

1/23/2012: State of the Big Ten, Volume 52 (premium)

Every Monday, we will be running a weekly series titled "State of the Big Ten," which will be made available to all members of HawkeyeDrive.com. This series of columns will focus on one major headline regarding the conference and go in-depth on the subject at hand.

By Brendan Stiles

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The past 48 hours were surreal. It began with an inaccurate report on the evening of Jan. 21 that former Penn State head coach Joe Paterno had died. Hours later, on the morning of Jan. 22, Paterno did eventually succumb to lung cancer at the age of 85.

What then followed were the mixture of emotions nationwide regarding Paterno's death. Some took the time to remember Paterno for the way he was regarded the majority of his life – as one of the most iconic figures the sport of college football had ever seen. Others remembered Paterno in a darker light, one that portrays him as evil because of his role in what is the most disturbing scandal college football had ever seen.

One way or the other, what remains clear is there is no middle ground. After living a life where he was always viewed by others as being in the right, one wrong decision completely tarnished his entire legacy.

While the man, Joe Paterno, is no longer on Earth, his death is far from the final chapter of this entire ordeal involving Penn State.

There's nothing wrong with mourning the loss of someone who, for generations, was the face of his university. Like it or not, he was someone's father, grandfather, relative, coach, mentor, and/or friend. The role he played in the numerous lives of those who have done and continue to do good in society can't be forgotten.

That being said, those who view him in a negative light also have every reason to do so. For one, freedom of speech is something valued strongly by all of those who live in the United States. Those who were victims of child sex abuse, or know victims of child sex abuse, have every right to remain upset with Paterno for not doing more upon being told one of his former assistants was allegedly making life a living hell for a 10-year-old boy in the showers of his practice facility.

Paterno's story will be polarizing no matter how it's told. The two perspectives are forever linked, and really, there's no way around that. One can't tell the story of his legendary coaching career without mentioning its downfall and the man's final hours alive. One also can't tell the story of this horrific ordeal without mentioning why Paterno's role was so prominent to begin with, and thus why acting sooner or in a much different manner could've made an enormous difference.

However anyone out there chooses to remember Paterno, context is always going to be needed with that remembrance. In order for any story to be told, or for any life to be remembered, the good and the bad ought to both be acknowledged. From there, opinions – one way or the other – can then be truly formed.