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TOP STORY

## Into the Hall: Krystal Brooks

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Submitted photo

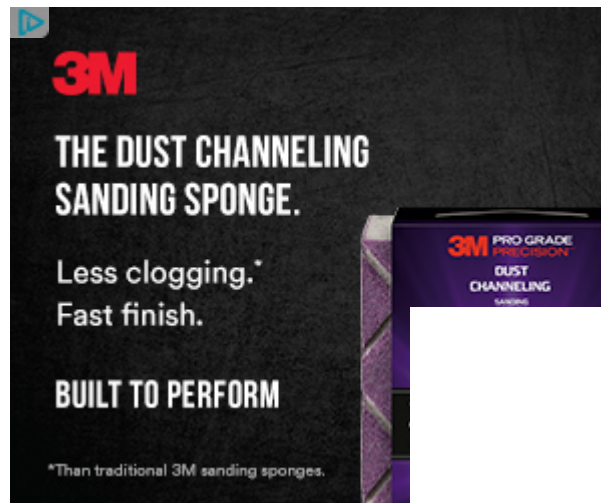
Brownsville graduate Krystal Brooks is shown during her playing days at James Madison University. Brooks is part of the 2020/2021 class of inductees for the Fayette County Sports Hall of Fame.

Submitted photo

Krystal Brooks excelled as a basketball player for Brownsville Area High School and James Madison University but she'll be the first to tell you she had plenty of help along the way.

“It starts early and it starts in the community for sure,” said Brooks, who is a 2001 Brownsville graduate. “It’s Jim Davis creating Bidy League in Brownsville, sort of allowing us to develop and then move on to the (Uniontown) YMCA which carried on to AAU. It’s just kind of building blocks that allow myself and other girls to develop their skills and be standouts.”

Brooks is part of the 2020/2021 class of inductees for the Fayette County Sports Hall of Fame. She and the rest of the inductees and representatives will be recognized at a Hall of Fame Golf outing/Luncheon/Social starting at 9 a.m. Friday at Pleasant Valley Golf Club in Connellsville.



Brooks was encouraged to play basketball at a young age by her father, Willibe Brooks, a great Brownsville athlete in his own right who was a Falcons’ track & field legend. She’s well aware of her bloodlines.

“I take care of my dad right now. He and I have been together, I’ve been looking after him for the past few years,” Brooks said while speaking recently about her induction on George Von Benko’s Sports Line Talk Show on WMBS Radio. “We have a picture of him where he’s in his track position and I tell him all the time, I’m like ‘Dad, this is where I get it from. It comes from you. I’m a Brooks.’”

“I hear it all the time. ‘Oh, your dad Willibe, he was amazing.’ So it’s pretty cool to be a Brooks and to come up in the community as well with my sister, Kristeena, who was a basketball player with me. We were like the point guard and the center. As my dad would say, one-two punch. It was really cool.

“It just felt great to come up and be so involved in sports but also to know that people really looked up to my father as well and the legacy that he held at Brownsville.”

Krystal Brooks has created her own legacy at Brownsville thanks to a stellar playing career under Lady Falcons under coach Frank Bernadowski with “great support” from Herb Mitchell.

The 6-foot-2 center poured in 1,360 points and grabbed 900 rebounds as a four-year letterman at Brownsville while earning all-section and All-WPIAL honors. Her teammates included her sister Kristeena and Penny Kezmarsky, who is currently the head girls basketball coach at Uniontown.

She was named Freshman of the Year for the Lady Falcons in her first year of varsity basketball for a team that went 14-10 overall and 9-3 in section play. Brownsville was 10-8 and 7-5 her sophomore year and 10-13 and 4-8 her junior season.

Brooks helped the Lady Falcons soar to a 21-3 record her senior year while winning the section championship with a perfect 14-0 mark. Brownsville lost a tight battle with North Catholic in the WPIAL playoffs, 46-40.

Brooks gives credit to her AAU team, the Uniontown Hustlers, for also helping her develop and draw even more attention from prospective colleges. She joined the team when she was 11 and played up with older girls. The Hustlers were coach by Fayette County Sports Hall of Fame Board Chairman Chris Cluss.

“He took me under his wing, he took my sister under his wing, my father, and he just looked after us,” Brooks said of Cluss. “He made sure that I was going to be successful. He gave me that support. I just am so thankful for it.

“He came to my wedding. He just was truly amazing and influential in making sure that I had the opportunity. I was able to get out there and travel and play the game I love which was basketball. I’m still appreciative of him.”

Brooks drew plenty of NCAA Division-I interest when it came to choosing a college. She took official visits to James Madison, Eastern Kentucky, St. Bonaventure and Ohio University and also took an unofficial visit to Robert Morris. She eventually accepted a full scholarship to play at JMU.

“Playing basketball I was truly dedicated early on. I had a lot of support within in the community. Playing AAU allowed me to travel the country and get great exposure to different universities, for them to see me play and get recruited to play Division-I basketball,” Brooks said. “I was lucky.

“I worked hard to get recruited and James Madison was just a standout for me, a place that I visited. I loved it. It really felt like a traditional university, a beautiful campus, a great program that was going in a great direction. It was a great distance from home, not too far, not too close. And it was a really great experience.”

Brooks flourished with the Dukes. As a four-year letterman she accumulated 642 points, 360 rebounds and 57 blocked shots in her career and was chosen as a team captain her junior and senior seasons.

JMU put up records of 16-12 (under coach Bud Childers), 17-12, 13-18 and 18-11 (under coach Kenny Brooks) while Brooks was playing.

“I look back at my time at James Madison and I just feel so grateful for the opportunities that I had and just the career I had, the girls I played with, my coach, Kenny Brooks, Greg Warner (JMU’s head strength and conditioning coach), all the ladies,” Brooks said. “Those are my sisters. I truly cherish the relationships that I’ve had throughout the years.”

Brooks graduated from James Madison with a double major in Sociology and Kinesiology, and a minor in Human Resource and Development. She spent two years as an assistant women’s basketball coach at Youngstown State.

Brooks’ accomplishments eventually led to her induction into the Fayette County Sports Hall of Fame.

“I was delightfully surprised. It was a great phone call to receive,” Brooks said of when she was notified. “When I got the call I was thrilled and truly honored.

“It feels great. I feel so honored and lucky to just be included in such a great class. Shelley Bortz, I played with her sister, Renee Bortz. She and I were the best of friends playing AAU basketball from 12 years old to like 17. So to be included with her sister just feels really special. I think that’s really cool. There’s a great connection there.”

This isn’t Brooks’ first Hall of Fame induction. She was enshrined in the inaugural class of the Brownsville High School Athletic Hall of Fame in 2015.

“For me what really stood out was to be the first woman to be chosen,” Brooks said of the Brownsville Hall of Fame. “That felt really special. It made really feel good about the career I had and all the hard work and effort that I put in as a young girl, playing basketball and just being totally dedicated to the sport.

“Brownsville is my home and to be thought of like that was really special and really cool.”

Brooks, who noted she'll be entering a Fayette Hall of Fame that includes trailblazing women's basketball coach and German Township graduate C. Vivian Stringer, believes the sport has continued to rise over the years.

“Even playing in college, I had a couple teammates who were amazing players who got to play in the WNBA,” she noted. “It just seems like it's getting more acceptable and better opportunities for women to stand out and be true superstars in the sport.”

Brooks is a Certified Personal Trainer and Nutrition Coach with the National Academy of Sports Medicine. She remains involved in sports and has created her own company based in Fayette County.

“As I'm making my way through life, figuring out my journey, I found myself always coming back to fitness,” Brooks explained. “I'm doing personal training and nutrition coaching. My company is 'Fitness and Heart' and I just launched in December of 2020.

“If you are looking to get into fitness and figure out your nutritional balance that's something I'd be happy to help you with.”

Those interested can check Brooks' website at [www.FitnessAndHeart.com](http://www.FitnessAndHeart.com).