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2021 Mayo Clinic Comeback Player of the Year Award Announces Nine Semifinalists

NEW YORK, NY. —The College Sports Information Directors of America (CoSIDA), in association with The Associated Press (AP) and the Fiesta Bowl Organization, has selected nine college football student-athletes who have overcome injury, illness or other adversity to excel on the field this season as semifinalists for the **2021 [Mayo Clinic Comeback Player of the Year Award](#)**. They include: **Taijh Alston** (DL, West Virginia); **Terrel Bernard** (LB, Baylor); **Jack Coan** (QB, Notre Dame); **Ryan Hubley** (WR, Johns Hopkins); **Aidan Hutchinson** (DE, Michigan); **McKenzie Milton** (QB, Florida State); **Cameron Rising** (QB, Utah); **Avery Samuels** (OL, Stetson); and **J.J. Weaver** (LB, Kentucky)

The semifinalists were selected by a panel of writers, editors, and sports information directors from CoSIDA, AP and *Touchdown Illustrated*, from a field of 30 nominees recognized throughout the season. On December 21, three winners and six honorable mentions will be announced and \$30,000 will be donated in the names of the honorees to their schools' general scholarship funds, with \$15,000 being awarded in the names of the three winners and \$15,000 on behalf of the six named honorable mention. Additionally, the three **Mayo Clinic Comeback Player of the Year Award** winners will be recognized at a special ceremony during the PlayStation® Fiesta Bowl on Jan. 1, 2022, at State Farm Stadium in Glendale, Arizona.

Here's a look at the remarkable comeback stories of the nine **2021 Mayo Clinic Comeback Player of the Year Award Semifinalists**:

Taijh Alston, a redshirt junior defensive lineman for West Virginia University suffered the second major knee injury of his career in the second game of the 2019 season versus Missouri. During his rehab, the native of Lumberton, NC tore his Achilles tendon, which forced him to miss the entire 2020 season. The 6-foot-4, 245-pound defensive lineman began his college career at East Carolina, but before ever playing a down for the Pirates, he suffered his first major knee injury. He transferred to Copiah-Lincoln Community College in Wesson, Mississippi and had an

impressive 2018 season, recording 78 tackles seven sacks and 15 tackles for loss. He transferred to West Virginia in 2019 and despite missing most of that season and the entire 2020 campaign, he has been a force for the Mountaineers this season. **STATS: 33 tackles, 10 TFL, 5 Sacks, 3 QBH**

Terrel Bernard a senior linebacker for Baylor University is unquestionably the heart and soul of the Baylor football team. The 6'-1" 222-lb La Porte, Texas native was the team leader in tackles, sacks and tackles for loss last season before suffering a torn labrum, dislocated shoulder and fractured glenoid at Iowa State on Nov. 7. The injury caused him to miss the rest of the season and refrain from all football activities for more than six months. His rehab process was a grind; he couldn't move much at all and spent the first month post-injury in a sling. But all the hard work paid off when he took the field on opening day and recorded 9 tackles, 1 PD, 1 PBU and 1 QBH in the Bears 29-20 win over Texas State. He was named Big 12 Defensive Player of the Week after his performance in the Bears 27-14 win over No. 8 ranked Oklahoma on Nov 13 when he recorded 9 Tackles and 2 sacks. In the Bears thrilling BIG 12 Championship Game win versus Oklahoma State he recorded 10 tackles. **STATS: 86 tackles, 10.5 TFL, 5.5 Sacks**

Jack Coan, the senior quarterback who transferred to Notre Dame from Wisconsin in 2021, missed the entire 2020 campaign when he suffered a non-contact foot injury during practice in October for which he underwent surgery four days later. Rather than return to the Badgers or enter his name into the NFL draft, the Sayville, NY native chose to transfer and compete for the starting quarterback position at Notre Dame. The 6'-3" 222-lb senior began his Irish career in style completing 26-of-35 passes for 366 yards and four touchdowns in the nationally televised 38-35 overtime win over Florida State. The following week he came back onto the field after dislocating a finger to throw the game-winning touchdown with 1:09 left on the clock against Toledo. He started all 12 games for the Irish, leading them to an 11-1 record, a No. 5 national ranking and an appearance in the PlayStation® Fiesta Bowl. **STATS: Passing 215-317- 2641 yards - 20 TD –6 INT (67.8%)**

Ryan Hubley, a senior wide receiver for Johns Hopkins University, was on pace in 2019 to surpass his remarkable 83-catch sophomore campaign when, in the sixth game of the season he fractured his right fibula and left collarbone on the same play. Although he avoided surgery, the injuries made rehabilitation especially challenging since he couldn't put weight on his injured leg or use crutches due to the sling needed to support his fractured collarbone. The Malvern, Pennsylvania native had more than 20 months to rehabilitate. And when he returned, the 5-foot-7, 165-pound graduate-student picked up right where he left off with 100-yards receiving in two of the first three games this season. He finished his career with 230 receptions, 2644 yards, 16 TD in 39 games. Ryan is now a three-time All-Centennial Conference receiver earning 1st Team honors in 2018 and 2021 and 2nd Team in 2019. **STATS: 77 receptions 915 yards 5 TDs**

Aidan Hutchinson a senior defensive end for the University of Michigan, suffered a season-ending ankle injury on the opening possession of the third game of the 2020 season. A captain at the time, his injury greatly impacted the Wolverines defense. The 6'-6" 266-lb defensive end worked hard to get back to his pre-injury level of performance and not surprisingly the Plymouth, Michigan native was once again voted a team captain by his teammates. He set a Michigan season record for sacks and set his career-high with three sacks at Penn State (Nov. 13) and in the Big

Ten East Division title-clinching win against Ohio State (Nov. 27). **STATS: 58 tackles, 15.5 TFL 14 Sacks 2 FF, 1 FR, 3 PBU 10 QBH**

McKenzie Milton, a senior quarterback at Florida State University suffered a catastrophic knee injury while playing for the University of Central Florida in a game at South Florida on Nov. 23, 2018. A two-time Heisman Trophy candidate at the time, the native of Kapolei, Hawaii suffered artery and nerve damage to his leg, a dislocated knee and multiple torn ligaments and tendons. He nearly had his right leg amputated after the helmet-to-knee hit caused a lack of blood flow to his leg. Doctors removed a vein from his left leg to help create a new artery for his right leg to restore blood flow and successfully save this leg. The main goal from the surgeons who operated on him was for him to hopefully one day walk without a limp and without pain. After eight surgical procedures, he persevered through more than 1,000 days of rehabilitation, and in December 2020, transferred to Florida State. As if his story was not remarkable enough, his return to the field seemed straight from a Hollywood script. In the season-opener - a nationally televised game versus Notre Dame, FSU quarterback Jordan Travis was forced to leave the game when his helmet was knocked off with 9:09 left in the game. Milton stepped in and never left, leading the Seminoles on two scoring drives to force overtime against the ninth-ranked team in the country. The performance earned the 5-foot-11 signal-caller starting assignments the next four weeks versus Jacksonville State, Wake Forest, Louisville, and NC State. **STATS: Passing: 81-139- 775 yards - 3 TD – 6 INT (58.3%)**

Cameron Rising, a sophomore quarterback for the University of Utah, suffered a season-ending injury on just the fourth drive of his first college game last November versus USC. Following off-season surgery and extensive rehabilitation, he secured the backup position behind Baylor transfer Charlie Brewer. With only one shortened career game and starting the season as a back-up, the Ventura, California native was voted a team captain by his teammates. After the Utes split their first two games this season, he took the field with the Utes trailing San Diego State 24-10 with 5:24 left in the third quarter and led an improbable comeback before falling 33-31 in triple overtime. The performance -- 19-of-32 (0 INT) with 153 passing yards and three passing TDs -- earned the 6-foot-2, 220-pound redshirt sophomore the starting position. He led the Utes an 9-1 record including the Pac-12 Championship Game win over Oregon, a No. 11 national ranking, and the school's first ever appearance in the Rose Bowl. **STATS: Passing: 187-298- 2279 Yards - 18 TD – 5 INT (62.7%) Rushing: 63-407-5 TD**

Avery Samuels, a redshirt sophomore offensive lineman for Stetson University, sat out the 2020-21 season as seven members of his family died from COVID-19. Following the death of his uncle last April and six other relatives in the months that followed, he decided to sit out of the season and spend the time with his family. Despite the family tragedy, the 6-foot-4, 315-pound psychology major returned to the Hatters this summer and worked his way back onto the field each week. He played in eight of 10 games, starting three. He was in for 341 snaps on offense and graded out at 95.5 percent for the season.

J.J. Weaver, a sophomore linebacker for the University of Kentucky, was having a breakout freshman campaign with 33.5 tackles and 6.5 tackles for loss (TFL) through nine games when he suffered a torn ACL in his right knee against Florida last November. Despite missing the final two games, the redshirt freshman still earned All-SEC Freshman Team honors. The injury capped off

a very difficult year for the native of Louisville, Ky. who previously had lost his father to a murder and his high school coach Rob Reader to liver cancer. As a result, his challenging off-season included both the rehabilitation of his knee and undergoing counseling to deal with his grief. Both have been successful as he returned with both a strong knee and a clear head for the Wildcats' season-opener. The 6-foot-5, 241-pound outside linebacker rose to the occasion on Oct. 2 when he took the field against SEC-rival Florida, the same team he injured his knee against just 10 months ago. He helped the Wildcats upset the Gators in Lexington for the first time since 1986 with four tackles and his first career interception. Four weeks later against Tennessee, he tallied a career-high 2.5 sacks. Weaver helped UK finish the regular season 9-3, giving them nine wins for just the third time in the last 44 seasons. **STATS: 34 tackles 10 TFL 6 Sacks 2 INT 4 QBH**

Past winners of the Mayo Clinic Comeback Player of the Year Award have included: **2018** – Antwan Dixon (Kent State), Seth Simmer (Dartmouth), Antonio Wimbush (Carson-Newman); **2019** – Jake Luton (Oregon State), Drew Wilson (Georgia Southern), Octavion Wilson (Salisbury University); **2020** – Jarek Broussard (Colorado), Kenneth Horsey (Kentucky) and Silas Kelly (Coastal Carolina). For a complete list of past honorees and additional details on their remarkable comeback stories, visit www.Comeback-Player.com; follow via Twitter at [@ComebackPlayrFB](https://twitter.com/ComebackPlayrFB) via the hashtag #MayoClinicCPOY; and on Instagram at [@Comeback_Player_CFB](https://www.instagram.com/Comeback_Player_CFB). Mayo Clinic does not have any role in selecting the nominees, semifinalists or winners of the award.

About Mayo Clinic: [Mayo Clinic](http://www.MayoClinic.org) is a nonprofit organization committed to innovation in clinical practice, education and research, and providing compassion, expertise and answers to everyone who needs healing. Visit the [Mayo Clinic News Network](http://www.MayoClinic.org/NewsNetwork) for additional Mayo Clinic news. For information on COVID-19, including Mayo Clinic's Coronavirus Map tracking tool, which has 14-day forecasting on COVID-19 trends, visit the [Mayo Clinic COVID-19 Resource Center](http://www.MayoClinic.org/COVID-19ResourceCenter).

About CoSIDA (College Sports Information Directors of America): CoSIDA was founded in 1957 and is a 3,000+ member national organization comprised of the sports public relations, media relations and communications/information professionals throughout all levels of collegiate athletics in the United States and Canada. The organization is the second oldest management association in intercollegiate athletics. To learn more, visit [cosida.com](http://www.cosida.com).

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