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"For The Buckeye Fan Who Needs To Know More"

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A Year To Remember

Ohio State Boasts Plenty Of Success, Championships

By JEFF SVOBODA
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

When Gene Smith met with BSB last summer to discuss an athletics year in which Ohio State finished a program-worst 25th in the annual standings of the Directors' Cup, he said he expected a turnaround a year later.

Clearly, the Ohio State athletics director knew what he was talking about.

Highlighted by football's magical run to the first-ever College Football Playoff title behind Urban Meyer, OSU won a school-record five national championships during the 2014-15 season and finished seventh in the Directors' Cup standings, earning its fifth top-10 standing in the past seven years.

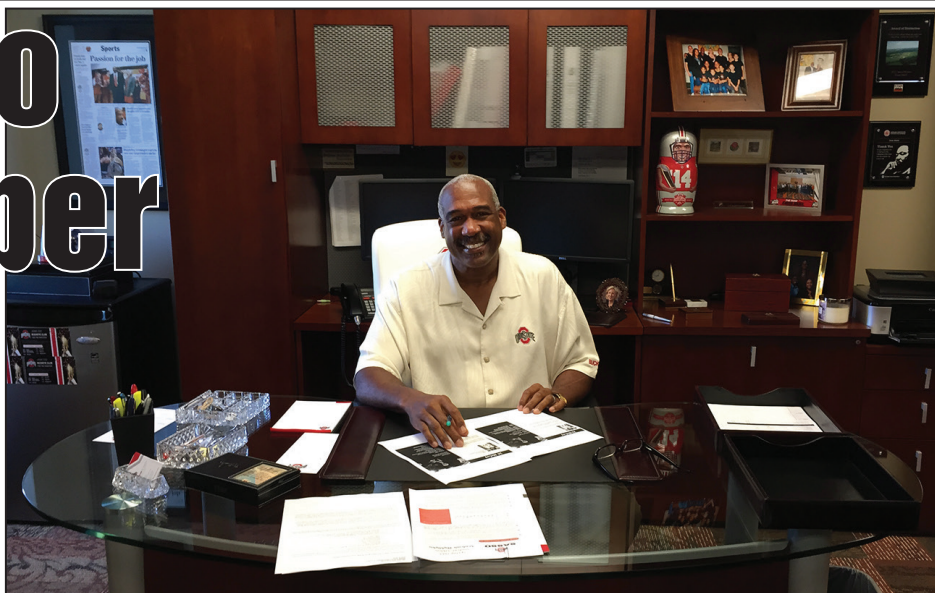
So it's no wonder Smith was all smiles as he met with BSB in his office in late June. Reflecting on a season in which the Buckeyes won titles not just in football but wrestling, pistol, synchronized swimming and rowing, Smith was more than happy to talk about what led to that all of that success as well as the major changes that are continuing in the college athletics landscape.

Smith is a major player in those discussions, and the fruits of that labor in the college athletics industry are starting to become clear. Cost of attendance stipends will be implemented this season, with more structural changes on the way, and lawsuits such as the Ed O'Bannon case continue to loom as potential major agents of change on the collegiate sports landscape.

While Smith handles those discussions, he also runs an athletics department that boasts 36 sports and is successful in many of them. Such sports as fencing, men's tennis and women's volleyball joined the championship squads in scoring big points in the Directors' Cup standings, while such sports as baseball, women's tennis, women's basketball and track and field are rising in the eyes of the AD.

The following is a partial transcript of the conversation in his office as well as one from earlier in June after the rowing team won its national championship.

BSB: What does winning five national titles say about Ohio State's athletics program?



JEFF SVOBODA

GOOD TIMES – Ohio State athletics director Gene Smith had plenty to smile about during an academic year that saw five Buckeye teams take home national championships.

Smith: "I think we have good leadership in our coaches. We have unbelievable support from the university community and Buckeye Nation, and we're really focused and make sure that all of our coaches work together and share their talents and skills to create winning programs. It's really a culture thing that all of our student-athletes and coaches have bought into competing at that championship level, and we have the support in place to help them do that."

THE INTERVIEW ISSUE
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BSB: Last year, you said you expected a rebound season in the Directors' Cup, and that's what happened. How did you see that coming?

Smith: "It's what we do as sports administrators. We can look at the teams, see what is coming back, understand their schedules. ... We could look at each team and see. I'm excited for track next year. They accomplished so much this year. The women won the indoor (Big Ten title) and were close to winning the outdoor, and the men were so close to finishing right there in the outdoor. I can go through almost every team – women's basketball, holy smokes. I start to think about if they're fortunate enough to stay healthy and execute, we can see where they have a chance to have a pretty exciting year."

BSB: This is what it's supposed to be at Ohio State in your eyes, right?

Smith: "It is. Exactly right. This is the way it's supposed to be. Our challenge is to sustain it. Each year will bring something different, the challenge will be different – but our

leaders as coaches, how do they adjust to whatever that new challenge is? We have to help our leadership and our coaches have the tools to adjust so that our student-athletes have a chance.

"We have great coaches. They all work well together. I really like how our coaches are sharing ideas and different tactics that they use in recruiting and different things, so we have a pretty cohesive group of people who are very talented and skilled. Recruiting has been phenomenal for all of our sports.

"I feel good about things. We just had a great year, obviously. Academically, we're doing great. Behaviorally, our issues are down because of how well our coaches are creating the cultures on their teams, so their kids are learning respect and how to strengthen their character a lot better. We're in a good place. It's really fun."

BSB: You've put a lot of emphasis on programs for student-athletes outside of the classroom in recent years where you're trying to establish a functional education for them.

Smith: "That's right. We're creating that culture and environment where all of our student-athletes understand the importance of internships, résumé writing, interviewing skills, all those things. They all bought in. The upperclassmen are teaching the underclassmen the importance of being engaged in those programs. We have our Bucks Go Pro program – we're north of 20 interns just in the athletics department and some of the areas around us. We're sending kids to different parts of the world with our study abroad program. It's working really well, and that's the important thing is getting the buy-in within the student-athlete culture."

BSB: Many of these are fairly new programs. Would you say you're a step ahead of a lot of schools in that regard?

Smith: "Bucks Go Pro is maybe three or four years old, and it's grown. We've had mandatory résumé writing for a long time, but we never really had the structure with it, the interview teaching and the career fairs. Urban did his own career fair and invited all the other sports. We also had a cou-

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Time Demands Of Student-Athletes Are Next Challenge

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ple of other career fairs throughout the year. Now (assistant director of career management) Latoya Farris is taking that to another iteration, so she's going to take a look at those majoring in marketing and we'll have a mini career fair of about maybe 10 to 12 firms that are marketing firms for those marketing students. It'll be focused on what they want to do business in, so now we're operating on another level, which is really cool.

"To me, that's the stuff that we're all about. We ended up with about 220 graduates, and there were 44 that had not gotten jobs or doing postgraduate work and that was a few weeks ago. Hopefully by now our numbers have shrunk."

BSB: That's better than the average student population.

Smith: "Much better. That includes guys who are going pro and a lot are going to get their master's, which is a big part of what we do is making sure they apply for postgraduate scholarship money. It's working. It's great."

BSB: Cost of attendance stipends are now in place for scholarship athletes. How do you make the money work?

Smith: "We did an estimate a couple of years ago when we saw this thing possibly coming. We did an estimate based upon our scholarships at the time and what our normal split is out-of-state vs. in-state, and that's how we came up with the \$1.65 million that we have in place this fall. We're not as challenged as many of the other schools are nationally. I think that's going to a challenge across the country, but it's the right thing to do."

"There's some nuance in management of that based up on whether the athlete is getting a Pell Grant, whether they're getting some academic money. There are a whole lot of things you have to manage around that with the financial aid office, but it's a good thing. Kids are getting more money in their pocket. Freshmen won't know a difference, but the returning athletes will know the difference. I think it's going to work fine."

BSB: According to federally published figures, Ohio State is middle of the pack in the Big Ten as far as the actual value of that cost of attendance stipend. There have been stories where some schools have a higher number and that could be a recruiting advantage. Is that something you're aware of?

Smith: "I think we're going to have to watch that down the road. I just read something about the SEC and Auburn is at like \$5,600 and Alabama is like us at \$2,000-something. So I think you are going to see that down the road. I don't know if it's going to have the impact right away. I think people are still trying to figure that out. You can't go out and say, 'Hey, kids, you're going to get this amount of money,' because it really depends on some things about them. I think eventually coaches will learn that and it could become a recruiting advantage, but for us you have other assets. You look at Columbus and the Fortune 500 companies that we have, and we work with student-athletes to ultimately help them get jobs and things of that nature. A lot of schools don't do what we do."

"Well make sure our coaches have their recruiting toolbox to combat that when they're in that situation, allow them to show somebody that, 'OK, right, you may get another \$450 at that school, but look at what we have here in Columbus, Ohio, and what

we do for you.' Kids are impressionable, but you have to figure out how to use those assets and sell the parents. Eventually maybe a couple of years from now once people really understand it, the money might become a factor. I don't think it's going to become a factor initially because people don't really understand it yet."

BSB: What is the next frontier when it comes to initiatives to promote student-athlete welfare at the NCAA level?

Smith: "I think the biggest decision is going to be around time demands and looking at the hours student-athletes put into their sports. I think the academic piece is going to be an issue because at a lot of schools, the gap (between student-athletes and the general population) is getting bigger, and how do we handle the student-athletes who are getting admitted who are underprepared? I think that's going to be a top issue."

"The O'Bannon case, we're in appeal right now. Technically, if it's not overturned, it gets implemented Aug. 1 of this year. Even if the appeal is lost, which I'd be surprised, we're going to need direction because the judge's ruling wasn't really clear. There are a lot of things that have to be clarified for us on how to implement things. Hopefully it's overturned. If it's not, then that's going to be a huge issue."

BSB: Do you think about that specific case much?

Smith: "No, I don't worry about the O'Bannon one. We know that the appeal has a good chance, but if it doesn't get overturned, we have a long time before they can actually be implemented because there are so many uncertainties in the judge's ruling. The biggest one is Title IX, so there are a lot of things that we would have to get direction from our conference, the NCAA, the Department of Education for us to even begin to implement something. So I don't worry about that one much. I'm really more focused on making sure that the new structure engages our coaches and our practitioners in talking about time demands, talking about the academic issues, and I think those are the two this year and we'll go from there."

BSB: Can the toothpaste be put back in the tube as far as time demands?

Smith: "It's going to be hard because I think it has to be done in a federated way by each sport. Every sport doesn't have that problem. Urban and I talked about football, and he and I agree that for football the first thing that comes to our mind is that January/early February time frame, it almost seems there ought to be a shutdown period. You go through your season, and we have a large number of teams going to bowls because there's so many bowls, so if you just say, 'Jan. X to Feb. X, it's shut down.' Then what you do to start back up and get ready for spring ball is defined within the calendar."

"I don't worry as much about the summertime. There are probably some different thoughts from people about football, but we have athletes doing internships, taking six credit hours and working out. That's what you did back in the day. It was just the working out was on your own back in the day, but you still worked (a job), you took six to eight credit hours and you worked out. It really is the same model, so I worry more about that January/early February time frame. We came back from the national championship game, and two weeks later we were working out."

"But for tennis, I have to rely on the tennis industry to tell me what that means because

if you're a tennis athlete, you want to play every day. It's a different deal. Each sport is going to be different. In the new structure, we're doing that. There is a committee on student-athlete welfare that will be discussing that in their meetings and coming up with strategy to get feedback and deal with that."

BSB: Another thing that was part of that discussion was freshman ineligibility. Was that just a trial balloon by the Big Ten?

Smith: "Right. We wanted to throw it out there. There are people that believe in it, but it was more to get the discussion going on around the academic piece and on the time demand issue to get people talking. I like that we got it out there. I like that Jim Delany sent it to a lot of different deep thinkers and influencers – the Knight Commission, the Drake Commission – to get feedback during the summer. Some people believe in it. I don't, but I like the fact that we're talking about it."

BSB: You've implemented a lot of things at Ohio State the last couple of years. What's the next thing on your docket?

Smith: "The biggest things now are facility oriented. One is the (new court sports) arena, so our goal is to finish fund-raising for that year and get started on construction next year. Then there is the student-athlete development center, which is a weight room, training room, locker rooms and offices for our Olympic coaches. We'd like to finish fund-raising on that this year and get started next year. And then the wrestling practice facility. Those three are probably my biggest drivers right now, working with our development team and our fund-raising and getting those things done."

"The other thing is I want to keep our team – our administrators and our support staff and everyone – continuing to grow. Using Urban as an example, he's making sure that our (football) team doesn't get complacent. I do the same thing every year. We can't get complacent. We need to constantly grow and learn and get better. Like the social media world, we need to make sure we stay on top of that and be a leader in that industry, which we are in the collegiate market, so we're constantly on that. But our biggest priority is those facilities. We have to get those done."

BSB: It seems like there haven't been as many major facilities projects the past few years.

Smith: "We've had a lot of those projects that people would define as smaller, but we've added the lights in the stadium, we have the new seats in there. We got the three new fields – the indoor field, the outdoor field and the stadium field. We have a lot of projects upcoming. We have to replace the roof on the Woody Hayes Athletic Center in 2017. We're going to replace that entire thing. We have the new scoreboards in some of our facilities and the video infrastructure. We have some things done, but the big deals like I was just talking about, we have to get those done. That's what our team is really focused on. We're going to do a renovation for the Schott – concourse improvements, concession stand improvements, things of that nature. It's not sexy, so to speak, but will provide better service for our fans. We'll do that hopefully next year, too. That will be a longer term project because you have to work around all the events."

BSB: What has been the feedback for the new plan in 2016 as far as seating for football season tickets? We've heard

from some fans who have been upset with the point system and potentially losing the seats they've had for a long time.

Smith: "The reality is we've had a points system in place for years, so technically your seating is based upon your points, and we have been doing that in the ticket office working with the development office. With your points, this is where you should be seated. But over the years, I can't remember when that was implemented, but we have some improprieties in the system."

"One of our challenges is bringing the integrity back to it, making sure that if that's what we're going to do, it's going to be based upon your points. We've met with I don't know how many people that we're seating inappropriately, and we're allowing them to understand what they need to do to get their points up. And then the other thing is taking advantage of the technology and allowing you to do what you want to do. You'll be able to go to the website and pick your seats."

"The thing that people are probably most upset with is that, 'Wait a minute, I've had these seats for years.' You're right, but the reality is you should be seated based upon the points system. We did it for faculty and staff last year, and it worked perfectly. We had one glitch with a gentleman in Europe because his computer couldn't make it work. But there will be trepidation and some people will be upset because they have been inappropriately seated based upon their points."

BSB: We've also heard some fans are not happy with the new prices for parking near the stadium established by CampusParc. Some people are feeling the big-business crunch.

Smith: "It's true. We went to CampusParc three years ago and you have that funding the overall university received from CampusParc in order to run that, which went to scholarships and research and things of that nature, which was huge for the institution. That changed the model. It really did. So there's no question when that happened, we received a few complaints. But it's a business change, and that's the hard part."

"I don't disagree with those feelings. We see it in life in everything we deal with. Change is hard, so that's why for the seat selection process I said, 'Hey, it's a two-year window.' We're not going to announce it and implement it the next year. So all of last year, it's education, education, education."

"There are a lot of people who knew their points. I went into it thinking nobody knew their points. A lot of people knew their points, so our whole deal was education, education, education and allowing people to have time to make the decision of what they wanted to do or not do. We go into it and you're going to have some people upset, but the system is clean. It's not, 'You have those seats because the athletics director said you could have those seats.' That's what we have. We have deals in there from years ago. I can't have you sitting in the club section or whatever because somebody did a deal for you 13 years ago and I'm over here and I'm abiding by the points system that is in place. We're sitting here talking and I'm like, 'How did you get these seats?' That's what we had."

"We said, 'Look, we have to clean this up,' but to clean it up we had to take our time and then we needed to take advantage of the technology that a lot of schools were using. We are totally behind in what we're getting ready to implement. We're ahead in a lot of things, but this one, we are behind."