

# The Keilani Factor

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH

One good look into the eyes of Keilani Ricketts as she stands in the circle sizing up her next victim tells you basically everything you need to know about her as a competitor. Before she ever goes into her windup, before she ever unleashes her wicked changeup, Ricketts has gained the upper hand.

It's called intimidation.

Batters refrain from digging in too deep. They grip the bat a little tighter. Their hearts race a little faster. They swing a little more wildly with hopes of somehow making contact.

Some might say Ricketts' imposing 6-foot-2 stature is cause for consternation where opponents are concerned.

And it is.

Others will point to the southpaw's devastating fastball—73 mph from 43 feet away that is the equivalent of a 103 mph pitch at the Major League Baseball level—as a major reason why opposing hitters owned a collective .163 batting average during her collegiate career.

That's true, too.

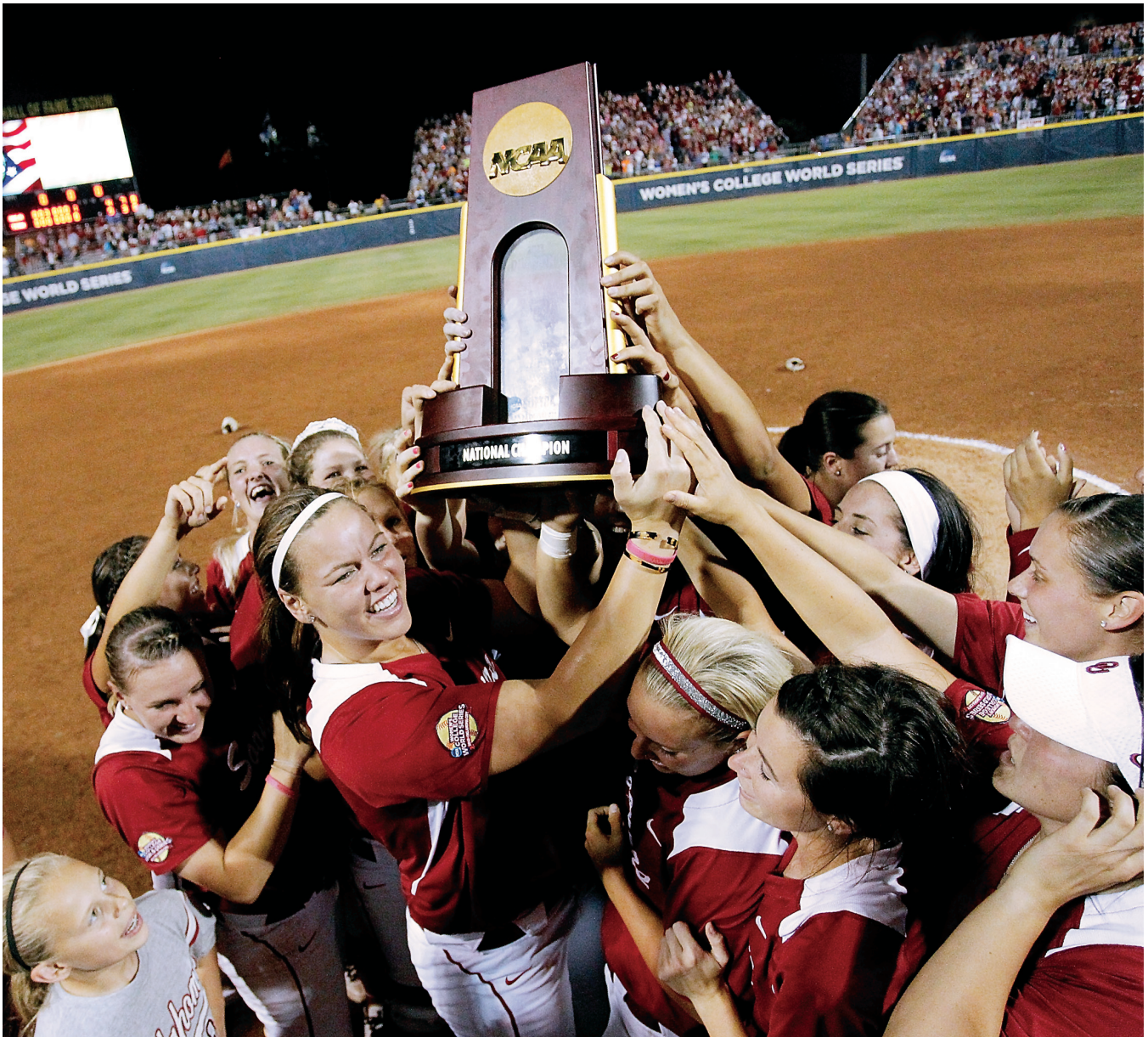
Ricketts' success, however, goes far beyond her athletic build and arsenal of pitches, starting with a stellar work ethic and an unequalled passion for the game. Her competitive fire burns deep, and she developed a take-no-prisoners mentality built on a rock-solid foundation of intensity, determination and supreme confidence.

When Keilani Ricketts first arrived on the University of Oklahoma campus in fall 2009, she had one goal and one goal only in mind—win a national championship.

The highly touted freshman from San Jose, California, was undeterred by the fact the Sooners had not captured the softball title in nearly a decade. She figured she had everything she needed to bring the trophy home to Norman, including a veteran coach who believed in her and a group of talented teammates who shared her dream.

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*The Sooners' superstar pitcher leaves OU with every award softball can bestow—including the one she most wanted to share with her teammates—the 2013 National Championship.*



Ty Russell/OU Athletics Media Relations

The 2013 Sooner softball team surrounds Keilani Ricketts, the National Championship Trophy held high, culmination of a season for the ages. The team dedicated its tournament run to victims of the devastating tornado in nearby Moore, which took the life of 9-year-old softball player Sydney Angle, whose sister Casey, far left, became their bat girl for the WCWS.



Ty Russell/OU Athletics Media Relations

Twice USA Softball named Keilani Ricketts the Collegiate Player of the Year. A four-time All-American and All-Big 12, pitcher of the year, defensive player of the year, the superlatives heaped upon her performance on the mound and at the plate go on and on. Arguably the best in the country? There is no “arguably” about it: Keilani Ricketts is the best.

“Winning a national championship is ultimately why you play the game,” says Ricketts. “It’s what motivates you to give everything you have every day.”

Over the course of four memorable seasons, Ricketts gave everything she had, and in the process, established herself as the best collegiate player in the country. When she wasn’t winning games as the most dominating pitcher in the game—72 victories with a 1.17 earned run average the last two seasons alone—the OU southpaw was getting it done with her bat, punishing opposing pitchers at a .340 clip with 50 career home runs and clutch hit after clutch hit.

Along the way, Ricketts earned All-America honors four times and All-Big 12 Conference honors four times. She was the Big 12 Player of the Year, Big 12 Pitcher of the Year and an All-Big 12 Defensive team honoree at various points of her career.

In 2012, Ricketts was named the USA Softball Collegiate Player of the Year for her pitching and hitting efforts, and she duplicated that accomplishment as a senior, becoming only the third player to ever earn that prestigious award more than once.

#### What Makes Keilani Tick?

“Keilani is the ultimate competitor,” says Jessica Shults, the Sooners’ All-America catcher. “She knows what she wants, and she’s not afraid to go after it. You can see it in her face and her demeanor when she’s on the mound.”

As a junior last spring, Ricketts won a career-high 37 games



Ty Russell/OU Athletics Media Relations

Her fierce stare-down from the mound, so intimidating to opposing batters, is quickly replaced by that dazzling smile as Keilani celebrates another victory with her teammates.

and posted a career-best 1.08 earned run average, while striking out 457 batters in 292 innings of work. Her 9-to-1 strikeout-to-walk ratio led the nation, and opposing batters hit an anemic .157 against her.

Those numbers only tell half of the story. As good as she is at hurling a softball, she's just as good—if not better—at hitting one.

A quick check of Ricketts' 2012 stat line is ample proof. When she wasn't mowing down opposing hitters, she was terrorizing opposing pitchers to the tune of a team-leading .395 batting average. She also led the Sooners with 13 doubles, 53 walks and a jaw-dropping .548 on-base percentage.

Ricketts' overall performance was considered one of the most dominating in NCAA softball history.

"Even before she came to Oklahoma, you could see that Keilani had the potential to be an elite pitcher. She had the size, and she was left-handed," says OU softball coach Patty Gasso. "More than that, she had a God-given gift, and she's taken that gift and worked extremely hard to be the best player she can be. Not only has she become a great pitcher, she has developed into a great hitter as well."

Ricketts' efforts helped push the Sooners back into the national spotlight and to the brink of a national championship in 2012. But top-ranked Alabama ended OU's title hopes with an emotional 5-4 setback in the decisive game of the Women's College World Series.

"Last season was phenomenal in basically every way except for the fact we did not win the (national) championship," says Ricketts, who earned Big 12 Player of the Year honors while leading OU to the conference title. "I was so proud of our team and the way we battled to the end. It was disappointing to come up a little short, but I think the experience we gained helped us in the long run."

#### **Title Time?**

Expectations for Ricketts and her teammates were off the charts in 2013. The Sooners, with eight returning starters, began the spring ranked second overall but wasted little time moving to the top of the national polls.

With experienced players like Shults, Brianna Turang, Lauren Chamberlain, Georgia Casey, Brittany Williams and transfer Shelby Pendley helping power the Sooners at the plate, and Michelle Gascoigne shouldering a bigger pitching load—Ricketts managed to take her game to an even higher level.

As her final season as a Sooner began to wind to a close, Ricketts was, by all accounts, the toast of the collegiate softball



Photo provided

**It's in the DNA. The Ricketts line of superb athletes is exceptional. From left: oldest sister Samantha was an OU record-setting, All-American home run hitter and first baseman; sister Stephanie pitched her University of Hawaii team to the WCWS; Keilani; brother Rick was an All-Mountain West defensive end for Air Force.**

world. Of course, something was missing. And that something was a hole in her competitive gut that all of the individual awards in the world could not fill.

Fortunately, Ricketts had one last post-season opportunity to fulfill her ultimate goal, and she was not about to let it slip away—especially after helping establish the Sooners as the team to beat for the 2013 national title.

Over the final 13 games of the season—all OU victories—Ricketts helped lead the Sooners to the promised land of that elusive national title, a feat last accomplished by a Patty Gasso-coached team in 2000.

Oklahoma rolled through its NCAA regional and super regional opponents and took the Women's College World Series by storm, knocking off Michigan, Texas, Washington and Tennessee twice en route to being crowned national champions. Ricketts pitched the Sooners to wins in the first four games of the WCWS, including a 12-inning, 5-3 barn-burner ESPN called perhaps the best softball game ever played. She then drove in all four of her team's runs in the clinching 4-0 victory over Tennessee, with Gascoigne on the mound pitching the 3-hit shutout.

Finally, the celebration Ricketts had been waiting for her entire career.

There was pure joy on her face as she climbed out of the traditional victory dog pile on the field and continued the celebration with coaches and teammates, including fellow seniors Shults, Gascoigne and Turang, all California natives who came into the program with Ricketts and never lost sight of the dream.

"We did it together, and I could not be more proud of my

team and our coaches. To finish off our careers like this means the world to all of the seniors,” says Ricketts. “It’s what we’ve been working toward for the last four years.”

Of course, there was one last individual award to take care of before the final curtain came down, as Ricketts was fittingly named the most outstanding player for the 2013 WCWS.

“Keilani has done it all during her time here. She’s done everything she’s been asked to do and more,” said Gasso, whose team finished the season 57-4 and joined Arizona, UCLA, Arizona State and Texas A&M as the only schools to win multiple WCWS titles.

“To see her and our seniors go out like this—being national champions—is incredible, because they worked so hard and made so many sacrifices to achieve this.”

### It’s in Her Blood

Ricketts is quick to credit her three older siblings for helping instill a tireless work ethic that has been instrumental in her development over the last few years.

Oldest sister Samantha Ricketts established several hitting records during a four-year stint with the Sooners (2006-09) that also saw her twice earn All-America honors. Brother Rick was an All-Mountain West defensive end for the Air Force Academy in 2010, and middle sister Stephanie was an All-America pitcher at the University of Hawaii.

“I’ve always looked up to my brother and my sisters. We are very close,” says Ricketts. “Sam was kind of my hero. Growing up, I went to all of her games, and I watched how hard she worked to make herself into a great player. She definitely inspired me to be better.”

Now an assistant coach at Wichita State, Samantha Ricketts recalls a time when she was playing for OU and a young Keilani sent her a signed photograph of herself that read, “You’re my role model now, but one day, I’ll be yours.”

These days, the sisters laugh about that picture and its bold inscription, which Keilani says was just her way of having some fun as a 14-year-old.

“I still have that picture. And look what she’s done,” says Samantha. “I’m proud of Keilani and all that she has accomplished. Seeing the way she’s matured and how she’s developed into such a great player—it’s been fun to watch.”

### Best Ever?

Besides being a four-time All-American and All-Big 12 performer, Keilani Ricketts earned a spot on Team USA last summer, along with Shults. Playing alongside some of the greatest players in amateur softball and against elite international competition did nothing but further add to Ricketts’ confidence.

“It was an honor to represent my country and the University of Oklahoma in that situation. And anytime you can gain that type of experience, it’s going to benefit you,” says Ricketts.

Maybe the biggest factor in OU’s 2013 title quest, according to Ricketts, was the chemistry between her and Shults, who was behind the plate for most of Ricketts’ school-record 133 victories.

“As a pitcher, you really rely on your catcher. There is a level of trust there that is really important,” says Ricketts. “Jessica is the best catcher in the country, so it’s pretty obvi-



Ty Russell/OU Athletics Media Relations

Keilani has been called the Babe Ruth of college softball by coaches and commentators: “a feared power hitter” and “best pitcher in the nation who doesn’t throw overhanded.”

ous she plays a huge role on this team.”

Always deflecting the attention elsewhere, if you ask Ricketts about the keys to OU’s most recent success, she will probably name each of her teammates before volunteering to toot her own horn.

Gasso has always admired that quality in Ricketts’ character, but she’s also more than happy to heap a little praise on her senior standout, who demolished more than a few OU hitting and pitching records, including throwing six career no-hitters.

“It’s been fun to watch her take huge steps forward every season she’s been here. Great players expect great things from themselves, and you see that in Keilani,” says the veteran coach. “She understands the game, she knows how to win, and she’s a team player. When you have someone like that leading your team, other players are going to want to play that much harder.”

That’s a lot of positives for one player to bring to a program. But Gasso doesn’t stop there.

“You would think Keilani has to have a weakness in her game somewhere—but to be honest, she doesn’t,” says Gasso. “I think at this point, you can honestly say she is one of the elite athletes to ever play this game.”

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