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**SHAWNEE MISSION NORTH HIGH SCHOOL STANDOUT NAMED
GATORADE KANSAS BOYS CROSS COUNTRY RUNNER OF THE YEAR**

CHICAGO (January 22, 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 Belesti Akalu of Shawnee Mission North High School as its 2015-16 Gatorade Kansas Boys Cross Country Runner of the Year. Akalu is the first Gatorade Kansas Boys Cross Country Runner of the Year to be chosen from Shawnee Mission North 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 Akalu as Kansas'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, Akalu 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 5-foot-7, 110-pound senior distance runner raced to the Class 6A individual state championship with a time of 15:43.40 this past season, leading the Indians to fifth place as a team. The All-Metro Cross Country Runner of the Year as named by the Kansas City Star, Akalu finished 21st at the Nike Cross Nationals Heartland Regional championships in 15:45.60. His winning time of 15:19 at the Class 6A regional championships in Lawrence was the state's fastest 5K among prep competitors in 2015.

Akalu has maintained a 3.34 weighted GPA in the classroom. In addition to serving as a tutor for his younger siblings and working a part-time job, he has volunteered at the Kidane Mihret Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

"Belesti was hands down the most dominant runner I saw from Kansas this year, and it's amazing to see what he accomplished having never run cross country before this year," said Jeff Onnen, head coach at rival Shawnee Mission West High. "I think that speaks not just to his talent, but also to his level of dedication and commitment."

Akalu will attend Iowa Central Community College in the fall, where he will run cross country.

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.

Akalu joins Gatorade Kansas Boys Cross Country Runners of the Year Stuart McNutt (2014-15 & 2013-14, Blue Valley West High School), Colton Donahue (2012-13, Blue Valley High School), Jacob Morgan (2011-12, Washburn Rural High School), Evan Landes (2010-11, Mulvane High School), Roy Wedge (2009-10, Lawrence High School), PJ Greer (2008-09, Saint Thomas Aquinas High School), and Bryce Volz (2007-08, Bishop Carroll Catholic High School) 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.