

DeWitt Awards honor Chatham's top 8th-grade student-athletes for 2022

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Five winners have been selected for the fourth annual DeWitt Awards for Chatham County's top eighth-grade public and private school student-athletes.

Winners are Talia Johnson of Calvary Day (girls private school), Amani Washington of Georgetown K-8 (girls public), Sebastian Garcia of STEM Academy at Bartlett (boys public), Stephen Cannon of Savannah Country Day and Asher Herrin of Hancock Day (boys private).

David DeWitt came up with the idea for the awards five years ago when he was coaching boys basketball. He knew his own players best and loved his teams, but he also respected the opposing teams' efforts. He felt there was a void in recognizing the accomplishments of this pre-high school class of student-athletes.

The awards are presented by the Exchange Club of Savannah and sponsored by Friday Health Plans.

Eighth-graders are nominated by their coaches, principals and athletic directors based on academic and athletic achievements as well as exemplary character shown through sportsmanship and community service. For more on the winners and nominees, go to savathleteofyear.com.

Each winner at a glance

Stephen Cannon, Savannah Country Day Academics: 88.4 grade-point average.

Community involvement: Volunteer coach at Jenkins Athletic Club; volunteers at Second Harvest Food Bank.

Athletics: Quarterback for back-to-back championship football teams, threw 14 touchdown passes; captain of championship basketball team and received the "Hornet Award"; won the 800-meter run (school-record 2:23.09), third in the 400 (57.16) and second in the long jump (17 feet, 11 inches).

Cannon: "I started this school year, my last middle school year, determined to be the best player and teammate that I could be. I am thankful that pursuing my goals brought accolades such as SPAL championships, broken records and ultimately winning this award.

"It is quite an honor to win the DeWitt Award. Quarterbacks Luke Kromenhoek and Jake Merklinger — two athletes that I admire — have won this award (in 2020). This makes me excited to be included in the same company as them — athletes that are good students, good citizens and good teammates. I have loved every minute of middle school sports and have been very lucky to be surrounded by excellent teammates and great coaches that pushed me to do my best. Through middle school sports, I have made friends for life and learned a lot about myself."

Demetrius Smith, school athletic director: “Stephen is a humble servantleader with a relentless work ethic.”

Asher Herrin, Hancock Day Academics: 4.0 GPA Community involvement: Volunteers with PACK helping with childhood hunger, with kids camp at his church and TopSoccer giving lessons to kids in need.

Athletics: Played wingback and cornerback in football and scored eight touchdowns; averaged 14 points, four assists, eight rebounds and two steals in basketball; shot 39 in nine-hole golf match play as second seed in SPAL championships; plays soccer for MLS Next for Tormenta and led Hancock to an 8-0 regular season and runner-up tournament finish.

Herrin: “I was familiar with the award after my older brother was nominated a couple of years ago. I just wanted to focus on all of the sports I played this year and to be the best for myself and my team.

“Knowing now that it is not just an award given for athletics but also for school grades and community service, it just means so much more. Hancock is a really small school, and knowing that my teammates and I were really competitive even against the larger schools makes me proud.”

Jason Helton, school athletic director: “Asher is unselfish to a fault. Asher elevates the play and spirits of not only his teammates but his coaches as well.”

Sebastian Garcia, Stem Academy at Bartlett Academics: 83 average while taking four high school classes.

Community involvement: Volunteers with his church helping children.

Athletics: Led his cross country team to second place in the city championship; led basketball team in steals and rebounds and was the best defender; led team to a city soccer championship and was named MVP.

Garcia: “Winning this award is an honor for me. It speaks to my coaches and their ability to train me and support me as well as they can. It also speaks to the players in my teams in allowing me to perform at my best.”

Stephen Routh, school athletic director: “Sebastian is a perfect example of a leader through his actions and deeds.”

Amani Washington, Georgetown K-8 Academics: 93 GPA, honor roll student while taking ninth-grade honors English and algebra.

Community involvement: Volunteered with “Read Across America” and “Jump Rope For Heart,” and serves others in her church.

Athletics: Starter and captain for her volleyball, basketball and soccer teams; selected to the SCCPSS all-star basketball team; allowed only five goals in soccer season.

Washington: “Before being nominated, I had no idea this was an award. My goal was to play as many sports as I could to become a more athletic person but I never knew it would lead me here. It’s an amazing award and I’m honored to have won it.

“On Feb. 14, 2020, I suffered a femur fracture and a growth plate shift. I had to undergo two different surgeries to get where I am today. It wasn’t an easy journey but I managed to pull through. Team sports have always been important to me. My leadership and the help of my teammates has led us to many successful wins. After one sport ended, I would push myself to do another. Not just because I’m competitive, but because I want to thrive and be a better person for myself.”

Joaquin Esquivel, school athletic director: “Amani is a leader on and off the field. She is respectful, responsible and caring of her teammates. Amani is a role model to our sixth- and seventh-grade athletes.”

Talia Johnson, Calvary Day Academics: B average. Community involvement: Works with her club volleyball team doing clinics with younger kids; volunteers in her neighborhood serving older residents.

Athletics: Volleyball team leader in kills; as an eighth-grader was the leading rebounder on her junior varsity basketball team (12-0); member of the winning 4x400 relay team at the track finals; also placed second as a member of the 4x100 relay and in the long jump.

Johnson: “I’ve just always wanted to do my best and am humbled and moved just to be recognized.

“I have a speech impediment and was bullied a lot when I was younger. Winning the DeWitt Award proves that actions speak louder than words. I feel that winning this is a reflection of the hard work of my coaches and mentors who have invested in me.”

Ken Shaw, school athletic director: “She is the type of kid who lights up the room with her smile and every response is ‘yes, sir’ or ‘no, sir.’ Will do anything a coach asks and is someone who leads, albeit quietly. Good student who is always doing what she should and is on the right track. Very conscientious. Wants to succeed.”

Other 2022 nominees

Blessed Sacrament — Anna-Sophia Upchurch, Wyatt Estabrook Calvary — Mason Gaylord Coastal Middle — Robert Dennison Hancock Day — Mills Smith, Evangeline Rominger, Wyatt Nolen Hesse K-18 — Caroline Ray Singleton St. Andrew’s School — Maren Wrieden, Isaac Ross, Blake Henry Savannah Country Day — Stone Wells, Josh Washington, Emerson Bromley, Sarah Catherine Gilpin Savannah Christian — Sadler Wilson, Katie Heavener, Blaise Thomas, Daimir Hicks, Reid Penrose Stem Academy at Bartlett — Sarah Harper Bennett West Chatham Middle — Sarah-Kate Branan, Ronald Ervin