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HERITAGE HIGH SCHOOL STANDOUT NAMED GATORADE VIRGINIA GIRLS CROSS COUNTRY RUNNER OF THE YEAR

CHICAGO (January 14, 2016) — In its 31st year of honoring the nation's best high school athletes, The Gatorade Company, in collaboration with USA TODAY High School Sports, today announced Weini Kelati of Heritage High School as its 2015-16 Gatorade Virginia Girls Cross Country Runner of the Year. Kelati is the first Gatorade Virginia Girls Cross Country Runner of the Year to be chosen from Heritage 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 Kelati as Virginia'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, Kelati 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 junior won the Foot Locker Cross Country Championships national title with a time of 17:09.7, despite running with a leg injury. Kelati also won the Group 4A state title in 17:22, leading the Lions to the state championship as a team. She was undefeated in 2015, setting course records in four of her eight races, including at the Third Battle Invitational, where her time of 16:29 was the fastest 5K ever recorded by a girl at an in-state race.

Kelati has maintained a 3.20 GPA in the classroom. A native of Eritrea in northeast Africa, she has volunteered locally on behalf of multiple community-service initiatives in association her church.

"Weini is such a positive, resilient young lady who has been through some big changes since coming to the United States," said Joan Hunter, co-head coach of Loudoun Valley High School. "After some initial adjustment to so many new things, Weini has really started to thrive. I think her ability to persevere through difficult life changes makes her incredibly mentally tough, which certainly translates to her racing and training."

Kelati 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 the Gatorade high school sports leadership team in partnership with [USA TODAY High School Sports](#), 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.

Kelati joins Gatorade Virginia Girls Cross Country Runners of the Year Libby Davidson (2014-15, E.C. Glass High School), Caroline Alcorta (2013-14, West Springfield High School), Sophie Chase (2012-13 & 2011-12, Lake Braddock High School), Annie LeHardy (2010-11, Hidden Valley High School), Kathleen Stevens (2009-10, Blacksburg), Megan Marsico (2008-09, Glenvar), and Kathleen Lautzenheiser (2007-08, Midlothian) 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 www.gatorade.com/poy.

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