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Women's Sports Foundation Honors Sports' Greatest Female Athletes

Megan Youngblood

Underneath the Waldorf=Astoria's chandeliered ceiling, hundreds of guests and more than 80 outstanding female athletes filled the Grand Ballroom. Monday night, the Women's Sports Foundation hosted the most decorated and celebrated female athletes as well as celebrities from film and television at the 26th Annual Salute to Women in Sports Awards Dinner and Auction. In an annual event that raises over \$1 million each year, this night was no exception. Supporters, activists and participants of women's sports contributed \$1.5 million to the Foundation's grassroots programming for girls and women in sports.



Female athletes represented 43 different sports ranging from archery and basketball to judo and wrestling – an overwhelmingly powerful grouping of women showcasing the dynamics of muscles, beauty and attitude. Among the familiar faces were top athletes such as Tamika Catchings (basketball), Carly Patterson (gymnastics) and Mia Hamm (soccer) and celebrity award presenters Soledad O'Brien, L.L. Cool J and Star Jones Reynolds. L.L. Cool J realized this strong presence as he faced the audience, saying, "There are amazing genetics in this room."

Olympic gold medalist Erin Popovich was named 2005 Individual Sportswoman of the Year and was recognized as a dominant competitor in Paralympic swimming. At the 2004 Paralympic Games in Athens, Greece, Popovich won a gold medal in every event that she competed in for Team USA and set five new American records.

Receiving the 2005 Team Sportswoman of the Year honor was Cat Osterman, the youngest member of the 2004 U.S. Olympic softball team. Currently a senior at University of Texas-Austin, Osterman led her team to a third-place finish last season at the Women's College World Series for the second time in three seasons. She has also been honored with two ESPY Awards.

Making her entrance onto the stage with some of sports' finest athletes, Angela Duckworth, 15, was presented with the SportsGirl of the Year award. As a nationally ranked swimmer, Duckworth's dedication to her sport, training four hours a day, is reflected in the time she commits to her community. She has volunteered for the Special Olympics; participated in the City of Hope's Walk, American Cancer Society's "Climb for the Cure" and the Paradise Heights Adult Care Home for elderly people; and acted as a team leader for the American Cancer Society's "Relay for Life," raising more than \$2,000 for cancer research and education.

Robin Roberts, one of the most distinguished and versatile figures in sports broadcasting, received the Billie Jean King Contribution Award, an award recognizing an individual who has made a significant contribution to the development of women's sports. Her commitment to increasing the opportunities for women and girls through sport and her pioneering journalism work has set a bold example for women everywhere.

Yuliana Perez was acknowledged for her heroism and perseverance of finding the opportunities to succeed. The Foundation awarded Perez with the Wilma Rudolph Courage Award, underscoring her desire to compete in the Olympic Games as an American citizen given her legal obstacles. Recounting her experience, Perez said, "Coming to the United States was like starting my life all over again."

Three women were inducted into the International Women's Hall of Fame. After 34 years of playing softball, Margie Wright has and continues to leave her legacy at the international, national and collegiate levels. Last night, the Foundation inducted her into the Hall of Fame, featuring her career as a champion player and coach. Olympic gold medalist, figure skater Katarina Witt was inducted in the contemporary category. Witt was the first woman in more than 50 years to win back-to-back Olympic championships in figure skating. Not only a powerhouse in the figure skating arena, Witt has also become a media fixture by lending her talents to television, motion pictures and sports commentary. So delighted in the programs and funding the Foundation has to offer for girls and women, Witt said, "The Women's Sports Foundation is something I'd like to adopt for Germany." In the pioneer category, Lusia Harris Stewart was the inductee, being honored for her advancements that have broken barriers in women's sports before the help of Title IX. She is also noted for being a member of the first women's Olympic basketball team in 1976 as well as the first woman to be drafted by the NBA.

Presenting a tribute to Mia Hamm, Julie Foudy, and the other '91ers, Donna de Varona said, "We've seen what sports can do for young girls. It's not just about winning medals; it's also about discovering yourself." Brandi Chastain, three-time soccer Olympic medalist answered, saying, "What is important about the Women's Sports Foundation is always giving the best of yourself to benefit others."

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