



# Sun sets on Smith's ASU tenure

## Athletic director preps for new job at Ohio St.

by Mark Saxon

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Nestled in a corner office on the sixth floor of the Carson Student-Athlete Center, Athletic Director Gene Smith pondered his future with 73,379 empty seats at his back.

In front of Smith's desk hangs a monolithic photo of Sun Devil Stadium filled to capacity, representing an ever-present carrot that dangles from a stick.

Even in the final three weeks of his tenure in Tempe, Smith has not stopped tapping his feet to the beat of ASU athletics.

Smith, who will take over as athletic director at Ohio State next month, said he had never considered leaving ASU.

"I've never been a person who has aspired to do something," Smith said. "When I was growing up as a kid, my father was an electrical contractor, so my heroes were plumbers and carpenters and electricians and bricklayers.

"I never aspired to do anything except work with my dad for the rest of my life in his company as an electrician. In my junior year [of high school], I got big, and all of the sudden athletics took control of my life."

### Becoming a Buckeye

Smith said he was as surprised as anyone when Ohio State came calling last month.

"Initially, I thought I would be one of two," Smith said about being asked to fly to Columbus, Ohio, for a formal interview. "When they [Ohio State officials] shared that I was the only candidate that was coming in to go through the process and that they wanted to have a press conference the next day with the announcement, assuming



Sarah Regnier / THE STATE PRESS  
Athletic Director Gene Smith will leave ASU for Ohio State on April 8. Smith has manned the athletic department since July 2000, eliminating more than \$4 million of debt.



File photo / THE STATE PRESS

everything contractually worked out, that took it to another thought process."

Smith accepted the job March 4, the day before the ASU men's basketball team's regular-season finale against UA. He said he intended to delay the announcement of his hire.

"One of the things I was concerned with was my press conference up there," Smith said. "What I had worked out with them was if I accepted the job, instead of doing it on Saturday [March 5], we would do it on Sunday, so we wouldn't take anything away from the ASU-UA game. It leaked on Thursday [March 3] that I was a candidate, so it made all that moot."

Smith said the frantic pace took its toll.

"That week was a nightmare," he said. "I must have lost 10 pounds."

There hasn't been any love lost between Smith, a Cleveland native, and ASU, but the Ohio State job seemed like a perfect fit.

"I feel fortunate to have been here at Arizona State," Smith said. "I love the job here, but to have the chance to go back to my home state and be close to my family, and then to lead one of the broadest-based programs in the country is exciting."

Smith said the chance to be around his parents was impossible to turn down. Smith's 83-year-old father, Ted, has Alzheimer's disease.

### **Search for a successor**

For Smith, the whistle will blow for the last time in Tempe on April 8. ASU President Michael Crow has no plans to run flags at half-mast.

The same search firm that helped Ohio State hire Smith away from ASU has been saddled with the responsibility of securing his successor.

Smith said he was familiar with Atlanta-based Baker Parker and Associates, which will help Crow select the next athletic director, even before the executive search company contacted him about the Ohio State opening.

### **TRACKING SMITH**

**AGE:** 49.

**HOMETOWN:** Bedford, Ohio.

**POSITION:** Athletic Director.

**EDUCATION:** Bachelor's degree, business administration, Notre Dame.

Former Athletic Director Charles Harris, right, is flanked by former ASU athletic department administrator Herman Frazier, now the athletic director at Hawaii. Frazier is rumored to be a candidate to replace Athletic Director Gene Smith.

**WHAT TO KNOW:** Before coming to ASU, Smith served as an assistant football coach at Notre Dame, where he helped the Fighting Irish win the 1977 national championship. Smith worked as a marketing representative for IBM for two years before becoming an assistant athletic director for Eastern Michigan. In 1985, Smith was promoted to athletic director. After eight years, he accepted the same job at Iowa State. Since coming to ASU, Smith has eliminated more than \$4 million of debt. Smith also oversaw a \$30 million capital campaign, which funded the \$19 million Carson Student-Athlete Center.

Smith said he doesn't know where the administration stands in the search process. He said his advice was sought in the days after he announced his departure.

"I just advised the president at the beginning to take his time, and I gave him some characteristics you might look for in an athletic director," Smith said. "He said at some point in time he will engage me for advice."

Crow has made it clear that the search will not focus on internal candidates. Smith said he felt personal responsibility to break the news to his administrators.

"[Crow] is more comfortable with bringing someone in from the outside," Smith said. "What I am advising young administrators coming up through the ranks is that one of the most important things in this business is that you need to be willing to move because you need to have a breath of experience."

Crow has not named any candidates, but Hawaii Athletic Director Herman Frazier, an ASU graduate, is rumored to be under serious consideration.

In July 2000, Smith bested Frazier for the ASU job after Kevin White left for Notre Dame. Smith would not comment on the possibility of Frazier, who spent 23 years in ASU's athletic department, returning to the University but said Frazier is more qualified for the position than he was when he departed.

### **Tying up loose ends**

Smith said he has continued to delegate more responsibility to his administrators in an attempt to overcome any hardships his departure might cause.

"I need to wean myself and they need to wean themselves in the relationship," Smith said. "They are going to have some outstanding candidates from all different levels."

Smith admitted there are still major questions that must be answered to ensure the future of ASU's athletic department.

Smith said the uncertainty surrounding ASU men's basketball coach Rob Evans must quickly be dealt with by the University to mitigate the effects it could have on recruiting.

"Most recruits don't look at the administration," Smith said. "All they look at is the coach and the players. At some point in time, the University has to talk about where they are going with men's basketball so the recruits and players know what's going on."

Smith said junior forward Ike Diogu's decision regarding his NBA status might have a greater impact on the men's basketball team than Smith staying or going.

"Players recruit players, so if a student comes to visit your campus and they have a bad experience with another student, regardless of the program, they are not coming," Smith said.

Smith said he does not know if Diogu will make the jump to the NBA. He figures Diogu stands to gain more in the long term by returning for his senior season.

"If I had the opportunity to make the recommendation to him, I'd recommend he come back," Smith said. "In my view, he would improve his stock even more if he came back. If Ike chooses to stay here, 10 years from now he can come back to Arizona and own this state."

Other housekeeping chores await the next AD, such as the hiring of a softball coach to replace Linda Wells, who plans to retire at the end of the season. Smith said there also are other pressing concerns for his successor.

"The next athletic director has to continue to take our fund raising to the next level," he said. "Our Sun Angel program is growing, and it's sitting at close to \$7 million a year, and it needs to be well up over \$15 million a year."

Smith's departure cuts into the ASU Foundation. His wife, Sheila, will leave her post as senior vice president to take an administrative role in Ohio State's booster organization.

"She will be an associate vice president for development in charge of their capital campaign," Smith said. "When I went there for the interview, I made it clear that she wasn't a traveling spouse. She was a professional. She's the better part of the deal."

ASU's financial picture is clearer today than it was when Smith entered the department. Since taking the job, Smith has eliminated more than \$4 million of debt.

"Now we need more dollars to support those plans, and that's going to come from fund raising," Smith said. "We're sitting with about a \$13 million deferred maintenance problem at Sun Devil Stadium and that needs to be dealt with."

Smith said the key to developing a thriving athletic program at ASU lies in the success of the football team.

"In the end, football has to always be at the top," he said. "Every single game last year was televised. What a platform for us to talk about the things that happen at ASU and have a chance to take our Nobel Prize winner and put him out there on ABC."

Applicants interested in the AD position must demonstrate a commitment to improving academics, Crow said. Crow's goal is to elevate the program to the high standard that Stanford and California have set for the Pac-10.

Smith's successor will inherit three teams -- football, baseball and men's basketball -- that failed to meet the preliminary Academic Progress Rate which was released last month by the NCAA. Teams that are still

below the standard in December might be penalized with the loss of scholarships.

Smith said the academic programs he has implemented should improve student-athletes' performance in classrooms.

"One of the things everyone talks about is our Scholar Baller program in football," said Smith, referring to the program that rewards players who maintain a 3.0 grade-point average. "That program has been in place, but it really won't affect our graduation rate for another year or two. When the following year's class graduates, our APR rates will start to go up."

Smith said new bookkeeping measures should help raise some teams' scores, but that the onus remains on student-athletes to perform off the court.

"As you see these sophomores and juniors begin to graduate, the numbers will go up," Smith said.

### **One man, two programs**

Smith said the ASU job bears none of the headaches that accompany vacancies at Colorado and Fresno State, schools riddled in turmoil.

"This one is the best that is open," Smith said. "Our athletic programs are in very good shape, and financially we are in very good shape, and academically we are on the right trajectory. ADs that are sitting out there know that. They study all those things. They kind of know that the internal challenges will be at a minimum."

Even at Ohio State, Smith plans on keeping a close eye on ASU.

"Next year, I am going to be watching this program constantly because I do believe that if [football coach] Dirk [Koetter] can have a great preseason and they can stay healthy, they have a chance to be special," Smith said. "If Ohio State played ASU, then of course I would want Ohio State to win, but I would hope it would be a close game."

Smith said whenever he accepts a job, he intends on leaving things better than when he arrived. He has grown close to many of ASU's coaches and players, but said he doesn't have any intention of trying to lure them to Ohio State.

"If I have to bring someone in because the talents and skills are not there, then I'll do that," Smith said. "I don't come in with the agenda to do that. A lot of ADs do that. They come in and bring one or two or three with them, and I don't operate that way."

Smith said he'll meet with all 327 of Ohio State's athletic department employees and assess their skill sets before determining if any personnel changes must be made.

"In an organization, there are a lot of people in their boxes doing their jobs, but their total skills and talents might not be maximized," Smith said. "We might have someone that's mowing the grass who might be a great poet, and we just don't know it."

Smith said he hopes Ohio State will be his final stop.

"I do have an aspiration to retire one day," Smith said, laughing. "When I do that, I'd like to be able to maybe coach high school football somewhere and maybe enjoy it."

Reach the reporter at [mark.saxon@asu.edu](mailto:mark.saxon@asu.edu).

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