

COOPER HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT-ATHLETE NAMED GATORADE KENTUCKY BOYS CROSS COUNTRY PLAYER OF THE YEAR

CHICAGO (February 13, 2026) — In its 41st year celebrating the nation's best high school athletes, Gatorade today announced Paul Van Laningham of Cooper High School is the 2025-26 Gatorade Kentucky Boys Cross Country 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 Van Laningham as Kentucky's best high school boys cross country athlete, and he joins an elite legacy that spans professional athletes and coaches to CEOs, such as Lukas Verzbicas (2009-10 & 2010-11, Carl Sandburg High School, IL) Edward Cheserek (2012-13, Saint Benedict's Preparatory School, NJ) and Charlie Vause (2024-25, Rio Rancho High School, NM).

The 5-foot-7, 125-pound senior took sixth at the national Brooks XC Championships and fifth at the Brooks South Regional this past season, concluding the year ranked No. 9 nationally in both the MileSplit50 and the Dyestat 100. He also broke the tape at the Class 3A state meet, clocking the fastest all-class time of the day in 15:01.2 and leading the Jaguars to fourth place as a team. A Brooks XC Second Team All-American and First Team All-Region honoree, he was the state's top finisher at the Trinity/Valkyrie Invitational, taking third in a personal-best 14:38.5.

A Best of Show winner in the 2024 Kentucky Duck Stamp Competition, Van Laningham is a member of his Antioch United Methodist Church youth group and has completed a service-mission trip to South Dakota, where he repaired houses. He has also donated his time as a Freshman Mentor Program leader at this school. "Paul Van Laningham won seven of 11 races at 5K last fall and his lowest finish was sixth at Brooks XC nationals," said Rich Gonzalez, editor of PrepCalTrack. "He submitted impressive runs at multiple high-profile invitationals and clocked four times under 15 minutes along with another four under 15:20."

Van Laningham has maintained a weighted 4.63 GPA in the classroom. He has signed a written letter of athletic aid to run at the University of Wisconsin this fall.

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 or follow us on social media on Instagram at [instagram.com/Gatorade](https://www.instagram.com/Gatorade), Facebook at [facebook.com/GatoradePOY](https://www.facebook.com/GatoradePOY) and X(Twitter) at [x.com/Gatorade](https://www.x.com/Gatorade).

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