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CARL SANDBURG HIGH SCHOOL STANDOUT NAMED GATORADE ILLINOIS BOYS CROSS COUNTRY RUNNER OF THE YEAR

CHICAGO (January 20, 2011) — In its 26th year of honoring the nation's best high school athletes, The Gatorade Company, in collaboration with ESPN RISE, today announced **Lukas Verzbicas of Carl Sandburg High School** as its **2010-11 Gatorade Illinois Boys Cross Country Runner of the Year**. Verzbicas is the first Gatorade Illinois Boys Cross Country Runner of the Year to be chosen from Carl Sandburg High School.

The award, which recognizes not only outstanding athletic excellence, but also high standards of academic achievement and exemplary character demonstrated on and off the racecourse, distinguishes Verzbicas as Illinois'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 January, Verzbicas joins an elite alumni association of past state award-winners in 12 sports, including Ryan Hall (1999-00, 2000-01, Big Bear HS, Calif.), Derek Jeter (1991-92, Kalamazoo HS, Mich.), Candace Parker (2001-02, Naperville Central HS, Ill.), Kevin Garnett (1992-93, Maudlin HS, S.C.), Abby Wambach (1997-98, Our Lady of Mercy, N.Y.) and Mark Sanchez (2004-05, Mission Viejo HS, Calif.).

The 6-foot senior won his second consecutive national Foot Locker Cross Country Championship with a time of 14:59, and also captured the Nike Cross Nationals Final title in 15:59.2, becoming the first prep runner to ever win both events in the same season. The returning Gatorade National Boys Cross Country Runner of the Year, Verzbicas was undefeated this past season, also earning victories at the NXN Midwest Regional championships, the Foot Locker Midwest Regional championships, the Southwest Suburban Conference Championships, the Lockport Sectional Championships and the Nike Northside-Southside Challenge.

Verzbicas has maintained a 3.25 GPA in the classroom. Recently voted Alietivis.com News Media & Publishing "2010 Best American Lithuanian" by online ballot, he is a devoted parishioner of the Blessed Jurgis Matulaitis Lithuanian Catholic Mission community and has volunteered locally mentoring youth triathletes and runners on behalf of the Multisport Madness Triathlon Club.

"Lukas undoubtedly moved himself into the ultra-elite class of prep distance runners with an unbeaten and record-setting season, while heading up the deepest national class of harriers in memory," said ESPN RISE/DyestatCal Editor Rich Gonzalez. "His unprecedented Nike Cross Nationals/Foot Locker double also establishes him as the sport's first ever three-time national champion and his career championship resume elevates him onto the same performance tier as two legendary preps, (two-time Gatorade State Track & Field Athlete of the Year winners) Dathan Ritzenhein and Chris Solinsky, one who has gone on to become an Olympian in the marathon and the other an American record-holder at 10,000 meters."

Verzbicas remains undecided upon a collegiate destination.

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 & field, and awards one National Player of the Year in each sport. The selection process is administered by ESPN RISE and the Gatorade high school sports leadership team, which work with top sport-specific experts and a media advisory board of accomplished, veteran prep sports journalists to determine the state winners in each sport.

Two-time winner Verzbicas joins Gatorade Illinois Boys Cross Country Runners of the Year Steve Sulkin (2008-09, York), and Chris Derrick (2007-08, Neuqua Valley) as athletes who have won the cross country award since its inception in 2007.

To keep up to date on the latest happenings, become a fan of Gatorade Player of the Year on Facebook and follow us on Twitter. For more on the Gatorade Player of the Year program, including nomination information, a complete list of past winners, and the announcement of the Gatorade National Player of the Year, visit playeroftheyear.gatorade.com.

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