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'I Actually Lost Hope'

AD Smith Speaks On COVID Year, Contract Extension

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It was a difficult year for many people, and that was especially true for Gene Smith. Ohio State's longtime athletic director had to deal with the potential cancellation of fall sports, namely football, and once those seasons were under way, Smith was tasked with keeping student-athletes safe through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite that, it was recently announced that Smith's contract has been extended through 2026. If he makes it through the entire contract, Smith will have been Ohio State's athletic director for more than 20 years.

The Buckeyes' AD since 2006 has also been in the news recently for speaking alongside State Sen. Niraj Antani (R-Miamisburg) on a name, image and likeness (NIL) bill.

Smith spoke to Buckeye Sports Bulletin for an exclusive interview on June 17 and talked on a variety of topics. Some

of those include why he signed an extension, why he spoke on the NIL bill, the difficulties in Ohio State's athletic department during the pandemic and how he feels about the current state of the football, basketball and Olympic programs.

BSB: To start it off, how do you feel about where the athletic department stands today after everything involving the pandemic and otherwise?

Smith: "I think we're in a really good place. This has been a challenging year on so many levels. To face the challenges of trying to make sure our student-athletes have a chance to come to participate and compete in a pandemic, and all the social injustice issues that were always there but brought to the forefront, just so many different issues.

"We're just blessed that we were able to have an environment where our student-athletes performed academically. They really did a great job in the classroom. Thirty-six of our teams maintained a 3.0 (grade-point average)

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FILE PHOTO

DIFFICULT YEAR – Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith said this past year, dealing with all of the repercussions of COVID-19 that included three canceled football games, was one of his hardest.

or better. We had 779 student-athletes with a GPA of 3.0 or better, and we had several conference championships and some NCAA championships.

"It was just a great year all the way around from that perspective and people stayed safe, but ultimately they had a chance to compete."

BSB: And you had mentioned how challenging it was. How difficult was this year compared to anything else you've dealt with as an athletic director?

Smith: "Having been doing this for four decades, I've had some challenges along the way obviously. When you lose a student-athlete to death, it's always a challenge. And when you have some NCAA challenges like we had in 2011. But this was really hard because there was a point in time, and I will say most of August, where I actually lost hope.

"I felt like we might not be able to give our kids a chance to compete, which is what we're all about, and so that was challenging for me. Fortunately, I work with a great team of people and our staff and then our coaches who uplifted me

and kept me motivated.

"It was hard, especially that window of time where I had uncertainty around whether or not we'd have football.

And if we didn't have football, we wouldn't have anything else. So that window, emotionally, was really trying for me and obviously the rest of my teammates in the athletic department."

BSB: Despite that difficult year, you've recently signed a contract extension to stay on at Ohio State through June 2026. What about this university has made you want to be here for so long and continue to be here for the near future?

Smith: "First of all, I really, really love what I do. I've been blessed that I'm healthy, and so I have some goals that I aspire toward achieving. And I love the people I work with, I love Columbus. There's just so much about that passion that's still there for me.

"I thought long and hard about other opportunities that



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Smith Proud Of Success Of OSU Athletes

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were presenting themselves. But one of the things that I wanted to make sure I was able to do was be in a position to possibly influence the direction of our industry of intercollegiate athletics, and I've had that opportunity most recently within NIL.

"There will be other things that I'm sure will emerge that I want to be able to do. I also want to continue to try and be a beacon, when I can, for our young athletic administrators of color and females. I hope to be a shining light that they can look toward if I do what I'm supposed to do, which I always strive to.

"There's a lot there to unpack, but I love it here and I love my president. President (Kristina) Johnson is really, really cool. She's really, really a good person to work for. I'm excited, and I've still got a lot of passion."

BSB: Speaking of President Johnson, you said how difficult that August period was, when there was so much uncertainty. How much did that time with President Johnson early in her tenure immediately help grow your relationship?

Smith: "That's a great pickup on your part – it was a major factor. I mean if we didn't have the pandemic and have the issues we were dealing with, I probably would not have had that daily conversation with her that allowed her and I to establish such a strong bond.

"It also allowed me to have an opportunity to see her leadership style up close and in the moment. And so, yes, good pickup. I was fortunate to have that ability to establish that relationship in an unfortunate circumstance, but to your point, it was extremely beneficial."

BSB: When you do look back at this football season, do you view it as success simply because you were able to get on the field through the pandemic?

Smith: "There are a couple of things, but yes, that's the highest of all the satisfactions. Looking at that and saying, 'Oh my God, we were able to do it,' and it was a collective. Ryan (Day) did a great job; Justin Fields did a good job; our parents association did a good job; and Jim Borchers, our doctor, did a great job. It was a collective push.

"So that was the biggest success, getting them on the field. But competitively, one of the things that was really important was to give this team a chance. It's hard to build a potential championship team, and I knew that we had a potential championship team as it related to the East Division and the Big Ten. I felt like we had a possible national champion, and we ended up in the title game with less games.

"The success of getting on the field was critical, but I would have to say also the performance was impressive. It was impressive, and I think it was the Michigan State game, we had 23 guys out. And even in the Big Ten Championship Game, we had a large number out (22 players). We still were able to overcome that and win, and so the resiliency of the players and their dedication to be successful was huge."

BSB: On the field, the big win for the season was taking down Clemson for the first time in program history. Just how satisfying was that win for you?

Smith: "Oh, it was extremely satisfying. I don't want to just dismiss the Big Ten championship, which was significant. To win it four years in a row, but yes, winning in the

semis against Clemson, a team that has been a nemesis for us – that was great.

"And really, just to see our kids perform the way they did, focused, it was outstanding. And to be down a couple of players, I was really proud."

BSB: On the other end, the Buckeyes fell short against Alabama. Do you think that there is any sort of gap between Ohio State and Alabama, and if so, what do you have to do to close that gap?

Smith: "I don't think there's a gap. I think that this past particular year, they were a better team. One day along the line, we'll face them again. But I don't think there's a gap. I think year to year, there's a gap sometimes with certain teams, but overall, our talent and our ability to execute, I think we're right on par with them.

"I don't try and evaluate teams, the way that question is posed. I look at every year and, hey, we got to the championship game. Whoever is at that level at that time, that's who I gauge us against."

BSB: How do you evaluate what Day has done through his first two full seasons as a head coach?

Smith: "Oh my goodness, phenomenal. People tend to forget about the personnel management side. He has a large group of people that he oversees, and he's managed his team exceptionally well – all the staff, coaches and support staff.

"And then he obviously has the athletes, and I think his ability to help this team get through what they got through last year is an indication of how well he's done from that personnel management point of view with the coaches, the staff and the players.

"Then he's just been exceptional as a coach.

"When you look, the job is to develop the players and put them in position to win. And he's done that, he's done that excellently. I'm just really, really proud of the great work he's done. He's just a joy to work with. He has a great personality, great demeanor, great style, and he's extremely bright. I just enjoy it. It's fun."

BSB: During the football season, you had three games that were canceled, only one of which was from COVID issues on your end. When you look back, how many games were you expecting there to be canceled or postponed? How did it go from your perspective as far as COVID cancellations?

Smith: "I just didn't know. I mean, I don't think anyone had a way to project, so each week you roll day to day. And I still, up to that Friday night, didn't think that we would have to cancel Illinois. And then we kept fighting to get to the Michigan State game, which we did.

"There was just no way to project, it was impossible. So we went into each day with the focus to get through each day, and that was our plan and we just kept working it."

BSB: You recently spoke at the Covelli Center on the name, image and likeness bill that was, at the time, entering the Ohio Senate. Why did you feel it important to speak with State Sen. Antani, and how important is this bill going to be for Ohio State and its student-athletes?

Smith: "I was hopeful that the NCAA rules would have passed by now. But they haven't, so it was important for our state to have a bill in place that allows our student-athletes to take advantage of NIL like many other states

across the country.

"Sen. Antani, who's a Buckeye, an Ohio State grad, he understood it. He knows a number of our former athletes. He stepped up strong. I was really glad that it passed through the Senate for all student-athletes in the state of Ohio. Certainly at Ohio State, but it's also about Kent State, it's about Miami of Ohio, it's about Toledo. It's about all those other student-athletes that will have a chance to take advantage of their NIL like other students in other states.

"From the time I chaired the NCAA committee in 2019, whenever that started, I began to truly embrace this concept, and I'm just so glad that Sen. Antani stepped up to put the bill in place and present it."

BSB: Looking at next year, I know you have said that you're hopeful there will be full capacity in Ohio Stadium. Is that still the hope, and what must happen for you to be able to make that decision in the near future?

Smith: "I think we should be there. I think it was the Columbus Clippers the other night, had 90 to 100 (percent capacity) in their stadium. And I know the Columbus Crew is planning their last home game (at Historic Crew Stadium) to be a sellout. I don't see any reason why we shouldn't.

"Obviously, we're in a good spot right now relative to the positivity rate. I'm concerned that our vaccinations are low compared to where we would like them to be. I'm hopeful that we could stay on an upward trajectory toward vaccinations. And hopefully, the COVID-19 variant that has hit our country and is hitting our state doesn't impact us. I don't see any reason why we wouldn't be at full capacity if we stay on this upward trajectory."

BSB: Recently, a College Football Playoff working group has recommended the expansion of the playoff to 12 teams, as well as having home games for the first round of the playoffs. What are your thoughts on both the potential for expansion and for home playoff games in Ohio Stadium?

Smith: "I think the group of four that studied this for two years did an excellent job looking at all the different permutations

and different models and then came up with a pretty exciting model. I think what we must do is now allow practitioners like myself and others to look at the great work they've done and try and, practically, see how it could work. Learn what we need to learn and what they learned in their process.

"It took them two years to get to that. We've just looked at it for the first time and actually haven't seen a lot of the details around it. So I'm curious to talk to my colleagues. I've talked to a few nationally, but as ADs and others, we have to get together. And it's hard now because we're in that time of year where people are taking vacations, particularly after COVID. But I'm looking forward to having conversations with my colleagues and learning more about the model, but I think the work they did was excellent.

"Playing at first-round sites is a perfect example. I want to talk about that more, look at that more. It sounds great. Fans always love that. But there is a reality that your first priority is a quality experience for your player.

"I think we have to look at when is that window of time that the game will be played? What's the historical climate? Do we truly, truly want to play in 32 degrees, in a cold rain or snow? Is that really right for the players? Or, if you're in the North, can you take that game to one of your domes in Indianapolis or Minneapolis or Ford Field (in Detroit)? I don't know.

"These are the questions that I have, along with a number of others. (The plan now is) just being curious and making sure that we do what's right for the players. It sounds good. It sounds like a great idea to play that at your own site, but I'm not so sure playing that game a little bit further north is a good idea. So we have to study that a little bit."

BSB: And then moving on to men's basketball, Ohio State had a successful campaign throughout the year, but it ended short with the big upset to Oral Roberts. What do you make of last year as a whole for that team?

Smith: "That team accomplished a lot. We were ranked in the top 10 for such a



FILE PHOTO

MAKING A DIFFERENCE – Gene Smith (right) spoke in favor of Ohio's name, image and likeness bill on May 24. After the bill, which was sponsored by State Sen. Niraj Antani (left), stalled in the Ohio House, Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine signed an executive order to allow Ohio student-athletes to profit from their name, image and likeness rights.

THE INTERVIEW ISSUE: GENE SMITH



FILE PHOTO

STILL IMPRESSING – Despite a disappointing first-round exit from the 2021 NCAA Tournament, Gene Smith said he is happy with what men's basketball head coach Chris Holtmann (right) has done in his first four years with the team.

long time, even top five. They performed exceptionally well, beat some teams that moved further in the NCAA Tournament like UCLA, and had great, great rivalry games. They played well and I'm really, really proud of them.

"We were in the Big Ten title game at the tournament, were beat up, and then we had to turn around and play an outstanding Oral Roberts team without a key player. Kyle Young, people forgot he wasn't there. E.J. Liddell was beat up, physically he was pounded and really trying to play through an amount of pain in that game. It was a tough challenge for us against a very hot Oral Roberts team who was very good.

"I was disappointed in that loss, but when you look at the body of work over the year objectively, they did a good job. Now it's about going to the next level and seeing what we could do."

BSB: What are your expectations for that team moving forward and how do you evaluate what Chris Holtmann has done through his first four years with that team?

Smith: "We always want to be in the hunt for a Big Ten championship and that catapults you, so we want to be in the hunt and periodically win. That's always been our goal and that never changes.

"Chris is an outstanding teacher. If you just watch what our players do and the position that they are put in, they still have to execute. You and I could probably think back to some games where you see a play emerge and you're like 'Oh my goodness,' and then we don't close, we don't execute.

"I think at the end of the day, he's an exceptional teacher, a good in-game coach and he's doing a great job of recruiting. The 2022 class has a chance to be significant. He's done a great job, really proud of him, made a great, great hire recently (Tony Skinn) and so I think we're in a good spot."

BSB: The women's basketball team had a strong year as well, but they couldn't participate in postseason play because of the Patrick Klein investigation. What led to the decision to have a postseason ban, and is there any regret on that decision?

Smith: "Our compliance team looked at all the cases similar to ours – historically and the precedence and things of that nature. We felt we needed to levy that ban for all

three sports: women's basketball, fencing and golf, because of the similar cases in the past and the decisions that the committee and the staff had made. We felt we needed to levy that."

BSB: There have been many successful Olympic sports this season. Who are the coaches in those Olympic sports that are overlooked from people on the outside?

Smith: "When you look at Nadine Muzerall and what she's done with women's ice hockey, it's just phenomenal. If you go back and look at our challenges that we've had with our women's ice hockey program, she's rebuilt it and revitalized it. Now we have great athletes, high academic achievers, and are just always in the hunt, which is the objective. Be in the hunt and have a chance to win it, which she's done. I'm really proud of all the work she's done.

"Karen Dennis, in women's and men's track, is constantly overlooked. She's one of the best in the business, and we had our highest NCAA finish for our women's track team ever (11th at the NCAA championships) and of course we won the women's outdoor (Big Ten title) again.

"And then you have Jen Flynn Oldenburg, and I was just so glad she had a season in women's volleyball. She came in, and then the whole season was moved to another time of year. We knew we had talent, and we knew she was a good teacher. No one could project the success that they ultimately had.

"Those young ladies, they've been putting their hearts out. And I go to a lot of practices. When you watch her teach, she's an outstanding teacher. Our coaches are first and foremost teachers. Sometimes people forget that. She's an outstanding teacher, and you can see it when they play that they bought into what she teaches. I'm really proud of her and what she's done."

BSB: With the Olympic sports, there have been some planned construction projects for things like the women's ice hockey facility and a lacrosse stadium. How much were those plans impacted this past year because of COVID, and are there any updates involving any of those projects?

Smith: "It's actually amazing, our donors have been exceptionally strong. They have been very helpful, and we're getting close to finishing our campaign for the lacrosse stadium.

I think we're about \$2 million away from our goal. We're really excited about that.

"We'll be recognizing a new \$5 million donor this fall who helped push us over the edge there, so we'll hopefully take that project to the board in October and hopefully start construction next year. And then with women's ice hockey, we haven't finished the planning yet. We're still finalizing those plans and hopefully somewhere toward the end of the year we'll have a plan in place for that."

BSB: Something else that has happened this past year was Urban Meyer leaving Ohio State's athletic department to become the Jacksonville Jaguars' head coach. Was that something that came as a surprise to you, and is his absence felt within the program now that he's left?

Smith: "It really wasn't a surprise because Urban and I talked on and off about his future. There was a time that colleges were coming after him, and he and I chatted a lot about that experience, and he would have no interest in going anywhere from a collegiate point of view.

"We also talked about the pros and cons on and what it might be like, and he does such an excellent job of studying things. He studied the NFL and had learned about the salary cap, all that type of stuff. And this opportunity, which actually was unique, as he shared. It's a total rebuild and he's a builder, and so he really saw that was a great opportunity for him to stay in the game and maybe accomplish something else.

"It made sense for him, and I'm happy for him. He's missed because he did so much for us in a lot of other ways that people don't think about. He was a really good partner to have and so I will miss him."

BSB: Something that's been big in all college sports is the increased size of the transfer portal. What are your thoughts on its current state and how it seems to be growing, and where do you think it will be in a few years with this type of growth?

Smith: "I think it will settle down. There's going to be student-athletes who think they can land somewhere and they won't be able to land at the place that they had aspirations to land. So over time, I think the culture will shift a little bit because people forget that all

of our other sports have had this for years. Soccer has been dealing with this for years.

"The most important thing for us is to make sure we create a culture in our program where one, we stay true to our promise and our commitment to the student-athlete and their family. We don't waver from that. Two, we have open and honest communication with them about all the issues – academic performance, behavioral performance and competitive performance and be honest with them. Be totally transparent, and then, if the student-athlete chooses to leave because of playing time and they just can't get into that position where they can gain the playing time, I don't have a problem with that.

"But if you're leaving for other reasons, then we need to go look in the mirror and look at what we did or didn't do. That's kind of how I always looked at transfers. For all of the other sports, it's always been that way for me, and it's that way for the sports that now have to deal with it for the first time.

"I think over time, though, the reality is there's some student-athletes who already have deals made where they know where they're going to transfer to. There's a high percentage of that.

"But there are a lot that go into the portal that have no clue where they're going and have aspirations to maybe go to certain places. And I think over time, as that data emerges and those experiences become more public, I think you'll see it steady a little bit."

BSB: After looking at everything you've done in the past year plus with COVID-19, is there anything you'd go back and do differently? Also, what is something that you are proud of from this athletic department through all the turmoil in this past year?

Smith: "I probably wouldn't have said some things I said on Zoom calls last August when I had to go street on some situations. But you always regret when you're not at your best, so I probably would go back and change some of the things I said in those conversations, be more respectful, but otherwise not a whole lot.

"I'm really proud of the resiliency that our players showed. Our athletes, coaches, staff, athletic trainers, oh my God. I'm just really pleased that we were able to allow our teams to compete and under crazy circumstances. I feel good about it."



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