



Syracuse Scandal: Boeheim In Hot Seat

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Is Syracuse the next Penn State?;
Iconic basketball coach Boeheim under fire amid fallout of scandal

Erik Brady and Marlen Garcia, USA TODAY

Bernie Fine's customary seat next to Jim Boeheim on the Syracuse bench was left open Nov. 19, as if in tribute, at the first men's basketball game after Boeheim's longtime assistant coach was accused of child sexual abuse and placed on administrative leave.

Today, when Syracuse plays Eastern Michigan in the first game after release of an incendiary recording of Fine's wife and his chief accuser, the question is this: Could the next empty chair be Boeheim's?

Such a notion would have been unthinkable only a few weeks ago, but so too would have been the idea that Joe Paterno could be ousted as football coach at Penn State.

"Boeheim is toast," says Mike Paul, a New York-based crisis consultant who is not working on this case. "I predict very soon he will be forced to resign."

Robert Thompson, director of Syracuse University's Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture, thinks such talk is woefully premature.

"I think it is important to remember that one has to do due diligence and get evidence," he says. "We have had witch hunts in this country before."

Boeheim, in his 36th season coaching his alma mater, is 862-301 with 33 20-win seasons and no losing ones. His teams have made three Final Fours and won the 2003 national championship. He was inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame in 2005.

The child sexual abuse scandals at Syracuse and Penn State have remarkable similarities, including the iconic coaches and longtime trusted aides who might have violated that trust. But there are stark differences.

Fine, who was Boeheim's assistant since 1976, has not been charged, unlike Paterno's ex-assistant, Jerry Sandusky, who faces multiple felony counts. Syracuse administrators are not accused of covering up an eyewitness account of child sexual abuse, as are two ex-Penn State administrators charged with perjury and failure to report it to authorities. And there is no 23-page grand jury report in the Syracuse case to spell out allegations in vivid legal detail.

But the Syracuse scandal that broke 12 days ago offers something else -- that game-changing

recorded phone call between Fine's wife, Laurie, and accuser Bobby Davis. Syracuse fired Fine, and Boeheim reversed his previous unequivocal support for him Sunday, hours after the recording was released by ESPN's Outside the Lines.

Laurie Fine says on the recording, made by Davis without her knowledge in 2002, that her husband "needs help" and "has issues" and "thinks he's above the law." ESPN said voice-recognition experts confirmed her voice.

The recording is "chilling and disturbing in its casual nature," Thompson says. "I can't tell you if it is real or if it is doctored, but it brings an element of soap opera to this. Given the serious nature of these allegations, one hesitates to make glib comparisons, but I have heard the phrase 'Real Housewives of Syracuse' uttered three or four times today."

Boeheim originally called the allegations of abuse made by Davis and his stepbrother, Mike Lang, both former Syracuse ball boys, "a bunch of a thousand lies." Boeheim didn't just stand by Fine, who denies the allegations, but also accused the accusers of looking for money. Victims' rights advocate David Clohessy said such talk from a pillar of the community could have a chilling effect on others coming forward.

Boeheim's Sunday statement reversed course: "What is most important is that this matter be fully investigated and that anyone with information be supported to come forward so that the truth can be found. I deeply regret any statements I made that might have inhibited that from occurring or been insensitive to victims of abuse."

Robert Udowitz, an independent public relations consultant with experience in crisis-management situations, who is not working on this case, said, "The faster you apologize and fall on your sword, the quicker you're forgiven. The longer you delay and put yourself in a compromising position, the longer it can all be drawn out."

Boeheim's contrition was not enough for Clohessy, director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, who issued a statement calling on Syracuse to fire the coach "for his extraordinarily hurtful recent comments attacking abuse victims. Boeheim's apology will do little or nothing to 'undo' the harm he's caused."

The Rev. Robert M. Hoatson, president of New Jersey-based non-profit Road to Recovery, says, "Jim Boeheim will probably have to resign. Those ball boys were under Jim Boeheim's direction. They were his responsibility. He's in charge of those boys."

'A culture that is above the law'

Paul, the crisis consultant who predicts Boeheim's forced resignation, says he sees at Syracuse and Penn State "an attitude of superiority. I believe Boeheim has an attitude problem the same way Joe Paterno had an attitude problem, where they are saying: 'This is my program. I built it. You wouldn't say anything negative about me, my coaches and my game.'

"The problem with both campuses: The sports programs have a culture that is above the law."

David H. Bennett, a history professor in Syracuse's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, thinks the scandals at Syracuse and Penn State offer a false equivalency.

"There is a linkage being made in the minds of some in the public, but there is no evidence of any institutional cover-up here," Bennett says. "It's a devastating story, but that doesn't speak to what Syracuse has done. It appears to involve one or two people," not the school as an institution.

Bennett, chairman of the school's athletics policy board from 1975 to 1994, said Syracuse took a wide-ranging look at its athletic department during the early 1990s when an NCAA investigation landed the men's basketball program on probation. He says there was "not a scintilla" found of any type of impropriety by Fine.

"What happened in the last few days was out of the blue," Bennett says. "A lot of the faculty and students were away last week for Thanksgiving, but the mood is generally one of real surprise and shock, especially over the information that came to light this weekend as a result of the tape."

Thompson says there was a sense on campus that Fine was innocent "until this last shoe dropped. We've seen audio do this before. Remember the Mel Gibson wig-out tapes? That's why it's perfect for talk radio. It's one thing to read a transcript. It's another to hear it, not to mention that the content is so disturbingly strange."

Accusations and opinions

Last week, a third accuser came forward. Zach Tomaselli of Maine accused Fine of abusing him when he was 13. Tomaselli also accused his father of abuse; his father denies it and contends his son never made a trip to Pittsburgh where Tomaselli says Fine abused him. Pittsburgh authorities say they expect to investigate the allegations.

Tomaselli faces sexual abuse charges in Maine involving a 14-year-old boy.

"The abuse from my father and Bernie Fine led to a lot of issues with me setting boundaries with children," Tomaselli told WHCS-TV in Portland, Maine. He declined to say more about the case against him.

"Research suggests about half of people convicted of molestation were themselves sexually abused," says David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire.

Matt Govendo, 29, is a nephew of Bernie and Laurie Fine. He said he does not believe his uncle abused anyone: "The American public wants to see someone guilty. They have their minds set because of the portrayal in the media. I've known the family and have never seen anything like that. I was a camper, I was a ball boy. "It's fishy with the tapes. Hearing it on TV, it's not a constant sound." He says there is a victim in the case, but "is it Bernie or Bobby? The truth will come out."

Boeheim will lead his Orange, ranked third in the USA TODAY/ESPN Coaches Poll, in today's game at the Carrier Dome on a court named for him.

"I love Syracuse basketball," says student Jerry Lange, 19, of Port Washington, N.Y. "I just hope it doesn't trickle down to Jim Boeheim. I'd be upset, because it'd ruin the basketball program, pretty much."

Marti St. George, president of the Syracuse University Alumni Club of Rochester, said she is proud of her alma mater "for trying to be open and transparent as they find things out" in the Fine matter. She doesn't think Boeheim deserves punishment.

"Unless they find out like Joe Paterno that he knew more than he let on," she said, "I'll take him at his word."

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