Brooklyn's Flatbush section, Joseph Vincent Paterno also struggled with his destiny. He was the eldest son of a New York Supreme Court clerk who wanted him to become a lawyer; and he pursued a college education with that goal in mind. After high school, Paterno earned a scholarship to Brown Uni-

versity where he majored in literature and played on the varsity football team. A motivated student who loved books, he was also a talented athlete excelling on the gridiron. Initially a defensive back, Bruins' coach Charles "Rip" Engle was so impressed with Paterno's leadership ability that he made him his quarterback.

When he graduated in 1950, Paterno intended to fulfill the promise he made to his father and enter law school at Boston University. But Engle, hired to become Penn State's new head football coach, persuaded him to become an assistant. Paterno, a 23-year-old bachelor, reluctantly agreed, telling Engle that his stay with the Nittany Lions "likely would be brief." Instead, Paterno followed his heart and threw himself fully into the career of a teacher-coach, eventually replacing Engle, his mentor, in 1966. Penn State would become his "Rome." Like Aeneas, Paterno was a leader of young warriors, preparing them to do battle every Saturday afternoon for 46 autumns. He emphasized the necessity of players giving their fullest effort, regardless of the outcome.

"A hard-fought, hairline-close game is as classical in sports as tragedy in theater," Paterno once explained.

"A tragedy usually ends with the stage strewn with bodies from both sides of a struggle, and you can't tell who won or lost. Victory is contained in defeat, and defeat is contained in victory.

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That's the way it is in the best of games. What counts in sports is not the victory but the magnificence of the struggle."

What really mattered to Paterno was the character of his student-athletes and the intelligence, passion and sheer physicality they brought to the game. He was "old school." No individual was bigger than the team. Quarterbacks often shared playing time and a running back could be changed to a defensive end if it improved the team's fortunes. The "team concept" was reinforced by the famously plain uniforms and the directive that players refrain from trash-talking and on-field celebrations.

In the process, Paterno achieved his destiny by building one of the nation's most respected collegiate sports programs. The football achievements are legendary. He holds the NCAA Division I record for most years as a head football coach at the same school (46); the Division I record for most victories (409); two national championships (1982, '86); and five undefeated seasons (1968, '69, '73, '86, '94). But for Joe Paterno, the educator, the more rewarding achievements involved the students whose lives he influenced.

Under Paterno, Penn State's football players ranked consistently at or near the top of NCAA graduation rates, underscoring his so-called "Great Experi-

ment" of "first-class football played by students who put first-class lives first." With an "old school" approach to life, he had a special talent for taking self-absorbed adolescents and turning them into men. Many of his former players went on to become highly regarded corporate leaders, physicians, lawyers, and teachers, among other professions. They remain Paterno's most valuable contribution to society. Don't think he didn't realize it, either.

In 1973, Paterno almost left State College to become a head coach in the National Football League. New England Patriots' owner Billy Sullivan wanted him so badly, he offered the native New Yorker a multimillion-dollar package that included part ownership of the team. Paterno initially accepted, but after a sleepless night, he turned down the offer. He knew, in his heart, he was destined to remain an educator.

When asked why he backed out, the bespectacled teacher-coach cited a lesson he had learned from *The Aeneid* when Aeneas discovers that Turnus, an Italian prince and longtime rival, has killed a close friend. Incensed, Aeneas, who now realizes that he should have killed the Italian prince earlier, ignores his pleas for mercy and runs him through with a sword. The lesson according to Paterno was: "When you make the wrong choice, as Aeneas found out,

life comes down on you with some terrible whacks." The remark was prophetic.

Paterno made the wrong choice in 2002 when he learned of former assistant coach Jerry Sandusky's alleged molestation of a young boy on campus. After he reported the incident to the athletic director Tim Curley and university vice-president Gary Schultz, he washed his hands of the matter, enabling Sandusky to continue the alleged abuse. Instead, Paterno, an educator, should have held himself to a higher standard and made sure that Penn State officials contacted the police and the state child welfare agency to investigate the incident.

When Sandusky was finally charged with the crime on Nov. 5, 2011, Paterno was immediately suspected of complicity in the administration's cover-up during the intervening decade. Four days later, Paterno, admitting that he "should have done more," said he planned to retire at the end of the football season. It was too little, too late. That same night, he was ignominiously dismissed as head football coach by Penn State's board of trustees. No doubt, Paterno felt betrayed by Curley and Schultz. There must also have been some resentment after Sen. Bob Casey and Rep. Pat Toomey withdrew their nomination for a Congressional Medal of Honor. And perhaps there was some embarrassment when the Paterno

family agreed to allow the prestigious Maxwell Club to remove his name from their "Coach of the Year" award.

Sadly, Joe Paterno, a man who so deeply believed in his life's mission, spent the last few months on earth battling lung cancer and evaluating his legacy. Like Aeneas, he had spent a lifetime enduring battles, storms and the rage of the gods, but the most painful battle was the one that raged inside himself before he died last Sunday morning.

As with all epic poems, Paterno's life must be taken as a whole because it's the victories and the challenges, the glories and the failures that inspire us, making those poems resonate centuries after they were written. Those classical poems also remind us that a single episode does not constitute the sum of a man's life.

If we celebrate Joe Paterno, we must do so with the understanding that despite his humanness, he had a remarkable and enduring influence on the lives so many. Like Aeneas, he went into battle with boys and transformed them into men.

If, on the other hand, we vilify Paterno, we must first put ourselves in his place and do so with a candid appraisal of our own shortcomings. Only those without fault can judge him. As with Aeneas, Joe Paterno can only be judged by his god. May he rest in peace.

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