

Ohio State Athletic Director Gene Smith Says Program Failed To Meet Standards Under Chris Holtmann's Tenure



Just hours after the school officially announced the firing of head men's basketball coach Chris Holtmann, athletic director Gene Smith took the lectern in the press conference room in Value City Arena on Wednesday night to offer his first comments on the matter. Speaking with a large set of reporters, a teary-eyed Smith said that while it was a difficult decision to let go of Holtmann, he ultimately felt it was the right time to make a change in leadership given the direction the program was headed under the seven-year coach's guidance.

"It's hard," Smith said before taking a 12-second pause. "It's really hard. When you have good people, and you care about people, it's hard. If you don't have a good person, and you really don't care about the person, it's easier. When you care about someone like I did, it makes it hard."

"My responsibility is to the program," he added. "It's to these young men who compete every single day. I don't care what sport it is, and whatever it is, my responsibility is to those young people and to the program. I just felt at this particular time, with six regular season games left and the Big Ten Tournament, and whatever the postseason brings, a spark of energy was needed. So yeah, it's about the program in the end. And I have to set aside my personal feelings. And just go with what's best for the program."

Smith has consistently offered support for Holtmann throughout his tenure, rating his coaching performance in 2022-23 as "excellent" in that season's performance review and even giving him a three-year contract extension that ran through the 2027-28 season. But the longtime athletic director said that the decision to offer the coach an extension - which will ultimately cost the university \$12.8 million in buyout money to pay Holtmann his remaining salary - was one of the "many" regrets he's had during his 19-year tenure.

“Of course you (have regrets),” Smith said when asked if he regretted giving the contract extension to Holtmann. “I have many regrets in my lifetime, I’ve been doing this a long time. If I could fix all of the regrets I’ve had in my life, I’d fix them all. But certainly, that’s one of them.”

While Smith declined to dive into the details of what specific areas Holtmann fell short in throughout his tenure at Ohio State, he did say that he felt a change in leadership was needed because it would give the younger players on the Buckeyes’ roster — such as starting sophomore guards Roddy Gayle Jr. and Bruce Thornton — a chance to most effectively showcase their talents and develop within the program.

The athletic director added he felt the talent on the team was not being recognized due to coaching, and that he still had full belief in the abilities of Ohio State’s younger player. He thinks his players can still send a message to both the conference and nation with a strong end to the season — which will now fall under the guidance of interim head coach Jake Diebler.

“I think the young men have played hard and they’ve given a lot,” Smith said. “But the reality is, (with) the body of work over this last year, I felt that they needed something different from a leadership point of view to give them that chance. While they are young, there are a lot of minutes on that floor, a lot. They still have six games and the tournament, so I wanted to give them a shot. And that’s what they have.”

“You know, it’s hard to imagine, but I think he’s a very good coach,” Smith said. “I think he’s going to demonstrate, for the kids, that we just need to keep fighting all the way through. And he’s going to do that. So I feel good about it.”

Despite the program boasting just a 30-30 record across the last two seasons and a 9-25 record in conference play under Holtmann’s last two seasons as head coach, Smith acknowledged that — regardless of who is the next man or woman in charge — the expectations are still high for the men’s basketball team heading into next season, citing consistent NCAA Tournament appearances and championship-level play as the standard moving forward.

“There’s nothing changed for any of our sports (regarding expectations),” Smith said. “I think we have 13 or 14 (teams) ranked in the top 25 right now. I mean, nothing’s changed. All of our programs have the same standard.”

“The blessing that we have at The Ohio State University is to recruit to this platform, to recruit to Columbus, the resources that Buckeye Nation provides us. So the standard for men’s basketball is the same. Be in the hunt, periodically win the championship, and then go deep into the postseason. But that hasn’t changed. And so that hasn’t been accomplished. We need to do better.”