



Harwood's Ava Thurston heads to the finish line in the freestyle race at the Nordic skiing state championships at the Rikert Nordic Center.

PAUL LAMONTAGNE/FOR THE FREE PRESS

## 'World class athlete' Ava Thurston earns Free Press honor for 2nd straight year

**Alex Abrami**

Burlington Free Press  
USA TODAY NETWORK

With her career at Harwood Union High School winding down, midfielder Ava Thurston volunteered to be fill-in goalie — target practice, really — when the starter was sidelined for a spell during April break.

"I thought it would be fun to hop in and try something different," Thurston said.

With just days to go, Thurston fine-

tuned her 8-meter shot with additional work after practice.

"I like the challenge of doing more. I'm never satisfied with doing the bare minimum," Thurston said.

Vermont's most decorated high school cross-country runner and Nordic skier still yearned for ways to improve, to be a good teammate on her lacrosse team just like she would in her more accomplished sports.

"She's a world-class athlete," Har-

See **THURSTON**, Page 6A

# Thurston

Continued from Page 1A

wood lacrosse coach Hillary Wheeler said. “She truly has a love for the game and just wanted to be part of the team. She had really great spirit and camaraderie and she was a super-easy kid to coach because you knew she was always going to put in a 110%.”

While her team commitment and production (31 goals, 35 draw controls) for Harwood lacrosse might go unnoticed to those outside the Duxbury school, Thurston’s exploits on racing trails are unmatched and eye-opening. In her senior year, Thurston captured her fourth straight Division II cross-country running title in the fall, completed an individual sweep at D-II Nordic states for the fourth year in a row and then raced to four victories at U.S. junior nationals in early March.

Another championship-filled year also earns Thurston one more repeat title: The Free Press’ girls athlete of the year.

“She’s the real deal,” said Mansfield Nordic Club executive director Adam Terko, Thurston’s club coach. “She’s on a track to being the best skier in the country and that’s really awesome.”

Bound for Dartmouth College in the fall to continue her skiing career, Thurston’s shining senior year wasn’t all packed with wins and gold medals.

At the 2022 U.S. national championships in Soldier Hollow, Utah, in January, Thurston fell one spot short of qualifying for junior worlds (in 2021, she was the top American and 14th overall). Tendonitis in her wrist, limiting her training with poles, was an acceptable reason to shrug off the disappointment and just move on. But Thur-

ston said it became a major motivator for her.

“It was a big moment for me for when things don’t go well,” Thurston said last week after a training day at the invite-only Eastern Regional Camp in Craftsbury. “Until you actually experience yourself, it really hits home. It was a big learning experience.”

Minutes after Thurston didn’t qualify, Terko said he saw her and her friends sledding down a nearby hill.

“Every time she takes a step back, she takes two steps forward,” Terko said. “She’s good at analyzing results without checking off boxes, a good approach in a healthy way. Ava can analyze and make corrections and come back from that. The whole second half of her season was pretty dominant.”

After a slew of success on the U.S. SuperTour and at the University of Vermont Carnival, Thurston wrapped a perfect 8-for-8 career effort at the D-II high school championship meet. On Feb. 24, she claimed the 5k classic in Craftsbury with a time of 14 minutes, 43.5 seconds. Then the following week in Ripton, she beat younger sister Julia Thurston in freestyle (12:57.9). Between the two disciplines, Thurston’s average margin of victory over four seasons was 95 seconds for classic and 74 seconds for freestyle, according to the Times Argus.

The Thurstons also helped Harwood win the freestyle relay.

“The atmosphere was really great and really positive and fun,” Ava Thurston said. “We hadn’t had (relays) in two years.”

In early March, Thurston tracked down three individual wins and was a member of the New England team that captured a relay event in the 18-and-under races at the U.S. junior championships in Minnesota. Thurston kicked off her sweep by winning the 5k free-

style by about 55 seconds. She then won the classic sprint and the 10k classic mass start, the latter by nearly 30 seconds.

Thurston anchored the 3k relay victory for a New England squad that included club teammate Hattie Barker, a multi-sport star from Mount Mansfield Union High School.

“It was good to have all those races in a row and see that I was really stacking up well against everyone in the country,” Thurston said.

Thurston’s sweep was the first at juniors since Olympic gold medalist Jessie Diggins pulled off the feat in 2011.

“Ava has that combination of emotional strength, psychological strength, physical strength and technical ability,” Terko said when asked about Thurston’s Olympic potential. “She can 100% do it, but at the same time, she’ll have ups and downs. And if she doesn’t get there, she’ll be fine. She has the right type of attitude to handle the pressure of being in that situation.”

Like in Utah, Thurston also navigated setbacks in XC running with determination. After losing to Loghan Hughes in her first two races of the season, Thurston topped the BFA-St. Albans star by over 30 seconds at the Burlington Invitational in late September.

Thurston didn’t lose to a Vermont runner again. She set a personal-best (18:15.4) at a meet in Maine, won D-II states, leading Harwood to the team title, and nabbed third at the New England championships.

At Dartmouth, Thurston is putting her focus on skiing.

“Each year skiing becomes a bigger part of my life and I fall in love more with the sport,” Thurston said.

Contact Alex Abrami at [aabrami@freepressmedia.com](mailto:aabrami@freepressmedia.com). Follow him on Twitter: @aabrami5.



**Harwood’s Ava Thurston moves with possession against Stowe during a girls lacrosse game this season.**

PROVIDED BY SARAH MILLIGAN

## BFP Girls Athletes of the Year

**2022:** Ava Thurston, Harwood

**2021:** Ava Thurston, Harwood

**2020:** Catherine Gilwee, Champlain Valley

**2019:** Lisa McNamara, Rice

**2018:** Lydia Maitland, Champlain Valley

**2017:** Annika Nielsen, South Burlington

**2016:** Aggie Bisselle, Burr and Burton

**2015:** Kathleen Young, Essex

**2014:** Autumn Eastman, Champlain Valley

**2013:** Anne-Marie Farmer, South Burlington

**2012:** Mollie Gribbin, South Burlington

**2011:** Rachel Crews, South Burlington