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GREATER CAPITAL REGION AQUATICS HALL OF FAME ANNOUNCES ELITE CLASS OF 2026 INDUCTEES AND ANNUAL AWARD WINNERS

SCHENECTADY, N.Y. — The Greater Capital Region Aquatics Hall of Fame today proudly announced its prestigious Class of 2026 inductees and annual award winners. This year's expansive class honors an extraordinary group of local legends and contemporary stars who have achieved historic success across high school, collegiate, masters, national, and international aquatics. The Class of 2026 celebrates groundbreaking NCAA national champions, dominant Olympic Trials qualifiers, legendary mentors, transformative adaptive sports advocates, elite officials, and the region's top high-performing high school athletes and coaches.

"We are thrilled to welcome these iconic figures and celebrate our annual award winners," said Tim Sinnenberg, the President of the Greater Capital Region Aquatics Hall of Fame. "From shattering decades-old records and pioneering inclusive pipelines to dominant state championship performances, this group represents the absolute pinnacle of athletic excellence, service, and coaching mastery in our community."

Meet the Class of 2026 Inductees:

Brandon Birchak (Diving – Shaker High School / The College of Saint Rose): An elite All-American diver who went undefeated (45-0) in high school dual meets, Birchak made history at The College of Saint Rose by overcoming a severe back injury to become the school's first-ever NCAA National Champion, sweeping both boards in 2007. He later achieved international renown as a premier high-diving acrobat for Cirque du Soleil, setting a world record off the Russian swing. After surviving a catastrophic 90-foot performance fall, Birchak engineered his own respiratory recovery to reach a 10-minute underwater breath-hold, and he now serves as a leading performance CEO optimizing lung volume for elite global athletes.

Amy Bopp (Swimming – Clifton Park / Ohio State University): One of the most dominant competitive swimmers in Adirondack Swimming LSC history, Bopp represented the Capital Region on the sport's biggest national stages. She qualified for the USA Swimming Olympic

Trials in three individual events (100m breaststroke, 200m breaststroke, 200m butterfly) and captured five individual Speedo Champions Series titles. At the NCAA Division I level, she starred for Ohio State University, competing at the NCAA Championships and placing 10th at the Big Ten Championships just behind an Olympic gold medalist, all while maintaining a pristine 4.0 GPA as a CSCAA Scholar All-American.

Maria Coomaraswamy-Falkenstein (Coaching – RPI / Flip and Rip Diving Club): A legendary regional icon with over three decades of excellence, Coomaraswamy-Falkenstein has built powerhouse collegiate programs and grassroots youth systems. As the head diving coach at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) following a successful tenure at Union College, she has captured 11 Liberty League Team Championships and coached nearly a dozen NCAA All-Americans. As the founder of the Flip and Rip Diving Club, she has mentored numerous Section 2 and New York State champions, directly guiding future Olympians and state record-holders.

Mike DeRocco (Swimming – Niskayuna High School / University of Tennessee): One of New York's most dominant sprint freestyle swimmers, DeRocco captured the state title in the 50 freestyle with a time of 20.65 seconds, shattering a legendary 35-year-old state public high school record. At the University of Tennessee, he put together a decorated career as a team co-captain, setting a school record in the 100 butterfly (46.29 seconds) and earning 10 total All-American honors across individual and relay events. Driven by a deep family tradition of military service, DeRocco later stepped away from Olympic Trials training to utilize his elite aquatic engineering in the United States Navy pipeline toward special operations.

Sean Maxwell (Swimming – Troy High School) is a legendary competitive swimmer widely regarded as one of the most dominant and versatile athletes to emerge from New York State's Section II. In 1990, he captured seven individual Section II championships and set historic state records in the 200-yard Individual Medley and 100-yard Breaststroke that stood untouched for decades. His elite success extended to the club circuit with the Albany Starfish Swim Club, ultimately earning him a spot competing at the U.S. Olympic Trials.

Brian Melanson (Community & Coaching – Schenectady High School): A cornerstone of Section 2 aquatics for over 20 years, Melanson has served as the Section 2 Boys' Swimming and Diving Coordinator, orchestrating championship events and acting as the direct liaison to the NYSPHSAA. As a varsity coach, he built the foundation of Schenectady High School swimming as its only boys' head coach in history, surpassing 100 programmatic wins. Beyond his competitive legacy, Melanson is a life-saving grassroots advocate who designed and launched a free "Learn to Swim" program for local elementary and middle school students to combat youth drowning risks.

Ann Svenson (United States Masters Swimming) : A highly decorated distance swimmer and former chairperson of Adirondack Masters Swimming, Svenson accumulated 262 individual and 58 relay Top Ten achievements in the United States, alongside 12 All-American honors. A Level 2 USMS Certified Coach who once broke the national 1500 record and served on multiple national committees, her extensive service earned her the prestigious 2010 USMS Dorothy Donnelly Service Award. As a specialized adult instructor at the Saratoga YMCA, she has dedicated decades to training triathletes and teaching technical buoyancy and horizontal body balance to beginner swimmers.

Barb Thomas (Adaptive Sports – Special Olympics New York): A legendary adaptive sports advocate, coach, and administrator, Thomas is honored for her life-changing work spanning more than four decades with Special Olympics New York. She has introduced hundreds of neurodivergent athletes to competitive swimming, combining technical stroke instruction with holistic leadership development that empowered athletes to join local Athlete Leadership Councils. Bridging grassroots adaptive programs with regional high school and club networks, Thomas's profound systemic impact and patience earned her the prestigious Special Olympics New York statewide Coach of the Year Award.

Jack Ward (Officiating – Section 2 / NYSPHSAA): A highly respected, veteran sports administrator and rules expert, Ward is inducted posthumously as a premier swimming and diving official who anchored Upstate New York pool decks for several decades. He served as a top starter, referee, and deck official for Section 2 and NYSPHSAA State Championships, bringing uniform regulatory precision to scholastic, collegiate, and USA Swimming club meets. As a certified official for U.S. and N.Y. State High School swimming for many years, he was inducted in the International Swimming Hall of Fame. Jack was honored with the New York State Certified Swimming Officials' Association, Inc. Distinguished Service Award in 2000.

Annual Award Winners:

Senior Female Athlete of the Year – Madison Wolfort (Niskayuna High School / Albany Starfish): One of the top-ranked freestyle competitors in Section 2, Wolfort captured the 200-yard freestyle Division II Championship title with a stellar time of 1:55.05 and secured a runner-up finish in the 100 freestyle (52.28). Competing at the New York State Championships, she placed 13th in the 200 freestyle and 32nd in the 50 freestyle, following a dominant top-three showing at the March 2026 Adirondack Gold Championships where she sprinted to a 24.11 mark in the 50 freestyle.

Senior Male Athlete of the Year – Anderson Baird (Saratoga Springs High School / Sharks Swim Club): A dominant force in New York State high school aquatics, Baird captured the

200-yard Individual Medley title at the NYSPHSAA and Federation Championships with an automatic All-American time of 1:48.81—making him the fifth-fastest performer in state history. The Section 2 Swimmer of the Year and State Sportsmanship Award recipient also earned All-American consideration with a fourth-place state finish in the 100 breaststroke (55.73) and swept individual short-course and long-course records across club sectional circuits.

Coaching Staff of the Year – Saratoga Springs Girls Varsity Swimming & Diving Staff: Led by head coach Josh Muldner alongside Dave Longbrake, Kevin Colella, Rachel Nacheman, Jim Wright, and Madeleine Wood, the Saratoga staff engineered a historic, undefeated 2025 dual-meet campaign. Utilizing their signature team mantra, "Trust the Process," they guided the Blue Streaks to their first Section 2 Division 1 Championship title since 2002 with an authoritative 74-point victory, while simultaneously qualifying multiple student-athletes and a dual-diving contingent to the New York State Championship meet.

Established in conjunction with the Capital Region Aquatic Center, the Hall of Fame annually recognize athletes, coaches, officials and community supporters who have made significant contributions to local aquatic sports through their service, performance and dedication. Inductees will be honored on a wall of the Capital Region Aquatic Center, which is coming soon to downtown Schenectady.

Spearheading the Hall of Fame effort is Tim Sinnenberg, a local coach, parent and Capital Region Aquatic Center advisory board member. “When Tim first approached us about a Hall of Fame, we were excited at the idea of bringing something like this to the area,” said Kara Haraden, Capital Region Aquatic Center board president. “We feel privileged to be able to play a role and help celebrate and honor exemplary members of our aquatic sports community.”

“We would like the Hall of Fame to serve as an avenue to highlight and thank all types of individuals who have dedicated themselves to elevating these sports throughout the region,” said Sinnenberg.

The formal induction ceremony and banquet will take place on October 17 at the Hilton Garden Inn in Clifton Park. For information on how to purchase tickets, or to support the Hall of Fame as a sponsor, go to capitalregionaquaticcenter.org.