

**WESTSIDE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT-ATHLETE NAMED  
GATORADE NEBRASKA FOOTBALL PLAYER OF THE YEAR**

CHICAGO (May 13, 2021) — In its 36<sup>th</sup> year of honoring the nation's best high school athletes, Gatorade today announced Cole Payton of Westside High School as its 2020-21 Gatorade Nebraska Football Player of the Year. Payton is the first Gatorade Nebraska Football Player of the Year to be chosen from Westside 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 Payton as Nebraska's best high school football player. Now a finalist for the prestigious Gatorade National Football Player of the Year award to be announced in May, Payton joins an elite group of past state football award-winners, including Emmitt Smith (1986-87, Escambia High School, Fla.), Matthew Stafford (2005-06, Highland Park High School, Texas) and Christian McCaffrey (2012-13 & 2013-14, Valor Christian High School, Colo.).

The 6-foot-3, 215-pound senior quarterback passed for 1,704 yards and 22 touchdowns this past season, leading the Warriors (12-0) to the Class A state championship. Payton completed 113 of 183 passes and threw just five interceptions, while also rushing for 1,029 yards and 17 touchdowns on 124 carries. He was selected as co-captain of both the Omaha World-Herald All-Nebraska team and the Lincoln Journal Star Super-State team.

Payton has volunteered locally on behalf of a food pantry and youth sports programs. "Cole Payton is just a winner," said John Gingery, head coach at Lincoln East High. "He's big, tough and smart, and he finds ways to make plays."

Payton has maintained a 3.75 GPA in the classroom. He has signed a National Letter of Intent to play football on scholarship at North Dakota State University 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.

Payton joins recent Gatorade Nebraska Football Players of the Year Jevyon Ducker (2019-20, Bellevue West High School), Nick Henrich (2018-19, Burke High School), Milton Sargbah (2017-18, Omaha North High School), and Trevor Nichelson (2016-17, Ashland-Greenwood High School), among the state's list of former award winners.

Through Gatorade's cause marketing platform "Play it Forward," Payton has the opportunity to award a \$1,000 grant to a local or national youth sports organization of their choosing. Payton 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 [playeroftheyear.gatorade.com](http://playeroftheyear.gatorade.com), on Facebook at [facebook.com/GatoradePOY](https://facebook.com/GatoradePOY) or follow us on Twitter at [twitter.com/Gatorade](https://twitter.com/Gatorade).

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