

Former Gamecock standout named IRONWOMAN by Global Eco Adventures

WNBA superstar A'ja Wilson says she is "blessed" to be "in such elite company"

COLUMBIA, SC, UNITED STATES, April 25, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- A'ja Wilson, the all-time leading scorer in South Carolina Women's Basketball history and the WNBA's unanimous MVP for the 2024 season, received yet another lofty honor on Tuesday, April 22, when she became the second-ever recipient of the Global Eco Adventures (GEA) IRONWOMAN award, the companion honor to GEA's IRONMAN award first presented in 2021.

Considered the equally difficult-to-earn companion honor to GEA's IRONMAN which was established in 2020, the IRONWOMAN award (aka "The Peg" or the "Heart of a Lioness Award") was created two years later and first presented to S.C. Lt. Governor Pamela Evette during the 2022 Eco Ball. The award is the namesake of the late Peggy Mullikin Kinney, an accomplished marathoner with a "refusal to quit spirit," according to Kinney's brother, Dr. Tom Mullikin, GEA's founder and the newly sworn director of the S.C. Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR).

"Both IRONMAN and IRONWOMAN are designations bestowed on select recipients by GEA who have served GEA and the state of South Carolina, often the nation, in varying capacities," said Dr. Mullikin, "Each Ironman or Ironwoman must also have demonstrated a level of physical, mental, and spiritual prowess – essentially an iron-willed toughness – beyond that which has been demonstrated by their also-tough peers."

According to Mullikin: "That demonstrated iron-willed toughness is an essential component with the exacting standards of the award, and has been so since it was created."



Former Benedict College basketball player Roscoe C. Wilson and wife Eva Rakes Wilson (A'ja Wilson's parents) are pictured with S.C. Lt. Gov. Pamela Evette and former S.C. Senator Thomas McElveen.

Mullikin added: "A'ja Wilson is the epitome of an IRONWOMAN and the GEA awards committee and board recognized that right away."

The founder of GEA who has served as SCDNR's director since February 2025, Mullikin is himself an Ironman, originally titled through the Christian men's organization, IRONMAN OUTDOORS. He is also a U.S. Army veteran, retired two-star commander of the S.C. State Guard, and an internationally acclaimed global expedition leader who has led mountaineering expeditions on every continent from pole to pole.



Dr. Tom Mullikin [pictured right], director of the S.C. Department of Natural Resources is the founder of Global Eco Adventures.

In addition to Wilson and Evette, GEA has thus far recognized fewer than 20 men and women with one or the other designations including superstar athletes, martial artists, and war heroes – men like retired USMC Maj. Gen. Jim Livingston, recipient of the Medal of Honor; retired USMC Major Gen. Charles Bolden, Space Shuttle astronaut and former NASA director, Marine Recon Sergeant Rudy Reyes (star of GENERATION KILL); and International Karate tournament champion, 10th degree Black Belt, and Hollywood star Keith Vitali.

In May 2024, Maj. Gen. Bolden became the 16th IRONMAN to be so-named since the establishment of the designation in 2020 and the first presentation of the award in 2021. His fellow Marine, Sergeant Reyes, became the 15th IRONMAN in May 2023.

Two weeks after Reyes was awarded his designation, two other U.S. military special operations NCOs were named GEA IRONMEN: Former Army Green Beret Staff Sergeant Lowell Koppert and former Marine Reconnaissance Sergeant Jared Evans.

IRONMAN has thus far been reserved for those with global expeditionary experience, or proven athletic skills, or who have served their country with distinction in peace and in war – or all of the above – all of whom have achieved accomplished-notoriety in at least two of the aforementioned categories. Traditionally, each recipient must also have "greatly enhanced the mission of GEA," a non-profit adventure-education organization that directs large environmental projects and outfits and leads exploratory expeditions to some of the most isolated regions around the world.

"To be chosen to be in such elite company is truly a blessing," said Wilson, now a seven-year

veteran in the WNBA (the “1st overall” draft pick, 2018, for the Las Vegas Aces), in pre-recorded acceptance remarks viewed by everyone gathered at the 2024 Eco Ball. Please see Wilson’s remarks here – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7f4YqI68E7M>.

“A’ja Wilson is truly a welcome addition to this elite group,” said retired S.C. Military Department Col. W. Thomas Smith Jr., a former U.S. Marine Infantry leader, war correspondent, and New York Times bestselling editor. “Aside from being a fellow Gamecock, A’ja has elevated women’s basketball both here in the Palmetto State and around the world. Her inclusion within our very limited ranks significantly adds to the prestige of both the IRONMAN and IRONWOMAN awards.”

Smith was named an IRONMAN in 2021.

IRONMEN so-designated since 2021 also include: National Wrestling Hall of Fame inductee and former S.C. Representative Ben Connell; Vitali’s fellow Black Belt Hall-of-Famers and martial arts legends Bruce Brutschy, Mike Genova, and younger brother and USMC Col. Steve Vitali (four Black Belt Hall of Fame inductees, including three 10th-degree black belts, are IRONMEN); retired U.S. Army Infantry Col. Bill Connor, a frequent national defense analyst appearing on NEWSMAX; state wrestling champion and Kershaw County Councilman Brant Tomlinson; SCUBA diver Dewayne “Duke” Gary; and former semi-pro football player and U.S. Air Force veteran Chris Carter.

Thomas Mullikin Jr., the current president of GEA and Dr. Mullikin’s son, who has himself led global expeditions often at the head of former U.S. military special operators is also an IRONMAN.

Former Benedict College basketball player Roscoe C. Wilson and wife Eva Rakes Wilson, A’ja Wilson’s parents [pictured with Lt. Gov. Evette and former S.C. Senator Thomas McElveen], accepted the award on her behalf.

The 2024 Eco Ball was held at the historic Junction 800 on Gervais Street, less than one-half mile from the towering statue of A’ja Wilson in front of Colonial Life Arena in Columbia.

For more information about Global Eco Adventures, visit – <https://www.globalecoadventures.org/>

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