Sports

Photo of the Day | Softball



UConn infield Savannah Ring slides for third base at the Huskies' game versus Villanova at Burrill Family Field in Storrs, Conn. on Saturday, April 4, 2026. The Huskies won 2-0 over the Wildcats.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MADISON HENDRICKS, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS

From Jersey to Connecticut: The Bella Cefola Story

by Kaden Knapp
CAMPUS CORRESPONDENT
HE/HIM/HIS
iwr25002@uconn.edu

Syracuse? In the mix. Holy Cross? Once the favorite. UConn? That's the one.

Bella Cefola, nicknamed "BC" because there are three Bellas on UConn's softball team, was set on playing in Storrs despite the university not initially recruiting her.

"Freshman year, I went to my first camp there, and the campus was nothing like I imagined," Cefola said. "It was state of the art. Everything was brand new."

But it wasn't just the facilities that stood out.

"It was the place where you met the team and they're all happy," she said. "I knew it wasn't one of those places where you go just to play softball. You could have a good time there without it."

Now, BC currently carved out a role as a walk-on contributor for the Huskies, appearing primarily as a pinch runner while providing energy in the dugout.

The team has a 16–22 overall record and is 9-3 in Big East play. Her impact goes beyond the stat sheet though, reflecting the persistence and team-first mentality that defines the program.

To understand how Cefola got here, it is important to go back to the beginning, where she stepped on the field for the first time as a third grader.

"My parents just put me in it like normal. It wasn't even T-ball," Cefola said. "I played for my travel ball team. It was out of Mount Olive in New Jersey."

Travel ball in third grade? According to Cefola, that's normal. Mount Olive is known for producing high-level talent and sending players to the next level.

The travel program hosts state tournaments frequently, so travel ball was pushed by the town.

"Everyone who plays in our organization is going to have an opportunity to play at the next level," her former coach Sergio Rodriguez said.

Rodriguez met Cefola when she was in seventh grade.

"She immediately caught my attention athletically. She was very gifted. You could just see she was one of those kids that was going to run through a wall to get to a ball," Rodriguez said.

His impact on Cefola stretched far beyond softball.

"[He had] the biggest impact. He was more than a coach. He was a father figure in every aspect too," Cefola said. "He taught me the rules of the game and how the game is supposed to be played."

After Cefola's tryout, Rodriguez did something he rarely does: offer a spot on the team without seeing anyone at the next tryout.

However, there was one caveat.

"I told her, 'I'm going to tell you right now, you will never be a catcher for me,'" Rodriguez said. "Based on your size and your athleticism, you will never be a catcher."

Most players avoided catching, but Cefola embraced the role growing up, doing whatever the team needed.

He also wanted her to have a better chance of getting recruited. So, the seventh grader switched to playing predominantly in the outfield.

But for all her talent, Cefola's recruiting process didn't go the way she imagined.

"My recruiting process gave me the most anxiety ever," Cefola said. "It was really stressful, and it can be a confidence killer."

"I try to tell kids all the time not to recruit a school," Rodriguez said. "But Bella's case is different. She knew where she wanted to go academically first, and she believed she could compete there. She understood her role might not come right away, and she was okay with that."

That mindset shaped Cefola's recruiting process from the start, as she prioritized academics before narrowing down her athletic options.

Holy Cross underwent coaching changes, drawing Cefola away from the program, while UConn continued to stand out for a different reason.

"It felt more like home," Cefola said.

As her high school graduation approached, Cefola still did not have an offer from Connecticut. But that didn't stop her. She continued attending UConn camps and stayed in contact with head coach Laura Valentino.

"I was in contact with the coaches, so I knew something was coming," Cefola said.

That day finally came in June following her high school graduation.

While at the beach in Long Beach Island, New Jersey, Cefola stepped away, waiting for a call from Valentino. But as the scheduled chat time passed, her phone stayed silent.

"I was like, 'Oh my God, what's going on?'" Cefola said. "I didn't want to text her because I didn't want to be pushy."



Bella Cefola - No. 21 for the UConn softball team. PHOTO BY MORGAN BLANCHARD, GRAB PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS

About 30 minutes later, the call finally arrived. Valentino realized her phone had been on "Do Not Disturb," and she didn't get a reminder notification.

Relief quickly turned into excitement as Cefola's persistence paid off, earning her a walk-on spot at UConn after attending multiple summer camps, including one shortly before her opportunity became official.

"They asked if I needed time to think about it," Cefola said. "I didn't even let her finish. I was like, 'No, I'm in.'"

Rodriguez soon learned of the news, a moment years in the making.

"It was emotional," Rodriguez said. "I'm extremely close to her and her family, and I was just really proud of her."

What ultimately stood out to head coach Laura Valentino had little to do with statistics.

"I love the intangibles that BC brings," Valentino said. "She's always smiling, always pushing people around her. When a teammate has doubt, she's right there to say, 'You got this.'"

A few weeks later, she was off to Colorado for a summer tournament with her new team.

"It was crazy. It's not just the field, it's the atmosphere," Cefola said. "I had all the people who go to school sitting in the stands, I had all these camera people all around, you have all these vendors for the team and it was an unreal experience that I'd never really experienced before."

While the moment highlighted the stage she had reached, it also reflected the type of teammate Cefola had become.

"I've never had a teammate or anyone in our organization say anything negative about Bella," Rodriguez said. "Everybody knows her and likes her, and that says a lot."

She even would travel to tournaments if she was hurt and couldn't play to cheer on her peers.

"She's always smiling, she's always pushing people around her," Valentino said. "My favorite thing is when one of her teammates' doubt comes in, BC's right there to say, 'hey, you got this' or 'go get them.'"

On top of being a collegiate athlete, Cefola also is an engineering major.

"Luckily for engineering, you kind of start off the same as everyone else, you take the basic chemistries, you take the basic calculus," Cefola said. "It will start getting harder, but honestly they [the coaching staff and university advisors] are really good at keeping us on top of our stuff."

She took the field for the first time against Akron on Feb. 13. In the sixth inning, Cefola pinch ran for Alexis Juhl and scored off a Bella Cruz single.

A few weeks ago, UConn played its first game in New Jersey since Cefola joined the team. Coach Rodriguez was there to watch.

"I don't go to a lot of college games," Rodriguez said. "But for her, I had to be there."

For Rodriguez, it wasn't about the stats or the box score. It was about seeing the player and person she has become.

"I'm just proud of her as a person," Rodriguez said.

For Cefola, the moment was another step in a journey built on persistence, belief and an unwavering commitment to her team.

"I'm just grateful for the opportunity," Cefola said. "I just want to keep growing and see where it takes me."