First-year Coach Ron Slagle jokes that he violated no recruiting rules to get star player Candace Wilson on the Cedar Valley Christian roster this year.

She more or less just showed up unannounced.

In her first and only season of high school basketball, the left-handed senior has taken the Tri-Rivers Conference by storm.

She leads the East Division in points scored with 297 (a 17.5 average) and her 60 steals (4 per game) are almost twice as many as anyone else.

Wilson, extremely quick and agile at 5-foot-5, also leads her team in rebounds (6.6 per game), 3-pointers, assists and blocked shots.

She competes, of course, in the smallest Class 1A level. But her statistics put her among the elite in the Metro area.

“Candace can do it all,” says Slagle, who took over the team from news boys coach Craig Foote after seven years as an assistant. “And as much ability as she has, what’s even more important is what she brings to the squad in terms of leadership.”

Her all-around game is so impressive that just last week she committed to join the national powerhouse program at Kirkwood next year. She also considered Coe College.

She's a hidden talent, for sure.

But, says the bubbly gum-chewing 17-year-old, "I've been playing with my brothers and sisters all my life. I think I've had a ball since birth."

It's just that few around here had seen her play before.

Like her two older sisters and three older brothers, Candace has been home-schooled by parents Karen and Steve (a self-employed business consultant) of Robins. The family is active with the Believers in Grace Fellowship church in Marion.

And for the past six years she played on the local Christian-based Defenders team coached for many years by Ray Vasser. Most of their games are played against teams from Illinois, where there are more similar programs.

While there is still a thriving Defenders boys team, there were not enough girls to field a squad this year.

Candace and her parents felt Cedar Valley Christian was her best option to join a new team even though she's not enrolled at the school.

"I'd never seen her play," says Slagle. "But of course I've known about Ray's teams and the type of character he instills in young people."

The Huskies coach also got an inkling of his recruit's athletic ability when she went out for the CVC volleyball team this fall and was named all-conference in her first year of prep competition.

Although she'd developed friendships and a bond with teammates by the time basketball season rolled around, Candace admits it was a different experience for her.

"On the Defenders I was always kind of the best player," she says without a trace of boastfulness. "But this is a lot better competition, and I didn't know if I'd do as well."

She admits that in the season opener she was so skittish that she passed up all kinds of opportunities to score because she was so intent on passing the ball to others.

"Coach finally told me, 'Just be yourself and everything will be fine.' And the other girls really helped me."

In Cedar Valley's second game against always-strong Easton Valley, she knocked down 26 points and grabbed seven rebounds. And she's hardly been stopped ever since.

Her season high so far is 28 in a win over Lisbon and a week ago she scored 26 again against Central City with six rebounds and seven steals.

In Friday's 51-47 victory over Midland, she collected 24 points (with two 3-pointers), 10 rebounds, five steals and three blocked shots.

Yet for all of her lofty offensive numbers, she contends her favorite part of the game is on defense.

"What I really like is getting lots of steals," says Candace, who plays with a flair in purple Under

Armour sneakers and a flying ponytail. “Then I try to get the ball to my teammates.”

Slagle, who weathered Cedar Valley’s growing pains in previous years when the squad sometimes had to rely on team managers or cheerleaders for reserves, says she provides some much-needed court savvy.

“She has really been a nice addition. Besides her speed, she has the ability to see the whole floor. She’s the whole package," he says.

“Candace is the strongest girl in the conference. If she’s in her zone, no one can stop her.”

After struggling in their first three years of inter-scholastic competition with a 9-55 record, the Huskies hoped to get over the hump last year behind senior all-stater Shelby Hembera.

They started the season 7-3 but went 1-11 when Hembera, now playing at Emmaus Bible College, was sidelined with an ankle injury.

With his heaven-sent point guard leading the way, there is renewed hope. There are 11 girls on the roster, including Hembera’s little sister Molly, providing both depth and experience.

The team has a 6-11 season mark with three games to go in the regular season against beatable teams that have won a total of only four games.

“We’ve been in most every game we’ve played this year, at least for a half,” Slagle points out. “ We’ve held our own and proved we can play with anybody.”