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A Pair of College Distance Runners—Samara Johnson of Eastern Connecticut State University and Ace McAlister of Trinity College—Named Hartford HealthCare Connecticut Courage Award Winners

Courageous student-athletes honored at ceremonies today with legendary marathoner Bill Rodgers

HARTFORD, Conn. – JAN. 28, 2020— The College Sports Information Directors of America (CoSIDA), in association with Hartford HealthCare, Connecticut’s most comprehensive healthcare network, have selected **Samara Johnson**, a senior distance runner for **Eastern Connecticut State University**, and **Weyassa “Ace” McAlister**, a senior distance runner for Trinity College, as recipients of the **Hartford HealthCare Connecticut Courage Award**. At a pair of ceremonies today, legendary marathoner and Connecticut native Bill Rodgers presented each of the honorees with a plaque and their schools with a \$1,000 donation to the general scholarship funds in their names to help future students achieve their dreams.

Each month, two inspiring student-athletes who have demonstrated courage in the face of adversity—such as overcoming injury, illness or other challenges—will be recognized as **Hartford HealthCare Connecticut Courage Award Winners**. A panel of writers, editors and sports information directors from CoSIDA, AP and *College Hoops Illustrated*, as well as the program’s Ambassador, Rebecca Lobo, will select the honorees.

In December, **Taylor Herd**, a senior guard on the **Quinnipiac University** women’s basketball team, and **Chris Liggio**, a senior running back for the **University of New Haven** football team, were the inaugural honorees.

Johnson, a senior who stands just 4-foot, 8-inches tall, is a distance runner for the ECSU women’s cross-country team in the fall and a middle-distance runner for the track and field team in the spring. The graduate of Lyman Memorial High School in Lebanon, CT, was born with multiple disabilities, including depth perception tracking disorders, which prevents her from driving, and

“tip-toe walking,” which required her to use leg braces as a youngster. In middle school, she experienced a digestive condition known as “leaky gut syndrome.” She also deals with non-classic congenital adrenal hyperplasia, which means she has trouble producing cortisol, an energy producer. Through all of this, Samara also has been dealing with those who have been less than understanding of the accommodations necessary for classroom success and social belonging. At ECSU, Samara has been a four-year member of the track and field program and three-year member of the cross-country program. In cross country, she was a member of the 2017 and 2019 Little East Conference championship teams. Off the track, she is a founding member of ECSU’s DiversAbility Club, a disability rights organization. After graduation, she plans to enroll in graduate school and hopes to work in a disability rights field.

McAlister grew up in a small village in Ethiopia. At age 4, his father died from water bacteria and since at that time, the family had no contact with his mother, Ace and his sister, Masho, were forced to live with their grandparents, who were already caring for nine other children. For the next three years, the siblings ran six miles barefoot to school every day until his grandparents sent them to an orphanage in the capital city of Addis Ababa. When Ace was 14, Steve and Rosemary McAlister from Great Barrington, Mass., who had previously adopted a boy from Africa, returned to adopt Ace and Masho. Upon arriving in America, Ace had to learn everything – from speaking English to running with shoes. After graduating from Monument Mountain High School, where lettered in both track and soccer, he spent a post-graduate year at Northfield-Mount Hermon, a prep school in Massachusetts.

Since arriving at Trinity in 2016, the 5-foot-9, 135-pound distance runner has been an intricate part of Trinity’s track & field and cross-country programs. A 2017-18 NESCAC indoor champion in the 5,000-meter run, he has graced the All-New England squad twice in indoor and once in outdoor track and has seen four top-ten placements between indoor and outdoor NCAA Regional Championships. In cross-country, he is a three-time USTFCCA All-Region recipient, placing inside the top 30 at the NESCAC Championships in three consecutive years. After running the fastest 8K time since 2002, he earned an at-large bid to the 2019 NCAA Division III National Cross-Country Championship.

“Hartford HealthCare is excited to recognize these two remarkable young student-athletes, who despite setbacks, have overcome challenges to continue to perform their best as both scholars and athletes,” said Jeffrey A. Flaks, president and chief executive officer of Hartford HealthCare. “Our organization’s purpose is to help people live their healthiest lives, and both Samara and Ace’s courageous stories of recovery and perseverance are an inspiration to all.”

Sports information directors at all colleges and universities in Connecticut can nominate deserving male and female intercollegiate student-athletes through March 30, 2020, at HartfordHealthCareCourageAward.com.

In May, one male and one female student-athlete will be chosen from the finalists as **Hartford HealthCare Connecticut Courage Award Winners**. Hartford HealthCare will donate \$15,000 to the general scholarship funds for the student-athletes selected as finalists, with \$2,500 being

awarded in the names of each of the two winners and \$10,000 on behalf of the other 10 finalists. The winners will be recognized at a special ceremony with basketball hall-of-famer Rebecca Lobo.

“We thank Hartford HealthCare for helping us create a platform to share the personal stories of courage for student-athletes at colleges and universities throughout Connecticut,” says Doug Vance, executive director of CoSIDA. “We hope the stories of the personal challenges that these remarkable young men and women have battled can inspire other young people to show courage in the face of adversity in their own lives.”

As the **Hartford HealthCare Courage Award Ambassador**, Ms. Lobo will attend award ceremonies with several of the honorees and help raise awareness for their inspiring stories of courage. Ms. Lobo retired in 2003, is a member of the National Women’s Basketball Hall of Fame, the Naismith National Basketball Hall of Fame and the CoSIDA Academic All-America Hall of Fame. She has served on the Board of Directors for Hartford Hospital, where she was born. She currently works as a television analyst, author and motivational speaker and lives in Connecticut with her husband and their four children.

About Hartford HealthCare: With 30,000 colleagues and total operating revenue of \$4.3 billion, Hartford HealthCare has cultivated a strong, unified culture of accountability and innovation. Its care-delivery system, with more than 360 locations serving 185 towns and cities, includes two tertiary-level teaching hospitals, an acute-care community teaching hospital, an acute-care hospital and trauma center, three community hospitals, the state’s most extensive behavioral health network, a large multispecialty physician group, a clinical care organization, a regional home care system, an array of senior care services, and a large physical therapy and rehabilitation network. Hartford HealthCare’s unique, system-wide Institute Model offers a single, high standard of care in crucial specialties at hospital and ambulatory sites across Connecticut. The institutes include: Cancer, Heart and Vascular, Ayer Neuroscience, Orthopedics and Tallwood Urology. Visit Hartford HealthCare at www.hartfordhealthcare.org.

About CoSIDA (College Sports Information Directors of America): CoSIDA was founded in 1957 and is a 3,000+ member national organization comprised of the sports public relations, media relations and communications/information professionals throughout all levels of collegiate athletics in the United States and Canada. The organization is the second oldest management association in intercollegiate athletics. For more than 60 years, CoSIDA has recognized student-athletes as part of its Academic All-America awards program. The Hartford HealthCare Courage Award is the third CoSIDA award specifically for student-athletes. Approximately 5,000 student-athletes are recognized each year for their excellence in the classroom and in competition. To learn more, visit cosida.com.

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