

**HARWOOD UNION HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT-ATHLETE NAMED
GATORADE VERMONT GIRLS CROSS COUNTRY RUNNER OF THE YEAR**

CHICAGO (January 27, 2020) — In its 35th year of honoring the nation's best high school athletes, The Gatorade Company today announced **Ava Thurston of Harwood Union High School** as its **2019-20 Gatorade Vermont Girls Cross Country Runner of the Year**. Thurston is the first Gatorade Vermont Girls Cross Country Runner of the Year to be chosen from Harwood Union 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 Thurston as Vermont'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, Thurston 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-5 sophomore raced to the Division 2 individual state championship this past season with a time of 19:19.9, leading the Highlanders to the state title as a team. Thurston also won the Manchester Invitational, the Burlington Invitational, the U-32 Invitational and the NVAC Mountain Division championships. She also took fifth at the New England Cross Country Championships.

A Nordic skiing standout, Thurston has volunteered locally as part of her school's Refugee Outreach Club and its student leadership team. "In my 45 years of coaching, I've never had an athlete as gifted, hard-working and unselfish as Ava," said Harwood coach John Kerrigan. "She's a strong athlete who continues to improve, and her best is yet to come."

Thurston has maintained a 3.74 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 and field, and awards one National Player of the Year in each sport. From the 12 national winners, one male and one female athlete are each named Gatorade High School Athlete of the Year. In all, 607 athletes are honored each year.

Thurston joins recent Gatorade Vermont Girls Cross Country Runner of the Year Alice Larson (2018-19, Champlain Valley Union High School), Rena Schwartz (2017-18, 2016-17, & 2014-15, Green Mountain Valley School), and Sophia Gorman (2015-16, Champlain Valley Union High School), among the state's list of former award winners.

As a part of Gatorade's cause marketing platform "Play it Forward," Thurston 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, on Facebook at www.facebook.com/GatoradePOY or follow us on Twitter at www.twitter.com/Gatorade.

###