PROVIDENCE — I have seen every Brown freshman basketball player since the late 1950s, and I have never seen a better one than Desmond Cambridge, a 6-foot-4 kid from Nashville, Tenn., by way of The Hun School in New Jersey.

How good?

How about the fact he’s already been the Ivy League’s Rookie of the Week six times?

How about the fact he twice been the league’s Player of the Week?

How about the fact that on Friday night against Cornell he got off to a very slow start, apparently on his way to one of those rare off nights, only to recover and up with 26 points?

How about the fact that in the history of Brown basketball, no freshman has ever had the kind of impact Cambridge has had?

But the scouting report is not without a few qualifications.

The biggest is that once upon a time freshmen players were relegated to playing on freshmen teams, a rule that went out decades ago.

No matter.

You don’t need to be the reincarnation of Red Auerbach to know Cambridge is a big-time talent, someone whose obvious athleticism seems to be outlined in neon lights. The first time I saw it was in a game in which, after he hit a couple of deep 3-pointers, he swooped in for a dunk, his elbows all but sitting on the rim.

Who was this kid?

And what was he doing at Brown?
The media guide gives you the hits, runs and errors of the freshman. How he is averaging nearly 18 points. How his name is all over this season.

But it doesn’t tell you about the journey.

It’s one that began back in the Nashville of his childhood, a place so very far from the Ivy League. He grew up in a family of 10 kids, as his father essentially had two different families. In many ways basketball was the life raft in this swirling sea, his own little world, complete with the dreams that came with it.

“I was trying to dunk when I was 13 years old,” he says.

Two years later he could.

Already he knew that basketball was his passport to a future opportunities, even though there must have been times when that dream seemed way out over the rainbow somewhere.

“It’s been a long journey,” he says, almost as if he’s an old man looking back on the many miles of his long life.

It’s also a peek into the wacky world of recruiting, for there’s no doubt Cambridge flew under the radar, this 6-foot-4 kid who can make 3-pointers off the dribble, and can jump as if he’s on some personal trampoline. As fate would have it, the father of Brown coach Mike Martin knew someone from Springfield, Massachusetts, who was Cambridge’s AAU coach in Springfield.

Plus, he was under-recruited.

“He was a little young for his class and he also played for a dysfunctional AAU team,” says Mike Martin. “We thought he was going to be very good, but you worry about someone being a little intimidated that first year. But he’s the opposite of being intimidated.”

Part of that is that he is the product on an elite AAU program in which one of his vaunted teammates was Marvin Bagley, the great Duke freshman. The point is he’s been in big AAU games against big-time talent.

“He’s a very talented, confident player,” says Russ Tyler, one of Brown’s all-time great players, who now does color on the radio broadcasts of the Brown games.

No doubt.
And, yes, he needs to get a little stronger, and, yes, he needs to fill out. And, yes, he will take a bad shot every once in awhile. And, yes, he's never going to be the defensive player the great Phil Brown was in the early '70s.

But to see him on Friday night against Cornell, to see him start off slow before finding his game in the second half, was to see the best Brown freshman basketball player I've ever seen.

And I've seen every one since 1958.