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Sandusky Turns to TV to Break Silence



NBC

Bob Costas, right, with Jerry Sandusky's lawyer, Joe Amendola, on NBC on Monday night.

By ALESSANDRA STANLEY
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Jerry Sandusky's voice was halting, and his affect was oddly flat. He denied charges of pedophilia but didn't flash the indignant anger of a person wrongly accused. Sandusky, the former Penn State defensive coordinator who is charged with sexually abusing young boys, told Bob Costas of NBC over the telephone on Monday night that he had done nothing wrong, but that "in retrospect," he regretted the showers and "horseplay."

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The accusations — and there are 40 counts of molestation and abuse — are shocking. But so was the contorted way in which Sandusky maintained his innocence.

The interview, which was excerpted on "Rock Center With Brian Williams" and shown at full length on the "Today" show on Tuesday, was one of the more disturbing and damaging attempts at spin control in recent memory — and this is an election year. Sandusky sounded a little like those men who are caught in pedophile sting operations on the program "To Catch a Predator" and can't stop talking. But Sandusky wasn't ambushed; his lawyer was the one who asked Costas if he wanted to talk directly to his client.

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If the Sandusky interview had any purpose at all, it was as a reminder of how pervasive and intrusive television has become. Even accused pedophiles who have every reason — and legal right — to lay low somehow believe that there is no alternative to TV. People live in such a heightened expectation of no privacy that even those facing the worst criminal charges feel compelled to speak up.

At one point, Sandusky seemed to seek credit for all the young protégés he didn't touch or shower with. Costas asked him about reports that still more possible victims from the Second Mile, the charity founded by Mr. Sandusky, could come forward.

"I would — I would guess that there are many young people who would come forward," Sandusky replied, "many more young people who would come forward and say that my methods, and what I had done for them made a very positive impact on their life." He added: "And I didn't go around seeking out every young person for sexual needs that I've helped. There are many that I didn't have — I hardly had any contact with who I have helped in many, many ways."

If the strategy was to present Sandusky in a more sympathetic light, it was a misfire that did nothing to help his case. Costas, who got the scoop on short notice, did a skillful job of asking hard questions and absorbing worse answers. But the exercise was gruesome to watch, all the more so because it was on opposite a show with a much happier exclusive. Representative Gabrielle Giffords, Democrat of Arizona, and her husband, the retired astronaut Mark Kelly, were on the ABC show ["20/20"](#) telling Diane Sawyer about her recovery effort after the Jan. 8 shooting near Tucson. Giffords and her husband have a compelling story, and also a book to sell: "Gabby: A Story of Hope and Courage."

Presidential candidates don't have much of a choice. Live debates are risky, [as Rick Perry can attest](#), but they can't be avoided. Scandalous charges can't be ignored for long. Herman Cain, stymied by charges from four women of sexual misconduct, held a news conference to deny the accusations. He survived that ordeal-by-camera only to find himself back in explaining mode after he was shown in a video as seemingly [unable to describe his position](#) on Libya in a meeting with The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

There is some precedent for people turning around an image problem by doing a star turn before an audience. At the height of the Anita Hill accusations, Justice Clarence Thomas took advantage of televised Congressional hearings to angrily describe the charges of sexual harassment as [a "high-tech lynching"](#) and cowed key senators fighting his nomination. Lt. Col. Oliver L. North became an overnight hero with a defiant, swashbuckling defense of his covert actions ("people have died face down in the mud") during the Iran-contra hearings in 1987.

But usually, people who try to sway public opinion do it when they have little left to lose and something new to sell. Ruth Madoff might not have won a lot of sympathy when she told "60 Minutes" that she and her husband, Bernard L. Madoff, attempted suicide after his [Ponzi scheme](#) was exposed. But the timing of that confession was what mattered most — it coincided with the publication of "Truth and Consequences," a book arranged by Catherine Hooper, the fiancée of the Madoffs' son Andrew.

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They are inured to tabloid celebrities charged with terrible crimes proclaiming their innocence on television, but even the worst usually go on camera with a well-rehearsed version of events. A cocky Drew Peterson, for example, coolly denied killing any of his wives on "Larry King Live." (He is awaiting trial in the death of his second wife, Kathleen Savio.) Peterson might not have been persuasive, but he was certainly polished.

Sandusky was anything but. And that may be the most shocking thing about the Costas interview: this former assistant coach had so little to say in his own defense and felt compelled to speak up anyway.

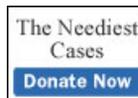
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