Sports Journalism in the Age of Paterno

Sports Journalism in the Age of Paterno:

Making JoePa

By

David Schwartz

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Sports Journalism in the Age of Paterno: Making JoePa

By David Schwartz

This book first published 2024

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-0364-1527-3
ISBN (Ebook): 978-1-0364-1528-0

To Bob and Beth

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Journalists know their work will only be as good as their sources' willingness to cooperate. All the research that went into this book would have been for nothing had it not been for the willingness of 30 journalists to answer my questions—during interviews conducted between 2016-2018—about what it was like to cover Joe Paterno. Fourteen of those 30 shared their expertise on background. They didn't want to become part of the story, but they knew this story itself is one that needs to be told. You know who you are, and I'm grateful. The 16 who went on record were Dave Anderson, Paul Campos, Emma Carmichael, Mike DeCourcy, Ty Duffy, Frank Fitzpatrick, Bob Flounders, Paul Hendrickson, Dan Jenkins, Kyle King, Will Leitch, Paul Levine, Malcolm Moran, Sandy Padwe, Joe Posnanski, and Neil Rudel. You'll find their names and experiences sprinkled throughout the following pages. Anderson and Jenkins died between our interviews and this book's publication. Anderson was so kind. We struggled to connect, so he left answers to my questions over voicemail, then I'd leave him another voicemail with a question, and so it went a few times over the course of a week. My email interview with Jenkins transformed the trajectory of this project. His candidness toward how he covered Paterno bordered on confessional. Also, I cannot wrap this up without a word about Posnanski's grace. He took a symbolic public beating in 2012 when he did not write his Paterno biography the way others thought he should have. It would have been understandable had he not cooperated with me. Instead, he gave me more time than anyone. Thank you to everyone. Together, I think we've written something important.

Will Ingalls, my former student at Augustana College, earned minimum wage to transcribe the interviews. Will doesn't know this, but I hand picked him for this research opportunity because I knew, no matter how dull or laborious the work became, he would do good work. I was not disappointed. Will is a part of this book.

Thank you to everyone who offered feedback, edits, guidance, and stern warnings. Paterno, more than a decade after his death, remains a sensitive topic.

Thank you, Annie, Josie, and PJ. You'll never have to ask me again how this book is going. Sam, I don't know what I did in a past life to deserve someone as supportive as you. You are the foundation.

INTRODUCTION:
ALL HE DID WAS THINK—AND WIN

In the fall of 1949, Brown University's football team found itself on the cusp of its best season in more than two decades. Joe Paterno, the Bruins' two-way sensation, anchored a team that started the season 5-1, outscoring its opponents a combined 158-47. Up next was a road game at Harvard, which Brown had not defeated since 1938. Brown won, 28-14. Paterno played brilliantly. In addition to throwing a 64-yard pass to Chuck Nelson, Paterno rushed for two touchdowns and, as a defensive back, shut down Harvard's passing game. He was, wrote John Hanlon of the *Providence Journal*, "Brown's big gun of the day." *Providence Journal* sports columnist Michael J. Thomas called Paterno a "dynamo."

Paterno earned numerable accolades from sportswriters, as one might expect for a team co-captain who that season led his team in scoring and set the school record for interceptions. He was far from an unknown, having starred at New York's Brooklyn Preparatory School in the mid-1940s before heading off to Brown. Dave Anderson, who attended rival Jesuit school Xavier High during the same time period, and who decades later sporadically wrote about Paterno as a Pulitzer Prize-winning sports columnist for the *New York Times*, did not know Paterno then but "knew of him. He was the best football player in the city at that time." After Brown defeated College of the Holy Cross earlier in the 1949 season, a headline in the *Brown Daily Herald* read "Brown grid team hands H.C. worst series defeat, 28-6, as Joe Paterno proves star" (Sadler, 1949).

If Paterno's high school and early college performances earned him a reputation as a standout player, coverage of the Harvard game on Nov. 12, 1949, transformed him into a regional sensation. Sportswriters from New York and across New England attended. From that game, legendary *New York Herald Tribune* sportswriter Stanley Woodward wrote the line that permanently attached itself to Paterno's legacy: "Paterno, the Brown quarterback, can't run and he can't pass. All he can do is think—and win."

It was a peculiar observation from a game in which Paterno both ran and passed well, but the line stuck. Woodward died in November 1965. Two months later Penn State University promoted Paterno from assistant to head football coach. Penn State's 1966 football media guide led its bio about

Paterno with, "The late great Stanley Woodward once wrote of Joe Paterno: "He can't run, and he can't pass. All he can do is think – and win!" Sportswriters kept Woodward's line alive, quoting it more than 400 times until Paterno's death in 2012—62 years after Woodward first wrote it. Most often it appeared in newspapers, but it also found its way into magazines, books, and digital spaces.

But there is one complication: Woodward almost certainly never wrote it. He did not attend Brown's victory over Harvard in 1949. No one from the *New York Herald Tribune* covered the game. Even if it had, it would not have been Woodward, who was fired from the newspaper in 1948 for insubordination. By 1949, when Paterno and Brown played at Harvard, Woodward had found work at the *Daily Compass*, a short-lived, Cold War-era New York rag that scared readers with stories about atom bombs and communism. Woodward wrote about Notre Dame football the day after Brown's win. *Daily Compass* sports coverage focused almost exclusively on New York teams (and Notre Dame, which held national rooting interest). As luck had it, the week after Brown beat Harvard it traveled to New York City for a game against Columbia University. Even then, however, Woodward's only mention of Brown all that week or the week after was to make the Bruins a 12½-point favorite over Columbia. He never mentioned Paterno in *The Daily Compass*, his autobiography, "Paper Tiger," or in any article he wrote during Paterno's time as a high schooler in Brooklyn or a college player at Brown.

Someone may have written the apocryphal line, but it was neither Woodward nor anyone else from the *Daily Compass* or *New York Herald Tribune*, or for that matter the *New York Times*, *New York Post*, *Providence Journal*, *Boston Globe*, *Boston Herald*, *Brooklyn Eagle*, *Brown Daily Herald*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Washington Post*, or any other newspaper that either covered Brown or Harvard regularly or carried any influential national presence.

According to research for this book, the foundational quote of the Paterno myth holds no known origin other than the 1966 Penn State University football media guide that was published after Woodward's death, and which quoted Woodward as having first written it 17 years earlier. In 1969, Brown's alumni magazine again claimed it was Woodward, but again no pre-1966 evidence was discovered. Paterno knew it. Late in his life, he told his biographer, Joe Posnanski, that he never knew anyone who had seen the quote. His family was proud of his accomplishments; they saved news clippings in which he appeared. They had never seen the quote, either. It was "just something that got mythologized and that nobody ever ran down." said Paul Henrickson, who used the quote in a 1979 feature for the

Washington Post's Style section. Woodward's phantom quote set the tone for Paterno's mass-mediated life. It built a comfortable theme—the cerebral Paterno—despite its suspect origins. It also sparked the traits sports journalists tried to instill in Paterno over the next 70 years: awkward, talented, intelligent, resourceful. Whether those traits proved true did not matter.

This book is not a history of Joe Paterno. There are numerous well-written Paterno biographies that were produced throughout his 61-year coaching career at Penn State, from Mervin D. Hyman and Gordon S. White's *Joe Paterno: Football My Way*, published in 1971, to Posnanski's *Paterno*, published in 2012. Nor is this a profile of the people who covered him. Although many who did generously gave their time to this book, they can and will tell their own stories. Instead, this is a history of *how* Paterno was covered, and it is the story of what those portrayals say about sports journalism, our culture's need for heroes and villains, and what happens to a profession when the hero they spent a lifetime manufacturing gets exposed as a work of partial fiction. This book is the result of an analysis of nearly 2,000 articles written about Paterno between 1943 and 2024; interviews with journalists who covered Paterno from the late 1950s, when he was an assistant coach at Penn State University, until his death in 2012; time spent in the archives of public libraries and American universities; and online searches that uncovered Paterno-related content from Rhode Island to Hawaii and everywhere in between the U.S. bookends.

Joe Paterno gave sportswriters the two things they wanted most. He gave them unprecedented access so they could do their jobs, and he gave them an anchor to whom they could tether the morality of college football. In return, sportswriters attached to Paterno's name and legacy a cultural currency so potent that he ceased to be human. He became a living myth, a figure so powerful that he took on a president of the United States; simultaneously championed racial equality while put up new barriers to it; represented liberalism during the Cultural Revolution and conservatism during the Reagan Revolution; and forced America to rethink how it thought about aging. Sportwriters erased Joe Paterno. In his place they created JoePa, America's ordained symbol of moral purity whose ethical compromises—revealed at the end of his life in the Jerry Sandusky scandal—exposed sports journalism as a profession very much opposed to the traditional tenets of journalism. If one's only exposure to sportswriting was coverage of Paterno, one could assume the profession is one mutually exclusive of journalism.

In late summer 1995, I found the one open chair at a large round banquet table inside an airy Chicago hotel ballroom. To my immediate left sat Paterno, who prepared to begin his 30th season as Penn State University's

football coach. He was 69 years old, energetic yet weary from the day's grind. He and I were just two of hundreds of role players in a made-for-media event known as Big Ten Conference Football Media Days. Over two days, sports journalists, myself included, peppered Big Ten coaches with questions about their football teams, while Paterno fielded questions that were broader in nature. Yes, he talked about his team, but he also took questions about the NCAA, politics, and how to build character in young men. With his trademark blend of snark and intellect, Paterno answered each question. My fellow journalists and I delighted as he filled our notebooks with retread content. Beyond formality, there was no reason anymore to ask him questions. Sports journalists did not need Paterno to write about Paterno. He was irrelevant to his own story. After decades of more media exposure than any college football coach in history, Paterno the man meant nothing next to Paterno the myth.

Years later, during the final days of his life, Paterno met with Posnanski. Sick with cancer and humiliated by the Sandusky scandal, he said, "It doesn't matter what people think of me. I've lived my life. I just hope the truth comes out." That the words "Paterno" and "truth" appeared so close together is instructive. Sports journalists spent more than a half-century constructing Paterno's image. They have spent the years since his death reconstructing his place in America's sporting culture. In the following chapters, this book deconstructs sports journalism's role in making the Paterno myth and examines how sportswriters wield culture to create heroes and tell stories. Coverage of Paterno holds two appeals. First, he had a long career. He joined Penn State's staff as an assistant coach in 1950 and became its head coach in 1966. He remained head coach until November 2011. Forty-five years for a head football coach at a Division I school remains an all-time record. Second, Paterno was interesting. He led his profession morally, strategically, politically, and in on-field victories. Politicians invoked his name to make themselves look good. Paterno nominated one United States president and rebuked another. He spearheaded academic reform that decimated a generation of Black American college athletes. He was such a good quote that sports journalists often abandoned their own prose to make room for more of his. Journalists first saw Paterno as college football's savior, then its protector. And when journalists discovered Paterno knew for years that Jerry Sandusky, his longtime assistant coach, sexually assaulted children and remained at-large, many turned on Paterno in a desperate act to save face. Others jeopardized their careers to defend him.

On November 9, 2011, the Penn State University Board of Trustees fired Joe Paterno. Live news coverage of the firing showed Penn State students

rioting, alumni crying, and local and national media members aghast. For a half-century sportswriters used the hero myth to transform Paterno into a shifting signifier—a cultural object that possesses adaptable meanings. The mediated Paterno adopted ever-changing meanings of the "idealized coach," defined here as a culturally transcendent public figure infused with narratives of unimpeachable morality. In the weeks and months that followed Paterno's firing, a new generation of digital-only journalists mobilized past mainstream coverage of Paterno to shame the professional practices and "mealy-mouthed nonsense" of traditional sports journalism. As a result, whether they meant to or not, the new generation behaved more within the traditional boundaries of journalism than older, more experienced sportswriters ever had—at least in regard to Paterno. To some sports journalists, Paterno represented an "idealized coach." To others, he encapsulated college football tradition and history. To others still, he embodied the ugliness of old sports journalism, a relic of the hero myth so long cultivated by the profession. Whatever meanings he held, sportswriters found ways to place him within American culture, reinforce that culture, and in many ways create it.

Sportswriting within journalism

Sportswriting has long existed somewhere between journalism and what Amber Roessner calls "hero crafting," a practice nearly as old in the United States as organized sports (Roessner, 2014). Grantland Rice, the most famous American sportswriter of the first half of the 20th century, said "when a sportswriter stops making heroes out of athletes, it's time to get out of the business" (Inabinett, 1994). Sports figures and sportswriters long used each other for professional survival. Sportswriters needed access to the teams and people they covered, and athletes needed sportswriters as a public champion of their work. Sportswriters therefore acted as both journalist and agent, before there was such a thing as a sports agent. Although the relationship began to shift significantly in the late 1960s when athletes formed unions, real agents emerged, and athletes began to earn salaries that dwarfed the income of a sportswriter, sports journalism continued to engage in hero crafting.

Rick Reilly's Dec. 22, 1986, *Sports Illustrated* cover story announced Paterno as the magazine's Sportsman of the Year. On pages 68 and 69 the magazine ran a large photo of Paterno walking through the Penn State campus surrounded by students. He is talking, his arms waving as always, while students, diverse in gender and race in a way seldom shown in the mid-1980s, smile, seemingly enraptured by JoePa. Two sportswriters and a

photographer interviewed for this book said they recognized students in the photo as employees of Penn State's office of sports information, a communication arm of the athletic department that exists to secure favorable coverage for its teams.

The sportswriter's dual role of publicist and journalist leads to inevitable conflicts both in how they are seen by non-sports journalists and in how they see themselves. The late *Sports Illustrated* writer Frank Deford acknowledged this friction in his speech "Sportswriter is One Word," which he delivered to a roomful of sports journalists in 2010. Sportswriters, he wrote, regularly deal with famous people who are talented, extroverted, celebrated, and raised to believe the world cares what they do and think. The structure of organized sport guarantees that athletes and coaches—"sources," in journalism speak—will spoon feed quotes to sportswriters, whereas crime and political journalists often spend years cultivating their reputations in the hopes that they someday will be trusted enough to have sources share with them the most vital public information. Thus, sportswriters are viewed by their non-sports peers with both contempt and envy. The bond between sports figures and sportswriters is so ingrained that we sometimes forget, as Deford said:

> Everybody else in the business is two words, modifier and noun, discreetly separated: editorial writers, foreign correspondents, movie critics, beat reporters, and even—yes—sports editors. But sportswriters: one word. The assumption, I suppose, is that we do not stand apart and clinically observe so well as our more respected brethren who better keep their distance from their subjects and are properly, clinically *objective*.

It's this perception that leads to sports coming across as the "toy department" of journalism (Whiteside, et al, 2012). Sportswriters have long been stereotyped as avoiding stories that cover social issues or, when social subjects are broached, they lack a level of nuance that might be found in a story written by an alleged real journalist. For example, in professional-sports labor disputes, sportswriters almost always come down on the side of ownership *or* players. Sportswriters who weighed in on the social protests of athletes Muhammad Ali and Colin Kaepernick sided either with the athlete or institution he was protesting. Much like in a sporting contest, the sportswriter had to pick a winner and a loser rather than explore the gray space that most social issues occupy. Of course, to so compartmentalize the profession of sportswriting is to ignore the many sports journalists who embraced nuance. Some of the best journalistic work on mental health, race, gender, and other social issues has been done by sportswriters. Yet for every sportswriter willing to look beyond wins, losses, and statistics, many more

exist who do not—especially during Paterno's protracted era—and it is this sheer quantity that continues to make sports an area of journalism that is more willing to celebrate its sources than report on them.

Sportswriters: The devoted journalist

The journalist who stood out most was the one who most vehemently did not want to talk. When I emailed a former Penn State football beat writer in 2016 to request an interview, it took several days to receive a reply. "What do you want to know about?" he finally wrote back. I told him I wanted to know what it was like to cover Paterno, and I wanted to know how he went about finding new angles to write since after 70 years pretty much all that could have been written about Paterno had already been covered. Several more days passed before he replied. "No," he wrote. "I'm sorry. The end was just too painful. I don't want to have to live through that again. Joe meant a lot to me."

It's hard to imagine a public figure having that kind of effect on any type of journalist other than a sportswriter. That depth of devotion helps explain how they spent the better part of a century mediating Paterno into a figure so powerful that, even in the shadow of unimaginable crimes and a coverup—even in death—his spiritual presence looms like a specter and continues to inspire emotions ranging from devotion to fury. Paterno wasn't born JoePa. Sports journalists built JoePa gradually, and in the process revealed as much about themselves and their profession as they did about the person.

Chapter 1 examines the first decade of Paterno's head-coaching career at Penn State, which included three undefeated teams, two highly publicized job offers, one fight with the President of the United States, and—despite the undefeated squads—no national championship. It focuses on sports journalists' response to a coach who courted their attention, then rewarded that attention with 24-hour access, diatribes against college football's corruption, and university-backed promotion of his "Grand Experiment," which sought to prove academic and athletic excellence were not mutually exclusive concepts (Denlinger, 1969). Sports journalists had never encountered anything like Paterno. Their promotion and protection of Paterno compose this book's principle focus.

On January 1, 1983, Penn State finally won a national championship after it beat the University of Georgia in the Sugar Bowl. Paterno's players hoisted him onto their shoulders as ABC broadcaster Frank Broyles called the win Paterno's "high-water mark." Four years later, Paterno defended the honor of all college football when Penn State defeated the University of Miami to win the 1986 national championship, still considered among the

most important games in the sport's history. Chapter 2 looks at Paterno's transition from college football's moral radical to its conservative champion, with special attention paid to sportswriters' use of him as the antidote to the villainy of Miami, a program assaulted with racist and generational labels. Paterno put his morality into action during this period. He raised money for a Penn State University library, helped the NCAA reform its academic standards, and became more active in politics. Most sportswriters considered only Paterno's motives—the academic integrity of college football—while a select few used this period to presciently discuss the dismal effects that the Paterno-pushed policies would have on African-American athletes.

By the 1980s, sports journalists had turned Paterno into a national phenomenon. Paterno's career began when college football was a popular, albeit regional, sport. Early during his tenure as head coach, Paterno promoted Penn State as one of the "best teams in the east." Cable television let fans see teams from across the country, not just the local team. A Supreme Court decision in the 1980s made it easier for colleges to negotiate television contracts with the big three networks: ABC, CBS, and NBC, as well as the upstart all-sports cable network, ESPN. Whether a school played on the East Coast, West Coast, in the Midwest or South no longer mattered. There were other changes. Recruiting rules and tactics shifted and the culture became even more cutthroat. Financial realities forced Penn State to abandon its independent status and join the Big Ten Conference. Paterno endured the changes, but not without suffering occasional damage to his reputation. Chapter 3 explores the aging Paterno, who survived college football's modernization to become the redefinition of what it meant to grow old and remain a productive member of the workforce. Between 1992-2010 Paterno's signature black hair finally gave way to gray. Penn State still had great seasons, but they occurred less frequently and were surrounded by mediocre or downright lousy campaigns. Paterno suffered health problems, including twice being run over on the sidelines when he could not get out of the way. He was nearly fired. Yet his career persisted. Although his nasally, booming voice had become a loud whisper, sports journalists wrote that Paterno was "ageless."

This lasted until late 2011, when the Sandusky scandal broke. Chapter 4 looks at November 2011 through his death in January 2012, when a new generation of sports journalists drafted Paterno's death to indict old norms of the profession. The digital generation used this period to attempt two feats. First, they used it to show that they deserve membership in the exclusive club of who is a sports journalist and who is not. Second, they tore

down tenets of the profession by publicly rebuking them, most notably the dangerous practice of hero-making.

A separate book could be written on Joe Paterno's post-death life. Or numerous chapters could have been added this one. But books have to end somewhere, and this one ends with Paterno's literal death in January of 2012. Since then, journalists' fascination with Paterno's legacy has produced rich new examples of how they fight over his legacy. The epilogue addresses several ways sports journalists have tried to recover their own reputations and the reputation of their profession. In all likelihood, some new form of Paterno-related news will come to light between the completion of this book and its publication. The sports journalists will argue about what it all means.

CHAPTER 1:
THE LIBERAL WHO ROARED

"Paterno is a Brooklyn-born, Ivy [Brown]-educated Eastern liberal." – Bill Jauss*, Chicago Tribune,* Sept. 19, 1975.

Joe Paterno made Bill Conlin's job easy. The first thing Conlin, a *Philadelphia Daily News* columnist, told readers about Penn State's new football coach was Paterno was a great quote (Conlin, 1966b). Whether he could make Penn State competitive was secondary to how proficiently he could fill a reporter's notebook. Conlin felt so moved by the hire that he assumed his readers would be as excited as he was. Paterno, wrote Conlin, was an "extrovert guaranteed to produce crisp, readable quotes" (para. 8). To sports journalists whose jobs depended on access to authoritative sources, Paterno's promotion from Penn State assistant to head coach in February 1966 was a dream come true.

College football's most successful coaches during the 1960s, while revered by sportswriters, treated journalists as the enemy. Ohio State's Woody Hayes once stationed armed guards outside his team's practice facility to keep out sportswriters, opposing coaches, and other spies. Alabama's Paul "Bear" Bryant, Texas' Darrell Royal, and Southern California's John McKay, while not going to Hayes' extreme, guarded information about their football programs like a fortress. They projected confidence through total control. Bryant wrote in his autobiography that college football was a coach's game and always would be. He has not been proven wrong, but Paterno's arrival signaled a departure from traditional coaching secrecy and territorialism.

Sportswriters obsessed over his openness, and they obsessed over his appearance. His dress pants never seemed long enough, highwater slacks unintentionally designed to momentarily steal your attention from the gaudiness of his coke-bottle glasses. He did not talk so much as whine. He was loud, and he sounded like he spoke every word while pinching his nostrils shut after taking a shot of helium. Wavy black hair adorned his head, an exclamation point atop rich, Mediterranean-tinted skin. Paterno liked to laugh, was quick with a joke, and appreciated those who were versed in subjects beyond sports, especially classic literature, which he forever held close to his heart.

In Paterno, sports journalists found their muse. Those who covered him as an assistant knew he was the head coach in waiting. Between 1950 and 1965, Charles A. "Rip" Engle, Penn State's head coach, deployed his assistant Paterno to handle tedious media responsibilities in addition to his regular duties. Paterno, who played under Engle at Brown, held a knack for conversation; Engle found it boring. When Engle promoted Paterno to associate coach in 1964, it signaled it was only a matter of time before sportswriters' prayers were answered ("Joe Paterno is," 1964). Conlin was Paterno's first champion, and he would become his most time tested, even when they occasionally clashed. The two built a professional relationship that lasted for decades.

The second description Conlin gave his readers about Paterno—after how great he was to talk to—was of the great respect the professional coaching fraternity held for Paterno. Conlin quoted none of Paterno's peers, nor did he cite anyone, but he wrote it (Conlin, 1966a). This form of journalism—"trust-me journalism"—became an integral part of creating the Paterno myth. Conlin's second assertion proved untrue. As Paterno's on-field success mounted, resentment toward him within the coaching profession grew congruently.

Other sportswriters learned quickly what Conlin and Sandy Padwe, who covered Paterno from the late 1950s through the early 1970s, already knew. The man could *talk*. He *wanted* to talk. Sportswriters found Paterno's phone number in the phonebook. He left his number listed most of his professional career and, for at least the first 15 years as head coach, it was common for him to answer his home phone when it rang. Whereas little was known about the personal lives of Hayes and his fellow "blue blood" coaches, as Padwe called them, Paterno drew no such boundaries around his own private life. As a result, sportswriters began their construction of Paterno immediately after he became head coach. Wire service *United Press International* introduced two Paterno storylines that lived for decades. The first, which was true, was that Paterno forsake law school to become a college football coach. This was noted as far back as 1950 in the *Providence Bulletin*. The second, which was false, was that Engle had been so smitten with Paterno that he went out of his way to convince him to abandon law school ("Paterno is named," 1966). In truth, Engle was desperate. Paterno was Engle's fourth choice (Michael O'Brien, 1999, pp. 39-40; Posnanski, 2012, pp. 52-53). Just before the start of Paterno's first season as Penn State's head coach, the *New York Times*' Lloyd Millegan wrote that Paterno's approach to football made Engle's hiring of him a foregone conclusion. "Engle," wrote Millegan, "was impressed by Paterno's leadership ability, and when he moved to Penn State in 1950, offered him a job." This was false. Paterno moved after being

offered the job. Millegan's unchallenged statement made little sense. Even by Paterno's confident standards, it would have been a bold move to relocate to State College, Pennsylvania, a town he had never been to, without the promise of employment.

Engle's job offer brought Paterno, a 24-year-old graduate of Brown who served a non-combat stint in the Army toward the end of World War II, to the western border of East Coast football. Students at the Pennsylvania State College, as it was first called, began booting a football around campus in 1870. Football got off to a rough start. In 1878, faculty decided to restrict football to certain parts of campus away from the main population. Despite that, its popularity grew at Penn State just as it had at campuses across the American East Coast, South, and Midwest. Penn State played its first football game in 1881. By the 1940s, when Wayland Fuller Dunaway wrote "History of the Pennsylvania State College," celebration of the school's football coaches had become commonplace. Early 20th century coach Tommy Fennell, wrote Dunaway, was "admired and beloved not only for his expert knowledge of football but also for his high ideals and manly character."

Sportwriters also championed Paterno's character, but his gift of gab brought him popularity. Plus, not only would he talk, he was opinionated. When sportswriters asked Paterno about race relations in sports, he answered in detail. When they asked about politics, he answered. Sportswriters had never encountered anyone like him. They were fascinated by Paterno because he was "much more approachable and accessible" than his coaching peers, Paul Levine, who covered him in the late 1960s, said in an interview. His personality, paired with the journalists' push for fresh content and the cultural progress of the mid-to-late 1960s, produced the recipe for a mutually beneficial relationship between the coach and sportswriter.

"You have to go back to that period to understand," Padwe said in an interview. "I mean, that was in the middle of everything that was going on in this country, the [Vietnam] War and Civil Rights and everything else. Paterno was a total contrast to that branch of coaching and that type of coaching figure. That's why people viewed him the way they viewed him. Here's this guy who came in and he talked about literature, and you could sit down and talk about Hemingway with him. You could talk about poetry with him. His players went to class."

Journalists embed prior beliefs and experiences within their work. They have an idea of what they want a story to be and—sometimes involuntarily, sometimes consciously—select sources who support certain points of view. During the period when Paterno arrived, sportswriters viewed corruption as

college sports' inevitable partner (Donaldson, 1974, para. 6-8). Academic negligence and under-the-table recruiting were as much parts of college football as linebackers and the forward pass.

So when someone new came in, and he was successful and unique and accessible, sportswriters swooned. "What happens is, you take a guy out of Brooklyn, put him through an Ivy League School—Brown, at that—and you'll get yourself a different kind of football coach," wrote *Sports Illustrated*'s Dan Jenkins in 1968. "He will look like a New York detective and talk like a social worker. More than that, he will like the idea of having players on his team who can read." Paterno's emergence let journalists indulge their narratives. Jenkins said 50 years later for this book, not long before his death in 2019, that he did not actually believe Penn State's players were "all that intellectual," but narratives, like fires, need to be fed, and besides, "it was good material." Sportswriters wielded Paterno like a bullhorn to expose college football's fraudulence. He was someone worth promoting and celebrating for the good of the game.

Equally crucial was Paterno's willingness to let sportswriters maintain their authority. True, Paterno pulled back the curtain on college football, but he only supplied the copy. Sportswriters retained the autonomy to shape the story. When Major League Baseball player Jim Bouton wrote "Ball Four," his memoir of the 1969 season that spilled dirt on baseball and his fellow ball players, he incensed sportswriters. Writing was their job, not his, so when his eloquent prose and effective storytelling became a national bestseller, they attacked. Sports journalists in concert blasted Bouton for exposing locker room secrets, and for breaking an unwritten code. "The outcry of course is not so much from the other ballplayers, but from the sportswriters and house announcers," David Halberstam wrote for *Harper's Magazine* in 1970. "They are, after all, the creators of the myths."

Paterno respected yet manipulated sportswriters' boundaries. He understood them, and he anticipated what sportswriters could do for him and the Penn State program. Jenkins, for example, doubted Paterno would have given him such rich access had he not reported for *Sports Illustrated*, the magazine that historian Michael MacCambidge called "the blueprint for modern American sports journalism." Shortly after his promotion to head coach, Paterno and Penn State sports publicist Jim Tarman embarked on a driving tour across Pennsylvania. A vast, horizontal space that embodies an American Northeast feel on its east border and a Rustbelt personality along the west, Pennsylvania marked Paterno and Penn State's main recruiting territory. The two Penn State representatives stopped at every newspaper and TV station that would have them. They behaved more like politicians running for office than public sports figures. The strategy bore Paterno two

benefits. First, it increased Penn State's exposure. Second, it flattered sports journalists. One of the less glamorous parts of sportswriting was time spent in the car. They might spend one, two, three hours driving to an assignment, only to be met by an inarticulate or unwelcoming source. Paterno came to them.

Sometimes he brought liquor. Suitcases of it. In the early years of Paterno's tenure, said Neil Rudel of the *Altoona Mirror*, Paterno and Tarman held casual summer get-togethers for sports media. Discussions were informal and off the record. This built rapport, appreciation, and the perception of friendship. There is no evidence that any sportswriter ever intentionally wrote a positive story about Paterno because they shared a fifth of whiskey, but human nature suggests it is much easier to write critical stories about emotionally distant public figures than about those with whom one has shared intimate moments. Paterno and Tarman made sportswriters feel special. They returned the favor by helping him turn Pennsylvania into Penn State's near-exclusive recruiting ground. "Penn State football was almost nonexistent until Paterno," said Frank Fitzpatrick, a teenager during Paterno's early seasons who became a sportswriter at the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the author of two books about Paterno. "Maybe this is just me as a teenager assessing it at the time, but [growing up in Philadelphia] I don't remember any talk about Penn State football until Paterno took over as head coach. He certainly put it on the map in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh."

Paterno at the right moment

One cannot write about Paterno's beginnings without acknowledging the time in American history that he found the spotlight. Paterno's head-coaching career came to life in 1966, during a time of significant American transition. Generational collisions of hopes and anxieties played out politically, on the streets, and through and within journalism. Cultural revolutions do not occur suddenly or spontaneously; they deliver, as Jean-Francois Revel wrote, "not simply a new political orientation. It works through the depths of society (Revel, 1978, p. 9)."

United States military troops officially entered Vietnam in March 1965. The Cold War between America and the Soviet Union drove global conflicts. In 1963, America's first Catholic president, John Kennedy, was assassinated. A year later the U.S. government passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Feminism leapt beyond academia into mainstream culture. The U.S. passed the Equal Pay Act in 1963, the same year Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*. Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater lost

his 1964 bid for president but reinvigorated American conservatism and turned the Republican Party into a "breeding ground for the [1980] election of Ronald Reagan" (Grove, 1994, para. 13). The Black Panther Party for Self Defense was established in October 1966, one month after Paterno coached his first game. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy were assassinated two months apart in 1968. In 1969, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people gave public force to the gay liberation movement with the Stonewall Riots. This is but a very small sampling of what was going on in 1960s America.

Paterno was still finding was his way when U.S. voters elected Richard Nixon president in 1968. Some saw Nixon's ascent as conservative America's pushback against progressive politics (Converse, Miller, Rusk, & Wolfe, 1969). Whatever the reason, "Millions of Americans recognized … that America was engulfed in a pitched battle between the forces of darkness and the forces of light. The only thing was: Americans disagreed radically over which side was which" (Perlstein, 2008, p. xii). Journalists used the coming years to make Paterno part of American discourse.

Paterno told the New York Times before the 1966 season—his first as head coach—"we'll be lucky to break even" because of a difficult schedule. Indeed, Penn State finished 5-5, and Paterno and Penn State earned praise for successfully following in Rip Engle's footsteps. Engle never finished below .500 at Penn State. The Nittany Lions went 8-2 in Paterno's second season, 1967, but the national media still focused more on Paterno's personality than his team's improvement. After Penn State defeated Boston College, 43-8, the *Boston Globe* noted that Paterno was one of college football's "nice guys" and therefore would not have intentionally run up the score. The *Baltimore Sun*, ahead of Penn State's Gator Bowl appearance against Florida, told readers that Paterno had made the unorthodox move of giving his players extra time to enjoy swimming pools and the beach (Baltimore Sun, 1967, para. 7).

Paterno broke into the national conversation in 1968. By then, he had Penn State on the brink of becoming a college football power. On November 9, 1968, four days after Richard Nixon won the presidency, Penn State beat the University of Miami to improve to 7-0. Dan Jenkins's *Sports Illustrated* feature appeared two days later with the opening line, "A Beethoven symphony swirls through the mind of a defensive tackle." Paterno, he wrote, "stares at the boutique-colored leaves of the pastoral Alleghenies, thinks about Romantic poets and longs to drive his kids over to Waddle or Martha Furnace or Tusseyville so they can sit down and talk to a cow."

To readers, it painted a picture. Who knows how many people received their introduction to Paterno through the magazine, which at its peak

reached more than 20 million readers weekly. But to Jenkins, it was just another story. In the article he wrote Paterno was "special" because of the Brooklyn-Ivy League marriage, but he acknowledged a half-century later that "I was never bowled over by Joe being a working-class Brooklyn kid going to Brown, like he really had overcome a great hurdle in life."

The Ivy League narrative roared. Two months after Jenkins's article ran, the National Football Foundation and Quarterback Club of Baltimore invited Paterno to keynote a celebration of scholar-athletes. The *Baltimore Sun*, in an unbylined story, touted Paterno's Brown pedigree and quoted the late Stanley Woodward for having once written that as a player Paterno "can't run and can't pass. All he can do is think—and win" (Baltimore Sun, 1969, para. 4).

The invitation to Paterno came at the conclusion of Penn State's first undefeated season since 1947. The Nittany Lions went 11-0 in Paterno's third season, 1968. Even Engle, Paterno's predecessor and mentor, never finished a year undefeated. Despite Penn State's perfect season, sportswriters, who used to vote on a national champion, awarded the championship to Ohio State and coach Woody Hayes. "I knew how polls were and I knew what was going on with the polls and how much of a closed society it was," Padwe said. "Back then Penn State was a newcomer and there was still a bias toward the blue bloods. Now, [Penn State is] a blue blood, but the real blue bloods [in the late 1960s] were Oklahoma, Texas, USC, Notre Dame, Alabama, Arkansas, and Ohio State and Michigan. The bias writers showed toward those teams was pretty unbelievable. There was just this atmosphere that I recall of, 'OK, we got this club going and we're going to keep it going forever.'"

It is difficult to know whether sportswriters punished Paterno for speaking out against them. Penn State sat third in the national weekly rankings after it beat UCLA to improve to 4-0. Paterno, speaking at the weekly meeting of football writers in New York City, told a disbelieving audience to do away with rankings until the end of the season. He argued that weekly rankings forced football teams to focus on how much they were winning by rather than just winning, which led to running up the score, a form of unsportsmanlike play. The *New York Times'* Gordon S. White Jr. wrote that Paterno was being critical despite his team's own high ranking, arguing that even though Paterno's team was benefiting from the rankings he was willing to sacrifice them for the game's greater good. Nevertheless, the writers voted for Ohio State and against Penn State. Paterno expressed disappointment yet played it cool, but the snub of his undefeated squad laid the groundwork for the 1969 season. No one could have guessed at the time, but Paterno and Nixon had been set on a collision course.

Paterno's and Nixon's careers traveled different paths. One was president of the United States, the other the football coach of a scrappy, mid-level college program. There was crossover. Nixon's uncle, Ernest L. Nixon, taught agriculture at Penn State. Richard Nixon also was an obsessive football fan. In "Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72," Hunter S. Thompson wrote of finally getting an audience with the president, except it turned out there was a condition: Nixon's staff thought he needed to relax. They told Thompson to talk about nothing but football. "[Nixon] made a lot of allusions to things like 'end runs' and 'power sweeps' on the stump but it never occurred to me that he actually *knew* anything more about football than he knew about the Grateful Dead," Thompson wrote. Their conversation led to a game that had taken place five years earlier. Thompson brought up a specific play. Nixon remembered the exact play and which players were involved. Thompson wrote that Nixon's knowledge of football left him stunned.

Nixon was a Republican. So was Paterno, who joked to at least two reporters not to let his parents know because they were Democrats (Denlinger, 1969). Sportswriters mistook Paterno's willingness to discuss politics for political ambition. "One suspects … he would be candidate Paterno with the proper amount of coaxing," wrote the *Washington Post*'s Ken Denlinger. For a quarter-century Paterno fed the narrative that he might someday run for office, finally giving an unequivocal no in the early 1990s. He repeated a standard line that stuck. It took sportswriters nearly a decade to catch on that when Paterno said he was considering a political career "four to five years" from now that it was his way of sending a signal to Penn State recruits that he would never abandon them during their four years at the school. Still, the storyline continued.

What Paterno really wanted in 1969, the same year Nixon attended his Uncle's Ernest's funeral on Penn State's campus, was a national championship. The undefeated 1968 season, wrote sportswriters, had whetted his competitive appetite. In 1969 Penn State again streaked toward an undefeated season when Nixon made a seemingly innocuous decision that infuriated Paterno. On December 4, Nixon's press secretary, Ronald L. Ziegler, announced that Nixon would attend that weekend's college football game between the University of Texas and the University of Arkansas. Nixon would crown the winner college football's No. 1 team, and he would personally present that team with a plaque. According to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, this angered Pennsylvania governor Raymond Shafer, Paterno, and Penn State fans ("Nixon fumbles ball," 1969). Penn State's supporters believed their team deserved consideration.

By the following day, according to the *Inquirer* story, Ziegler had held three press conferences to address Penn State football. Shafer, Pennsylvania's governor, pushed back on the White House by telling journalists "Penn State is the nation's No. 1 football team." Ziegler responded by pushing back against Shafer. Ziegler cited an *Associated Press* poll that indicated the winner of Texas-Arkansas should be No. 1. Ziegler did not think about college football in terms of blue bloods and up-and-comers. He never could have known that sportswriters were not "taking Penn State football seriously in their minds," Padwe said. The *Inquirer* used football puns to describe Nixon's gaffe. The headline declared "Nixon Fumbles Ball on Award to Penn State." The body of the story noted that Nixon "bobbled" Pennsylvania's electoral votes, but that he "recovered the ball just before the whistle blew." Ziegler "was pushed deep into his own territory," and Friday, "his footwork was faster if still uncertain."

The *Inquirer* assigned one of football's most egregious errors, a fumble, to the nation's highest office. The story was written lightheartedly with a tone that suggested amusement rather than outrage, but the snub lit a fuse in Paterno that burned for decades. In the moment, Paterno raged privately to reporters and Tarman. In later years, Paterno downplayed to reporters the full extent of his anger, but in the moment, sportswriters delighted as Paterno spit acid. "Obviously after a second straight undefeated season, it pissed him off," Padwe said. The climax occurred when Ziegler "reported breathlessly" that Nixon also wished to acknowledge Penn State ("Nixon fumbles ball," 1969, para. 10). The president would award Penn State a plaque to honor its undefeated streak if the Nittany Lions won their Orange Bowl game against the University of Missouri.

Then Paterno went public, unleashing his charm and wit like a content grenade. Sports journalists immediately positioned him opposite Nixon. United Press International (UPI) wondered whether the decision to cross Paterno would damage his popularity nationwide with all college football fans. A day later UPI reported that Nixon's press aide, Herb Klein, had been inundated with phone calls of protest that supported Penn State. Columnist James Reston of *The Oregonian*, out of Portland, Oregon, nearly 2,700 miles from Penn State's campus, tried to make sense of Nixon's decision by contrasting the complexities of the presidency with the escapism of college football. Forgive Nixon, Reston wrote, for he did not know the seriousness of his error.

Nixon's decision to honor another football program gave Paterno a microphone and access to journalists from coast to coast. In 1969 college football was in the midst of its transition from a regional game with national rooting interest to a fully national endeavor (Oriard, 2009, pp. 127-190;

Branch, 2011). The governing body of college athletics, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), tightly controlled how many games could be seen on television, who could see them, and which teams appeared (de Oca, 2013, pp. 84-92). Broadcast deregulation of college football did not begin until the late 1970s and early 1980s (Lee, 2009). In 1969, coaches struggled to command a national audience. Standing on the back of the President of the United States, however, Paterno found his pulpit. He argued his team's case for a national title and launched himself into a stratosphere of publicity typically reserved for Bear Bryant, Woody Hayes, and Darrell Royal. Penn State may not yet have been blue blood, but Paterno's notoriety skyrocketed. "That's when Joe's identity started to get known," Paul Levine said.

Paterno said Penn State did not want Nixon's plaque. It was a belated consolation prize for an accomplishment the Nittany Lions had achieved months earlier. Then, Paterno broke character. Instead of feeding reporters articulate quotes, he and Tarman let Penn State University craft a press release on his behalf. Press releases are a medium tailored to achieve maximum media exposure (Lassen, 2006). Paterno's hit its mark. "Said" Paterno:

> First, I wish to congratulate [Texas] Coach [Darrell] Royal, not only on a great victory, but for having the courage to go for two points. This will stand him in good stead in the Cotton Bowl. It appears that Texas and Arkansas read the script from our Orange Bowl game last year and from our win over Syracuse.
>
> In response to numerous telephone calls I received today regarding President Nixon's television remarks concerning a plaque to Penn State for having the nation's longest unbeaten streak, I have heard nothing official about any such plaque.
>
> Before accepting such a plaque, I would have to confer with my squad. I'm sure they would be disappointed at this time, as would the Missouri squad, to receive anything other than a plaque for the No. 1 team. And the No. 1 team following the bowl games could be Penn State or Missouri.
>
> To accept any other plaque prior to the bowl games, which are supposedly to determine the final No. 1 team, would be a disservice to our squad, to Pennsylvania and to the East, which we represent, and perhaps most importantly to Missouri, which might just be the best team in the country.
>
> Due to the fact that I had to babysit with our four children while trying to watch today's game I did not get to hear all of President Nixon's remarks. But it would seem a waste of his very valuable time to present Penn State with a plaque for something we already have undisputed possession of—the

> nation's longest winning and unbeaten streaks (Hyman & White, 1971, pp. 5-6).

The press release triggered a chain of events by journalists that helped shape the next four decades of Paterno coverage. UPI ran the statement but did not tell readers it came from a press release ("Paterno may refuse," 1969). It presented the article as if a reporter spoke to Paterno. The wire service wrote:

> 'It would seem a waste of his [Nixon's] very valuable time to present Penn State with a plaque for something we already have undisputed possession of—the nation's longest winning streak,' Paterno said after watching the Texas-Arkansas game on television.

The *Philadelphia Daily News'* Bill Conlin altered Paterno's press release even more. Using the same excerpt lifted by UPI, Conlin summed up Nixon's day at the Texas-Arkansas game, which was won by Texas. Of Nixon's proposed plaque for Penn State, Conlin concluded, "The only thing missing was the Paterno seal of approval." Conlin wrote that Paterno's words were, "said acidly," even though they were never actually said at all (Conlin, 1969a).

Penn State University issued the press release on Paterno's behalf. The next day a wire service used excerpts from the release and presented them as direct quotes. The day after that, Conlin attached emotion to a quote that did not exist. Conlin's choice-making was reminiscent of one made decades earlier by Grantland Rice. In 1924 Rice nicknamed four Notre Dame football players the "Four Horsemen" in what one author called "the most famous football lead of all time." Rice coined the phrase while writing about a Notre Dame football game that he neither attended nor saw.

Conlin then pivoted. He shifted blame for Penn State's snub away from Nixon toward Paterno. Conlin reported that Penn State's players voted against playing Texas in the Cotton Bowl in favor of playing Missouri, which ruined the Nittany Lions' chance of facing off with Texas. Conlin argued that Paterno was suffering from sour grapes, as Nixon once had. Conlin wrote that Paterno "is coming on with the grumpy logic displayed by Nixon after losing the 1960 presidential election."

The mass mediation of Paterno's anger spread. Making no reference to the press release, syndicated *Washington Post* columnist Shirley Povich wrote that Paterno's quotes were said in a "manner snide" (Povich, 1969). Tongue in cheek, Povich defended Paterno by reminding readers of Nixon's presidential responsibilities:

> In the first place, what Mr. Nixon did Saturday was unconstitutional and a usurpation of powers. The authority vested in the President of the United States is defined precisely in Article II with due recognition as chief of the armed forces, and his power to make treaties, and his duty to inform Congress in state of the union messages about what is ailing the country, or what isn't. Nowhere in the constitution, nor by faintest precedent, is the President authorized to go around the country awarding plaques to college football teams and giving a team White House blessings as No. 1 in the nation (Povich, 1969).

In 1969 the responsibility for picking college football's national champion was supposed to fall to sportswriters. Nixon butted into the process, stealing sportswriters' autonomy. Povich tried to expel him. Like Conlin, Povich referenced football failures to describe Nixon's decision. He wrote that the Penn State exclusion was a "bobble," a football synonym for fumble, and added that Nixon may have been distracted by a "losing scrimmage," Povich's term for a judge Nixon had nominated who was defeated in a congressional vote.

Paterno and Penn State University did their parts to keep Nixon's snub in the news. On the day Povich's column ran, Nixon received the Gold Medal award from the Football Hall of Fame. Sports journalists received the transcript of a telegram sent to Nixon from Paterno that read, "We may disagree on your football analysis, but Penn Staters have no doubt as to who is the nation's No. 1 college football fan." Paterno was aware how his behavior toward Nixon played publicly. He boasted on the speaking circuit in 1971 that he started his fight with Nixon before it became fashionable.

"Joe really understood—before probably anybody did—the value of creating an image," said Mike DeCourcy, a longtime sports journalist who spent the early part of his career in Pittsburgh. "I've been in this business for 35 years now, and he understood that better than any coach I've come across in all that time. He used that to his great advantage."

The day after he released the telegram, Dec. 10, Paterno told reporters that Penn State had a right to be heard. UPI called Paterno vs. Nixon a "feud" both in headlines and the bodies of stories ("Paterno on feud," 1969, para. 2). Paterno tried to recast the storyline when his team arrived in Southern Florida for the Orange Bowl. He told *The Associated Press*, "If our little commotion [helped college football steal headlines from professional football], it was worth everything that was done." Journalists began to treat Paterno like a martyr, willing to sacrifice himself for the well-being of his team. "The Penn State players and their coach Joe Paterno, who are totally accustomed to the brushoff treatment by now …," wrote *The Philadelphia Inquirer*'s Padwe.