

Northeast Volleyball Club: Changing the Face of Connecticut Volleyball

Cat Dailey Minyard and Garrett Minyard of Northeast Volleyball Club are flipping the script on Connecticut Volleyball.



If we're being forthright, when we think of powerhouse volleyball states, Connecticut isn't one of the first that comes to mind. But **Northeast Volleyball Club** co-founder **Cat Dailey Minyard** wants to change that. After spending time in Europe playing and coaching, Cat and husband **Garrett Minyard** learned just how much time and investment it takes to build and grow the game of volleyball. In 2018, they opened a facility with three full-sized courts and the knowledge they brought back from playing professionally and coaching overseas.

"We always had the intention of coming back and starting a volleyball club here we just weren't sure when, or how long we would stay abroad. I had offers to continue playing in Italy. But we felt like it was such a big opportunity, and we could make a bigger impact on the sport here (Connecticut), where the sport is still in its infancy," Cat Minyard said. The question then became 'how?'

Well, according to her, it starts with building a community and a culture around volleyball to the point that there are more outdoor courts, better youth programs, and better high school and club programs. It has to be a sport that people don't just know about, but want to play. The region isn't known for its volleyball as much as it is known for sports like lacrosse, tennis, crew, and soccer, the more 'New England' sports. Priority number one for NEVBC is a cultural shift in sports.

She said, "There are good volleyball players here but not a lot of great volleyball teams. That doesn't mean there aren't teams that are having success when they leave the region. But in general, when teams leave Connecticut, they don't find success because the level they're playing at here is lower than what's being played around the country." She continued, "Changing that starts with growing the youth game so that when freshman athletes get to high school, it's not the first time they've touched a volleyball, or they've only played in PE."

That's why NEVBC started 'mini-volley,' a program to teach younger players the fundamental mechanics of the sport, starting in second grade. Minyard stated, "They know how to hold their hands when they pass, they know what an arm swing looks like and the mechanics of a serve even if they're just serving from the ten-foot line. They are learning those motor patterns when they're in third, fourth, fifth, or even middle school." It's a great starting off point, a grassroots, educational volleyball experience to introduce young athletes to the sport and grow the game. Minyard said that overseas, many of her teammates began playing at six or seven years old in a school league, or a town league. In Europe, everyone gets to high school, and they know how to make a platform, just like kids in America, know how to kick a soccer ball or throw a baseball. But here, not everyone knows how to pass a volleyball.

The next step in the process is opening a facility. Growing up in California, she said that there were warehouses full of volleyball courts everywhere. She also said, "Right now, Northeast Volleyball has the only

facility in the county that is dedicated to volleyball. Having that allows us to do programs like mini-volley, middle school clinics, and Fall club because we're not just renting time for team practice at high schools. We need more facilities, whether indoor or outdoor, places for people to play."

The club is now in its second year under the Minyards, who met five years ago, coaching at the Chelsea Piers in Connecticut. "Garrett, originally from Long Island, had just finished his volleyball career playing Division I at Sacred Heart University – and he was ready to dedicate his career to coaching. Cat, who also played Division I volleyball at Yale University and was the 2008 Ivy League MVP, was working full-time in marketing and coaching club volleyball on the side – and that's how they were both introduced to the 'small but dedicated' Connecticut volleyball community.

When they opened the doors in Fairfield County, they knew it was a risky endeavor, but they also knew the demand for the sport was present. What they did not expect was just how big that demand was. "We had 160 kids for our first tryouts, just from word of mouth through kids and families from siblings we had coached a few years prior. Thankfully, we had the help of the best coaches we knew – our friends from all over the country – some of whom even moved to Connecticut to work with us. Our coaches have literally dedicated their lives to getting this off the ground with us." This season they added Northeast Boys with three boys club teams, headed up by Boys Director **Jonathan Mercado**, and more youth programs under a new Youth Director **Shawn Hoyt**. She went on, "We're still learning and figuring things out, but the response that we've gotten is amazing. I thought that it would take longer for people to latch on to the culture and the community, and it's been overwhelming how people have taken to the idea. The athletes feel at home and comfortable, and they're growing and getting better."

As for the rest of Connecticut, she credits clubs like **SMASH** and **Husky** for representing The New England Region well, saying, "Smash up in Boston is doing a great job. Husky in the Hartford area, is having great success and growth. There are pockets of areas that are really strong, but as a whole, it's just not there yet. There is a lot of opportunity for growth and raising the bar." They've also had a lot of support from their region – both from the USAV Region Director **Dave Peixoto** and AAU Director **Scott Grandpre** – to get their feet under them.

Until that growth happens, NEVBC will simply have to keep representing Connecticut volleyball in the best possible way, by playing good volleyball. Just recently, Cat Minyard said, "We had a lot of athletes go to college clinics this past weekend, and one of the Division I coaches said to one of our players, "Wow, you really represented Connecticut well." As a coach, I was beaming." They've also had a number of college commits in the past year, including Connecticut College and Dickinson College, with hopefully more to come in their upcoming 2021 and 2022 classes.

Where most coaches seek validation in the form of a bid to nationals or place on the platform after a finals win, Minyard says, "We're challenging ourselves, playing better competition. But it is going to take some time before we go out there and grab a bid. It's going to be awhile, but the athletes are fully bought in, and they're working really hard to change the reputation of Connecticut volleyball, and the results are going to come. The kids focus on the process and so do we. It's good to see success, but the athletes know we still have a way to go." With Cat and Garrett Minyard behind the wheel, the fate of Connecticut volleyball is on the right path and in the right hands.