

By BEN PICKMAN

During Caitlin Clark's pregame warm-up Saturday afternoon in Brooklyn, she took a break for an on-court interview with NBC's "Today" hosts Hoda Kotb and Jenna Bush Hager. Hours later, she posed in uniform for a picture next to trailblazer Billie Jean King. In between, Clark played a basketball game — the thing she's known for most of all — and scored a career-high 22 points with 8 assists and 6 rebounds. Jason Sudekis, Megan Rapinoe, Sue Bird and Dawn Staley watched as she darted up and down the court.

Clark's first week of WNBA action has come and gone. She made bulky debut in Connecticut (her first regular-season game) and Indianapolis (the Indiana Fever's home opener) against the New York Liberty on Saturday; she played in New York City for the first time in her life, receiving a mixed reaction from the crowd during lineup introductions.

In each venue, fans flocked to entrance gates hours before they were allowed in by arena security. They wore No. 22 T-shirts with Indiana logos and Iowa logos and "Caitlin Fever" printed on them. They held signs in adoration, asked for selfies and sought autographs. Clark tried to accommodate as many requests as she could.

But Clark is a basketball player first, a celebrity second. The first three games of her career reminded those with unreasonable expectations that the WNBA is a significant jump in competition from the NCAA, where she is the all-time leading scorer. Despite possessing a shooting ability that few on the planet can match, there is much for her to learn. Already, some of the WNBA's best defenders (Connecticut Sun guard Dijana Carrington and Liberty wing Betnijah Laney-Hamilton) hounded Clark, whether or not the 6-foot guard was ready to make a play. Both opponents — Connecticut on Tuesday, and New York on Thursday and Saturday — trapped her on ball screens and blocked her on staggered screens. They picked her up as she crossed half court and time-guarded her 30 feet from the hoop, at times effectively removing her from the play.

Clark acknowledged she can handle physicality better, be more decisive in navigating screens, and develop more chemistry with Indiana's posts. Thus far, she has assisted last year's Rookie of the Year Alysha Clark on four of Boston's 12 field goals. In 2023, Indiana guard Erica Wheeler assisted Boston on 24 percent of her field goals, according to FIP Stats.) But Clark's dimes to Boston haven't been spread out across games.

One came on Indiana's first offensive possession of the season and two were on consecutive possessions right before halftime of their second game. A lot of game has passed without Clark setting up Boston for easy scores, and Indiana is looking to push as much as possible, and



Indiana Fever rookie guard Caitlin Clark drives up the court during the second half of a WNBA game against the New York Liberty on May 16 in Indianapolis.

What we learned from Caitlin Clark's first week in WNBA

the Fever's half-court offense should feature a heavy diet of Clark-Boston pick-and-rolls. How they play off each other will go a long way in determining the Fever's eventual success.

Of course, 21 turnovers — Clark set an inauspicious WNBA debut record with 10 against the Sun — and 16 field goals is additionally not a ratio she wants to continue. "But also understanding this is a young group. This is a young team. I'm young. It's gonna be a learning process," she said Sunday. "Not everything is gonna be perfect."

The Fever know they have plenty to improve on as a team, too. Through three games, they are surrendering 18 fastbreak points and 17.3 second-chance points per contest, both second highest in the WNBA and a significant negative regression from last year. Their defense is allowing more than 116 points per 100 possessions, the worst mark in the league. Not getting out on shooters in the first half of their loss to New York on Saturday plagued them as much as any offensive lapses.

Multiple times throughout the week, Clark discussed the importance of giving herself grace. She's experienced the duality of being a pro, becoming the first WNBA player to log 21 turnovers in their first game, and just the second (Candace Parker the other) to log 50-plus points, 15-plus assists and 10-plus

rebounds, according to Across the Timeline.

"I know the outside world thinks I'm gonna do some amazing things, but that might take some time," she said Tuesday. She added Saturday, "I think the more we play together, our chemistry will build."

Nevertheless, the Fever's 0-3 start has been disappointing. Coach Christie Sides said they were "punched in the mouth" at the beginning of their 21-point loss to Connecticut. She was concerned by Indiana's effort in a 36-point walloping Thursday.

Before Saturday's matchup, Sides told players the word of the day was "competete." She asked her team what it felt, sounded and looked like to do so. What transpired against New York, a second time, albeit in an 11-point loss, was more to her liking. "I think we could not even figure that out the other night and that was what was so frustrating," Sides said.

The Fever are a young team, with potential, going up against some of the WNBA's best. That's not an excuse for losing the season's first two games by 57 points, the most ever in any WNBA franchise's opening two contests. "This is gonna take a little time," All-Star guard Kelsey Mitchell said Saturday. Mitchell came off the bench in Indiana's first two games as she worked her way back from an ankle injury.

"Us playing against the best of the best is only how we're gonna get better."

Between Clark's second and third games, she talked on the phone with her father. He stressed to her to just compete, play hard, have fun and learn something daily. She also picked up advice from her team. She's in constant communication with Sides. She warms up with assistant Karima Christmas-Kelly, who is a former WNBA player. Assistant Jesse Miller has become Clark's go-to when devouring film, showing Clark what she can improve on and what she's done well. Veteran guard Erica Wheeler continues to remind Clark to "KYP" — know your personnel.

Opponents also have been teachers for Clark. She subscribed to Pac-12 Network when Sabrina Ionescu played at Oregon and later developed a bond with her when Ionescu hosted Clark on a recruiting visit.

For two Fever-Liberty games, it wasn't as cordial. During one sequence in the second quarter, Clark missed a deep 3-pointer, giving the ball back to the Liberty. On New York's subsequent offensive possession, Ionescu from Clark with a pass-fake, then nailed a 3 of her own, with Clark failing to contest the shot. Running back down on defense, Ionescu shrugged as if to say Clark shouldn't have left her open.

Clark is adjusting to a new professional, game day rhythm as well. At Iowa, she said, sometimes the Hawkeyes would show up 90 minutes before tip, warm up and play.

She got to Moberg Sun Arena more than two hours before Tuesday's opener. In the locker room, Clark ate a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. She messaged with Wheeler as the veteran guard was getting a massage. She was "antsy," Wheeler said. "She's not used to being at the gym this early, so I told her, 'You gotta find things to do whether that's stretch, watch film. You gotta fill the time.'"

Clark hasn't had much downtime. Indiana is opening its season with seven games in 12 days, including matchups against the Sun, Seattle Storm and Las Vegas Aces taking place in the next week. What has she done for enjoyment away from basketball? "I'm about to move into my apartment. So I'm moving out of a hotel. So that's fun," she said.

Perhaps in new living quarters, Clark will find time to relax. Nevertheless, she's seldom looked overwhelmed.

"Caitlin is handling it so well," veteran Fever center Temi Fagbenle said. "I'm so proud of how she is as a person. I just hope we can band around her. It's a lot of pressure."

Clark, of course, is not just shouldering pressure from a franchise looking to make its first playoff appearance since 2016 but also the weight of a sport that is buzzing like never before. She said coming out, playing fast and competing will be her focus. She looks forward to visiting new arenas and making more memories. "I'm going to remember a lot of these games," Clark said, "because it is my first year in the league."

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