



THE CROATIAN AMERICAN SPORTS HALL OF FAME

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UFC World Champion Stipe Miocic Headlines Croatian American Sports Hall of Fame Induction Class

Washington, D.C. — Two-time UFC Heavyweight World Champion Stipe Miocic — the son of Croatian immigrants and widely regarded as the greatest heavyweight in the history of mixed martial arts — headlines the 2026 Croatian American Sports Hall of Fame (CAS-HOF) Induction Class, set to be enshrined in Cleveland on Saturday, Oct. 24. The CAS-HOF, in partnership with the National Federation of Croatian Americans Cultural Foundation and its major partner, the Croatian Fraternal Union, today announced its eight newest honorees.

The CAS-HOF recognizes Croatian Americans who have achieved national distinction through extraordinary accomplishments in sports. This year's class exemplifies that tradition at the highest level, bringing together legends from basketball, baseball, football, mixed martial arts, and Masters Olympia bodybuilding. From Miocic's record-setting UFC heavyweight title reigns to Heisman Trophy glory and Gold Glove excellence, these eight inductees represent the pinnacle of athletic achievement — and a deep, shared pride in their Croatian heritage.

"This 2026 induction class is among the most accomplished in our history," said Steve Rukavina, CAS-HOF Co-Chairman and President of the National Federation of Croatian Americans Cultural Foundation. "From world champions to Heisman Trophy winners and Hall of Famers, these Croatian American sports legends will be enshrined in Cleveland that evening — a night that honors not only their extraordinary careers, but the heritage that shaped them."

The CAS-HOF Selection Committee announced the following 2026 inductees.

Meri Abbado (Bodybuilding) is a Croatian American IFBB professional bodybuilder raised in Split, Croatia. She began competing at 46, earned her IFBB Pro Card in 2017, and has since won 26 IFBB Pro titles. A two-time Masters World Champion (2022, 2024), she has qualified twice for the Masters Olympia competition (2023, 2025).



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Fred Arbanas (Football), born 1939, in Detroit, Michigan, was a standout tight end for the Dallas Texans and Kansas City Chiefs. A six-time All-AFL selection and AFL All-Time Team member, he posted 198 receptions, 3,101 yards, and 34 touchdowns, helping win three AFL championships and Super Bowl IV. After retiring, he served for decades as a Jackson County, Missouri legislator.

Gary Beban (Football), born 1946, in San Francisco, was one of UCLA's greatest quarterbacks. Nicknamed "The Great One," he led UCLA to a 24-5-2 record (1965-1967) and delivered a historic 1966 Rose Bowl win over top-ranked Michigan State. In 1967, he won the Heisman Trophy, Maxwell Award, and unanimous All-America honors before enjoying a brief NFL career with Washington.

Bobby Grich (Baseball), born 1949, in Muskegon, Michigan, was an elite second baseman for the Baltimore Orioles and California Angels. A six-time All-Star, four-time Gold Glove winner, and Silver Slugger, he led the AL in home runs in 1981. Over 17 seasons, he posted a .266 average, 224 home runs, and 864 RBI, with a 71 WAR placing him statistically alongside Hall of Famers.

Jack Marin (Basketball) from Farrell, Pennsylvania, was a valedictorian, All-State player, and NBA All-Star. He led Duke to Final Four appearances in 1964 and 1966, then was drafted fifth overall by the Baltimore Bullets. A two-time NBA All-Star (1972, 1973) known as "Mr. Consistency," he is enshrined in multiple Halls of Fame, including at Duke, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania.

Stipe Miocic (Mixed Martial Arts), born in Euclid, Ohio, to Croatian immigrant parents, is a two-time UFC Heavyweight Champion and is widely regarded as the greatest heavyweight in the sport's history. He holds records for most wins in heavyweight title fights and one of the longest title defense streaks. Before MMA, Miocic was a Golden Gloves boxing champion and NCAA Division I wrestler at Cleveland State, bringing rare athletic versatility to his MMA dominance.



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Rob Ninkovich (Football), born Feb.1, 1984, in Blue Island, Illinois, is a former NFL linebacker of Croatian descent. After earning All-Big Ten honors at Purdue, he was drafted in 2006 and went on to spend eight seasons with the New England Patriots, winning two Super Bowls. He retired in 2017 and was named to the Patriots All-Dynasty Team (2001–2019).

Johnny Pesky (Baseball), born John Michael Paveskovich, in 1919, Portland, Oregon, was a beloved Boston Red Sox icon and son of Croatian immigrants. A standout infielder with a .307 career average, he led the AL in hits his first three seasons. His 61-year association with the Red Sox as player, manager, coach, and broadcaster made him a Fenway institution; his No. 6 was retired in 2008. The Red Sox named their right field foul pole in Fenway Park, the Pesky Pole. The 2026 CAS-HOF Selection Committee members are: Derek Hohn, Jerome Jurenovich, Jim Kresnik, Ken Krsolovic, Dino Mattessich, Vedran Joseph Nazor, Jim Berklan, Tom Steich, Bill Cumbelich and Steve Rukavina.

The 2026 induction ceremony to the Croatian American Sports Hall of Fame will take place on Saturday, Oct. 24th at the American Croatian Lodge in Eastlake, Ohio. Banquet tickets will go on sale in June.

The Four Points by Sheraton Eastlake at 35000 Curtis Boulevard will be the host hotel for out-of-town guests.

The CAS-HOF Committee is proud to announce that longtime sports broadcaster Jerome Jurenovich will serve as the Master of Ceremonies for the Oct. 24th induction ceremony banquet dinner.

Please contact the CAS-HOF Co-Chairmen, Steve Rukavina at: sjrukavina@gmail.com or Vedran Joseph Nazor at: croatianamericansportshof@gmail.com with any questions and visit our CAS-HOF website at: croatianamericansports.com.