

Did Paterno ultimately die of a broken heart?

BY JIM LITKE, Associated Press Sports Writer

Joe Paterno had barely hung up the phone when his wife of 50 years picked it up and redialed the number scrawled on the slip of paper.

"After 61 years," Sue Paterno said to the man who had just fired her husband, "he deserved better."

On the other end was John Surma, vice chairman for a Penn State Board of Trustees that couldn't muster enough courage or decency to fire Paterno in person. Board members were desperate to stanch the tidal wave of bad news that followed the indictment of Paterno's longtime former assistant, Jerry Sandusky, on multiple counts of child sex abuse just a few days earlier.

So an assistant athletic director knocked on the front door of the Paternos' home that cold November night and wordlessly handed over the note with Surma's name and a phone number on it. In that mercilessly brief call, Paterno was told that after nearly a half century as coach of the Nittany Lions, he was being fired "effective immediately."

Like that conversation, the one that began with Sue Paterno's call back didn't last long.

"He deserved better," she repeated, and then hung up.

Yes, he did.

And there may be no more fitting postscript for the life and career of a football coach, husband and father who became not just the face, but the unyielding, cantankerous soul of a school that over the course of his tenure

was transformed from a "cow college" into a top-shelf public research university. Now all those people who rushed to judgment about Paterno's role in the Sandusky case will have to find their way out from under the sordid scandal without the longtime coach.

Paterno, 85, died Sunday of lung cancer. Those who knew him well believe it was something more akin to a broken heart.

"The thing you hear about people who live long lives is that they were still passionate about something, still striving," said Brett Conway, who played for Paterno before graduating from Penn State in 1997 and embarking on a six-year career in the NFL as a placekicker. "Once they took that away from him, a lot of us felt he was going to have a tough time surviving."

"I talked to a few teammates this morning and tried to think of something profound to say about the man who did so much for so many of us. But I can't think of any single thing."

In his quiet moments, Paterno occasionally invoked the fate of Bear Bryant -- another coaching legend who died within weeks after stepping down at Alabama -- as though it were some kind of cautionary tale. Yet he remained stubborn to the end, beating back more than one previous attempt by higher-ups at the school to force his hand, most recently in 2004. He kept insisting the game hadn't passed him by, and that getting through to kids who weren't as old as some of the sportcoats in his closet was no big deal.

In the only interview granted since his Nov. 9 firing, a frail and sometimes-foggy Paterno told Sally Jenkins of The

Washington Post many of the same things he said when news of Sandusky's indictment broke. Most important, that he wished he'd done more when assistant Mike McQueary came to his house on a Saturday morning in 2002, shaken by what he would later tell a grand jury he had seen the night before in a shower at the team's football complex: Sandusky raping a young boy.

Except that out of deference to his aging and decidedly old-school coach, McQueary apparently withheld the most gruesome details from Paterno.

At the time, as in his last interview, it was a story Paterno couldn't -- or wouldn't -- comprehend.

"You know, he didn't want to get specific," Paterno told the newspaper. "And to be frank with you I don't know that it would have done any good, because I never heard of, of, rape and a man. So I just did what I thought was best. I talked to people that I thought would be, if there was a problem, that would be following up on it."

We know now that didn't happen. Paterno never sufficiently explained why, after meeting his legal obligations by notifying his superiors at the university, he didn't satisfy his moral obligation to do more. He said several times he wish he had. People who judged him guilty then will not change their opinions.

"This is not a defense, or an excuse, and maybe it's even a bad analogy," Conway began. "But there were so many things about Joe and his 'old-schoolness' that probably kept him from comprehending the horror of what Jerry had done. He knew something was wrong, something of a sexual nature and ultimately, all he could bring himself to do is what he was supposed to do."

And if the people who ultimately made the decision to fire him measure up to being even half the man he was," he said finally, "I'll be plenty surprised."

Paterno's legacy will forever be clouded, in large part because the chance to prove his remorse in the final chapter of his public life was taken by the trustees and now is gone forever. For the lion's share of his 85 years, though, Paterno piled one good deed atop one another that had nothing to do with football -- things that time can't erase, like the library that sits several blocks from the football stadium and was built in large part with his donations back to the school.

On balance, all that good should have been enough to earn him one final opportunity to erase the stain that he called one of the great tragedies of his life.

He deserved better.

(SOURCE: *The Intelligencer Journal/New Era*, Lancaster, PA, January 23, 2012)