

Mike Williams – OHS 2008

Why an Okemos man recently made a \$1 million donation to help 10 Michigan State athletics programs

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Mike Williams (center) stands with Michigan State coaches and other members of the school's athletic department. Williams recently donated \$1million to Michigan State to help 10 different programs. *Courtesy of Michigan State Athletics*

When Mike Williams wants something done, he doesn't waste any time.

So in December, when he decided he wanted to donate to Michigan State athletics, he got right to work. From the moment he contacted the school to the second he dotted the I's and crossed the T's on the checks, it only took about two weeks.

The end result: a \$1 million gift that will support 10 programs at MSU — women's basketball, men's and women's cross country, men's and women's soccer, women's tennis, men's and women's track and field, volleyball and wrestling.

[Michigan State officially announced Williams' sizable gift earlier this month.](#)

Williams joked that while the start-to-finish process progressed at warp speed, Michigan State's representatives — athletic director Alan Haller, Malissa Burke (the university's executive director of principal gifts) and Rebecca Surian (the senior director of development for the Spartan Fund) — couldn't have been better to work with.

"It was a collaborative effort, and everyone made stuff happen," Williams said. "Honestly, they killed it. It was a really, really good experience. It made me feel really good."

Those are the same feelings Williams hopes to imbue upon current and future Spartan athletes.

His donation will go toward a variety of efforts within the 10 programs, including recruiting, team travel, food and nutrition, wellness and mental health resources — among other things.

"We can get coaches places now," he said. "We can get jerseys, equipment. We can get lockers. I know the wrestling team is going to get new lockers, which it hasn't had in forever. There are just a lot of pieces to pick up, which this money is going to help. You feel the difference between a really, really nice (NCAA) D-I locker room and a D-III one."

The teams themselves couldn't be happier.

"This is an absolute game changer for all of us," women's basketball coach Suzy Merchant said.

Damon Rensing, the men's soccer coach, said Williams' gift will allow his program to operate "at a first-class level" going forward.

"Mike's contribution will have an immediate and lasting impact," Rensing said.

Exactly what Williams envisioned.

"Once someone's budget runs out, say \$30 grand a year, they're not traveling for recruiting anymore unless they go out and do public fundraisers, which takes time, effort and energy away from coaching," he said. "I just wanted to put the already existing budget on steroids and let them go with it so they can go and get more talent."

Though Williams didn't attend MSU — he's a Western Michigan alum — he's no stranger to the area. He's Okemos, born and bred. He went to Okemos High, where he was an all-state soccer player. He still lives in his hometown, working as a real estate broker. He regularly attends Michigan State athletic events. That only will increase in subsequent days and months, as he plans to make regular appearances at the sports he donated to, since he admitted he's "a little more ingrained" with them now.

"MSU has been in my blood since I was a kid," he said. "One hundred percent."

Williams conceded that while football and men's basketball are two of his favorite sports at the university, they "already were in good hands" financially. That's why he looked elsewhere. He embarked on what he called "a hardcore evaluation" of MSU's other programs.

He used three criteria: Which programs are on the cusp of doing something great? Which programs need the money to take their level of play up a notch? And which programs might benefit the most?

"So it was a deeper level of evaluation than just writing a check, for sure," Williams said.

So deep, in fact, that Williams exerted "100% control" over his donation. At the outset, he approached Haller and asked to look at the budgets for MSU's non-revenue sports. Williams wanted as much data as the athletics department could provide to aid in making a decision. After crunching the numbers, he zeroed in on the programs he planned to assist.

Ten different sports, Williams said, meant he signed 10 separate contracts.

"It wasn't, 'Here's the check. Go run with it,'" Williams said. "It was divided sport by sport, need by need. I was very, very involved in looking over and evaluating and then deploying the checks accordingly."

Williams always has been a fan of underdogs. For him, the donation is about giving worthy athletes — participating in sports that oftentimes receive little to no attention from the outside world — their due.

"I just wanted to put some other programs in the spotlight that aren't always in the spotlight," he said. "I really wanted to help out these programs specifically. They needed it, and it was a good fit."

It's also a vibe.

"I want the student-athletes in my town to feel really, really good," he said. "If you feel good, you typically play good. Psychologically, that's just how it goes."



Williams, left, gives money to an employee at his real estate firm. An Okemos native and resident, Williams regularly donates to local charitable causes. *Courtesy of Cam Best.*

The \$1 million gift ties in with Williams' larger vision: those in positions of financial strength should feel compelled to help those who aren't as fortunate. Williams has donated to charitable causes before; [during the Christmas season, he gave more than \\$200,000 to Lansing-area nonprofits, schools and families](#). He said he believes a person can either give time, or money. When he was younger, Williams devoted more of his time.

Now, he spreads the wealth through his wealth.

"In my mind, it's the only thing you can do when you succeed — help others," he said. "Time and money are two ways to do it, but this time for me, obviously, it was money. I think it will do a lot of good, and that was the whole point."

RELATED: [Okemos man donates more than \\$200,000 to local families, nonprofits](#)

Donating specifically to athletics, Williams said, also is a way of paying back what sports have done for him. Through sports, he said he learned the importance of teamwork, leadership, respect for others — traits that helped him in life, benefited him in business. Now, he wants to give others those same opportunities.

He's happy to lead the charge.

"Maybe this (donation) will make people see, 'Hey, this is a good thing. It can do a lot of good,'" he said. "Hopefully people will see it and follow suit because there are a lot of people out there who need help."

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