

And Another Coach Is Accused Of The Unimaginable

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Step by step, Jerry Sandusky has taken us deeper into the dark places of the human soul. Step by step, the former Penn State football coach has taken us down the path where none of us want to look, where none of us want to go.

Yet in the midst of the worst scandal in the history of college athletics, with a nation fully disgusted by alleged sexual abuse of children, by acts of deception and coverup, we must open our eyes to see ...

In the court of law, Jerry Sandusky is innocent until proven guilty.

"Hang him from the highest tree, I'll bring the rope," Sarah Palin said of Sandusky the other night on Fox News. When Greta Van Susteren interjected, "I assume you want a criminal process," Palin added, "Hang him from the highest tree, I'll bring the rope, if he is guilty of what has been alleged."

... and now Bernie Fine of Syracuse.

Dante Alighieri lived 700 years ago, roughly the time when Joe Paterno and Jim Boeheim began coaching, so there's no way of interviewing him today. Surely, Dante would assign a special circle of hell for acquaintance molesters and for those who would make false accusations of molestation for profit or vengeance.

For both monsters haunt us. They can anger us like few other beasts. They can make us act rashly and harbor ugly thoughts of revenge. The thoughts of a child being raped by a trusting adult or, conversely, a pseudo victim falsely accusing a loved one decades later in some sick ploy are not thoughts that a rational person can easily handle with calm.

So now we have Fine, assistant basketball coach at Syracuse for 35 years, being placed on administrative leave after allegations of sexual molestation by two former ball boys. Bobby Davis, 39, and Mike Lang, 45, said they were compelled to speak out after what happened at Penn State. A police case has been reopened. Syracuse University and the Onondaga County district attorney promise a full investigation.

Fine denied the allegations. So, too, has Sandusky.

Davis told ESPN that he was molested hundreds of times by Fine starting when he was in the sixth grade and that they had sexual contact until he was 27. ESPN had received information in 2003, but did not report it because it couldn't get anyone to corroborate Davis' claims. After Syracuse police decided not to pursue the case because the statute of limitations had expired, the school in 2005 investigated and decided that it could not find any support for the accusations.

Lang told ESPN that Fine had touched his genitals 15 to 20 times. Lang is also Davis' stepbrother. Boeheim has come out especially strong in defense of Fine. Boeheim said that Davis has lied about him seeing Davis with Fine in Fine's hotel room. And that if he's going to tell one lie, he'll tell more.

"The Penn State thing came out and the kid behind this is trying to get money," Boeheim told the Syracuse Press-Standard, which also investigated the story in 2003 and did not run it because of lack of independent evidence. "He's tried before. And now he's trying again. You know how much money is going to be involved in civil suits [at Penn State]? I'd say about \$50 million. That's what this is about. Money."

I always bristle when I hear a sports talk show host say, "Let's stick to what's happening on the field, callers. I don't care about ..." A major reason I became a columnist is a deep conviction that athletics mirror life and that there is much in open competition that reveals our inner character.

You scour the news Friday. After briefly banning its band for mocking its winless football team by changing the fight song lyrics, Columbia decided to let the band play today against Brown ... Yale is investigating coach Tom Williams for saying he was a Rhodes candidate on his resume. A misunderstanding or deception? ... Travel and tragedy again intersected when Oklahoma State women's basketball coach Kurt Budke and assistant Miranda Serna were killed in a plane crash ... From the quirky to the tragic, there is so much to invite comment every day.

As the Fine case evolves, however, I now find myself turning away, confused, shaken. I was certain that Joe Paterno and school President Graham Spanier had to be removed for the good of Penn State's future. Yet, it is now sinking in that Sandusky has led us down a dark path to man's ugliest possibilities and, frankly, those possibilities scare the hell out of me. An adult would break the most sacred of trust with a child? While another one might lie about it? And both could have led great institutions of learning to cover them up in the name of athletics? It is overwhelming.

Sally Jenkins of the Washington Post wrote a few weeks ago about how it would be so convenient if only a molester showed up with a hunchback and an M-shaped scar on his forehead. It doesn't work that way. They don't show up in a trench coat, drooling. They show up as your friend, your colleague, next to you in church. They show up as Little League coaches. In Sandusky's case, they show up behind the mask of an organization to help troubled youngsters. They are one of us. Former FBI agent Ken Lanning, who spent 35 years profiling pedophiles, told Jenkins that a hallmark of "acquaintance molesters" is that they tend to be deeply trusted and even beloved. They are masters of seduction, tricking adults, too.

I called Martha Stone, the executive director of the Center for Children's Advocacy in Hartford. She confirmed this.

"Most of molestation of kids is by parents and relatives, some type of acquaintance," Stone said. "We do not see many instances of it happening with strangers. Part of the reason for what we call the 'conspiracy of silence' is because the child is in some kind of trusting relationship and the adult is able to coerce or intimidate them."

"How do we say to kids, 'The only way these people differ is, they will be nicer to you than most adults?'" Lanning told Jenkins. "They will listen to you and shower you with attention and kindness, and so I want you to watch out for this evil bastard."

After Sandusky, you want to empower the helpless, empower those who have been so brutally deceived. You want to forever change a power structure that would allow brutality to be covered up in the name of religion or education or athletics. Yet all the time you trust that the abused are telling the truth. You cannot endorse witch hunts. You cannot allow those who would make up stories of horror for a huge payday to ruin an innocent man's life.

... and now Bernie Fine of Syracuse. More victims, or are they liars? I don't know. I do know that this is a national nightmare and that Jerry Sandusky, a man who insists he is innocent, haunts our every waking and sleeping moment.

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