

Penn State coach Joe Paterno: "There is no doubt in my mind that Maryland is the best football team we have played so far this season."



Photo by Randy J. Woodbury

# The coaches' game

Play Maryland's Jerry Claiborne off against Penn State's Joe Paterno and it will look as though neither team will win. But then Jerry starts talking crazy . . .

By Ray McAllister

The coaches' game.

There is no doubt that Joe Paterno plays it to near perfection. Whenever the Penn State coach begins his "analysis" of the next weekend's opponents, listeners must assume that opponent is the Miami Dolphin football team. It is somewhat incomprehensible to encounter a rational football mind which uses glowing terminology for, say, Syracuse...or Army...or Iowa.

Yet he does it. Week after week. Season after season. The team we are about to play, he will say, is big enough, fast enough, talented enough, well-coached enough to beat us. We had better realize this, he will say, or we could be in for a long afternoon.

Logically he needs to do this, of course. For if ever his team lost to a Syracuse, or an Army, or an Iowa, the season realistically would be over, at least as far as any high national ranking or major bowl bid would be concerned.

But, just as logically, very few believe him. The press and the fans are highly skeptical, the players only slightly less so. Even the opposition must be wondering at the words of this crazy man. It wasn't enough that he turned down a million dollars, some surely must say, now he thinks we will beat him.

But that isn't what Joe Paterno is saying. He is not saying that the other

team will beat his, only that it could. And he is quite determined to make sure it doesn't. Usually it doesn't.

His task is sometimes difficult. Tomorrow, for instance, he is up against a Maryland team which quite genuinely is a good football team, or at least appears to be. But after crying wolf for so many weeks, how convincing can Paterno be? Obviously, he must resort to the grandest of superlatives.

"There is no doubt in my mind that Maryland is the best football team we have played so far this season," Paterno decides. "Maryland has its best team in 10 or 12 years and this will be the biggest game for them since the days when Jim Tatum was coach."

"The Maryland team has more quality players than anybody we have met so far. They have size, speed, strength and ability. Maryland ranks among the national leaders in defense and it is easy to see why."

There it is. He has done it. The supreme compliment. And, cleverly, with the phrase "so far," he has left himself an opening for the games which follow with North Carolina State and Pitt. (What he comes up with for lowly Ohio University doubtless will be the greatest challenge.)

Maryland's Jerry Claiborne, in his second season as the Terps' coach is playing this game reasonably well also.

Though he is not quite so refined as Paterno, he knows better than to make inflammatory statements that end up on opposing team's locker room bulletin boards, statements such as the "we will win because hard work and determination will make the difference" Stanford coach Jack Christiansen made. Penn State beat Christiansen 20-6.

"On a man-to-man basis, you've got to say Penn State has the stronger team and bigger personnel," Claiborne says, playing the game by its rules. However, perhaps showing his inexperience, Claiborne continues: "But a lot depends on determination, and how the ball bounces."

This still is not a fatal slip by any means. True, it is less than devastatingly brilliant to hint that "determination" could beat the Nittany Lions, but it can be excused by Claiborne's being caught up in the euphoria of the first winning team Maryland has had in 11 years.

But, stubbornly, Claiborne persists. Using the example of New Orleans' stunning National Football League upset of Washington last Sunday, Claiborne adds: "Man-to-man the 'Skins were a tad better than the Saints."

By now it must be suspected that Claiborne is either stupid, obstinate or unfamiliar with the rules. In fact, he is to say, "when you beat a team like Penn State, or

play well against them, it helps with recruiting, with contributions and to put fans in the stands."

Beat Penn State?! What if Penn State hears this, or Joe Paterno? What then?!

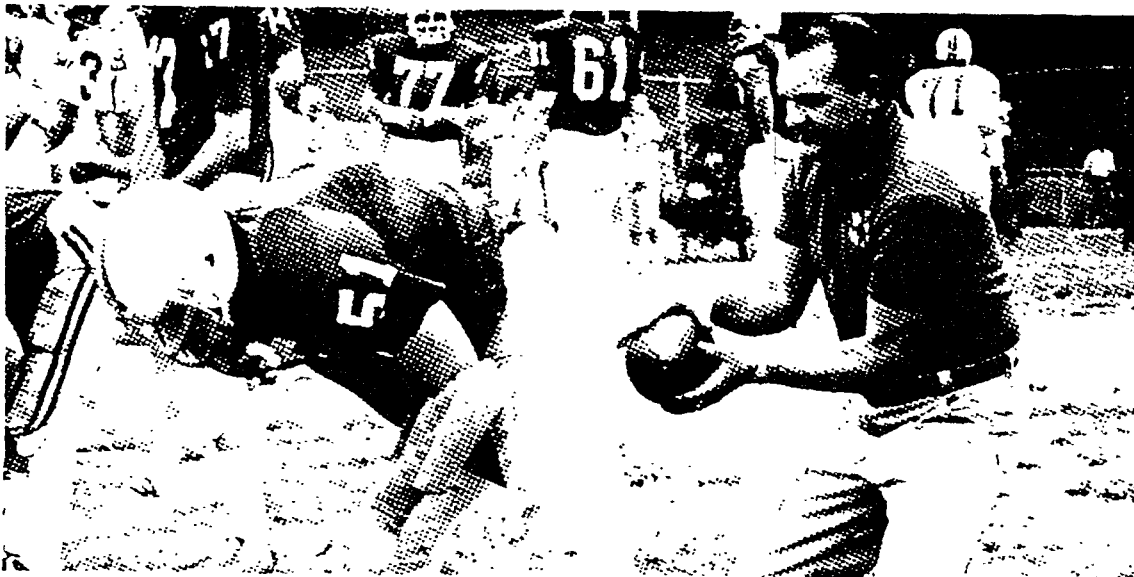
Claiborne seems undeterred. A win, he says, "would let people know we're making progress in our program, and help a great deal with recruiting in New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania. And it would make me feel a lot better."

The humor at the end doesn't help. Claiborne clearly has implied that he thinks it is possible for Maryland to beat Penn State. No two ways about it, that's what he said.

The man's 5-2 record must be making his head spin. Sure he has a good team, and sure the two squads were tied 10-10 at the half last year, but don't forget who you are, boy.

Claiborne offers some explanation, possibly an attempt at face-saving. "We're playing better this year, and we should have a better frame of mind," he says, later adding. "It will take a super effort to beat Penn State—a better game than we've played all year. One thing for sure, we must play error-free football."

Paterno, perhaps uninformed of Claiborne's remarks, perhaps unconcerned, sticks to his game plan. "We expect," he says, "the toughest game we have so far."



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