

JoePa: Great coach, greater character

By Shane McGregor

He stands with a slight hunch, a crease in his back where his blue jacket and khaki pants meet. In one hand a whistle, its thread snaking through his tanned fingers; in the other, a folded practice schedule. He watches as ten young men sixty years his junior huddle together in the middle of Holuba Hall, the expansive indoor practice facility at Penn State University.

It's the tenth practice of the 2011 spring football season, and the lingering central Pennsylvania winter has forced the Nittany Lions inside this Saturday morning. A red-jerseyed quarterback reaches the huddle and begins calling the play when the man with the whistle turns to his offensive coordinator and gives an order.

"I want the Iso."

"Alright, we have the play-action called, we'll call it next play," the coordinator replies.

"No, run it now. I want the Iso. Run it now."

The huddle is interrupted. The new play call, the isolation running play Joe Paterno just demanded, is signaled into the quarterback. And six seconds after the snap of the ball, running back Curtis Dukes is sprinting into the end zone forty yards away.

Touchdown.

"The funny thing is, Joe does that all the time," says (quarterbacks coach) Jay Paterno. "He just has a great feel for anticipating things, a great sense of vision."

At the age of 84, Joe Paterno has displayed a few other things as he prepares for his 46th season as a head coach and his 62nd at Penn State. Since he became head coach of the Nittany Lions in 1966, Paterno's teams have amassed 401 victories, national championships in 1982 and 1986, seven undefeated seasons, 78 All-Americans, 36 bowl appearances, 24 bowl victories, 47 Academic All-Americans and 18 NCAA postgraduate scholarship winners.

But the numbers fail to do justice to Paterno's greatest strength, his character. Just ask anyone who has ever interacted with him.

"I was sold on him from the first time he came to my house on a recruiting visit," says

Daryll Clark, a quarterback from Youngstown, Ohio who became an All-Big Ten player in 2008 and 2009. "For the first thirty minutes we talked about school, Youngstown, my family, his family. No one else did that, and as far as I know, no one else does."

Most other coaches haven't graduated with a degree in English from Brown University.

Most don't go home after a long day's work and pick up Abraham Lincoln's autobiography or Bob Woodward's Obama's Wars, books Paterno read during spring practice. And when faced with the darkest of times -- a 2004 loss to Northwestern that dropped the Lions to 0-6 in the Big Ten -- most coaches wouldn't turn to William Shakespeare for advice.

"Joe cancelled practice that Monday and read Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' speech to the team," says Jay Paterno. "He told the seniors, 'You guys can't win a national championship, but we have two more games and you guys can sow the seeds for us to win it next year.'"

The Lions used a late goal-line stand to win at Indiana and an offensive explosion to beat Michigan State in those final two games. The 2005 Nittany Lions built a record of 11-1, their only defeat coming in a last-second loss at Michigan, and completed their comeback season with a triple-overtime Orange Bowl victory over Florida State.

Paterno's influence has extended beyond the football field and into the culture of his university since the vision known as "The Grand Experiment," competing on a national level without academic compromise, began 45 years ago. There are no last names on the uniforms of his team or any varsity Penn State athletic team. One of two libraries on the University Park campus is named the "Paterno Library," after he and his wife, Sue, made a \$3.5 million gift in 1998. A family gift supported the creation of an interfaith spiritual center. At the university's popular Creamery, where long lines are a tradition of each football weekend, one of the most popular ice cream flavors is Peachy Paterno.

And Penn State has never had an NCAA violation in any sport.

Winning is valued, but winning with integrity is held in highest regard.

"We place a great importance on trust," Paterno says. "I've only ever had to fire two coaches in my whole time here, and both times were for cheating. We want to do things

the right way."

Of all the qualities that he could name -- endurance, persistence, loyalty, courage, attention to detail, competitive nature -- Paterno attributes his success to one factor.

"We've always had great people," he says. "The one thing we've always had on the staff and on the team and around here were great people."

In the early evening of November 6, 2010, nearly everyone in the crowd of 104,147 remained in Beaver Stadium as Joe Paterno walked toward a makeshift stage in the south end zone. A come-from-behind, 35-21 victory over Northwestern had made Paterno the first major college coach to reach 400 victories. As the thousands chanted his name, Paterno held a microphone and stared out into a sea of flashing cameras and smiling fans. With his wife, his children, his grandchildren, his coaches, his former players and his current Lions surrounding the small stage, he was presented with a crystal football to commemorate the victory.

Then he answered a question he had heard too many times.

"People want to ask why I stayed here so long, and you know what?

"Look around. Look around."