

Orlando, FL – National STUDENT-Athlete Day Giant Steps Honorees of the Institute for Sports and Social Justice have been chosen and will be honored in Orlando on October 25, 2018. This year we celebrate 31 years of Giant Steps.

Giant Steps Awards are given in conjunction with the celebration of National STUDENT-Athlete Day, a program of the ISSJ. Giant Steps Honorees are individuals from the world of sport who have overcome adversity while still succeeding in life, who use sport as a vehicle for positive social change, break down barriers to provide opportunities to those who would normally not have them, and individuals who inspire us to do great things, and make change by using the positive aspects of sport.

National STUDENT-Athlete Day also honors high school and college student-athletes nationwide for their hard work and dedication in the classroom and on the playing field, while making significant contributions to their schools and communities. Since its inception, over 4.4 million student-athletes have been honored with award certificates for their outstanding achievements.

The mission of the Institute is to use the power of sport to affect positive social change. We educate and empower individuals and organizations by inspiring values-based thinking leading to actions that promote social responsibility and equality.

This year's honorees include:

HALL OF FAME

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar

NBA All-Time Leading Scorer and U.S. Cultural Ambassador

Six-time NBA champion and MVP, Kareem changed the game of professional basketball and has become a celebrated *New York Times*-bestselling author, filmmaker, ambassador of education, and *Time Magazine* columnist. He serves as Chairman of Skyhook Foundation, bringing educational STEM opportunities to underserved communities through innovative outdoor environmental learning.

Kareem has written 14 books, and his Emmy Award-winning film, *Kareem: Minority of One*, debuted as HBO's most-watched and highest-rated sports documentary of all time. President Barack Obama awarded Kareem The Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor.

HALL OF FAME

Dr. John Hitt

President, Emeritus, University of Central Florida

Serving as president from 1992 to 2018, John transformed the University of Central Florida into one of America's greatest higher education success stories and one of the state's most valuable and innovative partners.

The Washington Post credited John and UCF in 2015 with helping to lead a

“national insurgency that aims to demolish the popular belief that exclusivity is a virtue in higher education.” UCF achieved remarkable strides in academic quality and diversity during John’s presidency. Graduation and retention rates soared. The percentage of UCF students who are minorities increased from 15 to 46. One of every four UCF students is the first in his or her family to attend college.

Under John’s leadership, the university opened a thriving honors college and medical school, as well as an on-campus football stadium, and received state approval for a new campus in downtown Orlando and a university hospital. UCF also joined area state colleges in establishing the DirectConnect to UCF partnership that has earned national acclaim for making a college education more accessible and affordable.

Washington Monthly named John one of the most innovative presidents in the country. The *Orlando Sentinel* and *Orlando* magazine regularly listed John as one of the most influential leaders in Central Florida, and in 2016 *The Washington Post* noted that he “is often referred to as Orlando’s most powerful man.”

John graduated from Austin College with a Bachelor of Science degree in psychology and earned a Master of Science degree and Ph.D. in physiological psychology from Tulane University. He remains part of the UCF family, serving as President Emeritus and working to help advance important philanthropic, community and partnership goals on behalf of the university. John and his wife of 56 years, Martha, have two children and two grandchildren.

CIVIC LEADERS

Taylor Ricci and Nathan Braaten

Co-Founders, #DamWorthIt

Student-athletes lead busy lives: hours of practice, travel for competition, and academic pressure. The physical and psychological demands can be intense. Having suffered tragic losses themselves and facing feelings of isolation and depression, Taylor and Nathan (former and current student-athletes respectively at Oregon State University) knew they needed to ask for help.

They founded #DamWorthIt to oppose the stigma surrounding mental health and to give other student-athletes the courage to get connected and seek help. “We feel this is a unique approach to mental health awareness as it’s a platform for student-athletes that is being coordinated by their peers,” said Braaten.

BARRIER BREAKER

Dr. Jen Welter

First Female NFL Coach

In the summer of 2015 Dr. Jen Welter served as a linebackers' coach for the Arizona Cardinals, becoming the first female to coach in the NFL. Widely known as a trailblazer and pioneer, in 2014 Jen became the first woman to play running back in a men's professional football league. Prior to that, she had a highly decorated 14-year career in women's professional football, which included four National Championships and two gold medals as a member of Team USA in the 2010 and 2013 International Federation of American Football's (IFAF) Women's World Championship.

Jen is known for looking at the game of football differently. She has designed programs to increase access and opportunity through football, empowering young girls and women to make good decision for their futures.

COURAGEOUS STUDENT-ATHLETE

Megan Cunningham

University of Missouri Cross Country Team

In 2015 Megan had just finished a successful sophomore cross country season for the University of Missouri when she experienced a nearly fatal accident. While on a road trip to Wyoming with her parents, the truck she was riding in flipped five times. Megan severely fractured her skull and broke her neck in four places. Her father was left paralyzed.

Megan never thought she would run again, let alone at the Division I level. But eight months following the crash, she was medically cleared. Her father served as her biggest inspiration. He gave her the drive to get back on the track—by taking one step at a time—and Megan became a two-time Southeastern Conference (SEC) champion, winning both the Cross Country 5,000-meter run and the outdoor 10K run.

COURAGEOUS STUDENT-ATHLETES

Stoneman Douglas High School Boys Hockey Team

2018 Florida State Hockey Champions

On February 14, 2018 Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL was the site of a major shooting that took the life of 17 students and staff members. Only five days after the tragedy, the Boys Hockey Team had to decide whether or not they would participate in the Florida State Championships.

The boys, their parents, and coaches agreed that they would play for those who had died in the shooting. Seeded last after two days of games, the team came back to win the state championship. As the boys were presented with their trophy and

medals, they realized that they had 17 team members playing that day. Upon their return to campus, each player placed their medal on the memorials for the friends, teachers, and coaches they had lost.

A HERO AMONG US

Norma Bastidas

Human Trafficking Survivor

In May 2014 Norma Bastidas embarked on a journey to fight human trafficking. She broke the Guinness World Record for Longest Triathlon, swimming, biking, and running 3,762 miles from Cancún, Mexico to Washington, D.C.—a known route for human trafficking victims.

As a human trafficking survivor herself, Norma’s mission is to educate and empower others and prove that everyday people are capable of making extraordinary strides in the fight against societal problems. In partnership with the anti-trafficking group iEmpathize, Norma uses her life story—featured in the documentary film *Be Relentless*

—to educate young people about human trafficking.

A HERO AMONG US

Jordyn Wieber

U.S. Olympian, Activist, Survivor of Sexual Abuse, and Coach

In January 2018 Jordyn—a member of the “Fierce Five” U.S. Olympic Gymnastics team that won gold in 2012—came forward as a victim of sexual abuse by the USA Gymnastics and Michigan State University’s team doctor, Larry Nassar. Jordyn joined over 150 young women and girls who testified in court.

As a successful and recognizable U.S. gymnast, Jordyn believes that her voice as a survivor makes a difference. She has become an advocate to ensure that all children are safe and that those who commit abuse are held accountable. Jordyn continues to play a strong role at Senate Hearings, where she speaks out on the U.S. Olympic National Governing Bodies’ responsibility to protect their athletes.

A HERO AMONG US

Rachael Denhollander

Former Gymnast and Sexual Abuse Survivor

At 15 years old, while receiving treatment for lower back pain, Rachael was molested by Dr. Larry Nassar, the USA Gymnastics and Michigan State University’s team doctor. Sixteen years later, she brought her story to the *Indianapolis Star*, becoming the first woman to publicly accuse Nassar of sexual assault. One by one, more young women came forward to share their stories. Eventually 265 girls reported abuse by Nassar, and he was convicted and sentenced to life in prison.

Judge Rosemarie Aquilina called Rachael the “Five-Star General” who brought the army of women and girls together to speak out about their abuse. Rachael calls all of those young girls and women her “survivor sisters.”