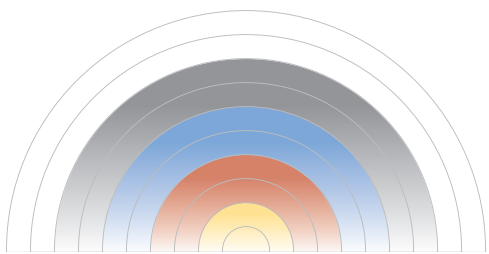




Hitting the Empowerment Bull's-Eye

In more than 200 schools across Montana, archery students are building self-confidence, practicing discipline, and enjoying success in competition. BY TOM KUGLIN





The volley of arrows thudded against burlap and foam in rhythmic percussion. Then more thuds echoed throughout the event center at the Lewis and Clark County Fairgrounds after each young archer pulled back a bowstring to anchor, found the mark, and released.

Supportive whistles from family members and teammates reverberated through the crowd, and after an official gave the “All clear!” call, the archers approached the targets to tally their scores. The arrow placement told the story of who won the round, but the scores were far from the ultimate measure of success.

“It’s amazing to see the excitement with these kids when they get to try archery, and how it empowers them,” says Ryan Schmaltz, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Youth Education Program manager and state coordinator for the National Archery in the Schools Program (NASP).

Hundreds of students from across Montana converged on Helena last March for the 2024 NASP State Tournament. Awarding points for precision on both bull’s-eye and 3D targets, the tournament featured competition while celebrating the skills and values that this acclaimed national program helps develop in participants.

“When we talk about society today, there are these huge issues with children with anxiety and pressure from being on social media,” Schmaltz says. “But with archery, everything is positive, and the feedback from teachers is that

Tom Kuglin, of Helena, is an editor at Bugle, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation magazine.

they’re seeing kids trying it and having fun. It’s active. It’s physical. It’s the opposite of staring at a smartphone screen all day.”

BLUEGRASS STATE BEGINNINGS

In 2002, the problem of TikTok-scrolling, Snapchat-loving, sleep-deprived kids obsessed with their smartphones wasn’t yet an issue. Even so, educators in Kentucky were looking for ways to improve student attendance, behavior, and focus, and to keep kids engaged in school so they would graduate instead of drop out. At the same time, the Kentucky Department of Fish & Wildlife Resources saw a need to offer young people opportunities to try outdoor activities and inspire them to spend more time in wild places. The two objectives converged with the Kentucky Archery in the Schools Program. First launched in 21 Bluegrass State schools, the program gave students a chance to learn archery techniques and safety under the tutelage of trained instructors.

Kentucky’s fledgling archery program quickly caught fire, and the state eclipsed its three-year goal of reaching 120 schools after only one year. Interest from neighboring states soon led to the formation of the educa-

tional nonprofit that now manages NASP. Today, the popular program reaches more than 1.3 million students in 9,000 schools in 49 states, nine Canadian provinces, and even New Zealand and the British Virgin Islands.

FWP plays a central role in making NASP a success in Montana. The department provides roughly a dozen teacher training sessions each year to certify instructors. Currently, more than 250 instructors, mostly physical education teachers, run about 200 programs in the state for kids in 4th through 12th grades, through PE classes, after-school and homeschool clubs, and even a few youth correctional facilities. NASP and FWP offer grants and financial assistance that cover roughly two-thirds of equipment costs, and several state parks host shoots or provide space for archery teams.

But it’s the teachers and other instructors who “make this program the success that it is,” Schmaltz says. NASP instructors get certified in technique and safety, earning state Office of Public Instruction credit. They also secure practice locations and haul teams to the state tournament. “NASP could not happen without them—along with the bus drivers, principals, parents, and everyone else who sees the value of kids learning this sport,” Schmaltz says.

Since 2023, FWP has rented the large fair-ground facility in Helena for the state tournament and helped staff the events to ensure they run smoothly. The annual competition

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is a qualifier for the western national tournament in Salt Lake City, where top teams and top-10 individuals in elementary, middle school, and high school divisions compete against some of the nation’s best school-age archers. Top finishers then go on to “the worlds”—the international championship.

Beckie Doyle brought a team of 19 shooters, plus coaches, friends, and family members, from tiny Trout Creek to the Montana State Tournament. “Some of these kids overcome a lot in their challenging personal lives to come out and stand here together,”



THEIR AIM IS TRUE Top left: FWP game warden Bill Dawson assists at the 2024 Montana state NASP tournament by entering scores into an app that tallies and compares results. FWP rents a facility at the Lewis and Clark County Fairgrounds for the tournament and staffs the event. Top right: NASP is great for kids with mobility challenges, like high school sophomore Ethan Jones of Hays, on the Fort Belknap Reservation, who scored a perfect 50 (all five arrows in the 10-point yellow) as a freshman. Below: Guy Rainville of Helena, a range officer and a volunteer at the Montana WILD Education Center in Helena, helps with NASP events.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: THOM BRIDGE; RYAN SCHMALTZ/MONTANA FWP; THOM BRIDGE



ARCH(ERY) RIVALS In NASP, students can compete in two events. The bull's-eye shoot (above) is the standard target competition, in which archers shoot five arrows at a target and score 9 to 10 points by hitting the yellow bull's-eye, 7 to 8 for the red circle, 5 to 6 for blue, 3 to 4 for black, and 1 to 2 for white. Below: The other event is the 3D shoot, where competitors aim at life-size foam animals to simulate a hunting situation. Archers shoot at six different animals, which include a wild turkey, coyote, black bear, pronghorn, white-tailed deer, and bighorn sheep—all legal game animals to bowhunt in Montana.



YOUTH SUPPORT Andy Keller, a ranger at First Peoples Buffalo Jump State Park, enters scores at the state tournament. NASP is a good fit for FWP's education mission of introducing young people to life-long skills for participating in outdoor activities.

says the education specialist. "Archery is a tool for youth development. Every kid can be successful because they have to learn patience and self-control, and that increases self-esteem. And our community supports them 100 percent."

BUILDING PRIDE

Rod Benson, a science teacher and archery instructor at Hays-Lodgepole High School on the Fort Belknap Reservation, sees NASP as a way to get kids interested in the outdoors. "I thought this'd be a great program for kids who aren't necessarily interested in traditional sports, because it lets them be competitive and represent their school," he says. "Being in Montana, where so many people are into hunting, and here within our Indigenous community, the ability to shoot accurately is a really valued attribute, so this sport can build a lot of pride."

At the 2024 state tournament, Rayah Bordeaux took careful aim at a life-size bighorn sheep target in the 3D competition and watched her arrow drill the 10-point center. A student at Paris Gibson Education Center in Great Falls, she began participating in NASP a year earlier. "I really like just being around the friends I have in archery and having fun," Rayah said. "It's also helped me a lot with things like remembering all the details, like where I aim, shooting positions, and just all the little patterns you have to know."

Paris Gibson coach Dugan Coburn sees many students thrive from both the enjoyment of the sport and the discipline it takes to become a proficient archer. Some participants like the social aspect. Others relish the competition, with goals of shooting well at state and national tournaments. Regardless, everyone gets the chance to

shoot and learn, he says.

"I really like that archery is a fun lifetime sport," Coburn says. "And I get kids from all walks of life and every socioeconomic background and kids who've never participated in a school sport or function before. You get them up there, start to give encouragement and positive feedback, and you can just see their confidence building."

Its inclusivity is a big reason NASP is so popular. Equal numbers of male and female students participate, and those shooting in Montana's state tournament come from communities big and small to compete both individually and as a team representing their schools.

"It's so great to go to the tournament and see rural kids and urban kids and everyone in between," says Sara Meloy, FWP Education Bureau chief. "And I also love that NASP allows for the individual excellence that some kids really get into, but at the same time brings kids together working as a team."

Montana abounds in individual excellence. Providing inspiration to all young Montana archers is Billings resident Brady Ellison, who won four world championships and five Olympic medals in the recurve bow category. Recently Bella Nottnagel from Trout Creek was selected as one of 19 student ambassadors for the national NASP. "That's a huge deal for a program that has over a million participants," says Schmaltz. Mavrick Greemore from Twin Bridges, who won the NASP bullseye event in the 2024 Montana state competition, is now ranked number one in the nation in the 4-H Olympic recurve bow division.

JJ Lamb, principal and superintendent of Swan River School, applauds the archery achievements but says that ultimately what NASP teaches kids goes beyond bows, arrows, and scores. "Kids learn that even if they don't always get a bull's-eye or even hit the target, if they keep trying and improving they can hit it the next time," he says. "That's a life skill they can use their entire lives." 🐾

The 2025 NASP Montana State Tournament will be held at the Lewis and Clark Country Fairgrounds in Helena March 18-19 and is open to the public.

NATIONAL SURVEY SAYS KIDS BENEFIT FROM NASP

In 2024, the national NASP program surveyed more than 7,500 student participants nationwide. Some survey results:

- 91%** said they liked archery
- 34%** said they feel more confident in other areas of their life
- 68%** said they feel more connected to their school
- 53%** feel proud of their archery skills
- 34%** said they work harder in the classroom
- 41%** said archery brings them peace and contentment



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: LEFT: RYAN SCHMALTZ/MONTANA FWP; THOM BRIDGE; THOM BRIDGE