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"For The Buckeye Fan Who Needs To Know More"

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Smith Recaps Year

Success, Change Big Part Of 2013-14 At Ohio State

 By JEFF SVOBODA
 Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

In many ways, 2013-14 was business as usual for the Ohio State athletics department.

The football team won all 12 games on the regular-season schedule for the second consecutive year, while the men's basketball program continued its streak of NCAA Tournament appearances. Some of Ohio State's other 34 varsity sports put together impressive accomplishments, and the Buckeyes again had a strong year in the classroom.

But it was also a year of change for Ohio State, and not just in sports such as women's basketball and men's hockey where first-year head coaches Kevin McGuff and Steve Rohlik got their feet wet and skipped impressive postseason performances.

Ohio State hired a new president – UC Irvine chancellor Michael Drake, who took over July 1 – and athletics director Gene Smith signed a contract extension that will keep him at the school through 2020. In addition, continued attacks on the college athletics system kept Smith and his fellow administrators across the country busy.

Smith was willing to discuss these topics and more when he sat down at the Fawcett Center with BSB in late June to discuss the state of his department and other issues.

Recapping the athletics year, Ohio State received plenty of standout performances, including a school-record 24-game win streak by the football program. The rowing team repeated as NCAA champions, while the pistol program won its second national title and the men's tennis team won the ITA national indoor championship.

Women's golf returned to the top 10 in the nation, where it was joined by football, men's tennis, fencing, men's gymnastics, wrestling and synchronized swimming. In addition, the women's lacrosse team made its first NCAA tournament appearance in 11 years.

However, it wasn't enough for the school to have a good year in the standings of the Directors' Cup, the yearly trophy that tabulates the on-field success of a school across all of its sports. The Buckeyes dropped from last year's finish of 16th all the way to 25th this season, its worst standing since the inception of the trophy in 1993-94.

THE INTERVIEW ISSUE

With all that in mind, Smith had a lot to talk about when he met with BSB. What follows is a partial transcript of our in-depth question-and-answer session with the director of athletics.

Buckeye Sports Bulletin: From your perspective, as you look back on this year, how do you feel about how it went?

Gene Smith: "It went great. We had a great year. We graduated 195 athletes over the year and then we had 329 Academic All-Big Ten honorees, and that's the second highest in our history, so it was a great year. Competitively, we had a lot of people that did well, a lot of teams did well.

"Having our rowing team win back-to-back national championships was phenomenal. The football team had a great

year even though we didn't finish as strong as we all had hoped. Men's basketball, I think Thad (Matta) did one of his best coaching jobs ever in a tough situation. I think he managed that extremely well. Recruiting has been phenomenal. I think Kevin McGuff, our women's coach, transitioned in well with the smaller numbers and injuries and so on, and I think he got a lot of great experience for those young ladies and set a great foundation for the future.

"You look at it, I think we had six coaches that received national coach of the year recognition. Women's golf, it's unbelievable the job Therese Hession does. Women's tennis got better, moved up the rankings, so it was a good year when you think about it overall."

BSB: In the Directors' Cup, you finished 25th. You want to be top five, top two, even top one.

Smith: "We have to win that bad boy from Stanford."

BSB: Does finishing 25th worry you?

Smith: "It doesn't worry me. We should strive to be in the top five. We certainly shouldn't be in the 20s. That's now who we are. You have to take into consideration where every individual program is. Certain sports didn't go deep enough in the postseason so those points we usually rack up, we just weren't able to achieve. Every coach knows that, but it's not like the end all, be all. It's just one of those indicators we have to constantly look at because we should be up there. There's five schools in the Big Ten ahead of us, and that shouldn't happen."

BSB: You mentioned it was one of Thad's best coaching jobs. Seeing it from your perspective, what was so impressive about what he did this year?

Smith: "We had a mix of such great kids, but it was challenging at some positions. We've been blessed over the years, we always have had that offensive go-to guy. We had Deshaun (Thomas), who was our most recent guy that had just unreal offensive talent in a lot of situations. We had Jared Sullinger before that, we had Mike Conley and Greg Oden, we had Evan Turner.

"We always had that one go-to, clutch guy, and we just didn't really have that (this year). Being on the basketball committee, loving this sport and having watched it over the years, to be where we need to be, you have to have one of those guys that offensively is the ball hog – 'Give it to me, I'm going to score one way or the other.'

"I thought what Thad did understanding that we did not necessarily have that, trying to put our young men in a position where they could be as strong as they could be, he did a great job. It's hard to get guys to be all in defensively like they were. Who wanted to play us? Defensively we were pests. I thought he did a marvelous job of holding them together and not letting them fall apart. We went probably as far as we could, so I was proud of them."

BSB: Obviously you lost to an in-state team, Dayton, who then goes to the Elite Eight. They had the headline in the Dayton paper mocking Ohio State. There was a lot of discussion before the game if Ohio State should play more Ohio teams ...

Smith: "There's your answer. It was like they won the national championship. You know, for us, if we lose, it's like it ended up. If we win, we're expected to win. There's



MATTHEW HAGER

'GREAT YEAR' – Ohio State athletics director Gene Smith was pleased with the 2013-14 athletics year, which included national championships claimed by several Buckeye squads.

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'Tough Losses' Hurt At End Of Football Season

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a dichotomy with that one. But no, it didn't bother me. I expected it when I saw it. You have to respect the fact that they have done a marvelous job with basketball over the years and they have a guy at the helm like they have in Archie Miller. He's talented, and he coached here. He's on that (Matta) coaching tree, so he's doing a marvelous job and will continue to do so. But you're right, those are the realities of, to some degree, one of the many reasons why we won't play."

BSB: Football-wise, head coach Urban Meyer recently said you are the best AD in the country. Do you feel the same way about him with what he's done with this program?

Smith: "We have a great relationship, no doubt. We spend a lot of time on different issues, and there's no one that could be better for our job considering the situation we were in and the opportunities that we have ahead of us. You know the pedigree – national champion, from Ohio, wife is from Ohio, kind of a Camelot type of deal, but at the end of the day, he gets what we needed to do to go to another level with our performance."

"More importantly, he understood the culture, and he's talking about that a lot right now – that we needed to establish a particular culture. That's relative to wins and losses, but for me – as he well knows, and he agrees – it's about everything else, too. It's about how you carry yourself. It's behaving the right way, that understanding of being respectful, understanding that it's not just about you. It's about your teammates, it's about your families, it's about the institution, it's about getting ready for life – the Real Life Wednesdays, all those things."

"I think he's packaged it really nicely and he's doing it extremely well to help the progress. He's done a good job with that piece. He's a CEO-type coach. We're in a good spot, we really are."

BSB: The 12-0 start to the season was great, so there was no complaining there. Then obviously the 0-2 end was frustrating for the program and the fan base as well.

Smith: "Tough losses – particularly the Michigan State one. That one hurt. Clemson hurt, but not as bad as the Big Ten Championship Game, to be quite frank. The Michigan State one hurt because we should have got that."

BSB: There are two new coaches on the defensive side of the ball. How involved are you when it comes to making those decisions?

Smith: "What's so funny is that our conversations are so fluid, and we talk about personnel all the time. We talked prior to the bowl game about personnel – who might be interviewing somewhere, who is ready to be a head coach, what jobs are opening – so it starts from there and then we evolve into conversations."

"We knew Everett (Withers) had his opportunity, so when that was coming down the pipe we began to talk and (Meyer) had some ideas of people. And then I might have a name to throw at him, but we have those conversations fluidly and naturally. We don't like schedule a meeting, you know what I mean? And then when he gets down to his final few, he asks, 'Gene, talk to these guys,' so he'll set it up and he'll make his recommendation and go."

"Larry (Johnson) was a no-brainer – 'What time can we get him here?' All those years of

experience, his pedigree. When (Meyer) called me and said Larry might have an interest, I said, 'Wow, let's figure that out and push that interest over the edge.' Mike (Vrabel leaving) was a surprise to us, and he was quality, but when you can get a Larry Johnson, that's another level, man. We were excited about that."

"I knew Chris Ash so that made it easier with him. I didn't have to meet him or talk to him. He was at Iowa State with me, so I didn't have a need to figure him out. So that's how that happens – it just kind of flows. Same thing with a lot of different situations like recruits or the leadership program. We just kind of talk naturally."

BSB: The stadium expansion is getting close to being done. At Michigan, there was a story that blew up in the media as far as their trouble with selling student tickets. Especially since the expansion, have you had anything similar happen here at Ohio State?

Smith: "We're fortunate. Obviously we've been watching it because it was happening at Michigan and it actually has happened over the years across the country. What was cool was those 2,600 seats we put in there for the student section will take the South Stands to 19,600 seats as opposed to 17,000, and we blew way past our ticket allotment. I think we went 1,600 tickets over our allotment for students. (Ticketing director) Brett (Scarborough) left the student ticket ordering open so more students could order."

"We're fortunate. Our public and donor sell was at about 98-point-something percent renewal. We're in good shape. However, you have to constantly continue to develop the fan experience. We had a call last Friday where I chaired a subcommittee on in-game fan experience from the Big Ten. We lifted the video replay policy last year and now we're talking about basketball and hockey and should we lift it for those two sports?"

"We also talked about technology in the stadium. We're going to have full WiFi in our stadium in 2015. We have the digital antenna system which helps with texting and phone calls, but the full WiFi we don't have. We'll have that in the fall of 2015, and more of our schools are moving toward that."

"We're going to try some new things on the video board that only the people in the stadium will get a chance to see. You won't be seeing it at home on your couch, it'll be for the people in the stadium. When you think about the new tunnel for the team under the seats, we're going to do some things around it with the team coming out that will be different. It will be really exciting for night games."

"We're constantly thinking about how we can continue to make the game fun and exciting beyond the game itself. We're doing everything we can to hold our ticket prices for a while. We're looking at a variable ticket model for the future. We're starting that study this fall with our Athletic Council. We've stayed pretty true to our model with the exception of premium prices. Now we need to look at the variable ticket model and how that will work, particularly since our scheduling really changes after 2016. We have to get ready for that and make sure we have the right pricing structure for the fan in place at that particular time."

BSB: Can you give us any sneak peeks as far as enhancing the atmosphere?

Smith: "No, they have to be a surprise (laughs). We have creative people, and it's

just that they are little things that people will say, 'Wow, that's cool.' It's like fireworks last year. I can't tell you how many people commented on the fact that we did that. We've been resisting doing that for years, but it was cool. I didn't have the vision. I had a hard time seeing it. These guys draw that stuff up, and I'm like, 'How is that going to work?' but then when you see it, it's like, 'OK, that's better than what I thought.'

"I say, 'Look, here's eight ideas. Let's try all eight. If three of them are good, great. The rest we'll never do again.' You have to try some things. You have to be sensitive to your traditions, protect those, but at the same time we have to understand our demographic is changing. You look at what's happening up north, you look at what's happening out west, you look at those attendance numbers and what's happening is we haven't been responsive to the changing demographics."

"People who come to our games are going to be different, so how do you make sure we protect our history and our traditions but also add that new component that recognizes their interests? Like our band – holy smokes. I asked (director) Jon (Waters), how are you going to do better than last year? That was phenomenal, right? The pressure is on, but they'll figure it out. That type of stuff is representative. Levy Restaurants, our concessionaire. I was shocked when they first came on board last year. You just walk the concourse and the colors and the splash, the aesthetics are different in the stadium. Those are the things that make you better."

BSB: You're going to have a new boss in Drake. Have you had much chance to pick his brain on athletics? He's coming from a much smaller school.

Smith: "A little bit. I had a formal meeting with him for about 90 minutes or so. It was a great conversation. He gets athletics and its value in higher education and in society. I think he's not going to have any challenge with the transition here. I think the magnitude of what we do is different, but he's an experienced professional at 63 years old so that adjustment won't be that hard. He gets it. That's really good. I'm anxious to get him here, get him started, learn from him. He has a lot of other issues on campus to focus on besides us, so he'll be pretty busy. I'll just be lucky to catch him when I can."

BSB: We have to ask about the O'Bannon trial that is going on right now? How closely do you pay attention?

Smith: "Yeah, I get updates every day. I'm watching it. It's going to still be a long time to go through this, then it will go to the appellate court and all that, so you're talking two years or whatever. The reality is some of the things I hope that happen in the new governance structure will deal with some of those concerns. I do think that ultimately if you have to pay for student-athletes' likenesses, then you have to figure out a financial model that works. It's not like it's a new discussion. Do you set up a trust fund, and as that person grows, X amount of dollars go into that trust fund? Because you know, when you come here, you have no persona ..."

BSB: Well, Braxton Miller does, but a lot of guys don't.

Smith: "A little bit, but we didn't contribute. So that's exactly right. So you come here but we didn't contribute to that, so if he wants to collect, he can collect from high school. Then you have that transition and

then you have to have some way to evaluate how you monetize that. People say it's just jersey sales, but I think it's more than that."

BSB: That's an easy metric, but it's only one.

Smith: "That's only one of X. So I think that's the big issue, that you have to sit down and figure out that formula. Where is the trust fund? Is it at the institution or is it in the conference office? If you say the conference office peels off X amount of money from the television revenue and retains it in the conference office and then you have a formula and at the end of the year you submit a report and it's filed, do you retain that in a trust fund until they graduate or do they get a check annually? So there's a lot of stuff around that. The courts aren't going to come up with the formula. They'll just say they should be paid for their likenesses and it's going to come back to us to figure that out."

BSB: So it's fair to say you have thought about potential outcomes and what might happen?

Smith: "Oh yeah. I don't know what is going to happen, but I know if the O'Bannon plaintiffs win, then the reality is we have to come up with a model and it's going to significantly change who we are and how colleges are run. It's going to go back to the old-school days. The reality is if I'm in the L.A. market, I can increase the value of a persona a whole lot faster than if you're in Ames, Iowa. It's all market driven. I can do the same thing here."

"The reason the rules are the way they were is because we were trying to change the old-school model, but now we're going to open it back up because I'm going to look at Braxton and I'm going to look at, how do we help monetize this persona? However you set up the structure – if he's paid yearly, monthly or when he graduates – that money has to grow, right? Because what it does is helps recruiting. That's where we're going, so that means we probably can't have as many sports, which means we significantly reduce our department. The game changes. We spend a significant amount of funds on marketing other sports (right now). I mean, it just changes."

BSB: It has to be worrying as somebody who has been in athletics as long as you have that you're going to lose something if it goes to its logical conclusion or past it.

Smith: "I was talking to a class about a month ago and that's what I was trying to explain to them, the changes to how that individual will operate, how they think. And any entity that is financially benefiting from those likenesses, they're open. They're fair game. It's interesting, isn't it?"

BSB: You don't realize how many ripples there are.

Smith: "Dan Guerrero, the AD at UCLA, and I were sitting around talking about that. We were like, people don't get it. They don't get the devastation. They just think, 'Just pay them,' but if that passes, it goes deep."

BSB: When a lot of this stuff started being discussed, Jim Delany said something along the lines of not being sure if his institutions would want to be part of a pay-for-play model. Do you think it could get to that point?

Smith: "We talked about that. Is there a different structure that we would go to? Ohio State is probably one that would not walk away from our environment, the Horseshoe, the great tradition and history. We'd probably walk away from our broad-based phi-

THE INTERVIEW ISSUE: GENE SMITH

losophy that we've enjoyed with 36 sports and 1,000 athletes.

"I could see a new piece of legislation going to the NCAA saying that - right now, 16 sports are required along with men's and women's basketball to be Division I. I could see that going down to another number, whatever that is. I can see conferences like the Big Ten saying, 'OK, here are the only ones we're going to compete in at a championship level.' If you have anything else, it's club or whatever.

"So you truly are moving into that professional model is what you're doing. I don't know how the federal government views this legally. You can say it's just for football and basketball. It would be hard, so I'd have to pick the sports where the athletes can monetize their likeness in this environment. So now you start going down that mental track. As soon as you print that, everybody is going to be on their napkin to figure out, 'These are the sports,' because that's what will happen.

"To your earlier question, we will lose something. We will lose a lot. That's why 70 percent of the public doesn't want us to pay our athletes. However, we have to come up with a way to solve some of the financial challenges that some of the kids are having. You know my message on that. I've been driving that for years, and I think that we will get there because that's the root of this in a lot of regards. If a full-ride student-athlete has to go out and get a loan, we're not doing something right. We have to figure that out."

BSB: As far as NCAA progress, you're getting toward August when you might get a chance to enact some of these changes. People are studying it - is that where things are right now?

Smith: "I think Aug. 7 is the board of directors meeting, and every indication is they are going to vote on the new model and the top five (conferences) will have autonomy. I think what will happen once they vote it in, I think we'll be able to get that cost-of-attendance piece of legislation in the system fast and hopefully get it voted on for an effective date of 2015. That would be a great opportunity because we've talked about that enough. People are studying it, so we should be able to create a piece of legislation that everybody can see, modify it by the January convention and get it voted in and go.

"Other issues I think will take a little bit longer because we haven't vetted them as much. Health care, those types of things, time demands for student-athletes - I think those are going to take a little bit more time and we need to engage more coaches in the discussion. One of the big things in the new structure that I think we'll be able to do better is identifying the best people to help solve a problem.

"I think the cost of attendance will get out of the chute pretty fast. The others might take a little while longer, but that's the game changer, getting us to that new governance structure because we'll be able to do what we can afford to do."

BSB: As far as other issues, you spoke on concussions at the NACDA (athletics directors) convention. I know the Big Ten is doing a study with the Ivy League schools on the subject. What were you able to discuss while you were there?

Smith: "My whole part of the panel discussion was not as much on the medical side, which was very interesting. It was more focused on a couple of things like having the right protocols in place, and that's based upon the environment and what you have. We're blessed to have a medical center so we have some unbelievable talent and skill here, but it starts from the fact that the medical

people make the call on the student-athlete, not the coaches. They make the call on coming out and when they return to play and have an environment where the team physician has total authority and that authority is respected.

"My coaches understand that they do not venture into that world. If the team physician says he's not ready, he's not ready - just move on to the next guy. It's that simple. A lot of places aren't set up that way. In fact, there's some places where the team doctor reports to the coach. That makes no sense. That's a conflict inherent in the structure.

"What I brought to the table was that drive. The other piece that I tried to bring home and why they asked me to be on that panel was people always just think about the impact the concussion has on the student-athlete on the field or the court or whatever, but they forget about the piece in the classroom. So if I'm concussed on Saturday and I have to go to class on Monday, how does that affect me? So what are your mechanisms with academic advisors to communicate with the faculty, what are your mechanisms to help that student-athlete deal with that class on Monday and trying to recover because brain trauma is brain trauma. That's why they asked me to be on the panel, to share my thoughts and feelings on those issues.

"The joy of listening to the medical experts like Brian Hainline from the NCAA, listening to them about all the different studies nationally, what is occurring, and the hope that exists out there to see real numbers of a true decline. The numbers aren't well-tracked right now, but there's a sense that there's a decline in the number of concussions. We've gone back to teaching how to tackle. Nobody ever really talks about gymnastics and lacrosse and all those other contact sports, but there's a lot of conversations in those sports and their cultures are starting to shift a little bit."

BSB: Another thing that came up this year was the controversy surrounding your bonuses when teams or athletes

won championships this year. Is that something you'd like to take out of your contract?

Smith: "That's an old model. That's not new. (Oklahoma AD) Joe Castiglione and I were talking about it - and his is the same way - and we were saying, 'You know, we need to change that.' This model has been in place for years. This year after President Drake gets settled and I've had some conversations with the general counsel on campus, we'll discuss how we change our incentive model because we're in a performance-based environment. So how do you shift that to the business side of the house? I've had some preliminary conversation with our general counsel on campus, and we'll eventually probably change that."

BSB: Do you understand why that became an issue?

Smith: "It's been so old, I wasn't as sensitized. I had it at Iowa State, which was, I don't know, how many years ago? I had it at Arizona State. If you made a public records request for some of the top ADs across the country, you would probably find the same thing. It needs to be changed and so we'll end up changing that. The optics don't look right, so we'll change it."

BSB: Maryland and Rutgers are joining the Big Ten on July 1 ...

Smith: "I'm excited about them coming in. I know it's not a popular decision, but from a business point of view it worked and it will work. We needed a presence on the East Coast. We needed to give Penn State partners to protect them. It worked, but yeah, I'm excited."

BSB: There was an article in Sports Illustrated recently with a little bit of sentiment that fans see the Big Ten losing a little bit of what made us. Do you hesitate to make decisions like that when that might be the outcome?

Smith: "That goes back to what we deal with locally, so being careful, holding on to our traditions and history but understanding our world is changing. People need to under-

stand that realignment was going to happen. If we took a vote back in 1996 about realignment, everybody would say, 'Don't realign because you're changing who we are.'

"Well, you know what? There's a lot of companies that fail because they stayed the way they were. There's probably only a few like Southwest that say, 'We're not doing anything differently. It's gang seating, and that isn't changing.' There's only a few that survive that way. Our world was changing and we were blessed that we put the Big Ten Network together, so the reality of trying to expand to that market made sense to us. Even the Sports Illustrated article missed the Penn State issue and the potential for the ACC to go into the Big Ten and go to Penn State and say, 'Hey, join us.' So it's interesting.

"My hope is that being part of the Big Ten, that (the programs at Maryland and Rutgers) will elevate. Maryland has a rich tradition in basketball and was dominant for a very long time, so hopefully that will increase. Rutgers had a good run in football. It wasn't consistent but they had a good run, so we can help them elevate. Anyway, it wasn't a popular decision, but I know for where we need to be down the road, it was the right decision. We couldn't go west very easily. So I feel good about where we are."

BSB: Do you foresee anything else happening with expansion?

Smith: "Not in the near future, no. Do I think it's going to happen down the road? Yes. I'll be retired, sitting in the stands, screaming, talking to the officials. But I think down the road it will probably happen again. It's just going to happen. There's television, the ability to keep the fan base growing in certain markets. Not all markets, but certain markets will say, 'We need to do something different.' The Big 12 to me, they are very solid where they are with 10 schools, but will that continue to work over time? You never know. So the reality is I think down the road we'll see expansion, but it's not anywhere in the near future."



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