

EAST CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT-ATHLETE NAMED GATORADE MISSISSIPPI BOYS CROSS COUNTRY RUNNER OF THE YEAR

CHICAGO (February 10, 2020) — In its 35th year of honoring the nation's best high school athletes, The Gatorade Company today announced Christian Balcer of East Central High School as its 2019-20 Gatorade Mississippi Boys Cross Country Runner of the Year. Balcer is the first Gatorade Mississippi Boys Cross Country Runner of the Year to be chosen from East Central 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 Balcer as Mississippi'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 February, Balcer 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 6-foot-3, 150-pound junior distance talent won the MHSAA 5A state title this past season, breaking the tape in 15:50.60—nearly a minute ahead of his next-closest competitor—to clock the fastest all-class time of the day and lead the Hornets to a fourth-place finish as a team. Unbeaten by an in-state opponent last fall, Balcer won the MHSAA Southern Regional Championships in a personal-best 5K time of 15:50.28 and picked up a victory at the MC Watson Ford Invitational in 16:02.31. A 2019 Clarion Ledger First Team All-State selection, he capped his season at the Foot Locker South Regional championships, crossing the line as the top Mississippi finisher in 62nd, with a time of 15:59.00.

A member of East Central's Future Farmers of America chapter, the Key Club, the student council and the school's student-leadership group known as The Swarm, Balcer has volunteered on behalf of multiple community service initiatives with the Caswell Springs United Methodist Church Youth Group. "Christian Balcer is a talented distance prospect with his senior season still in front of him," said Erik Boal, editor for DyeStat.com. "He was undefeated against his fellow Mississippians, clocked the state's fastest time and won his 5A title by an incredible 59.1 seconds, improving his performance at Choctaw Trails by nearly 90 seconds from the year before."

Balcer has maintained a 3.95 GPA in the classroom. He will begin his senior 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.

Balcer joins recent Gatorade Mississippi Boys Cross Country Runner of the Year Brock Kelly (2018-19, Tupelo Christian Preparatory School), Dylan Allen (2017-18, Mooreville High School), Giacomo DeLuca III (2016-17, George County High School), David Patton Little (2015-16, Starkville High School) and Curt Knight (2014-15, Jackson Academy), among the state's list of former award winners.

As a part of Gatorade's cause marketing platform "Play it Forward," Balcer has the opportunity to award a \$1,000 grant to a local or national youth sports organization of his choosing. He 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.