

89<sup>th</sup> Annual



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**VOTE FOR THE TOP SPORTS STARS AND STORIES OF THE YEAR:  
Nominees Announced for 89<sup>th</sup> Annual Sports Star of the Year Awards**

SEATTLE – Today, the Seattle Sports Commission (SSC) released the nominees for the 89<sup>th</sup> Annual Sports Star of the Year Awards Show presented by Microsoft and invites the public to help select the winners by voting at [seattlesports.org](http://seattlesports.org) through January 22.

Nominees for the three Awards categories are athletes from across the state who excelled in the 2023 season and include professional and collegiate athletes with history-making achievements. The winners will be announced live onstage during the Awards Show on February 15 at The Westin Seattle.

**Nominees: Sports Star of the Year, Women's Sports**

**Vanessa Aniteye**, Seattle Pacific University Track & Field | National Champion

*The 2023 National Champion in the indoor 800 meters set a school-record of 2 minutes, 6.84 seconds. Aniteye was a 9x Coaches Association All-American, Great Northwest Indoor Female Athlete of the Year, West Region Indoor Female Track Athlete of the Year, and one of thirty nominees across the NCAA for the national Woman of the Year Award, following a three-year hiatus during which time she gave birth to her son, Josiah.*

**Lauren Barnes**, Seattle Reign FC | An "OG" leading the National Women's Soccer League

*The Seattle Reign FC Captain led the club to its third NWSL Championship appearance and extended her record for most minutes played in the NWSL, becoming the first to pass 18,000 with over 2,000 more minutes than the second-most player. One of the original three players who've played their entire career with the Reign, Barnes also became the first NWSL player to log 200 regular season appearances all-time.*

**Jewell Loyd**, Seattle Storm | 5x WNBA All-Star

*Loyd broke the WNBA records for single-season points, free throws, and 25+ point games, and was named WNBA All-Star MVP with an All-Star Game-record 31 points scored. She stepped up as the leading force for the Storm as the remaining member of "the big 3" (Sue Bird, Breanna Stewart, Jewell Loyd) bringing career-best numbers.*

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**Charlisse Leger-Walker**, Washington State University Basketball | Pac-12 Tournament MVP

*A 3x Sports Star nominee for her excellence on the court every season, the Pac-12 Conference Tournament Most Outstanding Player was All-Pac-12 First Team, and ranked in points per game (3<sup>rd</sup>), 3-pointers made (5<sup>th</sup>), and assists per game (2<sup>nd</sup>). Leger-Walker is only the third Cougar in program history to score 40+ points and ninth Cougar to score 500+ in a season.*

**Angela Zhang**, Washington Junior Golf Association | Course Record

*At 14-years old, Zhang is turning heads in the golf world. In the 2023 season, she sank a 25-foot putt to qualify for the U.S. Women's Open, won her second-straight WA Women's Amateur title, seven WJGA titles, and earned the most points in WJGA history. At her home course in Dupont, she set the women's course record with a 7-under par 65 to win the WA State Champion of Champions event by 11 strokes.*

**Nominees: Sports Star of Year, Men's Sports**

**Matty Beniers**, Seattle Kraken | NHL Rookie of the Year

*The decisive winner of the 2023 NHL Rookie of the Year, Beniers became only the second rookie from an expansion franchise to do so within the first two seasons. Beniers led rookies in multipoint games and shooting percentage, was second in assists, and was the fourth player in NHL history to play at least 80 games in a season and receive two or fewer penalty minutes.*

**J.P. Crawford**, Seattle Mariners | Career Highs in 2023

*Crawford anchored the Mariners infield in 2023, posting the best season (5.0 bWAR) by a Mariners shortstop since Alex Rodriguez in 2000. J.P. was one of the most clutch hitters in baseball, leading MLB with a staggering .688 batting average with the bases loaded. He posted career-highs in nearly every offensive category, including a .380 on-base percentage (4<sup>th</sup> in the American League), while tying the club record with six leadoff home runs.*

**Stefan Frei**, Seattle Sounders FC | Captain Posts Career Bests

*The Sounders goalkeeper tracked some of his best career stats as the new captain of the club. He led the MLS with a 0.88 goals against average and 14 shutouts, setting a new single-season club record. The Sounders Team MVP and Humanitarian of the Year became the first Sounder in the MLS era to make 350 appearances.*

**Rome Odunze**, University of Washington Football | Star Wide Receiver

*The AP/All-Pac-12 First-Team selection is touted as one of the best, if not the best, wide receivers in Pac-12 history. Odunze helped the Huskies to a 14-1 season while breaking school records with nine 100-yard receiving games, broke UW's single-season receiving yards, and became just the second Husky to reach 1,000 yards in multiple seasons. He did so while playing half of the season with a punctured lung and other injuries.*

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**Michael Penix Jr.**, University of Washington Football | Heisman Trophy runner-up

*The Walter Camp First-Team and AP/All Pac-12 Second Team selection won the Maxwell Award as the nation's outstanding player and finished second in the Heisman Trophy voting, the highest ever for a Husky. Penix led the Huskies to a 14-1 season, falling only to Michigan in the National Championship. First quarterback in program history to record 4,000 passing yards in back-to-back seasons.*

## **Nominees: Sports Story of the Year**

### **Seattle Kraken score a first in playoff history**

*After clinching a playoff berth, the Kraken became the first team in NHL history to win their first playoff season series by beating the defending Stanley Cup champions. Following their inaugural season, the Kraken continued to draw in new fans, and delighted Day One followers, with a 7-game first-round win and thrilling second round, ultimately dropping out of the playoffs in the seventh game of the second series.*

### **Seattle Thunderbirds win WHL Championship**

*In front of a sold-out crowd at accesso ShoWare Center, the Thunderbirds overtook Winnipeg to win the WHL Championship. Goaltender Thomas Milic was named WHL Playoffs MVP and WHL Goaltender of the Year. Consistently noted as one of the best teams in program history, six players won gold medals at the U20 World Junior Championship and 10 players from the 2022-2023 team were drafted to the NHL.*

### **UW Football has undefeated regular season and trip to the National Championship**

*After an undefeated regular season, the Pac-12 Champions made it all the way to the National Championship. The first team in program history to play in the Sugar Bowl, the Huskies played as a collective unit, making for thrilling games and upset victories.*

### **UW Men's Track & Field set records and take first Pac-12 title**

*The Huskies had one of their best seasons in program history, including a major upset as they broke Oregon's 15-year winning streak to bring home UW Track's first-ever Pac-12 Championship. They made national history with eight athletes running sub-four-minute miles in the same race (twice!) and became just the second team ever to win every Pac-12 Championship distance race.*

### **WSU Women's Basketball win school's first Pac-12 Championship**

*The 2022-2023 team won the Pac-12 Championship and broke a 44-year-long program-record by winning 23 games. The lowest seed ever to win the Pac-12 tournament, the Cougs defeated six nationally-ranked teams and became the first women's sports team in school history to win a conference title in the NCAA era.*

Sports fans are encouraged to vote for a nominee in each category at [seattlesports.org](http://seattlesports.org) from January 15 until 11:59pm PT January 22. Fans will be able to vote once for their favorite athletes, teams, and stories of the year and can enter to win a pair of tickets to the Awards Show.

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Nominees are selected by the Sports Star Nominations Committee and then voted on by the public. Once an individual has been named a Sports Star, that person becomes a member of an elite group that forever etches their name in Washington's sports history. The winners will be announced during the 89<sup>th</sup> Annual Sports Star of the Year Awards Show presented by Microsoft, which will be held at The Westin Seattle on February 15, and broadcast on 89SSY Broadcast Sponsor station, KING 5 in March.

**The Seattle Sports Commission (SSC)** is committed to making Seattle a world-class sports community by creating opportunities that bring the world to the Pacific Northwest. The SSC seeks to strengthen social and economic impact, encourage generational engagement in athletics, and bolster pride in our communities. Go to [seattlesports.org](http://seattlesports.org) to learn more about the SSC. [LINK TO PRESS KIT HERE](#)