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**MERCY HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT-ATHLETE NAMED
GATORADE® CONNECTICUT GIRLS BASKETBALL PLAYER OF THE YEAR**

CHICAGO (March 19, 2018) — In its 33rd year of honoring the nation's best high school athletes, The Gatorade Company, today announced Bella Santoro of Mercy High School as its 2017-18 Gatorade Connecticut Girls Basketball Player of the Year. Santoro is the first Gatorade Connecticut Girls Basketball Player of the Year to be chosen from Mercy 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 field, distinguishes Santoro as Connecticut's best high school girls basketball player. Now a finalist for the prestigious Gatorade National Girls Basketball Player of the Year award announced in March, Santoro joins an elite alumni association of past state girls basketball award-winners, including Maya Moore (2005-06 Collins Hill HS, Ga.), Rashanda McCants (2004-05, Asheville HS, N.C.), Candace Parker (2001-02, Naperville Central HS, Ill.), Diana Taurasi (1998-99 & 1999-00, Don Antonio Lugo HS, Calif.), Shyra Ely (1999-00, Ben Davis HS, Ind.) and Lisa Leslie (1988-89, Morningside HS, Calif.).

The 5-foot-10 senior guard had led the Tigers to a 26-1 record and a berth in the Class LL state championship game at the time of her selection. Santoro averaged 17.6 points, 7.0 rebounds, 3.3 assists and 2.9 steals through 27 games. A New Haven Register First Team All-State honoree, she is also a three-time All-Conference selection.

Student Council Treasurer in her school, Santoro has served as a peer minister and has volunteered locally on behalf of the Middlesex Youth ARC Club. "Bella Santoro is the engine that gets that team going," said Quinn O'Brien, head coach at Luralton Hall. "She has a great outside shot, a very good handle and she's very composed on the court."

Santoro has maintained a 3.45 GPA in the classroom. She has signed a National Letter of Intent to play basketball on scholarship at Stonehill College beginning 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.

Santoro joins recent Gatorade Connecticut Girls Basketball Players of the Year McKenna Dale (2016-17, E.O. Smith High School), Shaquana Edwards (2015-16, Weaver High School), Kiah Gillespie (2014-15 & 2013-14, Capital Prep), Sarah Veilleux (2012-13, RHAM High School), Kristin Schatzlein (2011-12, Tolland High School), Katie Mahoney (2010-11, Bacon Academy), Kastine Evans (2009-10, Norwich Free Academy), Symone Roberts (2008-09, New Britain High School), and Heather Buck (2007-08 & 2006-07, Stonington High School) among the state's list of former award winners.

As a Gatorade Player of the Year, Bella 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 the conversation on Twitter #GatoradePOY. 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 <http://playeroftheyear.gatorade.com/>.

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