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"For The Buckeye Fan Who Needs To Know More"

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TIM MOODY

BIG MAN ON CAMPUS – Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith, 62, has helped the Buckeyes become one of the nation's most profitable and most successful athletic departments, earning more than \$200 million in revenue and winning numerous championships during the 2018-2019 academic year.

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Ohio State Athletic Department Continues To Thrive Under Gene Smith's Leadership

By ANDREW LIND
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

The Ohio State University Board of Trustees recently voted to approve a two-year contract extension for athletic director Gene Smith, which will keep him running one of the largest athletic departments in the country through at least the 2021-22 academic year.

Ohio State is one of just three schools, joining Texas and Texas A&M, whose revenue exceeded the \$200 million mark – \$203.8 million, to be exact. Football continues bring in the most revenue, totaling \$110.7 million, while men's basketball was a distant second with just under \$24 million. The Buckeyes also receive a significant boost from media rights, which reached \$42.6 million from ESPN, FOX and the Big Ten Network.

The football, men's hockey, men's tennis and women's track and field programs won Big Ten titles. The men's basketball team won an NCAA Tournament game, and the baseball team won the conference tournament. The women's synchronized swimming program won its 32nd national title, as well.

The Buckeyes also once again had a record number of academic all-conference and scholar-athletes, so it's safe to say the athletic department is thriving under Smith's leadership.

Shortly after he returned from the NCAA meetings in Indianapolis, Smith sat down with Buckeye Sports Bulletin to discuss Ohio State's athletic success,

Urban Meyer's health, the future of the football program under Ryan Day, expectations for the basketball program and much more.

BSB: I want to start by asking about the overall health of the athletic department, as well as its successes and places to improve?

Smith: "I think everything we do, we can improve in. If you're not working hard every single day to get better, then you're not focused on what you should be focused on. We're coming off of a relatively successful year, so while we're pleased with the academic performance of our student-athletes – we ended up with a cumulative GPA of 3.22, and 34 of our 36 teams all had an average GPA of 3.0 and higher – we can improve by getting those other two up there. Our graduation success rate is at 86 percent and (federal graduation) rate is at 75 percent, so you can improve in those categories.

"One of the things I'm most proud of is that 86 percent of our graduates from last year have jobs, they're going pro or they're going to grad school. Our goal is to get that north of 90 percent next year. That's a very important piece for us because, if you come here and you do what you're supposed to do, you're going to graduate. Our promise to the families and that young person is that you're going to get a job. That is why you go to college."

BSB: One of your major successes this year was the opening of the Covelli Center. What did it take to initiate that process and see it to completion? And do you have any other new projects on the horizon?

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Meyer's Health, Day's Hiring Among Smith's Priorities

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Smith: "It was a lot of work, and our fundraising team did a marvelous job in raising funding for two facilities at the same time – the Covelli and the Schumaker (Complex providing nutritional, physical and psychological support). It was north of \$90 million the team raised, and I'm so proud of them. The hardest part was raising the funding and then obviously going through the institutional approvals and getting access to the land. Both of those facilities will service all of our student-athletes in different ways."

BSB: You've done some improvements to Ohio Stadium, as well. Where is that project in terms of being completed, and are there any plans to for additional renovations in the future?

Smith: "Right now, we're finishing up with our four-year concrete maintenance program that will be concluded this year. Every piece of concrete in the stadium would have been resealed, which is really good. Then the suite and loge seat project will open up this year – it'll be done in August. Our suite holders will have access to those seats and the new club section behind it. Wi-Fi is on target to be completed this year, so that is a significant project, about \$7 million. The thing we're most focused on is maintenance – things that most people won't see, not very sexy. They won't see those things."

BSB: We're coming up on 100 years in 2022, so how much longer do you see the stadium being used?

Smith: "Forever. It's a landmark facility. It's why we invested more than \$6 million in concrete restoration. That will hold for nine to 10 years. There's no reason to believe that it won't last for a long, long time – minus shrinking capacity because of how fan behavior changes."

BSB: The football team won the Big Ten and Rose Bowl titles last year, but what were your overall thoughts on how the year went? You faced Urban Meyer's suspension, Ryan Day coming in on an interim basis, etc.

Smith: "Well said. You hit on it. I thought – considering the adversity that our leadership faced, the coaching staff, the support staff and then ultimately the players – it was an outstanding year. A phenomenal year. I was really pleased with how Ryan handled the games he was responsible for and really pleased with how Urban transitioned back into his leadership role. And then during that whole period of time, recruiting during the year, recruiting right after Urban's announcement and then up to signing day in December. If you look at it in totality, I thought both of them, in their changing roles, did an outstanding job."

BSB: How did you manage and pay attention to Coach Meyer's health throughout the year? I know that was something that loomed large in terms of recruiting.

Smith: "We were very open with him and he with us, using our medical staff and using the people around him on the sideline. It was certain stimuli in the game that would cause the cysts to flare and create headaches for him. We kind of understood what those were and tried to keep him calm on the sideline. It was very difficult with his personality. And that obviously led to the ultimate decision, but we tried to be very sensitive to what he had going on."

"We had (strength and conditioning coach) Mickey Marotti, (chief of football operations) Brian Voltolini and (director

of player development) Ryan Stamper and others tap him on the shoulder or pull him back when it looked like he was ready to blow. I thought we had a good management plan in place to help him lead for the rest of the season, and he did an excellent job from my view."

BSB: Meyer fell to one knee during the win over Indiana in early October, and nobody really knew the extent of his condition at that point. What did you say to him?

Smith: "When you see that in a physical way ... I knew he had challenges, but when it takes you – or any person – to their knee, we have to be concerned about whether or not he could continue the job. He has a responsibility to the student-athletes, so we intensified our conversations. We had a group meeting shortly after that game in his office with his doctor, our trainer, Mickey, Brian, Ryan and a couple other people because I felt like we needed a game management plan. During the week, he didn't have problems. I was very forthright with him and told him, 'You've got to be honest with us and be honest with people around you.' And he was so responsive, obviously. We just had to make sure he was capable of leading the team on Saturday. Once we had that meeting and set up that management plan, I was comfortable. I just told him, 'Reality is, we might have to take you out if you can't do it,' so we ended up with a great management plan and he responded perfectly."

BSB: At what point did you and Coach Meyer come to the conclusion that it was time for him to step away from coaching?

Smith: "It was really his decision. Every Sunday, we'd meet and talk, talk and talk in the morning and I would leave to go to the College Football Playoff meetings. We kind of had an agreement that if he was going to retire, he was going to need to do it right after The Team Up North game because you have signing day on Dec. 19. We were doing well. A lot of young people were committed to us. We didn't want to have a lag, so during the season, I was doing my due diligence and preparing myself for if he did want to walk away. Really, after that game, he made his decision. That Sunday morning, we met, and he made his decision. So, I had already lined up my decision on what I wanted to do for a replacement, which allowed us to move very fast. If he decided to stay, the plan would have just been shelved. But I really appreciate his humility, his openness and his honesty through all of our conversations every Sunday morning."

BSB: With Coach Meyer's departure, you've lost an all-time great coach. How difficult is it to replace him?

Smith: "It's hard. He and I established an unbelievable relationship – one that was truly difficult for people to truly understand. I remember when we lost to Michigan State (in 2015), I went into his office on Sunday morning like I always do. I gave him time to get settled. He was sitting there in the dark. I didn't turn the lights on, and I sat in the dark with him and we chatted for a long time."

"It was hard on a professional level because of what he brought our student-athletes and Buckeye Nation. The opportunity to see him perform, I'm a football guy so I was always amazed at how he was able to motivate the team and win games. Then from a personal side, it was a hard one for me because he and I got really close personally. It was very hard for me on both levels. But

I guess from a professional level, we had it pretty good. It's kind of hard to replicate."

BSB: Coach Day stepped in during Meyer's three-game suspension and led the Buckeyes to wins in each game. How do you think he performed as a head coach, and did that lead to you ultimately hiring him full time?

Smith: "That was a piece of the decision. It's interesting because that audition, so to speak, provided me some insight into how he would lead. Besides winning the games, I thought the most important thing was that he held it together. If you look back over the history of time in any situation similar to this, the thing that can be most challenging is the team. The team could become fragmented, it could implode. Whether or not you win or lose, the dynamics of the team could be pretty fragmented. Ultimately, they held strong. The culture we built – that Urban built – was sustained. He dealt with individuals like he needed to deal with them. It was a leadership moment not in just the X's and O's or on the field, but how he handled the press, which is a huge responsibility. I think he did an excellent job there. Of course, everyone thinks of the wins and losses, but I was really evaluating the other stuff."

BSB: You mentioned the process for finding Coach Meyer's replacement, but I'm sure you had some other candidates in mind besides Coach Day. Can you share any of those names?

Smith: "Nope. I can't. You know, there were obviously some people across the country who are outstanding coaches and I have a responsibility to hire the best. My pros and cons sheet included Ryan and others, but – at the end of the day – the pros with him were greater. We don't have an environment or a program that needed to be rebuilt, it didn't need to be blown up. Anytime you hire a new leader, they want to come in and change the strength program, change the academics, change the compliance, all those types of things. Our structure – in the complex organization we have – is the best it's ever been."

BSB: Did Coach Meyer have any input on Coach Day's hiring?

Smith: "Oh yeah. He and I talked about it a lot. There was a point in time, somewhere before Meyer's decision, where we talked about head coach vs. assistant coach and if there is someone who might be more right for the position. We didn't talk names because that's not his responsibility, it's mine. But we talked concept, so I listened to him on that. He gave me good insight that ultimately helped me make my decision. He was very supportive of Ryan, obviously."

BSB: How has Coach Meyer handled his new job as athletic director of athletics initiatives and relations, and do you believe he's happy with it or that he'll have an itch for coaching?

Smith: "I think he's handled it exceptionally well. He's learning. He's never operated in this space before, so there's a lot to it. He's been great with our donors and at events that we have for donors. He's been unbelievable with our leadership institute and what we're trying to do there. He taught a class, which he really enjoyed. He has accepted more speaking engagements, particularly on campus that he historically would have turned down. That's good for our environment. He's obviously going to do FOX television, and they flew him out to the U.S. Open. He was out at Pebble Beach, and he's never been there."

"The experiences that he's going through are new for him and enjoyable for him. We

went to Lima, Ohio, and we were at the Lima Correctional Institute. He went with me to something I would have done without him before. He was engaged with the environment he'd never been in. I think, right now, he's doing great. He's enjoying it and learning a lot. Coaching? Who knows? That's not for me to comment on."

BSB: You mentioned the Eugene D. Smith Leadership Institute and how some of Coach Meyer's roles are included in it. Can you explain the institute's purpose and why it was important for you to start something like that?

Smith: "It's really focused on job placement, grad school and professional (development). What we try to do is stay true to our promise with the family and the kid, to help them get on a continuum where they really home in on what they want to do around their junior year. Then we start the process of getting them aligned with that, whether it's applying to grad school or making sure they meet the requirements of grad school."

"For years, kids have come to me with a 2.82 GPA and they want to go to grad school, and I'm like, 'Eh, you're probably not going to make it.' So, what we've done is create a culture where kids understand that earlier. Our vision is to make sure that every kid when they're done here has a job, is going to grad school or is going pro."

"We had one of our donors go to one of our Real Life Wednesdays speeches where we had Ken Chenaault, the CEO of American Express, talking to our football team. This donor happened to be on the board of American Express, a great guy and one of my personal friends, and he was just amazed at the impact and the questions the kids were asking. He called me a few weeks later and he said, 'Gene, do you do that for every sport?' I explained how it's kind of fragmented and that some sports do different things, but how every sophomore is required to have a résumé and everyone goes through financial literacy. He said, 'If you can develop a comprehensive program, I'll give you \$1 million to start it off.'"

"He challenged us, so we met with him and his wife on maybe three or four occasions. We developed a purpose, a mission, the structure and the whole nine yards. So, it really forced us to have a comprehensive, integrated program for all student-athletes. Then he wanted to name it in my honor, so it wasn't my choice to put my name on it. It was something that he, as a longtime friend, chose to do."

BSB: That's obviously something that could define your legacy at Ohio State. You're coming on 15 years as athletic director next spring, so how much longer do you want to be or feel like you'll be here?

Smith: "I just signed a new contract through 2022, and I'm going to honor that. My wife will tell me I can keep going if the institution wants me. God has blessed me, so long as I'm healthy and passionate about what we have in front of us – and as long as I'm wanted – then I'm sure we'll go beyond that. I personally go year to year because I try not to look too far ahead. We're establishing goals and objectives for 2019-20, and we just had another meeting for that this morning."

BSB: With his current position, a lot of people see a pathway for Coach Meyer to become the athletic director once you step down. Is that something you can possibly see happening?

Smith: "Yeah, if he committed himself to

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it. I don't know if he will because we've never talked about it. He'd have to commit to another level of learning. You have to learn the Big Ten and NCAA rules and regulations for all sports, figure out the political complexities of our space. He's never expressed that to me, but who knows."

BSB: You recently left the College Football Playoff committee after two years in that role. Can you give some insight into that decision?

Smith: "I really felt that I needed to be here for Ryan. Anytime I've served on an NCAA committee, I never let my core responsibility be interfered by my service to my association. This is a huge responsibility with our football program that Ryan has in his first year, so I felt like I needed to be here. My presence on Sundays and Mondays is critical, and with the CFP, I was always gone Sunday evening, Monday and Tuesday. That's my window to be here. I just felt that I needed to do that. And I only had one more year, so..."

BSB: Sticking with the playoff, do you believe it's been successful, or do you see any issues with it? And how do you feel about possible expansion?

Smith: "I've always felt that the BCS wasn't as bad as most people thought it was – especially since we were in it every year. And I'm kind of old school, true to the bowl games. I always thought the top-tier bowl games were unbelievable experiences for young people. When we moved to the CFP, and I shared this before, but the bowls would be devalued... and they are. Now we're starting to see a different behavior. Attendance is going down and players are not wanting to play in those games, and I see that continuing."

"I think the CFP, based upon its original intent, has been wildly successful. We can always debate who is in and who is not, but that's always been the case. You can see that with basketball committee with 68, and 69 and 70 are complaining. If it expands, it's going to be the same. It's going to 7, 8, 9 and 10. It's never going away. That's what I've always tried to tell people with the BCS, they thought that a playoff would solve everything. No, it doesn't. You have a huge demographic with people with different thoughts and opinions. At the end of the day, expansion is not going to solve what people think it will."

"However, I do believe, down the road, it's going to expand. I'm worried about it from a couple of perspectives, I really am. First and foremost, from a student-athlete welfare point of view. After we played Alabama in the semifinals, I was worried about our guys playing Oregon. That was a slugfest, that Alabama game. I go in the locker room, I go in the training room, I see them the next day, I know what their bodies are like. I thought our sports performance team and Urban did a masterful job of getting them back for another game. If we have to play The Team Up North, play a championship game, play in the quarterfinals, the semifinals and the national championship, that's a gantlet. That's

a physical gantlet. Sometimes people forget these are 17-, 18-, 19-year-old bodies. These aren't 27-year-old pros."

"I'm worried that, I'm worried about finals week, I'm worried about the holidays. I think kids should have time around Christmas. You can't push it too far back in January because we're already missing class in January. Those days are important. All of those things are worrisome. The other thing I worry about is that you can't diminish the regular season. You can't just take eight teams and have all those other teams' regular seasons be diminished for the playoff. However, I do believe sometime down the road they'll probably expand."

BSB: Another big topic in college football right now is the transfer portal. What are your thoughts on the portal and waiver process, and how can it be improved?

Smith: "One thing to note is that waivers are not being granted as often as people think. There have been a lot of high-profile cases, but there are a whole lot of waivers that were not approved. I was just in the NCAA meetings (on June 24 and 25) and we just passed it to the NCAA Council (on June 26), but we're changing – if it's approved – how the waiver committee will evaluate a young person's request for a waiver."

"I was of the opinion the institution from which the student-athlete is transferring should not have a say in whether or not that athlete should be eligible at the other institution. We should be allowed to provide information if a student-athlete was seeing a sports psychologist here or if there was an extenuating circumstance. But whether or not they're eligible to play, that shouldn't come from us. Fortunately, this new model will ask the schools that they're transferring from to provide that information. Then it's on the waiver committee to make a decision and that other school to make its case."

"The thing we're all waiting on – and we have to wait until late September – is the final data. There are a lot of young people in the portal for all sports who might not land somewhere. At the beginning, many of us thought free agency. If you're going to go in the portal, 99 percent of the time, you're going to know where you're going. Now you can take their scholarships. That kid typically won't take that risk unless they know where they're going. But that's not true. And now there are going to be a lot of kids in the portal that don't land or whose expectations won't be consistent with reality and they won't land where they thought they were going to go. I'm anxious to see the data."

BSB: Speaking of the transfer portal, Justin Fields is likely to play a major role in Day's first season as head coach. What kind of expectations do you have for this upcoming year?

Smith: "Win every game, beat That Team Up North and graduate all of your players. Our main thing is keeping our performance level high. First and foremost, he's done a

phenomenal job in the recruiting space. But he has to make sure he puts this team in a position to win. If someone is better than you or you have an off night, I get that. But a coach's job is to put the team in a position to win. How he's handled the team in the spring and how he handles them in August as they get ready, how he manages the game. All those things will be important to me. My expectation is doing the best job we can and putting them in a position to win."

BSB: Coach Day has done an excellent job recruiting thus far while also placing extra emphasis on the state of Ohio. It's a little bit different than Coach Meyer's more national approach but seems to strike a good balance between the two. What are your thoughts on securing the state's best first and foremost?

Smith: "It's important for every sport, particularly one in which there are a large number of outstanding local athletes. He's done that well. I'm a firm believer that you should let someone go if they want to transfer from your institution, but 99.9 percent of the time, if you recruit Ohio and the contiguous states, those kids will stay with you. Our risk is farther out, and that's true for every school. It's important to keep the talent in Ohio, but also important – because we're an international institution – to go wherever the best players are. There are going to be years when Ohio is down and the numbers won't be as high, but when they're high, we need to be in the mix."

BSB: We mentioned some of the decisions Day has made since he was named head coach. Did you have any uneasiness about hiring defensive assistants Greg Mattison and Al Washington away from Michigan?

Smith: "Not at all. At the bowl game, Ryan and I were constantly meeting when he had downtime, going through a list of a bunch of people and narrowing it down. He ended up with Greg and Al, and they made perfect sense. Al's father played here and he's from here, so that was a natural fit. And Greg knows most of our staff and actually worked with Urban and Ryan. So, there was a relationship with them. The knowledge and experience he brings is huge, so it wasn't about where he was coming from. It was what he was bringing. And both of them bring unbelievable talent and skills."

BSB: Chris Holtmann, meanwhile, has led the basketball program to back-to-back NCAA Tournament appearances in his first two seasons in Columbus. What are your thoughts on the job he's done so far?

Smith: "It's been phenomenal. He's done an excellent job. He transitioned the right way. The young people we had at that time really bought into him and his philosophy. We obviously had a pro player in Keita Bates-Diop, and in basketball,

you need to have one. And he put Keita, Jae'Sean Tate, Kam Williams and that team in a position to win. I thought he did the same with last year's team, too. I think he's an excellent teacher and in-game coach."

BSB: Last year's team didn't play as well throughout the season but still ended up with a tournament win. What does that say about Holtmann's coaching?

Smith: "We had younger players, but a group of guys that played well together. That's the beauty of what he's capable of. He got the most out of those kids. He puts each of them in a position to win. How he's handled Kaleb (Wesson's suspension) and how he handled C.J. (Jackson). My goodness, he got everything he could out of C.J. I think he did a great job."

BSB: The Buckeyes play a difficult schedule this season with matchups against Cincinnati, Kentucky, North Carolina, Villanova and West Virginia, but they combat that with a top-10 recruiting class. Do you think the team can meet the high expectations that come along with that?

Smith: "I don't know how we'll do against those teams, but there's no question we should be able to compete."

BSB: You guys played a game at St. John Arena last season, the first in that building since 2010. Are there any plans to do that again?

Smith: "We'll do it again, off and on."

BSB: Ohio State wore throwback uniforms in that game, which leads me to my next question. In both football and basketball, how do you strike a balance between being respectful of tradition while also being attractive to fans and recruits?

Smith: "That's really cool and a good question. It's really hard. We talk about it; we meet about it and we're not just going to do it just to do it. We really make sure it ties to something like going to St. John. That makes sense to do that one time. Would we do it again? I don't know. I doubt it because it was a special moment. And we do the same thing with football. Somewhere down the line we might do another one."

BSB: Circling back, the game at St. John was an overall great experience. It left some fans wanting more out of the Schottenstein Center. In what ways are you working to improve the experience at Ohio State's current basketball facility?

Smith: "I think the Schott gets a bad rap because I remember some games in there that were just like St. John. It just depends on who you're playing and if you're winning. I think it depends. The fans love going to St. John and being in that environment, but they don't necessarily love the restrooms, the long lines at concessions and that type of stuff. So, I think the reality is we've just got to win."

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