

Incoming Ohio State Athletic Director Says Jake Diebler Checked All The Boxes During “Thorough” Head Coaching Search



When Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith fired former head coach Chris Holtmann after a 14-11 start on Feb. 14, many around the sport of college basketball and Ohio State athletics believed the university would look for an experienced and veteran leader to lead the program in 2024 and beyond. This sentiment seemed to be even expressed by incoming athletic director Ross Bjork, who told the Columbus Dispatch in late February that “experience in the head coaching chair matters.”

Contrary to the common belief, however, the Buckeyes went in another direction during their head coaching search this winter, one which Gene Smith called a “thorough” process that included many conversations with qualified candidates. Instead, Bjork and Ohio State hired in-house, shedding the interim tag off of 37-year-old Jake Diebler on Sunday after he guided the program to a 6-2 record in his first eight games, an effort that thrustured them back onto the NCAA Tournament bubble after a disastrous start to conference play.

While Diebler, who has never assumed full-time head coaching duties in his 14-year career, lacks the experience and name recognition that many other reported candidates possessed — the school also reportedly had conversations with Florida Atlantic’s Dusty May, with Creighton’s Greg McDermott, Xavier’s Sean Miller and South Carolina’s Lamont Paris also emerging as names to watch in the search — Bjork said that Diebler makes up for his lack of experience in the head coaching chair with his leadership, passion for the university, and overall coaching abilities, all of which made him a perfect candidate for the job.

“We laid out a very specific profile about what we envisioned for Ohio State basketball,” Bjork said during Diebler’s introductory press conference at Value City Arena on Monday. “Passion; energy; create a program; identity; a track record of player development; a recruiting machine, especially here in the Midwest and in the state of Ohio; strong leadership skills that can galvanize Buckeye Nation; someone

who understands and also can capitalize in modern day college athletics; born to coach. Jake Diebler fits each one of those characteristics, and then some.”

Bjork, who mentioned he was relaxing at his sabbatical in Texas when he received a call from Smith in February saying it was time for him to conduct a head coaching search, said he began to realize that Diebler possessed all the intangibles needed to become Ohio State’s 15th head men’s basketball coach after watching the way he led his team to success through the end of the regular season.

The incoming athletic director felt the younger Diebler outcoached several veteran Big Ten coaches during this 6-2 stretch — games that included wins over 20-year head coaching veteran Matt Painter of Purdue, Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Famer Tom Izzo of Michigan State and former NBA head coach and longtime college coach Fred Hoiberg of Nebraska — an impressive display of coaching and leadership that made him realize that Diebler possessed the “it” factor, among many other things, to lead a program.

“To me, you have the wherewithal or you don’t,” Bjork said. “If you break down the moves that were made during games, he outcoached coaches that have been doing this a long time. Strategy, substitutions, timeouts. So as you observe that, you say, ‘Ok, do you have that wherewithal?’ Clearly, he has his dad (longtime Upper Sandusky High School head coach Keith Diebler) in his ear, and sort of that born to coach mentality.

“So as we looked at all the characteristics, as we looked at, where is this program at now? What’s coming down the pathway, in terms of the next couple classes here in the state of Ohio, which are really deep in recruiting? So we just thought, ‘Look, if we know where we’re going, let’s pull the trigger.’ He’s the real deal. He knows how to live at the highest level of college basketball. He’s seen it in action. So, to me, that made up for the lack of long-term head coaching experience. Because he just fits where we are in this program right now.”

Bjork also said that Diebler’s fit as head coach was also validated when he spoke to about 15 former Ohio State players during the search to get a gauge on the expectations and standards of the program. According to the incoming athletic director, many of the players stated that they wanted a head coach that could both handle the responsibilities that come with being the face of the program and serve as a relatable and qualified leader, all of which were qualities Bjork thought Diebler possessed.

“As the new person here in Columbus, I was doing this from afar. I could believe characteristics, I could believe profile. But I had to cross-check that and make sure that (I could talk to) those who built the program — blood sweat and tears — so that goes to the tradition.

“But I asked them questions. What does success look like? What does it mean to be an Ohio State coach? What do you expect in the program? And the feedback was consistent. They wanted leadership. They wanted a fit for Ohio State. And they wanted relatability, among a lot of other things. It was great to hear that they expect excellence. But it really validated that Jake was the right guy for this job.”

Despite all these clear signs that Diebler was the perfect fit for the program, Bjork said he and the administration still challenged his head coach during the interview process, where they tested his ability to excel in some of the more broad responsibilities that come with being an Ohio State head coach, including dealing with the ever-changing landscape of college athletics and being a face of a well-known high-major program. Once the longtime Buckeye assistant passed these qualifications, Bjork said he knew Diebler could be the singular leader and face of this program, one which he thinks can

compete for championships under his guidance.

“It may be easy to say that we just walked right down and it’s an easy pick, he’s down the hallway and we could just name him our head coach,” Bjork said. “But we pressed Jake on what it takes to build championships, what it takes to make changes as the leader of the program. We asked him about modern day athletics.

“And we have a program — what’s really neat about this — is we have a program that is ready to excel. That’s ready to take flight. And with the right kind of adjustments, we know that we could cut down nets and raise those ladders that we expect. So every time we checked the profile, the values of Ohio State, the beacon was Jake. It just kept pointing to that he’s the right guy.”