

# Lincoln School Basketball Team Has Come a Long Way Under Batastini

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PROVIDENCE — If someone had stood before the members of the Lincoln School girls basketball team three years ago and told them their goals should be to win the SENE Championship and earn a berth in the NEPSAC Tournament, the Lynxes probably would have suggested that person have her head examined.

Not that they wouldn't have liked to achieve those goals. It's just that neither would have been very realistic, considering the team hadn't won a game in the previous four seasons.

But when Lincoln School coach Christina Batastini tells her players that winning the SENE title and advancing to the regional tourney are both within their reach this season, they now wholeheartedly agree. And having gotten off to a 6-0 start in league play, they are certainly on the right track.

That's how far Lincoln School's basketball program has come in the span of three seasons.

"When you consider that two years ago our goal was just to win a game, if you look at it from a distance, it's been an amazing transformation," said Batastini, the former Classical High All-American and New England Basketball Hall of Famer who took over as the Lynxes' head coach in 2006. "It's been wild."

The East Side school's basketball team enjoyed a fair amount of success in the late 1980s and early '90s, winning five SENE championships from 1985 to 1991. But then the program hit a drought, as the Lynxes found themselves continually overmatched and constantly struggling for wins.

Enter Batastini three years ago, when Lincoln School called upon her and her wealth of knowledge from playing college ball at Stanford University and then professionally in Europe to try to restore a sense of pride to its basketball program.

"Christina is one of the best technicians that I have ever seen," said Lynxes athletic director Ronnie McFarland. "She breaks down the skills and really does a great job with them."

Placing a strong emphasis on fundamentals, Batastini spent her first year with the team slowly building up the players' confidence.

"The first season it was a struggle, but it was really positive in that we were able to win two games, and I think the girls learned a lot," she said. "I think in that first year we were able to sort of change the perception of the program . . . and the kids started to believe they could have success playing basketball at Lincoln."

Batastini raised the bar last season, and again her players responded.

"Last year was probably the first year we were competitive," she said. "We weren't the best team in the league, but we were in the top three, and our goal going into the season was to be above .500. We ended up 10-8 and they started learning to develop a consistent expectation of winning games and being competitive every single contest."

The bar has been set even higher this season, and so far the Lynxes have exceeded even their own expectations. Once consistently beaten by 35 and 40 points, they are now racking up equally decisive wins.

"It's crazy. We never expected it to be like this," said Sarah Howard, a versatile forward who Batastini says has been contributing maturity and leadership as Lincoln School's only senior captain. "Everyone's super excited about the season. We have teachers that have never been to a basketball game before, and now they come to every home game, and some of them even come to our away games. It's unbelievable."

Joining Howard in the Lynxes' starting rotation, point guard Jenna Lemoi and guard Stephanie Kiser, both juniors, "are dynamic players offensively" who handle the ball well, are capable of creating their own shots and consistently put points on the board," Batastini says.

Meanwhile, 6-foot-2 center Corinne Coia is an imposing inside presence for the Lynxes.

"She has the physical ability to one day be one of the best post players in the state," Batastini said of the sophomore transfer from North Smithfield. "When I say she can run, she can move. And she can catch and she can jump, and those are things you can't teach."

Ellis Suchmann, a 6-foot post player who rounds out the starting five, and fellow freshmen guards Alexandra Nunez and Kendre Rodriguez, who are the first ones off the bench for Lincoln School, were all members of St. Pius' seventh- and eighth-grade team that won last year's New England championship. "So they come from a culture of winning," Batastini said. "Kendre and Alexandra are extremely athletic, and Ellis in just two months has improved tremendously."

Jackie LaPlante, a 5-9 sophomore center, brings "an incredible basketball IQ" to the team, says Batastini, while juniors Nina Nappa and Amanda Frias, the only two players who have been with the squad for each of the last three seasons, "have really helped transition us" with their consistent effort.

"Particularly this season, the kids are all very dedicated, they're all coachable and they all want to learn and get better," said Batastini. "So it's been an ideal situation coming into this season. I don't think a lot of the kids understand yet how good they could be. This is really just the beginning for them."

Lincoln School will attempt to keep its winning streak alive when it is host to Bancroft School in an SENE matchup on Saturday at 2:30 p.m.