



HOWIE KUSSOY

SPORTS COURTING THE AREA

How hoops star left behind powerhouse to turn around Wagner

By [Howie Kussoy](#)

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Dwaun Anderson

Photo: Ira Gershansky



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In the middle of the best season in Wagner history, the coaching staff was uncontrollably drawn to the future.

Head coach Dan Hurley, assistant Bashir Mason and the Seahawks were on their way to 25 wins during the 2011-12 season, but the best recruit in school history — Dwaun Anderson — was confined to the sideline, teasing imaginations in practice from the first drive of his first drill.

“Everyone is doing layups and then he does a windmill — and I played in high school with J.R. Smith, so I’ve been around some athletic guys — and it was almost like a cartoon character, like his waist was at the rim and he could’ve done whatever he wanted to do,” said Mason, now in his fourth season as Wagner’s head coach. “Me and Danny looked at each other and smiled and said, ‘We might have something with this guy.’ Things were going well, but we knew things were going to be going well the next couple years.”

Back-to-back 19-win seasons followed, and when Anderson found the spotlight, it was blinding. The mystery restricted to practices in the Staten Island

gym was unveiled for every inch of the country, with Anderson making multiple appearances on SportsCenter’s Top 10 with his inexplicable feats of athleticism.

Yet most moments were quiet. Most moments made it easy to forget the small town kid from Suttons Bay was “Mr. Michigan,” that the 6-foot-4 swingman initially was signed by Tom Izzo, and took classes and participated in Michigan State workouts before leaving in the summer of 2010, seeking a change of scenery as he continued grieving the death of his mother that May.

When Anderson came to Wagner — learning of the school’s existence from AAU teammate Eric Fanning, who had committed to the Seahawks, and eschewing the offers of other power programs for the comfort of the small campus — he came forever branded as the product of a national power, a player who impressed a coach who has been to seven Final Fours.

“That was a big thing that he was dealing with,” Mason said. “A Michigan State transfer, you see these highlight athletic dunks, [and people wondered] why not every game? Why not every possession? Why? Why? Why? And I think that got to him.



Anderson

Photo: David Saffran

“You could see a little insecurity coming out of him and I reiterated to him you were a starter on a team that won 38 games in two years. We know your value. We’ll show some people something different.”

Six minutes into last season, those plans were scrapped. Anderson broke a bone in his foot and missed the entire season, as the Seahawks won only 10 games. This summer, Anderson returned with as much uncertainty as ever, but has since made a substantial leap closer to the future he teased so long ago.

Helping Wagner (12-6, 5-2) already surpass last season’s win total and move into a first-place tie in the Northeast Conference with wins in five of the past six games, Anderson is posting career-highs in virtually every category, averaging over 30 minutes, 11.5 points, 5.0 rebounds and 1.6 steals. Most importantly, Anderson is leaned on as the team’s defensive stopper, assigned to shut down point guards, power forwards and everyone in between.

“There’s a big difference in my confidence and my comfort just being on the floor,” Anderson said. “It was hard for me to get comfortable, especially for me mentally coming from somewhere where I was the main guy and transferring from Michigan State, there were a lot of expectations of me. I can understand it, but I think it got to me and I felt more pressure and it messed with my nerves and my confidence. The hype of it, people had high expectations of me and I’d see in places people saying I didn’t play to my full potential, getting nervous knowing the spotlight was on me.

“It’s taken me a while to get back to a place to where I feel really comfortable playing.”

Sitting out an entire season helped, slowing down the game, as did playing to his strengths, rather than others’ expectations.

Often, he watches Michigan State on TV, and less often, he wonders what life would have been like had he never left.

“Obviously it’d be a big difference in the experience, but what could’ve been isn’t what happened so I don’t really put too much thought into it,” Anderson said. “It comes in my head once in a while.”

Then the thought leaves, the life-changing decision never questioned.

“I don’t regret it at all,” Anderson said. “This has been exactly what I wanted.”