

BSB Interview Issue: OSU Athletic Director Gene Smith Leads Way In Unstable Time For College Sports



This is an excerpt of a story from the July print edition of the Interview Issue at Buckeye Sports Bulletin. For four free issues of the print edition, no card required, sign up at the link here: <http://www.buckeyesports.com/subscribe-4issue-trial/>

Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith has served in his role since 2005, with over 18 years on the job at this point, but the last handful of athletic seasons may have provided the most challenge thus far in his tenure.

Beyond the obstacles presented by the COVID-19 pandemic in recent years, college athletics has continued to change with the introduction of the transfer portal in 2018 and the addition of the one-time transfer rule and adoption of name, image and likeness, both in 2021. All of these developments have made for a complicated landscape, one that Smith and the rest of Ohio State's athletic department have been tasked with working through despite being in unfamiliar territory.

On the field, Ohio State football and head coach Ryan Day have seen the tides of the rivalry shift with consecutive losses to Michigan. The basketball programs have moved in opposite directions, with the men's team under coach Chris Holtmann suffering the squad's first losing season since 2003-04 and the women, led by coach Kevin McGuff, making the Elite Eight for the first time since 1993.

Buckeye Sports Bulletin spoke with Smith for the annual interview issue and in the five-page interview, Smith discussed the health of the athletic department, the most recent football season as well as the men's basketball program's future under Holtmann, among other topics. Here is a sampling of those questions:

BSB: How do you feel about the health of the athletic department, and how do you assess the 2022-23 athletic season for Ohio State?

Smith: "We are really proud of our student-athletes and our coaches and support staff. It's really been a good year, competitively. We're top five again (in the Directors' Cup), and then academically, student-

athletes did a great job. Our academic performance rate is the highest it's ever been in our history. We're really proud of that being at 993. We did exceptionally well - you have to compliment our (Eugene D. Smith) Leadership Institute staff and our coaches.

"Ninety-five percent of our graduates were placed, so they either have jobs or are going pro or are going to grad school, with a large number going to graduate school. That's becoming the new trend now, is getting that secondary degree. So overall, a really good year, so I'm really excited about what our programs accomplished."

BSB: It's been a couple of years since we last spoke to you. In that time, the football program has had two losses to Michigan and no Big Ten titles. What have your conversations been like with Coach Day around getting Ohio State back to where it needs to be in the rivalry and the conference race?

Smith: "Nothing's changed relative to our goals. We all obviously want to win all of our games and beat The Team Up North and win the conference championship and then win a national championship. That's never changed. That's our goal. It's a high standard, it's a high bar, but that's who we are and that's what we chase.

"It's funny, we don't really talk about the goals because the goals are there. They don't change. So we get more granular. What type of things do we need to do to position ourselves and make sure we have an opportunity to meet those goals? That gets down to recruiting, that gets down to roster management, that gets down to your support staff and your coaches and every- thing around personnel management, your operations. It gets down to his role. As we all know, he's trying to move himself more to a CEO-type role and delegate some of the duties that he's historically had, like possibly some level of play calling. Those are the things that we've talked about, is what we need to do to position ourselves.

"I tell people all the time, if we don't beat Indiana, that Team Up North game won't mean a whole lot to us, so we've got to focus on the things that we need to focus on this time of year. We've got camps going on, so we've got to make sure that Mickey (Marotti) has, for example, everything he needs in place from a strength and conditioning point of view, because he had some personnel losses. Some people moved on, so we need to replace them with the right people so that when this time of year hits, he has his team ready and they can go and work on strength and conditioning, so when we hit August, we're ready to roll.

"The conversation - I know that the public probably wants me to talk about the Michigan game, but you've got a lot of games before you get to that. That game is important. There's no question, we've got to win it. We've got to win the Big Ten championship. But we've got to beat everybody else."

The full interview with Smith can be seen in the July print edition of Buckeye Sports Bulletin, available to subscribers. Subscribe at this link to receive immediate online access, or call 614-486-2202 to subscribe and receive online access, and ask about receiving our July interview issue.