

HOUGH HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT-ATHLETE NAMED GATORADE NORTH CAROLINA GIRLS SOCCER PLAYER OF THE YEAR

CHICAGO (June 18, 2026) — In its 41st year celebrating the nation’s best high school athletes, Gatorade today announced Riley Pickels of Hough High School is the 2025-26 Gatorade North Carolina Girls Soccer 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 Pickels as North Carolina’s best high school girls soccer player, and she joins an elite legacy that spans professional athletes and coaches to CEOs, such as Mallory Swanson (2014-15, Mountain Vista High School, Colorado), Riley Jackson (2021-22, Blessed Trinity Catholic High School, Georgia) and Addison Halpern (2024-25, Rutgers Preparatory School, New Jersey).

The 5-foot-7 senior goalkeeper led the Huskies (22-4) to the Class 8A state semifinals this past season. Pickels compiled a record of 22-3 in net with 121 saves on 128 shots, posting a save percentage of 94.5. The Greater Charlotte Conference Goalkeeper of the Year, she recorded 17 shutouts, adding three goals and two assists offensively to earn 8A All-State recognition.

A member of the Hough High School chapter of the National Honor Society, Pickels has volunteered locally as a Bags of Hope Neighborhood Ambassador, helping to organize food-donation drives that brought in more than 50,000 pounds of provisions. She has also donated her time at Cornelius Elementary School, helping second grade students with their math and science in addition to organizing classroom libraries. “If I were putting together the best team for the state, my first pick would be Riley Pickels since she is an absolute game-changer,” said Kim Montgomery, head coach at Ardrey Kell High School. “Amazing shot-blocker, fantastic with her feet, absolute commanding presence on the field.”

Pickels has maintained a 4.54 weighted GPA in the classroom. She has signed a written letter of athletic aid to play soccer on scholarship at North Carolina State University 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.

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