

All-WNY Girls Player of Year: From diamond to Division I gem



Cassie Oursler averaged 27.6 points in five playoff games to fuel Grand Island's postseason run. Buffalo News photo illustration

By Mary Jo Monnin / News Sports Reporter

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Who's on first?

Well, it isn't Cassie Oursler anymore.

The Grand Island senior made the difficult decision to give up softball in her early days as an athlete in favor of basketball. The result was a career that not only notched her a Division I scholarship, but the distinction of being the 2012-2013 Buffalo News Player of the Year.

"I was like a dead-set softball player, I never picked up a basketball until coach [Jenepher] Banker saw me in the halls and said I should give basketball a try," said Oursler.

In grade school Oursler's father signed her up to play softball in the all-star and travel leagues, and she not only played a mean first base, but she was developing into a pretty good hitter.

Always the tallest girl in her class, she was constantly being asked by classmates if she played basketball. By the time she reached high school, the answer was yes.

Four years later, and now standing 6-foot-4, Oursler has a Division I future waiting for her at Robert Morris (outside of Pittsburgh). Robert Morris, members of the Northeast Conference, is coached by Sal Buscaglia, best known locally as the UB women's coach from 1990-1998.

While some mid-majors may sign a center and consider her a project, Robert Morris is graduating its starting center in May, so Oursler could log some serious minutes next season.

“She was a no-brainer, it’s not like there were second thoughts – ‘Should we sign her, shouldn’t we?’ ” said Buscaglia. “We think she’s going to be more than a solid Division I player. And it’s always great to get someone from Western New York.”

Opposing coaches in the Niagara Frontier League are just as happy as Buscaglia that Oursler is graduating. Oursler made game-planning for Grand Island a nightmare, especially this season.

“It’s tough to prepare for 6-4,” said Lockport coach Bill Shaw. “You don’t have an answer for that length. She was kind of unstoppable. I think Jen did a masterful job with her and used her about as well as anybody could have. She got Cassie to play at a level Cassie never played at. People kept telling me Grand Island isn’t going to do anything this year, and I said you wait and see.”

Oursler averaged 22.5 points, 13.8 rebounds and 3.1 blocks per game. She had 22 of her team’s 37 points in a season-ending loss to Pittsford-Mendon in the Far West Regionals.

Grand Island was left for dead by many after it got embarrassed by Cardinal O’Hara in the season-opening Pastor/Cooper Tournament, 76-34.

But the Vikings usually grow up quickly playing in the NFL against mostly Class AA schools. There were some bumps in the road as Oursler missed 20 games with a sprained ankle. By the time late February hit, GI took a No. 3 seed and an 8-8 record into the Section VI playoffs and that’s when Oursler really went to work. The Vikings survived a scare from Williamsville South when they underestimated how good they were before hanging on for a 66-64 win. They went on to win Section VI Class A title, the fourth year in a row they’ve won the crown with Oursler on the roster.

Oursler faced every possible defense designed to stop her and still averaged 27.6 points in five playoff games. She practically won the season finale against Pittsford-Mendon single-handedly before bowing, 39-37. That was the game Robert Morris associate coach Charlie Buscaglia happened to catch.

“Charlie went to see her play at Buffalo State, he came back and said she did really, really well,” said Sal Buscaglia. “We have confidence she’s going to grow very quickly for us, and she’s a good student and we like that combination. We feel she’s someone who’s going to come in and do a good job for us.”

And if someone asks her on the Robert Morris campus if she plays basketball because she’s tall, the answer will still be yes.