

NATIONAL FEDERATION OF STATE
HIGH SCHOOL ASSOCIATIONS



NEWS RELEASE

Minnesota Student-athlete Selected as National Recipient of NFHS National High School Spirit of Sport Award

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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INDIANAPOLIS, IN (March 13, 2017) — Danny Lilya, a sophomore student-athlete at Moose Lake (Minnesota) High School, has been selected the 2017 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.

Like most other students at Moose Lake, a school with only 184 students, Lilya plays a variety of sports. Unlike those other students, however, Lilya was born with a broken back, is a paraplegic, and has been confined to a wheelchair his entire life.

However, that has not prevented him from participating in the sports he loves.

Among those are football, sled hockey, wheelchair softball and track. Last fall, Lilya was the holder on extra points and field goals for the Moose Lake/Willow River Rebels football team. He also plays left wing for the Minnesota Wild competitive sled hockey team, where he is 10 years younger than the rest of the athletes on the team. During the past three years, he has attended the USA Hockey sled hockey development camp in Buffalo, New York.

A National Wheelchair Softball Association player with the Junior Rolling Twins in a Minneapolis suburb, Lilya has competed in Baltimore, Chicago and Nebraska.

As a result of his involvement in these activities, Lilya has been featured on numerous media outlets. Among those are Twin Cities television stations WCCO-TV and KSTC-TV/Channel 45, as well as on CNN.

Despite the attention Lilya has received from his extraordinary achievements, Moose Lake High School Athletic Director Tony Andres said, "He's just an average teenager."

As a participant in Moose Lake athletics, Lilya clearly benefits from having a forward-thinking football coach in Dave Louzek.

"Part of Rebels football has always been including everybody," Louzek began. "Danny has displayed a great deal of courage in overcoming the challenge of participating in high school football while confined to a wheelchair without the use of his legs. As a holder for our extra point/field goal unit, he proves that anybody who is willing to work hard and truly wants to contribute can play an important role on a team and in life."

When it's time for Lilya's role in the game, he wheels out on to the field and climbs out of the wheelchair, which is then brought to the sideline. He receives and holds the football while sitting on both knees. After the kick, someone brings the wheelchair back on the field and Lilya climbs back in. Just like any other high school special team player across the country, he says "It's just the best feeling in the world," when he gets into the game.

Lilya's father, Dan, noted, "The wheelchair kind of becomes invisible ... he is every bit part of that program as are the able-bodied athletes who are out there."

Perhaps Lilya himself summed it up best when he said, "The wheelchair doesn't define you. If you want to do something but you're disabled, if you have the right mindset, you can still go out there and do it."

About the Award

In addition to the selection of Danny Lilya as the national award recipient, the NFHS National High School Spirit of Sport Award Selection Committee chose eight individuals for section awards. Following are the 2017 National High School Spirit of Sport section winners:

Section 1 – Danny Deitz, student-athlete, Simsbury (Connecticut) High School

Section 2 – Gunnar Eaton, former student-athlete, Glasgow (Kentucky) Barren County High School

Section 3 – Hasaan Hawthorne, former student-athlete, Pelham (Alabama) High School

Section 4 – Hunter Gandee, student-athlete, Temperance (Michigan) Bedford High School

Section 5 – Danny Lilya, student-athlete, Moose Lake (Minnesota) High School

Section 6 – Brittlyn, Madalyn and Mikyla Massey, student-athletes, Frederick (Colorado) High School

Section 7 – Kshaun Mata, student-athlete, Santa Paula (California) High School

Section 8 – Sitka High School boys basketball team, Sitka (Alaska) High School

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 Providence, Rhode Island, 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, 10 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

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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 fine arts activities. Since 1920, the NFHS has led the development of education-based interscholastic sports and fine 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 19,000 high schools and 11 million participants in high school activity programs, including more than 7.8 million in high school sports. As the recognized national authority on interscholastic activity programs, the NFHS conducts national meetings; sanctions interstate events; produces publications for high school coaches, officials and athletic directors; sponsors professional organizations for high school coaches, officials, spirit coaches, 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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