

**WESTERN MICHIGAN CHRISTIAN STUDENT-ATHLETE NAMED  
GATORADE MICHIGAN GIRLS CROSS COUNTRY PLAYER OF THE YEAR**

CHICAGO (April 8, 2021) — In its 36<sup>th</sup> year of honoring the nation’s best high school athletes, The Gatorade Company today announced Abby VanderKooi of Western Michigan Christian as its 2020-21 Gatorade Michigan Girls Cross Country Player of the Year. VanderKooi is the first Gatorade Michigan Girls Cross Country Player of the Year to be chosen from Western Michigan Christian.

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 VanderKooi as Michigan’s best high school girls cross country player. Now a finalist for the prestigious Gatorade National Girls Cross Country Player of the Year award to be announced in April, VanderKooi joins an elite alumni association of 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 junior raced to the Division 3 individual state championship this past season with a time of 17:12.5. VanderKooi, the Div. 4 state title-winner in both 2018 and 2019, also captured the Hill and Bale Invitational, the Allendale Falcon Invitational, the GMAA City Championship and the Regional championship. She placed fifth at the High School XC National Invitational.

Also a talented musician, VanderKooi has volunteered locally on behalf of her church youth group. “Abby is an extraordinary athlete who trains very hard and does all the other things necessary to be an elite competitor,” said Western Michigan Christian coach Kevin Aardema. “She is a joy to coach and a great teammate.”

VanderKooi has maintained a 3.99 GPA in the classroom. She will begin her 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 & 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 works with top sport-specific experts and a media advisory board of accomplished, veteran prep sports journalists to determine the state winners in each sport.

Two-time winner VanderKooi joins recent Gatorade Michigan Girls Cross Country Players of the Year Zofia Dudek (2019-20, Pioneer High School), Olivia Theis (2017-18, Lansing Catholic High School), and Anne Forsyth (2016-17, Pioneer High School), among the state’s list of former award winners.

Through 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 their choosing. VanderKooi is also eligible to submit a 30-second video explaining why the organization they chose is deserving of one of twelve \$10,000 spotlight grants, which will be announced throughout the year. To date, Gatorade Player of the Year winners’ grants have totaled more than \$2.7 million across 1,117 organizations.

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.playeroftheyear.gatorade.com](http://www.playeroftheyear.gatorade.com), on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/GatoradePOY](https://www.facebook.com/GatoradePOY) or follow us on Twitter at [www.twitter.com/Gatorade](https://www.twitter.com/Gatorade).

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