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**SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS STUDENT-ATHLETE NAMED
GATORADE KANSAS BOYS CROSS COUNTRY RUNNER OF THE YEAR**

CHICAGO (January 30, 2017) — In its 32nd year of honoring the nation's best high school athletes, The Gatorade Company, today announced Will Cole of Saint Thomas Aquinas as its 2016-17 Gatorade Kansas Boys Cross Country Runner of the Year. Cole is the second Gatorade Kansas Boys Cross Country Runner of the Year to be chosen from Saint Thomas Aquinas.

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 Cole 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, Cole 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 5-foot-9, 140-pound senior won the Class 5A state meet title this past season, breaking the tape in 15:49.80 to lead the Saints to a third straight state championship as a team. Cole went on to finish 17th at the Nike Cross Nationals Heartland Regional championships with a personal-best 5K time of 15:29.50, becoming the highest-placing Kansas finisher at the event and earning Third Team All-Heartland Region. He also ran the fastest three-mile time of the cross country season by an in-state competitor with a 15:08.20 at Iowa's Heartland Classic.

A peer mentor and a Student Ambassador for St. Thomas Aquinas, Cole has volunteered locally on behalf of Ronald McDonald House charities and the Gable Senior Living Center and Uplift, which helps serve the needy. He has also donated his time as a youth soccer official in addition to serving as part of his school's Key Club and STAPLES Club, which plans and celebrates masses. "Will is the vocal leader of a very strong team and has been a driving force in our program that has won the state meet three years in a row," said St. Thomas Aquinas head coach Justin Wrigley. "He is also very much a student of the sport. He follows running on all levels and seeks to learn more about it all the time. His passion and care for his team as well as his deep and burning desire to succeed also separate him from others."

Cole has maintained a 3.83 GPA in the classroom. He has signed a National Letter of Intent to run cross country on scholarship at the University of Notre Dame 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 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.

Cole joins Gatorade Kansas Boys Cross Country Runners of the Year Belesti Akalu (2015-16, Shawnee Mission North High School), 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.

As a Gatorade Player of the Year, Cole 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.

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