

STICKING WITH IT PAYS OFF By Brian Koonz

Graduate student Bianca Strubbe saw the text last March and felt her heart start to race, maybe even sink a little.

Strubbe, a standout midfielder on the field hockey team and a native of Poland, read the text again—just to be sure she didn't miss something. The text was as succinct as it was cryptic.

"Come to my office. We have to talk," head coach Becca Main requested.

After a winter of uncertainty combined with the mysterious text, Strubbe now sat across from Main at the Rec Center and learned the NCAA had approved her petition for a sixth year of play.

Strubbe came to Quinnipiac to play field hockey in 2018 after competing on the Polish junior national team from 2009–15 and the Polish senior national team from 2015 to the present. But she wanted more.

For six months, Strubbe and Main wrote statements, researched records and crafted a timeline to document a whole year of her intensive training for the Polish National team with the goal of earning Strubbe a sixth season of NCAA eligibility. It was a tall order by any estimate, even for the 6-foot Strubbe.

The NCAA gives Division I student-athletes five years to finish four years of athletic eligibility. A fifth year is automatically built into athletic scholarships in case of a serious injury or because of limited playing time. A sixth year of eligibility is much less common. Petitioners must prove the student-athlete missed two seasons of competition.

"The NCAA doesn't want to penalize [foreign] athletes for playing on national teams," Main said. "Bianca spent two years in deep training. One year, she was in very deep training, so we took that year and documented it [for her petition]. She wrote the most amazing state-



Photo Autumn Driscoll



Quinnipiac midfielder Bianca Strubbe, MS '20, on the offensive with UConn's Lindsay Dickinson in pursuit during a September game in which UConn prevailed.

ment. I'm absolutely convinced that after the NCAA read it, they went, 'Oh my gosh.'"

Oh my gosh, indeed.

"I was so excited, I can't tell you," Strubbe recalled in September after playing a match against the University of Connecticut. "I thought I was only going to get to play one season here. Instead, I get to play two."

After a year of blending her European style with the American game in 2018, Strubbe dominated opponents this fall as a second-year graduate student. She is poised to graduate in May with a master of science in sports journalism.

Strubbe led the Bobcats (5-13) this season with 21 points on nine goals and three assists. Her nine goals tied her for fourth place in the Big East Conference, an elite field hockey league with four teams ranked among the top 25 in the country at the end of the regular season—No. 3 UConn, No. 18 Liberty, No. 19 Old Dominion and No. 25 Providence.

"My coaches and teammates tell me I play very aggressive. They say I'm dangerous on the goal. I don't want to hit anyone, obviously. I just want to score a goal," Strubbe said with a grin.

"I feel like the national team experience that I brought here has helped my teammates. They are learning from it, too—asking me questions, trying new things. I'm very happy to help them, but I'm also learning from them. We're learning together."

At 23 years old, Strubbe was easily the most experienced player on the Bobcats this season. She has appeared in over two dozen international games and competed on six national championship teams in Poland.

"I have played in a lot of important games in my life—the Olympic qualifications, the European championships at the highest level—but I wouldn't say I'm a leader," Strubbe said.

"I'd say I'm a grandma with experience. Actually, that's what everyone calls me. Even though I'm considered young for European field hockey, in the U.S., I'm pretty old."

As far as Main is concerned, Strubbe was absolutely the leader of the Bobcats in 2019—on the field, in the locker room, in the classroom, on the road, everywhere.

Even so, Main stops short of calling Strubbe grandma.

"She might be great-grandma," Main laughs without apology, but rather, admiration and respect. "I love to talk the game with her. I like to listen to her. I like to ask her questions. She's had an impact here pretty much like no other. She's much older than everyone else on the team, but she doesn't shirk the duty of being the wise one, the guru, the sensei."

Last summer, Strubbe and her Polish teammates played in the FIH Series Finals in Hiroshima, Japan—with an eye toward the 2020 Olympics—but failed to advance after finishing fifth out of a pool of eight teams.

But for a while in Poland, well before she ever pulled a Quinnipiac jersey over her head, Strubbe had grown frustrated with field hockey.

After picking up the sport at 7 years old in her hometown of Wroclaw, a city of nearly 650,000 in southwestern Poland, Strubbe left her parents and brother at 15 to study and train with the national team.

Over the next four years, Strubbe developed into a world-class field hockey player. However, the success came with a cost. Suddenly, field hockey wasn't fun anymore. It was relentless. Strubbe needed some time away from the grind, so she headed to America for a new adventure.

Looking back, Strubbe's time at Quinnipiac has been memorable and often magical. In October, she scored twice in the Bobcats' 5-2 win over Brown for Main's 200th career victory. In November, she was named to the All-Big East Second Team by the league's coaches.

There were no cryptic texts this time, only a clear message. Given the opportunity, Bianca Strubbe will make a difference.