

PENN STATE'S VENERABLE FOOTBALL COACH, JOE PATERNO, SPEAKS OUT
ON BLACK QUARTERBACKS, POETRY, AND KIDS TODAY.

Joe Paterno

Joe Paterno, the legendary football coach of the Penn State Nittany Lions, has said that he draws his inspiration from the Aeneid, Virgil's account of the founding of Rome. Yet Coach Paterno himself has shown no inclination to roam. Thirty years ago this fall he took the helm at Penn State: perhaps no coach in the history of college football is as closely identified with a school.

The product of a close-knit Italian-American family, Paterno was educated by Jesuits at Brooklyn Prep. He won a scholarship to Brown University, where his tuition, and that of other football players, was paid by a comic-book publisher. Upon graduation he forsook law school for a job on the Penn State staff. He rose to head coach, and entering this season his teams have compiled a record of 278-72-3.

Paterno's teams have won two national championships (and would have won more if the sportswriters whose votes determine the champ didn't harbor such contempt for Eastern football). About 85 percent of his players earn degrees—a figure that dwarfs that of most of the football factories his teams play on autumn Saturdays—which has led his handful of detractors to dub him “Saint Joe.”

Associate Editor Bill Kauffman interviewed Joe Paterno in the lion's den of State College, Pennsylvania.

TAE: You were an English literature major. Indeed, you met your wife at a Leslie Fiedler lecture and courted her while reading Camus' *The Stranger* on the beach. Why do you think novelists have rhapsodized over baseball, found it full of meaning and metaphor, yet they either ignore football or they disdain it as dehumanizing and brutal?

MR. PATERNO: Robert Frost wrote a great essay on baseball. How could you spend a more beautiful day? He talked about the symmetry and the artistry, the grace of baseball.

I used to love baseball. I was an usher at



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Ebbetts Field back in '43 and '44. But when O'Malley moved the Dodgers out of Brooklyn, I lost interest.

TAE: Why don't poets find the beauty in football?

MR. PATERNO: They look at the physical part. They don't really appreciate the Jerry Rices, who play the game with such grace and skill.

Football is a very easy game to learn. It doesn't have the consistent beauty of action that you do in baseball, and I think that most people wouldn't want to rhapsodize about somebody knocking somebody else on their rear end.

TAE: How did Virgil enter and come to color your life?

MR. PATERNO: I went to a Jesuit high school. There was a young scholastic, Father Bermingham, who taught me in a Latin class. In those days, we had to take four years of Latin. And he said, "We're not going to get to Virgil's *Aeneid* in class." But he made a deal with my basketball coach that if I would come in early in the morning and shoot my foul shots, he could have me for a half-hour a day. He had a little cubicle and we translated Virgil together. I'd translate 10 lines, he'd translate 40. Otherwise, we'd still be doing it.

And it had such a profound impact on my life. The wonderful enthusiasm Father Bermingham had for it—like most good teachers, he was like an actor. We played the parts and I almost at times thought I was Aeneas, that I was fated to do certain things and to lead. It just stuck. The worse things got, the better Aeneas performed.

TAE: You don't make your players read the *Aeneid*, do you?

MR. PATERNO: No, no, no. They kid me about it. Some of them, I think, have read through the Cliff's Notes just to figure out what's going on. They get bored with it in a hurry. It's kind of low-key these days.

TAE: Do you find that your Catholic high-school players are, on average, more disciplined or more serious than the kids who come out of public high schools?

MR. PATERNO: Absolutely not. It's the other way. I think that the kids who come out of Catholic high schools are more inclined to drink. The best kids we're getting today—as far as aspiring to get the most out of this institution—are the black kids who had some family, or a high-school coach, or somebody, who has taken an interest in them. In most cases, they work harder and they're more appreciative of things.

TAE: Why is Western Pennsylvania such a football hotbed?

MR. PATERNO: It's not the hotbed it used to be. You take the Johnstown area, where the Novaks [Michael, Ben, and family] are from. When I came here, there would be six or seven players that we would like to have. There might be three or four Notre Dame or Pitt or Michigan or Ohio State would want. There won't be two or three there anymore.

What happened was a lot of the little coal towns joined together as one school. Where you used to have five schools with maybe 60 kids each out for football—300 kids—now you might have one joint school with 50 kids out.

TAE: Is there a sense in which your teams embody the personality of Pennsylvania?

MR. PATERNO: Oh, golly. I never heard that one. To a degree, I think that might be true. It's kind of a blue-collar, hard-working, ethnic mentality in this state. There may be a group of people in Philadelphia that are a little bit above it, but Pittsburgh is just a bunch of small towns. It's not easy to break into society, so to speak.

TAE: I remember reading that Pennsylvania has the highest percentage of people who were born in the state who still live there.

MR. PATERNO: There's a tremendous loyalty to it.

TAE: For years, quarterbacks were almost exclusively white. Was this just due to blatant racism or were there more subtle reasons?

MR. PATERNO: I think it was a combination of racism and the fact that a lot of black kids didn't want to play quarterback because it's a self-fulfilling prophecy. They probably felt there was no future there. Wide-outs, defensive backs, running backs: the black kids seemed to do better in those positions than the white kids. So I think maybe they backed away from quarterback. But once a couple of kids started to do well as quarterbacks, then a lot of these kids wanted to play quarterback.

TAE: Your first black quarterback had problems, didn't he?

MR. PATERNO: Oh, yes. He wasn't good enough. And unfortunately, Mike [Cooper] didn't realize it. He thought it was a racist thing. It was-

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n't. It really wasn't. Mike had been a high-school quarterback. He came up and he had to wait his turn. In 1970, I gave him the job and he wasn't doing it. Then I gave it to a kid by the name of Parsons, and he didn't do it. So I had to take a kid who was a safety man and move him over to offense. Once he started, we won 17 in a row.

But I have not talked to Mike Cooper in 25 years—he still lives in Harrisburg—and I feel bad about that. But it had absolutely nothing to do with race.

TAE: Some positions seem almost to be race-specific. There are almost no black punters or white cornerbacks, for instance. Does race have something to do with this?

MR. PATERNO: I'm not sure. Now you've got Reggie Roby, who's one of the best punters in the NFL. He's black. The kid who kicks for Northwestern, one of the best college punters, is a black kid. You've got to be careful that you don't stereotype anybody: there are some good white corners, not a lot of them.

This year, there's a white kid who won the state 100 and 200. We were kidding the black kids about what's happened: you know, white men can't jump and that kind of thing.

TAE: You've written that special help for black students does more harm than good. How so?

MR. PATERNO: I'd have to define what I mean by special help. I think that if you don't challenge people, they're not going to reach their potential.

Having said that, my wife tutors. I'll take a kid out of high school who maybe isn't a strong enough student and I'm worried about him and my wife will tutor him. But there comes a point where he's got to start standing on his own two feet, because when he leaves here, there's nobody who's going to help him and he's got to have some confidence in himself.

There's a point where a kid doesn't have confidence. I've had kids do lousy in school because they were afraid to go to class and afraid they were going to be asked questions.

Where I get uptight is if a kid knows he doesn't have to do well in high school and he can get into college. Who's kidding who? I mean, you're not doing him any good. The same thing with us. If we push him through school and put him with profs who will feel sorry for him, then they don't get the kind of education they're going to need, and they know. You can't fool them. A kid knows whether he's getting an education. We've got to make them appreciate the fact that the more they put into it, the more they're going to get out of it, and we can't make it easy for them.

TAE: Henry James once said that no man can be

a great writer and a good father. Do you think the same thing is true of football coaches?

MR. PATERNO: Pretty close. We have a high rate of divorce among assistant coaches because of the traveling, the intensity, and the competition. But it's amazing how many guys do a good job with that. I think it's close, but it's doable.

TAE: In what ways are kids today different from kids 30 years ago when you started coaching at Penn State?

MR. PATERNO: They're better. They're not phonies. They're not hypocrites, most of them. They're pretty darn honest people, and they've had to survive a much tougher situation. All the tough decisions in my life when I was a kid, until I left high school, were made by my church or my family. I mean, I didn't have any choices whether I wanted to sleep with a girl or do anything like that, God forbid. You are going to go to hell if you do that.

I think we gave these kids an awful lot of leeway. We've put them in a tough environment where they've got to make a lot of tough decisions and they've got to work their way through it on their own, and I think they respond better.

It's easier to have a good relationship with kids today than it used to be, as long as you're honest. When you get in trouble is when you play games with them, when you try to con them and talk down to them.

The problem is not the kid, the problem is us. The kids need somebody whom they trust and somebody who's honest. They look at the political scene out there today—who wouldn't get disillusioned? For crying out loud, they've got to be sick about it. It's going to be their country. I think the fact that they haven't had a revolution speaks well for them.

TAE: In your autobiography, *By The Book*, you single out Tom Osborne of Nebraska as a coach who ran a model program, yet last year he disappointed many people when he appeared to treat with great indulgence star players who were girlfriend-beaters and thugs. What do you think of that mess?

MR. PATERNO: Let me start out by saying Tom Osborne and I have been friends for a long time. I like Tom.

Without knowing all the facts, I'm a little disappointed in the way Tom handled it. I don't want to be critical of Tom. I don't know all the circumstances. I don't want to sit here and judge, because I have had to deal with those kinds of things.

I have maybe a little different attitude because I start with a little different attitude when we recruit. But if [Lawrence] Phillips turns out to

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be a great person, then I think everybody will say Tom did what was right. If Phillips turns out to be a bum, then Tom was wrong.

TAE: Is it true that in 1994, you seriously considered leaving Penn State to coach at the notorious University of Miami?

MR. PATERNO: No, no, never. A friend of mine was the chairman of the board of Miami and they were looking for a head coach and he wanted to talk to one of my assistants and I told him, "I don't think the coach is interested." And he said, "Would you be interested?" I said, "I'm flattered, but let me think about it," because I didn't want to just out and out say, hey, I'm not interested in Miami. But I was not interested.

TAE: Kind of like Saint Peter defecting to keep the gates of Hell.

MR. PATERNO: Not really. There again, there's a tendency for people to overreact to Miami kids. A lot of them are good kids. Even the ones that we don't particularly like: I sure as heck am not going to crucify kids because that's the way they were brought up. I'm not that way.

TAE: In 1972, you accepted, then rejected, an offer to be coach and general manager and even part-owner of the Boston Patriots at a salary of 40 times what you were making at Penn State. Why did you change your mind?

MR. PATERNO: Because the only reason I would have taken the job was the money, and I didn't go into coaching to make money. I make a lot more money now than I ever thought I would make. In fact, I would be embarrassed if people knew how much money I make.

But my dad had never owned a house. The fact that I was going to get part of the club, that I was going to own part of an NFL football team, almost got me screwed up. It was strictly a monetary thing. After I said I would do it I went to bed. I couldn't sleep and I said, "What are you doing, for crying out loud? You know you don't want to be a pro football coach." And so I called Mr. Sullivan up and said no.

TAE: If you had taken the Patriots job, what do you think you would be doing today?

MR. PATERNO: Probably looking for a job.

TAE: Why is pro football so much less exciting than the college game?

MR. PATERNO: Well, for me, because of the people. I'm a little bit of a pedagogue: I like to teach. I like to have an impact on people's lives. I like to see kids from 18 to 19 to 20, see them change, the challenge of being part of their lives, the challenge of putting a new football team together with a lot of new faces, creating some chemistry and establishing some leadership.

TAE: The players are also representing an institution, aren't they, whereas in the pros, they are corporate employees?

MR. PATERNO: Yes. It's a business. I mean, if you think it's anything but a business, you're crazy. That's why I say the only reason I would have coached pro football is because of the money, and that's not what I'm in it for.

TAE: Do you think the fans' identification with players is sometimes a little frightening?

MR. PATERNO: It is frightening. That's why I said kids are better today—because they're so much more mature. The kind of money that's out there, the agents that are out there, the girls—I mean, I have to chase girls away from the locker room some nights.

I don't know how some of these kids handle it. We have kids who are going to be doctors and lawyers and engineers and we have some who are just getting by, but they do well with their lives, and yet we ask them to do winter programs and weightlifting and all that kind of stuff, have a decent social life, and yet still be able to keep their heads on straight and not get carried away with all of this idolatry.

TAE: Should they get some sort of stipend from the school?

MR. PATERNO: Oh, I don't think there's any question they should. People will tell you there's a Pell Grant. But if a kid is really dirt poor and something goes wrong at home, if his kid brother gets in trouble or something has happened to the family car, then mom says, "I need that Pell Grant." There's a tremendous strain on a kid.

The NCAA has a student assistance program now where you can give a kid some money to buy clothes and things like that, but they don't want to get into an out-and-out \$50 a month because then you've got to do it for all sports. We have 800 athletes in 29 sports—you would bankrupt the program.

TAE: Penn State is now a member of the Big Ten, the storied Midwestern conference. Aren't you interlopers there? Doesn't Penn State belong in an Eastern league with Pitt and West Virginia and Syracuse?

MR. PATERNO: I tried to do that years ago but Pitt wanted to go with Big East basketball. If you had asked me that question seven years ago, I would have said you're absolutely right.

But there are no regional schools anymore. We're all worldwide. We've got exchange students all over the world. Walk this campus, you'll see people here from every part of the country.

We're a research-oriented institution. We're

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a land-grant institution. We're a public institution. And so are all the institutions we're now affiliated with, outside of Northwestern. So no, we're not interlopers. This is home for us.

TAE: Has television changed college football for the better or for the worse?

MR. PATERNO: A little bit of both. For the worse in that it's made it very commercial. We've had to adjust so much to television, changing kickoff times and things like that. It has a great deal of influence on the rules we make.

On the other hand, college football has never been more popular than it is now. Attendance is way up. Without the money generated by television through college football, we would not be able to afford all the programs we have.

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TAE: Has Title IX helped women's sports or hurt men's sports?

MR. PATERNO: There again, a little bit of both. Here, it has helped women's sports. We've always been committed to women's sports. When I came here in 1950, women had their own swimming pool on the campus. The men had to rent a pool downtown.

We saw Title IX as a challenge to go out and do more for our women, not take away from men. We've talked to women alumni. We've figured out different ways to increase our revenues so that we could create a better situation for women: better equipment, better coaching, better facilities, more scholarships. So it's been a plus.

Then there are some who are caught in between, like my alma mater, Brown. They tried to get a little bit more fiscal responsibility. They tried to cut a couple of men's sports and a couple of women's sports, but the judge wouldn't let them. He'd let them cut out the men but they couldn't cut out the women.

TAE: You grew up an opera lover. Have you been able to transmit that love to your teams?

MR. PATERNO: No, I wouldn't even try.

TAE: So you don't pipe Verdi in over rap music in the locker room?

MR. PATERNO: That's all I'd have to do. You go into that weight room and listen to that stuff: it'll drive you nuts. I can't stand it. But they like it, and it's their locker room.

THE TIPPING- POINT ELECTION

WILL FUTURE AMERICANS LOOK BACK AT THE 1996 VOTE AND SAY "BINGO"?

With national TV and a live audience looking on, a spirited and authoritative group of political experts and culture-watchers debated how the November races will reshape America's future.

MICHAEL BARONE	★	<i>U.S. News & World Report</i>
GARY BAUER	★	Family Research Council
KARLYN H. BOWMAN	★	<i>The American Enterprise</i>
ROBERT P. CASEY	★	Democratic Governor of Pennsylvania, 1987-1995
LYNNE CHENEY	★	American Enterprise Institute
MICHAEL FARRIS	★	Candidate for Lieutenant Governor of Virginia, 1993
CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS	★	<i>The Nation</i> and <i>Vanity Fair</i>
IRVING KRISTOL	★	American Enterprise Institute
FRANK LUNTZ	★	Pollster for the Contract with America
GROVER NORQUIST	★	Americans for Tax Reform

ROUNDTABLE ON THE NEXT PRESIDENT

MR. BARONE: We use the phrase in political journalism, "The president runs the country." It strikes me that nobody runs this country and that the president often doesn't even run the government. He will tell you on occasion that he's not running the White House staff.

How much does the president matter?

MR. BAUER: Some of my Republican friends, as they look at the polls, increasingly say the presidency doesn't matter, and I suspect if the congressional match-ups begin to look bad for

conservatives they'll say the Congress doesn't matter, either.

But of course the presidency *does* matter, if for no other reason than because it is the bully pulpit of the United States. The man or woman in that office can do a great deal to get Americans thinking about liberty and virtue by focusing the nation's attention, through speeches and symbolic events. This Congress has certainly learned over the last two years that a President matters just in the mundane act of either stopping or allowing important legislation to get through.

MR. CASEY: Having been a governor, I can tell you that the chief executive does matter: He sets the agenda.

MS. CHENEY: We have a country now where if you're Dick Morris, you can indulge in the most bizarre and morally culpable behavior and conclude a \$2 million book contract within a week. I worry about the kind of behavior that will be ratified with the election of Bill Clinton. We'll be electing a President who has gone on MTV and said to kids that drugs don't matter. Asked if he would inhale if he had it to do again, he said, "Sure, I would." This can't be good for the country.

MR. KRISTOL: If he gets elected, the thing I worry about most is his Supreme Court appointments. I don't think Bill Clinton has an agenda except to get reelected. The Democratic Party doesn't have an agenda,