

ATHENS ACADEMY STUDENT-ATHLETE NAMED GATORADE GEORGIA BOYS CROSS COUNTRY RUNNER OF THE YEAR

CHICAGO (February 10, 2020) — In its 35th year of honoring the nation's best high school athletes, The Gatorade Company today announced Graham Blanks of Athens Academy as its 2019-20 Gatorade Georgia Boys Cross Country Runner of the Year. Blanks is the first Gatorade Georgia Boys Cross Country Runner of the Year to be chosen from Athens Academy.

The award, which recognizes not only outstanding athletic excellence, but also high standards of academic achievement and exemplary character demonstrated on and off the field, distinguishes Blanks as Georgia's best high school boys cross country runner. Now a finalist for the prestigious Gatorade National Boys Cross Country Runner of the Year award to be announced in February, Blanks joins an elite alumni association of past state award-winners in 12 sports, including Lukas Verzbicas (2010-11, 2009-10 Carl Sandburg High School, Orland Park, Ill.), Megan Goethals (2009-10, Rochester High School, Rochester Hills, Mich.), Jordan Hasay (2008-09, Mission College Preparatory Catholic High School, San Luis Obispo, Calif.) and Chris Derrick (2007-08, Neuqua Valley High School, Naperville, Ill.).

The 6-foot, 135-pound senior distance talent won the NXN Southeast Regional championship qualifier this past season, breaking the tape in 14:57.70. Only the second Georgia prep in history, male or female, to qualify for a national championship race—and the first since 1987—Blanks crossed the line 28th at the national NXN Final, falling 4.4 seconds shy of All-American status. He also became the state's first runner to win the prestigious Great American Cross Country Festival, clocking a personal-best 5K time of 14:45.60 in the Race of Champions to finish 10 seconds ahead of his next-closest competitor. A two-time 1A Private state champion, a four-time All-State honoree and the 2019 Georgia Cross Country Coaches Association Runner of the Year, he set an all-class meet record at the GHSA State XC Championships, capturing the individual title in 15:33.32 and leading the Spartans to fifth-place as a team.

A Model UN participant and co-founder of the school's environmental club, Blanks coordinates weekend roadside and riverbank cleanups and helps lead trash collection efforts following home football games. "Graham concluded his high school cross country career as one of the best runners in state history," said Athens Academy co-head coach Geoffrey Walton. "However, while many runners strive to win a race and others strive to be the best in the state, Graham strives to be the best in the country. He has left his mark as a modest and hard-working leader who helped create a winning atmosphere for younger runners on the team. His legacy will be as much about the fun and joy of running as the fast times on the record board."

Blanks has maintained a 4.02 GPA in the classroom. He will attend Harvard University this fall, where he will run cross country as well as track and field.

The [Gatorade Player of the Year](#) program annually recognizes one winner in the District of Columbia and each of the 50 states that sanction high school football, girls volleyball, boys and girls cross country, boys and girls basketball, boys and girls soccer, baseball, softball, and boys and girls track and field, and awards one National Player of the Year in each sport. From the 12 national winners, one male and one female athlete are each named Gatorade High School Athlete of the Year. In all, 607 athletes are honored each year.

Blanks joins recent Gatorade Georgia Boys Cross Country Runner of the Year Kyle Harkabus (2018-19, East Coweta High School), Sam Bowers (2017-18, Milton High School), Jacob McLeod (2016-17, Trinity Christian School), Frank Pittman (2015-16, Marist School) and Reilly Friedman (2014-15, The Galloway School), among the state's list of former award winners.

As a part of Gatorade's cause marketing platform "Play it Forward," Blanks has the opportunity to award a \$1,000 grant to a local or national youth sports organization of his choosing. He is also eligible to submit an essay to win one of twelve \$10,000 spotlight grants for the organization of choice, which will be announced throughout the year.

Since the program's inception in 1985, Gatorade Player of the Year award recipients have won hundreds of professional and college championships, and many have also turned into pillars in their communities, becoming coaches, business owners and educators.

To learn more about the Gatorade Player of the Year program, check out past winners or to nominate student-athletes, visit www.Gatorade.com/POY, on Facebook at www.facebook.com/GatoradePOY or follow us on Twitter at www.twitter.com/Gatorade.