

Bred for the game: Grand Island's Dane Brown evolves to become All-WNY Player of the Year

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Dane Brown knew the game of basketball before he ever truly played it. Growing up, basketball was inevitable because his father, Darren Brown, played Division I at Niagara University from 1987-91. Although knowing the game and dominating it are very different, this season Brown did both.

The 6-foot-7 Grand Island junior emerged as one of the most complete players in Western New York, averaging 23.7 points, 7.9 rebounds, 1.8 steals and 1.6 blocks per game while leading the Vikings on one of the most memorable runs in program history.

Grand Island won the Section VI Class A1 title, captured the overall Class A crown, advanced through subregionals and rode a 12-game win streak before finally being stopped in the regional round to finish the season 23-3. The two-way play, coupled with the team's success, is why Brown is the 2025-26 Allen Wilson Buffalo News Player of the Year. Brown is the first Grand Island player to win the award.

"You win 23 games, not many teams win 23 games, sometimes not in two years," said Grand Island coach Christopher Simpson. "We had seasons where we won five and eight games and played one sectional game. We won five sectional games." "We should have been at states," he added, referring to the team advancing to Binghamton to compete in the state semifinals. Typically, the winner of the Far West Regional, this year called the Subregional, between Section VI and Section V, advances to the state semifinals. This year was the first with a Subregional game, meaning Grand Island needed to win one more game to reach the state Final Four. The Vikings didn't.

Bloodlines

Darren Brown was a 6-8 forward at Niagara from 1987 to 1991. His son never had a chance to avoid basketball and never wanted to.

"Since my dad played Division I at Niagara, I've always been around the game," Dane said. "I never really took it seriously until fourth or fifth grade when I started playing travel." Even then, Brown wasn't the most polished player on the floor. He was just the tallest and he knew what that could mean if he put in the work. "I wasn't always the best player," Dane said. "I just knew I was tall and I knew I could do something with it if I worked hard. Constant work led me to progress and progress and progress, and now here I am."

Here he is, a junior with a smooth jumper, an expanding offensive game and a stat line that makes opposing coaches lose sleep over game planning. The moment Brown fully understood what he could become came in the very first game of this season when he scored 33 points in the first half against Buffalo Arts. "I realized that no one can really block my shot if I jump and shoot at the highest point," Brown said. "I realized it was really hard to guard me. I'm 6-foot-7 and I can shoot the ball, so it's a lethal threat for everyone on the court."

Simpson has watched Brown develop from a spot-up shooter into something far more versatile. "He's been our spot-up shooter for the time he's been up, and he's done a great job of it," Simpson said. "Him being able to get to the basket really changes the game. It makes guys not only come out and guard him but also have to help on him and that opens it up for other guys. Him being able to get into the paint from the perimeter and make layups, or at least drive and dish, that's probably the biggest difference I've seen."

More than scoring

What made Brown's season impressive is what he chose not to do. Despite being the focal point of everything Grand Island ran offensively, Brown consistently deferred, trusted and distributed, sometimes to a fault, according to Simpson.

"Sometimes he should take an extra shot or two because he is our scorer," Simpson said. "They move the ball and pass the ball really well. Unlike the NBA, it's all one-on-one. You see college going one-on-one. It's nice to see guys passing and sharing the ball and getting guys open looks. Makes it easy to win." Brown fully embraced the team concept.

"I was the leading scorer, but it didn't seem like that some games," Brown said. "I would pass the ball and trust my teammates to hit shots if I was being covered heavily. It was just a lot of belief and trusting each other that everyone can make a winning play. That's what we did during the season."

Point guard Jonathan Neville was Brown's favorite partner in running the offense and Brown made sure to give him credit. "Me and Jon Neville did a great job leading the team," Brown said. "We believed in each other." That belief was tested repeatedly. Brown said Grand Island faced adversity in almost every game. Against Lockport at home, the Vikings found themselves in a sizeable deficit after the first quarter before rallying to win by double digits. Close calls became a recurring theme.

"In years past, we would have kind of not known how to overcome it," Brown said. "This year, we really learned what it took to beat some good teams." Simpson pointed to a last-second KJ Wilkes basket at Lockport early in the season as a turning point. "Teams were a little bit doubting us," Simpson said. "That kind of set the tone and we played without Jake Castiglia, a starter, so that just emphasized it a little bit more."

Memorable season

For Brown, nothing topped the moment Grand Island finally captured a section championship for the first time since 1992. Brown had been chasing to end the drought since he first suited up for the Vikings. "We've been trying to do that the whole time I've been at Grand Island," Brown said. "We lost to Amherst, we lost to Will South and it felt really good to just finally get that one."

Before losing in the state regional, Grand Island went on its win streak into the state regional. "It's been the most fun I've ever had playing basketball," Brown said. "Not just playing, but being with the people on the team as well." Simpson, who recalled his own playing days on a 27-0 team, put the season in perspective as the Grand Island lifer he is. He recalls always working the lobby at Buffalo State Sports Arena to finally being able to coach in the building multiple times.

"It means everything," Simpson said. "It shows that our kids are putting the time in, putting the work in and doing a lot of the individual stuff on their own. I just

go out there and throw the basketballs out and tell them 'Let's go.' That's all I really do."

What's next?

Grand Island loses Neville to graduation but returns everyone else from the core of Brown, Castiglia, Wilkes and Chase Uribes. Replacing Neville will be the program's primary challenge heading into next season and Simpson is optimistic the team will figure it out.

"We just want to get better," Simpson said. "That doesn't always mean wins and losses. It just means get better, improve over the summer, stay together, work a little bit, play together and see what happens from there." Brown's message to his teammates for the offseason was simpler and more direct. "Get workouts in over the summer," Brown said. "Get guys in when they're just sitting at home. Work hard and try to replicate it and go even farther."