

CAITLIN CLARK'S WNBA ROOKIE REPORT CARD: HIGH GRADES EVEN WITHOUT A COMPLETE POINT GUARD GAME

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 Clark's on-court performance often took a back seat in her first season. Instead, the news emanating from the WNBA was very much about the behavior and/or the ideas of a significant number of WNBA players and their supporters who opposed all or part of the Caitlin Clark story. Their concerns centered 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 showed little interest in reprioritization. By contrast, 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

Clark opened her inaugural WNBA season with the eyes of the entire basketball world, indeed of the entire sports world, upon her. To those familiar with Clark's collegiate career, it was not surprising that Clark exceeded the high expectations that accompanied her arrival in the WNBA. After all, the preceding four years at Iowa had shown Clark to be athletic, big, strong, competitive, resilient and in possession of an unstoppable offensive skillset.

What probably was surprising to many basketball insiders and to fans alike, however, was Clark's seamless and total transition to point guard in the WNBA. Clark's Big Ten Conference and NCAA season and career leading assist stats notwithstanding, she was better known for her long-range scoring exploits in college. Clark's college assist stats were quite likely viewed by

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many as merely a consequence of having the basketball in her hands most of the time. Not so in the WNBA. As a pro, Clark's league leading assist stats and overall point guard play shared top billing in her game along with her shotmaking. In other words, Clark redefined herself as a shoot-first point guard in the WNBA. Incidentally, there is a school of thought in basketball, one supported here, that believes shoot-first is the best way to play point guard, provided the shoot-first tactic is used to enhance the point guard's passing game.

As to why Clark became a full-fledged point guard in the WNBA, there are several possible explanations. Perhaps Clark determined that a switch to point guard was necessary in order to win against the best-in-the-world WNBA defenses. Or perhaps it was her team's needs that prompted Clark to take on the role and the responsibility of playing point guard. Or perhaps it was simply the natural evolution of Clark's offensive game that led her to playing point guard full time. Whether it was one or a combination of these explanations or another one altogether, the bottom line is that Clark is now best described as a dominant point guard.

As such, Clark's play at point guard has been a revelation. The athleticism, size and strength that would have enabled Clark to compete even-steven with the best WNBA scoring guards in a presumed continuation of her position/role in college, all of a sudden are dominant advantages for Clark against the best WNBA point guards. Besides physical dominance and two-guard scoring capability, Clark's top-of-the-line point guard package includes outstanding passing, ballhandling and court vision. So, with her physical superiority and well-rounded complementary skillset, Clark showed why she is a dominant point guard.

Just the same, Clark's road to total offensive dominance in the WNBA has not been entirely smooth. In fact, chronic problems plagued Clark's offensive game throughout her WNBA rookie year. The most serious of Clark's offensive problems were shot selection, field goal percentage and turnovers. Without doubt the best-in-the-world WNBA defenses, both individual and team, contributed to Clark's offensive problems. But the number one cause of Clark's offensive problems was actually deficiencies in her offensive skillset. Specifically, within the context of the whole-body jump shot theory's linkage of techniques and tactics, it is obvious that Clark's shot selection, field goal percentage and turnover problems all stem directly from her most acclaimed offensive 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 up-and-out extension of the shooting arm during the release produces significant push power. By shooting on the rise, the jump of the jump shot supplements the push power of the elbow-in-push jump shot's release. The elbow-in-push jump shot produces very good power, accuracy and touch by way of its straightstroke-push release.

The comp for Clark and her elbow-in-push jump shot is Bradley Beal. That's far from an insult. Beal is a high-scoring mid-range and long-range jumpshooter. Beal's elbow-in-push jump shot

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and his elbow-in-push jumpshooting game, however, are not beyond criticism. In particular, Beal's out-front and low elbow-in shooting position for the start of the release to a great extent precludes both shooting strongside pull-up jump shots and attacking the defense from mid-range on in with the jump shot. That's because of the elbow-in-push jump shot's athleticism and protection issues. As a result, the big, strong and athletic Beal is forced to specialize in weakside jump shots, many of the popular stepback variety. The same, unfortunately, 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 pull-up jump shots is just fine for Beal and other scoring specialists. But Clark is a point guard and it is the job of the point guard 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, just like many other talented weakside point guards in the NBA and the WNBA. Nevertheless, the argument here is that Clark and all the other weakside point guards would be much more effective if they could shoot a strongside attack pull-up jump shot.

Here's a fundamental reason why the strongside pull-up jump shot enhances the effectiveness of the point guard's game. 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 operate in and thereby 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. That disruption of the defense creates premium passing opportunities for the point guard to freed-up teammates on the inside and at mid-range.

With reference to the poor shot selection, low field goal percentage and the high turnover rate that tainted Clark's offensive performance during her initial WNBA season, the ultimate blame rests with the limitations of her elbow-in-push jump shot. Clark's poor shot selection and low field goal percentage are direct consequences 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 a direct consequence of the elbow-in-push jump shot denying her a strongside pull-up jump shot. If, instead of being forced to skirt the perimeter by the elbow-in-push jump shot looking for either weakside jump shot or thread-the-needle passing opportunities, Clark could attack the middle of the defense with a highly athletic and well protected strongside pull-up jump, then she would be able to disrupt the defense, which would lead to shorter, simpler and easier premium inside passes to open teammates. Clark's dynamic strongside drives are a step in the right direction.

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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 jumpshooting 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 reachup and the whole-body reachback 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 strong 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. There is no way that 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 middle of 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 means supplementing her point guard game with a strongside attack-capable jump shot.