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FOR GENE DOWNS AND RON MAR-ELIA,

Good Friends gone too soon.

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**Men must endure**

**Their going hence, even as their coming hither;**

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**Ripeness is all.**

—*King Lear* (Act V, Scene II)





# INTRODUCTION

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## **JOE PATERNO COULDN'T SLEEP.**

That was hardly surprising. Heading into the next afternoon's game with Northwestern, their ninth of the 2004 season, his Nittany Lions were a recipe for coaching insomnia. No matter what he tried, no matter how hard he worked, he just couldn't seem to turn them around.

But the Penn State coach's nature wouldn't permit surrender. And so, sometime before dawn on November 6, a brisk Saturday in State College, Pennsylvania, Paterno decided that rather than twitch around in bed for another hour, he'd review the game plan one last time.

He rose and proceeded down the hall to the den in the modest ranch house that had been his home now for nearly four decades. The four-bedroom house on McKee Street was just a few tree-lined blocks from the northern edge of the university's fifteen-thousand-acre campus, a twenty-minute walk from Beaver Stadium. Its backyard bordered Sunset Park, where even now, fifty days short of his seventy-eighth birthday, the coach would take brisk strolls along its tree-shrouded paths.

Paterno plucked a copy of the game plan off his desk and sat down. How could he squeeze more out of an offense that was by almost any measure his feeblest ever? He'd been pushing the envelope for weeks. For most of his fifty-four years of coaching, Penn State had won with a knock-'em-back simplicity—at times the only variation seemed to be which blocking hole the tailback would run toward. But the game plan he examined now had quarterbacks lined up at wide receiver, tight end, even tailback. There were fullback passes, faked field goals, and flea flickers.

What else could he do? Four weeks earlier, in a home loss to Purdue, his Nittany Lions had run the ball only seventeen times, the fewest ever in the Paterno era. They gained a paltry 18 yards.

By the time the morning sun angled through the den's high windows, he had made several changes. Restless, obsessively prepared, Paterno had performed this same kind of early-morning editing on dozens of Saturdays throughout his years at Penn State. "The will to win is important," he liked to say. "The willingness to prepare is vital." This time, however, he sensed that something in his well-ordered universe was out of place. He just couldn't identify exactly what it was.

Searching, he shifted in his chair and surveyed the room. Everywhere he looked he saw the familiar artifacts of the life he had chosen: the small den in the small house in the small town he had refused to abandon despite dozens of tempting offers; the photographs of his wife, his five children, his fourteen young grandchildren, his countless friends, and the former players who had gone on to the NFL, medical school, even the concert stage; the footballs, plaques, and trophies he had earned by winning 341 games—more than any other coach in history except one—all of them won, as his legion of supporters bragged, the right way.

Then he saw the problem.

Just beneath those elevated windows was a trophy shelf. Long ago, Paterno, a devout Catholic, had placed a crucifix up there, too, perhaps an attempt to ensure that he would not awake one day and find that his long and brilliant career had been a dream. Whenever he worked in the room on sunny

mornings, the shadow of that crucifix fell comfortingly upon him.

Recently, though, he'd been so obsessed with redeeming himself and his program that he hadn't noticed the absence of the reassuring shadow. Someone had moved the cross (probably his wife while cleaning). He wondered how long it had been missing. Weeks? Years? Maybe that explained Penn State's baffling fall from its once preordained spot high in the national rankings. He had coached five undefeated teams, won two national championships and four coach-of-the-year awards, led his teams to thirty-one bowl appearances. But in the last five years, his teams had lost more often than they'd won. He needed to change his luck.

So he climbed up on a chair and reached for the trophy that now obscured the crucifix. It was the Timmie Award, which the Washington (D.C.) Touchdown Club had presented him in 1986 as its Coach of the Year. It was a twelve-pound, silver-plated depiction of an adolescent football player standing on a solid wooden base, and as he held it in his hands it seemed heavier than he had remembered.

Suddenly, the trophy slipped from his grasp and, like one more well-aimed arrow of misfortune, tumbled toward his head.

It clipped the scalp behind his left ear and he staggered. He braced himself to prevent a fall and muttered something angrily in that whiny Brooklyn accent he had never lost. Carefully stepping down he pressed a hand against the fresh wound. The blood was flowing now, warm and plentiful. He was cut, not badly, but deep enough to ensure a hospital visit.

As he woke his wife to drive him to Penn State's Health Center, where they would sew eleven stitches behind his ear, he knew that the damn sportswriters would find out. He could imagine the next morning's headline in the *Centre Daily Times*: PATERNO INJURED BY FALLING TROPHY WHILE TRYING TO MOVE CRUCIFIX.

*No one's going to believe this*, he thought.

Actually, anyone who had been following Paterno and his Penn State football team in 2004 would have found it perfectly plausible. In the midst of another troubling season, he had been reaching for some spiritual comfort. Instead, he got smacked in the head by his glorious past.

That early-morning mishap explained a lot about Joe Paterno in 2004.

After nearly thirty-nine years as Penn State's head coach, he remained restless, curious, devoted, competitive, and superstitious. His luck had been bad almost since the moment a Minnesota receiver had grasped a desperate fourth-down pass against his second-ranked team in 1999. And as his persistent but loving critics pointed out at every opportunity, he was, in many ways, a fragile old man.

By the fall of 2004, Paterno's age and the deflated status of Nittany Lions' football had combined to create an unusually volatile atmosphere in State College. Troubling questions tumbled through central Pennsylvania's crisp autumn air like falling leaves. Would the old coach yield to reality and bow out gracefully? Or would he stubbornly hang on until he keeled over on Beaver Stadium's Kentucky-bluegrass sideline? Could so powerful a figure ever be persuaded to step aside? Or at least agree on a successor? If so, who might that be? His son Jay? Coordinators Tom Bradley or Galen Hall or someone from outside the program like Rick Neuheisel or Kirk Ferentz? Would Paterno at least reveal his plans at some point? And what would happen to the university's donations, applications, and prestige if he left? Or, worse, if he continued to lose?

There were no easy answers. Paterno's résumé was bulletproof. Time, tenure, and testimonials seemed to place the coach beyond the normal reach of authority. He had been at Penn State since

1950, when the Lions ran a Wing-T and played before crowds of fifteen thousand on a dusty field next door to Rec Hall. He had been head coach since 1966. In addition to the 341 games and the two national championships, he'd won nearly universal admiration for the classy program he'd built, one that had graduated eighty-six percent of its players and sent nearly three hundred of them to the NFL. His passion, intelligence, and commitment had helped transform an obscure agricultural college into a multifaceted Big Ten research institution, one that attracted topflight students and professors, deep-pocketed donors, and national respect. He'd rejected law school, countless NFL offers, and even politics to remain at the university.

In the process, he had become a national icon, the antidote to all that was toxic in college sports. He was "JoePa," Penn State's greatest asset. "Joe Paterno," former Penn State president John Oswald once said, "is a university president's dream." He was a towering figure in American sports, a Pennsylvania folk hero as solid and immovable as Mount Nittany itself.

But this unprecedented Penn State slump that began in 2000 and lingered on like a bad dream for five seasons now had eroded Mount JoePa's reputation. Losing had pulled back the curtain on Paterno's wizardry, revealing him to many as a stubborn, aging mortal. His supporters still outnumbered his detractors by a wide margin, but the gap was narrowing every day. Students, alumni, donors, fans, and sportswriters urged him to step aside. For the good of the football program. For the good of Penn State. For the good of Joe Paterno. Some of Paterno's more powerful foes had begun, according to the *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader*, "letter-writing campaigns, secret meetings in dark, smoke-filled rooms, even boycotts of the traditional post-home-game pasta dinners at the Paterno home."

"I agree that Joe has more than earned the right to go out on his terms, but there comes a point in all of our lives when you look in the mirror and say, 'It's time,' " a major Penn State donor told the paper. "Besides, and I know this is going to sound disrespectful, people aren't coming to that stadium every week because our library is rated number one in the nation. That's nice and all, but we'd still like to beat Michigan."

In the autumn of 2004, Happy Valley, long the capital of college-football optimism, had become a different place. A half century of certainty had been replaced by doubt. There had been no Big Ten titles since 1994, no nonconference road wins since 1999, just one bowl game in the last five years, and very few mentions on ESPN, unless it was some hand-waving ex-jock poking fun at Paterno's age. Even the huge crowds at Beaver Stadium had shrunk lately, down by four thousand a game.

The moral superiority Penn Staters had long felt about their pristine football program was crumbling too. While the team's graduation rate remained remarkably high, there had been so many disturbing off-the-field incidents involving players in 2003 that at times it was hard to distinguish Penn State from an outlaw program. At least eleven Nittany Lions had run-ins with the law that season. Worse, Paterno sometimes seemed willing to excuse, perhaps even hide, their transgressions.

"Penn State football is supposed to matter, as much as anything in sports can," said Ryan Jones, a '95 grad, early in the 2004 season. "We boast proud traditions and a coach and a program that still stand for things most coaches and programs don't. But we're not relevant anymore, and life was a little bit better when we were."

Most fans, their pride stung no less than the coach's, wanted assurances that the Penn State tradition would be reborn. If Paterno could do it, all the better. But if, as many now were convinced, he could not, then significant change was essential. And at Penn State, significant change could only mean one thing.

The detractors had hoped he might walk away when his contract expired after the 2004 season. But

the previous May, at his request, the coach received a four-year contract extension, a deal set to run through his ~~eighty-second birthday in 2008~~. The new contract virtually guaranteed that no one was going to tell him when to retire. Armed with that formidable club, Paterno could laughingly shrug off inquiries about his plans. He was not, he said, “ready to be buried.”

The extension was, depending on one’s view of Paterno, either a nice gesture or a national embarrassment.

“It’s disappointing,” said Paul Morrison, one of the first Nittany Lion Club boosters to call publicly for a coaching change. “I just haven’t seen the performance on or off the field for the past handful of years. I was hoping to see a change of direction, someone new with more youth and energy.”

“I know where I am and I think that if the day comes when I feel like I’m not able to do the job or the game’s passed me by or I can’t get up with a lot of enthusiasm . . . I don’t have to stay in coaching,” Paterno said. “I can get out of it. But I don’t feel that way right now.”

As the new season dawned, the apparently unbridgeable gap between what many alumni and fans felt was necessary and what was actually possible was wider than ever. That bred frustration, which led to more angry letters, e-mails, and radio-talk-show calls.

“I think, honestly, Joe has to realize at some point that he needs to kind of hang things up here and try to leave while he can still have some kind of good reputation,” Skip Dreibelbis, a former Penn State player, said on a State College postgame radio show, where the coach’s detractors tended to gather. “Because if things continue this downward spiral that they’re in, what’s going to become of Penn State football?”

Paterno’s supporters were, if not as persistently noisy, just as passionate. Their fortress was the State College Quarterback Club, a hardcore group of local loyalists who had been conducting casual weekly lunch meetings with the coach for decades.

“He deserves to be handled differently than anyone else,” said Jim Meister, the club’s president. “He put Penn State on the map. No matter where you are, if you mention Penn State, people will say, ‘Isn’t that where Joe Paterno is?’ ”

That renown tinges the debate with sadness. No one enjoyed watching Paterno tarnish his image, even if he insisted he was unaffected by it all. But what do you do when a legend falters?

“Years ago,” Paterno said, “when I came home crying that somebody called me a Wop, I said ‘Mom’ —he pretends to be crying—“ ‘they called me a Wop.’ She said, ‘Sticks and stones will break your bones but names will never hurt you.’ All of that is fine. As long as they don’t call me a Wop in the paper, I’m all right.”

That was about the only thing they didn’t call him. Long college football’s most revered figure, the aging coach was becoming the butt of jokes. And not just in Pennsylvania. In Biloxi, Mississippi, a reader wrote that city’s *Sun-Herald*: “More ugly rumors out of the Big Ten: allegations Joe Paterno once gave a recruit a free stagecoach.” From *The Miami Herald*’s Greg Cote came: “Did you notice last week? Poor Paterno coached the entire game with his left blinker on.” A Toronto newspaper had initiated a “JoePa Award,” to be presented annually “to those whose reputations are sullied by hanging around too long.”

He was at the heart of a tempest. And with each defeat the rain fell harder, the wind blew stronger. Had Paterno, an English-literature major at Brown more than a half century earlier, not been consumed by his team’s failings, he might have recognized how much he had come to resemble Lear, Shakespeare’s aging, befuddled king. Tarnished by time, confounded by his rivals, beset by the rising cries of critics, enmeshed in a controversy involving an heir, he was an increasingly tragic figure moored on the storm-wracked heather of his legend.

Four or five years ago, as Paterno tells the story, he ran into an eighty-two-year-old Penn State fan who had enjoyed a long and successful career as a corporate CEO.

“Never retire,” he told the coach.

Recently, Paterno saw the man again.

“Damn it,” he said to the coach now. “You took my advice.”

Throughout this late-life ordeal, Paterno could still laugh at himself. He liked to say that was because he had no ego. One of his favorite stories on that topic concerned his father, Angelo, a lawyer who had died of a heart attack in 1955.

“I have not been an ego guy. I never had an ego,” he said. “When I was a kid, a junior in high school, I got my picture in the *Brooklyn Eagle*. I’m sitting there in my room looking at my picture and my dad said, ‘Keep looking at that picture and that’s the last time you’ll ever have your picture in the paper.’ I’ve never forgotten that.”

It was a nice story. But no one gets to be as successful as Paterno without an ego. It was true he didn’t live in a big house, or drive a Mercedes or buy expensive Italian suits. But wasn’t it egotistical to demand so much from players and himself? And to get it? Paterno might not be self-conscious, but he certainly is self-aware.

“Joe’s ego is like Dean Smith’s,” said Patrick Reusse, a *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* columnist. “It’s not an in-your-face kind of ego. It’s more a sideways ego. But in the end it’s still a huge ego.”

Now that ego was badly bruised.

A few years earlier, he had seemed ready to wean himself gradually from the daily grind of his job. Maybe he’d cut back in this area or that, have one last great season and then walk away to become a kind of coach emeritus, one who, upon request, injected himself into recruiting, fund raising, or public relations for the university. Instead, the embarrassments of 2003 persuaded him he needed more, not less, involvement. So Paterno began to reimagine himself.

“I felt we weren’t very good and I hadn’t done a very good job,” he said. “So I had to sit back and say, ‘Hey, do you want to stay in this thing? If you want to stay in it, you’d better get off your backside and get to work again.’ ”

Before the 2004 season, he shuffled his coaching staff, bumping longtime offensive coordinator Fran Ganter into an administrative post and replacing him with Galen Hall. He altered lifetime routines. He more closely monitored his players’ performances and academic progress. He got more involved in the play calling. At times, he frantically—maybe even desperately—pushed his players, his staff, and himself. He nagged and challenged them all in practices that were more physically grueling than any Penn State senior could recall.

It was all quite taxing for a man of seventy-seven, even one so unusually fit and energetic. But that’s how he always handled adversity, with a hitch-up-your-pants, plant-your-feet-in-the-ground determination. That was the Brooklyn street swagger in Paterno, the cocky self-assurance that toughened, and sometimes obscured, his more familiar intellectual side.

“Over the years, every time things started getting a little rough, he’d always be one of those guys who thrived on it,” said Tim Curley, Penn State’s athletic director. “The rest of us would get gray hair and go crazy and he’s not like that. He’s so competitive he seems to welcome the challenge.”

He had watched Bear Bryant die in 1983, just a month after that legendary coach quit at Alabama, and it frightened him. So, in the words of *Centre Daily Times* sports editor Ron Bracken, who has known and covered Paterno for decades, he kept “hitting the reset button on his retirement clock.”

Every five years or so, he’d look around at his wife and children, or his wife and grandchildren, at the growing costs and commercialization of college sports, at the increased recruiting competition and

media demands, and he'd talk about retirement.

"I don't want to hang around too long," he said. "I'll probably coach another four or five years." That was in 1973.

He forecast his imminent departure again in 1978, in 1982, in 1986, in 1989, in 1997, and in 1999. In 1990, he had predicted that by 2000, he'd be sitting in the Beaver Stadium stands, "second-guessing a coach who doesn't throw the ball enough."

He was rightfully proud of the record he had amassed, the lives he had changed, the acclaimed program he had constructed. Still, he had regrets.

"I can remember things that happened twenty years ago in football games," he said once, "but I can't remember what my kids did."

Maybe he also thought about the books he hadn't read, the places he'd never seen, how nice it would be to sit on the beach near his summer home in Avalon, New Jersey, with a Jack Daniel's and a *New York Times* and not have anything to worry about.

And yet he couldn't walk away. He couldn't even settle on a scenario in which that might be possible.

Tommy Bowden, the son of Bobby Bowden, the seventy-five-year-old Florida State coach who had passed Paterno's record-setting victory total, recognized the symptoms. He grimly predicted that either his father or Paterno "will die on the field, I'm sure."

But for all his game-day miseries, when practice resumed each Monday, he would be miraculously revived. Standing out there on those skinny legs, wearing a plain gray sweatshirt, khaki pants, and black football cleats, Paterno was as energetic, as cranky, as meticulous, as vocal, as involved as ever.

Sometimes, despite increasing evidence that it would be unlikely for this diminished Penn State program, he mused about having one last unbeaten team. There had been at least one in every other decade he had been head coach. Sometimes he hinted that he'd like to name an assistant head coach and then gradually hand the reins to him, just as Rip Engle had done for Paterno. Sometimes he suggested that before departing he just wanted to get Penn State football back on track.

His lifelong passion to succeed—"a maniacal need to be first," his brother termed it—long ago trumped his other interests. Now it was too late and he was too proud to admit it. He had invested so much in Penn State football that to leave it in this state, despite all he had accomplished, would be a tacit acknowledgement of failure.

"If you think that I am going to back out of it because I am intimidated, you are wrong," he said as the season began in 2004. "If you think I am going to stay when I think I am not doing a good job, you are wrong. Those things have to develop and have to evolve. Right now, I think we can get this thing done and do a good job. We obviously have to recruit some people. We have to recruit some skilled people. I have said that before. I don't want to hang around here and pull Penn State down. . . . I could walk out of this thing. I could call and tell you today I am going. What does it mean to me? It doesn't mean a thing to me. What impact does it have on the program, the coaches, and is it the best thing for Penn State? They are the things that I think about all the time. It has nothing to do with Joe Paterno."

No, even with a battered ego, a fraying historical reputation, and a bloodied head, Joe Paterno couldn't leave.

"I know of several old friends who have called Joe and said, 'Look, nobody is going to make you leave. But for God's sake, why not get things lined up for when you do decide to do it?'" said one longtime Penn State insider. "Joe doesn't want to hear it. He just cuts those people out of his life."

Matt Millen, the former Penn State star who now is the Detroit Lions general manager, experienced that very thing. "Two years ago, I called him and said, 'You know, Joe, it really isn't my business, but

you should name a successor,' ” said Millen in 2003. “ ‘It doesn’t mean you have to retire.’

~~“He told me, ‘Millen, you’re right—it isn’t any of your business.’ ”~~

---

He was going to turn his program around—even if it killed him.





# CHAPTER 1

---

**THE WHISTLE** that officially began the 2004 season blew at precisely 10:00 A.M. on March 27, its shrill cry careening around cavernous Holuba Hall like the shriek of a wounded bird. From the outside the enormous corrugated-steel practice facility, just a short distance from Beaver Stadium, resembled a warehouse. Inside, its 118,000-square-foot vastness was dark and drafty, the dreariness enlivened only by the garish green Astroturf that carpeted its floor.

On this first day of spring practice, Joe Paterno prowled up and down that artificial surface. Hunched at the hips, head constantly tilted forward, dark eyes focused on the exercising players stretched out at his feet, he resembled a hawk waiting to swoop down on unsuspecting prey.

Wearing his usual practice uniform—gray sweatshirt, khakis, black football cleats over white tube socks—the coach frequently barked and snapped in a manner that, depending on the player, could irritate, intimidate, infuriate, or amuse.

But as familiar as this agitated figure might have appeared to his team that morning, the old man was not the same coach who just four months earlier had been humiliated by Penn State's season-ending 41–10 loss at Michigan State. The seventy-seven-year-old Paterno had, out of desperation, reinvented himself.

Bruised and battered during that nine-loss season, he had spent the last few months deconstructing Penn State football. He was going to demand more, inspire more, discipline more. He was going to discard some philosophies that no longer worked and adopt a few new ones.

“You forget to do the things that got you there,” he would explain. “You stop paying attention to the tiny details. Now I've got to get back to those things. It's like starting over. I've got to prove a couple of things and I think it's going to be interesting to see if I can do it.”

His team had gotten its first glimpse of the changes a month earlier.

The 2003 Nittany Lions had been as bad off the field as on it. Inside the program, there was a hope that with the end of that dreadful season might come an end to the extracurricular trouble as well. Paterno certainly intended that to be the case.

Then, sometime around 4:00 A.M. on February 7, near the end of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity's “Black Ice” dance and skate party at Penn State's Greenburg Ice Pavilion, a fight broke out. Like a sprawling barroom brawl from an old Western, it went on for more than ten minutes and eventually involved fifteen to twenty people. Among them were three key players, defensive linemen Matthew Rice and Ed Johnson and quarterback/wide receiver Michael Robinson.

Robinson, the central ingredient in Paterno's football plans for the upcoming season, had been knocked into the rink's glass trophy case during the fight. The junior was cut so badly behind his left ear that he needed twenty-four stitches to close the wound. No charges were ever filed, but Paterno suspended Johnson and Rice for summer practice. Robinson, whose role in the melee the coach deemed “not as aggressive,” was put on probation.

“They were wrong. They were in a fight,” Paterno told reporters. “We've taken care of it.”

That sentiment was for public consumption. Privately, Paterno fumed. He quickly summoned his team to a meeting. He told them he wouldn't put up with that kind of thing this season. They were going to discover a lot of changes when they returned to the field the following month. Either they'd work harder and behave better or they wouldn't be running out of the Beaver Stadium tunnel with him next September 4 for the season-opening game with Akron.

"He told us, 'That's it,' " said senior quarterback Zack Mills. " 'Next incident, you're gone.' He was tired of it happening every other week. He's serious. . . . The margin for error is gone."

All rules would be strictly enforced. No long hair, cornrows, beards, or mustaches. Players struggling in class or late for meetings would jeopardize their playing time.

The athletes, many of whom had been so dismayed by the 3–9 season that they were considering transfers, welcomed the new spark they saw in their old coach.

"We needed Joe to put us in our place," said tight end Isaac Smolko.

So even though, at this first spring workout, the players' outfits were relatively casual—navy-blue shorts, white T-shirts, spikes, and helmets—the atmosphere was surprisingly intense for March.

"He wants to coach like he coached in the past, when people were scared of him," said Levi Brown, an offensive tackle. "I don't think people have been scared of him lately."

Players had been accustomed to Paterno's whiny complaints and his obsession with details. Many of them, though, had begun to tune him out. While they respected his accomplishments, and were in awe of his reputation, they couldn't help but occasionally see him as a grandfatherly figure, a hopelessly outdated old man who sputtered furiously—comically sometimes to them—at their mistakes and constantly referenced long-gone players and coaches.

Now, with his postbrawl crackdown and his vow of zero tolerance, their views began to change. Almost immediately, defensive linemen Johnson, Lavon Chisley, and Tamba Hali got rid of their cornrows.

"[After] a three-and-nine season, a lot of people might say, 'It's over. We should leave. Some people should get out of here,' " explained Hali. "But if you have guys still here, trying to work . . . showing our dedication, that's more togetherness right there. . . . If anything is going to help us get back on track, we want to do that."

Paterno's message came through so loud and so clear that it even filtered down to some of the Pennsylvania high school players Penn State was recruiting.

"Paterno is cracking down on everything now, he wants his program run his way," Dan Lawlor, a fullback from Mechanicsburg who signed with the Nittany Lions, told a reporter. "He's doing everything he can to help it recover."

A. Q. Shipley, a defensive tackle from Coraopolis who also wound up at Penn State, said that in his talks with Paterno, the coach had "come across real strict. You can just tell it's his way or no way."

Paterno needed more than discipline. He needed a new Penn State paradigm.

While college football was getting faster and flashier all the time, Paterno's teams often appeared as out of fashion as their famously stark navy-and-white uniforms. Right or wrong, the perception was that the Nittany Lions were mired in the past. Was it any wonder so many hip-hop-generation recruits, even in Pennsylvania, were looking elsewhere?

"The teams that play us know what we're going to run," star running back Larry Johnson had said after a 2000 loss to lightly regarded Toledo, a bitter postgame analysis that inflamed the "Joe Must Go" movement. "They can pull out the tapes from '92 or '93, and we run the same offense. Same

plays, same offense. . . . Sometimes, I don't even know the play and I can guess what's coming. The system is too predictable. It's been around too long."

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If Paterno couldn't produce evidence of positive change in 2004—on and off the field—the tumult surrounding his age and abilities would ratchet up considerably. That was why a near-palpable sense of urgency surrounded him.

He had always been fanatical in his devotion to his job. "He goes and goes and goes until it's time to go to bed," his brother George once said. As he aged, that passion grew uncontrollably, like kudzu, until it choked out almost everything else.

"There isn't anything in my life anymore except for my family and football," Paterno said. His wife, of forty-two years offered a similar assessment, though adding "walking" to his short list of passions.

A year ago, however, he had hinted that he was nearing a point when he might begin to relinquish some duties to assistants. While he remained remarkably involved in every detail of football and recruiting, Paterno, mentally at least, had seemed ready to relax his grip.

But sometime during those long winter walks around town or on Sunset Park's bicycle and jogging paths, Paterno convinced himself that what was required was more, not less, dedication. At his age, with his detractors howling, he didn't have time for long-range solutions. So changes, drastic changes had to be tried. And they had to be tried fast.

Extracurricular demands had long been a burden and a drain on the time he could devote to the players and coaching. Now he began to think of ways to ease that load, perhaps by creating a new position in the athletic department for someone who could handle the requests, the phone calls, and the paperwork.

"One of the problems that you get the longer you're in it: The more friends and kids, and people who count on you," Paterno had said earlier, "and your time away from coaching gets more and more significant. People have funerals, [former] players have kids who need a hand, the whole band of people you're involved with stretches. Every year it stretches a little bit more. That's when you start to get swamped. You keep thinking it won't hurt here, it won't hurt there. You wake up one morning and you have a crappy organization."

By the time spring practice began, there were whispers around State College about Paterno's "Grand Experiment II." This master plan allegedly was not at all like its famous predecessor, in which Paterno outlined his plans to marry academics and athletics. This experiment was all about restoring the luster to his program.

"We had to get the whole program back into a little different mode," Paterno said of his off-season contemplations. "You've got to figure out how you're going to get this thing done so you can protect the coaches and make sure the university has the ability to continue the kind of tradition we've had. You have an obligation to make sure the kids you recruited have some success. All of that was in my mind when I decided I was going to give it a shot. And once I made that decision, I wasn't going to go about it halfhearted. I was going to bust my butt."

Continued football difficulties could be devastating to Penn State. Too much losing could adversely affect more than the school's athletic reputation. Alumni contributions, political support, and student applications all rode on the back of football success.

So in the run-up to spring drills, he further limited his access—and that of his assistants and players—to fans and reporters. He stopped walking to his office each morning and evening to save time. His wife told interviewers that he was "preoccupied, distracted."

"There's more getting up in the middle of the night and writing ideas down," Sue Paterno said of her husband. "More going to work at one or two in the morning. If something goes through his mind,

he can't sleep."

~~Had outsiders been able to observe him they would have seen a man who, despite having a contract about to expire, was not ready to quit. Quit? Hell, he was so excited he could hardly sleep. He made mental lists of problems that needed addressing. And given his 2003 team's rap sheet and woeful statistics, they were lengthy. Eleven Penn State players had been cited or arrested. On the field, the Lions' lone victories had come at home, against three perennial weak sisters, Temple, Kent State, and Indiana. Those teams' combined win-loss record was 8-28.~~

Paterno believed his last team had lacked heart and character. They hung in games until adversity arrived and then, typically in the fourth quarter, folded. Penn State had blown late leads to Nebraska, Northwestern, and Ohio State in 2003. They drew close to Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Purdue but extinguished themselves late in those losses.

Though he remained convinced physical conditioning was not a major reason why the 2003 Lions collapsed, he had his players lift more in the winter, run more in the spring.

"He wants to see who are the guys who are going to step up and make plays in the clutch, when you're tired, fatigued, sweating, breathing hard, because that's what it's going to take to win those fourth quarters," junior center E. Z. Smith said.

The needs of their legs, arms, and torsos addressed, he turned to where he felt the real problems existed—in their hearts and minds.

"I don't think we've been tough enough mentally in the clutch," Paterno said.

He had been disappointed with some of his now-departed players, particularly guys like Tony Johnson and offensive tackle Chris McKelvey who were constantly in his doghouse and didn't seem to care. The locker room lacked leaders. There had been few wise elders for the underclassmen to turn to in tough times. As a result, bad easily made the leap to worse.

"We had a lack of leadership," conceded kicker Robbie Gould. "Seniors didn't want to take that role. This year, there's guys that want to get it done and show the young guys how it's supposed to be done."

Penn State hadn't elected permanent captains in five years, but now Paterno felt this youthful 2004 team would need them. The coach discussed his plans with the players. He told them two of his favorites, fifth-year seniors Mills and linebacker Derek Wake, would be ideal. Not surprisingly, the two strong, silent types were selected.

"We've run the gamut," said wide receiver Gerald Smith, discussing the new captains' personalities. "In the past, we've had guys who, just because they were seniors, acted like leaders, jumping around and yelling. But in the back of your mind you're thinking, *What have you done? You haven't done anything.*"

The team assembled before Paterno that morning in Holuba Hall was a remarkably young one. Of the ninety-seven names on its spring roster, only fourteen were seniors in their last year of eligibility. That reflected an off-season purge of sorts, one that was further evidence of this new Paterno.

Traditionally loyal to veterans, often criticized for sticking with seniors over apparently more gifted underclassmen, he had decided Penn State would go with youth in 2004. He urged several fifth-year seniors to leave the team and a few, including offensive lineman Nick Marmo and linebackers T. C. Cosby and Tim Johnson, did so. At least two other players, linebacker LaMar Stewart and center Dan Mazan, already had decided to transfer.

That meant more time to work with freshmen. Most freshmen had difficulties adjusting to college

life. Many were away from home for the first time. There were the pressures of dorm life and schoolwork. And Paterno knew his ways took some getting used to.

“Kids coming out of high school just aren’t prepared for it,” said Robinson. “Coach will say something to reporters that’s meant for you. In meetings, you’ll think he’s talking about somebody else but he’s really talking about you. He’ll yell things at practice and you’re not sure how to take it.”

Three of the Penn State players on the field with Paterno that morning were freshmen whose high school classes hadn’t even graduated yet. Linebacker Dan Connor, offensive lineman Greg Harrison, and defensive lineman Elijah Robinson had accelerated through their senior years so they could enroll for the spring semester and participate in spring drills.

Connor, Pennsylvania’s outstanding scholastic defensive player the previous fall, had taken an extra load of core courses at Strath Haven High to finish early.

“One thing I don’t need to be doing is getting lazy, developing bad habits,” he explained to the *Philadelphia Daily News*. “I can avoid that by going up there and getting a jump on things. . . . It looked like they might need help [at linebacker]. If they needed me to play in September, I didn’t want to go through the whole freshman thing, getting acclimated and trying to fit in football. This way, I got that taken care of. I’ll know my way around, have classes already done, and it will be easier.”

Paterno was ambivalent about the trend. A sentimentalist by nature, he hated to see youngsters pass up things like senior proms and senior weeks at the Shore—even though most managed to squeeze in those activities anyway.

“It’s their last year in high school,” he said, “and it should be such a good time. . . . If I had my way we would have freshmen ineligible. That is the way I would look at it. Let [the NCAA] come in and give us eight to ten more scholarships and have freshmen ineligible. I would prefer that.”

In his mind, Paterno was mildly optimistic. Penn State’s strength would be its sophomores and juniors, players who would be at their peaks in ‘05 and ‘06. They would be supplemented by a class of freshmen recruits that *Sports Illustrated* ranked twelfth best in the nation. And that was before Pittsburgh-area quarterback Anthony Morelli (rated the third-best high-schooler at that position in the U.S.) decided to rescind his verbal commitment to Pitt and come to Happy Valley.

Morelli’s February 5 decision illustrated some of the benefits and drawbacks to Penn State recruiting. Paterno remained a first-rate closer. His charm, his legend, his commitment to academics could sway almost any recruit’s parents. But his reputation for rigidity, and the uncertainty his age created, often worked against him.

Rival coaches for years had been persuading recruits that the Paterno era might end at any time. “All these years when everybody was telling kids [not to go] to Penn State because Paterno won’t be there, about seven hundred of those [coaches] are gone,” Paterno had said.

A six-four, 212-pounder, Morelli originally had been the Lions’ second choice. Paterno wanted Chad Henne, from Wilson High, in West Lawn, Pennsylvania, Kerry Collins’s alma mater. The feeling was mutual. But Henne, who ended up at Michigan, told those around him he had not been impressed with quarterbacks coach Jay Paterno, and the head coach wouldn’t promise him that he’d play as a freshman.

It brought to mind the situation with Tony Dorsett, who, as a phenomenal high school running back in western Pennsylvania in 1972, had expressed a desire to play at Penn State. Paterno told him he would have to sit and learn for a year behind John Cappelletti. Dorsett went to Pitt instead and on to a Hall of Fame career with the Dallas Cowboys.

“I never tell a kid he’ll start, no matter what,” Paterno said.

What also drew Henne to Michigan was the knowledge that nearly every Wolverines quarterback i

the last two decades had made it into the NFL. “What’s Penn State done with its quarterbacks?” asked Henne’s coach at Wilson, Jim Cantafio, who also coached Collins.

Henne ended up starting for the Wolverines and helping them win a Big Ten championship and a Rose Bowl berth.

In the meantime, Morelli had verbally committed to Pitt, apparently convinced the Paterno era was ending. But on a January 24 visit to Happy Valley, when the coach persuaded him he’d be around at least another four years, Morelli got on board.

The indecision Morelli exhibited was typical. For the last few years, conversations among recruits about Penn State football had increasingly been dominated by concerns about the coach’s status. Just that morning, in fact, a bizarre rumor was wending its way through Internet chat rooms and radio talk shows. It claimed Rick Neuheisel, the former Colorado and Washington coach, would be hired as a graduate assistant and, eventually, become Paterno’s successor.

Paterno laughed it off. “I’d have to call him up and give him directions to State College,” he said of Neuheisel, a close acquaintance. The coach blamed the speculation on the Internet, even though this man who still didn’t use a cell phone or a computer admitted he knew nothing about the technology. (“What the hell do I know about downloading music?” Paterno once said when a player had been accused of that popular campus offense. “I can’t download a jar of peanut butter.”)

He enjoyed this time of year. With no travel, few media obligations, and the absence of in-season pressures, it was a time when he could focus on teaching. But concerns about the health of student athletes had led to recent limits on just how much teaching he could do. After NCAA medical personnel discovered that injury rates among football players were higher in the spring than during the season, guidelines were tightened. New NCAA rules restricted the number, length, and nature of the spring drills.

Schools were limited to fifteen days of practice, which could take place anytime within a twenty-nine-day period. On three of those days, contact was banned and the only protective equipment a player could wear was a helmet. Tackling was prohibited on four of the remaining twelve days, and on five others it was permitted no more than fifty percent of the time. The workouts could go no longer than four hours a day, including meeting time, and twenty hours a week.

That left just three days—including the April 24 Blue-White Game—when live scrimmages could take place.

“I’m comfortable with the new rules,” Paterno said. “But we can’t cut back any more. If we do, we might as well eliminate coaching altogether. The game will simply be about recruiting.”

At the news conference marking the start of spring workouts, Paterno had drawn snickers from the assembled reporters when he said one of his big worries in 2004 would be tackling. Penn State’s defense, though terribly inconsistent in 2003, particularly against the run, was deep in returning talent.

Junior cornerback Alan Zemaitis led the Big Ten with eighteen pass breakups and the team with four interceptions. Safety Mike Guman, one of just two senior defensive starters, and hero back Calvin Lowry were well above average. There were several young and talented linebackers, including sophomore Paul Posluszny, Tim Shaw, J. R. Zwierzynski, Connor, and converted fullback Brandon Snow. And the line had a host of returning veterans in Hali, Johnson, Chisley, Rice, Scott Paxson, and Jay Alford.

It was the offense, as Paterno and everyone else at the news conference knew, that needed serious help. The previous season, Penn State had ranked 103rd nationally in total offense out of 117 teams in

## Division I-A.

In 2003, Paterno had alternated Mills and Robinson at quarterback—getting little efficiency from either. Asked last November who would be his starter in 2004, he irritated both players when he said the job would be won in the spring.

Mills, who would be a fifth-year senior, felt the position should have been his. He had been sensational at times as a freshman, most memorably coming off the bench to lead the Lions to the stirring comeback victory over Ohio State that made Paterno college football's winningest coach. But shoulder and knee injuries, offensive-line troubles, and a lack of capable wide receivers had diminished his production and made the native of Ijamsville, Maryland, a favorite target of frustrated fans.

"I just look at it as just another thing I have to deal with," said Mills of his battle for playing time with Robinson. "It's part of the job. It's part of the responsibility."

Robinson, a junior from Richmond, Virginia, was more athletic, explosive, and versatile, with the ability to play wideout, running back, or even safety. Paterno persisted in saying he "may be the best all-around football player in the country." But he had serious flaws as a quarterback, not the least of which was his passing accuracy.

Robinson completed less than forty-five percent of his passes in '03 and had the same number of interceptions as TD passes (five). Mills was barely better, with six touchdowns and five interceptions.

"My passion to win would help me swallow my pride and play receiver or tailback," Robinson said. "But the only thing that would totally satisfy me would be to be the quarterback."

While neither appeared capable of single-handedly transforming the sputtering offense, they clearly were the most threatening weapons Penn State possessed.

"[Robinson] and Zack Mills are going to carry this football team," Paterno predicted. "I hope we can keep those two kids healthy."

So that spring he and his staff began to devise an attack designed to keep opponents off balance. Both QBs frequently would be used simultaneously. Each would get plenty of snaps. Each would line up as a slot receiver from time to time. Robinson might even run the ball from the tailback position.

"We are going to try to use him [Robinson] in a lot of different ways," predicted Paterno. "He can throw the ball. He can run the ball. He can catch the ball. As a wideout he would be a great blocker. As a running back, he can break tackles."

What continued to make Robinson appealing as a quarterback was Penn State's offensive line. The unit, which figured to consist of Smith, Brown, Tyler Reed, Charles Rush, and Andrew Richardson, had been dreadful in '03. That helped explain the lack of production from the tailbacks.

While it was widely known as Linebacker U., Penn State also had an incredibly successful tradition at tailback: Cappelletti, Lenny Moore, Lydell Mitchell, Curt Warner, Blair Thomas, D. J. Dozier, Curtis Enis, Ki-Jana Carter, Larry Johnson. But in 2003 Robinson, with 107 rushes, had carried the ball more often than either of the top two returning tailbacks, sophomores Austin Scott and Tony Hunt.

As a senior at Allentown's Parkland High School, Scott had set three spectacular single-season state records—3,853 rushing yards, fifty-three touchdowns, and 322 points. But his freshman year had been disappointing. Though fans continually clamored for the phenom to play, particularly when it became clear the '03 season was another lost cause, Paterno used him sparingly. Privately, the coach felt Scott hadn't grasped the offense quickly enough and that he had deficiencies as a pass-catcher and blocker. Scott ran the ball one hundred times in '03 for 436 yards and five touchdowns.

Hunt, from Alexandria, Virginia, carried it just thirty-four times for 110 yards and one TD. Another



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