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This is American sports' Catholic Church moment

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By Jon Solomon -- The Birmingham News

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Jerry Sandusky's arrest in November has started a wave of child molestation accusations in sports. (The Associated Press)

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama -- The horrific child sexual-abuse headlines keep invading our sports pages.

Penn State defensive coordinator Jerry Sandusky. Syracuse assistant basketball coach Bernie Fine. AAU president Bobby Dodd. Philadelphia Daily News sports columnist Bill Conlin.

And that's just since November.

ABC News revealed in 2010 that 36 swimming coaches had been banned by

USA Swimming for allegations of sexual misconduct, including molestation and hidden videotaping of children in locker rooms.

All of these allegations are sickening. I feel like never letting my young boys out of sight, which would be a complete overreaction, of course, so I'll try instead to teach them that they can tell my wife and I anything.

These victims are kids, the most vulnerable and innocent people in our society. If we can't protect them, something's seriously wrong.

We've reached American sports' Catholic Church moment.

Some good can actually come from these public scandals. Stories of kids getting molested are reaching new audiences -- dads who watch ESPN and athletes who need to know it's OK to tell their story.

Jon Solomon is a columnist for The Birmingham News. Join him for live web chats on college sports on Wednesdays at 2 p.m.

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Maybe this helps other victims come forward -- if not to prosecute criminals then to help themselves and prevent someone else from being abused. Maybe the rest of us won't turn a blind eye as adults did in some of these cases.

The sports world would miss a great opportunity if it simply shrugs its shoulders and writes off these stories as isolated incidents. Let's not bury our heads in the sand.

Let's demand better certification for our coaches, better laws to eliminate statutes of limitations in child molestation cases, and better training for parents, coaches and administrators to notice and report odd behavior.

Predators come in all walks of life. Take, for instance, the journalism world, which was stunned by the allegations against Conlin, a member of the Baseball Hall of Fame.

In any profession there are pedophiles. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in four girls and one in six boys are sexually abused before their 18th birthday.

Although the majority of adults associated with sports have the best of intentions when working with kids, the uncomfortable truth is sports can be ripe for sexual abuse and non-intervention. Children who are abused tend to know the adult. Sports provide the opportunity to build trust with adults who become authority figures.

As parents, we vet babysitters, schools and teachers. How often do we closely examine our children's relationships with their coaches? In sports, getting more attention from the coach is positive because the child must be playing well and there's a thirst to further his or her career and one day land a college scholarship.

Molestation is hardly a new issue in sports. Canada was rocked in the mid-1990s when junior hockey coach Graham James pleaded guilty to sexually assaulting two young players, including former NHL star Theo Fleury.

A 1995 survey of a sample of Canadian athletes by University of Winnipeg sociology professor Sandra Kirby revealed that 22.8 percent had sex with a coach or person of authority within their sport. Of those athletes, 8.5 percent reported the sex was forced, and 20 percent said it happened when they were under 16 years of age.

At the time, the United States Olympic Committee said one reason athletes did not report abuse was that are conditioned to follow a coach's direction. Also, the USOC said, allegations got turned back on the complainants as merely a misunderstanding.

That's why reactions in some of these latest high-profile cases came off as tone-deaf and inappropriate. Allegations are just that. The accused deserve their day in court.

But coming forward and admitting to being abused is extremely difficult, especially publicly. The victims can become stigmatized. So when Syracuse coach Jim Boeheim called the accusers of his longtime assistant "liars" looking for money, Boeheim badly stepped over the line and later apologized.

Sadly, we're probably not done opening our sports pages and reading of kids getting molested. If major universities such as Penn State and Syracuse couldn't prevent this under their noses, what else is happening in the dark shadows of sports?

Write Jon at jsolomon@bhamnews.com. Follow him at twitter.com/jonsol.

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aintdidnothin

December 25, 2011 at 6:27AM

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Classy headline, Jon.

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FinalVoice

December 25, 2011 at 6:47AM

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We have been certifying everything for years now and see what little that has accomplished....cant certify morality, integrity....what happened was a breakdown in morality- and divorce and broken families are at top of the list. An abusive coach was once an innocent child too - then divorce hits. We need to keep families together and keep mothers at home until their kids are school age.

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WarEagleMan67

December 25, 2011 at 6:54AM

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It was never just a Catholic Church problem no more than it is just a sports problem now. This sick behavior is not imune to any group of people, it is wide spread and happens every single day. If you don't believe me, go ask DHR or look at the court dockets at ant given time. May God Bless all the victimes and may God help heal the sickness in the people who do such terrible acts. Chances are they were victims too and no one ever knew. It is a tradgedy and it lessens the scope of the problem when the media centers on one group. They do the same with missing children. It happens every day yet they will pick one every now and then and run it in the ground while the others are ignored. I am not saying the media should not do stories when bad things happen, just don't vilify a particular group while ignoring the real story. Like I've said over and over, where is the outcry and why isn't the media at an abortion clinic doing a story on murder of the real innocent and defenseless. I know why, no famous person or group to vilify, just sweep it under the rug, ignore that it is a problem. So much hate in the world and so many victims every where you turn. My prayers go out to all for forgiveness, healing, comfort, and support, to

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everyone on both sides affected by such sad happenings. Merry Christmas and may the love and peace of Jesus Christ be with all. War Eagle.

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CoffeeAlabama

December 25, 2011 at 8:29AM

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Very well stated and written comment 67. I is a shame that the majority of today's hacks claim to be jornalist and write sensational headlines and pass off opinion or, as in this "article", create a collection of words to stir contraversary and take a back handed approach to a particular group. Your comment is much more jomalistic while the headline Jon Solomon's work is inflamatory and puts the reader "on alert for bias and hate" before reading the first sentence -- the body of the article was not too bad as opinion but it does not raise to the standard of journalism. Still, the first rule of journalism for a news article is that in the first paragraph it must answer: Who --What --When--Where--Why -- and how. Pathetically few "articles" or broadcast news reports are journalistic today -- there is an agenda behind the production of what these people pass off as journalism. I regularly read the Chinese People's Daily and it is more journalistic than most of the garbage of AL.COM.

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kennyc989

December 25, 2011 at 7:36AM

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I disagree-the catholic church is a "culture" of sexual abuse. If you notice the coach pervs are only places where they are allowed to stay 20 + years.

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WarEagleMan67

December 25, 2011 at 8:12AM

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You must not know much about the Catholic Church other than your outside preconceived notions. I am Catholic and hear so many false statements on a daily basis. There are over a billion Catholics world wide, you shouldn't judge the whole Church based on the sins of individuals no more than we should judge all of American sports based on some individulas that made terrible mistakes. Come visit and volunteer for some of the Catholic orphanages where they care for the deformed and disabled children whose parents did not want them. Turn off your computer, roll up your sleeves and join the Catholics in the trenches of filth, repression, and starvation and then share your point of view. May God Bless you and your family this Christmas.

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tidepriden09

December 25, 2011 at 8:21AM

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Amen, it happens in ALL religions not just the Catholic Church!

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WarEagleMan67

December 25, 2011 at 8:14AM

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You must not know much about the Catholic Church other than your outside preconceived notions. I am Catholic and hear so many false statements on a daily basis. There are over a billion Catholics world wide, you shouldn't judge the whole Church based on the sins of individuals no more than we should judge all of American sports based on some individulas that made terrible mistakes. Come visit and volunteer for some of the Catholic orphanages where they care for the deformed and disabled children whose parents did not want them. Turn off your computer, roll up your sleeves and join the Catholics in the trenches of filth, repression, and starvation and then share your point of view. May God Bless you and your family this Christmas.

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**bamamoose**

December 25, 2011 at 7:42AM

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I am of the firm conviction that Penn State's athletic program should be shut down. The fact that they allowed a child molester to rape children in school facilities after multiple reports is staggering. The fact that those who witnessed the events weren't man enough to immediately intervene offer clues to the type of organization that was run by Paterno. Individual predators aer one issue - when an organization aids and abets a molester's actions it becomes another one altogether. This should dispell any doubt that Satan and the fallen angels are raising hell on earth. If you consider the implications of PSU, think about the fact that Paterno's organization - and he did indeed run the school - was considered a shining beacon among large universities. This must be considered one of Satan's greatest triumphs. And let no one doubt that Satan runs this country, from Washington to Wall Street to local governments everywhere.

[Reply](#) [Post new](#)Inappropriate? [Alert us.](#)**Tallyluvsau**

December 25, 2011 at 7:43AM

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Agreed

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December 25, 2011 at 7:42AM

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Terrible headline attacking the Catholic Chuch! Show some class! Anywhere where children are entrusted in the care old adults this can happen, be it sports, schools, daycare, religions.

[Reply](#) [Post new](#)Inappropriate? [Alert us.](#)**WarEagleMan67**

December 25, 2011 at 7:55AM

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They love to attack the Catholic Church. It never ends and never will. Sooner or later the media will understand it is a hospital for sinners, not a hotel for saints. They should look in a mirror some time and ask "who am I Lord?" I stand with you, it is not a problem related to any one group, it is spread around equally.

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December 25, 2011 at 7:59AM

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catholic church's reaction to the scandals deserves attacking.

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December 25, 2011 at 8:22AM

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So does other religions where the same has happened.

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December 25, 2011 at 7:59AM

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unfortunately psu failed just like the catholic church. As far as over-reaction, I would not say not letting your kids out of your sight, or at least being present at practices is not an over-reaction. Also, unless our legislators give judges the power to put these un-fixable scumbags away forever, we as a country will fail our catholic church moment.

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