

2017 Ken Novell Ambassador Awards

Ken Novell saw a need for a swim league 51 years ago and started the Rappahannock Swim League. He wanted to provide an opportunity for kids to swim against each other in a friendly but competitive environment, where children could take their love of swimming and summertime fun, and combine those two activities in a way that promoted good sportsmanship.

What's sportsmanship, you ask? A great tradition in sports and competition that means playing clean and handling both victory and defeat with grace, style, and dignity. Sportsmanship is defined as: playing fair, following the rules of the game, respecting the judgement of referees and officials, and treating opponents with respect.

Some people define good sportsmanship as the "golden rule" of sports — in other words, treating the people you play with and against as you'd like to be treated yourself. You demonstrate good sportsmanship when you show respect for yourself, your teammates and your opponents, the coaches on both sides, and for the referees, judges, and other officials. Sportsmanship is a style and an attitude, and it can have a positive influence on everyone around you.

2017 Ken Novell Ambassador Award Winner

National Division

Gracen Kelley, Caroline Orcas

Gracen Kelley has had a fast track love for all things swimming since day two. She arrived at her first day of practice last year for the Caroline Orcas with tears in her eyes that she was being forced to just try swimming. That day a new passion was sparked. I was shortly thereafter informed that Gracen's new life goal was to swim in the Olympics.

She would attend summer practice and then come back to the pool later in the day to practice on her own. Fast forward to the school year. Gracen is in the 7th grade and is practicing with the high school team and volunteered to be the manager. She continued to practice on her own between the high school season and the summer season.

Fast forward again to just before this 2017 RSL summer season began. She recruited many friends and their families to join the Caroline Orcas. The Caroline Orcas team almost doubled in one year, with a large effort coming from Gracen and her family.

Gracen asks to help daily with the younger swimmers in practice, and I can count on her to give loving confidence to our 6 & Under kids. Every swim meet she can be found on the poolside with her poster boards that she made, jumping up and down to cheer on her friends and the younger swimmers.

Gracen is never found at her towel sitting. I can put Gracen in any event without complaint. She will finish her event and ask Coach how can I do better. The love for swimming, her compassion to others, sportsmanship to other teams is incredibly rare. Gracen is always the first to congratulate her competitors. At most meets I find her befriending other teams swimmers at clerk of course.

At a recent meet, Gracen beat her friend and swimming mentor in an event and they both came out of the water hugged and began crying with excitement and pride. Her focus, determination, love, recruitment, sportsmanship, and all around passion for swimming is exactly why I coach and why I nominate Gracen Kelley for the Ken Novell Award.

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American Division

Elizabeth McKenzie, Lee's Hill Lightning

Elizabeth McKenzie is one of the most hard working teens I have ever met. Once she sets her mind to achieving something she is going to work tirelessly to make it happen. Elizabeth joined the Lee's Hill Swim Team almost a month late into the summer season. When she first got in the pool she struggled to make it a lap down the pool without stopping. She was struggling to breath and was being lapped by others in her lane. She was not discouraged by this. In fact, this motivated her to work harder to become better.

Every day since she joined, Elizabeth has walked into the pool bright and early with her positive attitude and infectious drive for success. She takes off her shoes, lays out her towel and places her hearing aids in a safe place and prepares to get in the water. At this time Elizabeth's world is completely silent. She is unable to hear what the warm up is or hear the coaches tweaking little things like her kick, or correcting her breathing. She relies on her mother to interrupt what is being said as well as reads the coaches lips or motions. Being deaf does not hold her back in the least bit.

Her drive for perfection has her asking her mom to attend both morning and night practices to work on dives, turns, and new strokes. She often stays after her practice is finished to have her sister film her so she can watch what she is doing incorrectly once she is home.

If that isn't inspiring enough, Elizabeth has a passion for helping other improve as well. She is often seen at the pool pointing out and explaining how to complete the perfect dive to her sister and brother who are both deaf as well. She laughs out loud when her little brother belly flops and cheers when her sister completes a 50 of butterfly kick keeping her legs together the whole time. She is defiantly the model of hard work and dedication. I know her siblings look up to her for her drive and passion for success

2017 Ken Novell Ambassador Award Winner

Patriot Divison

Wayne Thomason, Dahlgren Sharks

This year, Dahlgren's nomination for the 2017 Ken Novell award is seven-year old Wayne Thomason. Wayne, like Ken, absolutely loves swimming—it is his passion—he thinks about swimming day in and day out. Wayne's passion for swimming shines through as soon as he walks onto the pool deck. You cannot keep that boy out of the water.

Wayne and his younger brother live with his grandparents. They have been his caretakers since he was two years old. Luckily, his grandfather understands Wayne's love of swimming and is willing to bring him to the King George YMCA almost every day. According to his grandfather, Wayne always wanted to play in the water. His grandfather said he just took to it naturally, so he started him in lessons at the Y at the age of two. Wayne suffered from severe asthma, too, but overcame that setback because he spends so much time in the water.

This is Wayne's second year with the Sharks. Last year, as a six year old he was entered in all eight and under events, because he was fast and knew his strokes well; and he was more than capable of beating eight year old's in competition. Amazingly enough, he started swimming with the year round team Rappahannock Raiders first at the age of five (a year before joining the Sharks.) Swimming at that level was never a problem for Wayne. At first, he was your typical child in the water, but as time progressed, he was asking for more attention, wanting to get better. Now, at Sharks practice he is receptive to instruction and feedback as he continues to improve; and does not mind being corrected. Wayne takes it with a smile and keeps on going. He truly swims with joy, whether he is swimming at practice, or playing in the shallow end of the pool with his brother.

Webster defines joy as the emotion of great delight or happiness caused by something exceptionally good or satisfying; and passion is described as a strong feeling of excitement or enthusiasm for something or doing something.

I know how Webster defines joy and passion, but we on the Dahlgren Sharks define those two words with one young swimmer—Wayne Thomason.

2017 Ken Novell Ambassador Award Winner

Battlefield Divison

Julia Storen, Fox Point Fintastics

In the eyes of the RSL a Ken Novell ambassador is someone who exemplifies good sportsmanship, a love for swimming, and the drive to encourage others within the sport; In the eyes of the Fox Point Fintastics a Ken Novell ambassador is someone like Julia Storen.

Julia Storen has been swimming for the Fox Point Fintastics for many years and has always shown extraordinary character in and out of the pool. She meets the high standard set by Ken Novell especially during meets and practices when she stops to shake the hands of swimmers next to her, cheers on her teammates, and comes to practice early in the morning with a smile on her face.

When entries came out for our first meet of the season, Julia greeted the challenge of the 100 IM with excitement, setting a shining example for those in her 9-10 age group who would be asked to swim the 100 freestyle or IM in the weeks to come. She has shown grace and maturity beyond her 10 years by remaining calm and positive, even in the face of challenges like these or mishaps at meets, like scratched relays.

Julia has recently demonstrated her radiant positivity by encouraging even the youngest swimmers on our team. This year, Fox Point has had the pleasure of having a three-year-old swim in our 6 and under group. After her very first event ever, in which she did a complete lap without stopping, Julia was there at the end of the pool to congratulate her. Later in the meet, Julia took a heat winner that she had won in one of her races and presented it to this young swimmer. Julia knew that being three, it was unlikely that this younger swimmer would win a ribbon of her own, but she gave away a highly coveted heat winner ribbon with many words of encouragement. Julia shared her pride in the incredible feat accomplished by a three-year-old and made sure to tell her that although she may not have won her event, she was a winner to Julia. Hearing this story further solidified for each one of the Fox Point Fintastics' coaching staff that Julia fulfills every characteristic of a Ken Novell ambassador. Julia's positive impact extends far past this one swimmer to our entire team.