

Sofia Vega: The heartbeat of a team on the rise

By **COOPER WOODWARD**
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Quinnipiac softball’s 2025 season could be characterized by one word: growth.

After years of disappointment, the team made its first appearance in the MAAC Tournament since 2016 last season. Despite the 1-0 loss to the Rider Broncos, in the first round of the MAAC Tournament, it sparked a fire under the returning members of this year’s team.

“They want it really bad,” head coach Hillary Smith said in a preseason interview. “They’re going to do whatever it takes to get there.”

Now, 37 games into the 2026 campaign, the Bobcats have proved doubters wrong, and then some, starting conference play with an 18-10 record, due in part to offensive surges from all over the diamond.

In particular, senior infielder Sofia Vega is in the midst of one of the statistically best seasons a Bobcat has had in the last decade, sporting a .390 batting average while starting all 37 games for Quinnipiac.

For Vega, it’s the culmination of over a decade of hard work, beginning 2,852 miles away from Hamden in San Diego, California.

Her story begins as a lot of great ones do, with rejection. At eight years old, Vega tried out for an 8U All-Star team in Chula Vista and didn’t make it. Most kids would cry about it and move on, but what did Vega do? She used the pain of that loss to spark a love for the sport that stretched over 15 years.

“I told my dad ‘it’s not OK,’” Vega said. “This is what I want to do.”

As he has throughout her entire childhood, her father, Michael, did whatever he could to support her. In this case, it was grabbing a friend, a tee and a bucket of softballs to give her lessons. It wasn’t

anything elaborate, but for Sofia, it worked.

It was that kind of dedication and desire for her passion that helped Michael and Sofia grow closer and develop a stronger father-daughter bond.

“Me and my dad have a great relationship beside softball, but softball was one of the main things that brought us together,” Sofia said. “One of the reasons I love softball so much is the early mornings we would go together. My dad is my number one fan and I’ve always felt that. Having that relationship with my dad has meant the world to me.”

At Hilltop High School in Chula Vista, it was clear that Sofia made the right choice in choosing softball. Across 82 games, she recorded a .398 batting average with nine home runs, 70 RBI and 39 extra base hits. That career earned her the title of Female Athlete of the Year, first and second team all-league and being named captain her junior and senior years.

That kind of resume made her an appealing player come recruitment time, a player who fit right into the culture that Smith was trying to make as head coach of Quinnipiac’s program.

“From the jump, she was talking about changing a program and creating a culture and I know that could be something I could do,” Sofia said. “(Smith) wanted a family base and I’ve always been

family oriented.”

An ensuing visit to campus sealed the deal for Sofia, as Quinnipiac was exactly what she was looking for in a school to call home.

“I wanted something that was more than softball,” she said. “The atmosphere at Quinnipiac is very tight.”

Her first year as a Bobcat was filled with inconsistencies. Offensively, Sofia recorded a .207 average with five RBI and four extra base hits, starting all but one game for Quinnipiac. Defensively, she recorded 26 putouts, 75 assists and nine errors to the tune of a .918 fielding percentage.

Despite a less-than-ideal start to her Quinnipiac career, the trust from Smith and the coaching staff didn’t waver.

“I never felt like no one else believed in me,” Sofia said.

Instead, she focused on the controllables. Being on time, respecting the upperclassmen and doing the little things right. She trusted that the numbers would follow, and in year two, they did.

Her sophomore campaign brought steady improvement across the board with career highs in batting average (.239), hits (22), doubles (six), RBI (eight) and on-base percentage (.286). Her biggest improvement didn’t come on the field, but off it.

“I realized I only had to prove it to myself,” she said. “I just had to go back to my roots. Play calm, play for fun and

play like a little girl who fell in love with softball.”

That mentality drove yet another statistical improvement in her junior campaign. While her batting average, extra base hit, on base percentage, RBI and slugging percentage numbers jumped, her biggest contribution came in the second-to-last weekend of the regular season.

Late in the seventh inning, with Sacred Heart leading 1-0, after infielder Brook Hilliard ‘25 and senior outfielder Noelle Reid reached base, it came time for Sofia to step up to the plate. She took an inside pitch from senior pitcher Sam Kowalski and drove it deep to left field, leaving the ballpark and sending the Bobcats to the MAAC Tournament for the first time in nine years.

“I told myself ‘she’s not going to beat me,’” she said. “There was no way we were going to get out of that game not winning.”

While the result of that tournament wasn’t what they wanted, the taste of postseason play sparked a fire inside Sofia and the entire roster for the 2026 season. One that has carried them to a 15-10 record in MAAC play, as of publication.

And just as she has in her last three seasons, Sofia had another jump in her statistics. In 37 games played, she boasts a .390 batting average, a .484 on-base percentage, an OPS over .800, 15 RBI, 46 hits, seven extra base hits and four strikeouts. No, this isn’t a typo; in 37 games played, Sofia has recorded four strikeouts.

And as the cherry on top, she crossed the 100 hit milestone March 22 versus the Niagara Purple Eagles.

That kind of jump comes not only from a natural skill progression, but a greater sense of trust in the girls in front of and behind her in the lineup.

An extended version with more information can be found at quchronicle.com



Quinnipiac volleyball's win streak ends at Rider's hands in MAAC Semifinals

By **ALEXANDRA MARTINAKOVA**
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FAIRFIELD — For the first time in four years, Quinnipiac volleyball will not be making an appearance in the MAAC Championship game. Rider blocked the Bobcats from that game, winning its Nov. 22 semifinals match-up 3-1.

“Some days you’re the bug, some days you’re the windshield,” head coach Kyle Robinson said.

It was almost a done deal that Quinnipiac was going to face off with Fairfield in the MAAC Finals.

Both teams entered the tournament as the No. 1 and No. 2 seeds, with the best conference records. Fairfield had beaten Canisius for that finals spot earlier in the day, and Quinnipiac was coming off a 13-game win streak. All that stood between the same MAAC Finals pair for four years in a row was the No. 3 Rider.

And Rider simply wanted that win more tonight.

THE SET UP

Last year, it was the same MAAC Semifinals game. Except that Quinnipiac was the one who came away victorious.

Last time these teams faced off on Quinnipiac’s senior day in Burt Khan Nov. 8, the Bobcats swept the Broncos and kept them at a maximum 16 points per set.

But even without that match-up, on paper, Quinnipiac was the front runner. The Bobcats had a 16-2 conference record and were on a 13-game win streak. Rider’s was 12-6.

Senior setter Damla Gunes was named the MAAC Setter of the Year for the third time in a row — only one of her program history-setting accolades this year. She ends her career with 4,212 assists — 781 more than the previous Division I record holder.

Alongside her, her twin senior outside hitter Yagmur Gunes and graduate student opposite Elena Giacomini were all named to

the All-MAAC First Team. Robinson was named MAAC Coach of the Year for the first time. Yagmur Gunes became only the second Bobcat to break the 1,000 kills and digs milestone.

Robinson has called this class “historic” on multiple occasions. And by their accolades, they truly are, not just based on this season.

But Rider had the MAAC Player of the Year senior opposite Kiannisha Santi- ago, who would prove to be Quinnipiac’s kryptonite.

THE GAME

Quinnipiac was outperformed in a way that it most likely didn’t expect.

It didn’t start out that way though. The Bobcats won the first set 25-17, out-serving the Broncos and playing a consistent game while Rider fell under the weight of its own errors.

Errors are fixable though. And once Rider changed its tune, Quinnipiac struggled to keep up.

The clear MVP of the game was Rider’s Santiago. She recorded 20 kills at Quinnipiac’s expense and only two attack errors. Quinnipiac’s blockers were no match for her swing tonight.

“I don’t know if we expected them to be that good,” Robinson said. “But either way, you still gotta play. She’s player of the year for a reason. I don’t know if she really killed us as much as we killed ourselves.”

Giacomini was the only player capable of even attempting to go head-to-head with her. She matched Santiago’s kills (20), but the 10 errors only added to the 28 that the Bobcats amassed in the game.

Ten different Bobcats saw action as Robinson subbed in junior outside hitter Leilani-kai Giusta and freshman setter Klara Olszewska

and outside hitter Vittoria Tonelli into the game as well.

“The athletes on the court just weren’t getting it done,” Robinson said. “We gotta try to find a spark and someone to bring some consistency to our game.”

Damla Gunes has been the “quarterback” of the team since her freshman season. Nobody expected to see her on the sidelines for half of the game tonight, yet that is exactly what happened.

Yagmur Gunes had the second highest number of kills on the night for the Bobcats (11) and matched sophomore libero Carola Negrón Díaz’s digs at 12. But not even she could break through Rider’s block for the majority of the time.

The surprise was in the form of senior outside hitter Ginevra Giovagnoni. Despite sitting out the entire last season due to injury, she was still named to the All-MAAC Preseason Team and led the team in kills in Quinnipiac’s first program sweep over Fairfield.

She recorded six kills and six attack errors tonight, often getting blocked before her hits could count in any way.

Quinnipiac’s key players who shined the entire season just did not come through in this game.

On the other hand, senior middle blocker Milena Silva not only opened up the scoring with a kill, but also recorded four on the night.

Giusta, who only saw action in two sets tonight, earned eight kills and the highest hitting percentage on the team.

Freshman middle block-

er Asia Belli led the pack with four service aces and recorded five block assists.

Two weeks ago, Rider had a singular block assist against Quinnipiac. Tonight, it blocked Quinnipiac 15 times, with a solo block and 28 block assists.

No matter what Quinnipiac tried, Rider was always there to match it with more vigor, more power and as Robinson put it, more “hunger.”

“Rider played a really good match,” Robinson said. “We didn’t play our game plan and execute well. That’s just how it goes.”

The only upper hand that Quinnipiac held was its serve. The Bobcats added four more to Belli’s service aces, while Rider committed 12 service errors, many coming from Santiago herself, as her very powerful serve found outside of the court more than it did inside of it.

Rider just had the drive and the grit to not let the ball touch its side of the court and it was no match for what Quinnipiac could come up with.

THE FUTURE

It was not a pretty final game for Quinnipiac. And it was not a pretty final game for the six graduating Bobcats.

With this loss, Quinnipiac now loses the final players from the roster that completed the Cinderella story and beat Fairfield for the program’s first ever MAAC Title. It also loses the majority of its starting line-up.

“Their play is program changing,” Robinson said. “Their level of commitment to the program has changed the identity of Quinnipiac volleyball.”

The only ray of hope for the Bobcats is the performance of the next generation shown on the court tonight. If the team builds on the foundation that the returning roster provides, there are still many MAAC Championship games in its future.

And with that, the 2025 season comes to an end.

