

Gene Smith Focused On Protecting Rivalries If Conference Adjusts Divisions



Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith said Wednesday that he would be okay with the Big Ten eliminating its divisions in the future, with one caveat: the conference has to protect each teams' rivalry games.

"I personally don't have a preference. I'm okay with losing the divisions but I'm interested in seeing the models first," he said. "One of the things we want to do is mitigate some of the issues, one of which is that a student-athlete can go through four years and never play at a certain place. I want to see if there's a way to fix that. Second, we have to protect our rivalries and we need to see what that looks like without divisions."

Most in the conference, which will meet in May to discuss these issues, would like to stay at nine conference games. In a format without divisions, schools would likely have three protected rivalries and rotate through the remaining conference schools over a two- or three-year period.

"I think Ohio State should just be picked every year to go (to the Big Ten title)," Smith joked. "We've talked about it as ADs, we haven't come to any conclusions. We've talked about eight games versus nine in the regular season - most preferences are for nine but we haven't voted on that. We have a meeting in May when we'd like to finalize some thoughts around that."

For Ohio State, these protected rivalries in a division-less format would certainly include Michigan and likely Michigan State or Penn State, as well as a team in the current West Division - likely Illinois, to maintain the series for the Illibuck Trophy.

Smith also noted that the conference wants to give student-athletes the opportunity to play at all 14 of the Big Ten's football venues. As it stands, Ohio State has gone a number of years without visiting some schools, including Illinois (2015), Wisconsin (2016), Iowa (2017), Maryland (2018) and Purdue (2018).

Another point of consideration with eliminating the divisions would be getting rid of the Big Ten Championship Game, which Smith said the conference is questioning its viability within the framework of the College Football Playoff.

"With the (College Football Playoff), what's the value of the championship game?" Smith asked. "We

have to talk about whether that, in the (College Football Playoff) structure, is it still as valuable as it has been.”

This news conference came before the College Football Playoff’s announcement that the format will remain at four teams until at least the 2025-26 season.