

Ohio State Athletic Director Gene Smith Made Decision To Fire Chris Holtmann, Ross Bjork To Lead Head Coaching Search



Ohio State's decision to fire head men's basketball coach Chris Holtmann on Wednesday came at a time of massive change for the university at both the academic and athletic level, with athletic director Gene Smith handing over the reins after 19 years of service to Ross Bjork on July 1, 2023 — with Bjork joining Smith as an advisor on March 1 — and William "Ted" Carter beginning his tenure as Ohio State's president on Jan. 1.

Despite the major upheaval in university leadership, Smith was clear with his remarks regarding who led the decision to relieve Holtmann of his duties after seven years leading the Buckeyes, with the longtime athletic director telling the media on Wednesday that while he talked to Bjork about the issue, it was ultimately his decision to make a change.

"I talked to him a lot, but it was my decision," Smith said. "I told him what I was going to do. It wasn't like, 'What do you think?'"

"I've had good communications with Ross along the way here about this issue and shared with him along the way the decision that had to be made," he added. "We talked about the process moving forward, and I'll help him along the way."

Smith, who will retire from his post on June 30, effective immediately, said that he also spoke with Carter regarding this issue, where he explained to him the reasoning behind why he wanted to part ways with Holtmann. He added that Ohio State's new leader was stern in his assessment of the situation and was supportive of Smith's decision to make a change in leadership, an agreement between both academic and athletic leadership that the longtime administrator said he appreciated.

"President Carter is unbelievable," Smith said. "Obviously because of his athletic background and his understanding of our space, conversations are pretty straightforward and frank. And he's a decision-maker, which I like — there's no gray area. And so he agreed, he supported and we made the decision."

While Smith did the heavy lifting regarding the decision to terminate Holtmann's contract — which will owe the school \$12.8 million in buyout money to pay Holtmann his remaining salary — he said that the ensuing search for a new men's basketball coach will be led by Bjork, with Smith providing support and guidance if necessary. Smith also said he will offer support to associate head coach Jake Diebler and his staff as they navigate a significant change in their program, with Bjork also chipping in once he officially arrives as an advisor to Smith in March.

"Obviously, we still have the remainder of the season (left), which I'm going to help Jake with and help navigate," Smith said. "And then when Ross gets here, as he shares with me his plan for the search, I'll be there to assist him and be very much a part of it, (with) conversations and background information, things of that nature."

"I'm going to all in, I'm going to be all in with Ross," Smith said. "I'm going to be honest, forthright, authentic and genuine. I'm going to tell him that we need to find someone that has the X's and O's and those talents and skills, but they have to fit our values, they have to fit our culture. So I'll be involved. It'll be heavy."

While Bjork has yet to offer his comments on Holtmann's firing and the ensuing coaching search, Smith said that he wants to see his predecessor vastly improve the program and return it to its winning ways. One way he thinks Bjork can do that is by injecting more energy and life into the program, one which has seen an increasing lack of fan enthusiasm in recent years, with Value City Arena eclipsing record-low attendance in each of the last two seasons.

While Smith pushed back on the claim that the program has "died on the vine," he admitted that a lot needs to be fixed in order for Ohio State to return to national prominence, something he thinks Bjork is capable of accomplishing during his tenure.

"There are going to be games throughout the year where you're only going to have 8,000-10,000 fans in attendance," Smith said. "The reality is that's going to happen. It happened during Thad Matta's years, there were 8,000 and 10,000 fans periodically throughout the season."

"However, there has to be six, seven or eight games where we're close to that sellout — or at the sellout. We haven't had that. It hasn't died on the vine. At the end of the day, we need to get better, we need to win. And my advice to Ross is simple: Product, Place, Price. That's marketing. You have to win. You have to win."