

**DEER CREEK HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT-ATHLETE NAMED  
GATORADE OKLAHOMA BOYS CROSS COUNTRY PLAYER OF THE YEAR**

**CHICAGO** (January 31, 2022) — In its 37<sup>th</sup> year of honoring the nation's best high school athletes, Gatorade today announced **A.J. Antonelli** of **Deer Creek High School** is the **2021-22 Gatorade Oklahoma Boys Cross Country Player of the Year**. Antonelli is the first Gatorade Oklahoma Boys Cross Country Player of the Year to be chosen from Deer Creek 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 Antonelli as Oklahoma'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 February, Antonelli 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-10, 140-pound senior won the Class 6A state meet this past season with a course-record time of 15:14.80, breaking the tape 17.16 seconds ahead of his next-closest competitor. In so doing, Antonelli sparked the Antlers to the team title—their third in four years. He took sixth in the national Garmin RunningLane Cross Country Championships Silver race with a season-best time of 14:58.70.

Antonelli has volunteered locally as part of multiple community service initiatives through his church youth group. "There is no doubt that 2020 was a tough year for many, and that was certainly the case for A.J., athletically and emotionally," said David Riden, head coach of Deer Creek High School. "He set big goals, took big swings at attaining them and, for the most part, met with disappointment. As I watched him over the course of the summer and early season, I sensed something had changed in him. I will forever remember A.J.'s season as a shining example of incredible growth and success coming out of disappointment and setback."

Antonelli has maintained a weighted 3.87 GPA in the classroom. He 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.

Antonelli joins recent Gatorade Oklahoma Boys Cross Country Players of the Year Gabe Simonsen (2020-21 & 2019-20, Mustang High School), Sam Bass (2018-19, Casady School), and Luke Murphy (2017-18, Lincoln Christian High 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, Antonelli 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. Antonelli 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](http://playeroftheyear.gatorade.com) or follow us on social media on Facebook at [facebook.com/GatoradePOY](https://facebook.com/GatoradePOY), Instagram at [instagram.com/Gatorade](https://instagram.com/Gatorade) and Twitter at [twitter.com/Gatorade](https://twitter.com/Gatorade).

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