

# TRIUMPH Over Tragedy

No obstacle too big for freshman

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**D**ominique Oden doesn't remember much about that moment in 2002.

It's probably a good thing.

As a 4-year-old, Oden sat in the backseat of her dad's car with her siblings, as Marquis ran inside a New Orleans barbershop to schedule a haircut for his son. The children were still there, probably napping a bit, when Marquis came back out and was confronted by a man he knew, a man he had tried to help, but a man who also held a grudge.

Marquis Oden was a school teacher, and at times over the years he had taken a group of students up to Angola, the Louisiana State Penitentiary that's also known as the "Alcatraz of the South," to show them what *not* to become. He wanted to scare them straight.

But the message hadn't set in with Michael Moore. On that spring day, Moore pulled a gun and shot Marquis Oden dead on the sidewalk, as the children sat only feet away.

It wasn't the Oden family's last tragedy.

Three years later, the family was forced to pack up quickly, tossing essentials into a van and heading east, never to return home. When Hurricane Katrina hit right after, it destroyed parts of New Orleans and tossed 11 feet of water into the Oden family home, all but toppling it to the ground.

Dominique Oden was tested at an early age, but those trials helped shape who she is now.

The 18-year-old freshman is mature beyond her years, unfazed by basketball, as she's taken to the challenges at Purdue — she's also an architectural engineering major, but don't tell her that's too much to handle — in only her first few months in West Lafayette.

"The story goes on and on and on," mom Trudy Oden said. "There are a lot of things that we have been through that makes her the way she is. She's just a strong kid."

## UNFLAPPABLE

Trudy Oden has seen her second daughter get rattled on a basketball court only once.

It was in the quarterfinals of the Georgia state girls basketball tournament last season, when two of Dominique's teammates suffered significant knee injuries. One was younger sister Diarra, who tore her ACL for the *third* time, a heartbreaking injury considering Dominique had basically begged her to spend one more season playing together.

The injuries, and loss, ended Oden's career at Marist High School.

Most occasions, she looks collected on the court: The 5-foot-8 guard is calm, not a bit nervous or anxious, unaffected by the opponent or the stage or anything else. She's been unflappable at Purdue, where she's quickly become a starter and consistent, averaging 11.1 points per game through mid-December.

Oden treats the court like it's her sanctuary, a place where she can't be affected by outside forces.

"Since we relocated to Atlanta, since the first time she told me she wanted to play basketball,

"She's never afraid. She's not scared."

*Teammate Miracle Gray*

that was part of our coping," Trudy Oden said. "I had to find a different outlet, not just for the girls but for me. So they couldn't think about all the adversities and the bad things that were coming against us. For Dominique, it's always been basketball and books."

In the Oden family, headed by a single mom of four daughters, it was critical to be self-reliant, especially in those days. Oldest daughter Diamond was so, focusing on lacrosse and her studies, plus taking on more household responsibilities after her father's death. This spring, she'll graduate from Cornell.

Dominique, three years younger, was an independent personality early. Near the family's neighborhood in Atlanta, she found a second home at the YMCA. She hung out there as often as possible — Trudy, who works in hospice, also had a second job as the Y's assistant youth sports director then — and was a regular in organized leagues and in open gyms.

She was spotted shooting around by an AAU coach, back when the family had no idea what AAU was, and asked to come to a callout. She did and joined the Georgia Metros.

"One of my coaches there really worked with me," Dominique Oden said. "I was really small, so I was always going to be a guard. But I didn't really want to be a point guard, and we had a point guard, so he said, 'Oh, you already have a pretty good shot for an 8-year-old, so you're going to be a 2 player.' Once I was a 2, I've always wanted to work and be good."

And that meant getting in the gym. It hit a peak one summer in middle school when she worked out two hours a day, seven days a week for two straight summer months. She was close to burning out by the end of the stretch, but had found something, too, that she loved to push herself to the limit.

"A lot of my friends are like, 'You're so not social. All you do is stay in the gym,'" she said. "But that was it pretty much: Go to the gym, go back to my house, go to the gym, go back to my house."

"... At one point, I was like, 'Man, I want to quit,' but I couldn't. The fact that I kept going showed me this was something that I like to do and I just needed to know my limit. It really showed me that I can do what I've been practicing."

As did an AAU game a couple summers later. Playing for FBC Southeast Elite, her team trailed by 20 at halftime to a big-time opponent from Tennessee.

But Oden erupted after the break, hitting three after three to spur a rally. Perhaps some stubbornness from the opponent helped — the Tennessee squad refused to come out of its zone — but Oden took advantage. She couldn't miss, ending an eye-opening 20 minutes of basketball with Southeast Elite coming back for a win.

"She put the team on her back," said Miracle Gray, an AAU teammate and longtime friend who is also now a fellow freshman at Purdue. "I was right there with her. She scored like 30 points in the second half and I said, 'Nique is going to be amazing one day. Once she realizes (that), that's when it will be it for her.'"

Oden was an impressive scorer at Marist, averaging 22 points as a senior and 23 as a junior, and totaling more than 2,000 points during her career. That's hard to accomplish without versatility. Oden's a solid shooter — she hit 33 percent of her three-pointers through mid-December at Purdue — but can get to the basket and hit in mid-range as well. She has a *feel* for scoring, showing so early this season; in one of Purdue's first games, she found a soft spot in the middle of the opponent's zone, receiving the ball in the lane and tossing up a short floater. That takes not only skill, but knowledge, as well, an understanding of how to beat a defense.

Then, in her first three games as a permanent starter following the Boilermakers' 1-3 start, Oden totaled 46 points, including a career-high 23 on 7-of-9 shooting with four three-pointers, in a win over Wichita State. Purdue won eight of its next nine with Oden as a starter, beginning with the win over the Shockers in the Cancun Challenge near Thanksgiving, a stretch that continued into late December.

"I knew she could score," said Purdue junior Andreea Keys, an Atlanta native who played against Oden in high school. "She's come here and just flat-out shot the ball really, really well. If she doesn't shoot well one game, she brings it the next game or she's bringing something else to the team. I'm impressed like everyone else is."

Few freshmen have made as big an impact as Oden during Sharon Versyp's 11-year tenure at Purdue. Her scoring average, as of mid-December, was second only to Courtney Moses' 11.7 as a rookie in 2010-11, but Moses came in with more well-known credentials. Oden's been a bit of a surprise.

"She's just a steady player, doesn't get too high, doesn't get too low," Versyp said. "She's a constant and very level-headed, and I think that's what has kept her grounded and really, really solid."

## UNFAZED

It was a rush in early August 2005.

The Odens, like so many others, were trying to get out of New Orleans as quickly as possible, ahead of a storm that would end up killing more than 1,200 and hamper the lives of many others.

It was a challenge.

Dominique, 7 at the time, didn't have a firm grasp

# Arni's Celebrates Student-Athletes



**Jon McKeeman, Men's Basketball**  
Graduate School (5), Health and Kinesiology

McKeeman, a guard from Fort Wayne, is one of 54 Purdue student-athletes to be honored with the Big Ten Distinguished Scholar Award as announced this past summer. McKeeman, who has already earned his degree in movement and sports sciences and is currently enrolled in graduate school, is one of just 14 Boilermakers to have a 4.0 gpa. He joins Bree Horrocks and Hayden Hamby (women's basketball), Jimmy Herman (football), Matt McClintock and Sharise Lund (track), Kim Love (soccer), Mary Gooding (softball), Evan Barta, Alex Toetz, Madison Monteiro and Nika Petric (swimming), Gergely Madarasz

(tennis) and Linnea Rohrson (volleyball).

Similar to the Academic All-Big Ten honor, Distinguished Scholar Award recipients must be letterwinners in at least their second academic year at their institution. However, the Distinguished Scholar Award encompasses only students with a minimum GPA of 3.7 or higher for the previous academic year, excluding summer school.



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of what was happening. The siblings had just gotten back from a trip — every summer, they went off to spend a couple weeks at uncle Carey Drayton's house in Tallahassee, Fla., where he was the chief of police at Florida State — yet were reloading their unpacked baggage for a return.

It didn't make sense, but they went along, as they got help from another family member who was urging people out of the city.

"We took bags like we were going on vacation," Dominique Oden said. "My mom packed up the whole van of stuff, all of our stuffed animals and everything, and my uncle (there) was like, 'Um, no. Pick one.' So I have one stuffed animal that I still have from when I was younger, my bunny."

Getting grandma in tow was a bigger challenge, considering the New Orleans native had lived through Betsy (1965) and Camille ('69) and figured she wouldn't have much trouble with Katrina. But she had colon cancer, too, which would take her life a year later, so the family insisted that she not try to ride this one out.

"We just boarded up the house and we left," Trudy Oden said. "When we found out how bad the devastation was, we had to rethink and revamp and try to figure out where would be the best place to plant our roots and start all over again."

That happened in Atlanta, where other family members were living, and life has been good.

But there's no avoiding the past. It's been more than 14 years since Marquis Oden was killed, but the hurt is still apparent. Moore was convicted on a manslaughter charge but didn't serve his complete sentence; he's free now, Trudy Oden says, after having time shaved off due to helping with Katrina cleanup efforts.

"With the Hurricane Katrina stuff, it got messed up and he got let out," Dominique Oden said. "I know at one time (mom) was upset about that. He got let out on 'good behavior.' So that was a little bit upsetting when I heard about that."

Trudy Oden tried to shield her children as much as possible during the aftermath, using the funeral to highlight her husband's spirit — Diamond Oden wanted her dad's enduring image to be his smile — rather than his death.

But the tragedy happened, there's no avoiding that. And Katrina did, too. There have been plenty of losses over the years, obstacles that have had to be overcome.

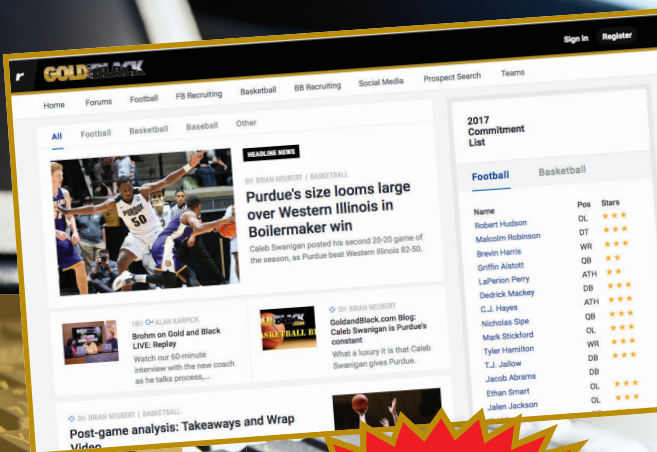
So basketball? Well, pardon Dominique Oden if she's not going to let it overwhelm her. Not going to happen.

"At the end of the day, it is a game," she said. "We really want to win, but compared to other stuff that is going on in the world, it's not as big of a deal. It's just a game. I can do better next time. It's not the end of the world.

"That's something that keeps me going, because I know that other people have it worse than I have it now." **ATW**

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