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Passion and grit defining women's basketball in landmark year

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It's the dawn of a new season for Quinnipiac women's basketball, as after a mass exodus unlike anything the program has ever seen, the Bobcats are gearing up for their first season in the post Fabbri era.

The new face at the helm of the program, head coach Roman Owen, knows that the season will be hard, but is ready to go nonetheless.

"It's a journey," he said. "We've got a long way to go."

Let's take a look at what the journey is going to look like:

NEWCOMERS

For the new season, 11 recruits have found a new home in Hamden, ushering in the Owen era. Five as incoming freshmen, and six as transfer students.

Spearheading the freshman class is guard Alanna Benoit, who departed Mandaville High School in Mandaville, Louisiana, with a record breaking career behind her. She became the first player in program history to eclipse 2,000 career points and average of 22.9 points, 8.6 rebounds, 4.7 steals, 4.2 assists and 1.2 blocks per game.

"She's the real deal," Owen said. "To be able to land a recruit like her in these stages of the process is huge for us."

That kind of resume made her an appealing recruit, one that Owen had his eyes on before Hamden ever came on his radar.

"I recruited her at UNLV and tried to get her to come there," Owen said. "Her parents turned me down and they said, no, we're going to stay close to home."

Benoit had committed to McNeese State in July 2025, but after then head coach Ayla Guzzardo became the head coach of the University of Georgia's program, she was forced to look elsewhere. Her first option? Call Owen on Easter Sunday after signing the paperwork to become the next head coach of Quinnipiac women's basketball.

From there the floodgates opened as six more recruits committed to Hamden in the coming weeks, split to an even three guards and three forwards. While the guards are talented in their own right, the frontcourt bring special skills and talents of their own to Hamden.

Two of those forwards, sophomore Lily Thomas and junior Leila Washington, bring the kind of efficiency and size that Owen wants the team's identity to come from.

"We want to be able to score in the paint," Owen said. "We want to try to control the game there."

Owen also spoke heavily about the importance of rebounding for his squad.

"We're trying to limit teams to one shot," he said. "I really feel like if we can do that the way we position ourselves defensively, we can have success not giving up multiple possessions."

While most of the new recruits find their homes within the continental United States, two athletes have come from over 4,000 miles away. Senior forward Ana Ramos Perez hails from São Paulo, Brazil, while freshman forward Uliana Doronina draws her roots from Moscow, Russia.

After a successful pair of seasons at Garden City Community College in Garden City, Kansas, Perez spent her junior season at Georgia State. After not seeing game action as a Panther, Perez is now looking to end her collegiate career on a high note in Hamden.

While doubt and uncertainty clouds this year's recruiting class, Owen knows that there is one thing that fans and fellow coaches alike won't have to worry about: they will compete.

"We just want to play hard," he said.

RETURNERS

After a mass exodus from the team unlike anything the program had ever seen, three athletes decided to go against the grain and make Hamden their home for their final season.

Senior guard Page Girardi decided to stay for one simple reason: the people.

"We have the most incredible support staff," she said. "The people really do make the place."

In her junior campaign, Girardi averaged 4.2 points and almost two assists per game. Despite not making a ton of noise in the stat sheet, Girardi was integral to the success of a Bobcat team that won its first regular season championship of the 2020s. How? By not turning over the basketball.

In 28 starts, Girardi recorded a nation's best 4.40 assist to turnover ratio. Her success on the court made her impact off the court, suffering a knee injury in the final weekend of the 2025-26 regular season against Niagara.

Seven and a half months after that injury, Girardi is feeling stronger than ever and can't wait to get back to the court.

"Somehow my right leg, my ACL leg is stronger than my left," she said.

Her injury has also forced her traditional role to transform into something more. One that reflects a leader, rather than someone who dazzles the stat sheet.

"It's different and it's also a responsibility"

Fellow senior guards Ava Sollenne and Maria Kealy will join Girardi as returners for this season. Kealy served as the second string point guard to Girardi, averaging 4.9 points per game across 34 appearances.

Sollenne on the other hand, saw game action 17 times and averaged 4.2 points per game. But the area where she has made the most strides? Leadership.

"She's one of my closest friends and to see her grow into that leader and that voice this year has been awesome to see," Girardi said.

Owen echoed that sentiment, expressing his gratitude for the Connecticut native.

"Ava's been a tremendous leader for our group," Owen said. "She shows up every day. She has the best attitude. So I'm super thankful for her."

Having leaders like Sollenne, Girardi and Kealy will be crucial to a team not only filled with youth, but one that is making the jump to Division I basketball for the first time in their careers.

COACHING STAFF

Coming in after a coach who had a resume of over 500 wins could be intimidating to most. But for Owen, he's embracing the chance to come into a program that knows what success looks like, regardless of his predecessor.

"Pressure is a privilege," Owen said. "If you come here to a place that has these expectations and has these resources, obviously there's going to be some pressure. So I welcome that."

Three other faces with deep ties to Owen will be joining him on the coaching staff. Associate head coach Adam Call, joins the staff after playing basketball with Owen and working with him on several stops along his journey. Assistant coach Kourtni Stevenson played under Owen at Mid-American, Christian University. Fellow assistant coach Amaya West served on the same staff as Owen at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Getting to bring coaches that you have deep personal relationships with is something that Owen is grateful for, especially for his second ever stint as a head coach.

"I got to bring my family. That's how I built it," Owen said. "And I think coming here to Connecticut once again, coming this far away from UNLV, it's the only way to build it."

The importance of family will be huge, as the Bobcats look to silence the doubters and overcome the odds.

The next step to overcome those odds will come Thursday, Nov. 6, as Quinnipiac travels north to face Vermont, looking to become 2-0 on the young season. Tip off is scheduled for 6 pm.



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