

## HIGH SCHOOL

# Lillian Barnes doesn't look like a freshman. Valparaiso guard doesn't play like one either.



**Brian Haenchen**

Indianapolis Star

Published 4:03 a.m. ET Jan. 26, 2023

VALPARAISO — It was obvious from the moment Lillian Barnes walked in to watch the final minutes of Valparaiso's JV game last Friday why the freshman is such a hot commodity.

The guard/wing is already built like an upperclassman — a "Big Ten body," as coach Candy Wilson describes it — evidence of her natural strength in how she fills out her 6-foot frame, and later demonstrated through her physicality in the post and on the glass against Lake Central's collection of sophomores and juniors.

You can feel her power, Wilson said of Barnes, who averages 17 points, seven rebounds and six steals per game. "You don't realize it until you're at floor-level. She goes by you and you just feel that raw explosiveness. It's pure power."

**More:** How HSE's 'Splash Sisters' found their love for basketball, use mom's experiences as guide

Now in her ninth season at Valpo and 25th overall, Wilson has never had a first-year player like Barnes. The upbeat 15-year-old held offers from Milwaukee, Western Michigan and Valparaiso entering her freshman year, and has since begun drawing interest from Purdue, Marquette, Miami (Ohio) and Xavier. She's deceptively fast, fearlessly physical and possesses an advanced understanding of the game, as well as uncanny floor vision.

Barnes maintains a scorer's mentality, but knows where to place her passes if she doesn't have a clean look, and where to be (and when to make her move) if she doesn't have the ball. Though still learning to consistently avoid foul trouble, Barnes is adept at reading her opponent, and using her length and athleticism to disrupt passing lanes and create transition opportunities the other way.

It can be difficult for a freshman to even function at the varsity level, Wilson observed, but Barnes has made the jump seamlessly. She logged 18 points, eight rebounds, nine steals, an assist and a block in the season opener vs. Winamac; then nearly clocked a triple-double against Hammond Bishop Noll two games later (25 points, nine rebounds, nine steals).

"I've been playing basketball for a long time, and I think playing up with varsity-level girls in AAU over the summer really helped prepare me for the season," said Barnes, who has also received constant support from her older Valpo teammates and mentorship from senior starting guard Kristin Bukata.

"This group of seniors is so unselfish and this team has such great chemistry," Wilson added. "They all knew how good Lilli was coming up and they've embraced her. She just makes everyone better."

### **What we Learned:** Takeaways for Valparaiso, Lake Central

Friday's visit from No. 14 Lake Central (19-2) represented the toughest test of the season for No. 17 Valparaiso (19-2), and provided Barnes an opportunity to test her mettle against a true lockdown defender in sophomore Vanessa Wimberly.

After a rocky first half — Barnes had a couple assists and a flurry of rebounds, but was held to two points with a handful of turnovers — No. 23 received some words of encouragement from Bukata, then joined her coaches on the bench to analyze the first 16 minutes and talk through some possible adjustments. "Instead of trying to force it, I needed to let the game come to me," Barnes said. "I came in too hyper and anxious, so I just had to calm down."

"She's never really had to analyze herself as a player before, but she's really matured and become more comfortable with that through the season," Wilson added. "You get to this level and ... there are no secrets out there. You have to adjust."

Barnes focused on establishing herself inside — something they've been working on this season — and, after opening the half with an assist, began showing off her ability to finish around the basket, before orchestrating a fourth-quarter takeover with 13 of her team-high 20 points.

When Lake Central pushed its lead to five late in regulation and Wimberly successfully sealed off Barnes at the wing, the freshman had the wherewithal to pass it over to Campbell MacLagan for a 3-pointer with 18 seconds remaining.

"Lilli's natural ability to make a move then a counter-move and to see things is like when everything slows down in *The Matrix*," Wilson said following the 57-53 setback. "We see everything going 100 miles per hour, (but) it slows down for her and she's a step ahead of everybody else out there. ... She's incredible."

**Sectional draw takeaways:** 10 things that stood out to our Insider

For her part, Barnes said there was "a big difference" in playing a team of Lake Central's caliber and in being guarded by Wimberly. "She's really good defensively and could read where I was going to dribble — and she's really fast — so I had to adjust to that."

Asked if she enjoyed the challenge, Barnes replied: "Yeah, it's fun being able to adjust and seeing what I can do against them once I calm down."

Barnes began the season as primarily a drive-and-kick-or-shoot player, but has since added a jump shot to her repertoire and become more comfortable with posting up. The "next step," Wilson said, will be getting her to look for opportunities from 3.

"Once she starts doing that, people come out to guard her and now she's even more open," continued Wilson, who will be looking to schedule a few games in Indianapolis next season to get Barnes more exposure and against different competition.

"She's such a complete player defensively and everything — she's a pleasure to coach."

***Follow Brian Haenchen on Twitter at @Brian\_Haenchen.***

**Featured Weekly Ad**