

## **WESLEYAN CHRISTIAN ACADEMY STUDENT-ATHLETE NAMED GATORADE NORTH CAROLINA VOLLEYBALL PLAYER OF THE YEAR**

CHICAGO (January 9, 2026) — In its 41<sup>st</sup> year celebrating the nation's best high school athletes, Gatorade today announced Nejari Crooks of Wesleyan Christian Academy is the 2025-26 Gatorade North Carolina Volleyball Player of the Year.

Gatorade Player of the Year is the top honor in high school sports, celebrating the nation's best high school athletes for their excellence in sport, academics and community. The award recognizes Crooks as North Carolina's best high school volleyball player, and she joins an elite legacy that spans professional athletes and coaches to CEOs, such as Kerri Walsh Jennings (1995-96, Archbishop Mitty High School, CA), April Ross (1999-00, Newport Harbor High School, CA) and Campbell Flynn (2024-25, Mercy High School, MI).

The 6-foot junior outside hitter and setter compiled 405 kills and 351 assists this past season leading the Trojans (21-3) to the NCISSA Class 4A state semifinals. Crooks also recorded 216 digs, 104 service aces and 65 blocks while posting a .528 kill percentage and a .426 hitting percentage. An American Volleyball Coaches Association First Team All-American, Crooks was a member of the USA Volleyball Under-19 Women's National Team that won the gold medal at the Pan American Cup in Canada last June. She concluded her junior year with 966 assists and 961 kills in her prep volleyball career.

A member of the Wesleyan Christian Beta Club and Trojan Law Club, Crooks has volunteered locally as part of multiple community service initiatives in association with her school's National Honor Society. "Nejari is one of the most exceptional volleyball players in the state not simply because of her talent, but because of her rare ability to dominate the game while elevating everyone around her," said Sandy Merkel-DeJames, head coach of the Ravenscroft School. "She excels at two of the most critical positions on the court, setter and opposite, and ranks among the very best in North Carolina at both."

Crooks has maintained a weighted 4.84 GPA in the classroom. She has made a verbal commitment to receive athletic aid to play volleyball at Pennsylvania State University beginning in the fall of 2027.

The [Gatorade Player of the Year](#) program annually recognizes one state winner from each of the 50 states and Washington D.C., in 12 different sports: football, girls volleyball, boys and girls cross country, boys and girls basketball, baseball, softball, boys and girls soccer, and boys and girls track & field. In total, 610 high school athletes are honored each year. From the pool of state winners, one national winner is selected in each of the 12 sports. The selection process is administered by the Gatorade Player of the Year Selection Committee, which leverages experts including coaches, scouts, media and others as sources to help evaluate and determine the winners in each sport.

As part of Gatorade's commitment to breaking down barriers in sport, every Player of the Year also receives a grant to donate to a social impact partner. To date, the Gatorade Player of the Year program has provided more than \$6.4 million in grants to winners across more than 2,200 organizations.

To learn more about the Gatorade Player of the Year program, check out past winners or to nominate student-athletes, visit [playeroftheyear.gatorade.com](https://playeroftheyear.gatorade.com) or follow us on social media on Instagram at [instagram.com/Gatorade](https://instagram.com/Gatorade), Facebook at [facebook.com/GatoradePOY](https://facebook.com/GatoradePOY) and X (Twitter) at [x.com/Gatorade](https://x.com/Gatorade).

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