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Game Day Kaimin, March 11, 2000

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Eyes on the Prize

Lauren Cooper and the Lady Griz set their sights on reclaiming the Big Sky title
By Matt Thompson

Women's Big Sky Tournament
Eyes on the Prize

LAUREN COOPER DIDN'T BECOME A BASKETBALL SENSATION OVERNIGHT.
HER JOURNEY HAD ITS UPS AND DOWNS AND ALONG THE WAY, A FEW THINGS HAPPENED THAT EVEN SHE NEVER DREAMED OF.

By Matt Thompson

"O"K, Lauren, here's the situation. There's three seconds to go, you're on the line. Get up and make it," he says as he hands his little girl the ball. She takes it, bounces it a few times on the cement and looks back for approval. "Listen, you have to remember this is a free basket — you have to concentrate and make it. If you focus and block out everything you will make it," he barks as he claps his hands three times to give his daughter encouragement.

She takes a few dribbles again, steadies the over-sized basketball in front of her and narrows her eyes, giving every ounce of concentration she has. She lets it go and the ball tumbles into the sky with an awkward arc. But as it falls back toward earth, it somehow finds its way through the rusty orange rim and slips through the half-torn netting.

He steps back and watches as her smile that would melt the heart of the devil himself. Then he gives her a little wink. That's his girl.

Scottie Cooper could see it in his daughter back when she was an eighth grader. It wasn't until Lauren grew up. The middle daughter, who loved riding horses and by the summer were engaged. As athletes in the spotlight, with almost a pseudo-celebrity status.

That path led her to Montana, where UM coach Robin Selvig welcomed her onto the Lady Griz. The slender 6-foot guard immediately made her presence known by scoring double figures nine times and becoming the team's fourth-leading scorer. She also grabbed Freshman of the Year honors. You could hear the whispers floating in the air — could she be as good as Greta Koss or even Shannon Cate someday?

"People are intimidated by her," says teammate and friend Linda Weyler. "On the court she has this powerful image that is hard to ignore. It's just how she carries herself."

They knew Lauren was on her way. And so did she. In the 1997-98 season, Lauren struggled with a vengeance, starting all 30 games and averaging 11.4 points a contest. She all but silenced any critics and scoffed at the notion of a sophomore jinx. Again, Lauren's stock rose as she was named to the first team All-Big Sky.

She decided to have surgery, but it didn't guarantee that the pain would go away.

The surgery was successful, but things got worse. Lauren sat on the sidelines in a cast, the Lady Griz experienced their worst season in 19 years. She felt out of place. How could she help from the bench? For Lauren, it meant redirecting her focus somewhere else.

People are intimidated by her.

ON THE COURT SHE HAS THIS POWERFUL IMAGE THAT IS HARD TO IGNORE.

IT'S JUST HOW SHE CARRIES HERSELF.

Eyes on the Prize

By Matt Thompson

But as quick as a lawyer's rebuttal, things would change for her.

That following summer, chronic pain in her foot was beginning to wear on her. First diagnosed as a stress fracture, she found out the pain stemmed from an abnormal bone, which had developed from overuse. Lauren decided to have surgery, but it didn't guarantee that the pain would go away.

The surgery was successful, but things got worse.

While Lauren sat on the sidelines in a cast, the Lady Griz experienced their worst season in 19 years. She felt out of place. How could she help from the bench? For Lauren, it meant redirecting her focus somewhere else.

She withdrew. She decided to tackle her rehab head on, just like she would anything else, and forget the lost season.

But it was hard. And it was with the greatest of luck that her sister, Ryan, decided to move to Missoula. Ryan would cook, clean, drive Lauren to classes and just talk her through the rough times.

"She was so incredible," Lauren says. "It's been awesome getting to know her. When I was in high school she was away so we never got the chance to get to know each other. She's more of a friend than a sister. Lauren made it through rehab and late that spring she was back on the court, practicing her dribbling drills and perfecting her free throws.

That spring she got another surprise when she met UM transfer quarterback Drew Miller. The two started dating and the summer were engaged. As athletes in the spotlight, Lauren and Miller have become one of Missoula's most recognizable couples, with almost a pseudo-celebrity status.

For Lauren, it meant getting through the aches and pains of being the center of attention as the Grizzlies made a run for the National Championship last fall.

"I've already made the decision," Miller says, "I can just come home and eat dinner and not talk about football for a few hours or not talk about the injuries. That was sometimes the best part, just talking with her."

"He just drives me and strengthens me," Lauren says.
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THE UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD OF GDK

Kevin Van Valkenburg

It's commonplace in sports these days to long for the feel-good story. It's not a difficult task; there are plenty of good stories out there. As fans, we want to hear, more than anything, about that skinny point guard, the one who overcame the greatest of odds to win a scholarship. We want to know about the crafty old coach, dead set on doing things the right way, still throwing together a speech, inspiring one last team to one last championship before riding off into the sunset forever.

It's no secret really; we just like heroes better. We want the good guys (or gals) to hoist the trophy at the end of the day, setting things right in the world. As fans and readers, it's sports we end up looking to for inspiration on a daily basis, to make us believe that the dreams we had as kids while dribbling a basketball in our parents' driveway weren't really as far-fetched as they seemed back then.

But it doesn't always work that way. A lot of the time, the villain dressed in black swoops down in the waning seconds to steal the ball or bury the jumper, sending the good guy home for the time, the villain having his way.

So forgive us if we in Missoula are a bit biased or smug this week. Because it sure feels like the good guys (and gals) are making things in the world right again.

It's been 10 years since two teams from the same school won the men's and women's regular season Big Sky title, as Don Holst's Grizzlies and Robin Selvig's Lady Griz did this season. Each represents a comeback worthy of its own series of chest thumping and fist pumping. After all that happened last season, who'd have thought we'd be where we are now?

Chalk one up for karma. This year a team that loved the Griz as if they were their own was being rewarded for their loyalty. This is the year we admitted we were rooting for the Griz.

Please forgive us if we're just a bit behind, but I think you'll find our sports-writing fresh and presented in a way only we can do.

We tried something a bit more risky this time out. We tried to pick two issues into one. Because we felt our photography deserved prominent play, we wanted to print two covers. To do this we had to print our pages facing different directions. As a result, things may look upside down at first. But you'll find if you simply flip the paper over, you're right inside the next issue. Just let our table of contents guide you.

Here's hoping you have as much fun reading us as we have putting it all together. And here's hoping the good guys (and gals) win it all, whoever you think they might be. We're pretty sure we've got a good idea.
This is all old hat for the Lady Griz, really. Montana, which won its ninth Big Sky title in the last 11 years in the regular season, is once again poised to earn a berth to the NCAA tournament. And it is something Montana has been perfect in, going 63-0 against their league foes.

And nothing has changed this year. Montana (13-3, 7-1) is undefeated at home in conference play and has dropped only one game in Dahlberg this season. The Lady Griz are led by Big Sky MVP Linda Weyler. The year (when she averaged 20.7 ppg), but Weyler was a dominant leader on a Grizzly team that had the largest average margin of victory in the conference, beating their opponents by 12.8 points. Weyler also had to make way for junior Lauren Cooper, who sat out last season, but came back this year to earn first-team All-Big Sky honors.

Cooper was fourth in the league in scoring, averaging 13.9 points per game. Weyler and Cooper are just a part of the physical frontline Montana possesses. The other Grizzly to watch out for in the tournament is forward Krista Redpath. The 6-1 senior from Great Falls, Mont., lit it up last week against Eastern Washington with a career high 29 points. Her sweet left hook and shot-blocking ability have given teams fits all season.

UM also boasts one of the deepest benches in the conference. Sophomore Simmarron Schildt, who was named the Big Sky's top Sixth Man, adds rebounding and consistency. Senior point guard Megan Thompson gives opposing teams a one-two punch when she relieves Megan Harrington. Laura Valley, UM's 6-3 center, is eighth in the league in blocked shots. True freshman Julie Demming rounds out a bench that has been productive all year.

Despite their untarnished home record, the Lady Griz did have their troubles on the road at times this year. Most notably, UM dropped two road games three weeks ago to Cal State-Northridge, the tournament's No. 2 seed, and NAU, who fell to Weber State on Wednesday in the first round.

Much of Montana's success can be attributed to their gritty defense. UM ranks second in the nation in field goal percentage defense and fifth in points allowed per game with 53.1. Harrington leads the team and is fourth in the league in steals, averaging almost two a game.

—Matt Thompson

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LADY GRIZ BACK AS TOP SEED

IDAHO STATE LED BY DILLON, MONT. STAR

It's been a sweet homecoming for Idaho State forward Mandi Carver so far.

In the Bengals' win over Eastern Washington in the first round of the women's Big Sky basketball tournament, Carver grabbed 18 rebounds, which broke the Big Sky single-season rebounding record of 308, and led ISU to its first win in the conference tournament in school history.

Carver, a 6-foot-2 sophomore from Dillon, Mont., was recruited neither by Montana nor Montana State in high school. An NCAA berth would probably provide a measure of redemption, but Carver denies any feelings of resentment.

"I'm just here to help our team win this tournament," Carver said.

Carver is also among the Big Sky leaders scoring at 14.4 per game and blocked shots, averaging 1.78 per contest. Idaho State is also led by point guard Angela Munger. The 5-9 senior from Hawthorne, Nev., leads the league in steals (2.5 ppg) and assists (5.6). Also look for shooter Chris Urbanski, who averaged 11.3 points per game and was second in the Big Sky in three-pointers with 2.4 per game.

ISU split with No. 2 seeded Cal State-Northridge, this year, but dropped both contests with tournament host Montana. ISU coach Ardie Mcleod finally got her first win in Dahlberg Arena on Wednesday, but has yet to beat the Grizzlies in her four-year career in Pocatello, Idaho.

The Bengals have been a particularly hot team of late, winning nine out of their last 11 games.

"We've been here twice before as the higher seed and lost," Munger said. "So it was nice to come in here and win."

—Matt Thompson

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pass to Howe, who finished the lay in the ball in, only to have it deflect off the ensuing inbounds pass, NAU threw and completed a three-point play. On Crystal Howe got the ball down low tied up the game when freshman Weber made a torrid comeback. After the first round of the women's Big Sky tournament, 62-60. Trailing for another NAU player with 3.8 seconds Mehgan Geddes launched a perfect coach Carla Taylor. "We're two deep at sophomore Stephanie Stranger at the excitement Comes of hell." not match up well with it is the Weber 2900 B rooks —Matt Thompson

Wildcats hope to outlast foes

If there is a team that Montana does not match up well with it is the Weber State Wildcats. Led by a group of quick and feisty competitors, the Wildcats (13-14, 10-6) may be the women's version of Arkansas' heralded "40 minutes of hell!" With senior guard Shelley Olson and sophomore Stephanie Stranger at the helm, WSU scraps, claws and pressures teams all night. "It wears them down," said Weber coach Carla Taylor. "We're two deep at every position so we can concentrate on pressuring and defense."

The Wildcats used their relentless defense to speak to Northern Arizona in the first round of the women's Big Sky tournament, 62-60. Trailing for almost the entire game and down by six with under a minute remaining, Weber made a torrid comeback. After two steals and a five-second call, WSU tied up the game when freshman Crystal Howe got the ball down low and completed a three-point play. On the ensuing inbounds pass, NAU threw the ball in, only to have it deflect off another NAU player with 3.8 seconds remaining.

Junior forward and team captain Megan Geddes launched a perfect pass to Howe, who finished the lay in and was fouled with 1.8 seconds.

"It was an incredible performance by Crystal," Taylor said. "It was great execution by the entire team."

Weber State, the No. 4 seed in the tournament, can attack teams from inside and outside. Howe, a 6-foot-4-inch freshman from Roy, Utah, has steadily become a dominant offensive force in the Big Sky. She ended the season with the highest field goal percentage in the league with a 60.0 percent average. She also finished fourth in rebounds, averaging 7.8 per game. And folks, she's just a little freshman. If teams can manage to stop Howe, Olson can do just as much damage. She led the Big Sky in three-pointers per game with 2.7, and also in three-point field goal average with a 39.5 percent average.

WSU won the first meeting against the Lady Griz back in January with a 50-49 win. The Matadors were one of the three teams that defeated the Lady Griz this season, when they trounced UM 49-67. Jerro said even without Curry, the Matadors have the personnel to pose the biggest threat to UM's title hopes. "We've just kind of gone past (the controversy) and worked with what we have," Jerro said. "I think the girls have handled it well. We've had a couple players step into leadership roles. But I think we've pretty much passed it and we are ready to go."

Northridge may have the numbers and the experience to pose the biggest threat to UM's title hopes. The Matadors were one of the three teams that defeated the Lady Griz this season, when they trounced UM 49-67. Even though defending the title is not on Jerro's list of things to worry about, it is something she and her team are aware of. "That is something we have to take pride in and come out and realize that people want what we have," Jerro said. "Now it is just a matter of how bad we want to hold on to it." —Courtney Lowery

Northridge back to defend title

At 1 a.m. Tuesday night, the Cal State-Northridge Matadors stepped off the plane in Missoula with last season's Big Sky Conference title under their belts.

But defending their title is not weighing heavily on head coach Frozena Jerro's mind.

"At this point, it is do or die for everybody, so we are taking it one game at a time," Jerro said. "We haven't really thought that much about the title. When you've got as much to worry about as we do, you've got to take one thing at a time."

The Matadors, seeded second in the Big Sky tourney, ended their conference season with 11-5 record, losing to Montana, Eastern Washington, Idaho State, Northern Arizona and Weber State. This is impressive when you consider that the team battled through what Jerro called some "shake-ups," which included leading scorer Edishna Curry quitting the team mid-season.

Northridge still had three players on the all-conference team: seniors Lynda Amari, Neda Milic and sophomore Sephora Scoubes. Scoubes ranks second in the Big Sky in scoring, and Amari's 48.7 percent accuracy from the field put her in third place in field goal percentage. Jerro said even without Curry, the Matadors have the personnel to make a strong showing in Missoula.

"We've just kind of gone past (the controversy) and worked with what we have," Jerro said. "I think the girls have handled it well. We've had a couple players step into leadership roles. But I think we've pretty much passed it and we are ready to go."

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Excitement Comes In Waves!
Eyes on the Prize

SHE’LL PLAY IT OFF AND RELUCTANTLY TELL YOU THAT HER BASKETBALL CAREER IS NOTHING BIG. BUT IF YOU LOOK CLOSER, YOU CAN SEE IT IN THOSE SOFT GREEN EYES OF HERS.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2/W

“He definitely gives me perspective when I’m down. The escape is definitely a good thing.”

Lauren and Miller may be a happy couple, but sometimes their competitiveness comes out. Lauren says she can beat Miller in one on one basketball, something he doesn’t like to admit. Miller, for his part, says he can whoop Lauren in tennis, something she hates to admit.

Instead of becoming soft and preoccupied with the romance of her engagement, Lauren has become relaxed and focused. This season Lauren has made a big comeback.

“I have seen her grow up more since (Lauren and Drew have) been together,” Ryan says. “This last year, she’s more focused in a calm sort of way.”

She’s the top scorer for the Lady Griz, averaging almost 14 points a game. She also has seen her overall game improve. Lauren’s assist and rebound numbers are up and she is in the top ten of the league in five other statistical categories. She also broke the Lady Griz record for career three-pointers this year as a junior.

“She used to just be able to shoot the three, but now she can dribble, post up or do anything else you ask her,” Weyler says.

Lauren seems focused on making the NCAA tournament. She’ll play it off and reluctantly tell you that her basketball career is nothing big. But if you look closer, you can see it in those soft green eyes of hers. The determination and tenacity is there. But the one who can see it best is Scottie, who still keeps in contact through e-mail every day.

Perhaps he saw it earlier this season at the championship game of the Lady Griz Holiday Classic.

“I had noticed that she was a bit off on her free throws so we talked about going back to the basics,” Scottie says.

Late in the game, trailing 53-51, teammate Linda Weyler was fouled by Pacific’s Millie Klimpton with 19 seconds remaining. Hearing the call, the Pacific bench erupted and drew a technical foul. Weyler made one of two foul shots to pull Montana within one. Lauren was now on the line to shoot the technical shots.

As she stepped up to the line, the crowd noise turned into a hush. She closed her eyes and could suddenly smell the wet pastures of Corvallis again. She took a few dribbles and then glanced up at the crowd and found her father.

This is a free basket, you have to concentrate. Remember, block everything out and you will make it.

She steadied herself, let the ball sit lightly upon her hand and sweetly released it into the air. The arc was perfect, as though it was sliding along a rainbow. The ball floated through the net, barely making a sound. Lauren took the ball again, released it with a confident, fluid motion and the ball sank magnificently. The Lady Griz won 54-53.

He jumped from his seat and that moment he felt as if he could soar over the ten rows in front of him to give his daughter a hug. She nonchalantly stepped off the line, found his smile in the crowd and winked.

That’s his girl.
25 reasons why you've gotta love Grizzly basketball

Continued from page 2M

13. The Den. Students were moved to the end of the court for the late night with fatter bodies and the Big Sky draw to put together a student cheering effort. Extra points here because Matt Williams thought up the name.

14. Shane Christensen's hustle. When it comes to talking Christensen, Holst rewrites the book on metaphor and simile. So far this season we've heard the Holster quip that his little point guard "weighs about as much as a chicken" and probably "couldn't bench press a pretzel." That's fine with us as long as Scooter keeps dishing passes to Matt Williams and keeps bombing clutch triples whenever the Griz need a spark.

15. Dominique Davis' power moves. Last season isn't something we like to talk too much about. Sentinel Gym was about as budget as Division I college basketball can get. But one upside to the high school facility was that every time you get a go in the paint, the refs are likely to attempt to straighten the rims. This season, at least once a game, Davis has come up with a block so huge it leaves us holding our hats.

16. Larry Krystkowiak. Does that have to be phrased any other way? Weber coach Joe Cravens said. "But I should add, we've still never forgiven Bill Laimbeer for that cowardly cheap shot that took out Krysco when he was a freshman." It's always because you have to, I guess; it's also a double-edged sword that your team must have a sharper side, when you win you get respect, when you lose people wonder who the seldom-used 6-9 forward was at the beginning of the year, but not at the end. You want to keep a rebound alive? Throw down a tough put back in traffic? Trouble with the guys. Everyone so ecstatic to have the tourney here should be sure to thank Travis before they get carried away. They don't come any bigger than his 16 points, eight rebounds and key block late in the climber against Western Oregon. Sorry Easterners, but we can't help but note how many of your title was snatched away by a kid who grew up 18 miles south of Cheney. Of course, we'd probably want to get as far as Cheney as possible, too.

17. "Who in the world is Travis Greenwalt?" Only one of the biggest clutch performers young star with the Milwaukee Bucks. But turning Montana's greatest player ever into a journeyman eventually brought him back to Missoula, where he's been the Obi Wan Kenobi to Matt Williams' Luke Skywalker.

18. Larry Krystkowiak. Does that have to be phrased any other way? Weber coach Joe Cravens said. "But I should add, we've still never forgiven Bill Laimbeer for that cowardly cheap shot that took out Krysco when he was a freshman." It's always because you have to, I guess; it's also a double-edged sword that your team must have a sharper side, when you win you get respect, when you lose people wonder who the seldom-used 6-9 forward was at the beginning of the year, but not at the end. You want to keep a rebound alive? Throw down a tough put back in traffic? Trouble with the guys. Everyone so ecstatic to have the tourney here should be sure to thank Travis before they get carried away. They don't come any bigger than his 16 points, eight rebounds and key block late in the climber against Western Oregon. Sorry Easterners, but we can't help but note how many of your title was snatched away by a kid who grew up 18 miles south of Cheney. Of course, we'd probably want to get as far as Cheney as possible, too.


20. Colleen Marks, basketball secretary. When your car is running great, you never stop to appreciate how hard your engine is working to make sure the outside looks and performs good. Simply put, that's Colleen Marks. One of the nicest people on campus, she'd track down a coach in the Bob Marshall Wilderness if the Kaimin convincing her it was important enough. And you know what? Usually we're just asking to get a goofy picture of the team holding up coach Holst during practice. Somehow, our absurd demands don't seem so absurd to her. For that, props go out.

21. Dan Carter's "Cadillac Work." Before DC arrived on campus, Holst told his players to "look like a '57 Chevy, but did Cadillac work." How true. Dan Carter's been a big help for the Griz off the bench this season by just being solid all the way around. Here's hoping that inflated gas prices won't slow the Cadillac down after tourney time.

22. The Future. Card. Cummings. Lynch. Stuart. Williams. Pederson. Milosaljevic. Are some of these guys stars in the making? You bet. Mike Card can jump like a kangaroo and Cummings can fill it up on the score­ board. But even more honorable, some of these guys sweat buckets every day in practice for little more than a jersey and a few seconds of playing time. You can judge a program by how well it treats its players who play the least. Holst will be the first to tell you, without these guys, UM wouldn't have come nearly this far.

23. Kyle Keyes. The truth of it? Kyle can flat out ball. Out. He's right, he is. They've kept him from showing the Garden City, but you better believe next year this star will get its chance to shine.

24. Blaine Taylor. Mike Montgomery. It's gonna be a showdown. Let's fast-forward a week and pretend the Grizzlies have already captured the Big Sky's NCAA berth. Now, let's also assume that to skimp on travel costs those thrifty gangs at the NC-two-A decide to put Montana in the West Regional in Salt Lake. If everything works perfectly (and things in Grizzly sports almost always do) we could be looking down the barrel of a match-up with the highly­ seeded St. John's Cardinal. We know we don't have to explain those implications. Can you say "local sports writer's fantasy?" Holst vs. Blaine Taylor/Mike Montgomery. Pupil vs. Teacher like the end of some low-budget kung-fu classic. Maybe it's a stretch, but what is life without dreams?

25. Because when it comes to Montana basketball, anything can and will happen.

Matadors take aim

The Matadors are talented and go deep into their bench playing as many as 10 players a night. But it's defense, not talent, that wins Northridge games. We're not talking some half­ court man-to-man defense.

We're talking about in-your­ shorts, pick-you-up when you get-off-the-bus pressure defense. Northridge defend­ ers will follow an opposing team's player into the bath­ room, (herself) if he doesn't. With their depth and sheer athleticism, Northridge has at least one player down flat. The Matadors will show a variety of defensive looks from full-court pressure to half-court zone traps to a stingy match-up zone to con­ fuse opponents and take their offense out of rhythm. Northridge frustrates teams into more than 18 turnovers a game and average a league best nine steals a game.

Brady said that his team's goal is to hold teams under 70 points. It is defi­ nitely a goal worth striving for because Northridge is 13-0 when holding opponents under 70, with their latest victim being Weber. Offensively, the Matadors' athleticism has them ranking 11th in the conference in scor­ ing at 77.7 points per game, first in field goal percentage at 47 percent and first in rebounding at 37.4 per game. The Matadors are led by all-league guard Markus Carr, who torched Weber for 23 points. Carr (8.4 ppg, 7.7 apg) may only be a sophomore but his savvy play at the point and deep range tenacity makes him one of the league's top guards.

Northridge is one of the most athletic forwards in the Big Sky in Jeff Parris and Andre Larey. Both can score from anywhere on the floor and are capable of scoring 30 points on any given night.

—Ryan Divich

Public Comment Wanted

The University of Montana will undergo its regular, 10-year, full-scale evaluation in April by the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges. The University is soliciting public comment about the University and its branch campuses. Send comments to:

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"Oh baby, Good Guys win again!"
Hungry Lumberjacks challenge the Sky

Northern Arizona head coach Mike Adras said that the Big Sky tournament is about seniors. "I am a big believer in this, it's their last time," Adras said. Good thing for Adras, since he has three of the better seniors in the conference in Billy Hix, Dan McClintock and Ross Land. The trio combined for 50 points in NAU's first round victory over Portland State.

Because of this experience, NAU was picked to finish in the top of the Big Sky but struggled early losing their first four conference games of the season. The Jacks, however, got hot and reeled off 11 straight victories before losing to Weber State and subsequently ending any championship hopes. But don't count NAU's seniors out.

Billy Hix (6.7 ppg, 5.5 rpg) is a gutsy defender who passes and rebounds well and can shoot the three. While he is NAU's best post defender, Hix is more than capable of getting 10-15 points per game.

The inside-outside duo of Ross Land and Dan McClintock is one of the most dangerous in the conference. Land (16.4 ppg, 41 percent from behind the arch) is the all-time Big Sky career three-point field goal leader and is NAU's go-to-guy. Don't let his California mop-top fool you, Land is a serious player with serious skills.

The 7-foot McClintock (15.6 ppg, 6.6 rpg) is one of the most dominant post players in the conference. He has surprising touch for a big man. Both he and Land were first team all-conference Big Sky members.

NAU must make the three-point shot to be effective. The Jacks launched 577 three-balls on the season and making threes is important to open up McClintock down low. Besides Hix and Land, junior Cory Schwab and sophomore Adam Lopez can also bomb from deep.

—Ryan Divish
Eagles could be the best team you've never heard of

When you look at Eastern Washington, you don't see a team of stars. There's no Matt Williams. There's no Eddie Gill or Harold Aroncues. But what matters most in basketball is how well the team does — and the Eagles know how to win.

Eastern Washington was atop the Big Sky conference entering the final game of the season, before losing to Montana at home 77-75. Eastern, seeded second in the conference tournament, will take a 12-4 conference record into Friday night's game against Northern Arizona.

The closest thing to a star for Eastern may be senior Deon Williams, and he wasn't even a starter until after the new year. The senior averages 10.4 points a game and is the Eagles' go-to guy.

Senior guard Ryan Hansen was awarded a spot on the All-Big Sky team, along with Williams. The 12.6 scoring average was good enough to lead the Eagles. Center Chris White gives the Eagles a presence down low, averaging 9.7 points a game, as well as being fourth in the conference in rebounds. Joining White in the front court are Aaron Olson and Kareem Hunter, who average 10.5 and 6.5 points a game, respectively.

A solid team all the way through the lineup, some key reserves off the bench include guard Jamal Jones and forwards Will Levy and Dennis Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald lit up for 17 points against NAU this season.

"Since Christmas break we've played very hard and played very well together," Aggers said. "Very unselfish play with great chemistry. The sum of the group is greater than its parts."

And their stats show the team effort. The Eagles lead the conference in scoring margin, defeating their opponents by six points a game. And the Eagles know how to shoot the ball from behind the arc, averaging a conference-best nine three-pointers a game.

Eastern Washington and NAU match up extremely closely. The teams split the games during the regular season, each team winning at home. The key to the game may be containing NAU forward Ross Land, who scored 26 and 25 points in the two games versus Eastern.

Tip-off for the game is 7:05 p.m.

Eastern and Cal State-Northridge are the only teams remaining in the tournament that have never made an appearance in the NCAA tournament. In fact, the Eagles have only one victory in four Big Sky tournament appearances.

—Casey Temple
Road to redemption leads home for Montana

The Grizzlies are looking a little more like Rodney Dangerfield every day. Everybody treats them with "no respect."

UM, 12-4, exceeded every-one's expectations and won its share of the regular season Big Sky title along with Western Washington.

But head coach Don Holst has said that the recent snub of Matt Williams (19.0 ppg, 10.3 rpg) as conference MVP has said that the recent snub of Matt Williams (19.0 ppg, 10.3 rpg) as conference MVP...
reasons why you’ve gotta love Grizzly basketball

(As if you needed any)

BY KEVIN VAN VALKENBURG AND CHAD DUNDAS

1. Don Holst. Do we really need to spell it out for you?

2. Matt Williams. Here's a memo to the fools who passed on Matt as Big Sky MVP: 19.2 points per game, 11.3 rebounds per game, 13 double-doubles, our leading scorer 19 times this season. What did you want from this kid? How about a 3.6 average in math and physics? We have to wonder what Harold Arceneaux's GPA is like in that strenuous "Technical Sales" major he's declared. But all kidding aside, Matt's a stand-up guy both on and off the floor, highly deserving of accolades. For bringing the pain in the lane all season and always saying "hi" when we see him on campus, Matt gets our (albeit unofficial) MVP vote.

3. Ryan Slider's dunks. "It happened Nov. 23 when the Griz were playing Montana Tech. Forward Don Carter chucked an alley-oop from half court that veered a full Chevy pickup's length wide of the basket. Number 34 was already in the air when Carter's lob came sailing in, looking like it might land in a Sugar Bear's lap. But Ryan Slider levitated like an Apollo astronaut and spread his arms wider than an albatross' wings. Catching the ball at waist level in his mammoth right hand, he brought the ball over his head, driving it through the hoop so hard it shook like a spring board." — From Nate Schweber's Feb. 4 article on Ryan Slider titled "Back in Place, Back in One Piece" in the Montana Kaimin. Nate, you said it all when you said it.

4. Mick Holien. The Griz's true sixth man. Everyone in the state knows that when Montana's on TV you turn down the sound and turn your radio way, way up. The sweet, soothing tones of Holien's golden-on-air personality help shepherd us through those nervous, sweaty times when Montana is on the road and we can't be there. Mick, we wouldn't trade you for ten Bob Costases. While we're not quite sure what a "pickle barrel" is, we sure hope that, during the tournament, the Griz rattle it so hard it snaps in half. But best of all, the big guy promised the Griz would have shirts available and get an earring if UM won the Big Sky title. No joke, you should see him now. Mercy, does he look pretty. Whatever happened to he's getting a tattoo of the Griz win the tourney. We only have one request. It needs to say "Oh baby, Good Guys win again!"

5. Eee-gad! The irony: Even a couple of greenhorn dimwits like us are smart enough to notice the literary aspects of the past two years in the world of Griz ball. Tension and conflict, drama and humor. But most importantly, Good Vs. Evil. Last year, EWU denies our bid for the conference tourney and this season we beat THEM in the last game, for all the marbles. Coincidence? Hardly.

6. Mike Warhank's duds. "While we're not quite sure what Schmautz is guaranteed to come flying off his seat on the bench within the first three minutes of play, even if Montana is up by ten. We love the energy, we fear the wrath.

7. Todd Schmautz. The most excitable assistant in our program. Schmautz is guaranteed to come flying off his seat on the bench within the first three minutes of play, even if Montana is up by ten. We love the energy, we fear the wrath.

8. Men of the people. If you can walk with kings but not lose the common touch, you just might fit right in with the Grizzlies this year. Of all the virtues Holst and his Mercy Band of Warriors possess, the way they carry themselves just might be the most admirable. Last year when the sky wasn't so blue and the Griz were losing to teams like Sac State, you'd still be greeted with a handshake and a smile by Williams, Warhank or Holst. But the most genuine moment for us didn't have a thing to do with basketball. Equipped with a Go-cup full of Diet Coke and voice like thunder, Don Holst sat in the student section and cheered with us plebeians as the Lady Griz volleyball team upset top-ranked Eastern Washington this fall. He was so impressed by the spikery's courageous effort, he told the girls he only wished his team played with the same heart and intensity. Classy move, and unique too. Much as we love him, you probably won't find Robin Selvig in the student section at the next UM soccer game. At least not with a Go-Cup.

9. Sam Riddle's cooky passes. It's not Sam's behind-the-back passes that have made Coach Holst clench his teeth on the bench this year; it's the behind-the-cheerleader's back, over the head, between the legs, no-look, off-the-floor, drop-your-jaw, mid-air, hanging-in-traffic type passes that have caused Holst to age a few years. Still, those things are amazing when they work and the Riddler has flat out schooled some nights. He's got a cocky swagger reminiscent of a guy named Ali, but you'd better believe Sam can sure be fun to watch.

10. The Match-up Zone. This quirky, yet suffocating defensive scheme was developed for Montana by Jud Heathcote and made a triumphant return to the program last year. During its surprise debut against Weber State, it so frustrated back-to-back conference MVP Harold Arceneaux that he tried to punch Matt Williams. Luckily for us, Harold's combat skills appear to be on par with his English and the only damage he caused was to himself. He twisted his own knee and was ejected on the same play. Now, THAT'S talent.

11. Jared Buckmaster. If we've learned anything from our time covering the Griz, it's that you can't, you simply CANNOT leave open on the perimeter. You might as well spot us the points. After battling a case of mononucleosis much of last season, he came back to score 68 points in Montana's last seven games and was instrumental in our late-season run at the tourney. Guess what? Now that the Griz have finally made it to the post-season, we're quite sure that Buck won't pass up the opportunity to make the rest of the conference feel his pain.

12. Buck's Socks. Pulled away up, bleached whiter than Elmer's Paste. What's not to love? It's a little old school, a little new school. It's a good look for a young man — shows that he's all business while clearly sending the message that he's still got love for the streets.

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