

Daniel Shepard

Carroll College tabbed first-ever NAIA National School of Character

Daniel Shepard

Sep 17, 2024



Carroll College President John Cech holds the first-ever NAIA National School of Character Award accompanied by Helena Mayor Wilmot Collins (pictured left), Saints mascot Halo (left), Carroll Athletic Director Charlie Gross (left), Montana Governor Greg Gianforte (pictured right), and NAIA representative Chesney Sallee (right).

Gary Marshall

Daniel Shepard

HELENA — A golden banner will soon hang among six red national football championship pennants on the PE Center’s walls, forever recognizing Carroll College’s receipt of the NAIA’s inaugural School of Character Award.

An extension of the NAIA’s on-going Champions of Character program, the award recognizes Carroll as “an institution that exemplifies exceptional commitment to fostering character development among their student-athletes and embracing the five core values.”

Those values are: integrity, respect, responsibility, sportsmanship, and servant leadership.

In July, Carroll was recognized as an NAIA Champions of Character Gold Five-Star Award winner for the 2023-24 academic year, earning a Frontier Conference-best 100 perfect score.

Carroll then represented the conference nationally, garnering the NAIA’s first and only award reflecting the effort of an entire institution.

“At Carroll, we believe that education extends beyond the classroom or playing field and that’s reflected in our mission to provide an integrative and value-centered education,” Carroll President John Cech said.

“I’m immensely proud of our student-athletes who have embraced this ethos whole-heartedly.”

Elevated on a mid-court stage, to the right of a giant video board and before a crowd filled with purple-clad student-athletes, Cech hoisted the accompanying trophy skyward, declaring in a speech Tuesday, “the best day of my life.”



Carroll College President John Cech, along with a representative from the NAIA, Chesney Sallee, unveiled the first-ever NAIA National School of Character Award on Tuesday during an assembly inside the PE Center.

Gary Marshall, BMGphotos.com

A brief video narrated by former sports broadcaster John Lagerquist was played, highlighting photos and video of Carroll student-athletes contributing to the Helena community.

“This recognition embodies our Catholic and liberal arts identity,” Cech said. “And affirms our commitment to instilling an enduring wonder of knowledge while preparing students for leadership in their chosen occupations.”

Helena Mayor Wilmot Collins thanked Carroll student-athletes for “making Helena a better community,” through programs like a first-of-its-kind on-campus food pantry, and an effort by the Carroll’s women’s soccer team to offer sanitary products to in-need individuals and students on campus.

Carroll’s women’s basketball team helps coach and mentor a local Special Olympics basketball team, and Saints football players participate in a “Coaching Boys to Men” program fostering positive mental health, healthy relationships and violence prevention methods.

Montana Governor Greg Gianforte was in attendance Tuesday lending support to Carroll and offering congratulations for the honor, as was Helena City Commissioner Andy Shirtliff, and members of Carroll's board of trustees.



Montana Governor Greg Gianforte spoke during Tuesday's assembly inside Carroll College's PE Center where the Montana institution was tabbed the first-ever National School of Character by the NAIA.

Gary Marshall, BMGphotos.com

“I think [this award] really shows how we value character here and how it’s preached to us by all our coaches and the athletic staff,” Helena Capital graduate Tucker Zanto said.

“It’s a big part of our program and I know all the sports here care a lot about it.”

Zanto, a redshirt sophomore linebacker on Saints’ football team, is the second-year vice president of Carroll’s Student-Athlete Advisory Council, a group designed to “develop cooperative projects and activities for student-athletes and the campus community,” according to Carroll’s website.

Zanto also participates in Carroll’s Special Olympics Club.

“It’s something I look forward to every week,” Zanto said. “Participating in bowling, basketball, track and field, soccer...

“I love the opportunity to meet new people and allow our Special Olympics athletes to make new friends.”



Confetti flies and Carroll College student-athletes react as their school is announced as the first-ever NAIA National School of Character Award recipient on Tuesday inside the PE Center.

Gary Marshall

Charlie Gross, Carroll Athletic Director, used his time on stage Tuesday to read emails submitted by community members.

There was one from a Hawthorne Elementary School parent commending Carroll student-athletes for encouraging kids on their first day.

Another from the parent of a first-year Carroll student praising the football team for helping during the campus' most recent move-in day. Then, an email from a local contractor lauding the work of a Carroll student-athlete over the summer.

“Thank you to our coaches and students who do not just give this lip service of what being a champion of character is about,” Gross said.



Members of Carroll College's volleyball team, along with head coach Moe Boyle, pose with the first-ever NAIA National School of Character Award on Tuesday inside the PE Center.

Gary Marshall

“You back it up with consistent and sincere actions. [Thank you] for embracing the athletic commitment to excellence and making it our foundation upon what we do every day.”

Email Daniel Shepard at daniel.shepard@406mtsports.com and find him on X/Twitter @IR_DanielS.
