

Ohio State AD Smith Preparing For Notre Dame Opener, Recruiting Fighting Irish To Big Ten



Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith vocalized his desire for Notre Dame to align itself with the Big Ten in a July 1 press conference with University President Kristina M. Johnson.

With 43 days until football kicks off, the Fighting Irish have recently been on Smith's mind. The Buckeyes begin their season against the Golden Domers — the first leg of a home-and-home series with the school from South Bend, Ind.

On Friday, Smith appeared on 97.1 The Fan's Morning Juice show with hosts Bradon Beam and former Buckeye linebacker Bobby Carpenter to discuss his plans for the game. He expects the matchup with Notre Dame will be Ohio State's biggest season opener in recent history.

"My biggest challenge right now is getting ready for that opener and all the operations that are associated with that opening contest," Smith said. "Tomorrow (July 23), we host the Buckeye Country Fest in the stadium, and I will get a chance to get face-to-face with some of my operations people and get the thought process around managing an opening game that we haven't had in years. The last time we've opened up with a game like this is — I can't remember when."

Smith was a defensive end at Notre Dame and won a national championship with the team in 1973 under Ara Parseghian. He played for one more season under Parseghian before finishing his career with Dan Davine at the helm in 1977. Still, the long-time athletic director will root for Ohio State when the lights shine at the Horseshoe on Sept. 3.

"I love my alma mater," Smith said. "They did so much for me. I got a great education, and I had great camaraderie with my teammates, but right now, I am a Buckeye. All I worry about is making sure we outscore them. It will be a little weird because I will see a lot of my teammates from my time there and be in touch with them. That will actually be cool, and there's little nostalgia there. But at the end of the day, I want to spank them."

Ohio State and Notre Dame have met six times on the gridiron dating back to 1935. The Buckeyes lead the all-time series 4-2, with their most recent win coming in the 2016 Fiesta Bowl when running back

Ezekiel Elliott rushed for 149 yards and four touchdowns. Wide receiver Michael Thomas added seven receptions for 72 yards and a score.

The schools are two of the most storied programs in college football history, modeling consistent success across several decades. They have combined for 19 national titles and nearly 1,800 weeks in the AP Top 25 poll, with over 200 weeks as the No. 1 overall teams. Additionally, the Buckeyes and Irish have produced 195 All-Americans, 14 Heisman Trophy winners and over 1,000 NFL Draft picks, including 157 first-round selections.

TEAM	OHIO STATE	NOTRE DAME
ALL-TIME RECORD (WIN %)	942-329-53 (.731)	929-331-43 (.730)
NATIONAL TITLES	8	11
CONFERENCE TITLES	39	0
BOWL-GAMES	53	38
BOWL RECORD	26-27 (.491)	18-20 (.474)
CONSENSUS ALL-AMERICANS	90	105
HEISMAN WINNERS	7	7
NFL DRAFT PICKS (FIRST ROUND)	479 (87)	522 (70)
WEEKS IN AP POLL TOP 25	950	849
WEEKS AT AP POLL NO. 1	105	98

Smith is keenly aware of Notre Dame’s football strength, and his familiarity with South Bend has helped him understand how valuable the school’s independence in the sport has become. Nevertheless, he continued his recruitment of the program to the Big Ten on the radio show. Smith said he’s talked with ND athletic director Jack Swarbrick and President John I. Jenkins and has encouraged them to think about the unique opportunities joining a conference would create for the Irish.

“I’ve always felt they should be in a league,” Smith said. “I’ve shared that with Jack, Father Jenkins and others there at Notre Dame for a long time. I’ve always been a proponent of that. I think it’s unfair that their football players that they get a chance to chase the national championship, which is the holy grail, but they don’t get an opportunity to chase a conference championship. I’m old school, and I put a lot of weight on a conference championship. I think it’s an unbelievable opportunity for a student-athlete to experience that, and they don’t get a chance to experience that.

“The other thing I told them is that they’re flying over Big Ten country to go play in the ACC with their Olympic sports,” he continued. “You (Notre Dame) can bus to Purdue, you can bus to Indiana, you can bus to Ohio State — I just went down the list — but you’re flying to Miami (FL), Florida State and Clemson. I hit them hard on that, and I don’t know what they will do. They really embrace their independence there because there is a lot of tradition around that.”

Notre Dame’s most important factor to consider should it remain independent are with finances associated with television partners. According to Dennis Dodd of CBS Sports, the school’s athletic department is seeking \$75 million from a media partner to keep its independence.

With the Big Ten’s media rights deal set to expire in 2023, commissioner Kevin Warren and other conference officials have discussed new terms with Fox, while companies like CBS, ESPN and NBC have also offered their services. The contract — regardless of what company the Big Ten chooses — will be

lucrative for each of the conference's member institutions. Dodd reports that USC and UCLA's addition arrival in 2024 has already boosted the potential value of the deal to over \$100 million per school annually. If Notre Dame enters the mix, that number would be even higher.

"I don't know if they are ever coming to our league or to another league, but I continue to hit Jack with those messages," Smith said. "Of course, the finances are strong in our league, but that is not what drives them."