

UNION CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT-ATHLETE NAMED GATORADE NEW JERSEY GIRLS TRACK AND FIELD PLAYER OF THE YEAR

CHICAGO (June 25, 2026) — In its 41st year celebrating the nation’s best high school athletes, Gatorade today announced Paige Sheppard of Union Catholic High School is the 2025-26 Gatorade New Jersey Girls Track and Field 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 Sheppard as New Jersey’s best high school girls track and field athlete and she joins an elite legacy that spans professional athletes and coaches to CEOs, such as Sanya Richards (2001-02, St. Thomas Aquinas High School, Florida), Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone (2015-16 & 2016-17, Union Catholic Regional High School, New Jersey) and Jane Hedengren (2024-25, Timpview High School, Utah).

The 5-foot-5 junior middle-distance and distance talent won the 800-meter run at the Brooks PR Invitational this past season. Sheppard’s time of 2:00.65 ranked No. 1 nationally among prep girls competitors in 2026 and No. 7 in prep history. She won the 800 and 1600 at the Non-Public A state meet in addition to winning gold in the 1600 at the Meet of Champions. Her top 1600 time of 4:28.77 at the Holmdel Twilight Series Night of 1600s also ranked No. 1 nationally and sits at No. 6 on the all-time list. A two-time New Jersey Girls Cross Country Runner of the Year, she capped her spring by winning the 800 at the USATF Under-20 Championships with a time of 2:01.76, earning herself a berth in the Under-20 World Championships in August.

Sheppard is a founding member of Union Catholic’s Care Club, which serves individuals and families affected by natural disasters. She has volunteered locally with Operation Smile and as a youth track coach in addition to donating her time making holiday cards for cancer patients through the Student Movement Against Cancer network. “For years, Paige Sheppard’s mere raw talent was more than enough to carry her to age-group national stardom in the club space,” said Rich Gonzalez, PrepCalTrack editor. “Now that her racing moxie has begun catching up to those weapons, she’s begun elevating herself to international prominence.”

Sheppard has maintained an A average in the classroom. She will begin her senior year of high school 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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