

Fame, New York City-style, takes draft sensation Cameron Payne out for a night on the town

By Michael Cohen

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NEW YORK — The draft before the draft takes place in the lower lobby of the Westin New York at Times Square, at the base of two escalators that carried some 15 members of Cameron Payne’s entourage. The choice at hand is a ticklish one: Payne, who one night later will be drafted 14th overall by Oklahoma City, must decide who should join him in the luxury SUV waiting to shuttle him around Manhattan.

He surveys a group of family and friends that made the journey from Memphis, his hometown, here to New York, to the eve of the NBA Draft and another mid-major fairytale. There are three open seats in the vehicle; Payne’s girlfriend and two cousins make the cut.

At 7:41 p.m., already 41 minutes behind schedule, Payne and his posse exit the hotel through a revolving door that serves as a portal into premature stardom. Payne, who played at Lausanne Collegiate School, finds himself surrounded by autograph-seeking children, his soon-to-be celebrity status betrayed by a nearby television camera.

He signs as he walks, inking his signature onto shirts and magazines and basketballs. He answers questions about which teams he worked out for and what it takes to become a professional.

“They’re Cam Payne fans,” he says, beaming.

Payne, 20, and his hand-picked crew maneuver down the sidewalk until they are stopped by a man in a white dress shirt and glasses, Bluetooth ear piece at the ready. He points to a shimmering black Cadillac with tinted windows parked at the curb. This, he explains, is Payne’s ride.

“This for us?” Payne says. “The presidential? This is crazy.”

Joined by a cameraman from NBA Entertainment and a reporter from The Commercial Appeal, Team Payne squeezes into the back of the seven-seat vehicle and pulls away to begin an evening that feels like a trance. Once passed over by every high-major program in the country, Payne is on the cusp of the draft lottery after two transcendent seasons at Murray State, exploding onto draft boards with a combination of deft passing and effortless scoring.

It all led to this night, to this black Cadillac, to the chic art gallery awaiting his arrival, and the entire restaurant and bar his agent reserved after that. It all led to the night Cameron Payne became famous.

‘I’m new to this’

As the driver navigates Manhattan, dodging and weaving the final remnants of rush-hour traffic, Payne’s personality takes over the SUV.

“Plug me into the Bluetooth,” he says, unearthing from his pocket the iPhone that refuses to stop chirping. He pairs his phone to the car’s audio system, and the drive to Tribeca morphs into a karaoke jam session beginning with a popular song by rapper Fetty Wap.

This is Payne’s first visit to New York, a confounding city whose traffic he finds mesmerizing and whose bikers he finds inexorably brave. He rolls his window down to enhance the view of both hustle and bustle, but more importantly the open air frees him up to dance.

Each intersection becomes an open microphone, with Payne belting out verses by Chief Keef, among others, and laughing at the songs’ vulgarity now captured on the NBA Entertainment camera. He is a showman, the type to make faces and incorporate his whole body as he raps, and more than one song is customized to work the name Cameron Payne into the lyrics.

Payne’s demeanor matches the outward goofiness of his interview session earlier in the day, of his two years of college, of his high school career before that. His smile is magnetic, ever-present, and to seek a more loquacious individual would be an exercise in futility.

“This is probably the first time you’ve ever seen me,” he said to reporters earlier in the day. “And I’m pretty sure I’m giving some great, positive (answers). You’re like, ‘Man, he’s a cool guy.’ That’s a lot of people’s first impression, and that’s all I really want.”

The ride to the art gallery serves as an infomercial for life in the 21st century. Payne and his two cousins, neither of whom is old enough to drink, argue over whether Chipotle is better than Moe’s Southwest Grill. While his girlfriend, Katie Shinkle, stands firm in defense of Qdoba Mexican Grill.

There are moments when four sets of eyes are glued to four different cellphones, and Payne marvels as his social media accounts boom. Every swipe to refresh his Twitter profile reveals more messages, more followers, more notifications. When one of his photos hits 1,000 “likes” on Instagram, Payne is dumbfounded.

“That’s how you know I’m new to this,” Payne says.

He is literally watching himself become a star.

‘Zero to 100’

The car stops at the intersection of Hubert and Collister in Tribeca, a trendy section of Manhattan tucked away on the Lower West side. The various members of Team Payne — parents, relatives, friends and his agent, Travis King — spill out of the three SUVs and onto the sidewalk for photographs.

They have arrived here to attend an art auction presented by the Smile Design Gallery, an organization headed by Dr. Lee Gause, a dentist and friend of King’s. The event, called The Art Of The Game, promises to match 100 percent of the art sold in free dental care for New Yorkers in need. It oozes sophistication, and a female staff member who greets King at the door carries with her a glass of champagne. It is her third.

For the next two hours, Payne is paraded through the gallery to shake hands and smile with an audience that skews young but exudes elegance. Music pumps throughout the rectangular space as women carry bottles of wine. Mason Plumlee, who played for the Brooklyn Nets last season, is here with friends. So too is a man introduced as the late Tupac Shakur’s personal photographer.

“From zero to 100 real fast,” says Leshawn Payne, Cameron’s mother.

When the introductions subside, Gause walks to a corner of the gallery and quiets the crowd. He is happy to announce the auction’s first sale of a work painted by Tonia Calderon. The piece was created in anticipation of the mega fight between Floyd Mayweather, who is one of Gause’s clients, and Manny Pacquiao. It was purchased by Cameron Payne.

“I don’t know anything about art,” a reporter says.

“Me neither,” Payne replies.

Before he can leave, Payne is ushered into the front portion of the gallery that has been walled off. Inside is a fully functional dental chair for patients who want their teeth cleaned in the presence of art.

Payne is told he will be receiving a custom mouth piece from Iceberg Guards. He plops into the chair, and a mold is inserted into his mouth by an attractive woman in a lab coat and high heels. She poses for photos as the mold sets. The whole process feels strange.

“I ain’t been a part of nothing like that ever in my life,” Payne says.

A few minutes later Team Payne is gone, down the stairs and out to the black Cadillac.

‘Waiting on me’

Back inside the SUV, Payne checks the clock on his phone. It's well after 9 p.m., and by this time tomorrow he will likely be wearing an NBA hat.

"I'm speechless about it," he says.

The long ride from the Lower West side to Harlem offers an opportunity for introspection, for reflection on how an undersized kid from Memphis — a kid largely ignored by the hometown Tigers, no less — made it to within 24 hours of the draft lottery. The NBA was the dream that "you know it's not going to work," yet here he is, Twitter followers soaring, comparing the whole experience to a young girl wanting to be a princess.

He exits the car at 9:56 p.m., walking through a neon blue tunnel as he enters Cove Lounge in Harlem. Team Payne rented the place out for a pre-draft celebration.

"They're waiting on me," he shouts, pointing to the sky as the NBA Entertainment camera rolls. He is Cameron Payne, and tonight he became famous.