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Phil Knight

Eulogy Address for Joe Paterno



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I'm Phil Knight. I'm chairman of Nike.

Two months ago in Cupertino, California, they held a memorial service for Steve Jobs. Tim Cook was asked to give one of the eulogies, and Tim Cook loved Steve Jobs. The week after the event, I called Tim Cook and I said, "How in the world did you get through that?" And he said, "It was one of the hardest things I ever had to do and I have no idea." I'm about to find out.

I have worked at Nike and its predecessor company for 48 years. Some might call me a short timer. In those 48 years, I have never had a promotion. But it's had its other benefits. It is how I met Joe Paterno. Thirty-three years ago, we started a college football coaches trip where coaches and their wives went with company people to a resort for five days to get to know each other, to exchange ideas, and maybe just let down a little bit where there was no media and there was no donors. It was there that I met Joe.

And a whole lot of Hall of Fame coaches have gone through those trips over those 33 years, including Bill Walsh, Bo Schembechler, Jimmy Johnson, Bobby Bowden, Mack Brown, Urban Meyer, Barry Switzer, Gene Stallings, Pete Carroll, Lavell Edwards, and hundreds of others. And the one coach they deferred to the most was Joe Paterno.

A lot of serious talk goes on there, but in the letdown periods sometimes it gets a little goofy. One year we had a skit for Nebraska coach Tom Osborne played Nikki Nike and Joe Paterno was a swaying palm tree. One of the great highlights those 15 years ago when Rick Neuheisel, who was the coach at Colorado at the time -- Rick played the guitar on Sunday evenings at the lounge at the Holiday Inn in Boulder.



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So, he was skilled, and he got on the stage and was playing his guitar and he asked Joe to come up and do a duet of "Wild Thing." Joe didn't hesitate. He jumped up on to the stage, and while not the most artistic performance ever, it was loud and enthusiastic. At its conclusion, the place exploded into a standing ovation and it became a tradition for every year. When Rick Neuheisel went to Baltimore, why Gary Patterson of Texas Christian could also play the guitar, so "Wild Thing" became a tradition for all 15 of the last 15 years. Twenty-one days from now in Hawaii, there will be [an] enormous void on talent night.

I'm a man who has always needed heroes. It started when I was a boy and I never outgrew it. It has, I'm sure, something to do with how I decided to make my living. A decade and a half ago an *Esquire* magazine reporter, noting our advertising played up the heroic aspects of great athletes, asked the question, "Who is your hero?" My answer was simple: my college track coach and partner, Bill Bowerman. He had won four national championships, coached more sub-four-minute milers than anyone when he retired. He was the 1972 Olympic coach. And yet he insisted he was not a track coach -- that he was a "professor of competitive response." One year at the University of Oregon, the only group that had a higher grade point average than the track team was the fraternity of Phi Beta Kappa, and burned into every distance runner's brain was his mantra: "Do right and fear no man."

When Bill Bowerman died on Christmas Eve in 1999, I asked myself what do I do for a hero now? Two months later on the Nike trip, the answer showed itself across the table wearing a thick set of eyeglasses. I said, "I'm not asking your permission. I'm just telling you. I need someone to look up to. You're my new hero." His response was typical. He threw that left hand up and said "Ah, shaah." In the 12 years since, through four losing seasons, big bowl wins, 12-win seasons, through All-Americans, and players with criminal charges, with [4.0] students, and players dismissed from the team for discipline, never once did he let me down. Not one time.

Conventional wisdom dictates that I would phrase it a different way. It would say in 11 of those 12 years he never let me down and those years outweighed this last year, but nobody ever accused me of wisdom of any kind, let alone conventional. In the year in question it turns out he gave full disclosure to his superiors, information that went up the chain to the head of the campus police and the president of the school. The matter was in the hands of a world class university and by a president with an outstanding national reputation. Whatever the details of the investigation are, this much is clear to me: If there was a villain in this tragedy, it lies in that investigation, not in Joe Paterno's response to it.

And yet, for his actions he was excoriated by the media and fired over the telephone by his university. Yet, in all his subsequent appearances, in the press, on TV, interacting with students, conversing with hospital personnel, giving interviews to Sally Jenkins, he never complained, he never lashed out. Every word, every bit of body language conveyed a single message: We are Penn State.