

Asagwara lights up Pandas for 35 in Friday loss

PAUL OWEN
Sports Editor

One look at Uzo Asagwara is all it takes to see why she's the highest scoring university basketball player in the country.

The shooting guard from the University of Winnipeg stands 5'9", but is 6'1" if you count her hairdo: half braids, half Ben Wallace-esque afro. Her long arms and legs lend her an innate ability to jump higher and stretch farther than her opponent when she attacks the basket, which she does both easily and often thanks to one of the quickest first steps in CIS. She can also stop on a dime to release her jumper in a smooth transfer of ball from hand to mesh that wastes no movement or effort.

"We've seen some great players from across the country, and Uzo's the best guard we've seen all year," says Alberta head coach Scott Edwards, whose team Asagwara torched for 35 points in a losing cause on Friday night. "She's unbelievable—she's almost impossible to defend off the dribble; she does a great job getting to the line; she's a very smart player, she's very athletic and long, and she defended way better than I gave her credit for before we played."

In her 35-point performance, Asagwara proved why she's so dangerous with the ball in her hands. The fifth-year science student shot 10-21 from the floor, 3-8 from behind the arc and 12-15 from the charity stripe while connecting on an impressive

array of athletic lay-ups and runners in addition to her potent jump shot.

"[My biggest strengths are] my ability to get to the hoop or to change up my scoring options—not just getting to the hoop but pulling up for the jump shot or taking the three or shaking someone off of me," the St Norbert, Manitoba native says. "Having the confidence of my coaches and my teammates definitely helped a lot. Last year they were all really supportive and let me be as creative as I could on the court. I got to be myself and play the way that I felt the best within my package."

In an attempt to slow Asagwara, Alberta defended her a few different ways, pressuring the length of the floor and guarding her man-to-man with both Kara Stevens and Carly McLennan. Asagwara was ready for everything they threw at her, however, using her quickness to get McLennan off balance before shooting over her and using her size to post up Stevens and get to the basket.

"She's a really bright player, and it didn't matter who we put on her, she had a game plan as to how to attack that athlete—she may not know the player, but she knows that type of athlete," Edwards says. He also notes that while the Pandas chose to defend Uzo by making her do all the work and tiring her, it may not work every night. "You probably have to do some other things for her. We thought of trapping her every time she touched the ball to get it out of her hands—she will pass; she's not a really selfish kid, but she knows that

on her team she needs to take a lot of shots."

"I'm never worried about who's guarding me; I don't worry about what the team is going to throw at me on defence," Asagwara adds. "I look to be a threat, first of all, defensively for our team. I feel like a lot of our team's offence and my offence comes from our confidence on defence, and that allows me to be effective offensively."

Asagwara's 29.3 points per game are leading the country for the second year in a row—coinciding with the departure of all-Canadian guard JoAnne Wells—and are garnering the focus of every opposing team, a strategy that she believes may not be the best to take.

"It's an honour to have coaches single me out and to think that highly of my abilities. At the same time, I'm not the only player on my team, so I don't think focusing on me is always in the best interest of other coaches."

While she has goals of playing pro in the European leagues after finishing her degree next year, this season is all about doing what she was unable to do last season, her first without Wells: take the Wesmen to Nationals, where Asagwara won two silvers and a bronze in her first three years.

"Once you have that kind of success, you never want to go away from that. It's nice to go to Nationals and get a medal and be in the final and know what that feels like, because you're always driven to get back there."



KIM SMITH

THAT HAIR'S GOING EVERYWHERE Just like her hair, Uzo Asagwara (22) can score from everywhere on the court. Which is good for Winnipeg.

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