

## Laura Brunner Gulden



It was no coincidence that the girls basketball program at Central Catholic High School began to turn the corner in the late 1970s and early '80s.

That's when **LAURA BRUNNER**, a talented 6-foot-2 center, arrived at the private school on West Rocks Road. By the time she was done, the Lady Cavaliers, an under .500 team their first two decades, found themselves playing in the state tournament. Meanwhile, Brunner became the all-time leading scorer in CCHS girls basketball history while being named All-City three straight seasons.

Brunner didn't waste any time making an impact, breaking into the starting lineup as a freshman in the 1977-78 season and averaging 8.3 points per game, second best on the team. As a sophomore, she upped her scoring average to a team-leading 13.2 points while making *The Hour's* second annual All-City Girls Basketball Team.

But it was her junior year, the 1979-80 season, that Brunner established herself as one of the best frontcourt players in the Western Connecticut Conference as she averaged 16.9 points—nearly 40 percent of the Cavaliers' offense—to finish second in the city scoring race while leading the city with 18 rebounds a contest. Those impressive numbers included a career-high 28 points against Joel Barlow and a career-best 26 rebounds versus New Milford. In addition to being named All-City again, Brunner was voted to the All-WCC Briggs Division team.

Something else noteworthy occurred in Brunner's junior season that helped upgrade her game. Tom Kriz took over as the new Central Catholic girls basketball coach and Brunner's play on the court flourished in the Cavaliers' new offense. Another significant piece of the puzzle was the addition of Jeanne Vallerie, a 2022 Norwalk Old Timers honoree, who entered CCHS a year earlier when Brunner was a sophomore. As the starting point guard in her sophomore year, Vallerie led the team in assists and was second to Brunner in scoring.

Then a year later, the 1980-81 season, it all came together for Central Catholic. Behind Brunner's scoring, Vallerie's floor generalship, and Kriz's coaching, the Lady Cavs posted the first winning season in the program's long history, finishing 12-6 in the regular season and making the state tournament for the first time. With more help on offense, Brunner didn't have to carry as much of the scoring load, but still led the team in scoring with 15.3 ppg while grabbing 14 rebounds a game despite playing hurt a good part of the season. She repeated as an All-Briggs Division selection and became the first three-time All-City pick.

And when the team needed her to score, Brunner answered the call, registering 20 or more points six times, and 18 or more in nine games. But no basket was more memorable than the one she scored on Feb. 3, 1981. With 1:17 remaining in the third quarter of Central's second to last regular-season game against Abbott Tech, Brunner hit a short turnaround basket for her 1,000th career point, making her the first player in the school's girls basketball history to reach the coveted mark. She was also only the second female player in Norwalk history to score 1,000 points, joining Margaret Diaz, who graduated from Norwalk High in 1979 with 1,046 points.

Brunner finished with a season-high 25 points in that game, then scored 18 in the regular

season finale and another 18 in a first-round loss in the Class S state tournament as the Cavaliers finished 12-7 overall. She finished her standout four-year career with 1,036 points, just 10 points behind all-time leader Diaz. Brunner is also one of only three basketball players in the 30-year history of CCHS to score 1,000 career points with the other two from the boys program.

Central Catholic High School sadly closed its doors in June 1990, meaning Brunner's all-time girls scoring record will never be broken. And while no "official" rebounding stats are on record, it's a pretty safe assumption she was also the CCHS career leader in that department.

Brunner received a scholarship to play at Iona College in New Rochelle, but a medical condition wiped out her freshman year and she returned home. She took advantage of the time off to return to her alma mater and serve as a varsity assistant and JV coach for one season at Central Catholic under Kriz.

The following year Brunner transferred to Connecticut College in New London and became a four-year standout for the Division III Camels.

Like the girls basketball program at Central Catholic, the Connecticut College women never had a winning season before Brunner arrived. They were only 5-13 her freshman year, but went 58-10 her final three seasons, including back-to-back Northeast Intercollegiate Athletic Conference championships in 1985 and '86.

Brunner graduated in 1986 second all-time in both points (1,484) and rebounds (1,009) while averaging 17.5 points and 11.9 rebounds per game during her career. She also set the school record for points in a game with 37.

The former Cavalier was named to the American Women's Sports Federation All-America team all four years and was selected a New England Women's Basketball Association all-star as a senior. Her biggest honor, however, came in October 1998 when she was inducted into the Connecticut College Athletic Hall of Fame.

Now married and a mother of two, Laura Gulden makes her home in basketball crazed Raleigh, NC, right smack in the middle of ACC country.