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The Dangerous Cocoon of King Football  
By GEORGE VECSEY

Really, we need to do something about big-time college sports.

The horrendous scandal at the most prominent public college in Pennsylvania has been aided and abetted by the oppressive status of King Football.

Officials at Penn State did not want to know that, according to prosecutors, boys were being abused by a trusted member of the football family. Perhaps the subject was too queasy for them. Besides, it would get in the way of entertaining the masses, which is what the sport is for.

Football is the central fact of life in the state. When a large male newborn is on display in the hospital nursery, people make loving jokes about sending him out to JoePa to play linebacker. Not so funny at the moment, is it?

Apparently, young boys were brought to the massive football program by Jerry Sandusky, who was first a major assistant coach and later an emeritus member of the football “family.” Some family. The guy had keys to the facilities, with enough freedom to take showers with the boys, and, if we believe the warrant for Sandusky, jeopardize the balance of their lives.

People saw. People knew. A few people even talked. But ultimately it got swept under the rug for years because of the rush to Saturday, those autumn game days when people funnel into Happy Valley for the biggest thing in the state.

Penn State is expected to win all 12 games every season, and when it doesn't, the boosters boo and whine and agitate, just as they do at 50 or 100 other major football foundries at all the other Happy Valleys in this land of skewed values.

It takes a yearlong effort to produce the gigantic shows to keep people happy. Who wants to hear bad news about a well-known assistant who runs a charity for underprivileged youth — but might have a dark side to him? Get with the program. That's what these monstrosities are called, programs. They loom over the rest of the campus.

The legalities of all this are going to have to play out. We do know that Sandusky was arrested on 40 counts of abusing boys over 15 years. The athletic director, Tim Curley, took an administrative leave Sunday night so he could defend himself; and Gary Schultz, the senior vice president for finance and business, resigned Sunday night. Both were charged with perjury for their testimony to a grand jury investigating Sandusky.

That leaves Joe Paterno, the 84-year-old coach, the icon, the benefactor, and most important, the winner of 409 football games, the most by any coach at this highest level. Apparently, Paterno knew about his former assistant in 2002 and went to Curley and then he went back to supervising practices and giving news conferences and recruiting large young men to play football for the program. Paterno is an admirable man. I like to write about the high graduation rates of his players and his occasional reminiscences of being a teenage vendor in a Brooklyn ballpark named Ebbets Field. So we've all got our soft spots. The attorney general said Monday that Paterno is not a suspect in this case, so I would think he deserves a polite retirement at the end of the season.

But I also think, these Penn State people are fathers and uncles and brothers. Did they not worry about these children being brought onto their campus?

The problem would seem to be a gerontocracy of the soul, too many people who have been in the same place too long. Paterno has been at Penn State, as an assistant and the head coach, for 62 years, a record. Graham B. Spanier, the university president, was a faculty member and an administrator there from 1973 to 1982 and returned to lead the university in 1995; Curley graduated from Penn State in 1976 and has been the athletic director since 1993; and Schultz graduated from Penn State in 1971 and has worked there ever since. Ultimately, they all serve the monster that rises on 12 Saturdays a year.

The question is, if Paterno heard some ugly stuff about Sandusky in 2002, it is now 2011, and he seems to have not done anything about it since. Maybe he didn't invite the guy to his house anymore. That I don't know. But as far as alerting people to the possible predator tendencies of his former assistant, Paterno seems to have been silent. He had a game to coach. He had players to recruit.

For an essentially good man, this is worse than the way Woody Hayes went out. Hayes was a bombastic legend at Ohio State, but in his dotage he leapt off the sideline and punched an opposing player in a 1978 bowl game. End of career.

And Hayes went out better than Jim Tressel, the most recent coach at Ohio State, who resigned after people figured out he was lying to cover up for some players who were selling their rings and trophies for tattoos. It wasn't the violation as much as the cover-up.

This seems to be a common malady for big-time coaches. They get so puffed up with trying to go undefeated that they lose sight of reality. Just to run this kind of program demands moral blinkers.

King Football is not about just academic scandals and recruiting scandals and now the growing shadow of concussion scandals. (What, you thought aging players now coming down with dementia arrived in the N.F.L. with their brain pans totally intact?)

Just the other day, Jeré Longman wrote in The New York Times about his beloved home state, where L.S.U. has downsized its foreign language program with minimal public reaction, but managed to maintain an undefeated football program.

Lots of Happy Valleys out there. Occasionally a critic like Taylor Branch or a panel calls for reform. At Penn State, it was even worse than prostituting education for the sake of a football powerhouse. The entire old-boy system in that university managed to overlook the possibility that children's lives were being ruined, within the dangerous cocoon of King Football. We need to look beyond the alleged abuses. We need to look at the system that encouraged people to look the other way.

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