

Community Sports

Voted Florida's No. 1 Weekly Sports Section

The leader of the pack

Mikhail Reece excels in school, football and life

By Kyle LoJacono

Originally published Sept. 21

Mikhail Reece stands out from the crowd no matter where he is thanks to his 6-foot-5, 245-pound body, but his mind and leadership abilities are what truly separate the Gaither senior from others.

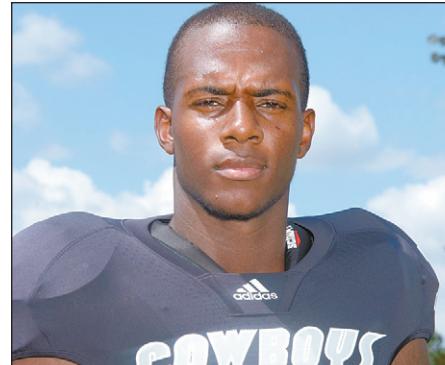
Reece currently has a 5.8 weighted grade point average (GPA), putting him on pace to be the Gaither salutatorian. His grandmother Nell instilled in him a thirst for knowledge, which endures to this day.

"My mom (Jaclin) would be working, so my grandmother taught me how to read and about math," Reece said. "I knew my times tables at the age of 5 because of her. She gave me that extra push to get started. Now it just comes natural, and when I'm engaged in a class I want to do the work."

Reece is also thankful for the free education offered in the United States. He was born in Kingston, Jamaica, a country where people have to pay \$500-\$600 a year just to attend basic schooling. Throw in money for uniforms and books, and most people on the island nation are not financially able to get a high school equivalent diploma.

"I know that it's a blessing to have free schooling here through high school, and if you excel enough they will pay you to go to college," Reece said. "It's not like that in Jamaica or basically everywhere else, so I want to jump on that and take advantage of the education here."

Reece came to the United States around age 4. He has gotten two Bs on his high school GPA, one in physical science while in eighth grade and another in English I.



Mikhail Reece is not only a leader in academics at Gaither, but is also one of the team captains on the Cowboys football team. (Photo courtesy of Gaither football)

"I didn't know the science would count because I took it in middle school, but it did," Reece said. "In English it was borderline and I didn't turn in one worksheet. I still think about that B in English, and after that I told myself I wasn't going to get a B again."

Reece's academic focus became apparent to teachers early in the school year. Danielle de Gregory teaches Reece Advanced Placement psychology and African-American history. She has only seen his work in the classroom for about a month, but already understands why he has been able to post such a high GPA.

"The bell rings and he starts his work," de Gregory said. "We all have bell work in every class. Mikhail starts his work immediately. He doesn't finish talking with someone or stand in the hall for a few more seconds. The bell rings and he knows it's time to get down to business."

Reece is also a defensive end and team captain on the Gaither football team. Cowboys coach Jason Stokes said he brings that same "down to business" approach to the gridiron.

"As soon as we blow the whistle he's all business," Stokes said. "When he sees kids in practice not focusing, he'll say something

before the coaches. He's one of those special kids you don't get to coach very often."

Reece had 12 tackles, two passes defensed, one sack and one forced fumble last football season. Stokes said he believes he will have a huge impact as a senior.

"He has all the measurables to be a big-time player," Stokes said. "He's very coachable and puts in the work to get better. Plus he understands concepts very quickly and can see what other teams are trying to do to him."

Reece isn't just a brain. He also has leadership qualities as apparent as his intelligence.

"I met Mikhail last year because as student government adviser I had to pick four juniors to take to the West Point Leadership Conference," de Gregory said. "Mikhail was a perfect person because they wanted student leaders and leaders on sports teams, and he is a leader on the football team and academically."

When de Gregory was working to find the right juniors to bring on the trip, she asked student government members who they believed should go.

"They all said Mikhail Reece without thinking about it," de Gregory said. "So not only do his teachers rave about him, but the kids think the same way about him. ... I couldn't find a more upstanding kid than Mikhail Reece. He is a fine young man."

Reece's efforts in the classroom and on the football field have one of the most prestigious Ivy League universities interested in him. He was officially given a scholarship offer to play at Yale.

"When I got the Yale offer, it's an honor, but I know that I have the ability because both sides of my family have people who are very strong academically," Reece said. "I have a cousin who went to Dartmouth, another Ivy League school. Then my father (Patrick) grew up very poor, like in tin houses, but he went to school and is an engineer. So I know if I don't do well it's only because I didn't put in the effort."

2011 REWIND

Mikhail Reece and the Cowboys reached the playoffs this year for the first time since 2008, making it all the way to Class 7A regional finals for only the second time in the program's 27-year history. Gaither finished with a 9-4 record. Reece posted 87 tackles, 5.5 sacks and two fumble recoveries. He will decide on what college to attend in early 2012.

Reece thanked Gaither offensive line coach Jeff Ditman for helping him get noticed by Yale. Ditman attended the Ivy League school and also played football for the Bulldogs.

"I think it's the perfect fit for him," Ditman said. "I have to watch myself because I don't want it to seem like I'm pushing him to go there, but looking at it objectively he's a great fit. I know they like him athletically, and I think he can succeed there as a football player. Academically I know it's a great opportunity for him, and I think his personality would fit perfectly there. I'll support whatever he does, but it would be good for him and for Yale to have him."

While Ditman never directly coached or taught Reece, he has still seen his intelligence shine through on the field.

"He plays intelligently and he understands what he needs to do and what the other team is trying to do to him," Ditman said. "I communicate that to my offensive linemen how much of an assist that is, and of course we have to deal with him in practice. We can't outsmart him. It's hard to fool him because he sees things in a different way."

Reece said he is most interested in math classes and would like to become an engineer like his father —if things don't work out with football.

"If I could go to the (NFL), that would be a dream," Reece said. "That would be the ultimate goal and after that I could do a lot of other things with my mind if it happens."

All stats as recorded to Maxpreps.com by coaches.

Ryan Pickett represents Pasco County in Super Bowl

By Kyle LoJacono

Originally published Feb. 2

A player who honed his skills at Bulldog Stadium at Zephyrhills High School will play beneath much brighter lights on Sunday, Feb. 6.

Ryan Pickett, a member of the Green Bay Packers, is headed to his second Super Bowl.

The defensive lineman was born in Zephyrhills and played with the Bulldogs from 1994-1997. Some of his fondest memories are of playing Friday nights against Pasco County rivals like Pasco High and Land O'Lakes High.

"That's where I learned the game," Pickett said. "That's where I'm from and it'll always feel like home. I don't live there anymore, but I take any chance I have to get back."

Tom Fisher coached Pickett at Zephyrhills and remembers him as one of the biggest and strongest he has seen. Fisher is still a teacher at Zephyrhills and said Pickett was definitely one of the best he has ever coached.

Zephyrhills principal Steve Van Gorden said his performances are a topic of conversation around the school.

"I never met Ryan, but it's nice to see a local get to the Super Bowl," Van Gorden said. "It shows if you work hard, you can be successful no matter where you're from. He's a great role model for anyone that hard work pays off. It's going to be great that he can represent not only the Packers, but Zephyrhills."



Ryan Pickett on the sidelines as the Packers won their wildcard matchup against the Eagles. (Photo courtesy of the Packers)

2011 REWIND

Pickett and the Green Bay Packers have run away with the No. 1 overall seed in the National Football Conference with a 14-1 record. Pickett has started in all of the Packers games while posting 32 tackles and two passes defensed.

containing the run is the key to getting his first championship.

"Those fast, skinny guys on offense may make the highlights, but everyone knows the game is really won and lost at the line of scrimmage with the big boys," Pickett said with a laugh. "It's us smacking each other around that are the real superstars."

Pickett, 6-foot-2, is nicknamed "Big Grease" in part because he tips the scales at 340 pounds. He said the weight comes in handy in frigid Green Bay.

Pickett's older brother Booker played at Zephyrhills and also in college at the University of Miami. Booker still lives in east Pasco and was an assistant on the Bulldogs football team last season.

Pickett and his wife Jennifer have three daughters, Esther, Abigail and Lydia, and one son, Ryan Jr. Pickett said his boy is only 3-years-old, but already thinks he will follow in his father's footsteps.

"Football is in our blood," Pickett said. "His daddy and uncle played high school and college ball, and I can already see him on the field in a couple years making plays."