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"For The Buckeye Fan Who Needs To Know More"

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The Cutting Edge

Ohio State Looks To Lead In College Athletics

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Buckeye Sports Bulletin Associate Editor

The 2014-15 athletic year was a banner year for Ohio State as the program won a school-record five national championships. In some ways, the following year was even better.

No, the Buckeyes didn't win five national titles, but Ohio State did finish the year second in the Learfield Directors' Cup with 1306.0 points, OSU's best total in the 23-year history of the award which honors an athletic department for success across all sports.

The success of the department was reflected in a pair of awards received by Gene Smith. The Ohio State athletic director was honored with the Sports Business Journal Athletic Director of the Year award, and he received the Corbett Award – the highest honor in collegiate athletics – as awarded by the National Association of Collegiate Athletic Directors.

The big year for Ohio State wasn't limited to on-field results as the athletic department moved forward with the Covelli Multi-Sport Arena as a replacement venue for sports currently competing in St. John Arena, announced renovations for Ohio Stadium and expanded beer sales to all of the Horseshoe for the 2016 football season.

Smith met with BSB prior to a late June trip to Indianapolis for NCAA meetings and discussed the success of the athletic department, Ohio State facility changes and more.

BSB: The athletic department has been very successful in each of the last two academic years. This year there weren't as many titles, but it's the best Directors' Cup finish in program history. Which year do you view as more successful, and which are you more proud of?

Smith: "We just had more sports across the board that finished in the top 10 or finished higher in the national rankings.

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FILE PHOTO

BUCKEYE LEADER – Ohio State's Gene Smith was named the Sports Business Journal Athletic Director of the Year and given the Corbett Award for his work with Buckeye athletics.

That's where you get your points in the Directors' Cup. The national championships bring you the 100 points, but we had in the aggregate just more sports perform better across the board – didn't necessarily win the national championship but highly ranked. Our coaches did a great job, and our student-athletes performed well.

"Spring sports performed well. I wish we could have had lacrosse in there a little bit. That might have given us a chance to knock off Stanford, but this is as close as we've come. So I'm proud of our guys.

"The Directors' Cup does not define our year. It's really when you look at the individual sports' performances. Volleyball won an unbelievable national championship. I'm so happy for (coach) Pete Hanson and I look at that sport and I look at Pete's tenure here, that was so cool for that particular sport compared to other national championships that may have happened the year before. I kind of look at them individually. Look at baseball – didn't win the regular season but they won the (Big Ten) tournament. At the end you sort of stop and look at the Directors' Cup, but I look at the sports individually."

BSB: Stanford has now won the Directors' Cup for 22 consecutive years. What will it take to catch them?

Smith: "I think it's an overall performance by as many sports as possible. We were close this year. Literally had we had a few more sports get in and have chances to advance we would have been a lot closer. You need an overall year like they have every year. They have 36 sports and they perform extremely well in the Olympic sports all the way through the spring. We had a great fall and winter. Even though wrestling didn't win the national championship they got third and got a lot of points, then your spring sports usually we get lacrosse in, usually our track finishes higher.

"It's going to take – North Carolina is the only other one that has ever won it, we have to have an overall performance. You're not cognizant throughout the year about chasing the Directors' Cup. You have to focus on the individual sports winning championships, and then at the end we say, 'OK, where are we?'"

**THE
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St. John Arena To Be Around For 'Some Time'

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BSB: You were honored with the Sports Business Journal Athletic Director of the Year award and became the first sitting athletic director to win the NACDA's Corbett Award. What do those honors mean to you?

Smith: "It's the entire department. It says a lot about the people that I am fortunate enough to work with every day and how hard they work. I've never been one to strive for individual awards, but they're recognitions for the team. I have great people, they do a lot. (The SBJ honor) meant a lot to me because I've won it before. It's the second one and that validates what we do in the industry. The Corbett Award was more meaningful for me because it was voted by my peers. That one meant the most to me."

"It's more about the fact that I have a great team."

BSB: You've made some strong hires in your time at Ohio State – Urban Meyer, Tom Ryan, Kevin McGuff. Are you more proud of a hire like Urban Meyer – a no-brainer home run – or a hire like Ryan or McGuff who were a little under the radar?

Smith: "I'm proud of them all, I really am. There's so many of them. It validates our process. I don't make these hires alone. It validates how we evaluate talent and skill and the process that we go through to get inclusive feedback from our team of people. I ultimately have to make the decision, but it just validates our process that our criteria is strong and our ability to assess talent and skill is strong. When you look across the board, this is the best group in my 31 years, best group of coaches that I've been fortunate to work with all the way across the board."

BSB: Where is the department at with the Covelli multisport arena, and how much concern is there over the cost overruns?

Smith: "It was a shock to us, the numbers. We have a team that is doing an assessment of those numbers, exactly where we are going to place the facility – we're re-evaluating that – so hopefully by the end of the year we'll have our assessment done and where we are going to put it."

"We're going to raise the dollars. We fund all our projects, so I'm not concerned about that. We'll have the money in place. For us it's more about, do we have the facility in the right place? Are they properly designed to meet our needs? And when we got the design teams on board some of the things emerged about our original planning, our original plans were from 2012 and we didn't do as good a job with our programming of the facilities as we should have in 2012. Then obviously the construction costs went off the chain. It caused us to pause and think about our location because Covelli was originally on the corner by Sports Medicine on Ackerman Road. Now we're looking at a different location. We'll break ground in



FILE PHOTO

GOING NOWHERE – Historic St. John Arena is likely to stay standing for the time being after originally being set for demolition.

2017. We're a year behind but that's not a big concern for us."

BSB: What locations are now under consideration for the venue?

Smith: "We're looking at the Buckeye Village area just north of the Woody Hayes, that's the primary one. We're also looking at over by the St. John site but I don't think it's going to be viable. So we are probably going to end up in that area, unless we stay on the corner which is still a viable option. To me it's not the best option at this time."

BSB: What feedback have you gotten in relation to the Covelli construction and moving sports out of St. John?

Smith: "The passion around St. John is huge. Originally, I don't even remember what year it was we started talking about this, there were people concerned about losing St. John, obviously. But once you sit down and talk about the economics of St.

John, they get it. And then St. John is going to be there for some time because we can't move it until we replace it and replace the track facility at the French Field House and the ice rink because all the mechanicals for St. John, the French Field House and the ice rink are connected through St. John. I'll be gone, that's years down the road, but that is where we received the most trepidation."

BSB: Sticking with facilities, attendance at the Schottenstein Center for the basketball team was the lowest since the 1997-98 season. Is that a product of the lack of success on the court, or is there a bigger concern there?

Smith: "I think that's a product of performance. I think in the end we have a lot of things that we can improve on relative to parking and access and the fan experience in the arena. You have to constantly look at how you make it more exciting, and we obvi-



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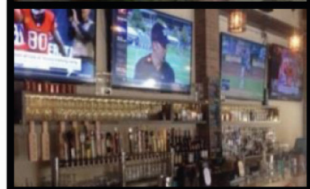
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THE INTERVIEW ISSUE: GENE SMITH

ously continue to do that. We've made some changes. But in the end you've got to win. It comes down to that.

"We still average north of 12,000 fans, and most places with 12,000 fans you are really happy. Our challenge is we've set a standard that is somewhere north of 15,000 when you look at it. We've had some 16,000 years, but realistically it's that 15,000 to 16,000, that's who we are. You're going to periodically sell out to 19,000 when you're doing extremely well and playing a team that is up there, but you're not going to sell that place out every night. I don't have that expectation, never have. But it comes down to we've got to win. We've got to have some type of performance that people can rally around."

BSB: Moving on to Ohio Stadium, you've expanded beer sales to the entire stadium for the upcoming season. What about last season's pilot program made you confident in the extension of the program?

Smith: "The first one was Levy, our concessionaire, they've done a lot of pro facilities, and watching them operate and how they manage things and they kept talking about what they would do throughout the stadium as we went through that process. The conversations with the athletic council, the studies that the Substance Abuse and Alcohol institute did, talking with Texas, Maryland and Minnesota and those schools that are Power 5 schools in particular Texas, we felt comfortable we could handle it with a Levy-type of concessionaire because they are good at it."

"Then we talked about deployment with our ushers and security to make sure we don't have some kind of thing like an NFL team and an unruly environment. I think we can do it. I never thought we'd be here, I really didn't, but it's expanding across the country and it's a good service to our customers. We'll see where it goes."

BSB: Sticking with football, how was the change in ticket policy and ticket selection for football games received?

Smith: "We had some initial people who had concerns, some individual people who were not happy with their seat selection, but largely, over 90-something percent, no issues. We needed to bring back the integrity to the point system that we had in place. It was really more about allowing you based upon your points to select where you want to be in the stadium. It's just like if you go on airlines and pull up the seat selection and boom, you pick your seat. So no longer do we have our ticket people in the back picking seats and people wondering how did I get here, you're doing it yourself. We're empowering you based on your priority to pick your place. There were obviously some people who were upset because they didn't get the seats that they were in before, but that's because someone else had a higher priority and they had an opportunity to pick those seats. It worked, largely successful."

BSB: What prompted the decision to move forward with the upcoming stadium renovations?

Smith: "A couple of things. The most important thing with that deal was the concrete restoration project. We started that a while back, made significant investments, but you have to think about the concrete in that stadium and ensuring that we maintain the integrity of that concrete. Once you have a breach in that concrete and it begins to crack and we get all those little porous holes in there. That was the biggest piece."

"The loge seats were an idea. We've been around the country and seen them

in different places, so we decided that in this area that we had obstructed view seats and it's largely single game ticket holders we decided that was a good spot to try and create a different experience for a different group of people. We're constantly thinking about the demographics of our fans and we think we have a group of people that are interested in not having a suite, they would prefer not to sit totally outside and they would like to have access to the Huntington Club. That's what those seats will provide. It's kind of something that we are frankly a little behind on. A number of schools have it."

"Then we needed to expand the university suite. We needed to find a way to make that more functional for university advancement and all the things they do for raising dollars. That redesign is to make that area much more functional."

BSB: In terms of the team on the field, are you a little surprised with how quickly Meyer got things rolling at Ohio State?

Smith: "I was surprised at the first year when he took over. I'm not surprised after that. We all have to keep in mind he didn't inherit a program that was down. Jim Tressel was one of our best ever, so we were winning and we had great athletes. His plan that he brought in enhanced what we had in place and took it to another level."

"It's kind of what I anticipated - he's a championship coach and we have great athletes. I didn't think we'd win the national championship. If I had that crystal ball we'd be doing something different. But you thought with his talent he'd eventually get one, and we got one probably a year earlier than we thought he would. He's a professional and he's at the top of his game. Great staff, we talk about his staff all the time - what do we need to do to help each one of them get better and be the best they can be. We've got a great group."

BSB: Speaking of the staff, how cognizant do you have to be of assistant salaries and keeping Ohio State's competitive nationally?

Smith: "Urban and I talk about it every year, once a year when we get to raise time. You have to look at not just their base but their aggregate compensation. We don't look at the SEC a whole lot because you can't figure that market out. Here we talk about where we should be in the Big Ten first and then we look at national. Urban makes a recommendation and I may challenge him here and there and we end up with a recommendation to our president. I feel good about where we are. We do have to keep an eye on where things are nationally because we should be in the top of the Big Ten and then nationally we just have to figure that out. It's a little strange nationally. The Pac-12, the Big 12, we kind of align in there. It's the SEC that seems a little helter skelter."

BSB: Some of your comments about holding spring practice outside of Ohio got a lot of attention as a perceived shot at Michigan and resulted in a back-and-forth between the programs. So long as it's good natured, can that type of exchange be good for college athletics?

Smith: "I think it's good for college football. (Jim Harbaugh) is a good coach, he knows what he's doing and he's stretching the envelope as far as it can go with the new rules. They're clean. He's a clean coach and they're a clean program. It's competition at its highest level. You have to look at if you want to do that many satellite camps. I disagree with the philosophy point blank. I want

to change that because we need our coaches at home as opposed to running all around the country to these little one-day deals. I think for the athlete it's better to limit that. I think we ought to limit it."

"It's a competitive field and he's taken advantage of the rules the way they are and driving that ship hard. It's good for college football and it reveals some things that we need to pause and look at."

BSB: Speaking of NCAA changes, and there have been some notable ones recently, are there any rules you would like to see revised?

Smith: "I look more in the football area, like we were talking with satellite camps. I think it's a bigger issue. How do we make July a total dead period so that our coaches stay home and there is no recruiting? How do we create windows of time for our coaches to be here for our athletes? There's a subcommittee looking at that."

"I'm worried about transfers. That's mostly with basketball. I don't really have the answer on that, but there is a group looking at that and I'm looking forward to that study."

"The other thing we're looking at is time management, and we're looking at how much free time athletes have and then defining what is athletic time and what is their time. Those are ones that are probably at the top of the pyramid for me."

"Academically I like where we are and I don't think we have to do anything massive, but just find tweaks that make sure we stay on this trajectory we're on with graduation rates all across the country. I feel pretty good about where we are largely."

BSB: You've always tried to ensure that Ohio State remains on the cutting edge of athletics. With that in mind, what's next?

Smith: "It's so many different things. This digital world, my mind is now on TV and all the viewership and the time slots for games. I'm really into the ratings now. You look at basketball last year overall and the ratings were down and some of that is cord cutting, some of that is just the digital world."

"I want to make sure that in our venues first and foremost we are creating the greatest experience that we can for our fans. That's why we are studying right now - where should we have WiFi in the stadium?"

Not necessarily the entire stadium because you don't need it in the entire stadium, but where do you need it?

"The other piece is more about TV time slots. We impacted people when we did more night games, and that was hard for me. There's an older demographic in a two-hour away radius that historically would drive down for our 12 o'clock or even our 3:30 games, but the night games they won't do it. That hurts, that's painful for me. But at the same time that's the prime-time slot we needed to be in so I shifted there. I think we just need to keep looking at that."

"The other thing is, I sent the (basketball) operations team up to the Cavs and to the Final Four, and looking at the technology that they have in those arenas, it's phenomenal. So we're looking at that in the Schott. How do we bring the floor to life with the visuals and your pregame, halftime? We're looking at all those things. Fan experience is critical. The beer is a perfect example. That's something I was resistant to and we needed to jump in. I was wrong. I think we need to constantly do those type of things."

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