

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

CHICAGO (January 24, 2022) — In its 37th year of honoring the nation's best high school athletes, Gatorade today announced **Ava Thurston** of **Harwood Union High School** is the **2021-22 Gatorade Vermont Girls Cross Country Player of the Year**. Thurston is the first Gatorade Vermont Girls Cross Country Player 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 player. Now a finalist for the prestigious Gatorade National Girls Cross Country Player of the Year award to be announced in February, Thurston 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-6 senior raced to the Division 2 individual state championship this past season with a time of 19:29.4, leading the Highlanders to the state title as a team. Thurston won the state's Meet of Champions in 18:24.1 and placed third at the New England Championships. She also broke the tape at the Manchester Invitational, the Burlington Invitational and the Harwood Invitational.

Also a talented Nordic skier, Thurston is active with the Harwood Peace Alliance and has volunteered locally on behalf of her school's chapter of the Rooted Organizing Community. "Ava is the first runner in the history of Vermont High School cross country to win the girls Division 2 championship in four consecutive years," said Harwood Union High School coach John Kerrigan. "What sets her apart, however, is that her number one concern has always been the finish of her team."

Thurston has maintained a 3.87 GPA in the classroom. She remains undecided upon a collegiate destination.

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 leverages experts including coaches, scouts, media and others as sources to help evaluate and determine the state winners in each sport.

Two-time winner Thurston joins recent Gatorade Vermont Girls Cross Country Players of the Year Abby Broadley (2020-21, Bellows Falls Union High School), Alice Larson (2018-19, Champlain Valley Union High School), and Rena Schwartz (2017-18, Green Mountain Valley School), among the state's list of former award winners.

Gatorade has a long-standing history of serving athlete communities and understands how sports instill valuable lifelong skills on and off the field. Through Gatorade's "Play it Forward" platform, Thurston has the opportunity to award a \$1,000 grant to a local or national organization of their choosing that helps young athletes realize the benefits of playing sports. Thurston is also eligible to submit a short 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 \$3.5 million across more than 1,300 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 or follow us on social media on Facebook at facebook.com/GatoradePOY, Instagram at instagram.com/Gatorade and Twitter at twitter.com/Gatorade.

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