Mario Tabone has spent hours since he arrived at UDM at 15 helping the Titans basketball squad with drills, coordinating game tape and traveling with the team. His dedication to the team lasted six years.

Marisa Schultz / The Detroit News

Super grad: Law degree, MBA -- by 21!

UDM alum gives new meaning to 'quick study'

Marisa Schultz / The Detroit News

At age 2, Mario Tabone could distinguish between Bach and Vivaldi compositions. In junior high, he hauled a backpack that weighed just as much as he did. At 15, he became the youngest graduate ever of the academically rigorous University of Detroit Jesuit High School.

And on Saturday, Tabone will graduate with a law degree and his master's in business administration from the University of Detroit Mercy at the ripe age of 21.

"I don't think it has sunk in yet," said Tabone of Dearborn. "Once it amounts to (a job), I'll see what these six years have meant."

In six years, Tabone will have earned three degrees from UDM including his bachelor's -- a feat that typical students struggle to accomplish in nine years. But then again, Tabone has a history of accelerated learning.

He skipped several grades as a child. "I was just too bored with the material at hand," he said. "I
was happier to have more challenging problems to
go over."

His parents, who own a cherry orchard in
Petoskey and a vineyard in Traverse City, knew
their oldest son was special when he could read at
age 2. He absorbed everything like a sponge, even
his parents' love for classical music, his father
Mario Tabone said.

"He knew 30 or more composers," the elder
Tabone said. "Vivaldi. Four Seasons,' he would
say. He knew the pieces."

What makes Tabone so successful is that he's
not only a quick study, but also a very hard
worker, an ethic he honed at a young age by
spending hours picking fruit and pruning trees at
his parents' orchard in the summer. By age 13, he
was managing his family's fruit stands at markets.

"Maybe he is genetically a genius? I don't
know," said Bahman Mirshab, dean of UDM's
College of Business Administration. "But based
on what I can say, it's his determination (that
makes him succeed) and the fact that he is very
serious about what he's doing."

Because of his humility, respect and drive,
Tabone has been a role model for Mirshab's two kids, ages 10 and 12, he said.

"I'm hoping my children walk in his footsteps," Mirshab said. "I myself wish I had walked in his
footsteps."

**Academic muscle flexed early**

By the time he was 9, Tabone needed more academic challenges. So he took the entrance exam for
U. of D. Jesuit High School and Academy, which serves grades 7-12. He passed the test with ease
and entered seventh grade.

During high school, he belonged to just about every club that was available. A lover of sports, the
young Tabone managed the U. of D. Jesuit football team in ninth and 10th grades. That meant the
11-year-old was a gopher, helping the coaches arrange practices and set up equipment.

Because Tabone was so small compared to some of the 18-year-old burly players, his parents
sometimes worried the coach would one day throw a jersey on Tabone so teammates could just toss
the pre-teen for a first down.

"We were always concerned that at fourth and one, they might use him and throw him over the
line," the elder Tabone mused.

After high school, Tabone chose UDM for college. His father is an alumnus and Tabone received
full scholarships.

But he was only 15. A true Titan fan, Mario began helping out the UDM basketball team at 15.
He spent hours passing balls at practice, running drills, coordinating game tape and traveling with
the team.

His dedication to the team lasted six years. Coach Perry Watson watched him evolve from an
awestruck and sometimes shy teen to a mature, humble and fun-loving adult, he said.

But at any age, the players respected Tabone, Watson said.

"Mario knows more about the program than they know," Watson said. "I bet a lot of players don't
know his age. … They accepted him because he was confident and a guy who was able to be successful on and off the court."

**Age disparity outgrown**

Tabone doesn't look like a teen anymore. At 21, he blends in more easily with his business and law school classmates. But there were certainly moments when the age gap was apparent.

"At law school, the mentality was to go out to the bar after an exam or after class," Mario said. "I couldn't do that. … But I didn't really feel I missed out that much."

For the first time in a while, Tabone may relax a bit before he takes the bar exam in February and starts the job hunt. But one activity won't change: he'll be picking cherries under the hot sun this summer.

He also hopes to visit his only sibling, brother Michael, 17, who just finished his freshman year at college in Florida.

Tabone's not quite sure where he'll end up eventually, but he's interested in doing marketing for a Fortune 500 company.

"I see Mario doing great things with his life," said Tabone's friend Dennis Morey, 23.

"I don't know exactly what. It will be interesting to see what road he takes."

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