

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

CHICAGO (April 15, 2021) — In its 36th year of honoring the nation's best high school athletes, The Gatorade Company today announced Christian Balcer of East Central High School as its 2020-21 Gatorade Mississippi Boys Cross Country Player of the Year. Balcer is the first Gatorade Mississippi Boys Cross Country Player 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 player. Now a finalist for the prestigious Gatorade National Boys Cross Country Player of the Year award to be announced in April, Balcer 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 state's returning Gatorade Player of the Year, the 6-foot-3-inch, 150-pound senior distance talent led the Hornets to sixth place as a team at the MHSAA Class 5A State XC Championships this past season, breaking the tape for the individual title with a time of 15:15.40—the fastest all-class clocking of the postseason. Balcer went on to run a state-record 5K time of 14:48.83 to finish sixth at the RunningLane National Cross Country Championships, earning First Team All-American status in the process.

An appointed member of his school's peer-leadership group, Balcer participates in Key Club and student council, which are both elected functions. He has also donated his time to the youth group at Caswell Springs United Methodist Church. "Christian Balcer is a phenomenal athlete—everyone knows that," said David-Paul 'DP' Daigle, head coach at Saint Stanislaus College. "He's a two-time state champion and state record-holder. But not everyone knows that he is a great kid. And he is top notch."

Balcer has maintained a 95.4 average in the classroom. He will attend Mississippi College this fall, where he will compete in both cross country and track and field.

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 Balcer joins recent Gatorade Mississippi Boys Cross Country Players of the Year Brock Kelly (2018-19, Tupelo Christian Preparatory School), Dylan Allen (2017-18, Mooreville High School), and Giacomo DeLuca III (2016-17, George County High School), among the state's list of former award winners.

Through 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 their choosing. Balcer 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, on Facebook at www.facebook.com/GatoradePOY or follow us on Twitter at www.twitter.com/Gatorade.

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