

Commentary

# Smith Has Brought Culture Change To USD Men's Hoops



JAMES D. CIMBUREK/P&D  
South Dakota head men's basketball coach addresses the gathering during USD basketball media day on Monday at the Neuharth Center on the USD campus.

BY JEREMY HOECK  
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VERMILLION – "If I were a stock, I would certainly buy."  
That was Craig Smith's message to fans when he was hired as the new head men's basketball coach at the University of South Dakota in March 2014.  
If you were to look at an S-Curve, he said that day, USD was on an upward trajectory. "And fast."  
Turns out, he was as much talking directly to his players as he was to the crowd in attendance.  
Smith, who had been lured away from the Big Ten universe at Nebraska, had helped – alongside Tim Miles – lead two teams, Colorado State and Nebraska, to the NCAA Tournament. He came to Vermillion with a reputation of turning programs into consistent winners.  
He was hired at USD to take the Coyotes to the Big Dance.  
And his new players understood right away that it wasn't simply talk from Smith. It wasn't just him saying the right things to the fanbase. No, he had tournament pedigree.  
"It wasn't just him talking about the



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NCAA Tournament, it was, 'I've been there, I know how awesome it is,'" senior Eric Robertson said during Monday's media day session in Vermillion.  
"It wasn't a want, it was a need for us to be there."  
Thing was, USD had some work to do.  
Not since 2010 had the program won a conference tournament, and that was back in the Great West days when the Coyotes were beating Texas-Pan American and Houston Baptist.  
When Smith was hired, the program hadn't put together a winning season in four years (2009-10) and hadn't won a game – it was 0-2 – in the Summit League tournament.  
In came Smith. And in came a culture change.  
"The culture of a coach travels with you," he said Monday. "It's always been our philosophy, we want to play the winning style."

Nobody, not even Smith, expected a drastic turnaround in year one under the new coaching staff. The Coyotes weren't going to improve from 12 wins to, say, 20. Not overnight.  
But the fact that USD had an above .500 record (17-16) and won a game in the Summit League tournament for the first time was proof – coupled with the opening next year of the new on-campus arena – that men's basketball was on the rise in Vermillion.  
Soon enough, the Coyotes will be at the level of South Dakota State and North Dakota State, which are both perennial NCAA Tournament threats out of the Summit League – a one-bid conference.  
"To get a taste of that, and having the belief that we can do anything we set our minds to, was huge," Smith said. "Once you get that taste, you'll do anything you can to be the best you can be."  
Spend even 10 minutes with Smith and you can see the culture change.  
It's in the way he talks about basketball. It's in the confidence. It's evident in

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# Defense Powering Bucks' Surge

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Defensive players and coaches like to talk about gaps. Play gap sound. Trust your gaps. Cover your gaps. For the Yankton High School football team, there were other gaps and spaces to worry about.  
The defending state champion Bucks had nine spots to fill on the defensive side of the ball. With only two returning starters – linebackers Colin Muth and Sheldon Gant – there was going to be some shuffling and plugging of holes with certain players to new roles.  
"It was like a big jigsaw puzzle," said assistant coach Dan Mitchell, who runs the defense.  
From every spot on the defensive line to every spot in the secondary, Yankton was going to need new faces to take on a starting role. That's where the puzzle comes in: The coaching staff, led by Arlin Likness, realized there were some options, but who would go where?

"Looking at the personnel we had coming back, we knew we had talent, we just had to get them in the right place," Mitchell said.  
In time, the right fit was found, and the progression by the defense has played a key role in Yankton's run to Friday night's Class 11AA state championship game against Pierre.  
After some early struggles, the defense has turned a corner of late, having allowed three touchdowns over its last four games – one each in the two playoff games.  
Opposing offenses are having a hard time moving the ball against the Yankton front seven. Harrisburg last week, for example, was unofficially held to one rushing yard after halftime – counting all the tackles for loss.  
That performance was proof that the Bucks have found their stride on defense, according to Muth.  
"We've been stressing on doing your own job," said Muth, the team's leading tackler (116). "A lot of the guys think, 'Oh there's a gap, I need to shoot it.' But no, do your job and we'll be fine."  
It took some time, though, for the defense to be fine.  
Early on in the season, the Yankton secondary, in particular, struggled to



JAMES D. CIMBUREK/P&D  
A trio of Yankton defenders pressure Harrisburg quarterback Hunter Headlee during their Class 11AA semifinal game on Friday at Crane-Youngworth Field. An improved Yankton defense has been a key to the Bucks' return to the state finals.

prevent big plays through the air – Sioux Falls Washington and Aberdeen Central took advantage of that in consecutive games.  
"We had a big learning curve to go through," Mitchell said.  
For those current seniors who saw a little bit of time last year during the state championship run, there had been flashes of what was to come.  
"I thought it would be pretty good again," senior lineman Alex Withrow said. "I knew some of the kids in our grade were good players."  
As the coaching staff worked to fit the pieces in the proper place, a silver lining emerged: The defense was developing depth. Yankton has probably 20 kids who have rotated through the various spots, according to Mitchell.  
There was also the mid-season realization that it would probably work better to move Withrow to the strong side of the line and

junior Michael Heine to the other side.  
How has that move worked out?  
Withrow has recorded 58 tackles, a team-high seven sacks and has recovered two fumbles, while Heine has recorded 45 tackles and two sacks. That's over half of the defense's 14 total sacks this season.  
"Everyone's stepping up and we're all playing better," Withrow said. "We're all filling our gaps and doing what we have to do."  
"It's just good team football."  
The play of the line, in particular, has allowed the rest of the defense to settle in, according to Mitchell.  
"The thing that's really working for us, our defensive linemen know what they have to do," he said.  
Consequently, the linebackers know what gaps they're responsible for and the secondary can worry about their job – either in a zone or man-to-man look.

Gant, in addition to his offensive duties, ranks second on the team with 74 tackles to go along with three sacks, while senior Sam Stewart (49 tackles, 4 sacks), junior Nick Rokusek (48 tackles, 1 INT) and senior Nick Ahrens (1 sack) have also produced.  
In the secondary, senior Tanner Frick has a team-high five interceptions and senior Rayden Terca has two interceptions.  
Still, it's the play of the guys up front that has set the tone, Muth said.  
"Every time I have so many tackles in a game, I'll always give those guys up

front a pat on the back," he said. "Once they do their job, I'm doing my job."  
"And if they're able to block two guys at once, that's a bonus for me."  
Yankton is going to need its defense to maintain its momentum for Friday's showdown with the Governors, who are led by senior quarterback Brevin Kaiser – a threat to run and pass.  
"We want to get the ball out of his hands," Mitchell said. "If we can shut him down a little bit, that's going to help us."  
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## Yankton Reserved Tickets For 11AA Finals Sold Out

The Yankton School District has announced that its allotment of 1,556 reserved seat tickets for the South Dakota Class 11AA football championship game, Friday in Vermillion, have been sold out.  
Those wishing to purchase reserved seats for the 11AA championship can still do so online through the USD ticket office at www.goyotes.com. Any reserved tickets still available on Friday will be sold at the door 90 minutes prior to kickoff.  
Student general admission tickets are still available at the YSD Administration building or the YHS Activities Office. Student tickets are not available online, but will be available at the door 90 minutes prior to kickoff.  
Fans requiring handicap seating are asked to contact the USD Ticket office at 605-677-5959.  
Yankton faces Pierre in the Class 11AA championship on Friday at the DakotaDome in Vermillion. Start time is set for 7:30 p.m.

## Bucks Pep Rally Thursday

Yankton High School will host a pep rally for the YHS football team on Thursday at 6 p.m. at the YHS main gym. The public is invited to attend. There is no charge for the event.  
Yankton plays Pierre in the Class 11AA championship on Friday at the DakotaDome in Vermillion. Game time is set for 7:30 p.m.

## Yankton Fans Asked To Wear Red For Finals

The Yankton School District Activities Office has announced that Yankton's appearance in the Class 11AA football finals will be a "red out." All YHS fans are asked to wear red to the game.  
Yankton plays Pierre on Friday at 7:30 p.m. at the DakotaDome in Vermillion.

## 'Volley For A Cure'



SUBMITTED PHOTO

The Yankton High School volleyball team presented a check for \$4,000 to Yankton Medical Clinic, P.C., funds raised from the team's 'Volley For A Cure' night last month. The money donated to YMC will be used for the 'All Women Count' program, which benefits women who otherwise would not be able to receive comprehensive breast health care. Pictured with the YHS seniors are Bev Karstens (center left), YMS Mammography Team Leader, and Diane Larson, YMC Director of Nursing.

## Calling All Cooks!

The Yankton Daily Press & Dakotan will be publishing a cookbook in December. This cookbook will not only feature recipes from *The Neighbor Lady Wynn Speece* but also local, regional, state and national celebrities as well as our reader submitted recipes. A fun and informative cookbook you'll want to be part of.

This cookbook will be distributed in the Wednesday, December 23 Press & Dakotan. We would like to have your submissions by November 20th. We thank you in advance for your consideration in participating in this cookbook.

You may use the following methods to submit your recipes:

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or mail to:  
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