

**NATIONAL FEDERATION OF STATE
HIGH SCHOOL ASSOCIATIONS**



NEWS RELEASE

**California Water Polo Player Selected as National Recipient of
NFHS National High School Spirit of Sport Award**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: John Gillis

INDIANAPOLIS, IN (March 11, 2014) — **Zach Pickett**, a water polo player at Shingle Springs (California) Ponderosa High School, has been selected the 2014 national recipient of the “National High School Spirit of Sport Award” by the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS).

The “National High School Spirit of Sport Award” was created by the NFHS to recognize those individuals who exemplify the ideals of the spirit of sport that represent the core mission of education-based athletics.

Since age five, Pickett has swum competitively, including three years as a talented player on the Ponderosa High School varsity water polo team. At an athletic 6-foot-1 with great upper-body strength, his athletic future appeared very bright.

That all changed forever on the hot summer afternoon of August 5, 2012.

With the temperature a sultry 100 degrees, Pickett and his longtime friends Hayden Cooksy and Frankie Kennedy were on break from their lifeguarding duties at Cameron Lake Park and dove into the water to cool off.

While Cooksy and Kennedy essentially belly-flopped, Pickett instead lowered his head into a diving motion and struck a sandbar submerged in the murky shallow water. That action crushed his seventh vertebra, compressing it into his spinal cord. As a result, Pickett was instantly paralyzed from the chest down.

Cooksy and Kennedy immediately stabilized Pickett in what was regarded as a life-saving measure and called his mother, Judy. She then made the 35-minute drive in the ambulance with her son

to the UC-Davis Medical Center in Sacramento. There, Pickett was hooked up to a dozen IVs, and the medicine made him sick. The doctors injected steroids into his neck and spinal cord.

During the next three months, Pickett and his parents spent all of their time among the medical center, the Shriners Hospital and the Sacramento Ronald McDonald House. He then spent several months in the hospital doing rehabilitation work, enduring countless hours of physical therapy.

Confined to a wheelchair, Pickett returned to school during the middle of his junior year. At the time, many people were surprised that he attempted to swim – but not those who knew him well.

With swimming already part of his physical therapy, Pickett competed in two meets for the Bruins during the spring. Participating in the 50-yard backstroke, Pickett was not so concerned about his times, but rather simply wanted to finish, to be part of the team again, and for people to accept him as an athlete.

That spring, Pickett also participated in the U.S. Paralympics Spring Swimming Nationals at the University of Minnesota. There, he placed first and second in the 50-yard backstroke and 50-yard breaststroke, respectively. During that experience, Pickett met other individuals who had experienced similar injuries. That helped inspire him to continue to pursue his water polo career.

Once a star player and one of the fastest swimmers in the area with the potential to follow in the footsteps of older brother Ryan, a scholarship swimmer at the University of Hawaii, Pickett's role has now dramatically changed.

During this past season, Pickett played in more than half of the matches, many of which were one-sided contests with the result already secured. Making the transition from a star player to a reserve has been difficult at times for Pickett, both from physical and psychological perspectives. However, he has positively embraced it, and maintains a very positive attitude.

One of the key abilities to success in the sport of water polo is not simply treading water, but gaining height above it to enable the athlete to shoot through a vigorous leg motion called "egg-beating." That ability was forever taken away from Pickett during the accident. In a sport that is largely powered by legs, Pickett now compensates for that with his arms. His upper body strength has been described by teammates as "mind-blowing."

During actual competitions, Pickett will usually arrive at the pool well ahead of the match and lower himself into the pool. The two teams will then play the match, with his physical impairment totally unbeknownst to the opposing team.

It's not until after the match when the two teams line up to conduct the traditional sportsmanlike post-match hand-shaking routine that the opponents become aware of Pickett's condition. They often will give quizzical and befuddled looks, and will even offer apologies for not giving him "a little slack" during the match.

While Pickett sincerely appreciates their compassion, he has never been comfortable in the spotlight, feels that no apologies are necessary, and will often just wheel on by during the hand-shaking routine.

Pickett is equally determined in the classroom, as he raised his 3.95 grade-point average to a 4.17 last semester. He plans to continue to swim both at Ponderosa High School and with the Paralympics, and to attend college.

About the Award

In addition to the selection of Zach Pickett as the national award recipient the NFHS National High School Spirit of Sport Award Selection Committee chose eight individuals for section awards.

Following are the 2014 National High School Spirit of Sport section winners:

Section 1 – Isaac Lufkin, student-athlete, Providence (Rhode Island) Classical High School

Section 2 – Mackenzie Guilford, student-athlete, Defiance (Ohio) Ayersville High School

Section 3 – Scott Hamilton, football coach, Dallas (Georgia) Paulding County High School

Section 4 – Springfield (Illinois) Sacred Heart-Griffin High School

Section 5 – Nick Lawson, student-athlete, Plankinton (South Dakota) High School

Section 6 – Mitchell Marcus, student-athlete, El Paso (Texas) Coronado High School, and Jonathon Montanez, student-athlete, El Paso (Texas) Franklin High School

Section 7 – Zach Pickett, student-athlete, Shingle Springs (California) Ponderosa High School

Section 8 – Dillon Gilpin, student-athlete, Evanston (Wyoming) High School

Nominations for this award were generated through NFHS member state associations and reviewed by the NFHS National High School Spirit of Sport Award Selection Committee composed of state association staff members. While the national winner will be recognized June 29 at the NFHS Summer Meeting in Boston, Massachusetts, the section winners will be recognized within their respective states and will receive awards before the end of the current school year.

###

About the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS)

The NFHS, based in Indianapolis, Indiana, is the national leadership organization for high school sports and fine arts activities. Since 1920, the NFHS has led the development of education-based interscholastic sports and fine arts activities that help students succeed in their lives. The NFHS sets direction for the future by building awareness and support, improving the participation experience, establishing consistent standards and rules for competition, and helping those who oversee high school sports and activities. The NFHS writes playing rules for 16 sports for boys and girls at the high school level. Through its 50 member state associations and the District of Columbia, the NFHS reaches more than 19,000 high schools and 11 million participants in high school activity programs, including more than 7.7 million in high school sports. As the recognized national authority on interscholastic activity programs, the NFHS conducts national meetings; sanctions interstate events; produces publications for high school coaches, officials and athletic directors; sponsors professional organizations for high school coaches, officials, spirit coaches, speech and debate coaches and music adjudicators; serves as the national source for interscholastic coach training; and serves as a national information resource of interscholastic athletics and activities. For more information, visit the NFHS Web site at www.nfhs.org.

MEDIA CONTACT: John Gillis, 317-972-6900
National Federation of State High School Associations
PO Box 690, Indianapolis, Indiana 46206
jgillis@nfhs.org