

Paterno State's Nittany liars

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Thoughts and observations about the Penn State child sex abuse scandal:

- After ridding itself of a coach it had employed for decades when it learned that the coach, Joe Paterno, has failed to provide adequate, minimal protection for young people in its sports facilities, Penn State claims it has wised up, will install corrective policies and programs, and change its internal culture of arrogant athletic hubris. Then again, it said the same thing after the departure of Rene Portland as the school's women's basketball coach after she and the school were sued for discriminating against lesbian student-athletes.

- Cars.com reportedly was one of the first of half a dozen or so advertisers to pull its spots from Penn State football games, beginning with last weekend's 17-14 loss to Nebraska: a game, incidentally, that ESPN said drew twice the number of expected television viewers. Guess advertisers really don't like the idea of their money either paying the pensions for the former PSU officials who were involved in the cover-up or to be used for the legal fees in the lawsuits that undoubtedly will start stacking up any day now.

- I love school spirit, but what the hell were those students doing when they were overturning cars and rioting after the firing of Paterno for his failure to act on the initial reports his former assistant coach Jerry Sandusky was having sex with a minor in the Penn State locker room showers? Talk about clueless.

- Some good will come out of this grim situation if it results in governments adopting appropriate laws, and organizations adopting appropriate procedures, to help ward off similar abuses in the future and accelerate their proper reporting. Pennsylvania law, for instance, until this year did not have a requirement that school employees report their criminal histories; and Second Mile, the program Sandusky founded to help at-risk youths and through which he is now accused of having acquired victims, has not required background checks on its employees.

But laws and background checks are in and of themselves not sufficient protection. Sandusky, for instance, had no criminal background; and statistics show that most pedophiles do not have previous criminal records. Intelligence, alertness, and the willingness to ask questions and confront situations are the first and best line of defense.

- On the flip side, there will undoubtedly be a chilling effect on volunteerism if the Penn State scandal triggers a witch-hunt atmosphere. False accusations or misinterpretations of spontaneous emotional expressions can discourage the kind of selfless support needed to provide the volunteer sport services at-risk youth benefit from the most.

- Beyond the disgust and rage over the alleged sexual assaults themselves, I, like so many others, am incensed at the institutional and individual failures in Happy Valley.

You see a kid being raped in a shower, you shouldn't run off to tell someone else and make it their problem, or worry about what effect reporting the incident might have on your career.

Damn it, you step in and stop it then and there. An instant waited is an instant too long. You get the kid to people who can take care of him and you get the cops to deal with the assailant. Period.

An assistant tells you he saw something "disturbing" in the school showers involving a man and a child, you ask questions. You don't just pass the buck and plead ignorance later. And when the guy keeps showing up, you keep asking questions.

If a coach tells you about an incident report, you don't try to bury it until the day a grand jury report comes out and accuses you of being a Nittany Liar: you bar the accused from your premises and set the legal inquiry in motion.

- If they were to make a movie about the Paterno era, they would create a portrait of the things that go so horribly wrong when a personality cult is allowed to overshadow the program it created and see itself as invulnerable to review.

In fact, I think I saw that movie the past weekend. It was called *J. Edgar*.