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Setting The Standard

OSU Athletics Continues To Lead On, Off The Field

By TIM MOODY
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

The 2017-18 academic year was another resounding success for Ohio State athletics, both on and off the field of play.

The year included a resurgence from the men's basketball team under new head coach Chris Holtmann, another Big Ten title in football and various other successful seasons. It also marked the conclusion of Ohio State careers for some of the school's best athletes – most notably quarterback J.T. Barrett, women's basketball star Kelsey Mitchell and champion wrestler Kyle Snyder.

Off the field, the Buckeyes set new records for academic honors once again, finishing the season with the most Academic All-Big Ten selections in school history. The academic side has always been a focal point for athletic director Gene Smith, who has spearheaded the charge to make Ohio State athletics a success in all facets since he took over the job in 2005.

Smith sat down for his annual Interview Issue session with BSB in June to chronicle the past year at Ohio State and take a look ahead at things to come.

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JOSH WINSLOW

FOCUSED – Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith has overseen progress on the field, in the classroom and around the Buckeyes' vast athletic complex.

this past year that are doing that which is a different thing for us that we're getting used to. It's cool, the culture is where we wanted to be. Academically, a great year."

BSB: Since you mentioned the degree completion program, what does OSU do to promote that when athletes are first getting here to know that they'll have that option if they do pursue another path?

Smith: "We talk to them as they leave. (Former football captain) Christian Bryant, who just completed, when he left, we kind of – there's a gentleman by the name of John Macko in our student-athlete support operation. That's his responsibility to work with the individual sports to make sure Christian Bryant understands, 'Hey, this is what you need to complete. Go chase the dream.' Which they're doing. Then, we're trying to stay in touch. Some of them can take courses online from where they are but, ultimately, many of them have to come back and sit in a classroom to finish. It's really, we kind of keep track of them at the moment that they get ready to go chase the dream."

"Then, some of them, they get that opportunity to just keep playing for quite some time. Every now and then we'll see them come back to a game or something, and then, we'll whisper in their ear. I don't know if Joey Bosa will ever come back, (laughs) but we'll always whisper in his ear and see how it goes. It's just more when they leave, we tell them, 'You need X number of credit hours. You need to keep that in mind.' Then, we stay in touch with them."

BSB: There are a few athletes I wanted to ask you about in particular – a couple of them have their pictures right out here on the wall outside your office. Kyle Snyder, Kelsey Mitchell and J.T. Barrett all wrapped up their careers this year. What was it like to watch them over the past four or five years, especially Kyle and Kelsey competing for Ohio State and internationally as well?

Smith: "It's unbelievable. I tell recruits and their families when you look at Ohio State, you come to Ohio State, you need to really, hopefully, get a chance to see other sports because you're going to probably see the top of the pyramid athletes in a particular sport. A Kyle Snyder, a gold medal winner, comes back to finish his degree. While you're here, you need to go see him. Those athletes, a Kelsey Mitchell, those athletes, they hopefully inspire other athletes towards excellence."

All of our athletes get it, coaches in other sports get it, it's the competitive fire of a J.T. Barrett and how he maximized his talent and skill not only from his athleticism but from his leadership traits and his fortitude. They were special athletes. What's interesting, there are a whole lot more."

BSB: Looking at some of the stuff going on with the NCAA, I know last year was the first year of the

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BSB: Starting off broad, how would you sum up the 2017-18 academic year for Ohio State athletics?

Smith: "It was a great year. Our coaches continue to do a great job. Our academic support unit continues to do a great job. We ended the year with like 238 graduates of 1,034 students. We ended up with 34 teams with 3.0 or better average GPA out of 36. Our kids are doing a great job in the classroom. We're just proud of them. I think we had eight degree-completion graduates, people who come back and finish their degrees. That culture of academic excellence we've been striving towards, we're there. I think it was 692 Scholar Athletes, I think, is what we had."

"It's the culture we wanted to create so it's been a great year. We have more student-athletes taking summer school courses. We had athletes graduating faster which is cool because you end up with a number of them taking master's courses, graduate school courses. I think we had 16

**THE
INTERVIEW
ISSUE**

Buckeyes Adjusted Well To New Recruiting Timeline

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early signing period in football. How do you think that went for Ohio State, and maybe how do you see that going in the future?

Smith: "We adjusted. We were one of the schools that, originally, was against it. We understood some of the benefits, we just had some concerns, but we adjusted to it and we've benefited from it. We've signed a number of athletes, and our coaches' time is different.

"The intent to allow those athletes who definitively knew where they wanted to go, go ahead and get it done, that's been that. That was the impetus from the beginning. I think from that perspective, it's worked. We just have to see I think the impact of it. You have to see over time. We have to go to a few iterations and look back and say, 'Okay, was there anything that changed in the behaviors of recruiting?' That takes a look back so we need some evidence before we can actually say, 'This is a great thing.' I think it is, but we need some time to see that."

BSB: You have a year on the College Football Playoff selection committee under your belt. How did that go? What were some of the highlights of it for you?

Smith: "It was a great learning experience. I served on the basketball committee, and one of the things that I was hopeful that I'd benefit from was just the camaraderie. We'll be around other teammates who have the same passion and interest that I do and around our sports programs, in that case football. It was cool. Just sitting around with the (committee) and you're talking football. Ultimately Frank Beamer, you go back to roots a little bit. I was having a lot of fun with that, and the policies and procedures were very similar to what we had on the basketball committee, that was a little bit easier for me to transition into from that perspective.

"Then, just watching games in a different way than I used to watch them and becoming more definitive and focused on the evaluation of the team as opposed to just watching games. It's a great experience and I'm looking forward to it now that I've gotten past my

rookie year and got my sea legs under me a little bit. I'm anxious to try to be a little bit better in serving a membership in that role this coming year. I'm looking forward to it."

BSB: Ohio State at the end of the year was right there on the fringe. What was that process like for you to have your school right on the edge of the picture?

Smith: "Well, I was out of the room. They have a policy where anytime your school's talked about, or your school is in a situation where the team that you might play is being talked about, you're out of the room. I don't know what the conversations were in the room. I just accepted the fact that that was the choice of my peers and my colleagues and I respect that. We move on and take advantage of the opportunity we had at the time and go play and be where we got to play. At that point you just shift your thinking because you can't change anything. I accepted the fate and moved on."

BSB: How do you think this new playoff system has gone through the first few years, and do you see any changes coming down the road?

Smith: "I think it's going well. I always had the concern of its impact on the other bowls. I think that has played out. We have to be really careful about that. How do we keep the other bowls relevant when everybody is so focused on the final four? It's difficult. I think we have to keep our eye on that ball. I think it's played out extremely well. I don't see any changes in the near future."

"The commissioners, the management committee, everyone seems to be comfortable with the current format. I think we need time. I think we always have to let these types of things play out over time, to see what tweaks need to occur as opposed to just being reactive. Just let it play out over time. I can't see any changes in the near future."

BSB: Now, looking at the football team in general, Urban Meyer signed a new contract this year. Can you take me a little bit through the process of first the decision to extend him, and why the timing was right to do it now?

Smith: "We were a little concerned about some of the conversations around recruit-

ing, and there were, for whatever reasons, suggestions that he might not be here long – those type of things – and that was a concern of mine and a concern of his. I forgot when we had the conversation. We ended up having a conversation about doing a contract extension. At the same time, I had a concern about his salary not being No. 1 in the Big Ten. When his performance – not just in the wins and losses, but in culture around our team. Behaviorally, academically, knock on wood, all those things are happening on track.

"I just feel like he's the No. 1 coach in the league and he needed to be compensated consistent with that. We talked to the president, got authorization to move forward and try to put it in place, and then it just came about a time we needed to get it to the trustees and get it approved. It was the right time to send the message that he is going to be here for a long time which was a concern of recruits, concern of those – not a concern but window for our competitors to call to recruits against us. Then also media conversations about that so I wanted to put all that to bed."

BSB: Then obviously the rest of the staff got new contracts as well, Greg Schiano and Ryan Day both hit that million dollar mark for the first time at Ohio State. Are you still comfortable with that decision to give those contracts, and was it really just kind of an inevitable thing where the market is?

Smith: "It was. You get it. It was inevitable. I knew we'd get there, it was just a matter of what year, what time. In that window of time the year before, actually, the market went berserk. It was unbelievable – salary increases and coordinators. There already were some, but it really went berserk the year before. Urban and I talked about it for a long time, but the ones that we took to that level they deserved to be at that level compared to their peers in their market performance.

"Those guys were the top of the pyramid. For us, one of the things that we have to constantly think about is talent retention. This great city, Columbus is a great place to live. This is a great place to work at Ohio State. At the end of the day, we need to make sure we have fair compensation. Salaries have gone berserk, we're in that game, we've just got to play it. So, that was an easy decision."

BSB: You mentioned talent retention. When you've got a guy like Ryan Day who's relatively young in his coaching career and he's had a lot of opportunities this year both as a collegiate head coach or maybe going off to the NFL, what does it say about Ohio State that he's not only staying, but he signs a three-year contract to stay at Ohio State?

Smith: "It's awesome. That's one of our commitments to do what is right from a salary perspective. One, the contract as you said. Two, the security piece. Someone like him with his family and I think he said this as well, finding a place like this to live and then raise your children and then have some stability for some period of time was important. We can't take for granted how great a place this is to live and work. Then you have a chance to – for him, as you said, a young coach to work with somebody like Urban, the experiences that he will gain by working with Urban, competing against the teams we compete with in our league and out of our league.

"Unbelievable experiences for him to

grow. He'll be a head coach someday, hopefully it's not too fast. In order to make sure that we help him reach that dream, we want to make sure that he has family, he's really comfortable with everything around him. That was important for us."

BSB: What did you think when you were watching the quarterback competition as it unfolded this spring?

Smith: "It was hard. Because you have – I'm on the periphery on that. You like the coaches but I had enough of a relationship with actually all three of them. Tate Martell, Joey (Burrow) and Dwayne (Haskins). I just love them as people. I had no clue where everyone was going to land, but my role was how do we make sure we do what's best for the student?

"I'm thinking Joey did the right thing for himself. He's got two years of eligibility, and he's a smart, smart young man. He's a perfect example of one that graduated early. Taking advantage of summer school and maximizing his credit hours. I might be the athletic director but I'm also a fan of sports so I was watching it like everybody else to see who was going to emerge. It was, I think, a good decision on Joey's part. When you still have two outstanding returning quarterbacks that have got this experience but our freshman (Matthew Baldwin) came in, it's pretty good. He'll be healthy and ready to roll."

BSB: Now looking at Haskins, he's going to be the starting quarterback this year. What are your memories from watching that Michigan game after Barrett got hurt and Haskins comes in?

Smith: "Unbelievable, because I went in the locker room with J.T. for a while with the doctors. Then when I came back out I was on the sideline. Just to watch him, you know what's interesting is I have a different perspective. The throw was phenomenal, but that catch. People forget how hard Austin Mack got hit.

"That grab, man. It's not a lot of receivers that you could throw it on a dime like that that would have held on, but Michael Thomas would have. (Anthony Gonzalez) would have. That was a heck of a catch and retention of the ball when he went to the ground. Those two are pretty special. Then, all the other receivers are going to be just phenomenal to watch. Great throw, great leadership. That speedy run he had, probably broke the speed barrier. It was fun to watch. (laughs) You know that demonstrated unbelievable decision-making. He didn't make a mistake. He made unbelievable decision-making, thrown in the fire in that situation."

BSB: Going back to Burrow, are you able to keep track of athletes like that? Especially a guy like him who had been here for years and has a degree?

Smith: "We'll be watching him and see how he does. Anyway, it depends on the athlete and how they leave. Some leave in a disgruntled way. Someone like Joey we'll track and obviously, I'll watch (LSU's) games more than I've ever watched them before and cheer for them and hopefully he does well. As I told Joey after he made his decision and announced it, I called him and said, 'Look, you're still our guy. Don't ever forget. If you need us, we're here. You've got my cell number, you reach back if you need some help.'

"Hopefully, he doesn't. Hopefully, things go excellently for him. He gave us a lot, and if he wants us, we'll be here for him. Even



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THE INTERVIEW ISSUE: GENE SMITH

when he's done there, if he needs help trying to find a job or something like that, we're here for him."

BSB: Shifting focus to the basketball team, we're here a year later after Thad Matta left and Chris Holtmann was hired. What was this year like for you, and what were your expectations going in compared to what you ended up seeing?

Smith: "I didn't have expectations that we would excel at the level that we did. I knew we had guys who were hungry. (Jae'Sean Tate) was hungry, Keita (Bates-Diop) was hungry. Unfortunately, Keita had a career prior to this year where he had so many different small injuries here and there. One major one but others were nagging so he really couldn't get on the floor in a consistent way. We knew once he did, that he would be an impact player. The thing that I was really – Chris did in a phenomenal way was gain their trust fast. I think we made some very good strategic moves to help with that."

"He established trust early, and then it's his coaching. This tactical and strategic coaching with these guys in their individual capabilities. He never asked J.T. to do what he couldn't do. Keita was always in a position where he could take advantage of his talents and skills. Andrew Dakich, holy smoke. (laughs)"

"I mean, we could sit here and go through each guy, right? To me, that was the beauty. One of the beauties of what he did is he put each of them in a position where each of them could benefit the team based upon their individual talents and skills."

BSB: You said you didn't have those expectations last year, but now seeing this season, what's your expectation going forward?

Smith: "Now, we've got to do more. (laughs) Just like everything in life. What did you do for me lately? But it is going to be interesting to watch and learn. We've never seen how he and his staff transitions in five new guys. We have four freshmen, a graduate transfer and C.J. Walker can't play yet but he will be practicing. Transitioning those individuals into guys who are returning, how do you re-create the leadership that J.T. and Keita provided? Who emerges? Who's that floor guy that helps them get through the storms?"

BSB: When I talked to you last summer it was a few days after Holtmann was hired. One of the things you stressed was recruiting, especially recruiting in this region. Obviously, last year he was able to put a roster together and then this year, another good class coming in. It seems that going forward in the future years, recruiting in this state is going well compared to maybe some of the more recent years under Matta.

Smith: "It's beautiful. It's beautiful. ... Well, Thad did an outstanding job for a long time recruiting in our home base and this happens for all of our sports, in Ohio, student-athletes at the high school level to aspire to be at Ohio State. Chris and his staff have done a great job of connecting with the high school coaches, the club coaches and all those people. Kind of share his style, his philosophy, what he does for students."

BSB: Talking about Matta, it seems like, No. 1, he's been pretty content over the past year, and I think it sounds like he missed coaching less than he expected to. What is your impression of the year, what it might have been like for Matta and how much of a relationship have you had with him over the past year?

Smith: "I think this past year has been great for him. He's had a chance to get away from

the game, get away from the stress, reconnect with his family. I was with him Monday in Indianapolis. We had two meetings, we had to come in. Actually, we were sitting together in this meeting all morning long and he is in a good space. I think he'll always peek and see if there's something that fits him."

"I think he's doing well and he's enjoying life reading books and enjoying his family and helping the industry a little bit."

BSB: Obviously, we talk a lot about basketball and football here at Ohio State, but you still get athletes from some of the smaller sports that are able to compete at a high level. What do you think you can do to keep promoting those sports and get them at a higher and higher level here at Ohio State?

Gene: "Great question. Dan (Wallenberg) and his staff, communications, continue to do a great job, and then we have a social media team. They're trying to do the best they can around that – in publications like yours and others focusing on recognizing their talents and skills. We had 10 conference championships this year. We had 10 conference championships, nine coaches of the year, one national coach of the year. That's a lot of talent. You go sport by sport by sport, from tennis to the track, and you can pick those individual athletes."

"You just go through every single sport. What we have to do is, in the moment when they're competing, we've got to try to bring them to life. Social media has been our primary avenue to try to do that. Then some things back home in their areas where they came from. Most of us would track that but trying to make sure there's articles in your local paper and those type of things. Tough to do. This is tough to do but we've got a great staff. They do the best job they can. Then the athletes promoting themselves, which they also do the job of, probably do their own little thing."

BSB: There are a few ongoing construction projects like at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center, renovations of the stadium. Can you give me an update on the general athletic projects that are going on?

Smith: "We've got a lot going on. The Covelli Arena will probably be done in March of 2019. It's going well. The Schumaker facility (housing additional sports adjacent to the WHAC), that will be open in October sometime. Again, I'm budgeting on time. It's going well. Suite project (at Ohio Stadium), suite and loge seats are doing good. They'll be ready for the 2019 season. We'll have less seats in the stadium this year because of it. I think our capacity will be 102,000, and then we'll add those back in '19, but that's gone well."

"Concrete renovation that most people don't pay attention to but I do. We're down to one side of the stadium that we have to finish and then we would have resealed and repainted the entire concrete in the stadium over a four-year period, and that will give us another 10 years before we have to do it again. That's a major project to help sustain the life of that iconic facility. We started the Wi-Fi project."

"We're pretty confident we'll have it done for the 'Shoe by this fall. There could be a couple of dead spaces because antennas didn't get done in time, but we'll have it pretty much done. Again, the 'Shoe will be done, the Schott (renovations) actually should be done by basketball season. We have a lot of projects."

BSB: Looking around Columbus in general, obviously the Blue Jackets had a big run this year. Then the Crew going through the situation they're going

through with a potential move to Austin, Texas. What kind of relationship does Ohio State have with the pro sports teams in Columbus, and what has it been like to watch them over the past couple of years?

Smith: "It's great. We have a strong relationship with the Blue Jackets, we've had for a long time and the Crew we've had for a long time. Blue Jackets we are from a management point of view, we oversee Nationwide Arena, we manage Nationwide Arena. We have a working relationship with them as our primary tenant at Nationwide, but we also have a collaborative relationship with them. Well, I'm just so happy that they were able to have a run that they had for the year, and hopefully they'll get a deeper run and it's just so much fun to watch and going to the games. This is really cool, they are unbelievable tenants."

"With the Crew, we hired (former Crew star) Brian Maisonneuve (to coach) the soccer program. One of the things we wanted to get stronger at is that relationship with their youthful member club program, the recruiting and things of that nature. We've always had a collaborative relationship, but we haven't been as successful as we wanted to in recruiting out of their system, their clubs, their youth system so I'm looking forward to working with them better and I hope they stay. I really do. I understand the business piece of it. I get it. Well, I hope they stay."

BSB: Earlier this week I was over at the Buckeye Boosters golf outing at the Scarlet Course. Meyer was there and he talked about you a little bit. He mentioned your experience as a college athlete yourself and how that can impact your outlook on the wellness of the student-athlete here. How do you think

your experience from when you played football in college has impacted your job here at Ohio State?

Smith: "It was one of my greatest blessings, to find a career path where I can take my personal experience and apply it in what I do every single day. If it wasn't for football, let's say high school sport participation with football was in the air, I never would have gone to college. My parents couldn't send me to college. I'm the only person in my family that didn't exist in my family so I was blessed."

"Then to have the experience that I had playing in college. I wasn't the greatest student, so I did have academic support. I did have tutors to get through college. I remember that and I know that the young people that we have in whatever sport, also, I kind of relate it back to my experience. I never forgot those things. I understand why someone needs a tutor. I understand when I have to tell a coach, 'Look, you got to give that student more time away from practice in order to help them attack their academics.' And coaches get it. I never get any pushback."

"It's valuable. It's helped me and that makes my opportunity not to just be professional but to be personal because that's how I look at it from a student-athlete, is look, this is personal for me. What I've got today, you can do better if you do what you're supposed to do. That's why you'll see more athletes probably talk to me the way I engage with them than most ladies because I can get granular with them around their experience and what they're going through. I'm passionate about what we do for our kids, all of them, every single sport."

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