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LEGENDS - Blockbuster Bowl - Penn State vs. Florida State - 8:00 p.m., December

## Bowden, Penn State's Paterno Transcend The Game

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FORT LAUDERDALE — Spanning nearly three decades and 2,000 miles, the friendship defines contrast and defies the odds.

For differences, simply rattle off a list, from styles to philosophies, backgrounds and resumes. But their union was borne of a kinship, as most enduring ones are. They see eye to eye on most things; care alike, love alike, compete alike, suffer alike.

"What matters to me seems to matter to him," says Joe Paterno, 64.

"And that's important," Bobby Bowden, 61, chimes in.

"He's probably my closest friend in the coaching business," they'll both confess.

Go figure.

Just how unlikely is it that Bowden, Florida State's wildly successful, gambling coach, and Paterno, the epitome of tradition and greatness at Penn State, would have this relationship?

Friendships, like legends, so often defy conventional appearances. And they so often confound us all.

The Baptist coach from the Deep South and the Catholic coach from deep in Pennsylvania's coal country - Happy Valley it's called - first hooked up 28 years ago, not wholly by design.

From Birmingham, Ala., it took two long train rides and some hitchhiking for near penniless Bowden, then head coach at Howard University, to reach tiny State College, Pa., where Paterno was an assistant at Penn State. All for a handshake and some lessons from the Nittany Lions' head man, Rip Engle.

What does Paterno remember about that first meeting? "Well . . ." he says, hedging.

"They were surprised that I wasn't black," Bowden says, interrupting. "He and Rip figured a coach from Howard University in Alabama had to be black."

The last time they met, a pair of swanky corporate jets touched down in Tallahassee and State College one cool morning in early December. From there, college football's reigning deans were whisked in unaccustomed luxury to sunny Fort Lauderdale.

"Couches facing each other, tables and food - you could stand up and talk the whole way," Bowden says. Southern-fried Birmingham never looked like this.

"Food, televisions, big chairs. Very nice - not what I'm used to," Paterno says. Poor boys from the streets of Brooklyn don't see this every day.

They stood shoulder to shoulder, before a slew of cameras, microphones and awed officials from an inaugural bowl game. Bowl founder H. Wayne Hutzenga, chairman of Blockbuster Entertainment Corp. and a fellow who counts his millions in triple digits, belled up to both, his moneyed sophistication oddly out of place next to the small-town charm of his gathered legends.