

Letterman Jimmy Cefalo to give speech at Joe Paterno's memorial

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By Timothy Schoen

It will be the hardest speech Jimmy Cefalo will ever have to give.

Although he will be speaking in a packed and emotional Bryce Jordan Center to a live television audience, his mind will be on the man who will have the best seat in the house today -- Joe Paterno.

Cefalo has been asked by the Paterno Family to be one of the speakers at this afternoon's memorial service. The former standout wide receiver at Penn State and Miami Dolphin is used to giving speeches in front of large audiences. In fact, Cefalo said he gives 80-90 speeches on average per year.

But he said this speech will be different.

It's not what he says in his speech that has professional speaker and current Miami Dolphins radio broadcaster nervous. Cefalo said he worries more about the things he will not say and hopes he is able to honor his former coach in the best way possible.

"It's a great honor to do it, I am honored the family asked me to do so," Cefalo said of today's speech.

Although Cefalo has not conferred his exact words for the speech, he said he plans on talking about what Paterno has meant to the lettermen and about the coach's legacy.

"We [the lettermen] are the keepers of that," he said.

And Cefalo said Paterno's legacy stretches far beyond the 409 wins, two national championships and 5-time coach of the year.

It's the lettermen that have continually kept in close contact with their coach and that goes to show the legacy of what their coach has meant to his players lives, he said.

Hundreds of former players have come back to State College this week from all over the country to pay their respects to a man that has been more than a coach to them.

"Some of the things [Joe Paterno] told me 35 years ago, I still repeat today," Cefalo said.

Throughout the past three months, when everything has been turned upside down at Penn State, the lettermen have become even closer with each other.

And there is one commonality that has brought former players together regardless of if they graduated from Penn State in 1969 or 2009. The closeness the former players share is something unique to Penn State, Cefalo said.

For the majority of lettermen, thinking of a world without Paterno is a difficult thing to do because of the foundation they have built their lives on. The coach in part constructed that foundation.

Cefalo said Paterno would constantly tell his players, "Everyday you are going to get better or you are going to get worse, but you are never going to stay the same."

But that was because Paterno cared about more than just simply winning football games. He was more concerned with preparing his players for life and ensuring they would be the best possible people.

Paterno challenged them everyday to become not just better football players, but better men for their families and be contributors in their communities.

"Joe made sure we did all the right things, it was black and white to him," Cefalo said. "You went to school, you went to class, graduated and you went to church, he made sure of it."

One day at practice, Paterno told a team Cefalo was on "just keep hustling, something good is going to happen to you."

At the time, Cefalo thought Paterno was talking in terms of football.

In the 35 years since, he has realized that Paterno meant that to be true for life in general.

And like many of Paterno's lessons, they took time to learn and fully appreciate.

Like the infamous "Paterno's Doghouse", which Cefalo claimed he was a four-year member of while at Penn State.

Cefalo credits lessons like that into making him the person he is today.

"At first, I didn't know what to make of it," Cefalo said. "As you mature and get a little older and understand that he did it to make us better and you realize it."

Even as Paterno began to get older and the list of former players got longer, Cefalo said Paterno still kept up on his old players.

When Penn State played in the 2005 Orange Bowl against Florida State, Cefalo was on the sideline but tried to remain out of the team's way and not distract Paterno.

As the teams came out of the tunnel for the second half, Paterno spotted his former four-year starter and immediately came over to shake his hand and ask about his parents.

He genuinely cared about former players' parents because when recruiting players, Paterno recruited mothers, Cefalo said. The coach would continually win over mothers with his presence, father-like mystique and constant compliments of the homemade pasta sauce on trips to recruits houses.

When Cefalo's mom died, there was a message from Paterno on his answering machine offering up his and Sue's condolences.

A similar phone call came when Cefalo's dad died.

Even though Cefalo graduated in the mid-70's, Paterno still remembered to ask about his family some 35 years later.

Cefalo said that is the reason Paterno is loved and adored by so many.

As for today's speech, Cefalo said it would be about the legacy.

When asked about what the legacy of Joe Paterno will be, he pointed to a group of former players, most had tears streaming down their faces and said "generations of these young people from coal mines to steel towns."

"That is Joe's legacy," he said.