



Ukrainian Student-Athletes Anastasiia Slivina of USC and Yuliia Zhytelna of CSU Northridge Named CalHOPE Courage Award Winners for January

SACRAMENTO – JANUARY 30, 2023 — Two California college student-athletes from Ukraine—**Anastasiia Slivina**, a senior on the University of Southern California (USC) women’s rowing team, and **Yuliia Zhytelna**, a sophomore tennis player for California State University Northridge (CSUN)—have been selected as the January recipients of the **CalHOPE Courage Award**.

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

Both student-athletes are natives of Ukraine’s capital city, Kyiv. When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Slivina was in Los Angeles preparing for the NCAA rowing championships, while Zhytelna and the CSUN tennis team were on the road for matches at Sacramento State and conference foe University of California, Davis. Slivina and Zhytelna have experienced extensive stress and anxiety over the past year as they balance their academic and athletic pursuits with their concerns over the situation in their home country.

Here’s a closer look at the January CalHOPE Courage Award honorees.

Anastasiia Slivina

Slivina, who spent the first 11 years of her life in Russia before her family moved to Kyiv, has always had a strong spiritual connection to Ukraine and to her family. The day the invasion began, she stayed home from school, eyes glued to the news, awaiting text messages from home. Her 19-year-old brother had to stay in Ukraine because men cannot leave the country, and her mother, a doctor, decided to stay to care for the wounded.

With the help of support staff, coaches, and teammates, Slivina was able to handle her emotions and continue to perform at the highest level.

She is once again a bright shining light on the USC women’s rowing team and brings her positive spirit and energy to practice every day, no matter what is happening back home. An international relations and social sciences major, she trained in taekwondo until age 15, and at the suggestion of a physical education teacher, she transitioned to rowing. She competed for Ukraine at the 2020 and 2021 European Championships, and last year, she competed in 15 regattas for the Trojans, earning top five finishes at three events.

"Immediately following the start of the conflict, I became very sensitive to things that I wouldn't be sensitive to otherwise," she said. "I remember last spring that when one of my coaches said some completely normal things to me, I cried because my mental state was off. With the help of the sports psychologists at USC, my friends, and my teammates, and the passage of time, I have been able to regain

a bit of normalcy. I still get upset when I receive news from Ukraine, but I have learned that it is okay to not always be okay.”

Yuliia Zhytelna

Born in Kyiv, Yuliia began playing tennis at age 7 and seriously starting at age 10. With the encouragement of her coach and mother, she would skip school to practice more extended hours and travel to tournaments. However, the pressure of tennis being so much of her life and only perfection was acceptable made her realize that she needed a change. She accepted a scholarship from CSUN without informing her parents or coach. Three years later, this is still a sensitive issue with her coach.

Her transition to America was a challenge as she arrived during the COVID-19 pandemic. The decision to redshirt her freshman season allowed her to adjust to her new life and get her tennis game back on track. However, in February 2022, as she started to feel comfortable, the Russian invasion of Ukraine turned her life upside-down again.

Yuliia chose to take time away from the team to deal with the tragedy back home and focus her efforts on helping raise awareness about the plight of Ukraine and to support her family. The fact that her CSUN doubles partner and best friend, Ekaterina Repina, was Russian attracted news media interest. A journalism major, Yuliia worked with one of her professors to organize a vigil to help educate fellow students about the situation in Ukraine. She was also able to help her family in Kyiv by connecting them with the family of CSUN teammate Magdalena Hedzrak, whose family in Poland was able to provide them with housing after they emigrated to that country.

After getting back on the court with a grueling workout regimen over the summer, Yuliia played in all five fall tournaments for the Matadors, compiling an 8-6 singles record and a 7-4 doubles mark. She is projected to be in the top six in singles for CSUN and be a part of the top three doubles team.

“I never seriously thought about my mental health until I was diagnosed with depression and started having physical health issues,” explained Yuliia. “The relationship with my family and former coach, coupled with the situation in Ukraine, made me realize how everything affected me mentally, and that my mental health suffered before my physical health. I hope my story serves as an example to others that we can only be strong physically when we are strong mentally. I keep working on myself to make my closest people proud of me and so I can become the best version of myself as an athlete and human.”

Said Dr. Jim Kooler, Special Consultant for DHCS: “CalHOPE is honored to recognize student-athletes throughout the state who, despite setbacks, have overcome life’s challenges to continue to perform their best as both scholars and athletes. CalHOPE’s purpose is to build community resiliency and help people recover through free outreach, crisis counseling and support services. We hope that by sharing these stories student-athletes have experienced, 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, a crisis counseling and support resource for communities impacted by public health emergencies, operated by the California Department of Health Care Services (DHCS); 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 this 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); and **Gretta Kirkby** (volleyball, Chico State).

Stories about all honorees are available at 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. Fans can learn more and engage on social media on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) at @CalHOPE_Courage.

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.

The Associated Press (AP): The AP is the essential global news network, delivering fast, unbiased news from every corner of the world to all media platforms and formats. Founded in 1846, The AP today is the most trusted source of independent news and information. On any given day, more than half the world's population sees news from The AP. For more information, visit www.ap.org.

###

Media Contact: Doug Drotman (631/462-1198 or doug@drotman-pr.com)