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Life After Smith

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The view from the Jacobson building is amazing. Walking into the office once occupied by former athletic director Gene Smith, I saw the football field through a window. It didn’t matter there was no game playing. It didn’t matter it was cold and raining. It didn’t matter the goal posts weren’t up. It didn’t matter there were no Cyclone fans in the seats.

When I entered that office, it was like I was actually on the football field. I could see everything. The press towers loomed above me on my right, and I was directly across from the scoreboard, viewing the entire field with no obstructions at all. I’ve been to Jack Trice Stadium countless times, but this was the first time I had actually seen it.

I was in the Jacobson Building early on a Friday morning to interview Elaine Heiber, the senior associate athletic director filling in as interim athletic director. I wanted to talk to her about how the athletic department was functioning with no permanent director. I wanted to know if the future looked as cold and damp as the weather that morning.

The skies were definitely overcast for the athletic department in the early ’90s. A few games were won here and there, but overall, Iowa State sports could be described as mediocre at best. Part of the reason for the mediocrity was a lack of cohesion in the athletic department. The coaches’ offices were spread around campus in five different buildings. There was no casual contact between the administration and the coaches.

Clearly, something drastic needed to be done and done fast. It was with that in mind that Gene Smith was hired to take over for Max Ulrich in July 1993.

Since then, the men’s and women’s basketball teams have become national powers, both winning the Big 12 regular season and tournament titles within the past three years. The wrestling team won the Big 12 championship last season, and the football team is on the rise, recently beating the archrival Iowa Hawkeyes for the third-straight year.

A lot of this improvement can be credited to Smith, athletic director until August, when he resigned to accept the AD position at Arizona State University in Tucson, Ariz.

Murray Blackwelder, vice president of external affairs, says Smith was successful in what Blackwelder considers the four main areas an AD should focus on: balancing the budget, hiring good coaches, raising money, and making sure the department keeps the program clean and NCAA-compliant.

"Smith brought our budget into a balanced position and kept it there every year he was here," Blackwelder says.

Smith clearly hired some great coaches in his seven-year tenure, including now Chicago Bulls head coach Tim Floyd, current men’s and women’s basketball coaches Larry Eustachy and Bill Fennelly, and depending how the football team does this season, maybe even Dan McCarney.

Blackwelder says Smith was a stickler for NCAA regulations, too. "We need to comply with the law and run a program that is above board, and Gene did a great job. We go by all the rules of the NCAA. You don’t see us getting into a lot of trouble," he says.

And obviously, Smith was no slacker when it came to raising the cash. "An athletic director in the decade of the 2000s will have to raise money. Gene got to be involved in several fund-raising efforts, and they included the $12 million athletic office complex, the $6.1 million skybox tower at Jack Trice Stadium, and the $2.3 million practice field for the football team," Blackwelder notes.

In building the Jacobson Building, an athletic office building that stands on the north side of Jack Trice Stadium, Smith directly combated the problem of low morale. Now the entire athletic staff is housed in one building where staff and administration have daily contact.

Before, says Blackwelder, only the football staff had offices together, in the small Olsen Building that currently sits just north of Jacobson. "All the other coaches were around campus. What we ended up doing is bringing all the coaches together in the new Jacobson Building, and it’s created a tremendous synergy for morale and really changed the whole operation."

Interim director Heiber also says Smith was good for Iowa State. She contends the construction of the Jacobson Building was a first major step in turning the athletic program around. "It had an impact not only from a physical structure, but a morale structure, bringing everyone together and working together as a team, starting to know each other, respecting each other, supporting each other, appreciating what the other people did for you and with you."

Smith’s departure came after a tremendous year for ISU athletics. The football team showed great strides of improvement, the men’s and women’s basketball teams proved to be national contenders, and the wrestling team won another Big 12 championship. Things were on the up and up. The future couldn’t look any brighter.

But Smith decided to leave after what surely was his proudest year as AD. Did Smith’s relationship with Iowa State go sour? As it turns out, Blackwelder says, the issue was simply money. ASU was just prepared to offer him more cash.

Blackwelder says Smith never broke any contract promises at the time he left. He was working without a contract, as he had for several years. "You only want a contract maybe if things aren’t going so well, and things were going super here," Blackwelder says.
Smith had been earning $167,000 a year at Iowa State, and he was in line for a raise up to $200,000 for the 2000-2001 year, a reflection of how much Iowa State wanted to keep Smith in Ames.

But Smith wanted to break into the $300,000 territory, which was no surprise to Blackwelder. It was, however, a logistical problem for him. "That was just something we couldn't do. No one in the Big 12 gets $300,000. So he went to Arizona State and got $325,000," he says.

Blackwelder says that was not only the defining reason Smith left, it's the only reason. "There's no smoking gun here. The issue that we lost Gene Smith on was money. There's no other issue. He loved it here; things were going super."

But now, in the post-Smith era, the future of the athletic department hangs in a state of limbo. Will the athletic program regress back to the way it was in the 1980s and early '90s with a new athletic director?

No, says Blackwelder. "I'm an eternal optimist. I believe that we've come a long way since '93. All these facilities were not here; we've hired all sorts of great coaches, and the program is in good shape. I think it will allow us to hire another great person and attract a person because the university is in such great shape athletically.

"It should allow us to recruit somebody we want," he says.

James Melsa, dean of the College of Engineering, is heading the committee that will be looking for that somebody. The committee is made up of a number of people within the athletic department, student athletes, coaches, and several faculty representatives.

Melsa says it is important to have a diverse search committee because the athletic director's job spans a lot of areas. "There's academics; there's fund raising; there is certainly interaction with athletic programs and coaches themselves."

One thing that Melsa's committee looks for in the selection process is unquestionable integrity, he says. "I think that has been a hallmark of Iowa State's program in athletics, and we want it to continue to be. We don't want it to become a program like Minnesota's, one that has had problems."

Another quality the search committee is looking for is financial responsibility. "[The next AD] has to be a person who can run a large, complex budget," Melsa says. "It's like a $17 million business with a lot of different sources of money and a lot of different ways that money is spent. They have to understand that and be able to manage it."

Smith's replacement "certainly has to be capable of doing fund raising," he says.

And of course, the committee wants someone who is deeply committed to making Iowa State competitive in athletics. "When all is said and done, we want to win football games and basketball games and championships," Melsa says. "There are people that don't think that Iowa State can do that effectively. Gene Smith showed we can become pretty competitive." The committee hopes to have a selection made by November 1.

But how is the athletic department functioning right now? How is the transition going? "It's been remarkably smooth, as a matter of fact," Heiber says, noting there are a few reasons for the lack of problems. "One, we have a very experienced administrative staff. I've been with the university and the athletic department for 21 years. I'm a senior associate, so I've had a great deal of day-to-day involvement with the department on a pretty long, ongoing basis. I'm very familiar with staff operation procedures."

Also, the department had done much of this year's budget planning before Smith's departure, always a time-consuming and complex process.

"We had our financial plan and our goals and objectives for this year already identified. We pretty much had the year mapped out as to what we were going to do, where we were going, what our finances were for each program and in the direction we needed to take it," Heiber says.

The quality of the staff is also very important, says Heiber. "I would say that there are a number of people who have obviously stepped up two or three notches. We all have a wide breadth of experience. We have specialties, but we also know a lot of the other areas of our operations that we can step in and help, if not assume leadership there."

Heiber also notes that Iowa State's current crop of coaches has helped make the transition easier.

"We have a very stable coaching staff who's experienced and share a common vision," she says. "And we like each other. That really is a very big plus when you like what you're doing. You're proud as a group of what you're accomplishing. It's probably the epitome of teamwork. It truly is. It's teamwork."

When talking about this upcoming athletic year, Heiber is upbeat. "We're very positive, happy, excited for the year. We have a lot of good things happening. There's a very bright future here. When you consider all the things that are going in the right direction, morale is very good."

The departure of Gene Smith probably won't hurt Iowa State athletics in the long run. Perhaps it will bring the athletic department together, give it some solidarity, a new challenge to be met, and new goals to achieve.

Sometimes you have to look through the rain to see that the beauty is still there.

Joe Doolittle is a junior in English. He originally wanted to do a story about the Ames bar scene, but this one worked out just fine.