The international roots of Quinnipiac women's volleyball

By COOPER WOODWARD
Sports Editor

The journey of a college athlete comes in many shapes and sizes: different starts to their journeys, different paths off the field, different adversities, and, oftentimes, different countries. Quinnipiac women's volleyball is a testament to that diversity, as the Bobcats will field a roster of 11 international athletes for their 2026 campaign—something head coach Kyle Robinson believes to be unintentional but also not accidental.

"It just kind of happened," Robinson said.

The 2026 roster will bring athletes from six countries to Hamden: four from Italy, three from Turkey and one each from Puerto Rico, Egypt, Poland and Germany. That leaves freshman setter Sophia Glissen as the only athlete from the continental United States.

"I found a sort of second family here," sophomore setter Vittoria Tonelli said. "Both in volleyball and in my team."

Building a roster that went from 21% international in 2021 to 92% five years later started with an opportunity.

After a loss in the first round of the MAAC Tournament to Rider, Robinson faced a tough challenge: replacing the nine athletes who graduated or left Hamden for greener pastures. The problem? He was up against the clock.

"We had girls leave the program kind of unannounced, so it was kind of late and a shock for us," Robinson said. "We were scrambling."

That scramble led Robinson to turn his attention to the international pool, which he described as "more appreciative" of the opportunity to play Division I volleyball.

Robinson offered that opportunity to every newcomer on the 2026 Bobcats roster, and every one of them couldn't be more excited to take it.

"It was not really a hard decision," sophomore setter Klara Olszewska said. "It was kind of the most obvious option for me."

Olszewska's club in Poland gave her a serious chance to perform at the professional level—something anyone in her shoes would jump at. Instead, Olszewska decided to follow her teammates and look to the United States. The cross-planet jump fulfilled her desire for change, but it also gave her something else.



"I was really searching for someone that I could trust," she said. "From (Robinson) it was visible from the first call we had."

Trust wasn't just something Olszewska wanted; it was the reason she came to Quinnipiac in the first place. Freshman outside hitter Sophia Mineland came to a similar conclusion in her own way.

Mineland grew up in Berlin, where she had a rare opportunity for European athletes: to pursue athletics and academics at the same time. Even with that opportunity, the time to choose between her sport and her studies was coming.

At Quinnipiac, that time could wait.

"My high school enabled me to play volleyball and go to school at the same time," she said. "Coming here, I just wanted to continue that opportunity."

That balance between the court and the classroom is the same thing that pulled Tonelli away from the professional pipeline of western Italy to Hamden.

"When you play volleyball in Italy, volleyball and university are completely separated," she said. "It's difficult to do both. That's why I decided I really wanted to go study in the U.S."

The work to get from the Adriatic coast to the U.S. started as soon as she decided this was what she wanted. She balanced a rigorous club schedule, learned English, filed stacks of paperwork, and finished secondary school, all at age 16, before finally getting to Hamden last fall.

Then there's sophomore opposite hitter Farah Sherif. Unlike Mineland, Olszewska or Tonelli, who all come from countries with major pipelines to professional volleyball, Sherif hails from Alexandria, Egypt. A city approximately 5,418 miles from Hamden and with little representation in the NCAA. Just like her Bobcat teammates, she had the opportunity to come to the U.S. to play college volleyball and decided to take it.

Robinson saw the Alexandria hometown attached to an athlete who tore up the Iowa junior college circuit and one thing came to his mind. He didn't care about the former; he needed the latter on his team.

"There was never a thing of where she was from," he said. "It was like, no, this is a good player. Let's go after her."

Four athletes, four countries, four different backgrounds, all with one similarity: when faced with a move that would send them across the world from their loved ones, it was their parents who were there for them.

Tonelli's parents pushed for her to go. Olszewska's were supportive from the first conversation. Mineland's are still rooting for her from across the pond. And Sherif was inspired by her father to pursue an opportunity she may never get again.

"I'm the only one in my family who actually took this chance and traveled outside at such a young age," Sherif said. "He told me to take care of myself, to go and enjoy it."

That's the story of the 2026 Quinnipiac volleyball team: 12 athletes, all from different regions of the world, being told by the people who love them most to go out, grow and make the most of what was being given.

"Be grateful every day and enjoy it because it's truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience," Olszewska said.

Photo: Field Hockey mental health awareness game




TYLER MIGNAULT/CHRONICLE







By COOPER WOODWARD
Sports Editor

"It just means more"

Those were the words lingering on the minds of the athletes, coaches and spectators in attendance at the Quinnipiac Field Hockey Stadium Sept. 11, as the Bobcats held their mental health awareness game against the Hofstra Pride in Partnership with The Hidden Opponent. Quinnipiac defeated Hofstra 2-1 in overtime.