

## **CAITLIN CLARK JOINS THE WNBA: CAN HER COLLEGE DOMINANCE CARRY OVER?**

*By Robert Tilitz*

The pro leagues in every major American sport have many times in the past administered the baptism by fire rite of passage to ballyhooed rookies. As such, the 2024 Women's National Basketball Association season was slated to be about putting Caitlin Clark to the test. In the crucible of competition, legends are born and legends die. It's the stuff of sports, the drama of sports. The drama was also supposed to vault the WNBA onto the national and world stage of big-time sports, which its players have been yearning for but so far had not reached.

But strangely basketball has often taken a back seat in Clark's first season. Instead, the news emanating from the WNBA has very much been about the behavior and the ideas of a significant number of WNBA players and their supporters who oppose all or part of the Caitlin Clark story. Their concerns center on race, gender identity and progressive politics. They pride themselves on steadfast advocacy for their causes. Even though their advocacy could cost them major financial gain and enhanced sports celebrity, the anti-Clark faction of players has shown little interest in reprioritization. Then there is the Caitlin Clark fan base, which greatly exceeds in size any previously developed by the WNBA. It appears that the Clark fan base has embraced their homegrown hero one because of her performance excellence and two because she embodies the Middle-American ideals of hard work and fair play in sport and in life.

The hope here of course is that the WNBA's growing pains will resolve themselves as quickly and as amicably as possible for the good of all concerned. In the meantime, there is plenty of pure basketball news growing out of Caitlin Clark's baptism by fire to discuss.



Caitlin Clark, left and above

To begin with, any doubts about Clark's physical attributes and skillset working in the WNBA have been rapidly dispelled. Clark's size and athleticism are superior for a WNBA point guard, her natural position. Yes, Clark also has the size and athleticism to compete and to succeed as a WNBA shooting guard. But Clark would be less physically dominant in the two-guard slot than at the point. Plus, besides physical dominance and two-guard scoring capability, Clark's top-of-the-line point guard package includes outstanding passing, ballhandling and court vision.

Just the same, Clark's road to resuming her college dominance in the WNBA has not been entirely smooth. Without doubt the WNBA's world's best defense, both individual and team, has contributed to the exposure of Clark's offensive shortcomings. Yet despite its formidability,

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the WNBA's defense ranks second to deficiencies in Clark's offensive skillset when it comes to explaining her offensive problems. Specifically, it is patently obvious within the context of the whole-body jump shot theory's linkage of techniques and tactics that Clark's major offensive deficiencies stem directly from her most acclaimed skill, her jump shot.

To understand Clark's jump shot, there are two good places to start. One is its type and the other is its comp. According to whole-body jump shot theory classifications, the type of jump shot that Clark shoots is an elbow-in-push jump shot. Although supporters of the prevailing elbow-in-strokesnap theory are likely to be put off by the push part of the name, which is close to a dirty word in their misguided circles, the whole-body jump shot theory views push power as one of two fundamental forms of jump shot power. The other is leveraged pull power. The elbow-in-push jump shot's shooting arm sourced push produces very good power, accuracy and touch with its straightstroke-push release. See the eponymous *PS* website article for details.

The comp for Clark and her jump shot is Bradley Beal. That's far from an insult. Beal is a high-scoring mid-range and long-range jumpshooter. There are, however, valid criticisms to be made of Beal's elbow-in-push jumpshooting game. In particular, Beal's out-front and low elbow-in shooting position for the start of the release to a great extent precludes shooting strongside pull-up jump shots. That means the big, strong and athletic Beal specializes in weakside jump shots, many of the very popular stepback variety. The same can be said of Clark.

The whole-body jump shot theory acknowledges that many of basketball's best jumpshooters prefer shooting weakside pull-ups and stepbacks. And the whole-body jump shot theory understands that the weakside jumpshooting game can be highly effective because it is fast and easy. Both the speed and the ease derive from the setup of the shooting grip off the weakside dribble, which is fast and easy. But at the same time, the weakside jump shot's exposure of the basketball as it is being raised to the shooting position discourages pulling up in close proximity to the defender, ergo the popularity of the weakside stepback. To put it another way, the weakside jump shot's poor protection of the basketball as it is being raised to the shooting position almost completely precludes attacking the defense with the jump shot.

The preference for weakside stepbacks over strongside attack jump shots is just fine for Beal and other scoring specialists. But Clark is point guard, whose job is to attack and disrupt the defense. Given her abundant talents, Clark manages her point guard responsibilities very well even with her weakside elbow-in-push jump shot. And many other talented weakside point guards in the NBA and the WNBA are fairly effective. Nevertheless, the argument here is that Clark and all the other weakside point guards could be even more effective if they could shoot a strongside attack jump shot. Here's why. The strongside pull-up jump shot provides the body-wedge protection of the basketball as it is being raised to the shooting position that enables strongside point guards to attack the middle of the defense. That's the key to the best possible point guard play because it forces the interior defenders to step outside to confront the attacking point guard, which disrupts the defense and creates premium passing opportunities for the point guard to freed-up teammates on the inside and at mid-range.

With reference to the low field goal percentage and the high turnover rate that have tainted Clark's offensive performance during her initial WNBA season, once again the ultimate blame

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rests with the limitations of her elbow-in-push jump shot. Clark's low field goal percentage is a direct consequence of the high degree of difficulty shot selection that the elbow-in-push jump shot dictates, which includes mainly mid-range and long-range often off-balance weakside pull-ups, fallaways and stepbacks. Clark's high turnover rate is an indirect consequence of the elbow-in-push jump shot denying her a strongside pull-up jump shot. If, instead of skirting the perimeter looking for weakside jump shot and thread-the-needle passing opportunities, Clark could attack the defense with a well-protected and highly athletic strongside pull-up jump, then she would be able to disrupt the defense, which would lead to simple premium inside passes to open teammates. Clark's dynamic strongside drives are a step in the right direction. But the interior defenders know that at present Clark cannot pull up off the strongside dribble, so they wait for her at the basket instead of stepping outside to confront a possible pull-up.

There is, however, a relatively easy to implement solution for the strongside problems that currently plague Clark's otherwise excellent jumpshooting and point guard games. Fundamental to the fix is retaining, without alteration, Clark's elbow-in-push jump shot for weakside jump shots. But also fundamental to the fix is accepting that Clark's jump shot game needs to be supplemented with another jump shot to cover strongside pull-up jump shots. The whole-body jump shot theory calls the concept jump shot diversity. It means that the jumpshooter has the technical capability by way of mastery of two or more different jump shots to handle all or most jump shot contingencies. That might sound like a tall order at a time when most players have not mastered one jump shot. But the whole-body jump shot theory's relatively easy to learn jump shots make it doable. See Kyrie Irving, who has mastered both the whole-body reachback and the whole-body reachup jump shots. For Clark to achieve jump shot diversity in order to fill the strongside pull-up gap in her jumpshooting game and to expand her point guard game, the recommendation here is that she learn how to shoot the whole-body elbow-out jump shot.

The answer to the question, then, of whether Caitlin Clark's college dominance can carry over to the WNBA is a decided yes. Furthermore, with the breadth of talent in the WNBA encouraging specialization, Clark's transition to point guard is an unexpected but awesome marriage of player and position that could lead to an increase in her dominance. In terms of size, strength and athleticism, Clark qualifies as a perfect point guard. The same can be said for her passing, ballhandling and court vision. There is, however, a "but," a major "but."

In order to truly dominate the defense, the point guard must be able to attack the middle of the defense with the jump shot. Without a doubt, Clark's elbow-in-push jump shot is not up to the task. If Clark's strongside deficiency does not persuade, consider Steve Nash, who dazzled but never dominated with his point guard game because his elbow-in-push jump shot was also not up to the task. Plus, there are countless very good past and present point guards with different types of strongside deficient jump shots who similarly come up short in the domination department. Clark might end up being the best of the bunch or close to it. But that is a far cry from point guard domination by way of attacking the defense with the jump shot. So it should be back to the drawing board for Clark. It should be pursuit of jump shot diversity, which would mean supplementing her point guard game with a strongside attack-capable jump shot.