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U.S. Olympic Committee announces 2016 award winners

Awards to be presented this week at U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Assembly in Colorado Springs

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. – The United States Olympic Committee today announced the recipients of six awards, which will be presented at a celebratory dinner during the 2016 U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Assembly that begins tomorrow at the Antlers Hotel in Colorado Springs, Colorado. The Friday awards dinner will conclude the Assembly and feature NBC sports reporter Lewis Johnson as host.

Jim Easton was named the Olympic Torch Award honoree, while Jim Eckford was selected to receive the Jack Kelly Fair Play Award presented by BP. Also, Glen Bennett and BlazeSports America were chosen as the individual and program recipients for the Rings of Gold awards.

Two National Governing Bodies will also be recognized for achievement in the areas of diversity and inclusion. USA Synchro was named the 2016 recipient of the Advancing D&I Award, while USRowing was selected by its peers as the D&I Choice Award winner for its Freedom Rows initiative.

The Olympic Torch Award recognizes an individual who has positively impacted the Olympic Movement by promoting the Olympic Ideals. Easton, who has devoted more than 60 years of service to the development of archery, acted as president of the International Archery Federation (now known as World Archery) from 1989-2005. Additionally, he served more than 20 years as a board member for the International Olympic Committee and USOC (1994-2015), including four years as an IOC vice president (2002-06). Under his leadership, the Easton Sports Development Foundation has supported the development of several regional training facilities, including the Easton Archery Center of Excellence at the U.S. Olympic Training Center in California, as well as the World Archery Excellence Center in Switzerland.

The Jack Kelly Fair Play Award presented by BP recognizes an athlete, coach or official for an outstanding act of fair play and sportsmanship. When Eckford was in pursuit of a personal-best marathon time, he met Amelia Dickerson, a blind athlete, at mile 15 of the California International Marathon. Dickerson's guide runner could not finish the race with her, so Eckford took over as the guide despite having no experience. The pair ultimately crossed the finish line in 3:20:28, a new personal best for Dickerson. Even though it meant giving up his personal race goals for the day, Eckford selflessly helped Dickerson reach hers.

The Rings of Gold awards annually recognize an individual and a program dedicated to helping children develop their Olympic or Paralympic dreams, and reach their highest athletic and personal potential. A volunteer coach for the Michigan State University archery team for more than six years, Bennett has developed archers into national champions and All-American athletes. He also currently serves as the program coordinator for the Michigan State Demmer Shooting Sports, Education and Training Center, and teaches a Junior Olympic Archery Development Program. Bennett also works with visually impaired and quadriplegic athletes to help them learn archery and crossbow shooting.

For 20 years, BlazeSports America has been at the forefront of advancing the lives of children and teens with physical disabilities through adaptive sport and recreation. Designated as a USOC Multi-Sport Organization and Paralympic Sport Club, BlazeSports America focuses not only on the athletic development and Paralympic potential, but also provides opportunities for young athletes to gain independence, self-confidence, and leadership and academic skills. Since its inception after the 1996 Paralympic Games, BlazeSports America has touched the lives of more than 800,000 children with physical disabilities with more than 18 million hours of Paralympic and adaptive sports programming.

The Advancing D&I Award recognizes the NGB with the highest annual growth percentage of underrepresented individuals based on diversity data for women, and racial and ethnic minorities. USA Synchro led all NGBs with an 8.57 percent increase in membership for women and persons of color from

2014-15. Percentage increases were evaluated based on overall NGB numbers, which includes board members, employees, NGB membership, and national team athletes and coaches.

Celebrating its third year, the D&I Choice Award recognizes an NGB for best practices in advancing diversity and inclusion, as determined by a vote of NGB peers. Originally launched in 2014 as a diversity initiative, USRowing's Freedom Rows was established to increase the number of military service members and veterans with disabilities participating in adaptive and para-rowing categories. Freedom Rows aims to provide training and outreach coordination to Veteran's Affairs adaptive sports program managers, recreational therapists and coaches. Freedom Rows expanded to provide equipment and administrative support to 20 local clubs in 2015.

Johnson has covered many historic Olympic and Paralympic moments while reporting for NBC at a total of 11 Games, including the recently concluded Rio 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Johnson currently covers track and field for NBC, college football for the PAC-12 Network, March Madness for CBS/Turner Sports and the NBA for Turner Sports. Prior to his career on screen, he was an All-American track athlete at the University of Cincinnati and is a member of the school's Athletic Hall of Fame. He competed professionally throughout Europe for seven years. Johnson was ranked among the top 10 U.S. athletes in the 800-meter and competed in the U.S. Olympic Team Trials in 1988 and 1992, when he reached the semifinals.

2016 Award Winners

Olympic Torch Award: Jim Easton

Jack Kelly Fair Play Award presented by BP: Jim Eckford

Rings of Gold – Individual: Glen Bennett

Rings of Gold – Program: BlazeSports America

Advancing D&I: USA Synchro

D&I Choice Award: USRowing

About the Assembly

The U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Assembly was initiated in 2005 to give a voice to the various member organizations of the USOC; to keep dialogue open between members, staff and volunteer leadership; and to help further the Olympic and Paralympic movements in the United States. The two-day event – themed "Future of Sport" – welcomes more than 250 participants, representing Olympic, Paralympic and Pan American National Governing Bodies; U.S. Olympians and Paralympians; Multi-Sport Organizations; the Athletes' Advisory Council; the Paralympic Advisory Committee; and USOC board members and staff.