



Myron “MJ” Amey of San Jose State, Marne Sullivan of the University of Southern California (USC), and Darren Wong of the University of California, Berkeley Recognized with CalHOPE Courage Award

SACRAMENTO – APRIL 15, 2024 — Three California college student-athletes, **Myron “MJ” Amey**, a junior guard for the **San Jose State University** basketball team, **Marne Sullivan**, a graduate student on the **USC** cross country squad, and **Darren Wong**, a graduate student for **University of California, Berkeley** gymnastics, have been selected as the March 2024 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 the recognition, \$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 three student-athletes:

Myron “MJ” Amey – Basketball, San Jose State

Myron "MJ" Amey's journey is a story of athletic triumph and a testament to resilience in the face of profound mental health challenges. Despite averaging 27 points per game as a senior at Vacaville High School, MJ did not receive a Division I scholarship offer. At the same time, he experienced the passing of his beloved uncle Bobby, leaving MJ stricken with grief and unresolved emotions as COVID-19 restrictions prevented a proper funeral.

To continue his basketball dream, MJ traveled 2,600 miles to Scotland Preparatory School in Pennsylvania. He led the school’s league in scoring but was still not rewarded with a Division I scholarship offer. Committed to making it happen, he worked as a food delivery driver to earn money to travel to a college showcase in Phoenix. His impressive performance earned him a scholarship offer from San Jose State.

Following a freshman campaign during which he averaged 9.5 points per game, he underwent foot surgery. It was then the loss of basketball and the emotions from the death of his uncle spiraled, and MJ found himself in a dark place. He began self-harm and attempted to take his own life. Despite being treated and released from a behavioral health center, he would continue to harm himself before finally agreeing to see a therapist. With her guidance, he began journaling and finding comfort and acceptance.

When his 2022-23 season was cut short after just nine games due to an ankle injury, he worried he would once again be unable to accept life without basketball. Instead, he leaned into his love of music and expressed his feelings in a rap song. Then he attended a Black Student-Athlete Summit and built connections with people outside of basketball. These experiences inspired him to create a TikTok account ([@win a day wit MJ](https://www.tiktok.com/@win_a_day_wit_MJ)) to share his story and discuss mental wellness.

MJ entered the 2023-24 season both physically and mentally fit, which showed on the court. He played in all 32 games and led the Spartans in scoring at 15.7 points per game, including a season high of 30 versus Boise State in January 2024.

“I felt like everything I had was because of basketball, so when I was injured, I didn’t know what to do and felt alone,” said MJ. “I would feel so bad if somebody I love had to go through what I went through. I hope that by speaking out about mental health, I can help others to seek help.”

Marne Sullivan, - Track & Field, USC

From early childhood growing up in Wilmette, Illinois, Marne Sullivan faced challenges that set her apart from her peers. Born deaf, she received a cochlear implant at age 3 and then spent hours in speech therapy, at audiologist appointments, and with multiple hearing specialists. She initially attended an all-deaf school before transitioning to a public school with an early intervention program that provided a critical foundation of listening and spoken language skills, including speech and language development, listening, and developmental play skills.

Navigating through elementary, middle, and high school, Marne tried to blend in, never allowing her cochlear implant to define her. On the track, she was a four-time All-State runner, earning seven medals at the Illinois State Meet.

Her transition to Boston College brought on new challenges as the unfamiliar environment made it difficult for her to maintain a sense of normalcy. Recognizing a lack of awareness and understanding regarding accessibility, she became a leader and advocate for change. Through storytelling, social media, marketing, and public relations, she has raised awareness and fostered open conversations about disabilities. She founded and led the non-visible/visible disability subcommittee to destigmatize student-athletes with disabilities within Eagles for Equality, a diversity, equity, and inclusion student-athlete committee. At USC, she continues her advocacy efforts, partnering with brands for Deaf Awareness Month and beyond.

At Boston College, she earned All-Atlantic Coast Conference academic honors three times while competing in the 800m/1500m distance medley relay (DMR) and 4x400m relay. At USC, she competes in the 800m and 1500m, with her best performance as a Trojan coming when she broke the indoor 800m school record and indoor DMR school record.

“Growing up, I never saw any deaf athletes or runners and realized we need more deaf role models and deaf sportspeople,” said Marne. “I face many challenges on and off the track, and being as honest and open as I can, I hope to motivate others to change negatives to positives. Growing up, I was taught to self-advocate, especially in the classroom, but it’s important to self-advocate for our mental health, too. Once we realize we can adapt to adversity, there’s no barrier that can stand in our way.”

Darren Wong, Gymnastics, University of California, Berkeley

Darren Wong's journey as a gymnast at the University of California, Berkeley is a testament to resilience in the face of relentless physical and mental adversity. Bursting onto the collegiate scene in 2019 with remarkable prowess, the native of Vancouver, British Columbia set records in his freshman and abbreviated sophomore years before the COVID-19 pandemic halted his momentum. Little did he know that this would be just the beginning of a series of personal setbacks.

Over the next three years, he suffered a string of debilitating injuries, each more devastating than the last. First, his left Achilles tendon cost him most of his junior campaign, then his left anterior cruciate ligament, followed by his right Achilles tendon, keeping him sidelined for his entire senior and graduate seasons.

With each injury, he faced the physical pain of rehabilitation and the crushing blow to his psyche. Initially, he approached the challenges with a resilient mindset, attributing the misfortunes to sheer bad luck and redoubling his efforts in recovery. However, the third injury proved to be the tipping point.

The toll on his mental health was profound. Struggling to understand the inexplicable recurrence of injuries despite his meticulous rehabilitation efforts, he found himself engulfed in doubt and fear. The once-promising athlete plunged into uncertainty, questioning his abilities and was haunted by self-doubt.

Amid the turmoil, he refused to succumb to despair. Opting to return for his sixth year of eligibility this season while pursuing a graduate certificate, he emerged as a pillar of strength for his team. Despite his physical limitations, he assumed the mantle of leadership, embodying resilience and fortitude in the face of adversity.

"Getting injured allowed me to experience significant personal growth," he admitted. "Those years were the most difficult of my life. I had to become someone else as a leader, thrust into a team captain role while being unable to lead by example in the gym."

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](#), the Department of Health Care Services' (DHCS) crisis counseling and support resource; and the Governor's Council on Physical Fitness and Mental Well-Being. This year's other honorees are: **Jennika Davis** (soccer, UC Irvine); **Jannah Loggins** (soccer, San Jose State); **Nik Trapani** (baseball, San Jose State); **Elizabeth Fox** (water polo, Delta College); **Megan Janikowski** (soccer, Cal Poly Humboldt); **Jamel Pink** (football, Reedley College); **Brett Johnson** (football, University of California, Berkeley); **Gabbie Silva** (volleyball, California State University, Dominguez Hills); **Cameron Nelsen** (volleyball, Antelope Valley College); and **Lesown Hallums, Jr.** (basketball, University of the Pacific); **Cole Kitchen** (baseball, Santa Clara); and **Julia Betti** (soccer, Sonoma 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 at 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 and via social media at [@CalHOPE_Courage](#).

Sports information directors at all colleges and universities in California are encouraged to nominate deserving intercollegiate student-athletes at CalHOPECourageAward.org. The honorees are 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.

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.

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