

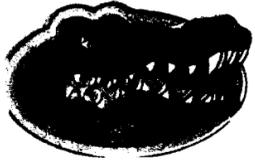
PIGSKIN PREVIEW

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Photo illustration by Robin Tilley, Collegian



URBAN LEGEND



Could Meyer have been the next JoePa?

By Brendan Monahan
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

Good friends Joe Paterno and Urban Meyer seem like an odd pairing with 37 years separating them in age.

But that's not the only irony existing between the two coaches.

The Penn State icon has stayed at one place for 61 seasons as an assistant and head coach, while Meyer spanned seven programs in less than half that amount of time — 25 seasons.

Meyer became a coach in the modern culture of college football, characterized by primetime TV and star-studded recruits. Paterno had his start when quarterbacks still called the plays on the field, and headsets were as alien as 90,000-seat stadiums.

One of them will walk away from the field and into the tunnel with no imminent return when the clock hits zero Jan. 1 at Raymond James Stadium in Tampa Bay — and perhaps more ironic than all the above, that coach isn't Paterno. Kickoff for the Outback Bowl is 1 p.m., and ABC will televise.

"Joe's been coaching for 45 years," said Mick Hubert, Florida's play-by-play announcer. "Urban's 46 years old, and he's retiring."

Meyer walks away from the game at the prime of his coaching career. The decision is almost unfathomable when looking at

If you watch

Time: 1 p.m.
Date: New Year's Day
TV: ABC

the decision in light of Paterno, who has transcended the culture of modern college football 45 seasons after he took over the helm at Penn State.

"To have what you have at Penn State, that will never be duplicated," Hubert said. "The money's too great. The pressure's too great, and it's a grind."

Meyer, who spent time at Bowling Green and Utah before coaching the last six seasons at Florida, has two national titles and one undefeated season in 2004 with Fiesta Bowl-winning Utah. Paterno didn't have two national championships after 1975, his 10th season, but he did have three undefeated years.

Paterno leaving after 1975 would have meant no 400 wins, no coaching rivalry with Alabama's Paul "Bear" Bryant and no Paterno's saints versus Jimmy Johnson's rebels in the 1986 national championship, in which Penn State defeated Miami.

Paterno was 102-23-1 in his first 126 games as a head coach, while Meyer is 103-23. Meyer left despite a lot of future success and history at stake, and his similarities with Paterno leaves one to consider: Would Meyer break Paterno's 400-win mark if the college football culture was different or if he had somehow managed to stick around?

At his current pace, Meyer would need 28 more years to reach the 400-win plateau. That would make him 74, which would be about 10 years younger than Paterno, a true example of Meyer's dominance in a decade.

"He's got a great feel for the game," Paterno said of Meyer.

"To have what you have at Penn State, that will never be duplicated. The money's too great. The pressure's too great, and it's a grind."

Mick Hubert

Florida play-by-play announcer

"I've looked at a lot of tapes of his games through the years because he seems to be always one step ahead of the people he's playing against."

Yet Paterno — the winningest Division I-A coach — churns on after decades of coaching, as Meyer — the only college coach to win two BCS national championships at one school — leaves at the height of his career.

But time changes, as do priorities.

Paterno, avoiding retirement for years, seems time proof. Meyer, though, understands there aren't enough moments for everything, such as coaching a premier FBS program and running a family at the same time.

Coaches constantly find their jobs on the line in today's pressure-filled college landscape, marred with instant success. Meyer met more adversity in 2010 than in any previous season at Florida, posting a 7-5 record, the worst record in a season for Meyer.

"There's certainly a lot of frustration and a lot of disappointment," Meyer said Tuesday, "but that's also a part of college athletics."

Considering signs before this

season, the oddity of both decisions becomes greater.

Just months ago, Paterno didn't attend at least three summer events because of illness and appeared frail when he publicly returned in early August in Chicago.

Chicago swirled all season as to whether the soon-to-be-84-year-old coach would step down with one year left on his contract, and though Paterno said he'll be back, he still has to undergo an end-of-season review meeting with president Graham Spanier and athletic director Tim Curley.

Just months ago, Meyer looked reinvested in Florida's program after he retired in December of 2009, reversed his decision the next day and then took a leave of absence for health reasons.

Though ironic, Meyer is leaving for the immediate future — with still much left to gain.

"He was a guy that came in here and reunited the fan base," Hubert said. "This was a place that had success previously, and I think he felt he could get the job done here ... There are so many positive things that he did."

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Daily Collegian Predictions

AJ Cassavell



Score: Florida 24, PSU 17
What's good: Young players take advantage of bowl practices.
What's bad: Season ends, still no QB of the future.
What to look for: Royster chasing another 1,000-yard season.

Audrey Snyder



Score: Florida 27, PSU 20
What's good: The Lions keep it close.
What's bad: Team loses momentum heading into 2011 season.
What to look for: An emotional Urban Meyer.

Brendan Monahan



Score: PSU 23, Florida 20
What's good: Lions notch third-straight bowl win against SEC.
What's bad: PSU ends season without a signature win.
What to look for: Possibly for the last time, two legendary coaches greet at midfield.