

DeWitt Award honors Savannah's top eighth-grade student-athletes



By Savannah Morning News

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The Exchange Club of Savannah has announced the winners of the second annual DeWitt Award for the top male and female eighth-grade student-athletes from public and private schools in Savannah.

Criteria for the honor includes academic achievement (a minimum of a B average), athletic performance (played two or more team sports) and exemplary character (sportsmanship and community service).

The 2020 honorees from Chatham County public schools are Ernajah Mallard and Makai Hampton, and from Savannah Parochial Athletic League schools are Mary Sophia Fischer and, in a tie, Luke Kromenhoek and Jake Merklinger.

Hubert Middle School's Mallard was the only female football player in the district. She played both fullback and defensive end. Mallard averaged 17.8 points per game for her girls basketball team, which advanced to the championship game. She shined in volleyball and soccer as well. Her athletic director described her as funny, witty and a high-energy teammate.

She was the leader of the all-female academy that reached out to the elderly in the neighborhood. Mallard also carried an impressive 3.3 grade-point average.

Blessed Sacrament's Fischer earned straight A's in the classroom and earned high marks on the court. She led her volleyball and basketball teams to championships this year. Her team was unable to defend their 4x100 relay team title this spring because sports were halted due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Fischer serves at her church, has been described as a coach's dream and is a great example to the younger students.

Southwest Middle School won the district championship in basketball, and Hampton was the tournament most valuable player. On the football field, Hampton played defensive end and also shined at safety and tight end on a team that reached the semifinals.

His principal describes him as a good all-around kid and a playful comedian who really matured academically this year.

There are co-honorees from the private school division this year in former teammates Kromenhoek from Saint James and Merklinger from Calvary Day. The two played together on the Dawgs football and baseball teams. Both are honor roll students. Both were team captains in football and basketball. Both shined at quarterback.

Merklinger led his team to a championship in football this school year, titles in basketball in sixth and seventh grades and runner-up in eighth grade. He was outstanding in track as well, winning Calvary's track athlete of the year in sixth grade and capturing the 800-meter and 4x100 titles as a seventh-grader. Merklinger also was part of Calvary's championship baseball team as a sixth-grader. He is described a natural leader with a fierce desire to carry his team to victory.

Kromenhoek was all over the field in football, leading his Saint James team as a linebacker in tackles, and at QB in carries and points scored. In basketball, he was sidelined by an injured ankle, but the team captain still managed 192 points in a partial season. Luke played pitcher and outfield in baseball.

He volunteered with the Carmelite nuns and is always looking for opportunities to teach and encourage the younger boys that look up to him. Kromenhoek's coaches echoed the sentiment that he is a selfless servant leader.

Others nominated:

Blessed Sacrament — Alexis Ghaleb, Houston Jackson

Coastal — Jordan Cave

DeRenne — Sage Wilson, RaKari Harrison

Garrison — Ava Rolen

Georgetown — Erin Green, Destiny Mobley, Ava Foster, Andy Doan

Godley Station — Rian Bailey

Hancock Day — Anna Bridges Smith, Athon Herrin

Hesse — Natalie Marie Ingram, Rachab Wilson

Hubert — Jermaine Edwards

Isle of Hope — Tashiya David, Larry Johnson

Memorial Day — McKenzie King, Joe Barnes

Mercer — Sidney Flagg

Myers — Jaden Pugh

Oglethorpe — Terrence Williams

Rice Creek — Dilynn Weaver

Saint James — Mary Grace Meyers, Bryce Baker

Savannah Christian — Blake Hall

STEM — McKenzie Clayton, Kadin Dibkey

West Chatham — Jada Metze, Cleveland Rougier