



## Megan Janikowski of Cal Poly Humboldt and Jamel Pink of Reedley College Recognized with CalHOPE Courage Award for November

**SACRAMENTO – NOVEMBER 30, 2023** — Two California college student-athletes — **Megan Janikowski**, a junior defender on the **Cal Poly Humboldt** soccer team, and **Jamel Pink**, a sophomore defensive lineman for the **Reedley College** football team — have been selected as the November recipients of the **CalHOPE Courage Award**.

The award, presented monthly since February 2022, honors student-athletes at California colleges and universities who have overcome the stress, anxiety, and mental trauma associated with personal hardships and adversity. In addition to being recognized by CalHOPE, \$1,000 will be donated in each of their names to support on-campus mental health services at their schools.

Here's a closer look at the inspiring personal stories of these two student-athletes recognized with the CalHOPE Courage Award for November.

### **Megan Janikowski**

Megan Janikowski's journey has been a testament to her resilience, marked by both personal and athletic triumphs amidst the shadow of her mother's death and her resulting mental health challenges.

Wrestling with the profound loss of her mother to metastatic brain cancer in January 2021, Megan found herself at a crossroads. The impact on her mental well-being was immense, casting doubt on her ability to continue playing college soccer and leading her to grapple with the reality of navigating life without her best friend and role model. In the throes of grief, Megan initially distanced herself from friends and family, struggling to rediscover happiness.

Megan was a freshman at Eastern New Mexico University when she learned of her mother's diagnosis. She subsequently transferred to Cal Poly Humboldt to be closer to home. In turmoil, she found solace and success on the soccer field. The camaraderie and support of her teammates did not replace that of her mother, but it did help rekindle her passion for the game and life.

Despite the toll on Megan's mental health, her mother's memory remained her guiding force, motivating her to uplift those around her. With the support of eight of her mother's best friends,

Megan established the *Heather Janikowski Foundation* to assist families affected by cancer. During the past two years, they have helped cover the treatment and medical costs of 20 families and groups. In honor of her mother's legacy, the foundation sponsors numerous events, including 5k runs, hikes, "Kicking for Cancer" educational initiatives, and the annual Cal Poly Humboldt Soccer "Pink Game".

This season, Megan purchased pink jerseys for the women's soccer team. The night before the "Pink Game", her teammates dyed their socks pink and decorated the field as a symbolic gesture of their support for those affected by cancer.

On the field, Megan earned All-California Collegiate Athletic Association (CCAA) second team recognition as a center-back, contributing to a record-breaking 11 shutouts and 13 wins – the most in the program's history. The team's historic victory in the CCAA tournament further underscored their remarkable year. Megan started all 20 games, averaging 87 minutes per game.

"Throughout these past few years, I've realized how important it is for your mental health to keep family and friends close," said Megan. "I want to continue to share my story so others going through what I went through can see that things will get better. I hope to continue to advocate for student-athletes facing mental health challenges."

### **Jamel Pink**

Jamel Pink's journey from Reading, Pennsylvania to Reedley College in Fresno County is a testament to his resilience to overcome tragedy, injury, and debilitating mental health challenges.

When Jamel's older brother, Jamain, achieved success playing college football for Lincoln University near Oxford, Pennsylvania, it inspired him to also pursue education and football. However, in August 2020, tragedy struck when both were shot. While Jamel recovered from his wounds, Jamain did not.

Jamel resolved to honor his brother and play college football. At the suggestion of a friend, Jamel reached out to a coach at Reedley College to request a tryout. A week before the spring 2021 semester began, he was accepted.

His freshman season in fall 2021 was cut short due to a torn anterior cruciate ligament suffered in practice midway through the season. But in just four games, he excelled, recording six tackles and three sacks. He also performed academically, earning a spot on the dean's list. Following surgery, Jamel returned home for two semesters to rehabilitate his knee while taking online classes. During this time, Jamel experienced headaches, insomnia, and lack of an appetite, and he spent most of his free time secluded.

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Despite these challenges, Jamel returned to Reedley laser-focused on playing football and earning his degree. However, when his athletic trainer, Stacey Mendoza, identified Jamel's symptoms of depression, she encouraged him to seek professional help.

For the last several months, Jamel has followed a treatment plan of medication and therapy to address his depression. While he admits he is still working through his challenges, he is feeling much more like himself.

This season, the 6-foot-4, 270 pound defensive end has appeared in seven games for the Tigers, recording seven tackles, including 1.5 sacks and 2 tackles for a loss. He will graduate in December and hopes to transfer to a four-year institution and continue playing football.

"Throughout this journey, I have become very aware of how important your mental health is, and it shouldn't be taken lightly. That's why I advocate for seeking professional help," explained Jamel. "I aspire to be a role model for those dealing with mental health issues. My story is proof that resilience can triumph over despair."

#### **About the CalHOPE Courage Award**

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. This year's honorees include **Jennika Davis** (soccer, UC Irvine); **Elizabeth Fox** (water polo, Delta College); **Jannah Loggins** (soccer, San Jose State); and **Nik Trapani** (basketball, San Jose State).

"CalHOPE is honored to continue recognizing student-athletes statewide who have overcome their challenges to perform their best as both scholars and athletes," said **Autumn Boylan, Deputy Director of the Office of Strategic Partnerships for the California Department of Health Care Services (DHCS)**, which oversees CalHOPE. "CalHOPE's purpose is to build community resilience 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, all will be inspired."

At the end of the school year, two of the student-athletes will be selected as the CalHOPE Courage Award winners. The previous winners were: **2023 - Anysa and Amaya Gray** (soccer, U.C. Berkeley) and **Nigel Wilson** (basketball, Pasadena City College); and **2022 - Julia Schwayder** (lacrosse, Occidental College) and **Breyon Jackson** (basketball, San Francisco State).

Stories about all CalHOPE Courage Award honorees are available at [CalHOPECourageAward.org](https://CalHOPECourageAward.org) and via social media 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 March 2024 at

[CalHOPECourageAward.org](http://CalHOPECourageAward.org). The honorees will be selected by a panel of writers, editors, The Associated Press, and the College Sports Communicators.

**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 navigate during times of crisis. 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), accessing the [live chat](#) feature, or visiting [www.calhope.org](http://www.calhope.org).

**College Sports Communicators:** The 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](http://collegesportscommunicators.com).

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