

2009 NMAA Sportsmanship Award Winners



FARMERS

DEL NORTE VOLLEYBALL TEAM (Class 4A) -- Sportsmanship can be defined by many acts, one of which went above and beyond the call of duty last fall. When members of the Del Norte Knights learned that Kim Bell, head coach of district rival Moriarty, was diagnosed with breast cancer, they took it upon themselves to raise money to help offset the enormous medical costs incurred by Bell's surgery, chemotherapy and radiation treatments. The Knights held a Volley for the Cure Night, as did several other teams around the state. The girls presented Bell with dozens of pink flowers and a personal note of well wishes. Inside was a check for \$3,700. Another match raised that total to more than \$10,000. "Needless to say, I was blown away by their generosity and kindness," Bell wrote in her nomination letter. "There was not a dry eye in the house." Beyond that, the Knights attended the Class 4A state tournament championship match in support of Moriarty. As they watched from the stands after their own elimination two days before in the state quarterfinals, the players adorned the green and white colors of their arch rivals - a gesture that showed the true meaning of what it's like to put aside petty differences for a higher cause.

WENDELL BARNETT, Espanola Valley (Class 4A) -- To say Wendell is one of the state's great tennis ambassadors would be an understatement. The man loves the game, but he loves promoting it within the community even more. For more than two decades he has been the head coach in Espanola, a town notorious for its un-tennis-like weather in the spring. No matter. Whether there's six inches of snow on the ground or it's 100 degrees under a blazing sun, Wendell is there for anyone wanting to learn the game and adhere to its rules. Above all else he stresses honesty, integrity and sportsmanship. All three issues are central to tennis etiquette, and all three are the driving force behind Wendell's remarkable devotion to the game. Now 82 years young, he is as much a fixture in northern New Mexico tennis circles as anyone. And he loves to pass along his knowledge of the rules and finer points of the sport to the next generation. His players are unflinchingly loyal and his teams know he is willing to go the extra mile to get the job done. While the Sundevils have never been known as a tennis superpower, their coach has always been regarded as the perfect man for the job.

MIKEY LONG, Manzano (Class 5A) -- A genuine love for life is one of the best ways to describe this Monarchs senior. Mikey is an accomplished athlete, having earned multiple awards as a football player for one of the best teams in the state. He's also a noted ski instructor who hits the slopes as often as he can. When he's not carving the slopes by himself, he's teaching what he knows to those hoping to try. In the classroom he relies on his self-starter mentality to get the most of his potential. His focus, says Monarchs football coach Aaron Ocampo, is what elevates him above so many of his

peers. "Mikey is able to zero in on a goal and put all of his effort toward it, without letting outside distractions interfere," the coach said. As an offensive lineman, that focus paid dividends. He was named offensive team captain and was in charge of educating his teammates about the blocking schemes in every formation. It would be easy for him to concentrate solely on one of his own goals, but that's not Mikey. He wants to be part of something bigger than just himself. Success is gained through teamwork and there's not many people who exemplify that ideal better than this Manzano senior.

MELISSA SUSAN ROHR, Cibola (Class 5A) -- Prospective job seekers are asked to keep their resumes to one page, maybe two. Melissa will have a tough time sticking to the space restrictions. Aside from the usual gamut of high school sports -- basketball, volleyball, track and field -- she bounces around from student government to community service projects, volunteer coaching and officiating to serving as a youth minister in her church. She even spends more than a month of each summer volunteering at a youth camp in Arizona. Oh, and she maintains a grade point average that is near the top of her enormous senior class. Through it all she remains upbeat, positive and courteous. And it goes without saying that she's one of the more competitive people around. While most athletes are obsessed with lighting up the scoreboard with bloated offensive stats, Melissa gets pleasure in stopping opponents with her relentless defense. In basketball she's regarded as the so-called "shut-down" defender most opponents detest. In truth, it's nearly impossible not to like this Cougars senior. Her personality lends itself well to having a good time on and off the court. She prides herself on treating others fairly. Her team comes first, but never does she compromise her sportsmanship for reaching personal goals.

LAUREN HOWARTH, Albuquerque High (Class 5A) -- If there were a definition befitting a model student, it might have a little something to do with Lauren. Yes, she's a fixture in the numerous advanced placement classes at AHS. Sure, she's among the top of her class in grade point average. Unlike nearly everyone else, however, she's got a calm, care-free air about her that sets her apart. She prides herself on being prepared and never gets caught up in the rat race for the best possible grade. Get her out of the classroom and you'll get a completely different story. A talented swimmer for the Bulldogs, she's a virtual beast in the water. The team captain, she is regarded as one of the fastest female sprinters to come along in years. She's not too shabby at soccer, either. She has earned all-district honors and is an easy selection as a team captain. More than that is her incredible devotion to family. Lauren's brother is a special needs student. It is with him that she flashes the most remarkable aspects of her personality -- compassion, diligence and loyalty. Where she goes, he goes. And she goes everywhere, whether it's volunteering to help the homeless, spending time as a youth soccer coach or working in student activities, she's everywhere.

JORDAN RUSSELL, Moriarty (Class 4A) -- There are few voices among New Mexico's high school athletics ranks that carry the weight and significance of Joe Butler. When he speaks, people tend to listen. It's only logical that when the Moriarty athletic director nominated Jordan for the annual sportsmanship scholarship award, folks paid attention. And for obvious reasons. Jordan is a 4.0 student, is regarded as trustworthy

with teachers and peers, goes above and beyond to promote fair play, and flashes a maturity level that is well beyond her years. She has fought through stressful health issues in her private and athletic lives, turning those moments into sources of motivation for both herself and those around her. She helped create pink jerseys for the Moriarty volleyball team to wear in honor of breast cancer awareness. Jordan played for four years with the school's volleyball team, capping her career by being named as a setter to the North-South All-Star team. She was a central figure in the Pintos' run to consecutive Class 4A state championships the last two years. She is also a two-year veteran of the school's basketball team that enters this year's postseason as the No. 3 seed in 4A. Her accomplishments on the athletic front are unquestioned, but one trait she learned when she was a freshman helped make her the team-first player she is today. Promoted to the varsity, she was treated unfairly by a senior on the team. Browbeaten and unrespected, she told her coach, Kim Bell, she vowed never to treat others in that fashion. She stayed on the team and has since become an inspirational leader to peers of all ages. It is therefore an honor to reward this fine young student-athlete with one of the two \$2,500 sportsmanship scholarships.

YOSHIO NAJERA, Bernalillo (Class 4A) -- As is the case with most of this year's scholarship winners, academics, community service and personal conduct tell only half the story about this particular recipient. A senior at Bernalillo who has played baseball and basketball since he was smaller than the equipment bag he regularly totes around, Yoshio was honored by a host of underclassmen when a quartet of younger students decided to dress like him in a tribute to his leadership qualities. It seems students were asked to imitate the superheroes they most admired during Spirit Week earlier this school year. Four freshmen came dressed in white T-shirts with Yoshio's name and jersey number scribbled on the back -- and the trademark mustache Yoshio sports. "I tell this all the time, but if my daughter weren't dating someone already I'd want her to be with someone like Yoshio Najera," said his basketball coach, Terry Darnell. "He's just a good kid with a great head on his shoulders. I can't say anything bad about him." Yoshio carries a 4.2 grade point average, volunteers for various projects in the community, spearheads numerous endeavors at school and prides himself in both sportsmanship and team unity. Look around the Bernalillo area and you'll see the affects of this young man's work. Be it Little League, community cleanup projects or work within the local church, Yoshio's fingerprints are everywhere. And when he isn't performing at an all-district level in baseball and basketball, he's doing what he can to make those around him accomplish more than they dreamed. It is for these reasons this Bernalillo senior has been named one of two \$2,500 scholarship winners for the NMAA's annual Pursuing Victory With Honor Sportsmanship program. Congratulations to the Najera family for the achievements of a bright young man.

TRISTEN MOONE, Piedra Vista (Class 4A) -- Not everyone needs to be a superstar on the athletic front to be a superstar in life. Tristen is living proof of that. Although a talented distance runner on the Panthers' cross country team, she is the quintessential student-athlete in that she carries a dazzling 4.7 grade point average and is the ultimate teammate to those around her. Piedra Vista cross country coach Mark Turner, also Tristen's AP government teacher, said Tristen would routinely slow down in practice to

check on the younger runners. More than that, she would offer encouragement and remind them that the greater purpose for competing is to be part of a team. Of course, Tristen isn't too bad on the athletic front. In softball she is regarded as one of the top hitters and pitchers in the state. She played a key role in the Panthers' run to the Class 4A state title last spring. In her spare time she volunteers for the Four Corners Special Olympics Invitational and is a member of the National Honor Society. Among her greatest attributes is dissecting problematic situations and making the most informed decision possible -- a characteristic that will lend itself well when Tristen narrows her list of college suitors.

MEG KNORR, Artesia (Class 4A) -- Basketball player, drum major, exemplary student, Sunday school teacher. All those things tell part of the story about this Bulldogs senior. To unearth the rest, one must simply observe Meg in everyday situations. Among her strengths, according to her basketball coach, is her ability to communicate clearly while understanding others. It's her ability to project herself in a respectful manner that catches most people's attention. In short, she makes others feel better by doing the little things -- leading by example, making others feel part of the team and aiding her coaches and teachers by completing tasks to the best of her ability. Perhaps her adherence to a strict code of conduct can be traced to her mother's death when she was in grade school. Or maybe it's her own determination in making herself the best person she can be despite the numerous odds young people face these days. No matter. What Meg accomplishes in sports and in life -- she's a starter on the basketball team, is a straight-A student and an accomplished musician -- she touches countless others by simply being who she is. In other words, kind, sincere and driven. Teachers laud her tireless work ethic. The rest of us would be wise to do the same.

SUNNI RAE BAIRD, Bloomfield (Class 3A) -- A quick glance at Sunni's laundry list of high school achievements makes one wonder where she finds the time to do anything other than tend to her commitments in sports and academics. A four-time all-district winner in volleyball and three-time state pole vault champ in Class 3A, she also maintains a remarkable 4.8 grade point average while mastering numerous honors classes. If that's not enough, she volunteers at her local church and for the National High School Rodeo finals. Her senior project involved raising funds for five needy families during the Christmas season. Her coaches rave about her willingness to inspire others, but the most impressive thing about Sunni's recognition for this scholarship comes from the fact that most of the nomination letters came from her teachers at Bloomfield. Each talked briefly about her exploits on the athletic front, but all of them lauded her electric personality that has become a driving force for those around her. "Sunni Baird is a wonderful student here in Bloomfield, and will be missed when she leaves," one teacher wrote. "However, we are all eager to see her progress and grow, and therefore look forward to hearing about her college years."

MARCUS MARTINEZ, Lordsburg (Class 2A) -- Savoring victory is the easy part. Losing with dignity? That's a trait that comes naturally to a shining example of sportsmanship like Marcus. Coaches and teammates hail this Mavericks senior's maturity level in good times and bad. A multi-sport star in basketball, baseball and football, he

routinely rises to the occasion as both an athlete and an example of how to deal with adversity. His football coach, Louie Baisa, claims it's easy to root for a kid like Marcus because of his calming manner and team-first mentality. "His sense of reliability and loyalty have always been assets to the way he commands himself. His teammates can trust him to perform at a high level and lead by example," Baisa said. Part of that example meant becoming more of a vocal leader. Until his senior year he was regarded as the strong, quiet type. Now in his final year he has broken out of his shell and used his gifts to inspire others by sharing his enthusiasm with them. That approach has spilled into the classroom where he encourages others to attack academic challenges the same way a blocker would engage a hulking linebacker on the football field.

BRANDON GURULE, Penasco (Class 2A) -- Ten varsity letters, numerous awards and plenty of highlights are what Brandon's athletic career as a Penasco Panther have been all about. Well, sort of. While his first love is basketball, this senior displayed true school spirit when he dropped everything to join the Panthers soccer team last fall. Even though he hadn't played in years, he led the team in scoring and was voted to the all-district squad. He has also led the hoops program to the Class 2A semifinals each of the last two years. Aside from that, teachers and coaches hail Brandon's approach to academics and sports, saying he sets himself apart with his never-quit attitude. Some say it's the product of a supportive family anchored by a respected math teacher for a father. Others say it's merely Brandon's personality. He carries a 3.9 grade point average and routinely spends several hours a week outside of school challenging himself to get the most he can out of his academic pursuits. Those who know him best testify that this young man is on the right path. He plans to be an engineer after college because, as he says, this country is in dire need of the best and brightest minds to step forth and make a difference. Consider him to be in that group.

AMANDA PADILLA, Mora (Class 2A) -- Rangers basketball coach Mark Cassidy knows good people when he sees them. When he looks at Amanda, he sees a shining example of what high school students can become if they realize their true potential. A senior at Mora, Amanda is well on her way to doing just that. She has run the gamut of prep sports, becoming a star in volleyball, basketball and track. It's what she does out of uniform that impresses observers the most, however. She spent her own money to buy the team chaperone a blanket for road trips. She routinely brings food for her teammates and coaches. During the volleyball season two of her teammates were caught at an off-campus Halloween party and faced disciplinary action. Their first letter of apology went not to the coach or the school, but to Amanda. "Their high esteem for Amanda and how she would react had more of an impact on them than even getting kicked off the team," one Mora teacher wrote in her nomination letter. Amanda's 4.0 grade point average has earned her co-valedictorian honors. She plans to pursue an advance degree in Sports Management and, in time, give a little back as a guidance counselor.

DAWNA SUE WALTER, Animas (Class A) -- Staying involved has been a staple of Dawna's life for as long as she can remember. Be it athletics or 4-H, student government or the local Future Farmers chapter, there's not much this Panthers senior hasn't tried. Athletically there's not much debate over Dawna's ability. She is a four-year starter in

both volleyball and basketball and will be a five-year member of the school's track and field team by the time she graduates this spring. She helped the school win the 2007 volleyball championship and last year's basketball state title. Along the way she has learned the delicate balance of academics and dedication to other pursuits. She has maintained a 3.96 grade point average (tops in her senior class) and has won multiple awards in sports and community programs. If that's not enough, she sings at her local church, volunteers with elementary students and has traveled to Washington, D.C., as part of the Close-Up Conference to better understand the inner workings of government. No matter what the future holds for this standout student-athlete, observers agree that she's off to a quality start thanks to the devotion she displays in everything she does.