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**STAPLES HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT-ATHLETE NAMED  
GATORADE CONNECTICUT BOYS CROSS COUNTRY RUNNER OF THE YEAR**

CHICAGO (January 30, 2017) — In its 32<sup>nd</sup> year of honoring the nation's best high school athletes, The Gatorade Company, today announced Zakeer Ahmad of Staples High School as its 2016-17 Gatorade Connecticut Boys Cross Country Runner of the Year. Ahmad is the second Gatorade Connecticut Boys Cross Country Runner of the Year to be chosen from Staples 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 Ahmad as Connecticut'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, Ahmad joins an elite alumni association of past state award-winners in 12 sports, including Lukas Verzbicas (2010-11, 2009-10 Carl Sandburg, Orland Park, Ill.), Megan Goethals (2009-10, Rochester, Rochester Hills, Mich.), Jordan Hasay (2008-09, Mission College Prep., San Luis Obispo, Calif.), Donn Cabral (2007-08, Glastonbury High School, Glastonbury, Conn.) and Chris Derrick (2007-08, Neuqua Valley, Naperville, Ill.).

The 6-foot, 150-pound senior raced to the State Open championship this past season with a time of 15:46. Ahmad also won the Class LL state championship in 15:49, leading the Wreckers to the state title as a team. He broke the tape at the Stratton Brook Invitational and the FCIAC championships, while placing third at the New England Cross Country Championships and sixth at the Nike Cross Nationals Northeast Regional championships.

Ahmad has volunteered locally on behalf of youth track programs and charity road races. "Zakeer is one of the best who has ever run for Staples High," said Staples coach Laddie Lawrence. "He's a knowledgeable, dedicated and determined competitor who has a true love for the sport."

Ahmad has maintained a 3.66 GPA in the classroom. He will attend the University of Pennsylvania this fall, where he will compete in cross country and track and field.

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 Player of the Year Selection Committee, 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.

Ahmad joins Gatorade Connecticut Boys Cross Country Runners of the Year Eric van der Els (2015-16, Brien McMahon High School), Alex Ostberg (2014-15 & 2013-14, Darien High School), Henry Wynne (2012-13, Staples High School), Connor Rog (2011-12 & 2010-11, Fairfield College Preparatory School), John Raneri (2009-10 & 2008-09, New Fairfield High School), and Donn Cabral (2007-08, Glastonbury High School) as athletes who have won the cross country award since its inception in 2007.

As a Gatorade Player of the Year, Ahmad will be able to select a national or local youth sports organization to receive a grant as part of the Gatorade Play It Forward program. Every Gatorade Player of the Year state winner receives a \$1,000 grant to donate and will have the opportunity to enter for an additional \$10,000 spotlight grant by writing a brief essay explaining why their selected organization deserves additional support. 12 spotlight grants - one for each sport - will be announced throughout the year.

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](http://www.gatorade.com/poy).

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