

# From Okemos High's O-ZONE to Michigan State's IZZONE: The Red Cedar Journeys of "The Chieftain Fourteen"

by Kerry J. Byrnes (Okemos '63)

*Proud Chieftains fly their colors high,  
Maroon and white unfold,  
Through endless years of days gone by  
This wondrous tale is told:*

*Beside a stream where people dreamed  
And planned their life anew,  
There stands a school both proud and strong,  
Praise Okemos so true.*

Lyrics and Melody by H. Owen Reed for  
Okemos High School ~ 1958

## ***Victory for MSU***

*On the banks of the Red Cedar  
There's a school that's known to all  
Its specialty is winning  
And those Spartans play good ball.*

*"Victory for MSU" ~ 1959*



Michigan's Red Cedar River (between Okemos and East Lansing)

## **From Okemos High's O-ZONE to Michigan State's IZZONE:**

### **The Red Cedar Journeys of "The Chieftain Fourteen"**

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## 🏀 Dedication 🏀

I dedicate this book first to my father, Francis C. Byrnes, who in the late 1950s and early 1960s, took my brother Kevin and me to Michigan State Spartans basketball games at Jenison Fieldhouse where Jumpin' Johnny Green's amazed with his rebounding and scoring skills—and wowed the fans whenever he dunked the ball.

The next dedication is to Gus Ganakas who was my first/only basketball coach during the winter of 1957-68, while I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade at St. Thomas Aquinas, in East Lansing, Michigan. Saturday practices under Gus' tutelage introduced me to the game in a little more depth than had my father who hung a basketball hoop with no net in our garage, the hoop nailed to a board affixed to the cement blocks on the backside of the chimney of our living room's fireplace. One could only get a long shot off from certain spots as the track for the garage door partially blocked any long shot to the right side of the hoop, plus we needed to be careful not to put too much arch on our shots lest the ball knock out the light bulbs on the garage's relatively low ceiling. It was such rudimentary skills acquired in our garage under those conditions that I brought to Gus' practices. The end result was that come game time I mostly rode the bench, getting minutes of playing time only when I could do little to no harm if Coach subbed me into the game when my more skilled teammates already had victory well in hand.



**“The Byrnes Boys” @ Spartans First Big Ten Game against Maryland**

**L to R: Kevin Byrnes (my brother), Shannon Byrnes (my son), Gus Ganakas, Kerry Byrnes and Braden Byrnes (my grandson)**

While “The Byrnes Boys” are big Spartans Basketball fans with a modicum of b-ball talent, that talent improved greatly over the past three generations. While I never made the Okemos High team, my son Shannon was a member of the South Lakes Seahawks (Reston, Virginia) team that made it to a Virginia regional final game, while grandson Braden (now 11 years old) has played on local, travel, and AAU teams, primarily as a point guard or on the wing as a scorer, passer, and team leader. He also was a member NOVA94, an AAU-U9 team that won the AAU national championship for that age group in 2018. Recently, the kid won an Elks Lodge Hoop Shoot contest, making 23 out of 25 free throw attempts—and was selected to the travel league’s all-star team.

For all the time Shannon has invested in coaching South Lakes High teams at all levels from Freshmen to Junior Varsity to Varsity and, on top of that, coaching and mentoring his son, and for all the hard work that Braden has put into developing and improving his game, this **Chieftains**-cum-**Spartans** Basketball chronicle is also dedicated to them.



## 🏀 Acknowledgements 🏀

This book would not have been possible without the help of many fans of Okemos High School basketball and Michigan State University basketball, including the collaboration of each of **The Chieftain Fourteen**: John Shick, Brian Breslin, Joe Shackleton, Greg Lott, Bob Fossum, Greg Vanek, Sue Tucker, Kris Weshinskey, Kristen Rasmussen, Mike Kebler, Anthony Ianni, Tracy Nogle, Dan Chapman, and Conner George.

Internet searches using Google and other search engines (e.g. Spokeo) helped me in tracking down and obtaining contact information ( email address and/or phone number) for most of the fourteen **Chieftains**-cum-**Spartans** who, once contacted, kindly shared information by mail, email, phone, and/or in person. For several players who were a bit more difficult to track down, a special thanks to their mothers – Cathy George, Michelle Chapman, and Sally Nogle – who were most kind in helping me to get in touch with their son or daughter.

Thanks also to Sherrie Paty Barber (Okemos High Class of '66) whose fantastic Internet search skills tracked down contact information when I was not able to locate a player or coach.

A shout out to the seven **Okemos High** coaches of **The Chieftain Fourteen** who kindly shared for this book's Foreword their memories of and reflections on the Chieftains they once coached. These coaches are: Ron Mott, Bob Porritt, Doug Richey, Tom Schaberg, Stan Stolz, Dan Stolz, and Jeff Wonch. A special thank you to Scott Richey who kindly helped me get in touch with his father, Doug Richey, the most senior of these coaches; and to Scott Stolz who similarly helped me in contacting his father (Dan Stolz) and his grandfather (Stan Stolz).

A hearty thank you also to the current and former **Michigan State** head coaches and former assistant coaches who shared memories of the former **Chieftains** they coached as **Spartans**. The head coaches are: Tom Izzo, Suzy Merchant, and Karen Langeland. Former assistant coaches are: John Holms, Pat Miller, and Lance Olson. Thanks also to several former assistant coaches – Dave Harshman, Edgar Wilson, and Fred Paulsen – for their help in figuring out that it was John Holms who was Bob Fossum's Spartans JV coach during the 1980-81 season.

A special thanks to Rod Ellis (Okemos'65 and President, Okemos Alumni Association) who tracked down and scanned hundreds of pages from over 50 Okemos High School *Tomahawk* yearbooks, including scans of individual players as well as of the boys and girls basketball teams. This process was facilitated by Okemos High School Librarian Sandy Fields who retrieved yearbooks from library archives and allowed Rod to borrow the books to get them scanned either at his home or at the Capital Area District Library.



Thanks also to Sky Tribell (Okemos '69) who helped me to contact one of the earliest Chieftain players, Brian Breslin (Okemos High Freshman Team 1965-66). Also, when the Okemos High School Library was missing a *Tomahawk* for a specific year, Sky put out APBs to track down those fugitive *Tomahawk* yearbooks. For the years when Brian Breslin was at East Lansing High School, Eileen Zimmerman, the ELHS Library Media Manager, shared scans of pages from the yearbooks for Brian's two years at ELHS.

A thank you shout out to Laura Winkel (Okemos '68), Heather Burch (Okemos '88), Shelly Davis (Okemos '88), and Kellie Eberly Page (Okemos '88) for their assistance in helping me to obtain scans from the 1988 *Tomahawk*.

A special thanks to Ed Busch, Archivist at MSU Archives, for his assistance in tracking down and emailing scans of basketball-related pages from MSU *Wolverine* yearbooks and high quality photos of MSU teams, players, and/or action shots.

Early in my research, Bill Beekman (then MSU Vice President and now MSU Athletic Director), Jane Miller (Office of the MSU President), and Jamie Baldwin (MSU Athletics) were helpful in steering me in the right direction to track down information.

A subscription to Newspapers.com enabled searching back issues of the *Lansing State Journal* and other newspapers, which made it possible to reconstruct high school game-by-game results and the contributions of **The Chieftain Fourteen** to those games—and ditto for university-level games! A little piece of software called “Snipping Tool” enabled capturing JPG images from newspaper articles; web sites (e.g., YouTube); social media posts from Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter; and televised Spartans games recorded on my DVR.

Also extremely valuable—the *Michigan State Basketball Media Guides* published each season by MSU Athletics Communications Department. Each season these contain a profile on each Spartan player plus lots of historical information on prior year Spartans teams. Fox Sports College Properties staff (Sarah Hinsberg, Stephanie Pajot, and Morgan Stinson) assisted in providing copies of Spartans *Game Day Programs* that featured **Conner George**.

Men's Basketball Office staff (Kristin Ray & Cedes Powers) helped in contacting Coach Izzo, while Cedes Powers in the Women's Basketball Office helped in contacting Coach Merchant.

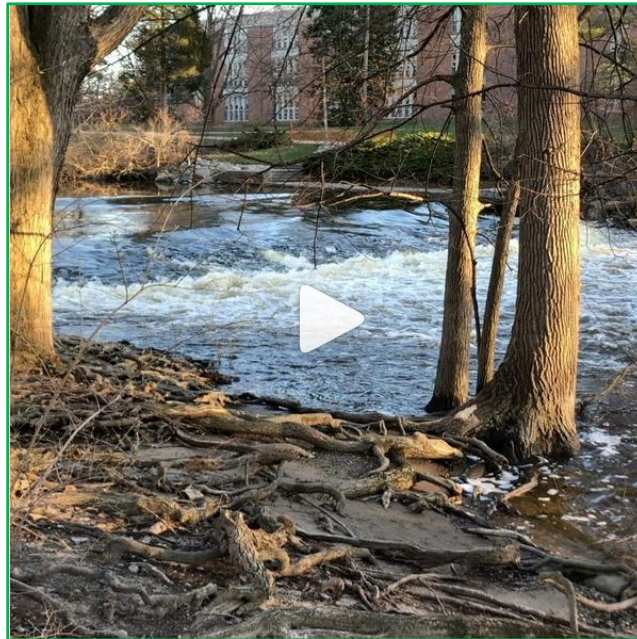
Finally, a special thanks to my wife Sonia for her patience in allowing me to put so much time into this project.

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## 🏀 Foreword 🏀

Over the past 60 seasons of **Okemos High Chieftains** basketball, 14 student-athletes (eleven boys and three girls) traveled from **Okemos High School** down the **Red Cedar River** to nearby East Lansing, to continue their education and pursue their dream of playing basketball for the **Michigan State University Spartans**. While none of these **Chieftains** were a Magic Johnson, Mateen Cleaves, or, Cassius Winston, at the end of the day they also were **Spartans**!

This book chronicles the **Okemos High** and **Michigan State** careers of **The Chieftain Fourteen**, each chapter highlighting an individual player's accomplishments on the basketball courts of OHS and MSU, providing updates on their lives since graduating from MSU, and sharing each's reflections "looking back" on playing basketball as a **Chieftain** and a **Spartan**. The last chapter (**Chapter 15 - 🏀 Red Cedar Rebounds**) highlights significant contributions of these **Chieftains** to **Spartans** basketball.



**The Red Cedar River Flowing from Okemos High to Michigan State**

## Chapter 0 - Introduction

This is a story about a river (**Red Cedar**), a high school (**Okemos High**), a university (**Michigan State**), and 14 **Okemos High Chieftain** basketball players who, after graduation, went on to become members of the **Michigan State Spartans** basketball team. The story begins in this chapter that includes: (1) a brief description of the **Red Cedar River** in relation to **Okemos High** and **Michigan State**; (2) my connection to **Chieftain** and **Spartan** basketball; and (3) an overview of the Okemos community. Then each ensuing chapter (1 through 14) chronicles the basketball career of each **Chieftain-cum-Spartan**, including what became of each after he or she had graduated from **Michigan State** and each's reflections “**looking back**” on how their basketball experiences contributed to their lives. Finally, the last chapter, **Red Cedar Rebounds**, highlights the contributions of these 14 **Chieftains to Spartan** basketball.

### The Red Cedar River

The first verse of “Victory for MSU,” the Michigan State University fight song, references the Michigan State campus as located along the banks of the **Red Cedar River** (Map 1). Flowing East to West from Cedar Lake near Livingston downstream to Okemos and through the MSU campus, the **Red Cedar** empties into the Grand River near Lansing.



Map 1: Red Cedar River Flowing Through Okemos and Michigan State University



As shown in Map 2 below, Hagadorn Rd. runs north to south and marks the western boundary of the Meridian Charter Township, with East Lansing and Michigan State University just to the west of this boundary. East Mount Hope Ave. runs west to east, intersecting Hagadorn Road immediately above the “Michigan State University” text in Map 2, and then continues east ending at Okemos Road.

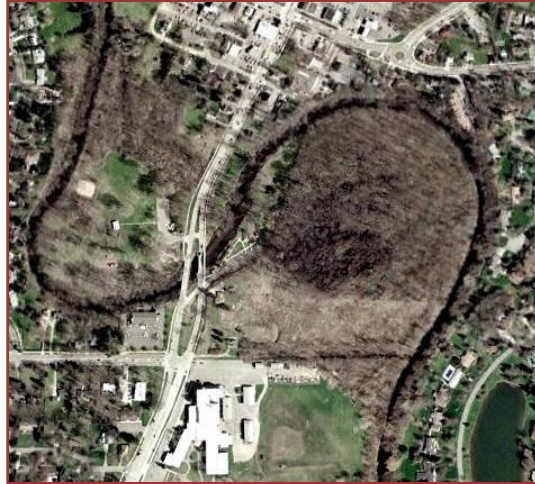


**Map 2: Okemos in Meridian Township in Relation to Michigan State University**

The building (see photo below) that houses the original Okemos High School is located just southeast of the intersection of East Mt. Hope Ave. and Okemos Road. Of special note here, the **Red Cedar** winds its way through Okemos just north of the original Okemos High School (see photo at top of next page).

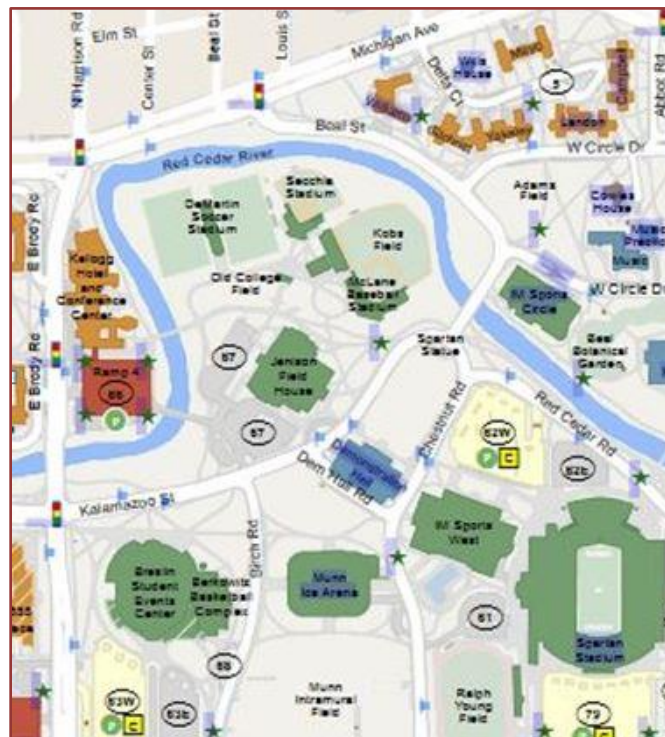


**Okemos High School (circa late 1950s)**



**Okemos High School (left of lower center) just south of the Red Cedar River on the southeast corner of the Okemos Rd. and Mount Hope Ave. Intersection**

Note in Map 2 (on previous page) that the **Red Cedar** passes not only just north of Okemos High School but also, several miles downstream (see Map 3 below), through Michigan State University, just west of Jenison Field House and north of the Breslin Center, the two buildings that have hosted the home games (see photos further below) of the **Michigan State Spartans** basketball team.



**Map 3: Red Cedar River in relation to Jenison Field House and Breslin Center on the Michigan State University Campus**



The **Spartans** home court was first housed in Jenison Field House (1940-1989). It was on this court that Earvin “Magic” Johnson (Lansing’s Everett High School) led his team to the **Spartans** first NCAA Championship in 1979. Ten years later in 1989, the home court of the **Spartans** was moved to the Breslin Center, where the **Spartans**, ten years later during the 1999-2000 season, battled in key games that culminated that season in the **Spartans** winning the 2000 men’s NCAA championship.



**Jenison Field House (Spartan Basketball Home: 1940-1989)**

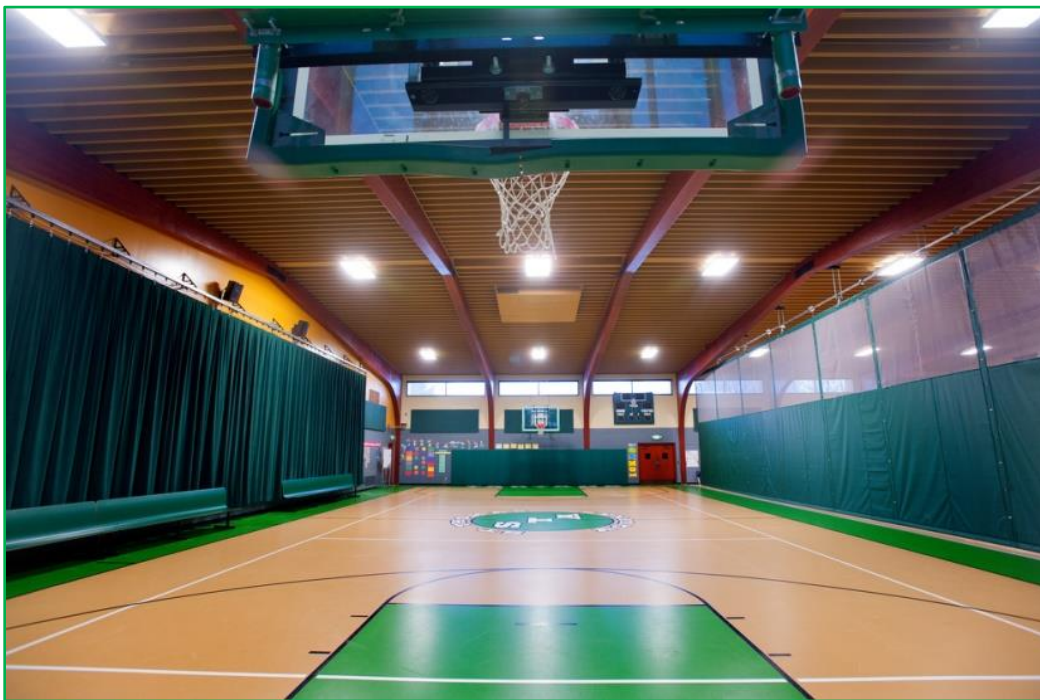


**Breslin Center (Spartan Basketball Home: 1989-Present)**

## My Connection to Chieftains and Spartans Basketball

In the late 1950s, our family lived in a house (no longer there) that was located at 4528 South Hagadorn Road, just three lots north of the northeast corner of the Hagadorn Rd. and Mount Hope Avenue intersection (Map 2). Our house was on the Meridian Township (shaded area) side of Hagadorn Road, just across the street from East Lansing and the farm fields of the MSU campus.

It was 61 years ago in 1958 that I only began to play basketball while in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade at St. Thomas Aquinas in East Lansing, Michigan. With only rudimentary basketball skills, and in spite of the disadvantage of wearing glasses, I somehow made the team. During practice my role was largely to defend the starters, and during games to ride the bench, ever ready for the coach to call on me to go into the game. But finally I got some playing time near the end of a game or two after the starters had run up the score and our lead over the opponent. As I vaguely recall (or would like to think), I once grabbed a rebound and put it back up to score a basket, though that may have happened only in practice.



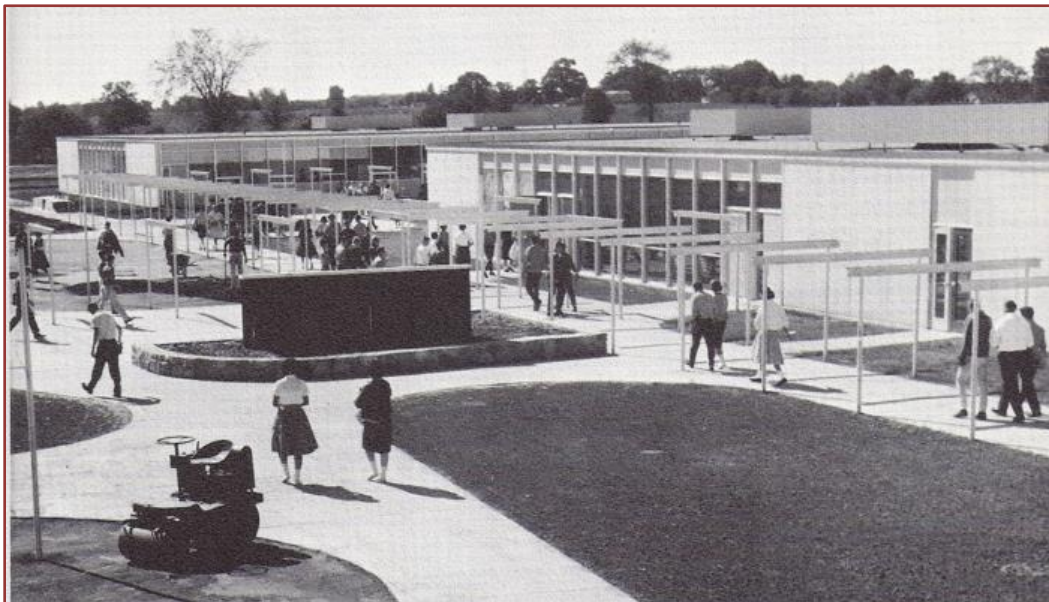
**St. Thomas Aquinas Parish School Basketball Court (November 29, 2017)**

After graduation from St. Thomas Aquinas, and after some discussion with my parents, it was agreed that I would enroll at **Okemos High School (OHS)** rather than stay at STA for 9<sup>th</sup> grade or enroll at Resurrection High School in Lansing, quite a bit farther from our home than Okemos High. As the basketball season neared, I worked on my basketball skills, practicing my jump shot on a basket hung over a neighbor's garage door, dreaming I'd be good enough to make the **Chieftain** freshmen basketball team.



But I never made the OHS basketball team even though I tried out four years in a row. Looking back more objectively on those days than I could at the time, I now clearly see that any chance of making the team was greatly impeded not only by lack of height (6' 1") and speed but also by even less basketball talent, skills, and IQ. Chances of making the team were squashed even further my freshman year when, during tryouts, I severely sprained my right ankle. This put an end to any chance I might get lucky and be able to demonstrate what little basketball prowess I had at the time.

That freshman year (1959-60) was the last year the Chieftain Basketball team's home games were played in the school's original building at the corner of Mt. Hope Ave. and Okemos Road (see photo below Map 2). By the fall of 1960, the school's student body had relocated to a [new campus of buildings located further south on Okemos Road](#). The school's gym, with bleachers closed, hosted two basketball courts. When the bleachers were opened, they framed a beautiful "center" basketball court outlined in **maroon** and white, the school's colors. It was on this court that I first attended an Okemos home basketball game.



**Okemos High School (OHS) Campus (1961 *Tomahawk* Yearbook)**

In the meantime, from 1953 to 1960, my father held a position as associate professor at Michigan State, while serving as assistant director of the National Project in Agricultural Communication (NPAC). Often, during the winter, dad took my brother Kevin and me to Spartans basketball games at Jenison Field House. There I saw Spartan greats such as Johnny Green and Horace Walker excel on the court. After I graduated from **Okemos High** in 1963, I enrolled at **Michigan State** and graduated with a BA in Sociology in 1967 and a MA in Communication in 1968. During that period I went to some of the **Spartans** home games where I saw another **Spartan** great, Pete Gent, play.



After MSU, I was out of touch with **Spartan** basketball for quite a while, first going to Colombia in 1968, where I was a “walk-on” to a project that MSU was implementing, under U.S. Agency for International Development funding, to conduct a study of the agricultural marketing system in the Cauca Valley. I left the project just short of a year, in September 1969, to begin study for a doctorate in sociology at Iowa State University. Interrupted by a year-and-a-half of service in VISTA (Miami, Florida) from 1970-1972, I graduated from Iowa State in 1975 and moved to Alabama for a job as a sociologist with the International Fertilizer Development Center (IFDC) where I was employed until late 1984.

During most of this period I did not stay touch with **Spartan** basketball, my attention focused on working on the project in Colombia, doctoral study at Iowa State, serving with VISTA in Miami, and working with IFDC in Alabama. But one day in 1979, I saw that HBO was going to show an exhibition game featuring Russia’s national basketball team and the **Michigan State Spartans**. I didn’t have HBO on my cable subscription but knew a friend who did and arranged to view the game at his apartment. That not only was the first time I heard of and saw Earvin “Magic” Johnson play but also became the impetus for me to reconnect with **Spartan** basketball. Thereafter I’d try to catch every **Spartan** game on TV (which was all too infrequent) and, otherwise, would try to listen on the radio to **Spartan** basketball games played in the evening.

Eventually, with the explosion of cable channels and Internet radio, it became possible to listen to or even watch most **Spartan** basketball games. Indeed, now with multiple cable channels (AXS, BTN, CBS, ESPN, ESPN2, ESPNU, FOX, FS1 – and even BTN Plus on the internet), it is now possible to watch every **Spartan** game on TV unless one opts to travel to East Lansing or an away destination game (e.g., against Maryland) to watch the **Spartans** in person. Even when traveling outside the United States, I watch **Spartan** games, thanks to my home’s Wi-Fi, cable box, and DVR being hooked up to a Slingbox that “slings” **Spartan** games over the Internet to far-flung countries where, with the Slingplayer app installed on my laptop, tablet, and cell phone, I can watch **Spartan** basketball games anywhere in the world where there is a wi-fi connection.

Over the years, as I watched **Spartan** games and reviewed the **Spartan** roster, I saw that several **Spartan** teams had one or more players who had graduated from **Okemos High**. This sparked an interest to chronicle their **OHS** and **MSU** basketball careers and beyond, figuratively as it were, their journeys down the **Red Cedar** from **Okemos High** to **Michigan State**. In researching those journeys I identified 14 **Chieftains** (11 boys and 3 girls) – **The Chieftain Fourteen** – who later became members of a **Michigan State Spartans** basketball squad during one or more seasons. Before turning to our recounting of the journeys of **The Chieftain Fourteen**, let’s first get acquainted with the community of Okemos as the social setting of Okemos High School.

## Overview of the Okemos Community

### Proud Chieftains

*Proud Chieftains fly their colors high,  
Maroon and white unfold,  
Through endless years of days gone by  
This wondrous tale is told:*

*Beside a stream where people dreamed  
And planned their life anew,  
There stands a school both proud and strong,  
Praise Okemos so true.*

**Lyrics and Melody by H. Owen Reed for Okemos High School ~ 1958**

Twelve of **The Chieftain Fourteen** graduated from Okemos High, while two Chieftains transferred to and graduated from other high schools. One played basketball for OHS his freshmen year but, after his parents bought a home in East Lansing, he transferred to East Lansing High School for the balance of his high school basketball career. The other player's family, after his sophomore year at OHS, moved to Virginia, where he played his last two high school basketball seasons for Loudoun Valley High School in Purcellville, Virginia.

Okemos High School serves the community of Okemos, an unincorporated community in the Meridian Charter Township, Ingham County, Michigan. For statistical purposes, Okemos is a census-designated place (CDP) without any separate legal existence as a municipality. Local government is provided by the township. Founded in 1839 and first known as the settlement of Hamilton, Okemos was a trading point with the surrounding Ojibwa people with farming as their primary economic activity. In 1859, a year after the death of Chief John Okemos (on whose treaty lands Hamilton was built), the community was renamed Okemos to honor Chief Okemos as a Native American, thus why Okemos High has the nickname of the Chiefs or Chieftains.



**Chief John Okemos**

Originally a farming community, Okemos is now a major suburb of nearby Lansing and East Lansing, with many Michigan State employees residing in Okemos. As reported in the 2010 census, the population of Okemos as a Census Designated Place (CDP) is comprised of 21,369 people, 8,824 households, and 5,416 families. At the time of the census, the racial makeup of Okemos was 76.5% White, 14.4% Asian, 5.1% Black or African American, 0.3% Pacific Islander, 1.1% from other races, and 2.6% from two or more races, with 3.3% being Hispanic or Latino. [US News](#) reported the distribution of the student body of Okemos High as predominantly White (71%), the bulk of minority enrollment being a mix of Asian (15%), Black (8%), and Hispanic (4%). Thus, Okemos is largely a White community with minorities in the population at large and at Okemos High comprising nearly 25%.

Overall, the average household's median income in the CDP was \$75,736, and median family income was \$101,903. Only about 3.3% of families and 9.6% of the population have incomes below the poverty line. In 2011, *CNN Money* rated Okemos as the 12th-best city to live in for "the rich and single." More recently, as the [Lansing State Journal](#) reported, [Niche.com's 2017 Best Places to Live In America list](#) ranked Okemos as the fourth best place to live in the United States. In April 2020, [US News and World Report released the 2020 Best High Schools](#) list. Among 18,000 schools nationwide, **Okemos High School** ranked #438 nationally and #9 in Michigan, up two spots from its prior #11 rank.

## Okemos High School 2020 Rankings

Okemos High School is ranked #438 in the [National Rankings](#). Schools are ranked on their performance on state-required tests, graduation and how well they prepare students for college. Read more about [how we rank the Best High Schools](#).

### All Rankings

- 🏆 #438 in National Rankings
- 🏆 #9 in Michigan High Schools
- 🏆 #1 in Lansing, MI Metro Area High Schools
- 🏆 #52 in STEM High Schools

SCORECARD		97.54
Took at Least One AP® Exam		58%
Passed at Least One AP® Exam		53%
Mathematics Proficiency		74%
Reading Proficiency		86%
Graduation Rate		96%

Over the past half century, the ethnicity of Okemos High sports team has evolved from teams comprised totally of White players to more ethnically diverse teams. When I was enrolled at Okemos High from 1959-63, the basketball squad was comprised of White players as illustrated by the 1960-61 OHS varsity squad (see 1st photo). But, if we fast break forward in time by nearly 60 years, OHS basketball squads have become more racially diverse, as illustrated by the 2018-19 OHS varsity squad (see 2<sup>nd</sup> photo).



### Okemos High School Varsity Basketball Squads: 1960-61 (L) and 2018-19 (R)

Interestingly, the 2018-19 OHS basketball squad (right photo above) had stellar Black players (e.g., Noah Pruitt and Evan Thomas) who led the team to a 23-3 record, with the team's third loss coming in the 2019 MHSAA Championship Tournament semifinal game. This is not to say that previous Chieftain basketball squads did not include some highly talented Black players. Indeed, **Jonathon Jones** (Class of 2006), was honored twice as All-State and was a Mr. Basketball Finalist in 2006. On graduation, Jones went to **Oakland University** where he played basketball as a four-year starter and in 2008-09 was the NCAA leader in assists. Jones later played professional basketball and was among the first inductees to Okemos High's Athletic Hall of Fame (2015).



**Jonathan Jones (Class of 2006)**



Jones is among other Okemos graduates who played basketball at the university level, just not for the Michigan State University Spartans. Chieftain basketball players, looking just at the boys, who played university/college-level basketball, other than at Michigan State, include at least the following:

- **Bill Breckenfeld** (OHS 1965 / Albion College)
- **Al Inkala** (OHS 1967 / Northern Michigan University)
- **Greg Hebden** (OHS 1972) / Lansing Community College)
- **Jon Wiseman** (OHS 1972) / Aquinas College)
- **Paul Cryderman** (OHS1973 / Albion College)
- **Dave Valkanoff** (OHS 1981 / Albion College)
- **Mike Mertz** (OHS 1982 / Albion College)
- **Bruce Arensmeier** (OHS 1982 / Albion College)
- **Greg Mitchell** (OHS1984 / Hope College)
- **Jonathon Jones** (OHS 2006 / Oakland University)
- **Travis Bader** (OHS 2009 / Oakland University)
- **Matt MacKenzie** (OHS 2009 / University of Chicago)
- **Mitch Asmus** (OHS 2010 / University of Dayton)
- **Matt McKearney** (OHS 2011 / Dartmouth University)
- **Chris Harrison-Docks** (OHS 2012 / Western Kentucky Univ. & DePaul Univ.)
- **Corbin Polec** (OHS 2012 / Lesley University)
- **Vail Hartman** (OHS 2017 / Case Western Reserve University)
- **Evan Thomas** (OHS 2019 / Hope College)

One could also generate a list of **Okemos High Chieftain** girl basketball players who played basketball at the university or college level. For example, while **Laya Hartman** (OHS Class of 2019) was offered a scholarship by Michigan State, she enrolled at **Northwestern**. **Jasmine Clerkley** (Class of 2020) held a MSU scholarship offer but ultimately enrolled at **Bowling Green**. Thus, to date, only three OHS girls basketball players have gone on play basketball for **Michigan State**.

### **The Chieftain Fourteen**

When I enrolled at Okemos High in 1959, the school's enrollment was much smaller than it is today. Then OHS' smaller enrollment resulted in the school being designated as Class B, though at the time there were schools with even smaller enrollments that were designated as Class C or Class D. As the population of the Okemos grew over the years, so too did the enrollment at Okemos High, so much that OHS is now designated as Class A. Of course, growth of Okemos' population over the years had the associated benefit of increasing the pool of athletic talent available for Okemos High to field quality teams in basketball as well as other sports.



Over the years Okemos High's athletic teams competed in various leagues (e.g., years ago Okemos competed in the Ingham County League). Today, Okemos High is a Class A school in the [Capital Area Activities Conference \(CAAC\)](#)'s Blue Division. Created in 2003, the CAAC is a [Central Michigan](#) high school sports league that has 20 member schools across seven counties: [Clinton](#), [Eaton](#), [Ingham](#), [Ionia](#), [Jackson](#), [Livingston](#), and [Shiawassee](#). Since 2014 the CAAC Blue division has eight high schools: East Lansing, Grand Ledge, Holt, Jackson, Lansing Eastern, Lansing Everett, Lansing Sexton, and Okemos (which previously was in the Capital Circuit League but joined the CAAC in 2003). The [Michigan High School Athletic Association](#) (MHSAA) organizes the annual MHSAA Basketball Tournament for the state championships for Class A through Class D high schools.

**The Chieftain Fourteen**, just as referenced in the "Victory for MSU" fight song, have also played "good ball." Indeed, the 1980-81 Okemos girls and boys basketball teams each won the 1981 Class B state championship, with the 1981-82 boys team repeating as the 1982 Class B state champion. Later, the 2005-06 boys team almost won the Class A state championship, losing the championship game, while in 2018-19 boys team came within one game of playing in the Class A state championship before losing in the semifinal. Over the years, near misses aside, Chieftain teams have won many league or conference, district, and regional championships.

Over the past 60 years of OHS boys basketball, the Chieftain boys squads have played under four head coaches: **Bob Baker** (coaching tenure: 1954-1968), **Stan Stolz** (1968-1994), **Dan Stolz** (1994-2012), and **Jeff Wonch** (2012-present). On the side of OHS girls basketball, either **Ron Mott** (1979-1997) or **Tom Schaberg** (2005-2009) coached one or another of the three Chieftain girls who later played for Michigan State. During this span, OHS graduated over two dozen Chieftains who played basketball at the college or university level. However, of all these players, only 14 became members of the NCAA Division I university program closest to Okemos High – the **Michigan State University Spartans**!

For these 14 **Chieftains** it became their dream, sooner or later, to grab a rebound on OHS' home court and, as it were, figuratively dribble the ball down the **Red Cedar River** from the **Okemos High O-ZONE** to the **Michigan State IZZONE** to play basketball for the MSU **Spartans**. Ultimately, these 14 players not only chose to go to Michigan State University but also had the passion and basketball talent, skills, and IQ to succeed in becoming a member of the Spartan basketball squad as a walk-on, a preferred walk-on, or even a scholarship recruit. This special group of 14 basketball players, **The Chieftain Fourteen**, is comprised of **John Shick**, **Brian Breslin**, **Joe Shackleton**, **Greg Lott**, **Bob Fossum**, **Greg Vanek**, **Sue Tucker**, **Kris Weshinskey**, **Kristen Rasmussen**, **Mike Kebler**, **Anthony Ianni**, **Tracy Nogle**, **Dan Chapman**, and **Conner George**.

In the following 14 chapters you also will travel down the **Red Cedar** to discover and relive the journey each of these 14 **Chieftains** took in dribbling a basketball from the **Chieftain O-ZONE** to the **Spartan IZZONE**.



### O-ZONE – A Chieftain Tradition ([Video](#))

[https://twitter.com/student\\_ohs](https://twitter.com/student_ohs)



### Michigan State Spartan Fans in the IZZONE

Each chapter is a player-specific vignette that chronicles not only a player's basketball career at **Okemos High (OHS)** and at **Michigan State (MSU)** but also what became of that player after graduating from MSU. Further, each vignette includes a "looking back" section in which the featured player shares memories of his/her basketball career.

While each chapter provides season-specific game-by-game reporting for each player while he/she played as a Chieftain, the player's career as a Michigan State Spartan generally does not follow this format, rather presenting season-by-season highlights. However, the chapters on two Chieftains (**Sue Tucker** and **Kris Weshinskey**) provide season-by-season and game-by-game coverage for the first female Chieftain and first male Chieftain to play basketball for Michigan State on a four-year scholarship.

Further, the last player-specific chapter not only chronicles **Conner George**'s playing days at **Okemos High** and **Michigan State** but also, for his last two seasons (2018-2020 - Redshirt Junior and Redshirt Senior seasons), follows him from the Spartans first game of the season to their last game of the season. Coverage of George for these two seasons includes a wealth of visuals such as newspaper clippings, photos, videos, and posts from Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Because of this indepth coverage of George, his chapter is divided into three sub-chapters (14-1, 14-2, and 14-3).

Now, before we jump into our time-travel canoe to go back in time and down the **Red Cedar River** from **Okemos High** to **Michigan State** to relive the basketball careers of **The Chieftain Fourteen**, bear in mind the following five considerations (or caveats).

1. Given this chronicle focuses on individual **Chieftain**-cum-**Spartan** players, this narrow focus generally does not capture in-game dynamics (e.g., ties, lead changes, rallies, player fouls, player substitutions, technicals, etc.) that impact on which team is ultimately a game's winner or loser. Similarly, player-specific chapters generally do not capture within-season dynamics of how winning or losing any given game impacts on a team's standings in the conference in which the team competes or, more generally, how wins and losses impact on a team's standing in state-level or national rankings (e.g., Top 25 in the case of NCAA Division I Basketball). But, in each chapter, material copied from a particular source includes a hyperlink that, if clicked on, takes the reader to the source document (e.g., newspaper) from which the text, photo, etc. has been copied. Often these sources provide more detailed information on in-games dynamics or how a team is faring in its conference (league) or in rankings (statewide or nationally).
2. Each **Chieftain**'s path to becoming a **Spartan** wasn't necessarily linear. Rarely, if at all, did a player go from being a starter on the **OHS** varsity squad during his or her senior year to being a starter on the **MSU** varsity squad during his/her freshmen season. To the contrary, the path to becoming a starter or substitute getting more minutes off the bench and on the court, varied from one to another of **The Chieftain Fourteen**, as will become clear on reading each chapter.
3. The dream of making the **Spartans** basketball squad didn't always take root for each **Chieftain** early in his or her basketball career. Depending on the player, the decision by a **Chieftain** to go to college at **Michigan State** and play basketball as a **Spartan** may have been influenced early on by a parent or relative who was or had been associated in one way or another with **MSU**, either as an employee, the school's athletic program, or both. For other **Chieftains** the dream of playing basketball for the **Spartans** did not take root or start to blossom until after a player was on scholarship and playing basketball at another university. Only then, after a season or two, did the player decide to transfer to **Michigan State** and pursue the dream of playing basketball as a **Spartan**. In short, this is to say that each player followed his or own path to begin dreaming about playing basketball for **Michigan State** – and then pursued that path to achieve that dream.

4. Once a **Chieftain** became a member of a **Spartans** basketball squad, it was not always the case that the **Chieftain-cum-Spartan** stayed with the squad for all the basketball seasons for which the player was eligible before graduating from **MSU**. Indeed, several players for one reason or another stepped away from playing basketball as a **Spartan**. However, of these 14 **Chieftains**, none transferred from **MSU** and all stayed through graduation or beyond such as re-enrolling for graduate school at **MSU** to continue playing basketball for the **Spartans**.
5. Importantly, the reader should not forget that basketball is a team sport. When a team's five players are on offense, they play together as a team with the goal of scoring points by shooting the basketball so its trajectory puts the ball through the hoop for one, two, or three points. Then, on defense, the team's five players try to stop the opponent's team from scoring points. Thus, in some ways, it is unfair to single out the accomplishments of one player. For example, often a player is able to score only because another teammate passed the ball to the player who shot the ball and scored the basket. The player who passed the ball gets credit for an assist, while the player catching the pass gets credit for scoring the basket. Similarly, a player gets credit for grabbing a rebound off a missed basket but was only able to haul in the rebound because another teammate blocked out and prevented a player on the other team from being in position to get the rebound.

In short, while this chronicle shines the spotlight on the basketball accomplishments of each of the **Okemos High Chieftains** who became **Michigan State Spartans**, please bear in mind that their accomplishments were made as part of an overall team effort during games in which other team members may have scored more points, hauled in more rebounds, had more assists or steals, or blocked more shots. Whether a team wins or loses, playing basketball is a team sport in which each player strives to help his or her teammates win the game, often in ways a fan watching the game may not notice.

Such ways include providing leadership (e.g., communicating with and motivating one's teammates); setting screens on offense; sliding or fighting through screens on defense to keep up with the player one is trying to defend or switching to defend another player on the other team; going after, diving onto the court, and scrambling for possession of a loose ball; and rushing to help a fallen teammate get up after having been fouled and knocked to the floor by a player from the other team.

All too often, players who warm the bunch for much of a game just don't get the credit they deserve because their role, behind the scenes (out of sight of the fans at games) is to play in practices on the "scout team" to help a team's starters and primary substitutes to be better prepared to score points and defend against the next game's opponent.

Thus, with no disrespect to the contributions that all **Chieftains** made to their respective **OHS** and **MSU** teams, this chronicle highlights the accomplishments that each of **The Chieftain Fourteen** made to help their respective **Chieftain** and **Spartan** teams to go out and try to win each and every game!

## River Map

Each of the following fourteen chapters chronicles the basketball careers of each **Chieftain** at **Okemos High** and later as a **Michigan State Spartan**, where each took his or her life after graduating, and each's "looking back" reflections on the days when he or she played basketball as a **Chieftain** and as a **Spartan**. The last chapter highlights the contributions that **The Chieftain Fourteen** made to **Spartans** basketball.

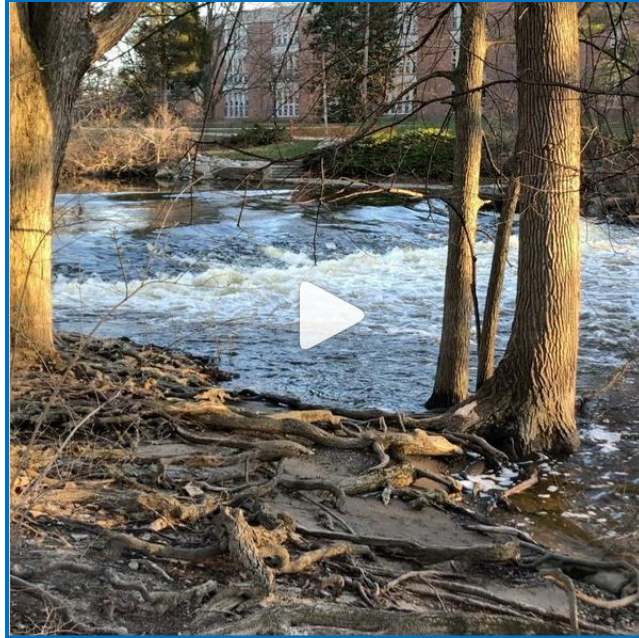
After the fourteen player-specific chapters, 🏀 **Chapter 15 - Red Cedar Rebounds** presents a summary of **The Chieftain Fourteen**, including sections on the following:

- 🏀 **Factors Shaping Chieftain Paths to Becoming Spartans**
- 🏀 **Chieftain Contributions to Spartans Basketball**
  - 🏀 *Women's Squads*
  - 🏀 *Men's & Women's Squads*
  - 🏀 *Men's Squads*
  - 🏀 *Men's National Invitation Tournament*
  - 🏀 *Men's Big Ten Tournament*
  - 🏀 *Men's NCAA Tournament*
- 🏀 **Video Highlights of Chieftains and Spartans**
- 🏀 **MSU's All-Time Top 50 Male Basketball Players & Chieftain Teammates**
- 🏀 **Red Cedar Reflections (Coaches' Memories of Their Chieftain & Spartan Players)**
- 🏀 **The Chieftain-cum-Spartan Dream Team**
- 🏀 **Where Are The Chieftain Fourteen Today?**
- 🏀 **Conclusion**

With this "**River Map**" in mind, the first player-specific stop on our journey is **Chapter** 🏀 **1 - John Shick**. When Shick played as a **Chieftain** in the late 1950s to early 1960s and then as a **Spartan**, that era was long before the current **Spartan** head coach Tom Izzo, long before the Breslin Center's **IZZONE** at **Spartan** home games, and long before the **O-ZONE** on the **Okemos High Chieftains** home court.

That "long before" takes us back over a half century to the late 1950s when **John Shick** was the first **Okemos High Chieftain** who went on to play basketball as a **Michigan State Spartan**.





The Red Cedar River Flowing from Okemos High to Michigan State

Go Chieftains! Go Spartans!