

## Press Clippings 7/21/2022

### Chicago Tribune/Daily Southtown

#### The sounds of summer: scouting the best forwards and centers in girls' basketball from the Chicago Tribune's suburban publications --- 7/20/2022

By Staff Reporters



Carmel's Jordan Wood (13) goes to the basket past Geneva's Zosia Wrobel during a game in the Chicagoland Invitational Showcase at Fremd in Palatine on Saturday, Dec. 4, 2021. (Brian O'Mahoney / News-Sun)

It's July. The heat of summer looms large.

But in gyms across America, the familiar sounds of winter can be easily heard, with the travel schedule taking over after high school girls basketball teams hold their annual camps.

The Chicago Tribune's suburban publications cover a handful of the best teams in Illinois and Indiana — guards, forwards and centers, all trying to lead programs to state titles.

Today, in the second part of a weeklong three-part series, we take a look at the forwards and centers from a coverage area that runs from Wisconsin's border through Chicago's suburbs into Indiana.

### Cassidy Arni, Geneva

Is that all there is?

That thought recently crossed the mind of Cassidy Arni as the Geneva senior continued to ponder her future.

Arni and her M14 Hoops 17U team were preparing for the final two AAU tournaments in late July, an event in southern California followed by the Summer Final Midwest hosted by the U.S. Junior Nationals in Lynwood.

“My last AAU season and this July has been a big month,” Arni said. “It’s gone by very, very fast. That’s just crazy, sad and scary.”



Geneva's Cassidy Arni (15) drives past Batavia's Brooke Nazos (5) during the first quarter on Saturday, Jan. 29, 2022. (Brian O'Mahoney / The Beacon-News)

One thing is comforting, however, for Arni.

The 2021-22 Beacon-News/Courier-News Player of the Year averaged 14 points and 5.8 rebounds in leading the Vikings to an undefeated DuKane Conference title and the program’s 13th state regional championship.

She knows there’s plenty more basketball to come.

Arni entered her final AAU season with scholarship offers from San Francisco and Lewis. She’s added offers from Parkside and Grand Valley State.

While Arni continues to speak with other programs, she hopes for more offers before deciding on where she will take fall visits in reaching a decision.

“Recruiting has been very different,” said Arni, citing issues for the 2023 class due to COVID-19 and the transfer portal. “It seems like coaches are looking more at 2024s and 2025s and going to the portal, but it is what it is.

“I’ve felt like I have to show what I can do. This is the time to do it and put it all out there.”

It’s why Arni has worked to be more consistent with her 3-point shot.

She’s versatile enough to play inside and outside in high school but figures she will probably get more looks as a guard in college.

## **Aniyah Bishop, Lake Central**

Aniyah Bishop likes this summer a lot more than the last one.

That’s because the 5-foot-10 forward, who will be a junior next month at Lake Central, isn’t sitting on the sidelines.

“Last year I was just watching everyone else,” she said. “It’s a lot different this year. I feel like I could’ve used last year for more development because this year is a higher stage.

“But it’s going pretty good and I’m getting a lot more exposure than I had before.”

A knee injury at the end of her freshman season kept her on the bench into the summer, but a healthier Bishop has been extra busy this summer.



Lake Central's Aniyah Bishop looks to shoot during a game against Crown Point in St. John on Friday, Dec. 17, 2021. (Michael Gard / Post-Tribune)

Last winter, she was a force on the inside for Lake Central, leading her team in both categories by averaging 14 points and five rebounds.

After this summer, though, she could be a perimeter threat, too.

“I’ve been focusing on my shot more,” she said. “Everyone needs to work on different things, and I felt like I needed to work on getting my shot to be more consistent.”

Bishop has made a point to hit 500 shots every time she heads to the gym, although she’s raised that target to 1,000 on a few occasions to account for missed sessions.

While midrange jumpers are part of that process, Bishop said most of those shots are coming from behind the arc.

“I feel like my shot has gotten a lot better,” she said. “I’m just getting more familiar with it and making sure I take the same shot consistently.”

## **Emily Fisher, Libertyville**

Before she heads off to the Big Ten to play at a powerhouse Maryland program, Emily Fisher is focused on becoming unstoppable at Libertyville.

“I’m going to be in the gym every day trying to get bigger, faster and stronger, working on my handles and just trying to make myself unguardable in high school,” Fisher said. “My goal is to take our team as far as we can go.”

The 6-1 Fisher, who averaged 14 points and 7.9 rebounds last season, is a matchup nightmare for defenses — capable of running the point as well as posting up inside.



Libertyville’s Emily Fisher takes a shot during a game against Hersey in Arlington Heights on Thursday, Nov. 18, 2021. (Brian O’Mahoney / News-Sun)

“A lot of people assume that I’m just a power forward or want to be in the paint all the time,” Fisher said. “But I like playing at the point and handling the ball, too.

“My goal is to be able to do whatever my coach asks me. I want to play anywhere as long as I can get the job done and help my team.”

Fisher has observed opponents starting to back off when she has the ball on the perimeter.

“I’m trying to become more of a 3-point shooter,” she said. “I’m being played off a little bit and defenders are trying to make me shoot. I’m not taking those opportunities.

“If I make those, that just opens things up for everybody, including myself.”

Libertyville coach Greg Pedersen is certainly excited to see Fisher’s senior season.

“This summer was the best I’ve seen her,” Pedersen said. “She’s really able to control the team and be a leader in all aspects. She can handle the ball. We’ve never seen anyone in our program history make the passes she’s able to make.

“She’s just in for a huge year.”

## **Baylei Johnson, Larkin**

In the past, Baylei Johnson spent her summers playing travel softball before switching back to basketball mode in the winter for Larkin.

After last summer, however, she decided to give AAU a try, with an eye on playing basketball in college.

“It was something I always wanted to do,” Johnson said. “I made the decision to pursue that. It was the biggest decision I’ve ever made and probably the hardest.”



Larkin's Baylei Johnson, left, fights Jacobs' Courtney Pahl, center, and Roslyn Leitner for a rebound during a game in Algonquin on Monday, Dec. 9, 2019. (Brian O'Mahoney / The Courier-News)

This spring, when Johnson joined the Full Package travel team, her eyes were opened.

“I was thrown into this whole different pond,” Johnson said. “AAU has been amazing for me. I wish I didn’t have to stop playing AAU after this summer.”

Going up against tough competition and preparing to play in college has forced Johnson to change her game as well.

Instead of just being a dominant rebounder and defender who could score in the post, the 6-1 senior has expanded her offensive game.

Larkin coach Stephen Knapp said she has made quick strides.

“Her AAU team has helped her out,” Knapp said. “She’s increasing her range. She’s looking to shoot some threes. She’s hitting one or two a game, which is fantastic, because you can’t guard her out there. Her handles have gotten better, too.”

After playing last week in the Nike Nationals in Chicago, Johnson landed on the radar of college coaches who had not heard of her. It’s turned her summer into a busier time.



“That really helped,” Johnson said. “There were a lot of college coaches there. I’ve had a few phone calls. I’ve been getting texts the past few days. It picked up really fast.”

## **Janae Kent, Oak Forest**

Janae Kent is nearing the 2,000-point mark in a stellar career at Oak Forest.

The LSU recruit has certainly cemented her legacy with the Bengals, but there’s still one thing left to do — go to state. It’s something she wants to do for the program.

“Making a big postseason run is something I’ve got to do my senior year,” Kent said. “It’s important to me because the school, the coaching staff and the girls have put so much into this. Coach (Jeff) Kelly has done so much for me.

“I want this, not even for myself, but for the girls and the coaches. A lot of people don’t know how much they’ve done for me. The excitement for the girls and the coaches is what makes me happy.”



Oak Forest’s Janae Kent (34) shoots over Evergreen Park’s Claire Gavin (4) during the Class 3A Evergreen Park Regional championship game on Thursday, Feb. 17, 2022. Oak Forest won 49-36. (John Smierciak / Daily Southtown)

Kent put up huge numbers as a junior, averaging 26.3 points and 9.5 rebounds.

The 2021-22 Daily Southtown Player of the Year was selected all-state and named the South Suburban Blue’s player of the year.

The Bengals lost to Marian Catholic in a Class 3A sectional championship game.

“I know she’s got a little bit of a chip on her shoulder after that Marian game,” Kelly said. “I know she wants to move past that stage this year.

“Her comparison from where she is now to where she was as a freshman, it’s drastic. And she was great as a freshman. It’s crazy actually how much she has improved her game.”

Kelly called Kent “a workhorse. She’s always in the gym.” She plans to stay in the gym.

“I’m getting in that mindset of, ‘You’re committed to LSU, you’ve got to get better,’” she said. “I just want to continue to be consistent — to work on the little things in the game.”

## **Tia Poulakidas, Neuqua Valley**

As so-called positionless basketball takes over the sport, Tia Poulakidas is perfectly positioned to take advantage of it.

The 6-0 senior center will enter her fourth varsity season at Neuqua with a burgeoning repertoire and the confidence to go with it.

“I’ve grown up playing in the post but I’ve been developing my skills more,” Poulakidas said. “I’m able to now shoot the three a lot better. With more confidence comes driving to the rim, getting that drive-and-kick action. It is super satisfying.”

Poulakidas and the Wildcats recently spent four days at a team camp at Oregon. Neuqua coach Mike Williams was impressed with what he saw from Poulakidas.



Neuqua Valley’s Tia Poulakidas goes for a layup against West Aurora during a game in Aurora on Monday, Jan. 10, 2022. (Mike Mantucca / Naperville Sun)

“It’s amazing,” Williams said. “You get these really great athletes and great players, they come in as freshmen and sophomores and obviously they have a great skill set, but the maturity is always the one that trails behind.”

“When the maturity factor kicks in, along with being a great person and great character and great work ethic, it’s pretty fun to see it all come together. That’s what it is with her. She’s got the total package.”

Poulakidas, an honor roll student, doesn’t have any college offers yet but has interest from top academic schools — Columbia, NYU, University of Chicago, Washington in St. Louis and Emory.

One of only three seniors, Poulakidas will be relied upon heavily to lead the Wildcats. She spent the time in Oregon working on her leadership skills.

“We do have a lot of underclassmen so it’s been a lot of figuring out how to get that team chemistry,” Poulakidas said. “Being out here in Oregon practicing with them basically 12 hours a day definitely helped.”

Poulakidas feels an urgency to succeed.

“This is my last year,” she said. “Time to go all out.”

## **Jordan Wood, Carmel**

Jordan Wood has been working hard to get better this summer. Her extra effort recently resulted in some pain when she collided with one of her Midwest Elite travel teammates.

“My teammate tried to eat me,” Wood said, with a laugh. “We ran into each other and I got some teeth in my head. There was a lot of blood.”

Wood needed some stitches but then it was right back to work for the Michigan State recruit, who averaged 14.4 points and 6.1 rebounds last season for the Class 3A state champions.

“My big focus is to get stronger,” Wood said. “I’ve been getting in the weight room a lot this summer and I’m going to continue that. I’m going to take the fall to lift every day.

“That will prepare me for the season and also Michigan State.”





Carmel's Jordan Wood (13) tries to drive past Benet's Lenée Beaumont during a game in Lisle on Wednesday, Jan. 19, 2022. (James C. Svehla / Naperville Sun)

The 6-5 Wood can play anywhere on the floor, but she expects to be in the post more next season after the graduation of center Grace Sullivan, who averaged 14.6 points and 7.6 rebounds before heading off to Bucknell.

"This summer, we did a lot of highs and lows with me in the middle," Wood said. "I didn't get to play on the perimeter that often. I like playing out there, but I have to adjust and make sure I'm strong and ready to play inside."

Carmel coach Ben Berg appreciates Wood's versatility.

"Her skill set makes her tough to match up against," Berg said. "She's a problem if they want to put a guard on her because she can take them inside. She can also step out on the perimeter."

"She had a really good June where she shot the three really well. She's very unselfish with the ball, too, and always looks for her teammates."