



Straight Aim Students

Archery gives kids self-confidence and recreation that can last a lifetime. **BY NICK GEVOCK**

Shyann Kennedy draws her bow in the tiny lunch room at Melrose Elementary School. The sixth-grader steadies herself before releasing an arrow that smacks the middle of a target 10 yards away. She and eight schoolmates—the entire student body—spend an hour shooting round after round inside this small ranching town’s sole school. It’s the first time many of the kids have shot a bow, and they are excited.

Shyann says for years she has wanted to

use her father’s heavy-duty compound bow, which he uses to hunt deer and elk. “But it was too tough to pull,” she says.

With the smaller, lightweight bows the school uses, Shyann is easily able to pull back the drawstring. And after a few days of practice, she was shooting tight groups of arrows into the target at the makeshift indoor archery range.

Students on this cold, sunny winter weekday are shooting under the direction of teacher Shelby Blixt. Blixt had never fired a bow before taking a training class put on by the National Archery in the Schools Program



HOLDING STEADY Compound bows may look intimidating, but youth models like this one are designed for beginners with light arm strength. “A 5-year-old or an 80-year-old could shoot these bows,” says one instructor.

(NASP) last fall. The daylong course focuses on archery range safety and how to teach kids shooting skills.

Blixt initially doubted whether her nine students could safely shoot arrows inside the school. “At first I thought, ‘Are we really going to do this?’” she says. But the exercise worked out, as it has in roughly 50 other schools throughout Montana.

Several small schools in southwestern Montana formed a cooperative to participate in the NASP. The idea was developed six years ago by Ray Haffey, a psychologist with Dillon-based Great Divide Education Services and an avid bowhunter who enjoys working with young Montanans. Great Divide is a consortium that provides special education instruction, counseling, and other services to member schools. Haffey used it as a model for the regional archery co-op.

He secured commitments from seven rural schools to pitch in \$300 apiece for

archery equipment. Financial help came from the Montana Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. The schools collectively ordered a NASP base package: 11 bows, a few dozen arrows, five targets, a backstop curtain, a repair kit, and a stand for holding bows.

Haffey says the innovative program is custom made for schools like those in Jackson, Grant, and Melrose with fewer than a dozen students. “The co-op approach gets archery into schools that couldn’t justify going out and buying their own equipment,” he says. Larger schools elsewhere in Montana purchase their own archery gear.

The NASP requires that all of Montana’s 50 participating schools use standardized equipment and range protocols that promote safety. Schools have set up archery ranges in cafeterias, multipurpose rooms, and even a local barn. “All they need is a minimum of 30 feet between the shooters and the targets,” Haffey says.

Equipment is half of the national archery program. The other element is a mandatory training course for teachers. Each school in the program must have a trained instructor who passes a test showing she or he understands archery fundamentals and how to maintain safe shooting conditions.

Blixt says she dreaded the idea of spending an entire day taking the archery instruction course. But her mood changed after spending a few hours shooting with half a dozen other teachers. “It was really fun once we started,” she says. “We each shot at least 100 arrows that day.”

Nick Gevock of Butte is a freelance writer and a reporter at The Montana Standard.



“Archery is a sport that any kid can do with some success.”

Before the Melrose students are allowed to shoot, Blixt makes them recite the safety rules. Archers must stand back from their bows until the instructor blows a whistle that allows them to move to the shooting line and pick up their equipment. Another whistle command from the teacher gives the go-ahead to start shooting. Instructors teach an 11-step process on how to shoot correctly and accurately that includes proper stance, draw, anchor, aim, release, and follow-through.

Jory Thompson, Sheridan High School principal and an avid bowhunter, says on some afternoons more than 40 kids from fifth through eighth grades use his school’s indoor range. Such enthusiasm for archery doesn’t surprise Kurt Cunningham, an FWP education specialist. “You don’t have to be the biggest and the tallest and the strongest kid out there,” he says. “Archery gives kids who aren’t great athletes or members of teams a chance to develop self-confidence and learn a lifetime sport.”

Many young archers like to compete. Montana NASP holds regional competitions, with winners moving on to the state championship. Of a perfect score of 300, some kids have scored in the 270s and even higher. “It’s amazing how quickly they pick it up,” Thompson says. “Every year some kid will blow my mind.”

Thompson has twice taken Sheridan archers to the NASP national shoot in Kentucky. Local businesses and residents chipped in to help cover the kids’ travel expenses. In 2009 Michael Tilstra, a local middle school student, scored 287 points and came in 13th of 500 archers in his group.

Supporters say the archery program fosters the next generation of bowhunters. Thompson says many kids who learn to shoot a bow at Sheridan High School later take up archery hunting. To encourage the transition, the principal holds an annual hunting contest and gives small prizes such as hunting magazine subscriptions to the winners. Some awards go to the biggest deer, elk, or pronghorn. Others go to kids with the best hunting stories.

Cunningham says that no matter whether young archers become bowhunters, enter competitions, or just shoot for fun, they all benefit from spending time launching arrows into targets. “Archery is a sport that any kid can do with some success,” he says. “There’s something really satisfying about taking aim and hitting a target.” 🐾

Learn more at archeryintheschools.org or fwp.mt.gov/education/teachers/nasp.html. For information about Montana State University Extension’s 4-H archery programs, visit montana4h.org.



BOW-MOBILE A grant from the Montana Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation paid for a horse trailer that hauls archery gear to several small schools in southwestern Montana. Archery proponents say the sport is popular because it’s accessible to kids of all sizes and strengths.

ALL PHOTOS: NICK GEVOCK