

Documentary Film Analysis

Matthew J. McCarthy

University of Western States

COUN 6155: Sport and Society

Dr. Matthew Moore

November 19, 2023

"The Paterno Legacy"

Joe Paterno was the head football coach for Penn State University from 1966 to 2011. On November 5, 2011, after a three-year investigation, one of his former assistant coaches was charged with 52 accounts of child sexual abuse. The coach was on Paterno's staff for 32 years and the abuse accusations happened on the Penn State campus. The assistant founded The Second Mile, a non-profit, to serve underprivileged youths and football camps he organized a Penn State were underwritten by the university. The coach used the foundation and Penn State endorsement to find, groom, and abuse young boys. He was ultimately convicted on 45 accounts and sentenced to 60 years in prison.

What sets this movie apart is that the plot neither supports the one "bad apple," deviant coach narrative (Coakley, 2021), nor follows the "cancel culture" narrative that would sweep the situation under the rug, never to be talked about again (Ho, 2022). Rather the film focused on organizational accountability, the people in power, their decisions, the ramifications, and the impact on the legacy of "JoePa." It raises the questions of responsibility to protect vulnerable youths, institutional coverups, accountability for inaction, and the personal failures that enable child abuse to continue for years.

Addressing deviant behavior can be tricky because norms can change over time, the importance of principles can vary, and social factors change (Coakley, 2021). Why would seemingly competent administrators at a major university enable a child abuse predator? Did they use all available resources, or did they lose the plot? Excuses Paterno sighted from the film included, "Not knowing how to deal with the situation," "I had a job to do," (win football games), and "I reported it to administration," (but did not follow up). These excuses raise the

Documentary Film Analysis

question of the sports behaviors and ethics used by Paterno and Penn State. Does the excuse I did my job, but abuse was allowed to continue in hold water in the court of public opinion?

Sport ethic is formed around four general norms (Coakley, 2021). 1) Athletes and coaches are dedicated to the game above all else. 2) Athletes strive for distinction. 3) Athletes accept risk and play through pain. 4) Athletes accept no obstacles in the pursuit of success in sports period. In the best of circumstances, these values help athletes overcome obstacles to achieve goals, but without context and perspective, athletes are susceptible to hubris and bad decisions.

This situation was made worse because of the lack of critical thinking and lack of actions by the people in power. The university administration had the responsibility of seeing the bigger picture, bringing perspective, and applying wisdom. The AD, VP of finance, and President discuss the situation internally and decide to not report information to the police. Instead, a verbal warning was issued to the former coach. Neither the film nor any research on the situation documented training was provided, or consequences linked to the perpetrator. The decision not to report accusations ultimately projected their disregard for the safety of children into a national scandal. The decision not to report crossed the line into conspiracy, cover-ups, and lack of institutional control. One wonders if there was some kind of oversight board? What resources were available to the administration and to what degree did they use them?

One can look at deviant behavior in four contexts: informal and formal norms, informal and formal deviance (Coakley, 2021). Inform norms are unwritten customs and shared understandings of how a person is expected to act in a social group. Formal norms take the form of written rules or laws. Conversely, informal deviance is the violation of a custom and is punished by informal sanctions by observers or peers. Notice there is not a significant power

Documentary Film Analysis

imbalance between the perpetrator and the observer. Formal deviance involves the violation of a rule or law, punished by official sanctions, and administered by people in positions of authority.

Applying these principles, Penn State's administration's failure was not recognizing the severe power imbalance, not acknowledging the gravity of the charges, and ignoring their requirement to report. As a consequence of deciding to withhold information from authorities, the President, VP, and Athletic Director, the people in power, were all convicted of felony child endangerment.

Societally, we have a general, informal understanding of the norms of big-time college football. Coaches are highly paid public figures. Mass media portrays stories of coaches working long hours, and even sleeping at the facilities for days on end. Football teams may have separate weight rooms, training facilities, and mess halls from the rest of a university and even the other teams. It is not a stretch to think in this case there was a sense of hubris, a sense of privilege, powerful inner group dynamics, (Coakley, 2021), and groupthink. Most sexual assaults are perpetrated by heterosexual males against females (Coakley, 2021).

Gender played a role in this situation because it was male-on-male assaults, involving children. One could conclude the situation was outside of Paterno's and other's scope of decency and usual business. Paterno admitted, "He did not know how to deal with the situation." Paterno tried to distance himself from the situation, and from addressing the root cause. He failed to follow through to assure the assistant coach was connected to authorities. This is a great example of a fundamental that sports teaches; Penn State fell to the level of their training, rather than rising to the occasion. Educated coaches in mental health awareness and establishing pathways to connect people to authorities who can help was the solution. How could we learn from this situation and raise the bar of coach mental health certification in the U.S., and in our local

Documentary Film Analysis

communities? At one point in the film, Paterno's wife asks him who from Penn State had talked to the victims? Paterno gave her a blank look and his wife asked in disgust, "You mean no one even talked to the victims?"

Victims of sexual assault crimes in the United States are almost always subject to character assassinations and harassment (Macur, 2013). The victim's fears of gender shame, lack of support, and lack of empathy must be considered as a reason for delays in reporting. In this situation, the first victim was forced to testify and relive the events in front of three different grand juries over three years. I wonder if the scene with Mrs. Paterno was used by the film's director as a bridge to connect the outrage many felt about the administration's enablement of abuse?

"The great sports myth" (Coakley, 2021) presented itself in the form of social class and the power difference between the coach and his 10 to 12-year-old victims. The assistant coach founded a nonprofit organization that worked in conjunction with Penn State football to provide football camps for underprivileged boys; "because all sports are good, and all coaches are well-meaning." He used his position and support from the university to repeatedly target, groom, isolate, and abuse young boys. A master manipulator, he preyed on the weakest with financial aid guilt, normalizing sexual behavior from a trusted adult, and isolating kids from others. For many, outrage over this situation is because it shattered their ideals of sports, and the pedestal Penn State football was put on.

Online abuse prevention training is completed by less than 33% of first- and second-year coaches in the U.S. (Aspen, 2023). Most coaches finish classes without training on how to lead an abuse prevention discussion which would be an important step towards normalizing abuse prevention for parents, athletes, and coaches. When everyone knows the behaviors of grooming,

Documentary Film Analysis

isolating, and boundary violations; abusers cannot operate in the shadows. When people have been instructed on how to report and escalate issues, the resistance to connecting victims to help is reduced.

At Penn State, the assistant coach was arrested on November 5th, and four days later November 9th, Paterno was dismissed from his position. Fueled by mass media coverage, at first, there seemed to be public support for Paterno, but it soon turned towards outrage as facts and timelines were revealed by the media. The film showed that within days the court of public opinion shifted from a beloved, longtime coach, to; a helpless, toothless coward who repeatedly let child abuse happen on his watch. How as a leader could he have failed to care for the least of his community?

The excuses the Paterno and others used in the media ultimately unearthed the politics of the situation and did not hold water with the public. Members of his circle were fired, charged with crimes, and convicted of crimes. Paterno died on January 22, 2012, and never faced any charges. His stature was removed from the campus of Penn State on July 22nd. The university cited that it had become a source of division and an obstacle to healing. In the wake of the scandal, the once proud football team and community have lost their identity and direction. Even today, twelve years later, seeing a Penn State football uniform is a dull reminder of the crimes. In the end, this film asked what is Paterno's legacy? While physical signs have been removed, the memories and lingering pain remain. One could suggest his legacy is, "Actions speak louder than words and wins." What can be learned from this situation and what can be done to decrease the chances of it happening again? Abuse prevention training, discussion, and normalization were detailed earlier.

Documentary Film Analysis

High performance can be looked at in the formula ($HP = P - I$), High-Performance = Potential – Interference (Gallwey, 1981). Stress can be considered not knowing what the hell to do when pressure mounts. Gallwey vividly explains how as stress increases interference and resistance to high performance increases. The Project Play Report recognized the need for mental health and well-being training for coaches (Aspen Institute, 2023). Specifically, the goal is to help coaches; 1) recognize mental health issues, 2) determine how severe they are, and 3) get the student-athletes connected with someone who can help. If the people in power at Penn State had been trained in and/or aware of these fundamental principles, then they would have had tools to better address the situation. Their performance was poor because whatever training they had did not kick in when the pressure was applied, and that was their failure.

People who take on challenges, like coaches and managers, are focused on achieving their goals. Great managers and coaches build in flexibility. They have mechanisms to keep balance and perspective. One could consider it a character flaw to not know how to keep perspective. Or it could be seen as poor planning, but it emerges in poor decision-making and burnout. Good leaders navigate through decisions by employing guidelines for checks & balances to help determine what is under their control and what is not. They rely on members of their community to understand the norms and help identify deviance. When we normalize and provide mental health training to first- and second-year coaches, we encourage good decision-making. It is uncomfortable to have hard conversations and deal with deviant behavior. When pathways to connecting student-athletes to people who can help them with mental health issues are established, coaches are empowered to be change-makers. Clearly, the assistant coach had mental health issues. Training and discussing the well-being of student-athletes provides a

Documentary Film Analysis

pathway for coaches, parents, and peers to prevent abuse. We reduce the resistance to reporting and the chance of issues being swept under the carpet and abuse surviving in the shadows.

References

Aspen Institute (2023). Project play, state of play 2023. Top 5 coaching trends.

<https://projectplay.org/state-of-play-2023/coaching-trends>

Coakley, J. J. (2021). *Sports in society: Issues and controversies* (13th ed.). McGraw-Hill LLC.

Gallwey, G.T. (1981). *The inner game of golf*. Random House, inc. New York, NY.

Ho, J. C., (2022). Texas Review of Law & Politics. Vol. 27 Issue 1.

Levinson, B. (2018). *Paterno*. (film)

Macur, J. (2013). In Florida state case, a tangle of questions. *New York Times* (December 16)

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/17/sports/high-school-football-rape-case-unfolds-online-and-divides-steubenville-ohio.html>

Noren, N. (2023). *Listen*. (film)

Sciallo, M. (2022)., *The Paterno legacy*. (film)