

Jake Diebler Staying True To Himself In First Days As Ohio State Interim Head Coach



When Jake Diebler walked out of a one-on-one meeting with Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith on Wednesday — a meeting that resulted in Smith anointed Diebler as the Buckeyes’ interim head coach for the remainder of the 2023-24 season — the longtime Ohio State assistant was struck with a mix of emotions.

On one hand, Diebler was emotionally impacted by the firing of now-former head coach Chris Holtmann — who he had spent the last five seasons with on the Ohio State’s staff, including the last three years as his associate head coach. But, amidst these strong emotions, Diebler also felt he had an obligation to lead his players through a time of adversity and change by serving as interim head coach for the remainder of the season, an opportunity to lead a program that he is eager to take on.

“I’ve talked about my desire to be a head coach, and in recent years, I’ve gotten even more excited about doing that,” Diebler said Thursday afternoon at Value City Arena, his first time speaking since the official firing of Holtmann. “These are absolutely not the circumstances I would have ever imagined getting an opportunity to fill that seat. The hardest part, two days removed, is that my mind and heart is with (Holtmann), Lori Holtmann, their family. I’m not going to get into the details about the conversation with him, I didn’t have time to talk with him for a long time, but that was really hard.

“And when Gene asked me to step in, I don’t know if that decision to (accept the interim head coaching job) was really hard. In that moment, I immediately thought about our guys, and I wanted to be there to support them. And Gene felt like that was the best way to do that. I felt it was a duty to do that.”

Diebler, who will begin his tenure as interim head coach when the Buckeyes host No. 2 Purdue on Sunday, said he began adjusting to life as interim head coach as soon as he left the meeting with Smith.

After speaking with Smith — and calling his wife, Jordyn — the new program leader worked to create transparency with his team and players amid the firing, where he had separate meetings with his staff and players before having an entire team meeting. He also said he made sure to individually speak with

each player as well as at least one family member of each player across the next two days.

Diebler said he made a concerted effort to meet with each player to not only inform them of the current state of the program, but assure them that they are getting a leader who will stay true to his authentic self for the remainder of the season. This was an effort he added he made during the team's first practice since the Holtmann firing, where he slightly altered its format in order to best fit his coaching philosophy.

"What I told them was, at this point, with six games left, it's hard to make these wholesale changes," Diebler said. "But the best thing that I felt that I could do for them, and the best way that I could serve them and serve this program is to be me. Not try to be (Holtmann) or be someone else, but I needed to be the best version of me.

"So we changed some things in practice. Not necessarily drills. But we changed the format a little bit to fit my personality. And it allowed me to be really authentic, and that was helpful...I think our guys would probably tell you, I operate with a passion and urgency and pace to things, so we tried to tailor practice around that. I was very open with what I wanted it to look like, and they embraced that."

Whether it is laying the foundation and establishing a culture in practice or offering constant communication with his players, Diebler said that he is committed to leading Ohio State through the rest of the season and will do whatever it takes to elevate the program he has grown to love across his nine combined years on staff.

"Who I am and what I know to do is to do this, serve this program and these players as hard as I possibly can with as much energy as I possibly can," Diebler said. "I'm not going to sit here and pretend like I have some secret formula that's all of the sudden going to make all the difference in the world. But I do know that I care and I love these guys and this staff, and I care about this program. I care about serving this program well, not just for the guys currently in it, but for the guys who have been a part of this program long before I got to be here.

"Certainly my brother's connection means a great deal, but there are a lot of guys who have gone through and have played in this program that are like family to me. We talk a lot about family. And I think we have to come together and that's going to be more important than ever. (Former Ohio State point guard) Aaron Craft stopped by practice yesterday. What a great example for our guys to see and understand that this is bigger than themselves. This is bigger than us, and people care. And our guys care, we care about finishing well. And that was evident by the way we practiced."