

Scandal, strikes and crashes are top sports stories

By Rachel Cohen

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NEW YORK – The ouster of one of America's most revered coaches, Penn State's Joe Paterno, after shocking child sex abuse charges against his former assistant was overwhelmingly voted the sports story of the year by members of The Associated Press.

On the morning of Nov. 5, Paterno's Nittany Lions were undefeated in the Big Ten and ranked No. 16 in the country, and the 84-year-old Hall of Famer was renowned as the winningest coach in Division I football, a leader who preached and practiced "Success with Honor." Then came the staggering revelations: the indictment of longtime defensive coordinator Jerry Sandusky for allegedly sexually assaulting eight boys over a 15-year span, perjury charges against two high-ranking school administrators – and a grand jury report that suggested Paterno knew of accusations against Sandusky and did not do enough to pursue them.

Within four days, Penn State's board of trustees had done the once-unthinkable, firing JoePa after 46 seasons as head coach.

Here are 2011's top 10 stories:

1. PENN STATE: Paterno said in a statement Nov. 9, "It is one of the great sorrows of my life. With the benefit of hindsight, I wish I had done more," and that he would retire at the end of the season. It wasn't enough to quell the rising outrage that he didn't go to the police after then-graduate assistant Mike McQueary told him in 2002 about witnessing an apparent assault. By the night of Nov. 9, Paterno was out, and so was Penn State Presi-

dent Graham Spanier. As 2011 comes to a close, athletic director Tim Curley, who was placed on leave, and since-retired university vice president Gary Schultz await trial, and Sandusky faces additional charges. Paterno revealed Nov. 18 he had been diagnosed with a treatable form of lung cancer. The Nittany Lions play Houston in the TicketCity Bowl on Jan. 2.

2. NFL/NBA LOCKOUTS: "Millionaires vs. billionaires" was often fans' reaction to the labor woes that struck the NFL and NBA this year. Football's work stoppage lasted 4 1/2 months before an agreement was signed Aug. 5; it cost the league just one preseason game. Fans have quickly forgiven the owners and players based on ticket sales and television ratings. Basketball's dragged on for more than five months and wiped out 16 games of the normal 82-game schedule. The fallout won't be clear until the season begins on Christmas.

3. PACKERS WIN: Aaron Rodgers and Green Bay are shining and well out of Brett Favre's shadow. The injury-ravaged Packers barely made the playoffs as a No. 6 seed last season, then won three road games to reach the Super Bowl, where they beat the Pittsburgh Steelers 31-25 in February. They kept right on winning into the 2011 season, rolling to a 13-0 start led by play from their quarterback almost as perfect as their record, until an upset loss to the Chiefs.

4. CONFERENCE REALIGNMENT: San Diego State in the Big East? Another dizzying round of college conference hopping made a mockery of geography. Texas A&M bolted the Big 12 for the SEC in September –

likely ending its more than century-old rivalry with Texas – which set off the dominoes. Missouri followed the Aggies to the SEC. The Big East lost Syracuse and Pittsburgh to the ACC and West Virginia and TCU to the Big 12, then regrouped by adding some hardly Eastern schools: Boise State, San Diego State, Houston, SMU.

5. CARDINALS WIN: St. Louis trailed in the wild-card race by 10½ games in late August but rallied to clinch a playoff berth on the season's final day. The Cardinals' comeback in the World Series might have been even more remarkable. They were twice down to their final strike in Game 6 against the Texas Rangers, who were up by two runs in the ninth and 10th innings. St. Louis won it on David Freese's home run in the 11th before clinching the championship in Game 7. Manager Tony La Russa retired after the victory parade.

6. OHIO STATE: The Buckeyes beat Arkansas 31-26 on Jan. 4 in the Sugar Bowl with five players allowed to take part even though they were suspended for the first five games of the 2011 season for NCAA infractions. Ohio State would soon have far bigger problems. The school learned that month that Jim Tressel, who coached the Buckeyes to their first national title in 34 years, long knew about the transgressions and had violated NCAA rules by not reporting them. On May 30, he finally resigned under pressure. After a 6-6 season, Ohio State replaced Tressel with somebody who's won two national championships: former Florida coach Urban Meyer.

7. MAVERICKS WIN: Five years after blowing a series lead in the NBA finals to the

Heat, Dallas and Dirk Nowitzki got revenge and redemption against Miami. The Mavs picked up fans around the country by beating the Heat, suddenly everybody's favorite team to hate with the nucleus of LeBron James, Dwyane Wade and Chris Bosh. After Dallas won in six games, Dirk finally got his title – while LeBron still seeks his.

8. WHELDON DIES: Two-time Indianapolis 500 winner Dan Wheldon was killed Oct. 16 during IndyCar's season finale in Las Vegas in a fiery 15-car crash. The 33-year-old Brit won Indy this year in one of just three starts during the season as he searched for sponsorship. Wheldon was chasing a \$5 million incentive in Las Vegas, and IndyCar is still answering questions about whether the race was excessively dangerous.

9. SYRACUSE: Less than two weeks after the Sandusky charges, ESPN reported that two former Syracuse ball boys accused longtime men's basketball assistant coach Bernie Fine of molesting them. On Nov. 27, Fine was fired after the network aired a tape in which a woman it identified as Fine's wife tells one of the men, Bobby Davis, she knew "everything" that was going on. Fine has not been charged, and an investigation is ongoing.

10. WOMEN'S WORLD CUP: Their country devastated by a tsunami and earthquake, Japan's soccer players vowed they would inspire their homeland. They did it with an improbable victory in the final, rallying from a goal down late in regulation and again in overtime against the favored Americans to force penalty kicks, which they won 3-1. The Japanese also upset host Germany in the quarterfinals.

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