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**PORTSMOUTH HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT-ATHLETE NAMED
GATORADE RHODE ISLAND GIRLS TRACK & FIELD PLAYER OF THE YEAR**

CHICAGO (June 22, 2017) — In its 32nd year of honoring the nation's best high school athletes, The Gatorade Company, today announced Nikki Merrill of Portsmouth High School as its 2016-17 Gatorade Rhode Island Girls Track & Field Athlete of the Year. Merrill is the second Gatorade Rhode Island Girls Track & Field Athlete of the Year to be chosen from Portsmouth 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 track, distinguishes Merrill as Rhode Island's best high school girls track & field athlete. Now a finalist for the prestigious Gatorade National Girls Track & Field Athlete of the Year award to be announced in June, Merrill joins an elite alumni association of state track & field award-winners, including Lolo Jones (1997-98, Roosevelt High School, Iowa), Allyson Felix (2002-03, Los Angeles Baptist High School, Calif.), Robert Griffin III (2006-07, Copperas Cove High School, Texas), Grant Fisher (2013-14 & 2014-15, Grand Blanc High School, Mich.) and Candace Hill (2014-15, Rockdale County High School, Ga.).

The 5-foot-4 sophomore won the 800-meter run and the 1,500-meter run while anchoring the winning 4x800-meter relay team at the state meet this past season, leading the Patriots to a second-place finish as a team. Merrill's winning time in the 1,500 of 4:29.70 ranked as the nation's No. 12 among prep competitors this spring at the time of her selection. She finished third in the 800 at the New England Outdoor Championships, slashing nearly six seconds off her previous personal-best with a time of 2:09.12, which ranked No. 36 in the nation in 2017 at the time of her selection.

Merrill has volunteered locally at an animal shelter and she has donated her time as part of multiple initiatives through her school's Community Service Club. "Nikki Merrill is exceptional—watching her run is just plain fun," said Annmarie Gower, head coach of Barrington High. "She has a plan in mind and doesn't seem to stray from it. As she accelerates toward the end of her races, it is beautiful to watch."

Merrill has maintained a 3.58 GPA in the classroom. She will begin her junior 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 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.

Merrill joins recent Gatorade Rhode Island Girls Track & Field Athletes of the Year May Stern (2015-16, Classical High School), Quashira McIntosh (2014-15, Hope High School), Maddy Berkson (2013-14, 2012-13 & 2011-12, Classical High School), Aleide Fernandes (2010-11, Central Falls High School), Molly Reilly (2009-10, South Kingstown High School), Eryn Wheeler (2008-09, Coventry High School), and Victoria Flowers (2007-08 & 2006-07, Classical High School) among the state's list of former award winners.

As a Gatorade Player of the Year, Nikki 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.