

Ohio State AD Gene Smith Discusses Ohio State's Coronavirus Response, Expresses Support Of Student-Athletes



Concerns regarding the coronavirus have shut down all athletic events at Ohio State.

Both conference and NCAA basketball tournaments have been canceled, and in-person recruiting is on a one-month hiatus, at least. Additionally, Ohio State football's pro day has been postponed indefinitely, while spring practices have been suspended.

Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith conducted a teleconference with members of the media, taking a variety of questions surrounding the coronavirus and what has transpired in the sports world as a result of growing concerns.

What follows is a bullet-point summary of Smith's comments:

- "Obviously this is uncharted territory for us as an institution, let alone as an athletic department."
- All the measures implemented are to prevent a "significant community burden on our health care system." Everybody needs to think of the disease from a community perspective rather than an individual basis.
- It's "disheartening and extremely painful" to abruptly end seasons, but it's the best for communities and individuals in communities.
- "It was really a pretty complicated process, to be quite honest." There were NCAA, Big Ten, institution and department conversations. He was in Big Ten meetings on March 11 while his internal team was in Columbus having meetings, so there had to be a lot of communication. He was on three different conference calls, while driving home from Indianapolis, where the Big Ten men's basketball tournament was to be held.
- Ohio State has not "quantified" the financial impact of the cancellations.
- Smith said he decided individually the Big Ten and NCAA tournaments needed to be canceled, so he began to have conversations with those within the conference. Then they talked to the school presidents to get to the Big Ten to the point to cancel the tournament. Once that happened, they shifted focus to canceling the NCAA tournament. Smith complimented Big Ten Commissioner Kevin Warren for taking the "leadership role" by bringing the Big Ten presidents together in such a short window of time.
- Smith said he hasn't been able to have any face-to-face conversations with student-athletes since the cancellations were announced. Said he has had a few text and email conversations with seniors hopeful they'll be able to get a fifth year of eligibility. "We'll move down that path when

we get to it.”

- The NCAA coordinating council has already started working on the logistics of granting seniors an extra year of eligibility. They understand that it is something that we should try to do, but there are a number of issues that need to be worked out. Bottom line, we have to do what is right for the student-athlete.
- On if he’s thought about the possibility of not having a football season: “No, I haven’t thought that far.” They have “issues on the ground floor today” to deal with.
- He said the due diligence that has to be taken and the focus required is the most difficult aspect of dealing with the situation from his perspective.
- Smith said he was on a group text with all the other Big Ten athletic directors and has a “collegial” relationship with them, which made it easier.
- He said he wasn’t frustrated with the timing of the cancellation of the NCAA tournament. “I was just hoping they’d come to a decision ... I was fine with the process.”
- Smith said Big Ten commissioner Kevin Warren has a good perspective on “student-athlete welfare.” Warren was a student-athlete and has a son who is a student-athlete. Smith referred to Warren as “student-athlete centric” and noted he has a law degree which allows him to think “linearly.”
- Why postpone rather than cancel spring practice? “The Big Ten made a decision that all organized team activities be suspended until April 6. Personally, I was of the opinion just like a few other colleagues, that it should have been eliminated.” However, since the Big Ten postponed rather than canceled it, Ohio State went along with the conference. He said he hasn’t even thought how many practices the Buckeyes would be able to have if they resumed it this spring.
- Compensating stadium/arena employees? Great question. That’s on our agenda. We’re working through that right now and still have to decide.
- On whether student-athletes can continue to take advantage of their support services: “Yes. Our student-athlete support services organization has been working with the office of academic affairs, and we’re taking advantage of technology.” Each team has an academic advisor. He said motivational techniques might change since they’re not in-person, but they feel “really good” about the ability to continue to offer services.
- On Ryan Day: “Fortunately, Ryan’s extremely talented and he’s got an experienced staff.” He said he and deputy director of athletics Diana Sabau have had conversations with Day and will eventually sit down with him to discuss strategies.
- Smith said he was happy the NCAA implemented a recruiting dead period “from a competitive equity point of view,” which was “important.”
- “I’m definitely in support of an extra year or semester of eligibility for our spring sport athletes.” He said he’s uncertain on a full academic year since he hasn’t yet delved into it, especially for student-athletes who have already graduated.
- He said he hasn’t looked into winter sports yet, but he thinks he will likely be supportive of them getting an extra year of eligibility.
- Smith said no student-athlete has tested positive for the coronavirus (COVID-19).
- He said he’s in on the conversations with Ohio State president Michael Drake about the impact of this disease. “I may have come at it from a different place than many of my colleagues.” He said he was ready to cancel events on March 9.
- “We needed to put in measures to mitigate the growth of the virus.” He said that since the virus would be able to spread if tournaments weren’t canceled, it was “common sense” for him.
- Smith said the “hardest part of all of this” is prematurely ending seasons. That’s where you get yourself trapped in the process of making those decisions, “because you have the faces. I have Andre Wesson’s face. I know what he’s gone through. I have Alex Seelig’s face in tennis. I have all

that. You're going through the process of those conversations, and those faces pop up constantly. But you got to think of what's right for society."

- Smith acknowledged that a potential cancellation of spring practice would have an impact on the football team's preparation for the season, but he's confident in the coaches and strength and conditioning staff's ability to get them prepared regardless of what happens. He said he hasn't really thought much about the competitive-balance aspect yet.
- On Ryan Day's schedule: "I don't know what his day-to-day schedule will be like." He said he'll continue to communicate with his coaches, and they'll continue to communicate with their players, probably on a daily basis, knowing them.
- Smith said Ohio State was prepared to put its own policies in place to suspend spring practices and other organized team activities if the Big Ten didn't, so he's glad the conference came together so everyone's on the same page.
- On how this compares to Sept. 11, 2001: "Very different. I didn't think of it until someone mentioned it this morning in passing." He said this is such an unknown.
- He said those living off-campus have the option of living in their apartment or moving back home. However, they won't have access to facilities.
- On whether Ohio State's decision to close athletic facilities was its own: "It was a decision we made on our own." He said they have already "disease-bombed" the Woody Hayes Athletic Center to kill bacteria. The school didn't want to "encourage any volunteer group activities."
- He said the sports psychology offices are still open for student-athletes. They are still working, and the administration emphasized to coaches that those are still available.

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