

CAITLIN CLARK AS POINT GUARD: STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

By Robert Tilitz

It was entirely appropriate for the veteran players of the WNBA to greet Caitlin Clark in her 2024 rookie season with basketball's version of Mike Tyson's bad intentions. In professional sports, the long-established custom is for the resident veterans to subject ballyhooed rookies to baptism by fire. The purpose is to test the mettle and the skills of the newcomer and to take advantage of the rookie's hype to remind the fans of just how good the veteran players are.

The trouble was that too many of the veteran WNBA players did not adapt Mike Tyson's bad intentions to basketball. Instead, too many of the veteran WNBA players physically assaulted Caitlin Clark as if basketball was a combat sport. To her credit, Clark endured the cheap shots without complaint and further distinguished herself with outstanding play at the same time.

The Women's National Basketball Association, however, brought everlasting shame down upon itself by essentially approving of the physical abuse of Clark by the not so few. As a governing body, the WNBA has issued minimal penalties, punishments, fines or criticisms against Clark's blatant and felonious attackers. As a collective, the WNBA, consisting of its players, coaches, executives, owners and their minions in the media, has treated Clark worse than Major League Baseball treated Jackie Robinson when he broke the color line.

Clark has not been confronted with the historical and societal mountains that blocked Robinson. Clark's obstacles are more of the current culture wars variety. Over the course of time, the mountains that blocked Robinson grudgingly gave way. Unfortunately, the ideological fault lines that underlie the various Clark-related controversies appear to be hardening.

To say that Clark has performed well while running the culture wars gauntlet during her early WNBA years is an understatement. Clark has continued the long-range sharpshooting that she was probably best known for in college. Many have been surprised, however, that Clark has also revealed herself to be a dynamic, stylish and top-of-the-line caliber point guard.



Caitlin Clark, left and above

Despite putting up Big Ten Conference and NCAA season and career leading assist stats, Clark was better known in college for her long-range scoring. Clark's college assist stats were likely viewed by many as a consequence of having the basketball in her hands most of the time, rather

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than as a sign of point guard talent and point guard identity. Not so in the WNBA. As a pro, Clark's league leading assist stats and overall style of play shout point guard. Because her shotmaking shares top billing with her passing, Clark is best described as a shoot-first point guard. There's nothing wrong with that. In fact, there is a school of thought in basketball, one supported here, that believes that 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 many possible explanations. Perhaps Clark determined that a switch to point guard was what was necessary in order to win against the best-in-the-world WNBA defenses. Or perhaps Clark's switch to point guard was determined by her coach. Or perhaps Clark's switch to point guard was determined by her team's needs. Or perhaps Clark's switch to point guard was determined by the natural evolution of her offensive game. Whether it was one or a combination of these explanations or another one altogether, the bottom line is that by position Clark is now a point guard.

Clark's play at point guard has in fact been a big story. The athleticism, size and strength that would have enabled Clark to compete even-stein with the best WNBA scoring guards in a continuation of her position/role in college, all of a sudden are dominant physical 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 first-rate passing, ballhandling and court vision. With her physical superiority and well-rounded complementary skillset, it is clear why Clark is a dominant point guard.

Despite establishing herself as a premier point guard, Clark's offensive play during her brief WNBA career has not been without problems. The most serious of Clark's offensive problems have been shot selection, field goal percentage and turnovers. Certainly, the WNBA's best-in-the-world defense, both individual and team, has played a role in causing Clark's shot selection, field goal percentage and turnover problems. But the primary cause of Clark's offensive problems has been of her own making. Clark's mistake has been building her point guard game around her most acclaimed and possibly her favorite offensive skill, which is her long-range jump shot. For point guards, the problem with building their game around the long-range jump shot is that, no matter how excellent, it contributes little to attacking and to disrupting the defense, which is essential to make-it-happen point guard play.

To understand Clark's jump shot, two good places to start are its type and its comparisons. 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 jump shot 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 release power. The other is leveraged pull power.

Clark's elbow-in-push jump shot's up-and-out push extension of the shooting arm during the release produces significant push power. By setting up the shooting position/set point close in front of the body, Clark gains access to whole-body jump shot power. By shooting on the rise, Clark uses the power of the jump of the jump shot to supplement the push power of the elbow-in-

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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 and its supplemental power sources.

A comp for Clark and her elbow-in-push jump shot is Bradley Beal, which is far from an insult. Beal is a high-scoring mid-range and long-range jumpshooter. Beal's elbow-in-push jump shot and his elbow-in-push jumpshooting game, however, are not beyond criticism. Beal's relatively low head-high shooting position for the start of the release hurts athleticism by cutting short the arm action that raises the basketball and doubles as upward momentum power for the jump of the jump shot. The low-starting release and the low jump also hurt protection. Most importantly, the head-high elbow-in shooting position blocks the rollback of the shooting shoulder to engage with the release mechanism. Without the setup rollback there will be no following forward rotation of the shooting shoulder during the release, which, in addition to initiating and helping to power the release, is the primary power source for the rotation of the square-in-the-air jump that many strongside pull-up jump shots require and all could use. As a result, the big, strong and athletic Beal seldom attacks the defense with the jump shot but instead specializes in weakside jump shots, including many weakside fallaways and weakside stepbacks.

The whole-body jump shot theory acknowledges that many of basketball's best jumpshooters prefer shooting weakside pull-ups, fallaways and stepbacks. That's because the weakside jumpshooting game is fast and easy by way of the fast and easy setup of the shooting grip off the weakside dribble. 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, which accounts for 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 makes it very difficult to attack the defense with the jump shot.

The preference for weakside stepbacks over attack-capable strongside pull-up jump shots is just fine for Beal and other scoring specialists. But Clark is a point guard whose job is to attack and disrupt the defense with the jump shot. Given her abundant and various talents, Clark manages her point guard responsibilities well enough even with her elbow-in-push jump shot's heavy weakside tendencies, 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 an attack-capable strongside pull-up jump shot. For Clark, adding the ability to shoot an attack-capable strongside pull-up jump shot would very likely result in better shot selection and field goal percentage and fewer turnovers.

Consider the fundamental reason why the attack-capable 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 during the square-in-the-air jump of the jump shot that enables strongside point guards to attack and to disrupt 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 and disrupting strongside pull-up point guard. The disruption of the defense creates premium passing opportunities for the strongside pull-up point guard to find freed-up teammates on the inside and at mid-range.

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So, the ultimate blame for the poor shot selection, the low field goal percentage and the high turnover rate that has tainted Clark's offensive performance during her early WNBA career 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 long-range and often off-balance weakside pull-up, stepback and fallaway jump shots that the elbow-in-push jump shot dictates. Clark's high turnover rate is a direct consequence of the elbow-in-push jump shot forcing her to skirt the perimeter looking for either weakside jump shots or long-distance thread-the-needle passing opportunities. If Clark could attack the middle of the defense with an 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 stop-and-go strongside drives are a step in the right direction. But the interior defenders know that at present Clark cannot pull up off the strongside drive, so they wait for her at the basket instead of stepping outside to confront a possible strongside pull-up.

There is a relatively easy remedy for the strongside pull-up jump shot problem that is currently afflicting 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 long-range and weakside jump shots. But also fundamental to the fix is accepting that Clark's jumpshooting game needs to be augmented with another jump shot to cover strongside pull-up jump shots. The whole-body jump shot theory calls the addition of a second jump shot to a player's arsenal jump shot diversity. It gives the jumpshooter the technical capability to handle all or almost all 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 recommendation here is that she learn how to shoot the whole-body elbow-out jump shot.

To achieve jump shot diversity would raise Clark's point guard game to a virtually unstoppable level. Factor in Clark's superior size, strength and athleticism along with her elite passing, ballhandling and court vision, and you're talking about a near perfect point guard.

Just remember, 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 up to that task. If Clark's strongside deficiency does not sound the alarm, recall 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 of attacking and disrupting the defense. Plus, there are legions of 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 that bunch or close to it. But that is very different from and inferior to point guard domination by way of attacking and disrupting the middle of the defense with the jump shot. Therefore, it should be back to the drawing board for Clark. It should be pursuit of jump shot diversity for Clark, which should mean augmenting her point guard game with the strongside attack-capable whole-body elbow-out pull-up jump shot.