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**National STUDENT-Athlete Day Giant Steps Award Winners Announced**

***The National Consortium for Academics and Sports (NCAS) Announces the 2008 Winners of the Giant Steps Awards in Honor of National STUDENT-Athlete Day (NSAD)***

**Orlando, FL...April 4, 2008** – The 21<sup>st</sup> celebration of National STUDENT-Athlete Day takes place April 6, 2008. This landmark day, created by the National Consortium for Academics and Sports (NCAS), honors college and high schools student-athletes nationwide who have achieved excellence in academics and athletics, while making significant contributions to their schools and communities. All honorees have achieved at least a 3.0 GPA or above and must be involved in outreach programs.

National STUDENT-Athlete Day is currently sponsored by the NCAA, and the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS). Since its inception, over 2,554,692 outstanding student-athletes have been recognized. National STUDENT-Athlete Day has truly become “America’s Day” to celebrate the achievements of student-athletes and sports as a whole.

In conjunction with National STUDENT-Athlete Day the NCAS awards National Giant Steps Awards honoring individuals who exemplify the meaning of the day by using sport as a vehicle for positive social change, bring awareness to social issues, and who help student-athletes have a balance between academics and sports. Nominees are made in the categories of Civic Leaders, Parents, Teachers, Courageous Student-Athletes, Coaches and more. Each year award winners are announced on April 6<sup>th</sup>.

The 2008 Giant Steps Award winners will be honored during a banquet in November 2008 in Orlando, FL. The 2008 Giant Steps Award winners include: Civic Leader **Braylon Edwards**, Cleveland Browns; Courageous Student-Athletes **Martel Van Zant**, Oklahoma State University, and **Katie Holloway**, California State University Northridge; Coach **Joe Ehrman**, Former NFL star and current Football Coach, Gilman School; Community Organization, **The Travis Roy Foundation**; Barrier Breaker **Shamila Kohestani**, Blair Academy; and a “Hero Amongst Us” **Jon “Blazeman” Blais** (posthumously), Ironman and ALS Warrior.

See Appendix for detailed biographies of the award winners.

*More...*

## APPENDIX

### COURAGEOUS STUDENT-ATHLETE – MALE

#### **Martel Van Zant**

Since Martel earned a spot as a member of the Oklahoma State University (OSU) Football Team, he has won numerous awards for his work in the community. He has volunteered with the YMCA, churches, Harvest II, food drives, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, local schools and more. He has also won many prestigious awards for his academic and athletic accomplishments including the OSU Academic Achievement Award, Big Twelve Honor Roll and the Big 12/Chick-fil-A “Community of Champions” Award for his outstanding work in academics, athletics, sportsmanship, and community service.

Martel has brought national attention to OSU by becoming one of their best defensive players. In 40 games, he had 127 tackles, two interceptions and helped guide OSU to two bowl wins.

Being in command during the game, in the classroom and still making time to give back to the community is a challenge in itself and not an easy one for the average person. However, Martel is not your average person. As one of five children of Andre and Alice Van Zant, Martel has been deaf since birth. His parents never let his lack of hearing get in his way. He attended public school and his parents expected him to excel. He has clearly done that and more.

Martel has lived his life to the fullest, while helping others and being a leader in his community. He has become a mentor to a local elementary school student who is also deaf. Both of them have inspired the young students at his school to learn American Sign Language. His teammates have also signed up for a class as well.

Martel utilizes the help of an American Sign Language Interpreter. Allie Lee is Martel’s ASL interpreter and is his eyes and ears everyday for football activities and tutoring sessions. Martel is a true leader who has changed the perceptions of everyone he meets. Most people forget that he is deaf because of the way he interacts and lives life.

### COURAGEOUS STUDENT-ATHLETE – FEMALE

#### **KATIE HOLLOWAY**

Katie once said “No one should feel sorry for me. This isn’t a disability, it’s just a challenge. And challenge is just something that makes you stronger.” She was just 12 years old when she spoke these words of wisdom well beyond her years.

Katie was born without a fibula in her right leg and, when she was 20 months old, her right foot and ankle were amputated. Since then she has worn a specially made prosthesis, a manmade replacement for her right leg that extends about 12 inches below her knee. If you didn’t know her, you would just think she is wearing a knee brace. That is the way Katie likes it.

Now in her senior year at California State University, Northridge Katie is a member of the women’s basketball team. In fact, Katie was always known as a great student, peer mentor and an active community member. She didn’t tell people about her leg because she expected to be treated like everyone else. At Cal State Northridge, she is seen as an all around standout person among student-athletes and young people in general.

## COACH

### JOE EH RMANN

Joe Ehrman was an All-American football player and lettered lacrosse player at Syracuse University. Named to Syracuse's All-Century Football Team, Joe is a recipient of the University's most distinguished alumni honor for his contributions to society. He played professional football for 13 years and was selected as the Colts Man of the Year and the very first Ed Block Courage Award Winner. During and following his football career, Joe matriculated at Dallas Theological Seminary and Westminster Theological Seminary and was ordained in 1985. Since 1995, he has been the Defensive Coordinator and Assistant Head Coach at Gilman School in Baltimore. Parade Magazine featured him on its cover as "The Most Important Coach in America" because of his work to transform the culture of sports by reframing and redefining the social responsibility of coaches, parents and players. The Institute for International Sport named him one of The 100 Most Influential Sports Educators in America. He is the subject of the New York Times Bestseller *Season of Life* by Jeffrey Marx, published by Simon and Schuster.

Joe and his wife Paula, a psychotherapist, co-founded Building Men and Women for Others (BMW O), an organization that holistically addresses issues of masculinity and femininity. BMW O also seeks to redefine and reframe the social responsibility of sports, coaches, parents and players, as well addressing issues of violence and child advocacy. They are also co-founders of The Door, an inner-city, community-based ministry that addresses issues of poverty, systemic racism and social justice. Joe is the co-founder of Baltimore's Ronald McDonald House, which has served over 35,000 families from all over the world since its inception.

The Baltimore Business Journal selected Joe as the Renaissance Person of the Decade for his dedication and commitment to Baltimore City's betterment. He also was selected as the Frederick Douglas National Man of the Year Award for empowering male youth and the institutions that serve them to work as allies with women in preventing rape and other forms of male violence. The recipient of the National Fatherhood Initiative's Man of the Year Award, Joe was honored for his work in improving the well-being of children by helping fathers become more involved, responsible, and committed to their children. In 2007, the Father's Day Council and American Diabetes Association recognized Joe as Father of the Year. Joe Ehrmann is an inspirational, dynamic speaker and seminar leader who works with corporate, civic, and community organizations and associations to promote growth, teamwork, effectiveness and individual responsibility. Joe and his wife Paula have four children and reside in Baltimore, MD.

## CIVIC LEADER

### BRAYLON EDWARDS

Braylon Edwards earned a football scholarship to the University of Michigan where his father also played. While there, he earned first-team All-Big Ten Conference, All-American, Big Ten Offensive Player of the Year and Biletnikoff Award honors.

In 2005, Braylon was the third player chosen by the Cleveland Browns where he has had the opportunity to make his mark in the NFL as a starting wide receiver. In 2006, he racked up 61 catches for almost 884 yards and a total of six touchdowns to complete his second season as a pro. During his third year in the league, Braylon played like an unstoppable man, running for 1,289 yards and scoring 16 touchdowns. Braylon was recently named to the 2008 AFC Pro Bowl Roster and the Associated Press' 2007 NFL All Pro-Second Team.

While all of his on the field plays are great, he has earned a Giant Steps Award for his off the field

accomplishments. Braylon makes an impact through community service initiatives in both Cleveland and Detroit where he grew up. Through his non-profit *The Braylon Edwards Foundation*, he developed the ADVANCE 100 Program, an education initiative which supports academic achievement among 100 junior high students who pledge and demonstrate their commitment to graduating from high school and attending college. Through the program, students will receive scholarships toward college. Additionally, Braylon established a scholarship endowment fund for U-M's No. 1 football jersey. During the holiday season he led a canned food drive challenge among elementary school students to support the Cleveland Food Bank. Through his combination of talent, passion and enthusiasm, both on and off the field, Braylon brings a defining energy and excitement to every endeavor he pursues.

## COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION

### THE TRAVIS ROY FOUNDATION

The Travis Roy Foundation was founded in 1997 to help spinal cord injury survivors and to fund research for a cure. The Foundation was inspired by Travis Roy himself who suffered a spinal cord injury in his freshmen year of college.

As a long time hockey player, Travis dreamed of playing for a Division I university. He got his dream when he stepped on the ice for Boston University in 1995. That dream lasted only 11 seconds. Travis shattered his fourth and fifth cervical vertebra, severely damaging his spinal cord. Travis is now a quadriplegic with no feeling below his shoulders and movement only in his right arm.

Since 1997 the Travis Roy Foundation has distributed more than \$1.3 million in individual grants and to research projects and rehabilitation institutions across North America. Individual grant funds have been used to modify vans and to purchase wheelchairs, computers, ramps, shower chairs and other adaptive equipment to help paraplegics and quadriplegics live their lives.

In the U.S. alone, there are approximately 250,000 people currently living with a spinal cord injury. With their grants, the Foundation is changing the daily lives of individuals by providing them with adaptive equipment.

## BARRIER BREAKER

### SHAMILA KOHESTANI

Shamila Kohestani was part a group of Afghan girls who came to the U.S. in 2006 for a soccer clinic as part of the Afghan Sports Exchange. The thought of participating in sports just seven years ago seemed out of reach. Women were not only kept from speaking their minds, but speaking in public at all.

As a young woman living in Afghanistan under Taliban rule, Shamila was unable to go to school, play sports, leave her home with a male other than a family member, and music and television were forbidden. Confined to their home, she and her six sisters made money embroidering burqas. They also sought out underground schools and traded books with friends violating the laws. Shamilla was beaten publicly for not wearing her burqa properly.

With the defeat of the Taliban this all began to change. After attending the soccer clinic in 2006, the Julie Foudy Sports Leadership Academy offered to pay one year of Shamila's tuition to Blair Academy. Shamilla arrived with the clothes on her back, a small carry-on bag and her soccer cleats. But she had to play catch up before anything else. She had to catch up from missing five years of school and learn more English.

Shamila is a pioneer in her country as a soccer player. When she came to the U.S. originally she was with seven other girls who made up the entire group of Afghan women who played the sport. When back in Afghanistan, she is the captain on the Afghanistan Women's Soccer team. In August 2007, the team played in its first international event in Pakistan. They won four out of five games and Shamila scored six of the team's eleven goals.

At Blair Academy Shamila practices her Muslim religion and prays daily in her dorm. She presented her story in front of her fellow classmates who now have an incredible respect and understanding for her.

## **A HERO AMONGST US**

### **JON "BLAZEMAN" BLAIS**

Ironman Jonathan "Blazeman" Blais was and will always be known as the "Warrior Poet."

On May 2, 2005 while teaching and finishing a master's degree in Education, Jon was given what he called a death sentence. He was diagnosed with ALS (*Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis*) more commonly known as *Lou Gehrig's disease*. According to statistics, this motor neuron disease progressively and relentlessly destroys bodies over a two to five year period. The reality is that now, 70 years after former baseball legend "*Iron Horse*" Lou Gehrig was walked off field at Yankee Stadium, the world has only one FDA approved drug that clinically fails to do anything beyond extend suffering.

On October 15, 2005, Blazeman, number 179, finished the 27th annual Ford Hawaii Ironman Triathlon Championship: 2.4 miles of ocean swimming followed by 112 miles of cycling and concluded with 26.2 miles of running through the lava fields of Kona. Having already lost movement in his hands, he was unable to grab water bottles to hydrate. He instead used a tank with a long straw to drink from.

Prior to being diagnosed with ALS, Jon was an avid triathlete and shared his passion for triathlons with activities such as mountain climbing and hiking. Jon applied his love for the outdoors to his profession, teaching students with special needs. Two years after his diagnosis in May of 2005, Jon founded the Blazeman Foundation, an organization dedicated to promoting awareness of and fundraising for those battling ALS. The foundation continues to grow and has expanded this year to include Team Blazeman, a group of athletes called "Blazeman Warriors" who have committed to raising awareness and funding a search for a cure for ALS, so others may live.

In a short time, Jon became an invaluable member of the Ironman family, opening eyes and hearts to the seriousness of ALS. After his participation in 2005, he returned to the 2006 event in a wheelchair to cheer on a fellow triathlete who was racing on behalf of the ALS cause.

Jon Blais passed away on May 27, 2007. He had a profound affect on everyone he met and even those he hadn't. From his outlook on life and the wisdom he exuded while battling ALS to his passion for Ironman, the impact will last for a lifetime.

The World Triathlon Corporation announced that all domestic Ironman, Ironman 70.3 and Iron Girl events will reserve Jon's race number 179 for athletes racing for a charitable cause. The race number was made famous by Jon Blais, who made Ironman history in 2005 by becoming the first athlete with ALS to complete the world's toughest endurance event.

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