Volleyball prepares for playoff matchup against Sacred Heart

By JAMES NOLAN
Staff Writer

Quinnipiac volleyball will face the Sacred Heart Pioneers in the opening round of the Metro Volleyball Championship Tuesday, Nov. 17 at 7 p.m.

The Bobcats finished the season as the No. 5 seed after a 12-6 conference record. The Pioneers nabbed the No. 4 seed with a 13-5 record, rattling off a six-game win streak to cap off the regular season.

The teams split the season series. The Bobcats swept the Oct. 4 matchup while the Pioneers outlasted them in five sets Oct. 30, with both teams winning the game they were on the road for.

Quinnipiac has now made the conference tournament each of the eight seasons during the tenure of head coach Kyle Robinson. This is the first year since 2022, the season when they won their last conference title, that the Bobcats have not received a bye to the semifinals.

On paper, the two Connecticut schools match up incredibly well. Sacred Heart has the slight edge in points per set, 16.51 to 16.50.

They also both have top-of-the-line setters. The Bobcats' freshman setter Sophia Gisslen ranks second in the Metro with 9.39 assists per set, while Pioneer sophomore setter Addy Franz is third at 9.15.

Quinnipiac is led offensively by its captain sophomore middle blocker Asia Belli. Her .390 hitting percentage is second in the conference and good enough for first on the team. She also leads the Bobcats with 27 service aces.

"When you have a middle that can come in and score on both sides, offense and defense, score from the service line," Robinson said Sept. 8. "That's really big in our sport."

Belli is also one of a few Bobcats with playoff experience; she started on last year's team that lost to the Rider Broncs in the semi-finals. The Cassina De Pecchi, Italy native and junior libero Carola Negron Diaz are the only two regulars still in the lineup for 2026. Sophomore outside hitter Vittoria Tonelli got on the court for a handful of plays, but registered two hitting errors on two attempts against the Broncs.

Meanwhile, the Pioneers are anchored defensively by star junior libero Miliani Villarreal. In 2024, she was named the MAAC's Rookie of the Year. She is the only libero in the conference to tally 500 digs each of the last three seasons. She's already etched her name in school history, placing third in program history with 1,631 digs throughout her career.

The winner of the game faces a dreadful matchup: the No. 1 seed, 18-0 Fairfield Stags.

The Stags haven't lost a conference game since Oct. 24, 2025, when Quinnipiac swept them at Burt Kahn. Since then, they've rattled off 28 consecutive victories against Metro opponents.

They are also looking to four-peat in conference titles. Since the 2022 Bobcats took them down in four sets, they have been the conference champions the last three seasons.

It's the last chance any of these teams will have to take a stab at Fairfield, at least as a conference opponent. On June 26, the university announced it will depart the conference at the end of the academic year to join the Coastal Athletic Association (CAA).

That's why, despite their perfect record, the semifinals and championship match will take place in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., at Marist University.

According to the Metro website, "As a departing member institution, Fairfield University is not eligible to host Conference championships in 2026-27 per Conference bylaws."

It's good news for both the Bobcats and Pioneers. Quinnipiac has never beaten Fairfield in its home gym, and the Pioneers are 0-6 against the Stags since joining the conference in 2024.

It's the first year of it being the Metro Conference Tournament. It's the last year of Fairfield being a part of it. And it all comes down to this week.



ANTHONY ANGELILLO/CHRONICLE

Quinnipiac volleyball huddles up during a timeout against Rider Oct. 23.

Perimeter offense is the key to success for men's basketball this season

By REX NAYLOR
Staff Writer

Following early season tests against Michigan State, Bryant, Vermont and Monmouth, the Quinnipiac men's basketball team is showing promising signs of growth. A deeper bench has been utilized, as well as perimeter shooting emerging as an x-factor for the Bobcats.

Quinnipiac men's basketball opened its season in East Lansing, Michigan, where it took on the Michigan State Spartans. The contest concluded 96-59 with the Spartans victorious, but the match showed possible signs of Bobcat success before they took on Bryant.

Three point shooting got off to a slow start, but was one of the bright spots in East Lansing. The Bobcats got settled before the Bulldogs visited.

Against Bryant, the Bobcat perimeter offense improved as they took down the Bulldogs in a 66-56 comeback win. Senior guard Tayeshawn Cunningham-Pemberton shot three for six from beyond the arc, impressing alongside sophomore forward Nas Hart, who made both of his three-point attempts.

As a whole, the Bobcats shot eight for fifteen from three-point range, cementing an impressive first win of the season. Cunningham-Pemberton made three consecutive threes early in the contest, helping the Bobcats to an early lead.

"It's great; obviously it's tougher for the opposing team to play against, but for us it's huge," Cunningham-Pemberton said after Bryant.

The Bobcats' three-point shooting continued against Vermont — the preseason favorite to win America East — in a 79-76 win. Sophomore guard Tai Turnage was lights out, shooting a perfect five for five beyond the arc, with freshman forward Nedas Cholevinskas in tow, shooting two for four.

When the Bobcats shoot threes at a high clip, a win is always in their grasp. Against Monmouth however, the Bobcats couldn't sustain the three-point offense at home as they fell 74-70, with Cunningham-Pemberton being their best performer, shooting two for five from three-point range.



COOPER WOODWARD/CHRONICLE

"I mean, Tayeshawn was a Division II guy, and he comes in, and he's playing so well. So that just shows you how good Division II ball is…we're lucky to have them," head coach Tom Pecora said after Bryant Nov. 5.

The Bobcats shot three for 15 from deep, and zero for five in the second half. This season, it seems the three point shooting can make or break a game for the Bobcats, even in contests where they're favored to win.

"We learned, you know we're young, we learn from it, and we got to figure out a way to get better tomorrow, watch it, break down the film, and show them, the eye in the sky don't lie," Pecora said.

A key absence from the season opener against Michigan State and Monmouth was Turnage. So far, Turnage has shot six for 11 in two games. In high school, Turnage shot 39% from the arc and 44% from the field.

His freshman campaign was limited, as his highest point total came against Hofstra with 12 points and one three-point make.

A glaring problem for the Bobcats last season was their inability to put games away, as well as unreliable three-point shooting when opponents packed the paint. The Bobcats shot just 31.5% from three-point range, noticeably below the national average of 34.1% during the 2025-2026 season.

This led head coach Tom Pecora to enlist the help of former Quinnipiac star Matt Balanc '24 as Director of Player Development. Balanc ranks second in program history with 239 career three-pointers, and is a clear investment in last year's inefficiency.

With someone like Balanc who knows the ins and outs of the program, Pecora adds valuable insight into this area of the team at a time when they need it.

The bench is noticeably deeper than last season, as no reserve player averaged more than 4.5 ppg previously. Even though it's still early, Pecora is utilizing shooting sparks like freshman forward Ali Diouf, Turnage and Cholevinskas to propel the Bobcats to wins and stay competitive in close games.

The three combined for 35 of 37 bench points, along with eight of 11 threes in their narrow win against Vermont.

When everything clicks, the Bobcats can beat well above their weight and give tough competition a run for their money.

The problems arise when players don't turn up, and the three-point game becomes unreliable. Currently, the Bobcats three-point percentage sits at 38.9%, and ranks as the 68th best in the nation.

One of the sparks of Quinnipiac is sophomore forward Keith McKnight who struggled against the Spartans. Pecora lit a fire under him as McKnight scored 30 points across the next two contests against Bryant and Vermont.

When he was called "invisible" by Pecora, this was McKnight's response: "That definitely gets under my skin. He called me that today too, in the first half, and it got to me, so I had to wake up in the second half and make plays."

The Bobcats have a great opportunity to string wins together and make it to the Metro tournament, but a large part of establishing the path is succeeding from beyond the arc.

