

# Michigan State's Adreian Payne not shy about telling how he hurdled learning disability

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Adreian Payne



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Richard Gates looked down at his phone and frowned. *Why was Adreian Payne calling him in the middle of a school day?*

The superintendent of Jefferson Township (Ohio) Schools, stuck in a meeting at the time, declined the call. Payne called again. Gates excused himself from the meeting and answered.

Payne had just excused himself from his high school precalculus class, stepping into the hallway to call Gates. He wanted him to know that the teacher was not explaining quadratic equations correctly.

Gates had to smile.

"Moments like that, those are the rewards," Gates said of that conversation during Payne's senior year of high school. "It hits you, you realize how far a kid can come if he wants it and is willing to work for it. This is a kid who couldn't add fractions in ninth grade."

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Michigan State's Adreian Payne, scoring against Illinois Jan. 31, received his team's Scholar-Athlete Award as a sophomore. / KIRTHMON F. DOZIER/Detroit Free Press

A kid who was diagnosed as "cognitively disabled" in kindergarten. A kid who spent kindergarten through sixth grade in a separate building with other "CD" cases, then seventh through ninth in the "resource room," isolated from his peers.

A kid who was named academic All-Big Ten and received his team's Scholar-Athlete Award as a sophomore at Michigan State.

Payne's story is earning attention -- it was recently featured on the Big Ten Network's "The Journey" -- because he is a 6-foot-10 bundle of skill and athleticism on the basketball court. The junior big man is starting to play like a future pro for the No. 4 Spartans (22-5, 11-3 Big Ten) as they try to stay in the Big Ten race today in his home state against No. 18 Ohio State (19-7, 9-5).

It's also earning attention because Payne wants it that way. He shrugged off the snide remarks in high school, the people calling him "soft" and "Dr. Gates' boy," and worked

every weekday with Gates from sophomore year on to make it as a student.

Payne talks openly of his hurdles and what it took to overcome them.

"It's been great," said Payne, an interdisciplinary studies major at MSU with a 3.1 grade-point average. "The fans, everybody has been great, saying they like my story and they appreciate it. Some kids were motivated by it, and some teachers (in Lansing) want me to come speak to their staff about my situation in high school."

Payne is an advocate for the philosophy Gates and many educators share: That kids with learning disabilities should be included in the general student body when possible. And as one of about 1,200 MSU students who receive help from the school's Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities (RCPD), Payne makes sure to tell kids that there's no shame in asking for it.

"If you don't use your resources, you're not going to make it," said Jim Pignataro, MSU associate AD and director of the school's Student-Athlete Support Services (SASS). "That's the neat thing about A.P.'s story, he wants to get it out there that it's OK to use those resources."

Pignataro has been giving academic support to MSU athletes for 14 years and has been in the field since 1994. He's not sure he has seen anyone as devoted as Payne.

"From Day 1, his attitude has been excellent," Pignataro said. "And it's not just his attitude and work ethic. He literally does not miss things. He really is focused on getting that degree."

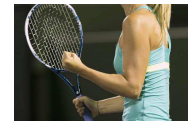
Kristin Reinhart is the SASS academic coordinator for the MSU

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men's and women's basketball teams, and Payne works about 12 to 15 hours a week with Gretchen Paige, learning specialist and liaison to the RCPD. Beyond that, Pignataro often sees Payne in the Clara Bell Smith Academic Center working on his own.

Much of Paige's time with Payne is spent reinforcing things he is learning in class. That's how Gates did it when he started working with Payne as a high school sophomore.

When Payne was a freshman, Gates was still a math teacher in the Jefferson Township 7-12 school. And Payne was still in the "resource room" with others with learning disabilities, mixing with the general student body only for physical education, lunch and assemblies.

"They're kind of pushed to the side," Gates said. "It's easier that way. There's low expectations or no expectations, that's the bottom line."

Gates became principal the next year, and he immediately began targeting kids he believed could flourish in an "inclusive environment." Payne was one of those kids.

Payne was raised by his late grandmother, Mary Lewis. His mother, Gloria Lewis, died when he was 13. Gates approached Mary Lewis and told her the "resource room" was doing her grandson no good.

"I told her, 'This is going to be the tallest janitor in America, because that's all he's going to be able to do,' " Gates recalled.

When Payne was diagnosed with a learning disability as a child, an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) was created for him. It called for his separation from the general student body and exempted him from the "exit exam" Ohio students must take to graduate from high school.

By Ohio law, an IEP can't be changed unless a parent or guardian agrees to change it.

"Grandma tore it up," Gates said of Lewis.

Payne left the "resource room" as a sophomore, and Gates tutored him daily with help from others, even after Gates became superintendent in Payne's junior year. By the end of that year, Payne had passed the exit exam with ease.

By midway through his senior year, Payne had achieved a qualifying score on the ACT and regularly would volunteer to figure out problems on the board in his precalculus class. He "caught fire," Gates said, his hunger to learn more voracious even than his hunger to play basketball.

Gates said other Dayton-area high schools approached Payne when it got around that he was ditching the protections of his IEP to qualify for college as a "normal student."

"They were telling him, 'You don't have to do all that stuff, come here and focus on basketball,' " Gates said. "But Mary and Adreian were having none of that."

Because of his status, Payne could have taken the ACT at his school, alone, administered in portions at different times instead of all at once. He refused.

"He didn't want all that," Gates said. "He didn't want this to look like some (stuff) had been trumped up. And when schools came in to recruit him, we made it clear to everyone: 'He's going to be eligible and he's not going to cheat.' "

Kentucky, Kansas, Ohio State and many others got into the Payne sweepstakes.

Payne said he was turned off when Kentucky coach John Calipari showed up at his school in a helicopter. Lewis favored MSU early and throughout because of coach Tom Izzo's approach. "You could tell," Gates said of Izzo, "the guy was on the up-and-up."

Lewis died Aug. 22, 2011, at 68, a loss Payne has described as "devastating." MSU coaches, players and support staff showed up for the Aug. 30 funeral in Dayton, arriving by bus to support Payne.

When guests at Omega Missionary Baptist Church were invited to speak, Izzo was the first, telling of Lewis' outspoken involvement in the recruiting process. When the service was over, Payne chased down Gates so he could introduce him to Paige.

"He wanted the Michigan State people to know there were people back home who had helped him," Gates said. "And he wanted me to know he was in good hands up there. That was a special moment."

There have been others -- like when Payne gave Gates his academic All-Big Ten plaque and told him of his plans to open a youth center some day in Jefferson Township. And when a Jefferson basketball player said at her signing day news conference that Payne inspired her to excel in class.

And that phone call from Payne to Gates, right in the middle of a school day. Payne had worked ahead with Gates on quadratic equations and was convinced his teacher was wrong in her explanation of them.

"And to be honest," Gates said with a chuckle, "Adreian was right."

*Contact Joe Rexrode: 313-222-2625 or [jrexrode@freepress.com](mailto:jrexrode@freepress.com). Follow him on Twitter @joerexrode. Check out his MSU blog at [freep.com/heyjoe](http://freep.com/heyjoe).*

*MSU football recruit Dylan Chmura will answer your questions in a live chat at 2 p.m. Tuesday at [freep.com/sports](http://freep.com/sports). [Submit early questions here](#).*

### **More Details: Meet Adreian Payne**

**Age:** 22.

**Vitals:** 6-feet-10, 240 pounds.

**Hometown:** Dayton, Ohio.

**Major:** Interdisciplinary studies, emphasis on business and human

resources.

**Notable:** Payne was an academic All-Big Ten selection as a sophomore, winning the team's Scholar-Athlete Award for having the best grade-point average (3.1) among upperclassmen (sophomore or older). He is fourth on the Spartans in scoring (9.8 per game) and leads the team with seven rebounds per game. In five career games against Ohio State, Payne is averaging 10.6 points and is shooting 20-for-26 from the field.

### Big Ten standings

Team	Conf	All
Indiana	12-2	24-3
Michigan State	11-3	22-5
Wisconsin	10-4	19-8
Michigan	9-4	22-4
Ohio State	9-5	19-7
Illinois	7-7	20-8
Minnesota	6-8	18-9
Iowa	6-8	17-10
Purdue	5-8	12-14
Northwestern	4-10	13-14
Nebraska	4-10	13-14
Penn State	0-14	8-18

### Saturday's result

Nebraska 64, Iowa 60

### Today's games

Illinois at **Michigan**, 1:00

**Michigan State** at Ohio St., 4:00

Northwestern at Purdue, 6:00

### Today: Buckeyes

**Matchup:** No. 4 MSU (22-5, 11-3 Big Ten) vs. No. 18 Ohio State (19-7, 9-5).

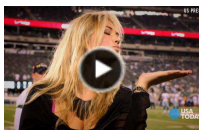
**Tip-off:** 4, Value City Arena, Columbus, Ohio.

**TV/radio:** CBS (Ch. 62), WJR-AM (760).

**Line:** Buckeyes by 5.

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