

GI Oursler named Gazette Player of the Year

BY MIKE MEILER Niagara Gazette

Niagara Gazette — It was a season of new experiences for the Grand Island girls basketball team.

Adjusting to life after four-time Gazette Player of the Year Kallie Banker, the Vikings -- who'd taken just 11 losses from 2009-12 -- lost nine times in 2012-13.

Young players struggled to adjust to increased roles, and the season looked lost when an injury to leading scorer Cassie Oursler coincided with a four-game losing streak in late January.

But the Vikings found their way in the postseason, when Oursler averaged a remarkable 26.8 points and 19.2 rebounds per game to help her team earn the Section VI Class A championship and herself the title of Niagara Gazette Player of the Year.

“(When she was hurt), we knew we weren’t going to win the league, and we wanted to make sure when she came back she was ready so we could make a run in the playoffs,” said Jenepher Banker, who retired from coaching the Vikings after a 39-37 loss to Section V Mendon in the Far West Regional.

And what a run it was.

After losing five of their last seven regular season games, Oursler scored a school-record 39 points and added 18 rebounds as the Vikings squeaked by Williamsville South, 66-64, in the first round of the A-1 sectionals. She followed that with 34 points and 13 rebounds in a 65-42 blowout of McKinley; 16 points and 21 boards in a 49-39 win over Hamburg in the A-1 final; 23 points and 28 rebounds in a 46-29 win over Pioneer in the Class A crossover final (A-1 vs. A-2); and 22 points and 16 boards in the loss to Mendon.

“I (knew) this was my last season,” Oursler said. “I didn’t want it to end.”

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It’s not difficult to figure out the key to Oursler’s success on the court. Standing 6-foot-4 with generations of athleticism passed down to her -- her father, Chris, was an All-Western New York wide receiver for the Vikings and numerous brothers, cousins and uncles dot the GI record books -- she towers over nearly all of her competition.

But she wasn’t always a basketball player.

Oursler played softball as a child, until one day in sixth grade when Banker caught her walking down a hallway and, impressed by her size and athletic build, told her she should play basketball.

“I was just walking out of English class and I saw Ms. Banker, and she pulled me aside and was like, ‘You have to play basketball,’ “ Oursler said. “I wasn’t really sure at the time because I had always played softball.”

Banker and GI mainstays Megan and Sue McGuire got Oursler onto an AAU team, going as far as driving her to games. As her skills developed, JV coach Rachel Martin took her under her wing.

“She always had the god-given stuff, even when I saw her in 6th grade, she was blessed with size and strength and athleticism,” Banker said. “Then it was a matter of putting the basketball skills with that.”

She was called up to the varsity team for experience at the end of her eighth-grade season, and began starting as a freshman. During her five seasons, the Vikings won five A-1 titles and four Class A championships. And as she played more, her skills developed enough to land Oursler a Division I scholarship to Robert Morris University, near Pittsburgh.

Oursler knows size isn’t going to be enough to succeed in Division I, and Banker says she expects her to continue to improve.

“She’s not any different than anybody else going (D1),” Banker said. “It’s a completely different level. It’s a whole different ball game day in and day out. But, in a way, it’s kind of like when we first started with her. If she continues that development, there’s no reason she can’t have success at the next level.”

“I’m up for the challenge,” Oursler said. “I know it’s going to be tough, and I know it’s going to be a whole different game than it is now. I’m not going to be the tallest, but I’m excited to get stronger. I want to see my maximum potential.”