One old adage I remember my father telling me was that if something sounds too good to be true...it probably is. The public image of Ohio State coach Jim Tressel has always had some of that “too good to be true” quality to it, and this week that image has been tainted, probably for good.

That image had been constructed by a career full of good works and public service, and by his admirable leadership and mentoring of thousands of young athletes. In other words, he came by his image honestly. It has never been a false front. Other people have written the words. Tressel has led by deeds. He has never trumpeted his many charitable works and assorted kindnesses, in fact he often takes pains to deflect media attention from them.

That’s why the deeds that we are learning about this week - the dishonesty and almost inexplicable disregard for propriety and the conduct required of a college football coach - have rocked the Ohio State community. Tressel has put forward his defense for his actions, and he is seemingly at peace with himself for having acted in what he saw as the best interests of the players in his charge. But those explanations have fallen short.

There is no way to get around the fact that Tressel has lied, both by omission and by commission, and that he signed documents that he knew to be false. He can rationalize what he did by claiming to have acted in his players’ interests, but as honest observers of his actions, we can attribute no more lofty motive to them than the one driving every major college football coach. Winning. Because if the coach’s private notion of what constitutes “the players’ best interests” can serve as an excuse for misconduct by that coach, then anything goes.

But I'm ahead of myself....

As every sports fan in America knows by now, Tressel was suspended Tuesday for the first two games of 2011, and fined $250,000 by the university for failing to report information he possessed implicating two Ohio State players in activities that constituted violations of NCAA regulations. Validating another old adage...that "it ain't the crime, it's the cover-up that'll get you"... Tressel's actions were far more serious and damaging to the program than were the sales of apparel and memorabilia that eventually earned suspensions for six OSU players, including Terrelle Pryor.

Emails sent to Tressel in April of 2010 by a local attorney, (later identified as former OSU player Chris Cicero), informed him that Pryor and another OSU player were involved in selling Ohio State merchandise and awards to Eddie Rife, a Columbus tattoo parlor operator, and more importantly, the subject of an ongoing federal drug trafficking investigation. The existence of this email evidence went viral Monday evening in a report at Yahoo Sports by Dan Wetzel and Charles Robinson, and the OSU administration scrambled its top officials to assemble for a press conference Tuesday night to address the blooming scandal. They might have considered a different plan.

You can watch video of Tuesday's proceedings here or here , but I think it's fair to characterize the event as not exactly OSU's finest hour. Athletic Director Gene Smith took some of the suspense out of the evening right away, when in his opening remarks he announced, "At the end of the day, wherever we end up, Jim Tressel is still our football coach." Smith went on to assert flatly that there had been "no intent in what he did. He is our coach and we trust him implicitly." One assumes he meant "no intent to violate NCAA rules" but that wasn't exactly on point at that moment. The facts of the violation were at issue.

Tressel's Self-Defense

Tressel took the mike and mentioned that he needed his notes to keep him concise, and then proceeded to speak for about ten minutes while barely glancing at them. He started out forcefully, defending his judgment call to keep the emails a secret on the basis of what he saw as the need to protect the players themselves, as well as "protecting the confidentiality" of the federal investigation, something that had been requested by Cicero in the second email. "Admittedly, I probably didn't give quite as much thought to potential NCAA part of things as I

read it [the emails]", said the coach.

He went on, "Obviously, I'm disappointed that this happened at all. I'm saddened that I let people down and didn't do things as well as I could have done." And later, “[We] worked very hard to make it a teachable moment. As time went on, what was most important was we didn't interfere with the federal investigation”

What went unexplained at the time, and is still unexplained by Tressel to date, is why he continued to feel the need to “protect the confidentiality” of the investigation even when the “lid” came off of it in late December, and the six OSU players were suspended for their role in the memorabilia sales to Rife. Tressel could have informed his superiors and the Compliance Department at OSU at any time after the university became aware of the players’ violations in January. But he didn’t. Nobody’s interests were being “protected” by that point except his own.

The reason why he didn’t now seems painfully obvious. He was hoping his cover-up of his advance knowledge of the players’ involvement would escape notice altogether. But for the discovery of the emails in the course of a separate OSU investigation, it might have.

Tressel seemed to weaken, rhetorically and emotionally, as the event wore on, and he appeared very uncomfortable when the media directed specific questions to him. When asked why he didn’t just sit the players immediately when their violations came to light, he was momentarily speechless. It was an awkward moment that ended when he weakly offered that sitting players thought to be eligible would have raised “a whole new set of questions.”

The answers and explanations provided by Tressel seemed to get weaker by repetition, and with Smith stepping in, as an attorney might have, to limit the media’s inquiries, he may have been saved further embarrassment. His contention, “I don't think less of myself...I felt at the time that I was doing the right thing” rang hollow, even if it was sincerely felt.

As for OSU President Gordon Gee, he might just as well have stayed home from the press conference for all the help he provided for the OSU image. He gave a rambling commercial for the wonderfulness of Jim Tressel, relating things we all know to be true about the man, but which in this context came off as awkward and gratuitous. This is a man who shouldn’t do a lot of off the cuff public speaking.

Gee added, "He feels very sorry about this...and this University is very committed to this coach." Asked later if the university had considered firing Tressel, Gee replied “No. Are you kidding?”

The Great Divide

Gee’s sentiment is shared by legions of OSU fans. Fire Tressel? Are you kidding? This cohort of Buckeye Nation, (exemplified by this column by our own Gary Benz, and one by BSB’s Mark Rea), is prepared to give Tressel the benefit of the doubt, contending that he has earned a reprieve from the ultimate punishment by virtue of his track record of running a program that has been widely regarded, until now at least, as one of the “cleanest” in college football. It’s a fair question to ask of these Tressel-backers though, as Mark Schlabach suggests in his unsympathetic column at ESPN, if they would be as supportive of the erstwhile Mr. Clean if his record against Michigan were 1-9 instead of 9-1.

A common sentiment expressed by fans I talk to is that the violations by the players were, relatively speaking, trivial in nature, even though they constituted violations of the NCAA’s rules. And while Tressel’s withholding of information about those offenses is a serious matter, it shouldn’t be a hanging offense. Even if they aren’t persuaded by Tressel’s explanations, they acknowledge that he was confronted with a difficult and unique set of circumstances, albeit one he dealt with poorly.

On the other side of the argument are great numbers of equally staunch OSU fans who feel that, to this point at least, the university has failed to hold Tressel accountable for what amounts to a very serious breach of his responsibilities to the school and to his players. For many of these folks, nothing short of termination will suffice to see justice done. The very real OSU fans in this off-with-his-head group are of course joined by the congenital OSU-haters across the country and a good portion of the national media. Nothing would suit these people better than to see a man who is held up as an icon for “doing it the right way” brought low. The charge of hypocrisy is an easy one to make, and those calls are already being heard in the media far and wide.

That Tressel has lied, and covered up, and made serious errors in judgment is not in dispute.

The disagreement among OSU fans, and among football fans without any attachment to Ohio State, seems to be over whether this violation should cost him his job. I don't mind saying that I'm in the camp that says it shouldn't. (a shock, I know, to my regular readers). That said, I would understand completely the reasoning if the OSU administration felt it necessary to terminate him. Every OSU football coaching change in my lifetime has come too late, not too soon, to suit me. I just feel Tressel (barring further disclosures) has earned the right to choose his own expiration date.

Tressel will be required to make a formal apology as part of his penalty, but so far he has expressed more sadness than sorrow. From all appearances, it will be hard to convince his Buckeye players that they have been done wrong by their coach. Right or wrong, he has taken a bullet for his players, and there is every indication that he will be loved and admired by them even more for having done so.

Could it Get Worse?

The NCAA investigation goes forward, and there may be more damning evidence that comes forward to complicate things for Tressel. But as Buckeye Sports Bulletin writer Marcus Hartman wrote today, if Tressel's explanations have been convincing to no one else, they have convinced the people who matter the most. Gene Smith and Gordon Gee are not prepared to define their coach on the basis of this one incident, and they have decided that he deserves to continue as the head coach of the Ohio State Buckeyes. The NCAA can sanction the coach, but they cannot force the university to fire him.

As the official OSU self-report letter (pdf) to the NCAA points out, and as Smith emphasized in his remarks Tuesday, the university has invited the NCAA officials to assist and cooperate with them throughout the Tressel investigation, which began internally in January, and has involved the NCAA team since the first week of February. This close cooperation, along with Smith's former involvement as a member of the NCAA infractions committee has led Hartman and other OSU beat writers to believe that the two-game suspension for Tressel will probably stand.

The NCAA could impose additional game suspensions on Tressel, but as Hartman says, "conducting this investigation in concert with the NCAA, as Ohio State says it did, seems to leave little chance for surprises when the organization reviews the case. I find it hard to believe Smith would sign off on a report he did not have a very strong belief was going to be met with

approval."

A separate issue entirely from Tressel's continued employment as coach is the possibility that the NCAA will vacate the 12 victories achieved by the Buckeyes in 2010 if they determine that ineligible players were used. This seems like a strong possibility at this point, and it will be hard even for Tressel's staunchest defenders to make a coherent case that the 2010 season shouldn't be forfeited.

Tressel made a point to tell his players and the media on Tuesday that he doesn't indulge in self-pity, calling leaders who do that "pathetic". He will carry on as before, and the Buckeyes will surely be able to weather his absence against two weak opponents this September. It was initially reported (and stated in the self-report letter) that Tressel would be barred from spring practice and summer workouts. That report was a mistake, and a university spokesman corrected the record Tuesday night. Tressel will be allowed to supervise all team activities this spring and summer.

I hope Tressel will assume a more contrite posture going forward. The doing it "for the children" justification is lame and transparent when we hear it from politicians, and it comes across as just as silly in this context, knowing what we do now about the circumstances. The same holds true with the confidentiality claims. Not persuasive, coach.

For my part, I'm more bothered by his refusal so far to admit that his motivation was, at least partly, just naked self-interest...a chance *for him* to go unbeaten and win the whole enchilada. Every football fan with a pulse knew that 2010 represented Ohio State's best chance in years to win it all. Are we to believe that Jim Tressel read those emails in April of 2010, and it never occurred to him that if he reported these violations by his star quarterback...easily the most irreplaceable player on his team...that the dream of a glorious undefeated season could vanish in an instant? Is he actually asking us to believe that this never crossed his mind? Sorry. I'm not buying it. So please Coach, quit selling it.

As distressing as all this is for the Buckeye faithful, and I of course count myself in that number, I am equally disturbed by the cries of hypocrisy directed at Jim Tressel. Because hypocrisy is not defined as espousing high moral standards and then failing to always live up to them. We all stumble and fall occasionally, human imperfection being what it is. Hypocrisy is espousing high moral standards and then *making no attempt* to live up to them...giving lip service to them...habitually talking the talk without walking the walk.

Whatever one may say about the recent stumbles of the OSU football coach, that is not a description of Jim Tressel.

Resources and Opinion on the Tressel Case

Decoding the Emails - The-Ozone.net

OSU Self-Report Letter to NCAA - March 8, 2011

Dan Wetzel and Charles Robinson's Yahoo Sports report

AP report - Rusty Miller

Dispatch story

Adam Jardy - Scout story

Dr. Saturday

Stewart Mandel

Mark Schlabach

other various commentators in PD

press conference video

presser video

Mark Rea - Buckeye Sports Bulletin

Eleven Warriors commentary

EDSBS

more Dispatch

Bob Hunter commentary

photocopies of emails

Doug Lesmerises

Rob Oller - Dispatch

Bob Knight defends Tressel