

High school basketball stars rise and grind

Basketball players working hard before D-1 careers begin

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Oursler in learning mode

Cassie Oursler was sick of it.

She was playing basketball for the first time in seventh grade and “did not want to be there.” Though she was one of the tallest girls on the court, she kept getting pushed around in the post. That just didn’t sit well with the fiery competitor.

“I wasn’t strong enough,” Oursler said. “I don’t want to be worse than someone, so I’ll work and work and work to get better. I practiced. I’d work on all the things I needed to work on. I knew I could play a really high level.”

How high? “Division I, that was my goal,” she said. “I knew what it would take to get here. I knew it would be a lot of work.”

Indeed, she knew what it would take.

Oursler saw first hand what is required to become a D-I player. During her first three years on the Grand Island girls squad, she played alongside Rhode Island guard Kallie Banker.

“She’s a Division I player, and she had that intensity,” Oursler said. “I learned a lot from her, how hard of a worker she was.”

Now Oursler has reached the same level as Banker, as she prepares for her freshman season with Robert Morris University. Oursler, the 2012-13 Buffalo News Player of the Year, spent the final week of June at the suburban Pittsburgh school.

Oursler considered more than 20 schools, but she knew Robert Morris was the right one the first time she visited.

“When I visited the team, everyone was very welcoming and the campus is beautiful,” said Oursler, who is back home in Grand Island and will move into her dorm at RMU at the end of August. “It’s the perfect size. The coaches are awesome. The trainers are the coolest people ever.”

As for Oursler’s training?

“A bunch of crazy stuff, but I enjoy it,” she said.

She has been lifting weights for an hour every day in addition to doing agility work and running stadium stairs. She watched some of the team’s skill-specific workouts when she was on campus and has been emulating them back at home.

Oursler had a chance to get acquainted with her new teammates the week she visited, and she wasn't disappointed.

"They're so motivational," she said. "We all push each other. Everyone is happy and there's no negativity. I have teammates from different countries, so I've learned a lot about where they're from. They're all just really great people."

Oursler averaged 22.5 points, 13.8 rebounds and 3.1 blocks per game last season. Her Vikings fell in the Far West Regionals. The first-team All-WNY performer is far from complacent with her overall game.

"I have to get a lot stronger," she said. "High school basketball is going to be completely different from college basketball, so I'm definitely working on my strength, and then getting better at shooting – not far out, but having a better shot for my inside game. I'm working on speed and agility, too. Everything can always get better."

Oursler, who is 6-foot-4, plans on continuing to play center in college, though she expects to get some looks at power forward, too. The Colonials return eight of their 11 players from last year's 7-22 squad, but their starting center graduated.

Their coach is a familiar name in Western New York. Sal Buscaglia was the UB women's coach from 1990-98.