

The State News



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It's Miller Time

When the likes of Mateen Cleaves, Charlie Bell, Morris Peterson and Antonio Smith graced the floor of Breslin Center, it was clear to everybody watching where they were from just by looking at them.

Each one of them hailed from Flint, Mich., and they, along with the media and Spartan fan base, affectionately called the group "The Flintstones." All have the word "Flint" tattooed on their upper arms.

Many players across the spectrum of professional athletics have tattoos, and the trend seems to be trickling down to the collegiate level as well.

Men's basketball head coach Tom Izzo said it's a fad — it's just one that doesn't go away. "I just wonder if all these guys that got them, what they're going to feel like 10 years from now because it's still your body," Izzo said. "I'm always trying to tell our guys 'Keep everything in moderation and you'll be fine.'"

It's not only the men's game where the practice is becoming more popular. Women's basketball head coach Suzy Merchant said she agrees with Izzo in that she wonders what the students will look like down the road.

"A lot of these kids, when you recruit, they already have them, and if their parents are going to let them get them when they're minors, we can't really stop it," Merchant said. "My personal preference is that you don't put a tattoo anywhere you can see it, in street clothes or shorts or whatever."

The big man

Derrick Nix has a lot of tattoos.

Up and down each of his arms and trickling down to his hands, tattoos represent many of the beliefs and true loves of the senior center and captain of the MSU men's basketball team.

He has the state of Michigan on one arm with a tagline that reads "product of my environment" underneath it, representing his birthplace of Detroit and his personal connection to where he's from. Nix also has his mom's and aunt's names high close to his shoulder on the other arm.

"I feel like tattoos definitely (are) a new era that everybody's getting them, not to say that's why I'm getting mine," Nix said. "A lot of people get tattoos because they think it looks sweet. I get tattoos because it's something I like, not because it's something I see."

Because it might be difficult to get a job, he said he uses his tattoos as motivation to eschew the possibility of working a desk job in pursuit of a career in basketball.

"I've got tattoos on my hands, so I don't plan on working a job unless I get hurt," Nix said. "I don't plan on working because I feel like my profession is basketball."

Barring a major injury or personal setback, he said the future will play out, and he's not terribly worried about what his tattoos look like down the road.

"Like my mom always tells me, 'You've got all those tattoos, what are you going to do when you're 70 and wrinkled, and you're going to have all these wrinkle marks on you, and your grandson and granddaughter going to be asking, 'What's all that?''" Nix said. "I just tell her I'll worry about it when it gets here."

Smells like team spirit

Still, the negative connotation that many times comes with tattoos is not always true.

Many members of the MSU swimming team have a single Spartan head tattooed on their left shoulder, and head swimming coach Matt Gianiodis said it's mostly just the guy's team doing it.

"The left shoulder thing was started six or seven years ago by the guys that graduated in 2010," Gianiodis said. "At this point, not counting the freshmen, maybe 60 percent of our (men's) team has it on there."

Although it doesn't have an explicit significance to getting the tattoo, he said it's a nice way to show which team they swim for, especially in a sport that doesn't have jerseys.

"Sometimes, the boys, when they go up there, they don't have a lot of space to put a logo on the uniform, so that's kind of cool," Gianiodis said. "It's a nice way to let everyone know they're Spartans. It's a way to show their pride."

The swimming team members aren't the only Spartans to show their pride with ink.

Sophomore running back Nick Hill has an intricate Spartan with puffy clouds that takes up the entire right side of his chest.

Former Spartan football player Jerel Worthy has a Spartan on his arm stomping on a Wolverine, and former MSU basketball player Delvon Roe has a gruff Sparty on his arm.

"It was something that I just thought up," Worthy told his hometown Dayton Daily News in 2011. "I was thinking about getting a Spartans tattoo anyway. I threw a couple ideas up in the air, and this is what we came up with."

How is it done?

Kevin Platte, owner and artist at The Tattoo Shop in Lansing, has worked on Spartan athletes including former running back TJ Duckett and former basketball players Korie Lucious and Draymond Green and said he loves his career because of his love for art and drawing.

“The idea that I can create something on paper and then tattoo it onto someone’s body, and they’re going to wear it (until) the day they die, that’s a huge, warming feeling,” Platte said. “When people want your work, that’s a huge compliment.”

He said he thinks so many athletes want tattoos simply because so many of their peers already have them.

“They see that, and they want that,” he said. “Guys play pro ball, and these kids want to play pro ball, so for them, I think that’s what it is.”

Platte, who has been working in the business for more than 20 years, said there are two types of customers he typically sees — one of which encompasses the demographic of athletes he’s seen.

“Somebody might come in here and get one tattoo as a remembrance piece of a child or a parent, and then we’ll never see them ever again,” he said. “Other people that are heavily covered, like Korie (Lucious) and Draymond (Green), most of those guys we’ll see once a month for continuous work.”

Career effects

MSU Field Career Consultant Jennifer Jennings said many times, students come into her office to ask how getting a tattoo can affect their career.

“I always think it’s interesting that they know to ask, that always tells me something that they’re a little unsure career wise,” Jennings said. “Getting them to really think through that process of why it is a big deal because sometimes that might answer their question of whether or not an employer would hold that against them.”

She said with the popularity of tattoos growing, she looks for professionals have them to show them an example of successful people with them.

“When getting tattoos, it’s got to be something that they want to do, that they believe in doing,” she said.

“If they have a concern that someone might judge them because of it, they probably aren’t going to have something that everybody else sees. Since it is a popular activity for college students to get tattoos, it is something they want to consider, and so I will set an example for them of current professionals that have one that you would never know because they’re covered.”

Jennings said she doesn’t know of an industry that frowns upon tattoos, but they also can be used as a confidence booster.

“I think that is a personal choice,” she said. “I would never coach or advise a student to get one or to not get one. If it makes the person, through their own self-expression, feel better, I don’t think that’s bad.”

Just a fad

Reminiscing of his days of growing up in Iron Mountain, Mich., to his time on the bench behind longtime mentor Jud Heathcote, the fad makes sense to Izzo.

Izzo doesn't like looking at his college photos with long hair or remembering when he wore bell-bottoms, but he said tattoos are a different type of fad because they are permanent.

"The only thing is, a tattoo is one of the fads that doesn't go away," he said. "It doesn't kill me one way or another, I just wonder what they're going to be like five, six, seven, 10 years from now."

Still, he said similar to any other fad, the longer it lasts, the more people are going to have them. "Right now, I try to tell (Nix) most of the (professional basketball team) owners don't have them," Izzo said. "Like some of the other fads, as it gets later and longer, people hiring people will have them, too."

Merchant added that there really isn't any way to stop college athletes from doing it because they're adults and they can do what they want to their bodies, but wonders what it will look like when they're older, especially with women.

"It's pretty cool when you're 18, 19, 20, and on a basketball court, but then the next step is how does it look when it's old," she said. "It's like you're going to have to get married someday or go for a big-time job interview. That's where I start to grapple with it."

She said that looking around the league both in college and the WNBA, most players have them, and have them all over their bodies.

"They've got them up on their ears and down their necks and on their arms and on their legs," Merchant said. "That's who our girls look up to, that's who they see, (those are) the best players in the country. More than 80 percent of them have some sort of tattoo."