

## **WESTERN MICHIGAN CHRISTIAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT-ATHLETE NAMED GATORADE MICHIGAN GIRLS CROSS COUNTRY RUNNER OF THE YEAR**

CHICAGO (January 28, 2019) — In its 34<sup>th</sup> year of honoring the nation's best high school athletes, The Gatorade Company, today announced Abby VanderKooi of Western Michigan Christian High School as its 2018-19 Gatorade Michigan Girls Cross Country Runner of the Year. VanderKooi is the first Gatorade Michigan Girls Cross Country Runner of the Year to be chosen from Western Michigan Christian 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 VanderKooi as Michigan's best high school girls cross country runner. Now a finalist for the prestigious Gatorade National Girls Cross Country Runner of the Year award to be announced in February, VanderKooi joins an elite alumni association of past state award-winners in 12 sports, including Lukas Verzbicas (2010-11, 2009-10 Carl Sandburg High School, Orland Park, Ill.), Megan Goethals (2009-10, Rochester High School, Rochester Hills, Mich.), Jordan Hasay (2008-09, Mission College Preparatory Catholic High School, San Luis Obispo, Calif.) and Chris Derrick (2007-08, Neuqua Valley High School, Naperville, Ill.).

The 5-foot-6 freshman raced to the Division 4 state championship this past season with a time of 17:47.3, leading the Warriors to third place as a team. VanderKooi finished fourth at the Foot Locker Midwest Regional championships and crossed the line in third place nationally at the Foot Locker Cross Country Championships in 17:14, earning All-American status. She also captured wins at the Portage Invitational, the Sparta Invitational, the GMAA Invitational and the Allendale Falcon Invitational.

VanderKooi has volunteered locally on behalf of her church youth group. "I can hardly believe all that Abby has been able to accomplish as a freshman," said Western Michigan Christian High School coach Kevin Aardema. "She's a great runner and a great teammate, and she's been so much fun to coach."

VanderKooi has maintained a 4.0 GPA in the classroom. She will begin her sophomore 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.

VanderKooi joins Gatorade Michigan Girls Cross Country Runners of the Year Olivia Theis (2017-18, Lansing Catholic High School), Anne Forsyth (2016-17, Pioneer High School), Madison Troy (2015-16, Grandville High School), Audrey Belf (2014-15, Seaholm High School), and Kirsten Olling (2013-14, Breckenridge High School) as athletes who have won the cross country award since its inception in 2007.

As a part of Gatorade's cause marketing platform "Play it Forward," VanderKooi has the opportunity to award a \$1,000 grant to a local or national youth sports organization of her choosing. She is also eligible to submit an essay to win one of twelve \$10,000 spotlight grants for the organization of choice, which will be announced throughout the year.

Since the program's inception in 1985, Gatorade Player of the Year award recipients have won hundreds of professional and college championships, and many have also turned into pillars in their communities, becoming coaches, business owners and educators.

To learn more about the Gatorade Player of the Year program, check out past winners or to nominate student-athletes, visit [www.Gatorade.com/POY](http://www.Gatorade.com/POY), on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/GatoradePOY](http://www.facebook.com/GatoradePOY) or follow us on Twitter at [www.twitter.com/Gatorade](http://www.twitter.com/Gatorade).