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Celebrating 25 years of women's hockey in Hamden

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If you're familiar with ice hockey in any capacity, you know that the ice that lies in the Herb Brooks Arena in Lake Placid, N.Y., is sacred.

In 1980, it was the home of one of the greatest moments in the history of the sport, when the United States men's national team defeated the Soviet Union to advance to the gold medal game in their "miracle" win. In 2026, it became home to another memorable moment: Quinnipiac women's ice hockey's second ECAC Championship.

Senior forward Kahlen Lamarche skated to center ice following the Bobcats 5-1 championship win over the Yale Bulldogs. She picked up the trophy, skated back to her teammates and hoisted it in the air, putting an exclamation mark on a memory she will never forget.

"As soon as I touched that trophy, it was like everything I had been working towards my whole life just clicked," she said. "It was super awesome."

Twenty-five years ago, there was no program, nor a trophy for anyone in the ECAC to hoist.

The story of Quinnipiac women's ice hockey begins in 2001, as they kicked off their inaugural season as the Quinnipiac Braves in the ECAC Eastern Conference. Back then, the landscape of women's hockey was vastly different. The idea of a professional women's hockey league in the United States was nowhere near a reality, and the path to anything beyond college hockey was much narrower than it is now.

The first few seasons of Quinnipiac women's ice hockey were characterized by struggle. The Bobcats failed to record a positive record in each of their first eight seasons, eclipsing 10 wins once during that span. In the years that followed, the program began to turn their fortunes around, recording five straight seasons with 19 wins or more and finding success in the postseason for the first time in 2010.

Despite the tide turning in its favor, Quinnipiac needed change. It needed someone to elevate the program to new heights.

Head coach Cass Turner came in and did just that.

Off the backs of a 52-point season from forward T.T. Cianfarano '17 and a breakout debut from forward Melissa Samoskevich '19, the Bobcats rolled to a 30-3-5 record in 2016, sweeping their way through the postseason en route to winning their first conference championship and doing it on home ice.

"That year was super special to us," Samoskevich said. "It's really hard to win the league because it's just so competitive."

Repeating that success turned out to be just as hard as Samoskevich thought. Quinnipiac wouldn't return to the ECAC semifinals for seven years. Looking at the numbers, the Bobcats had no shortage of victories, but just couldn't deliver when it mattered.

That changed in 2022.

After a 26-win season, the Bobcats made the NCAA Tournament as an at-large team for the third time in program history. Their opponents? The College Hockey America champion Syracuse Orange. The result? Dominance.

Quinnipiac left the rink that night with a 4-0 victory and another piece of history to take back to Hamden. Even though the Bobcats didn't achieve the goal of bringing home a national title, it gave them a taste of what Turner described as the ultimate goal.

"We want to win a national championship," Turner said. "We're going to keep working really hard to win it."

The years that followed were more of the same. Regular season success with struggles in the postseason.

That was until the 2025-26 season.

The campaign started out with a streak of non-conference wins against Maine, Providence, Syracuse and Northeastern, opening conference play with a win against Yale to make them 9-0 on the year. The highlight of that streak? Lamarche, who recorded 11 goals in six games, including a seven-goal weekend against Northeastern, the most by an NCAA ice hockey athlete in eight years.

"It's always an honor to set a record like that," Lamarche said after the game against Northeastern Oct. 18.

The first stretch of conference play was categorized by adversity, as the Bobcats recorded a 2-3-1 record in the month of November, despite outscoring their opponents 18-12 in that span. But as the calendar turned to 2026, Quinnipiac went on a run.

After a third-place finish in The Friendship Four, the Bobcats would go on to sweep conference opponents for four of the final six weekends, only falling to the Clarkson Golden Knights and St. Lawrence Saints for the rest of the regular season.

But the November hole the Bobcats dug themselves into turned out to be too much for them to climb out of, as they would finish third in the regular season standings, earning themselves a first-round bye and a quarterfinal matchup against the Brown Bears. One of the only blemishes on their near-perfect conference slate made Quinnipiac feel like it had something to prove.

And the Bobcats played like it.

In game one, Quinnipiac came out swinging, battling with a hungry Bears team before a three goal third period gave them the distance they needed to go up 1-0 in the series. Game two saw another battle, with Brown coming out on top in a 3-2 overtime win, setting up a winner take all game three.

Quinnipiac started game three doing what they did best: scoring. After 40 minutes, Quinnipiac was in control, and the road to Lake Placid became clearer and clearer. But the Bears just refused to bow out, bringing the game within one with under five minutes to go and battling until the final horn. But as the story goes, the Bobcats came out on top, punching their ticket to that miracle ice in Lake Placid.

Their opponents? The Princeton Tigers. The only opponents to take care of business in both contests versus the Bobcats. It was a tall task, but for a squad that spent the entire season defying the odds and doing the impossible? They were ready for it.

"We were excited," Turner said. "Whenever you lose to someone twice, you start to think 'It's our time.'"

After being tied for 60 minutes of play, the Bobcats once again were heading to overtime. There, junior forward Avery Bairos capitalized on a Tiger mistake, sending Princeton packing and Quinnipiac to the ECAC Championship for the first time since that 2015-16 season.

And in identical fashion to their 2016 counterparts, the Bobcats dominated, routing the Yale Bulldogs en route to a 5-1 victory and their second ever conference title.

If you ask anyone from the 2016 team, the 2026 team or any of the players in between why they are where they are in their hockey careers, they'll point to the woman who has anchored the bench for 12 seasons. Coach Turner.

"I owe a lot to Cass," Samoskevich said. "I had a great hockey career, but as a leader and as a coach, she's guided me many times"

If you ask Lamarche, she'll credit Turner and assistant coach Amanda Alessi for being the reason she came to Quinnipiac in the first place.

"I was always told 'go where you're wanted,' and I knew I was wanted here," Lamarche said.

For Alessi, it continues to be the gift that keeps on giving, 11 years after she joined the staff fresh out of graduate school.

"Being able to come to work with Cass everyday is amazing," Alessi said. "There's no other head coach in the country I would rather work for … she's really seen me grow up and has been such an unreal mentor for me"

That mentorship doesn't end whenever a player or a coach leaves Hamden. If the two conference championships and five NCAA tournament appearances don't tell you that Turner has on this program, the 21 alumni who have found a home in the Professional Women's Hockey League will.

"These women have really learned to love the game in a way that allows them to be a successful professional," Turner said.

For Samoskevich, the league represents a new opportunity as she seeks to build a new program at the University of Delaware from the ground up. Giving them a dream she never got the chance to have when she was a player.

"I felt more like a professional at Quinnipiac than I did when I was actually playing pro," she said. "The game has progressed. The leagues have really progressed. Now there is a vision and girls can work towards something."

If you ask Alessi, the existence of that pipeline from Hamden to the professional level is one of the most rewarding parts of the job.

"The PWHL has showcased how well we do development here," Alessi said. "You're seeing players who were great college hockey players but have continued to grow and develop. A Bobcat can go to the PWHL and play any role which I think is just so cool."

Twenty-five years ago, there was no pipeline. There was no PWHL. There was no championship banner in the rafters of a non-existent M&T Bank Arena. Just a roster, a freshly established conference, and a season.

Today, young girls in Connecticut, including Alessi's daughters, get to watch Professional Women's Hockey. They get to watch Bobcats. They get to cheer for Bobcats. They grow up with something they always thought was a reality.

It wasn't. Someone had to build it. And one program that plays a major part in building it is about to go back to work for the 25th time.