

Ohio State Athletic Director Gene Smith Confident Jake Diebler Can Thrive In Interim Role



Speaking in front of the media on Wednesday just hours after firing now-former head men's basketball coach Chris Holtmann, Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith said he felt a change in leadership was needed in order to best bring out the talents and abilities of the young men on the Buckeyes' roster.

That change will come with the elevation of Jake Diebler to interim head coach for the remainder of the 2023-24 season, who previously had served as Holtmann's associate head coach since the 2021-22 campaign after spending his first three seasons as an assistant coach with the program.

Although this is the first time Diebler is officially tasked with leading a team in his 14 years in coaching — a period that also includes an assistant coaching stint with Valparaiso from 2012-2013 and a period as Ohio State's video coordinator from 2014-2016 — Smith said he is confident in the 37-year-old's ability to guide the Buckeyes through the rest of the season on the court, while also helping his players get through a time of great change within the program.

"I think he's a very good coach," Smith said. "I think he's going to demonstrate, for the kids, just that at the end of the day, we need to keep fighting all the way through. And he's going to do that. So I feel good about it."

Smith, who said that he will do his best to help Diebler through this transition, acknowledged that this may be a difficult situation for the longtime assistant to take on, given that he will not only have to find the best way to lead the program with six games left in the regular season, but also lead a group of young players who could be emotionally affected by the late-season coaching change.

Despite these concerns, Smith said he feels Diebler possesses the right temperament to handle these added responsibilities and that he has been put in the best situation to succeed given the circumstances, as he has four full days to adjust to the new role before the team takes the floor at home

against No. 2 Purdue on Sunday.

"I am so appreciative that Jake Diebler has stepped up and accepted the challenge. That's not easy. I hope you guys appreciate that. What he's doing is not easy. And so my heart is with him to a great degree. But we have a little runway. We have days between now and Sunday where you have time to accept the emotions of this moment and adjust and begin to coach our kids.

"There are some games where you only have two-and-a-half days to recover...So the runway, for him, is the best that it could possibly be when you're this deep in the season. So we're so appreciative of him just stepping off and being a warrior and taking this on."

While Diebler has yet to offer his first comments on the firing and his new role, he did give some insight on his head-coaching philosophy when he filled in for the flu-ridden Holtmann during Ohio State's Dec. 21 win over New Orleans, a game in which the Buckeyes won 78-36 and held the Privateers to just 25.0 percent shooting from the field. This was one of just two times Diebler filled in as acting head coach for Holtmann during his tenure, the second being on Jan. 9, 2022, when he led Ohio State to a 95-87 win at Value City Arena after the former head coach contracted COVID-19.

"We tried to keep things mostly the same," Diebler said after defeating New Orleans. "People probably couldn't notice it a great deal, but there's real chemistry within our staff. For me, that gave me great comfort. I felt like things flowed really well. We tried to be really organized in timeouts and I felt like, and I think our guys felt like, it was kind of seamless."

Diebler will speak to the media for the first time since Holtmann's firing on Friday afternoon.