

Lingering Items--Retribution Edition

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Thursday, July 26 2012 11:30 AM - Last Updated Thursday, July 26 2012 8:00 AM



Time will be the real arbiter of whether or not the NCAA did the right thing in severely punishing Penn State University, but for those complaining perhaps they missed the meat of NCAA president Mark Emmert's reasoning.

That Penn State was made an example of is probably beyond question. But of what, exactly? With no sense of irony, Emmert railed against the fact that the culture of winning has become so all consuming that it has created an atmosphere of "too big to fail" programs at some universities.

The phrase "too big to fail" is thrown around a lot these days and I'm not sure that it could ever apply in this context, but the point is still taken. At Penn State as in many places, the wants, needs and desires of the football program came to dominate the entire ethos of the university. When Joe Paterno, as well entrenched of a head coach as there has ever been, could literally impose his will on his own superiors by halting any further investigation into or a reporting of the allegations regarding Jerry Sandusky, it's pretty clear to any objective observer that the tail is wagging the dog and that's usually a huge red flag.

It's easy to understand how it gets to that point and that's perhaps where the NCAA is still turning a blind eye, particularly in the context of "too big to fail." Everything the NCAA stands for at the moment is about money and how its two most prominent programs, football as practiced in the Bowl Subdivision and Division I men's basketball, can generate even more of it. That money is used by the universities as a way of offsetting the costs of running big time programs and other non-revenue generating sports and that money also is used by the NCAA itself to run

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the rest of its so-called mission.

The athletic budgets at some schools these days runs upwards of \$100 million. The bulk of that money goes toward football but it's also used to run the multitude of other programs that provide great opportunities for student-athletes but serve only as a drag on the budget. Few athletic programs these days are self sustaining so it takes subsidies from the university's general fund, along with private fundraising, to cover the difference. Those are dollars that can't be used elsewhere in the university community.

That puts a great deal of pressure on football and basketball. A winning program is critical to a large university because it generates far more money than a losing program. They really are the tide that raises all of the university's ships.

This really was the basis of Paterno's "grand experiment" at Penn State and in a larger sense the basis for how the NCAA itself operates. The revenue generating sports serve as a catalyst for everything else that needs to get done and for awhile it worked, at least until it didn't.

As the program under Paterno's leadership began to assert its control over the university generally, the construct flipped. Arguably the NCAA never had that solid of bearings in the first place.

In any case, that's the context in which Penn State's punishment was handed down. By essentially assuring that Penn State will not be competitively relevant for years, the NCAA really is attempting to change a culture of winning at any cost that the trustees of the university still seem unwilling to change.

The question is when will someone step in to teach the NCAA the same lesson?

Nothing about what the NCAA is doing generally is meant to change this equation. The agreement to go to a half-assed playoff system is about first generating even more money and second finding a new way of splitting that ever-increasing pie. It will only continue the emphasis on winning at every level of what's an increasingly corrupt enterprise.

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Penn State will serve as a cautionary tale for awhile but it will end up being forgotten eventually, sooner rather than later. But as sure as you're reading this, there's a handful of programs around the country that are heading in the same direction that caused Penn State to spin out of control. How big is Nick Saban in Alabama? How about Les Miles at LSU? Where will Ohio State get under Urban Meyer? The next time any university makes another compromise in favor of the football program, and its probably happening a dozen times a day across the country, will be another clue that its trustees missed as to why the program ultimately exploded in a wave of some scandal or another.

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Speaking of the Penn State trustees, if they think their job is done because they decided, albeit reluctantly, to take down the statute of Paterno, they are mistaken.

We'll never know for certain, but had the trustees stepped in and shut down the program at the end of last season and carried it into this season, it seems unlikely that the NCAA would have lopped on additional penalties.

As it was, the NCAA was faced with an incredible situation. The Freeh report revealed in letter and form how the trustees were willing participants in allowing the culture of Penn State to metastasize to the point where they, too, were essentially underlings of Paterno. They voted down reforms in previous years that would have changed the culture of the university if adopted. They cast a blind eye when Paterno insisted on dealing with his player disciplinary issues outside of the university's general population. The president of the Board failed to inform the rest of the Board about the problems bubbling up on the Sandusky front. The trustees as a group acceded to Paterno's demands for a more lucrative contract even as the controversy was developing. Then as the problems played out the trustees were very reluctant to act. Firing Paterno was the easy part. What they failed to do was take a more firm stance on the program

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itself.

All of this put the NCAA in a nearly untenable position. Its reaction may have been unprecedented but so too was the situation it faced.

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As it turns out, Paterno isn't the only one to feel like the Sandusky scandal wasn't a football scandal. I've been fascinated, actually, by the number of head coaches and columnists that have been critical of the NCAA for sticking its nose into a situation where they claim it doesn't belong.

If the trustees won't do anything, who then is left?

But you don't have to answer that question to appreciate that that NCAA had no real alternative and stay true to its ever murkier mission. Even if you take the view that the NCAA only deals with competitive balance issues, this was certainly one of them.

By protecting the football program from the public revelation that its long term assistant head coach was a long term serial pedophile, Penn State and Paterno were able to retain a favorable reputation long after Paterno ceased to be an effective head coach. It helped in recruiting. Put it this way, what parent would knowingly send their son to be coached by someone who was inclined to protect a pedophile at the expense of his victims? Exactly.

Penn State was able to stay competitive because of this cover up and for that, at the very least, it deserved punishment by the NCAA.

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