

**UNION CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT-ATHLETE NAMED
GATORADE NEW JERSEY GIRLS CROSS COUNTRY PLAYER OF THE YEAR**

CHICAGO (January 22, 2024) — In its 39th year of honoring the nation’s most elite high school athletes, Gatorade today announced **Paige Sheppard** of **Union Catholic High School** is the **2023-24 Gatorade New Jersey Girls Cross Country Player of the Year**. Sheppard is the first Gatorade New Jersey Girls Cross Country Player of the Year to be chosen from Union Catholic High School.

The award, which celebrates the nation’s top high school athletes for excellence on the field, in the classroom and in the community, distinguishes Sheppard as New Jersey’s best high school girls cross country player. From CEOs and coaches to star athletes, Gatorade Player of the Year winners showcase the power of sport, touting an all-star group of alumni that includes Irene Riggs (2022-23, 2021-22 & 2020-21, Morgantown High School, Morgantown, W. Va.), Katelyn Tuohy (2019-20, 2018-19 & 2017-18, North Rockland High School, Thiels, N.Y.) and Jordan Hasay (2008-09, Mission College Preparatory Catholic High School, San Luis Obispo, Calif.)

The 5-foot-5 freshman won the Non-Public, Group A state meet this past season with a time of 18:09.0, leading the Vikings to the team title. Three weeks later, Sheppard won the Nike Cross Northeast Regional individual championship, breaking the tape in 18:12.29 to help Union Catholic qualify for the Nike Cross Nationals Final, where the Vikings took 10th as a team. The state’s top runner at the Ocean State XC Invitational, she finished second in a personal-best 17:35.30.

An accomplished artist whose work has been selected for display at various art shows, Sheppard has volunteered locally with the Student Movement Against Cancer at UC, which prepares holiday cards for cancer patients. She was also a recent recipient of the Paul Robeson Youth Achievement Award, which honors high-achieving African American students in a variety of disciplines. “Paige Sheppard emerged as one of the top ninth graders in the country in 2023, then catapulted to the top of the Northeast region by season’s end,” said Rich Gonzalez of PrepCalTrack. “Her performances at the Nike regional and the NXN Final cemented her as a top gun to watch closely for the next three years.”

Sheppard has maintained a 4.16 GPA in the classroom. She will begin her sophomore 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 leverages experts including coaches, scouts, media and others as sources to help evaluate and determine the state winners in each sport.

Sheppard joins recent Gatorade New Jersey Girls Cross Country Players of the Year Emma Zawatski (2022-23, Freehold Township High School), Angelina Perez (2021-22, Lakeland Regional High School) and Charlotte Bednar (2020-21 & 2019-20, The Lawrenceville School), among the state’s list of former award winners.

As part of Gatorade’s commitment to breaking down barriers in sport, every Player of the Year also receives a grant to donate to a social impact partner. To date, Gatorade Player of the Year winners’ grants have totaled more than \$4.9 million across more than 1,600 organizations.

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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