

Montana Academy

August 15, 2008

Letter from Lost Prairie

Mens sana en corpore sano

August has been a busy month both personally and at the ranch. There have been several weddings to attend, all in glorious settings, and a fine graduation on August 8th for 19 Montana Academy students on their way amidst tears and laughter to the next stages of their young lives. These community and family events have been bitter sweet. We will miss these lovely young people in our daily lives and hope very much that they will return regularly to visit with us, as several did this last week, and bring news of the wider world in which they must now find their places. New, fresh faces are taking their places and we welcome these newcomers and their parents to Lost Prairie and look forward to becoming close to them also in the coming months. They are joining an interesting and intimate community - and a fit one too.

This month the world is glued to television watching the Olympic Games in Beijing. It seems to me to be an apt time to comment on the physical fitness program for students at Montana Academy.

I have written several times during the past year about the changes that I have observed in the community of Montana Academy over the past decade. One of the most gratifying changes is in the level of physical activity on campus. Those of us who were here during the first couple of years will readily remember students lying around on sofas, barely willing to rouse themselves to walk from building to building. Getting them out to take a walk in the surrounding countryside was a major staff challenge which we undertook mostly on weekends. Their bodies, as well as their attitudes, tended to demonstrate this physical laziness.

Our staff was young and physically fit. We hoped that they would be an inspiration but, like most things, it took more than wishing. It took structure, time and effort to get our sports program up and running. Jason Rasco joined us in a team leader role initially and put his back into making a serious sports program. He created a soccer field and made an effort to flood it in the winter to create an ice hockey rink. We acquired balls and goals and, when faced with resistance, Jason piled everyone into the school vans and bused them down the road for a couple of miles in order that they would walk back to campus. Our now remodeled school house was centered on a small gym where staff diligently played basketball with students and taught them to climb with handholds. Jason invented a winter carnival. This took place on a shallow frozen local lake in February. Students played ice hockey, skied and snow shoed in various competitive combinations for a couple of hours before returning to the ranch for a simple BBQ dinner.

Some months ago Dennis Malinak passed me on the way out to my car on a Friday afternoon and asked if I wanted to put a smile on my face. He pointed me in the direction of the gym. When I opened the door I found the large vaulted space a hive of purposeful

activity. Students in our blue gym uniforms were playing basketball and volleyball, others were in the loft area working out on a variety of strength and weight training equipment. Still more were doing aerobics in the back room. Not one student was sitting out.

Dennis Malinak, himself a runner, initiated a 5 K fall run on Lost Prairie Road. He boosted the stakes by promising that all those who beat him could come over to his house for a steak dinner. Our students did, indeed, begin to run and to compete. Tim Corson started a cross country running team 5 years ago, training at lunchtime and also in the early mornings with our students. They signed up for a number of summer runs, starting with Boogie to the Bank in Columbia Falls and moving on to the Whitefish Lake run and others. Three years ago some of our runners began to train for marathons. In 2005 one of our boys came in 9th in his age group in the San Francisco marathon, in 2006 three boys and one girl completed this race and this year Aaron Chilewich, an August graduate, completed the San Diego marathon. In June I watched with pleasure on a lovely early summer morning while eight students from Skyhouse took part in 5K run, the Herron Hustle, a fundraiser for a local organization, Foys to Blacktail Trails project, with which I am involved in working to preserve a historic trail system close to Kalispell. They were accompanied by our staff Chad Castren and Joe Wassif. On a single weekend in February four students participated in a half marathon in the Swan Valley. Four others participated in a climbing competition at The Summit and one girl, Meghan Toomey, went with her trainer, Todd Cardin, to the weight lifting championships in Missoula and took first place in her age group, breaking state records in all but 4 states. Meghan is now competing again, hoping to lift between 170-205 lbs and asking for sponsorships to raise money for Suicide Prevention International. Meghan also graduated a week ago and will be competing first in California and soon thereafter in world weight lifting championships.

Not only are our students running in competitions off campus, but Jason organized the NW Montana Specialty Schools Soccer League in 2007 and this year 9 games are already scheduled for both boys' and girls' teams with a final tournament on October 11th. Our summer intern, Nathaan Demers, from Middlebury College was teaching soccer moves from his experience playing on the Middlebury team before his injury in a small airplane crash. This winter we also had a competent and dedicated basketball team which competed occasionally off campus. In March the formerly all boys' team was joined by a ferocious girl player, Kelsey Hildal, for the annual staff vs. student match. This match was exciting and hard fought on both sides. The entire community watched with bated breath. In the end there was a tie and with overtime the staff scored the winning goal.

For those who are not runners, soccer or basketball players Nick Hong, himself a black belt in karate, started a winter karate workshop and took a select group of students into Kalispell to train with his sensei and to earn their first white belts.

Last fall we added a part-time athletics director, Phil Moore- a boxer- who has a degree in kinesiology, to develop our program yet another notch. Phil oversees a schedule for all students to rotate through general fitness training, strength training, aerobics, cardiovascular training. This training is designed to prepare students for the physical requirements of our block break trips as well as to introduce them to a wide variety of intramural fun and games in addition to competitive sports. Phil has created a classroom component addressing the intellectual, social, emotional and physical benefits

of healthy lifestyles for all beginning students. He also teaches a second level class focused on exercise physiology, as well as self management and lifetime fitness planning for more advanced students and plans to tie this in to our clan work.

Our boys' teams prepared diligently for their challenge trips in our late July break. Team 7 worked hard biking three times a week during sports and increasing the length of their rides on weekends up to 30 miles in preparation for a 250 mile back country bike trip to Sandpoint, Idaho. Teams 1, 3 and 5 worked on their water skills before setting off to negotiate Lake Slocan in Canada, the North Fork of the Flathead and the Smith River.

Our annual triathlon was held on August 1 at Lake McGregor. Students and staff competed alone or in relays, swimming, biking and running. Taylor DeMatto won the boys' solo with Owen McGaffigan a close second. Lynn Barlow won the girls' solo and Kelsey Hildal came in second.

Many of our students, while not Olympians, are fine athletes. All are fit. I think that we have earned the right to include this famous Latin British public school motto: A healthy mind in a healthy body, as part of the work that we do here at Montana Academy.

Warm regards,

Rosemary McKinnon, MSW