

**ST. THOMAS AQUINAS HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT-ATHLETE NAMED
GATORADE KANSAS GIRLS SOCCER PLAYER OF THE YEAR**

CHICAGO (June, 23, 2022) — In its 37th year of honoring the nation's best high school athletes, Gatorade today announced **Sydney Watts** of **St. Thomas Aquinas High School** is the **2021-22 Gatorade Kansas Girls Soccer Player of the Year**. Watts is the fifth Gatorade Kansas Girls Soccer Player of the Year to be chosen from St. Thomas Aquinas 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 Watts as Kansas's best high school girls soccer player. Now a finalist for the prestigious Gatorade National Girls Soccer Player of the Year award to be announced in June, Watts joins an elite alumni association of state award-winners in 12 sports, including Alexi Lalas (1987-88, Cranbrook High School, Mich.), Steve Cherundolo (1996-97, Mt. Carmel High School, Calif.), Abby Wambach (1997-98, Our Lady of Mercy School of Young Women, N.Y.), Heather O'Reilly (2001-02 & 2002-03, East Brunswick High School, N.J.), Matt Besler (2004-05, Blue Valley West High School, Kans.), Jack Harrison (2013-14, Berkshire High School, Mass.) and Mallory Pugh (2014-15, Mountain Vista High School, Colo.).

The 5-foot-9 junior midfielder and forward led the Saints to a 17-0-2 record and a second straight Class 5A state championship this past season. Watts scored 37 goals and passed for 10 assists and scored both goals in her team's 2-1 win over Mill Valley High in the state final. The Class 5A Forward of the Year, Watts is a member of the U.S. Soccer Under-17 Women's National Team player pool and is ranked as the nation's No. 22 recruit in the Class of 2023 by TopDrawerSoccer.com. She concluded her junior year with 50 goals and 19 assists in her prep soccer career.

Watts has volunteered locally at a Catholic thrift shop, and she has donated her time as a youth soccer coach. "Both times Sydney scored [against us], we had defenders standing her up and playing great defense on her," said Michelle Pothoven, head coach of Blue Valley Northwest High School. "After she scored my defenders looked at me and asked what they needed to do differently ... I had no answer. She made something out of nothing both times."

Watts has maintained an A average in the classroom. She has made a verbal commitment to play soccer on scholarship at Vanderbilt University beginning in the fall of 2023.

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.

Watts joins recent Gatorade Kansas Girls Soccer Players of the Year Grace O'Keefe (2020-21, St. Thomas Aquinas High School), Sophia Stram (2019-20, Bishop Miege High School), Marissa Popoola (2018-19, Blue Valley West High School), and Gracely Briley (2017-18, Blue Valley Southwest 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, Watts 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. Watts 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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