



NATIONAL FEDERATION OF STATE HIGH SCHOOL ASSOCIATIONS

NEWS RELEASE

Alabama's Hayden Holton Selected as 2021 National High School Spirit of Sport Award Recipient

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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INDIANAPOLIS, IN (March 18, 2021) — **Hayden Holton**, a former student-athlete at Elmore County High School in Eclectic, Alabama, has been selected the 2021 national recipient of the “National High School Spirit of Sport Award” by the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS).

The “National High School Spirit of Sport Award” was created by the NFHS to recognize those individuals who exemplify the ideals of the spirit of sport that represent the core mission of education-based athletics.

Holton graduated from Elmore County High School in 2020 as an accomplished student-athlete, earning academic and athletic honors for his four-year career excelling in four sports. It was a remarkable ending to a high school career that began with an unspeakable tragedy.

In September 2016, during the first semester of Hayden’s freshman year, his parents died in a double shooting in his home. In addition to becoming an orphan, his older brother was charged with the murders, putting Hayden and his siblings in the public spotlight in tiny Eclectic, Alabama.

As Hayden moved to live with relatives in nearby Alexander City and his brother sat in prison awaiting trial (charges were eventually dismissed two years later), he filled his time with high school sports to help cope and relieve stress. Hayden returned to Elmore City at the beginning of his

sophomore year and competed on the football, basketball, soccer and baseball teams. His coaches and teammates became his family, providing him structure and support.

“They wrapped their arms around him and embraced him, and helped him through this situation as much as you could,” Elmore County Principal Wes Rogers said to Josh Bean of AI.com.

In his first year back at Elmore County, Hayden could not compete in football and basketball. But, he could practice and never missed a session or workout, and he often served as a team manager, statistician or waterboy just to keep close to his athletic family.

“I look at it as I can’t sit there. I have to move on,” he told Bean. “I have a whole life ahead of me. There’s work that needs to be put in.”

When Hayden returned to the football field as a junior, he excelled, earning All-County and All-Region honors as a tight end. But, he still was often one of the first athletes on campus each morning before school for voluntary 5 a.m. workouts. In addition, his football and basketball teammates voted him team captain and was named most improved player on the baseball team in 2018.

“I loved the family part of sports, most definitely,” he told Bean. “That seriously helped the most. It’s always something to fall back on. If you break down, there’s always somebody there for you no matter what, and you’re there for them the same way. It’s one big family, a huge family.”

It was his athletic family that often protected him from the near constant reminder of the tragedy. Hayden and his family have been the topic of every local media outlet and been the subject of two Dateline NBC profiles. Even just last year, another television series featured the Holton family story. Knowing how difficult it is to be continually reminded of the ordeal, his coaches and teammates organized a bonfire and cookout away from any media access during the show’s airing.

Hayden also was active in the Future Farmers of America and his church community, participating in a mission trip to Guatemala in 2019.

As a senior, Hayden was named the Bryant-Jordan Foundation Achievement Award State Recipient which recognizes students statewide who face and overcome difficult obstacles. It is perhaps the most prestigious award a high school senior in Alabama can receive. He currently attends Southern Union Community College in Opelika and plans to pursue a career in the Navy.

About the Award

In addition to the selection of Hayden Holton as the national award recipient, the NFHS National High School Spirit of Sport Award Selection Committee chose six other individuals for section awards. Following are the 2021 National High School Spirit of Sport section winners:

Section 1 – Patrick Rosetti, student-athlete, Danbury (Connecticut) High School

Even though Rosetti suffers from a speech impediment that keeps him from completing full sentences, it has not stopped him from leading the Danbury football team as its quarterback. He is a leader in the classroom as well, maintaining a high GPA while taking several advanced placement classes.

Section 3 – Hayden Holton, student-athlete, Elmore County (Alabama) High School

Section 4 – Abby Tuma, student-athlete, Shawano (Wisconsin) High School

Diagnosed with a cancerous brain tumor in 2019, Tuma endured a six-hour surgery, more than a year of radiation and chemotherapy treatments and using a feeding tube. However, she was declared cancer free last fall and rejoined her volleyball teammates to complete her senior year competing on the court.

Section 5 – Alex Edwards, student-athlete, Holton-Jackson Heights (Kansas) High School

At age three, Edwards was diagnosed with a heart condition called Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy. At age 12, he received a pacemaker. At age 15, his life expectancy was day to day. Then in 2018, he received a new heart, which allowed Edwards to participate on the school's cross country team his junior and senior years.

Section 6 – Kent Walker, coach, Liberty Hill (Texas) High School

As the defensive coordinator of Liberty Hill's football team, Walker assisted his older brother, Jeff, who was the school's head coach and athletic director. After his brother passed away from cancer, Kent stepped into his brother's shoes as head coach and athletic director, steadying Liberty Hill's student-athletes through adversity.

Section 7 – Lance Gillespie, student-athlete, Kaysville (Utah) Davis High School

Despite competing on Davis' swimming team since his sophomore year, Gillespie, who has Down Syndrome, and his family weren't sure if he would be chosen as a team captain during his senior year. However, during the team's year-end banquet in 2019, Head Coach Kit Barker surprised Gillespie by announcing his selection as team captain for the following year.

Section 8 – Gabby Weber, student-athlete, Belgrade (Montana) High School

During a basketball game in 2018, Weber’s leg gave out leaving her unable to stand. After a diagnosis of a serious vascular disease in her leg, Weber battled through complications and the potential loss of her leg to return to the court 14 months later.

Nominations for this award were generated through NFHS member state associations and reviewed by the NFHS National High School Spirit of Sport Award Selection Committee composed of state association staff members. While the national winner will be recognized June 29 at the NFHS Summer Meeting in Orlando, Florida, the section winners will be recognized within their respective states and will receive awards before the end of the current school year.

The National High School Spirit of Sport Award was started in 2008. Including this year, 14 individuals and three teams have been chosen national award recipients.

The previous award recipients follow:

2008 – Tammy Dufford, cheerleading coach, Evergreen (Colorado) High School, and Megan Bomgaars, cheerleader, Evergreen (Colorado) High School

2009 – Dakota Dana, student-athlete, Afton (Wyoming) Star Valley High School

2010 – Tori Clark, student-athlete, Roselle (Illinois) Lake Park High School

2011 – New Kensington (Pennsylvania) Valley High School Softball Team and Umpire Bill Dithrich

2012 – Jacob Goldberg, student-athlete, Fort Lauderdale (Florida) Pine Crest High School

2013 – Magoffin County High School, Salyersville, Kentucky, and Logan County High School, Russellville, Kentucky

2014 – Zach Pickett, student-athlete, Shingle Springs (California) Ponderosa High School

2015 – Grace Cummings, student-athlete, Madison (Connecticut) High School

2016 – Ashley Carson, student-athlete, Ord (Nebraska) High School

2017 – Danny Lilya, student-athlete, Moose Lake (Minnesota) High School

2018 – Marissa Walker, student-athlete, Waterford (Connecticut) High School

2019 – Amanda Merrell, student-athlete, Huntingtown (Maryland) High School

2020 – Noah Lambrecht, student-athlete, McCool-Junction (Nebraska) High School

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About the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS)

The NFHS, based in Indianapolis, Indiana, is the national leadership organization for high school sports and performing arts activities. Since 1920, the NFHS has led the development of education-based interscholastic sports and performing arts activities that help students succeed in their lives. The NFHS sets direction for the future by building awareness and support, improving the participation experience, establishing consistent standards and rules for competition, and helping those who oversee high school sports and activities. The NFHS writes playing rules for 17 sports for boys and girls at the high school level. Through its 50 member state associations and the District of Columbia, the NFHS reaches more than 19,500 high schools and 12 million participants in high school activity programs, including more than 7.9 million in high school sports. As the recognized national authority on interscholastic activity programs, the NFHS conducts national meetings; sanctions interstate events; offers online publications and services for high school coaches and officials; sponsors professional organizations for high school coaches, officials, speech and debate coaches, and music adjudicators; serves as the national source for interscholastic coach training; and serves as a national information resource of interscholastic athletics and activities. For more information, visit the NFHS website at www.nfhs.org.

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