

Shall the Good Perish With the Bad?

The film is old and grainy, definitely black and white. My father, a photography buff all his life, showed the home movies of NYU football so many times that I think he wore out the film. I can still remember the clackety-clack of the old projector and the odor of the hot plastic as the film ran between the white hot projector light and the magnifying lens. I do not recall who NYU was playing, but my father knew the team, the scores, the names of the players, and each one of their personal stories.

By the time I was a student at the great University, football had long before been abolished. New York University still had a basketball team capable of reaching the NCAA finals, but even that was only a rare accomplishment. By the '60s, the only thing NYU was really known for, when it came to athletics, was its excellent fencing teams, several of whose members made it to the Olympics.

Few people would remember or believe that in the '20s, New York University was a football powerhouse. The team was established in 1873, the fifth college football team to be assembled in the United States. Long before anyone even thought of Penn State football, there was New York University. An NYU player was even the model for the Heisman trophy. The college's teams that played in the '20s were legendary.

When I first moved to Central Pennsylvania in the '70s, I was surprised and even discomfited by the worship in connection with Penn State football. I knew some people who even had an RV painted the Penn State colors so that they could watch Saturday football games with their friends in their very own driveway! Very few people talked about Penn State education, even those who attended the fine University, and most of the discussion was about its athletic prowess. I recall a clergyman who complained that if his congregants were as enamored with G-d as they were with Penn State football, his church would be full all the time.

A brief confession is in order. I represent one of Jerry Sandusky's victims. Out of an abundance of caution, and respect for my client, I will not recite the details of the sexual abuse. Neither will I detail my high respect for the university environment, the achievements of Penn State as an academic institution, or the importance of a solid athletic program.

New York University made the decision in 1952 to go cold turkey and abolish its football program. The football program had already been suspended in the early 1940's because of World War II, and after that conflagration, the University never really got its football program back on track. I had always heard that the football program was abolished because of a betting scandal, but apparently that was not the case. Rather, the University decided that academics were more important than athletics.

Athletics do make a university known in the current environment. People are so sports crazy that they will attend a university, give it money, and give it high ranking because it has winning teams. The New York Times recently published an exposé about SUNY Binghamton's basketball team, which a few years ago was the subject of scandal because of its recruitment policies. The athletics department at that university were totally reconstructed, tossing out virtually the entirety of the old administration, and replacing it with educationally oriented athletic coaches and directors.

Penn State is not the first great university to go through the throws of self-examination because of a faulty emphasis on athletics. Pennsylvania State University will survive and will make a comeback as a better, more highly respected institution. The short-term pain will be great. The loss of money will be significant. Penn State may even have some recruitment difficulties on the academic side because there will be less to cheer about on the athletic fields. All of this will be temporary.

Perhaps most distressing is that many good players and principled athletic enthusiasts at Penn State will suffer. When G-d wanted to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham is credited with demanding, shall a just g-d destroy the good with the bad? G-d agreed and said that he would look for good people in the cities. Penn State football and Penn State athletics will not be destroyed. Rather, if the University does its job correctly, the entire athletic program will be analyzed and reprioritized. After all, what is the mission of the University?

The job of a college is to teach people how to think. That statement is not original with me. University education means exposure to the great achievements of civilization. Amateur athletics in the context of a learning environment are part and parcel of a good university education. Even those who do not participate in the highest level Division I sports should build their bodies, as well as their minds. College for too long has been a place for students to learn how to drink, do drugs, and punish their bodies rather than as portals for intellectual development and physical excellence. I have tried all kinds of athletics in my life, from running to bicycling, swimming, and "yes" even Lacrosse. I was never very good at any of those sports, but I learned to respect myself and to interact with others.

There will be many loyalists who will decry the "severe" NCAA punishment meted out to Penn State. However, the Association has sent a powerful message for Penn State and every other college and university to take to heart; we are paying for education, not entertainment. While we all love to see our local teams win, that must be balanced against the moral values of responsibility and accountability that go with guiding our children from adolescence to adulthood. We need to demand more of the people who run our institutions, whether universities, government, corporations or the military. I find myself often reminding members of the Pennsylvania Patient Safety Authority, on which I have served since its inception, that we are supposed to be serving "patients" as our name indicates. Government agencies have a way of getting lost in the personal mission of those who run them. The mission of many of those at

Penn State has been to have a well-known University that succeeds in the top ten football conference.

It is going to be necessary for all the enthusiastic fans of Penn State athletics to support the NCAA and to work for the restructuring and the rebuilding of a Penn State football program that extolls the values of integrity, honesty and respect as much as it does winning. We often talk about the importance of a good effort being more significant than a "win." However, the truth is that very few people live that way. If we could teach our young people that a principled effort is a crucial component of a university education, we will have gained greatly from the Penn State scandal.

In the meantime, we must not forget about the fact that there are victims who must be addressed. Lives have been shattered, childhood lost, and great pain inflicted. Spending many hours with the victims is an education unto itself. Speaking in detail with anyone who has been the victim of sexual abuse is one of the most painful occupations that an individual can know. Punishing Penn State, restructuring Penn State's overemphasis on athletics, and addressing the needs of the victims will be a long and arduous process. The process must be begun and carried forth by people of goodwill. Those people are the ones who truly love Penn State and see its colors as the blue skies of heaven.

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