



Amiyah Aponte of University of Pacific and Nigel Wilson of Pasadena City College Named CalHOPE Courage Award Winners for March

SACRAMENTO – MARCH 28, 2023 — Two California college student-athletes — **Amiyah Aponte**, a junior pitcher on the University of Pacific softball team, and **Nigel Wilson**, a sophomore forward for the Pasadena City College basketball team — have been selected as the March recipients of the **CalHOPE Courage Award**.

The monthly CalHOPE award honors student-athletes at California colleges and universities who have overcome the stress, anxiety, and mental trauma associated with personal hardships and adversity.

Here's a closer look at the inspiring personal stories of the March CalHOPE Courage Award honorees.

Amiyah Aponte

Growing up poor and raised by a single mother in Riverside, Amiyah had a very challenging childhood. With her father in and out of prison for most of her life, and her mother in financial distress, Amiyah and her two siblings were forced to live with an assortment of family friends and relatives for the first 12 years of her life.

Even though on more than one occasion there was not enough money for food or to fill the car with gas to get to school, Amiyah did not realize her family's struggles until, as a teenager, she noticed friends going on vacation and getting new clothes and shoes, luxuries that were not available to Amiyah. Rather than confront her reality, Amiyah lied to mask the situation.

It was at this time that her stepfather and grandfather stepped up as the main providers by working extra hours to care for her and her siblings. Her grandfather got her involved in sports to ensure she felt part of the community. When she turned 12, the family finally moved into a home, and she began to have some stability in her life. It was also when she began to understand her mother's, stepfather's, and grandfather's work ethic, sacrifices, and commitment made this a reality.

With these role models in her life, she experienced success both on the field and in the classroom at Martin Luther King High School in Riverside. She was recruited to pitch for the University of the Pacific Tigers. As a freshman, she posted a 2-0 record in 12 appearances, allowing only eight earned runs in 32 innings for a 1.79 ERA (Earned Run Average). Last year she led the pitching staff with 88.2 innings, five wins, a 3.47 ERA, and 1.30 WHIP (Walks and Hits Per Inning Pitched). This year, through March 20, she has a 1-3 record and a 2.67 ERA in 18 innings.

"Watching a strong woman like my mother go through the struggles of being a single mother, but keeping a positive outlook on life, set a great example for me," said Amiyah. "I try to emulate her every day as I take on the many challenges of being a student-athlete."

Nigel Wilson

Following a successful high school career at Foothills High School in Tucson, Arizona, Nigel began his college basketball career at MiraCosta College in Oceanside, California during the pandemic shortened 2020-21 academic year. The combination of being far away from home for the first time, several serious COVID-related family illnesses, the inability to connect with people in person, and a foot injury that kept him off the court put a strain on his mental health. He struggled with depression, but by opening up to his athletic counselor, he was encouraged to see a therapist. With the help of on-campus mental health counselors, an athletic counselor, and his teammates and coaches, he worked tirelessly to get his life back on track.

Last season, as he continued to work on his mental health, he played in 18 games at MiraCosta, averaging 4.2 points and 3.2 rebounds per game. The highlight of his season was a 6 point, 7 rebound, and 4 steal performance against San Diego City College in the California Community College Athletic Association (CCCCA) SoCal Regional Finals. His steady improvement, strong academic performance, and superb athleticism convinced Pasadena City College head coach Ryan Frazer to offer him a roster spot for the 2022-23 season.

The 6-foot-9-inch forward started the season coming off the bench for the Lancers, but after just two weeks, he was inserted into the starting lineup. He delivered back-to-back 14-point performances, earning a starting spot that he kept for the remainder of the season. He was a big reason for the Lancers' dramatic improvement from a 1-26 record last season to a 22-9 mark and a berth in the CCAA SoCal Regional Finals, where they eventually lost 63-58 to San Bernardino Valley. In 29 games, he averaged 10.3 points and 6.2 rebounds.

Nigel is on schedule to earn his AA degree this spring, and at the end of the semester will transfer to one of the many schools that have expressed interest in his talents.

"I was in a very dark place during the 2020-21 school year. For the first time in my life, I felt isolated and was unsure of a path forward. Not being able to play basketball just added to my depression," admits Nigel. "I am forever grateful for the people at MiraCosta who encouraged me to seek counseling and deal with my feelings. I encourage all young people to seek help during the difficult times we all face."

Said Autumn Boylan, Deputy Director of the Office of Strategic Partnerships for the California Department of Health Care Services (DHCS), which oversees CalHOPE: "CalHOPE is honored to recognize student-athletes statewide who have overcome their challenges to perform their best as both scholars and athletes. CalHOPE's purpose is to build community resiliency and help people recover from disasters and public health emergencies through free outreach, crisis counseling, and support services. We hope that by sharing these stories of courage, we will all be inspired."

The monthly CalHOPE Courage Award is presented by the College Sports Communicators (formerly CoSIDA), in association with The Associated Press; [CalHOPE](#), DHCS' crisis counseling and support resource; and the Governor's Council on Physical Fitness and Mental Well-Being.

At the end of the school year, two of the student-athletes recognized during the year will be selected as annual **CalHOPE Courage Award** winners, and a \$5,000 donation will be made in each of their names toward mental health services at their schools. Previous honorees have included: **Cameron Brink** (basketball, Stanford); **Garrett Jensen** (baseball, San Francisco State); **Lexi Zandonella-Arasa** (soccer, Sonoma State); **Anysa and Amaya Gray** (soccer, U.C. Berkeley); **Sam Nimmo** (lacrosse, Whittier College); **Ian Gilligan** (golf, Long Beach State); **Mike Asante** (basketball, Academy of Art); **Gretta Kirkby** (volleyball, Chico State); **Gretta Kirkby** (volleyball, Chico State); **Anastasiia Slivina** (rowing, USC); **Yuliia Zhytelna** (tennis, California State University, Northridge (CSUN)); **Nathan Merren** (volleyball, CSUN); and **Jordan Smith** (soccer, Cal State East Bay).

Stories about all honorees are available at [CalHOPECourageAward.com](https://www.calhopecourageaward.com) and via social media on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) at [@CalHOPE_Courage](#).

Sports information directors at all colleges and universities in California are encouraged to nominate deserving intercollegiate student-athletes through April 2023 at CalHOPECourageAward.com. The honorees will be selected by a panel of writers, editors, and sports information directors from College Sports Communicators and The Associated Press.

ABOUT CalHOPE

CalHOPE is a multi-level campaign run by DHCS to connect people with vital mental health and wellness resources and information to help them find their way during difficult times. CalHOPE offers critical behavioral health crisis counseling programs and uses a public health approach that is focused on strength-based strategies of building resiliency and connecting people to the support they need. CalHOPE partners with the California Governor's Council on Physical Fitness and Mental Well-Being to promote the CalHOPE Courage Award. CalHOPE resources may be accessed by calling the program's warm line at (833) 317-HOPE (4673) or by visiting www.calhope.org.

College Sports Communicators: College Sports Communicators is a 3,600-plus member national organization, comprised of the athletic communications, media relations, digital, and creative professionals throughout all levels of collegiate athletics in the United States and Canada. Founded in 1957, the organization is the second oldest management association in intercollegiate athletics. The organization's signature program is the Academic All-America program, honoring thousands of outstanding scholar-athletes annually. To learn more, visit collegesportscommunicators.com.

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