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**MCMINN COUNTY HIGH SCHOOL STANDOUT NAMED
GATORADE TENNESSEE GIRLS CROSS COUNTRY RUNNER OF THE YEAR**

CHICAGO (January 12, 2012) — In its 27th year of honoring the nation's best high school athletes, The Gatorade Company, in collaboration with ESPN HS, today announced Haley Ward of McMinn County High School as its 2011-12 Gatorade Tennessee Girls Cross Country Runner of the Year. Ward is the first Gatorade Tennessee Girls Cross Country Runner of the Year to be chosen from McMinn County 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 Ward as Tennessee's best high school girls cross country runner. Now a finalist for the prestigious Gatorade National Girls Cross Country Runner of the Year award to be announced in January, Ward 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.), Abby Wambach (1997-98, Our Lady of Mercy, N.Y.) and Mark Sanchez (2004-05, Mission Viejo HS, Calif.).

The 5-foot-4 junior raced to the Class AAA individual state championship this past season with a time of 18:41.83. The 2011 Prep Xtra Girls Cross Country Runner of the Year, Ward also won the Class AAA Region 3 meet in 19:36.40, crossing the line 37 seconds ahead of her next-closest competitor.

Ward has maintained a 3.8 GPA in the classroom. A standout varsity soccer and basketball player, she has volunteered locally as part of multiple community service initiatives on behalf of the National Honor Society.

"Haley Ward is an exceptional competitor," said Peter Mueller, head coach of rival Ravenwood High. "I watched her perform at the state meet and she dominated in Class AAA, which is the toughest class in the state."

Ward will begin her senior year of high school this fall.

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 HS 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.

Ward joins Gatorade Tennessee Girls Cross Country Runners of the Year Joanna Thompson (2010-11, Knoxville Catholic High School), Megan Ferowich (2009-10, Knoxville Catholic), and Kathy Kroeger (2008-09 & 2007-08, Independence) 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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