

MONTANA KAIMIN

A NEW AGE OF 'NATIVE BALL'

Browning, UM, basketball and how a decade changed everything

Story by Maxwell Johnson
Photos by Henry Doellinger



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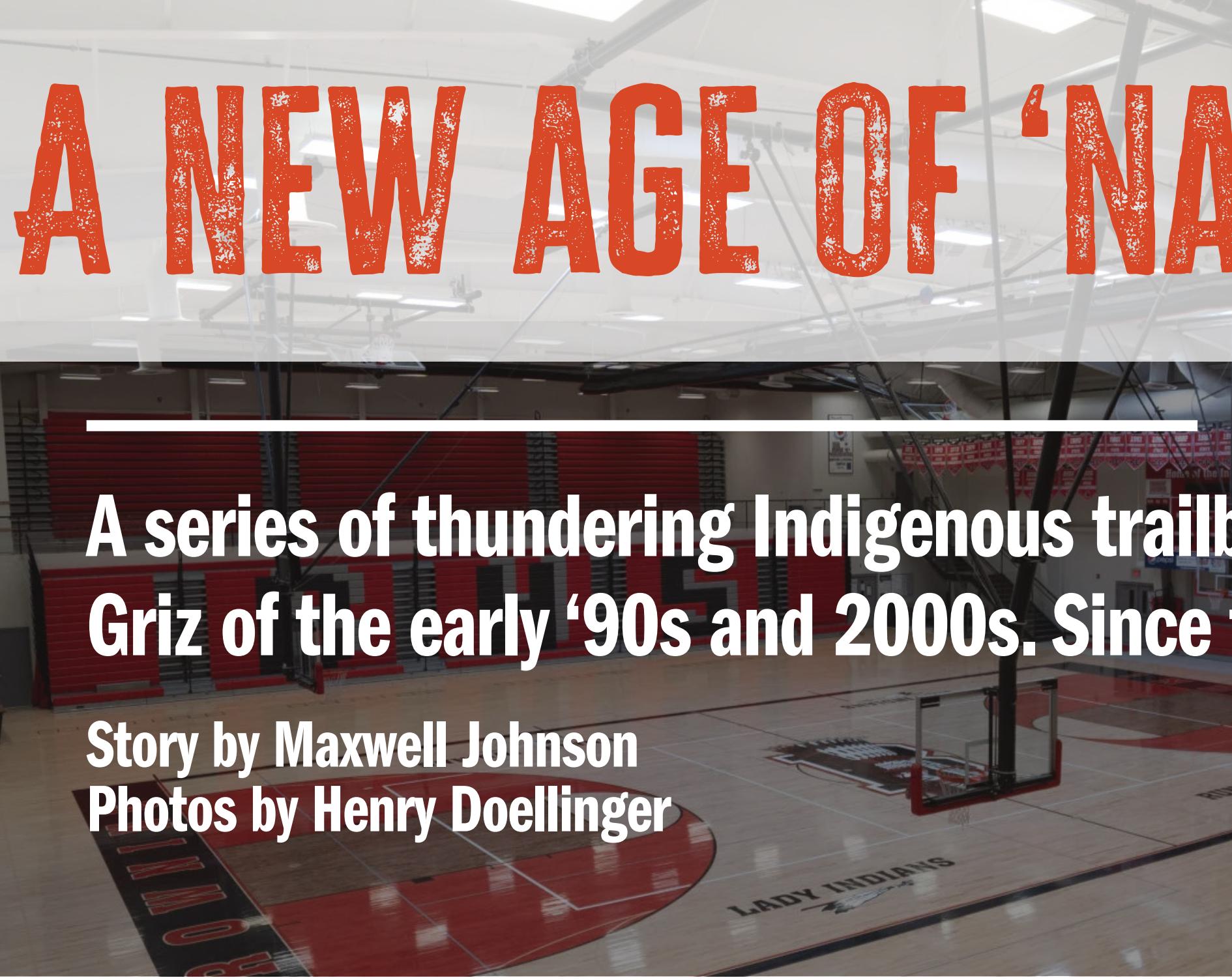
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Cover photo by Henry Doellinger

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A NEW AGE OF 'NAT



A series of thundering Indigenous trailblazing Griz of the early '90s and 2000s. Since the

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Built in 2007, Browning High School's basketball court has a capacity of 4,086 people. Concessions for games are a big deal, with preparations starting at 9:30 a.m. for evening games.

In Browning, Montana, when the Friday night lights flicker on and the doors to the gymnasium open, the small town shakes off its quiet reputation. The town of around 1,000 transforms into a sports hotspot with the ability to fill a stadium four times its capacity. It's the place to witness the perfect combination of beauty and zeal, of natural talent and unflinching work ethic and of quiet pride and thunderous trailblazing.

The town's pride lies in Browning High School and its athletic facilities — a place of sport with history rich enough to

put any Texas town's Friday night lights football to shame.

Without a major professional sports team in Montana, fans, coaches and athletes alike often say high school sports are elevated to the college level in popularity and college-level sports to pro level fandom. Despite this, Browning's sports success stories are few and far between.

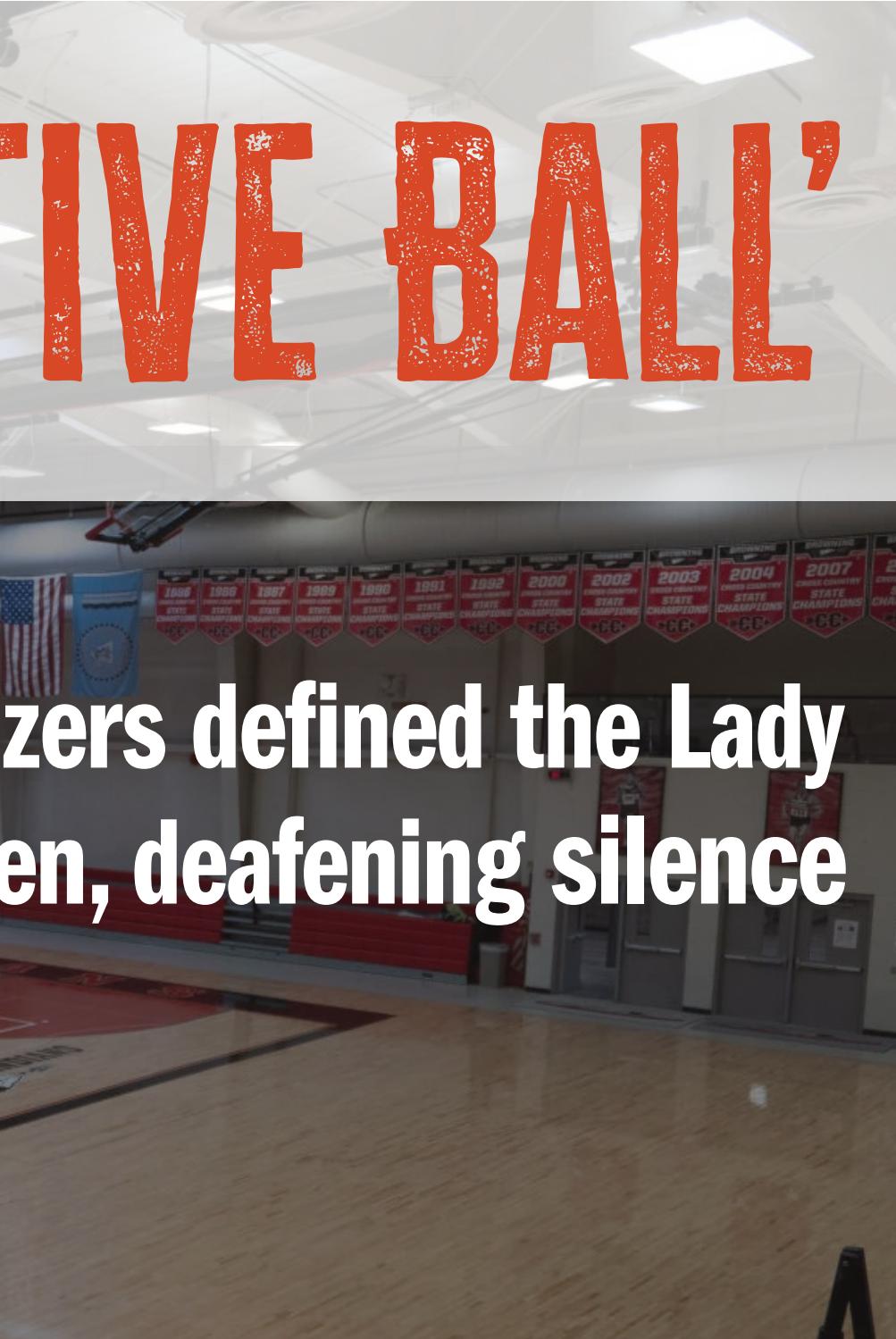
"It's amazing not too many athletes make it out on an athletic scholarship because we're a small tribe," said Jerry Racine, Browning High School football coach. "If you have a kid fulfill their dreams, there's no words for it. It's special."

Racine recently coached Tommy Running Rabbit, the first football player from Browning to receive a full ride scholarship to play with the Griz football team at the University of Montana. But Running Rabbit is far from the first Browning alum to make his mark on the NCAA.

In the '90s and early 2000s, a series of Browning Lady Griz players led by forward Barbara 'Mali' Kipp brought about the team's golden era, breaking barriers and inspiring a generation of Griz fans and Indigenous peoples in the process. Then, as quickly as it began, things seemed to trail off.

NATIVE BALL'

zeros defined the Lady en, deafening silence



In the 2023-2024 season, both Griz men's and women's basketball teams had no Native American-identifying players on their rosters, with the last Lady Griz Browning alum leaving the team a decade ago. Across over 400 Griz coaches and players, Native Americans made up only about 1.5% of the population, as opposed to roughly 8% of the total student population enrolled in UM in the 2024 fall semester.

Kipp spoke to her experience playing at UM in the documentary "Native Ball" a year before she passed away in December 2024. "My motivation to stay at Missoula, to get a degree, to continue playing basketball were my family, who I am, where I come from, to kind of reverse the stereotype. Yeah people talk, like, 'Oh you're from Browning,' and then



Kellen Hall, athletic director of the Browning Indians, walks out of the school's wrestling room on March 22. Hall credits his coaches for instilling determination and work ethic in his athletes.

it was already like you were marked," Kipp said in the documentary. "So, I'm going to surprise you."

As college sports move into a new era, the town of Browning and the legacy of its players remains.

The business

Since 2020, the NCAA has undergone several drastic changes, including relaxed penalties for transferring schools, introduction of Name, Image and Likeness deals and, most recently, the potential of revenue sharing. Many believe these changes have resulted in less recruitment of both Indigenous athletes and in-state Montana students.

"I know our tribal youth have the abilities to succeed at that level, they just have some challenges," Donny Wetzel Jr. said. "It's really just giving them a chance and sometimes our school systems in Indian Country don't really set our youth up academically."

Wetzel said even in his roles as the Montana Indian Hall of Fame Director and a source for media to get into contact with athletes, he hasn't seen much recruitment of Indigenous athletes. He said the transfer

portal's deregulation led to a noticeable drop in recruitment and encouraged universities to recruit outside of Montana.

He mentioned the success that Montana programs have had on the court, in filling the stands and in inspiring future athletes with Montana players at the helm.

"Our Indian people, once we're involved in something, we make it better," Wetzel said.

Daniel Trageser, the athletic director and basketball coach at Flathead High School, said he believes college coaches look close to home first. But, as Trageser said, when a college has a limited amount of scholarships available, some years there might not be an athlete in Montana who fits the roster coaches are trying to fill.

"When a college is recruiting you, they are making an investment in you. If it's a four year investment, that's \$250,000," Trageser said. "There's 364 Division I schools and 300-plus east of Mississippi, and for a kid from Montana, there's just not a lot of opportunities."

It's a far cry from Kipp's 1992-1993 team, made up of 14 Montanans and one Minnesotan, although only one Indigenous Montanan. In comparison, the 2024-2025 Lady Griz basketball roster had four Montanans on its team.

"I think a lot of major D1s have stopped

recruiting [from Montana] high schools," Trageser said. "I think they will look at an [out of state] proven product versus raw local talent."

Trageser also said college coaches rarely have an opportunity to get out and recruit in person during the traditional high school season. He said much of the recruiting happens during the summertime, per NCAA regulations, and at major events where coaches can catch 100 prospects at once, rather than just one.

"There's not a lot that happens in Montana [in terms of recruiting events]," Trageser said. "A lot of kids will go play for a team out of Boise, but most of our athletes that want that high level exposure have to go to Phoenix, Vegas, Seattle, California ... [there's] not a lot of amateur athletic basketball, [here]."

Wetzel, along with Trageser, share the view that youth travel sports and organizations such as the Amateur Athletic Union have become a financial burden for some families. Trageser said they are often seen as required to have an athlete succeed, while in his opinion, that is not the case.

"AAU Leagues, those have become a racket. You're dropping five to 10 grand a season," Wetzel said. "I want to create an athletic academy under our [hall of fame] umbrella, but that's tough... It takes money to do that and I know our Native youth, our families don't have it."

Due to the above factors, Trageser believes many athletes must make the most of their opportunities at the lower divisions of the NCAA or other types of collegiate play. Schools like Browning have recently sent more athletes to levels such as the non-NCAA affiliated National Association of Intercollegiate Athletes, with Racine recently sending around eight football players in the last six years to the NAIA level, a significant uptick.

In the past, these schools were often seen as a last chance for players, but have increasingly become a sports pipeline. Griz basketball player Kai Johnson, for example, successfully transferred from an NCAA Division II program to the Griz.

Kent Haslam, UM's athletic director since 2012, has overseen the school during the NCAA's most recent transformative decade. While he acknowledges the competitive nature of sports, he also said he believes the fundamental athletic experience at the University has remained the same, a view shared by head football coach Bobby Hauck, who stated he has connections keeping eyes on talent in every high school in the state, including Browning.

Haslam said coaches keep an eye on local talent while acknowledging the transfer portal can be the best way to go about building a competitive roster. He also said the fan experience has changed, as less and less athletes remain lifelong Grizzly players.

When asked about the lack of Indigenous athletes at UM over the past couple of years,



Browning Indians athletic director Kellen Hall overlooks the school's basketball court on March 22. The varsity boys basketball team finished the 2024-2025 season with a 17-7 overall record.

Haslam stated in an email that because he does not recruit student athletes directly, he could not provide a comment.

Another valuable opportunity sports can provide is the possibility of a full-ride scholarship. Kellen Hall, athletic director at Browning High School, said many Indigenous students choose to either join the military or work for the Bureau of Indian Affairs or the Indian Health Service out of high school, as there are not a wealth of options available.

Barriers broken

The documentary "Native Ball" opens with the statistic that out of 5,000 high school girls that received a full-ride basketball scholarship in 1992, only one was Indigenous: Kipp. She was also the first Indigenous Montana woman to receive a Division I scholarship.

Kipp, like other athletes, represented her hometown and Lady Griz basketball with distinction. But in a time with few Native American players, playing for Browning on the court meant representation for Indigenous athletes and women alike.

Between her sophomore and senior year, she helped the team to three straight first

place finishes in the Big Sky Conference and three NCAA tournament appearances, two of which the Lady Griz advanced to the second round.

"She was a quiet, strong leader," said Megan Harrington, a former Lady Griz alum who played alongside Kipp.

Harrington later directed the short documentary detailing Kipp's basketball career, "Native Ball."

"Being able to reconnect with her for 'Native Ball' was a gift," Harrington said.

Although Harrington, from Missoula, played with Kipp for years, she said she didn't realize how different Kipp's playing experience was coming from Browning.

Although it's been decades since Kipp played for UM, the struggles she faced when transitioning from Browning to Missoula still exist for Indigenous athletes today.

Lasting legacy

Hall has coached in some capacity for the last 18 years. He described the culture shock between the two towns as one of the biggest challenges Indigenous athletes face when

jumping up to a Division I sport.

Even in the '90s, when all but one member of the team was from Montana, the contrast between the two towns was stark. Missoula is a college town nestled in the mountains, boasting a population of 80,000 with 10,000 students attending the University of Montana. Four hours away sits Browning on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, a close-knit community of 1,000 with a high school of around 500 students.

Hall said the town has two different cultures, with one possessing a Blackfeet metaphysics mindset and the other a Eurocentric mindset.

Despite the challenges, however, he said he feels schools such as UM do enough to accommodate athletes.

"We're Native American, we do things a certain way," Hall said. "We have a strong sense of community."

Hall idolized Kipp during his childhood. For him, she brought the perfect combination of work ethic and talent to break through and become an incredible athlete.

UM Native American studies professor Wade Davies spoke to some of the unique challenges facing Indigenous athletes. He wrote the book "Native Hoops," a history of

Native American contributions to basketball. Although he said he can't speak to the last 30 years, he said historically, some coaches may have been hesitant to give Indigenous players scholarships due to the stereotype of them struggling academically and culturally in college and ultimately leaving.

Robin Selvig, former UM Hall of Fame Lady Griz head coach, however, was no such coach. He drove eight hours round trip to Browning just to watch Kipp play and eventually recruited her. The Lady Griz coach was described as intense and wasn't afraid to yell at his players, but it came from the right place.

"Rob came and watched me play here in Browning. I don't know any other coaches that did come in person to Browning. It meant a lot that he came all that way to watch me play," Kipp said in the documentary. "Rob was really focused on being culturally sensitive. He asked me to come into his office, and I noticed he had four different books in regards to Native Americans, and I was like, 'Oh!' if people would take the time to learn about someone else's culture, I think that we wouldn't have the difficulties or the stressors that we have in our world today."

With Selvig's help, Kipp improved, starting in more games year by year. By her senior year, she was a lock to start on a dynasty Griz team. She started 28 games, was fourth on the team in playing time and second in rebounds. She also put up 174 points and over 30 steals and blocks on the season.

Instead of being an anomaly for Browning, Kipp would be just the beginning. Fellow Browning athletes like Simarron Schildt, Tamara Guardipee and Shanae Gilman made their own contributions to a series of Lady Griz teams that would collectively go to eight NCAA tournaments from 1992 to 2015. Since then, Indigenous players from Browning have been few and far between. Selvig stopped coaching in the 2015-2016 season.

"Stepping on the court for the first time as a Lady Griz, I was super excited. I felt like, 'Is this really happening?' I could feel the energy, and you couldn't even hear anything," Kipp said in the documentary.

Average attendance for Lady Griz games in the 1996 season, when Kipp and Harrington were both on the team, was 4,600. Fans waited in line for hours outside the Adams Center to get the best open seating in the Dahlberg Arena. Attendance for the most recent Lady Griz season was 2,300.

This success extended out through the Kipp family. Barbara Kipp's brother, Logan Kipp, played pickup basketball with Hall growing up and helped lead Browning High School to a state championship in 2001 and again in 2002.

"Through the '90s we had a lot of losing seasons, but we had great basketball players," Hall said. "We won state for the first time in 21 years and it was a boom. That's when basketball took off again for the rez."

But Hall and the Kipp family weren't alone

in making an impact on Indigenous sports history. While Logan Kipp would spearhead the team's 2001 run, Mike Chavez would do the same on Browning's 2002 team, eventually going on to play for the Griz. There, he helped two teams make it to an NCAA tournament and became a fan favorite. Another Browning High School alumni, Pete Conway, embarked on a successful journey at Montana State University around the same time.

More than a game

Even for athletes that don't make it to the college level, sports play a crucial role in not only recreation, but also education, according to Wetzel, director of the Montana Indian Athletic Hall of Fame.

"[I] worked in Indian education for many years," Wetzel said. "During athletic times, you have the most attendance and most involvement."

Wetzel spoke about sports as a way to reconnect with a tribe's warrior culture and history. That was part of the motivation for him and his late father Don Wetzel Sr. to put the hall of fame together back in 2007. With it, they could acknowledge the strength of Indigenous communities.

Wetzel previously did work in suicide prevention and other civic programs. He said one of the best times on the reservation for mental health is when basketball tournaments happen.

"[Educators] can fight it all they want, but basketball is king," he said.

Hall also described basketball and other sports events as one of the only opportunities the community has to come together. Individual families often sit in the same area

for every game and volunteers come to the school as early as 9 a.m. to cook concessions.

"We have a warrior concept here," Wetzel said. "Blackfeet were a warrior tribe. Now it's kind of bestowed on our youth in our high schools that whoever does athletics has that spirit."

The Plains tribal tradition of "counting coups" has since carried over to athletics. Historically, Plains nations members gained prestige by touching enemies without killing them and escaping unharmed in order to intimidate them and persuade them to admit defeat.

In modern day sports, a prestigious coup would be beating a basketball player in high school that went on to play D1 or a rival program.

"Even when a tribe plays another tribe, there's history," Wetzel said, comparing it to soccer games between Germany and France. "We've only been in the assimilation process for 120 to 130 years. Sports have been with us for thousands of years."

Despite Browning's appreciation for sports, whether or not UM will have another historic streak of Indigenous basketball players is yet to be seen.

The future at UM

As for the rare one-in-5,000 athletes like Kipp, her legacy continues to be felt at UM as well as in Browning. In 2024, Tommy Running Rabbit became the first football player from the town to receive a full ride.

"I think [in] the present day, the kids that I coached that have gone off to college and stuck it out have made it a lot easier for Natives especially up here in Montana to be



Tommy Running Rabbit is a sophomore from Browning, Montana, and a member of the Blackfeet Nation.

recruited and trusted to be recruited," Jerry Racine, who has also sent a number of players to lower levels of college athletics, said.

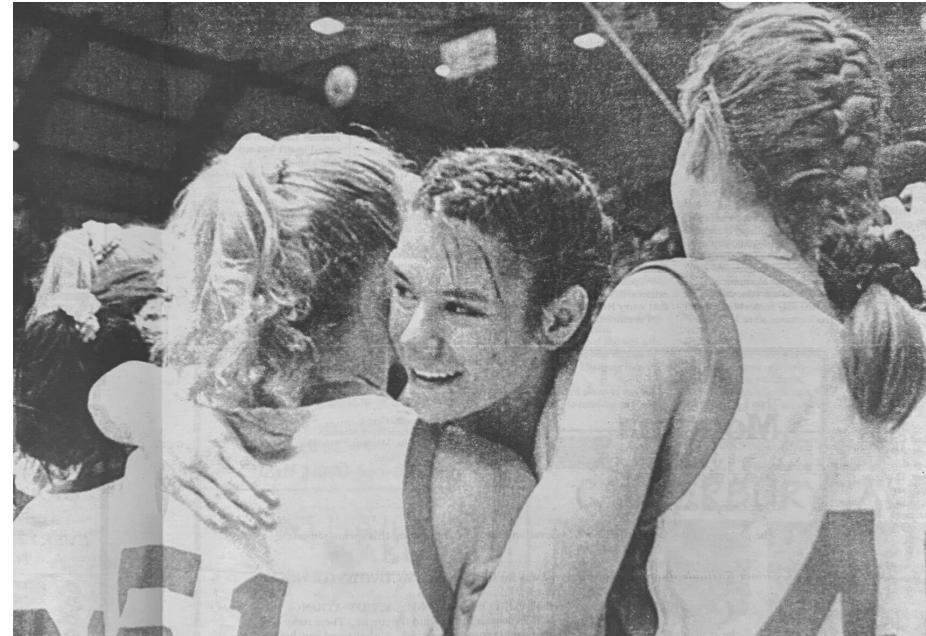
Running Rabbit wanted to be a Grizzly many years before joining the program. During his sophomore year of high school, Racine encouraged him to go to a football camp in Missoula.

"[I told him] if that's where you want to go, you have to get in front of those coaches, and that's what he did. He went to multiple camps and made an impression: how he carried himself, how hard he worked," Racine said. Running Rabbit said he "balled out at the camp" his sophomore year and Hauck made a comment encouraging him to keep working.

Running Rabbit emerged as a two-way player over the rest of his high school career, playing offensively as both a wide receiver and tight end and defensively as an outside linebacker. He joined the Griz in 2024, although he was unable to get into a game his freshman year. Despite that, he said he feels his development is progressing well as he goes into his sophomore year.

Hall mentioned Running Rabbit as an athlete that, much like Kipp, possesses that perfect combination of work ethic and talent. He said Running Rabbit shares common motivation with Kipp and the other trailblazers from Browning.

"My big motivation is my family," Running Rabbit said. "That's why I'm here, just to keep motivating them too, also just motivating my whole city, in Browning."



Kipp exchanges a warm moment with teammate Dawn Sackman after the Big Sky Championship ceremony March 9, 1996. ANN WILLIAMSON | MONTANA KAIMIN

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