

Contact: Lauren Rollins (312-729-3607)

**MERRIMACK VALLEY HIGH SCHOOL STANDOUT NAMED
GATORADE NEW HAMPSHIRE BOYS CROSS COUNTRY RUNNER OF THE YEAR**

CHICAGO (January 23, 2012) — In its 27th year of honoring the nation's best high school athletes, The Gatorade Company, in collaboration with ESPNHS, today announced Colton Ham of Merrimack Valley HS as its 2011-12 Gatorade New Hampshire Boys Cross Country Runner of the Year. Ham is the first Gatorade New Hampshire Boys Cross Country Runner of the Year to be chosen from Merrimack Valley HS.

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 Ham as New Hampshire'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, Ham 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 raced to the Division 2 individual state championship this past season with a time of 16:10, leading the Pride to fourth place as a team. A First Team All-State selection as named by the New Hampshire Union Leader, Ham placed seventh at the Meet of Champions in 15:58.50 and finished 25th at the New England Cross Country Championships in 16:25. Ham took second in the Manchester Invitational Large School competition this past fall, crossing the line in 16:24. He recorded a third-place finish at the 2010 Division 2 state meet as a junior.

Ham has maintained a B average in the classroom. In addition to donating his time as a youth running instructor, he has volunteered locally as part of charitable running events, an elementary school health fair and tornado cleanup efforts.

"Colton's success came as a result of years of hard work and dedication to the sport of distance running," said Merrimack Valley head coach Dave Irving. "He improved consistently each year, each year surpassing others who had previously been ahead of him. His continued improvement is his most impressive quality—that fact that he exemplifies the success that continued focus, goal-setting, and hard work can bring you.

Ham 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 ESPNHS 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.

Ham joins Gatorade New Hampshire Boys Cross Country Runners of the Year Samuel Gagnon (2010-11, Manchester Central High School), Eric Jenkins (2009-10, Portsmouth), Eric Malnati (2008-09, Fall Mountain Regional), and Alex McGrath (2007-08, ConVal) 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.

###