



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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The Foundation for Global Sports Development Awards Athletes in Excellence

Ten athletes to receive \$10,000 for their community service and mentorship work

Los Angeles, CA – The Foundation for Global Sports Development (GSD) proudly announces the selection of the ten recipients of its 2023 Athletes in Excellence Award. This recognition celebrates exceptional athletes who embody the highest standards of sportsmanship and fair play within their sport and community.

“Our Athletes in Excellence stand out not just for their athletic achievements, but for their impressive community outreach, humanitarian efforts, and youth mentorship,” said David Ulich, Executive Board Member of The Foundation for Global Sports Development.

Awardees are recognized for inspiring others through their accomplishments on the field, and for harnessing the power of sports to bring about change in the lives of others. “This year’s cohort is unique in that seven out of ten are Paralympians or represent athletes with disabilities. They’re breaking barriers and helping younger generations to dream big,” Ulich added.

Each winner will receive a \$10,000 grant to help them to expand the impact of their work.

“Thank you to all the nominators for bringing these remarkable individuals to our attention. They made our decision particularly difficult since each nominee is doing something that benefits their community. We want all the athletes to know we’re proud of their leadership and others are too,” Ulich concluded.

2023 Athletes in Excellence Award Recipients

1. Jacob Heilveil (US – Paralympian – Wheelchair Racing)

A native Korean, Jacob Heilveil moved to Hawai‘i when he was twelve to undergo spinal surgery to correct scoliosis -- a complication of the polio he contracted as an infant. He became interested in wheelchair racing soon after and has been a competitor ever since, having participated in ninety marathons, three Paralympics, and two World Championships. Jacob has coached wheelchair athletes and co-created the Exciting Programs Adventures and New Dimensions program (EXPAND), Colorado’s first Paralympic sports club, operated through the city’s Parks and Recreation Department. He’s currently developing an initiative to supply adapted equipment to existing

mainstream community sport programs. He regularly volunteers in Vietnam, Thailand, and Japan conducting wheelchair racing clinics. Jacob is an advocate of providing people with experiences and exposure to expand their perceptions of what is possible. Nominated by 2014 Athletes in Excellence recipient, Candace Cable.

2. Anton Jackson (US - Deaflympics Gold Medalist - Basketball)

After passing up Division I offers to attend Gallaudet University, Anton Jackson, a Deaf basketball player, went on to win Rookie of the Year at the university, a bronze medal at the 2007 World Championships and a gold medal at the 2009 Deaflympics. Returning to Gallaudet as an assistant basketball coach, Jackson led the school's team to one of its few conference championships, before attending Trainer University to obtain an I'm Possible certification. In 2021, he founded AdroitBucket to provide access to elite basketball training and inspire Deaf youth to achieve their athletic dream. Some of his alumni are well on their way having been selected to represent Team USA. Nominated by 2019 EYS recipient Blessed Mbogo.

3. Natalia Mayara Azevedo Da Costa (Brazil – Paralympian - Wheelchair Tennis)

Ranked top twelve in the world, top ten for doubles, and number one in Brazil for wheelchair tennis while actively competing, Natalia qualified for the 2012 and 2016 Paralympic Games. She won a silver medal at Les Petit As, Wheelchair Tennis Junior Masters, and gold medals at the Juniors South American Games and the Para Pan-American Games in both singles and doubles, giving Brazil its first gold medal in tennis. Now retired from competition, Natalia has been a force spreading awareness of adaptive sports and the Paralympic movement, actively volunteering in various capacities with organizations who deliver adaptive sports programs for youth, including Angel City, PlayLA, Ready, Set, Gold! YMCA, and Triumph. A frequent guest speaker, she has shared her Paralympic journey with audiences young and old. She has promoted wheelchair tennis by hosting clinics, conducted school assemblies, and created and shared content to amplify the reach and impact of these initiatives. As part of the Ready Set Gold! program, Natalia participated in their virtual series, promoting a healthy lifestyle by teaching children how to stay active at home. Beyond her local community, Natalia has volunteered for Brazilian Paralympic Committee (CPB) and Paralympic APC campaigns, advocating for the empowerment of Paralympic athletes and the importance of inclusivity. Natalia also had the honor of representing all Paralympic athletes at the United Nations in Switzerland, where she delivered a powerful speech on the visibility of Paralympic sports and the significance of the Olympics/Paralympics being held in South America. Nominated by Ready, Set, Gold!, Izabela Maria da Silva, Andrea Tabor, Shanda Vail, Lauren Bendik, and Crystal Yang Edwards.

4. Amobi Okugo (US – Retired MLS Player)

A first-generation Nigerian American from California, Amobi Okugo played over 200+ matches across multiple teams (Philadelphia, Orlando, Kansas City, Portland, Austin Bold, and the USMNT Youth Teams including the 2012 Olympic Qualifying Team) during his soccer career. While in the MLS, he represented his teammates as Team Captain

and Player Representative, successfully negotiating improved player rights, and winning the Open Cup Championships (2015), Western Conference Winners (2017), and Copa de Tejas (2019). Okugo is a prolific volunteer, directly engaging with approximately 1,200 youth per year in a mentorship role, as well as an average of twenty-five community-based programs per year. His mission is to “help others understand their unique opportunities and create excellence through exposure.” He is the founder of Frugal Athlete, a business that helps athletes through financial education and athlete empowerment, as well as the creator of the Ok U Go Foundation, a non-profit supporting BIPOC youth. Nominated by the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency.

5. Ella Rae Rodriguez (US – Collegiate Wheelchair Basketball)

Currently studying neuroscience and cognitive science while playing collegiate wheelchair basketball for the University of Arizona, Ella Rodriguez has been competing since she first discovered adaptive equipment. Before college, she played wheelchair basketball, danced, surfed, cheered for her high school team, and even helped her high school coaches create a new adaptive team, which included three other students with physical disabilities. After winning two silver medals at the Paralympic trials in 2021 in long jump and discus, she’s now set her sights on joining Team USA’s U26 Wheelchair Basketball team. As a Challenged Athletes Foundation (CAF) Ambassador and youth mentor, she has generously shared her story to inspire others at corporate functions and outreach events, including CAF’s fundraising gala. In her spare time, she volunteers as a mentor and coach at CAF clinics, including CAF’s work with the Golden State Warriors wheelchair basketball clinic series and their multi-sport clinics at the University of Arizona. Ella has expanded people’s horizons by connecting them to CAF for equipment and giving them a glimpse of what is possible. Nominated by Challenged Athletes Foundation.

6. Jessica Smith (Australia – Paralympian – Para Swimming)

Jessica Smith began representing Australia in para swimming when she was just thirteen. She swam for Team Australia for the next seven years, ultimately competing at the 2004 Athens Paralympic Games at nineteen. Since retiring from swimming, Jessica has become a runner and an international advocate for diversity and inclusion, disability awareness, and positive body image, sharing her journey with diverse audiences including the United Nations. Her message to people living with a disability is to focus on what your body can do. Smith is co-founder and COO of TOUCH Talent Inclusion Consultancy, an international inclusive talent agency and disability inclusion consultancy, as well as a brand ambassador for corporations, and a member of the Australian Government Sports Commission’s AIS Female Performance & Health Initiative Athlete Advisory Group. Jessica has received numerous awards for her work, including the prestigious Order of Australia Medal (OAM), Australia’s highest honor, for her activism and dedication to sport. Nominated by 2017 Athletes in Excellence recipient Mo’ath Alkhaldeh

7. Esther Vergeer (Dutch Paralympian – Wheelchair Tennis)

In 2004, Esther founded the Esther Vergeer Foundation to help children with a physical disability or chronic condition develop self-confidence through sport. After winning her first of seven gold Paralympic medals, Esther was regularly approached by parents and disabled children asking how they too could get involved in sports. She began her community outreach by hosting two clinics at a tournament she was in, eventually growing the initiative into the Esther Vergeer Foundation which gives hundreds of children with a physical disability the chance to play sports every week across the Netherlands. Esther serves on the Dutch Paralympic delegation and is a member of the Dutch Sports Council. She is also Director of ABN AMRO Open's wheelchair tennis tournament. Vergeer is the recipient of the 2022 and 2008 Laureus Award for Sportsperson of the Year with a Disability. In 2016, she received the Fanny Blankers-Koen Career Award - the highest accolade for a Dutch athlete. In addition, she was named International Tennis Federation World Champion in women's wheelchair tennis every year from 2000 to 2012, dominating the sport until her retirement in 2013. Having won 148 singles titles and 136 doubles titles over her career, Esther Vergeer has become a role model and advocate for female and male tennis players with a disability.

8. Jeff Williams (US – Olympian – Track and Field)

Jeff Williams became a sprinter when his college track coach noticed his speed as a football player. After graduating with a degree in Physical Education Recreation and Sport, he continued competing and was ranked #2 in the U.S. and #3 in the world in the 200-meter dash from 1994 to 1998. He took bronze in that event at the 1995 World Championships, and in the 100-meter dash at the 1991 Pan American Games and earned a spot as a USA Olympic team member in 1992 and 1996. In response to Southern California school budget cuts eliminating physical education classes in the late '90s, Williams co-developed the Psychomotor program which features activities that build agility, coordination, endurance, and cognitive development in children. Psychomotor is still in use nationwide as a YMCA program offering. Jeff was also an early participant in the Ready, Set, Gold! program, where he continues to spread the joy of sport to youth. Today, Jeff is a USATF Level II Certified Coach and a USATF Athletics Official and coaches high school track. In addition, he is the National Director of Track and Field for the non-profit Student Athlete International (SAI), overseeing track and field operations, and providing coaching, consulting, and mentoring services for the SAI track and field athletes. Nominated by 2014 Athletes in Excellence recipient, Candace Cable.

9. Kelly Worrell (US – Para Triathlete)

A lifelong runner turned triathlete at 41, Kelly Worrell took silver in the 2018 Paratriathlon National Championship, was selected to represent Team USA, and has won gold and earned accolades like Elite Paratriathlon Development Athlete of the Year ever since. Currently ranked in the top ten in the world and second in the US in her sports class, she's currently working towards the 2024 Paralympic Games in Paris. Besides her role as Northeast Regional Programs and Community Relations Manager for Challenged Athletes Foundation, she's an athlete mentor and coach to the U23 Para Triathlon Development Team, the co-founder of Swim Bike Run 4 Equality Foundation promoting

diversity and inclusion in the sport of triathlon, and a volunteer assistant director/board member for the Athletes with Disabilities Network Northeast, an organization dedicated to bettering the quality of life for people with physical disabilities. Nominated by Challenged Athletes Foundation.

10. Shane Young (US - U20 National Team - Rugby)

After leading his high school rugby team to three state championships and being named MVP his senior year, Shane founded Florida Gulf Coast State University's rugby team, serving as club president and team captain. In 2012, at the age of twenty-two, Shane co-founded Memphis Inner City Rugby (MICR). With no budget, he leveraged the power of social media and funds from his teaching job to provide equipment, registration costs, rides, academic support, and case management to youth from some of the poorest zip codes in America. Over the next 5 years, MICR grew to serve hundreds of students and partnered with six schools. In 2017, Shane left teaching to focus on MICR full-time. Today, the program — which has been recognized as a best-in-class model of Sport-Based Youth Development — partners with fourteen schools and counts professional rugby players as alumni. Nominated by 2022 Athletes in Excellence recipient, Kevin Battle.

About The Foundation for Global Sports Development

Established in 1996, The Foundation for Global Sports Development delivers and supports initiatives that promote accessible, fair, and abuse-free sport for youth, through grants, awards, and educational projects. In 2015, the Foundation launched its media division, Sidewinder Films, to inspire and educate audiences through films that highlight remarkable, untold stories of sports and life. Learn more at <https://globalsportsdevelopment.org> and <https://www.sidewinderfilms.org>.

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