



Nathan Merren of Cal State Northridge and Jordan Smith of Cal State East Bay Named CalHOPE Courage Award Winners for February

SACRAMENTO – MARCH 2, 2023 — Two California college student-athletes— **Nathan Merren**, a redshirt sophomore on the California State University, Northridge (CSUN) men’s volleyball team, and **Jordan Smith**, a redshirt junior goalie for the CSU East Bay women’s soccer team — have been selected as the February 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.

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

Nathan Merren

Nathan’s journey from dual-sport athlete at Quartz Hills High School in Woodland Hills, California to playing in his first college volleyball match was a long and painful journey. The odyssey began in 2020 when a clerical error during the college admissions process made him ineligible to suit up for the Matadors. The following year, the ongoing pandemic shortened the season to just five weeks, so rather than burn a year of eligibility, Nathan chose to redshirt the season.

Last year, after a strong fall practice, during which he earned a starting position, disaster struck his family as his older brother, Christopher, who suffered from schizophrenia, was struck by a car on the highway while he was in the state of psychosis. He was killed. The tragedy was devastating for his entire family, but especially for Nathan, as Christopher was also his confidant and best friend. As he fell into a deep depression, Nathan’s grades suffered, and volleyball was the furthest thing from his mind. He took leave from the team as he dealt with the unimaginable weight he found himself carrying.

The CSUN coaching staff wondered if Nathan’s volleyball career would ever begin. However, nine months after the terrible loss, with his mental health getting stronger, Nathan’s father shared a story with him about how he gave up wrestling while at the Naval Academy due to the death of his father. Knowing how much Nathan loved volleyball, he encouraged him to ask his coaches for an opportunity to return and fulfill his dream.

“What allowed me to come out of my funk was to embrace my brother’s death and not pretend that nothing happened,” explained Nathan. “I chose to surround myself with people I love -- my family and the CSUN men’s volleyball team. I learned that whenever I am sad, if I express my feelings, I can get the support and love I need.”

The coaches played him sparingly in the first three games this season to ensure he was ready both physically and mentally before making his debut more than 40 months after first stepping foot on campus.

In the 10 matches since, he has become a starter and one of the Matadors' most valuable players, and, as a bonus, he was a member of the Dean's List for the fall 2022 semester.

Jordan Smith

A three-year starting goalkeeper for the CSU East Bay women's soccer team, Jordan has overcome many challenges in her young life. At age 7, her father passed away, leaving her mother to care for Jordan, her twin brother, and a younger brother. The combination of grief, mental illness, and financial instability made for a very challenging environment growing up in Gardnerville, Nevada. Like many youngsters, she found her escape in soccer early on in life. The team environment and competitiveness made it a place of belonging.

While soccer was her escape, upon earning the starting job for the Pioneers as a freshman, it also became a stressor as she began to experience performance anxiety. She put extra pressure on herself to perform, which, in turn, manifested into panic attacks during pre-game warmups. With the help of the university's therapy programs, she implemented a pre-game meditation routine that helped tremendously.

The success of the meditation program encouraged her to restart individual therapy to help herself both on the field and in life. She knew her next hurdle would be to come out as gay to her coaches and teammates to ensure she could be her true self. Although she admits she is still a work in progress, she hopes to help others by sharing her vulnerabilities in her visible role as the president of the Student-Athletes Advisory Council (SAAC). She believes her openness will help ease the stigma of mental health amongst her peers.

"It has been a challenge balancing school, soccer, jobs, clubs, and mental health along with everything else that comes with being a woman in college," said Jordan. "It has given me so much confidence and has really helped me develop into the person I always dreamed of becoming. It was isolating my first year of college, as I didn't know how to reach out for help. Fortunately, my coaches and peers recognized I was struggling and helped provide me with the tools and support I needed to improve my mental health."

On the pitch, she has started 54 games in three seasons for the Pioneers. She earned All-California Collegiate Athletic Association (CCAA) Honorable Mention and CSU East Bay Freshman of the Year honors. After the cancellation of the 2020 season, she returned in 2021 to lead the team to the CCAA Conference championship with a 0.87 goals against average and a school record 10 shutouts. This season she was named a team captain and recorded three shutouts while playing every minute of the season.

Said Dr. Jim Kooler, Special Consultant for the California Department of Health Care Services (DHCS), which oversees CalHOPE: "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 that 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](#), DHCS' crisis counseling and support resource for communities impacted by public health emergencies; 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); and **Gretta Kirkby** (volleyball, Chico State).

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

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