



Defining a legacy is complicated.

As a society, we feel the need to make someones legacy a universal and accepted truth -- not because we strive to agree with each other, but because unity brings comfort when facing the complicated emotions that accompany the death of someone we cared for.

Joe Paterno had barely taken his last breath before the rest of us went to work -- relentlessly scrambling to define the parameters in which we should remember an 85 year old man who impacted so many.

Just three short months ago -- this would have been very easy for most of us.

Joe Paterno would have been remembered by most as a man who dedicated his life to the development of young men. The words "college football" would trigger his face in our minds -- the unhindered smile that revealed wrinkles etched by decades of hard work and charity.

"Joe Paterno was a good man," we'd say. "His loss is our own."

Unfortunately it's not that easy. His legacy will never be universally accepted.

That's because a legacy, by definition, cannot be surmised by the court of public opinion. A legacy is perceived individually by those left behind who were changed, positively or negatively, by the one we lost. My feelings on Joe Paterno's legacy will likely be different than yours. That's the point.

Some people -- likely those with ties to Penn State -- will fight to build his legacy from the mountainous amount of good he did. They'll reference the millions of dollars he made for the university. They'll reference the work he did (and the money he raised) for the Special Olympics and the athletes who participate in that amazing event. They'll reference hundreds, literally hundreds, of stories where Paterno altered a road leading to a bad place to a destination of joy and happiness.

That is absolutely their right to remember Joe that way. That's his legacy to them.

To his former players, they'll remember Paterno completely differently. They'll remember him as a father figure -- a man who taught them more about life than anyone else ever bothered to. Some players will be able to say he helped them reach educational standards they never thought possible. Some players, like Adam Taliaferro, will remember how supportive Paterno was after a devastating blow left him paralyzed from the neck down. Taliaferro will remember how Paterno visited him on a weekly basis in the hospital, encouraging him despite the 3% chance the doctors gave him to ever walk again. Paterno was there when Taliaferro proved everyone wrong, and the young man stood up and hugged the coach who never gave up on him. Taliaferro was recently quoted saying, "The last three months, I've just wanted to go up on a rooftop and shout, 'I wish you knew him like I do!'"

No one can tell Taliaferro he's wrong to feel that way about Joe. That's his legacy to him.

To his family -- the five children he raised and the wife he left behind -- they'll remember Joe as their rock. They'll remember him as the person responsible for the good in their lives. They'll remember him as the best father in the world, and the most loyal and loving husband you could ever imagine. They'll take his loss harder than anyone -- and they will vehemently defend him to anyone who thinks less than they do of him.

That's their right as family members. You wouldn't expect anything less.

But to the victims of Jerry Sandusky (and the families of said victims), they likely remember Joe in a different light. These memories haven't been formed over years of direct contact with Paterno. In fact, Joe's legacy to them was formed by his complete and utter absence in their lives. These victims probably stay up at night wondering how they turned someone who was Superman to so many others into a silent spectator in the horror that became their own personal lives. These victims probably have trouble hearing about all the people Joe helped because it reminds them of the shame they faced as a result of Sandusky's monstrous actions -- and how it must be their fault, or something they did, that hindered Joe from doing the right thing.

There isn't a whole lot anyone could do to convince these victims that Joe didn't monumentally fail them, and everything we thought he stood for, by his inaction in the Sandusky scandal. That's his legacy to them.

So how should the rest of us remember Joseph Vincent Paterno? Should we remember him as a saint? Should we remember him as a man who did more good than bad, or vice versa? Should we remember him as strictly a football coach or a humanitarian who made one mistake?

Again, by definition, a legacy isn't something that's agreed upon by a large group of people. By definition, a legacy is a lasting impression someone leaves behind after they pass. So, in short, Joe Paterno's legacy is whatever you think it should be -- just don't expect anyone else to agree with you.

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