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“A Change of Seasons”: An Exercise in Enterprise Journalism

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“A Change of Seasons”:
An Exercise in Enterprise Journalism

Jessica Gill

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with honors to the Department of Communication Studies at Carroll College, Helena, Montana.

Spring, 2004
This thesis for honors recognition has been approved for the Department of Communication Studies.

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Abstract

Two years ago, the Human Rights Bureau (HRB) decided to change the athletic seasons in Montana high schools to match the national norms. This change moved girls’ basketball to the winter season with boys’ basketball and moved girls’ volleyball to the fall season. The change of seasons battle began more than twenty years ago and throughout its history caused divisions between people involved in Montana athletics. This thesis is an exploration of enterprise journalism as a research method into the Montana change of seasons to create a feature article that might be printed in a Montana newspaper.
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Introduction

On August 15, 2002, the Whitehall Trojan volleyball team, as well as other squads all across the state, took the court in the fall athletic season.

This event marked the official transition for Montana athletics to match the national norms: girls’ basketball reluctantly relinquished the fall season to girls’ volleyball and joined boys’ basketball in the winter season.

This season change culminated more than twenty years of legal struggle to align Montana with the national athletic standards.

The conflict was intense on both sides of the issue.

Volleyball fans, players and coaches supported the change to a “traditional” season. These advocates claimed a season change would offer better opportunities for female athletes in the state.

Basketball fans, players, coaches, and administrators opposed the season change. These opponents believed the change would harm girls’ basketball and upset Montana tradition.

This five-chapter thesis consists of three chapters that might be printed in a Montana newspaper. The other two chapters provide context for the feature articles including why the topic was chosen, how the articles were researched and written, and finally, what insights into writing were gained through the project.

The first three chapters are for actual newspaper publication – published on three consecutive days or on three consecutive Sundays.
First, I will recount the history of the season change. Next, I’ll outline the choices forced upon people by the change, and finally I’ll ask the question: was the change the right decision for Montana?

The final two chapters offer personal reflection on the project.

Chapter 4 – The birth of a thesis – reflects on my own life as an athlete and how my own experience inspired this thesis. Chapter 5 – The making of a feature article – is a final reflection on the project, seeking insights from the journalistic process.
A Change of Seasons: In the Beginning

In the fall of 1999, Helena High School freshman Cassidy Merrick faced an impossible decision.

Merrick was a two-sport athlete who enjoyed basketball and soccer – both fall season sports. The conflict between the sports forced Merrick to decide between the activities she enjoyed.

"I had to choose," said Merrick, "and it was the hardest decision I ever had to make."

For three years, Merrick lived with her decision to play basketball in the fall, but she could only dream about playing on the soccer field for Helena High. However, for the next two years, Merrick heard rumors about a possible season switch for girls' basketball.

Luckily for Merrick, the rumors were true.

The girls' basketball season moved from the fall to the winter, allowing Merrick to play soccer in the fall and basketball in the winter.

"It was so exciting in my senior year," Merrick says, "because I could play [both] soccer and basketball again."

Merrick had been keeping her footwork sharp by playing club soccer in the spring season, enabling her to hit the ground running with the Helena High soccer team in her senior season.

“And for the first time we won state!” Merrick remembers – something she would not have been able to experience if the seasons had not been changed in 2002.
The story of Cassidy Merrick’s soccer success is just one of hundreds of stories from athletes all across Montana affected by the change of seasons.

* * *

Montana was one of a few states with the unique calendar that assigned girls’ basketball to the fall season and girls’ volleyball to the winter season. The change to match the national norms – girls’ basketball in the winter and girls’ volleyball in the fall – helped some athletes like Merrick, but created conflicts and difficult choices for others.

Like Merrick, many Montanans celebrated the change of seasons because they saw the new opportunities it would offer to female soccer and volleyball players. Aligning with the national norm, they said, would allow volleyball players to participate in club volleyball – the off-season tournaments and games – and to be more easily recruited by college programs all across the country.

But for every athlete or coach who rejoiced in the change of seasons, there were just as many shaking their heads at the lost opportunities for female basketball players. These opponents said aligning girls’ basketball with the boys’ basketball in the winter would mean losing fans, revenue, referees and status in athletics, said the skeptics.

* * *

The study of the change of seasons in Montana is a drama with many players fighting for control of the athletic courts in the fall. It began a legal battle fought in the courts, but the argument became personal for many Montanans.

To get a sense of what happened, we will first look back at the history of the battle for the fall, then explore choices forced by the season change, and finally look
ahead to see whether the changes will, ultimately, help or hurt Montana high school sports.

While the season change was instituted in 2002-2003, this journey began nearly 30 years ago with the passage of Title IX, which turned the nation’s attention to equality for females. Title IX provided women’s athletics with legal leverage that eventually led to more females playing more sports in schools across America.

In May 1982 a group of parents filed a lawsuit, citing Title IX, which would begin the fight for the fall season in Montana.

These citizens demanded equal treatment for female athletes in Montana. The Ridgeway, et al. lawsuit wanted the Montana girls’ basketball and girls’ volleyball seasons to match the national norm – girls’ volleyball alone in the fall and girls’ basketball in the winter with the boys.

Helena High head volleyball coach Sheila Williams was one of the individuals in favor of a change of seasons.

“As girls got better and we were looking for opportunities, I don’t think people realized how it [the winter season] limited opportunities,” Williams said.

Williams, other volleyball coaches, parents, and players who supported the change of seasons focused on equality for girls’ volleyball players. A fall season for volleyball would allow Montana players to participate in club volleyball in the winter.

Club volleyball is the collection of off-season games, practices, and tournaments many volleyball players participate in across America. A fall season would align Montana volleyball not only with the regular athletic season, but also with the national club volleyball season.
Putting the volleyball season in the winter, the proponents argued, was also discriminatory because colleges awarded volleyball scholarships before the Montana season even started. If the seasons were changed, they said, Montana volleyball players could be more easily recruited to college programs.

Helena High basketball coach Steve Keller opposed a change of seasons because girls’ basketball gained advantages and opportunities by being the only team on the courts in the fall.

“\textquote{I felt that girls’ basketball in its own season was improving drastically,}” said Keller. “\textquote{Montana girls’ basketball was ahead of a lot of states...getting their own publicity, radio and TV time.}”

In states where girls’ basketball shared the winter season with boys’ basketball, crowds and publicity were shared as well. Keller argued that by separating the girls’ basketball season, the sport had become “something special” in Montana.

Keller and other coaches, players, and parents who opposed the change of seasons focused on equality for girls’ basketball players.

A season change for girls’ basketball might mean fewer fans and fewer referees; gym time and publicity would be shared with boys’ basketball, argued Keller.

The Ridgeway lawsuit was settled in late 1983, mandating many Title IX changes including equal treatment of men and women in facilities, length of season, and travel accommodations. The settlement, however, did not address the issue of the girls’ volleyball and basketball seasons.

Despite a federal trial and an unsuccessful appeal to the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals, the fall season still belonged to girls’ basketball.
The parents and players battling for control of the fall season, however, did not give up.

Another complaint was filed with the Montana Human Rights Bureau (HRB) in January of 1999 by three Montana volleyball coaches and their daughters.

Kerryanne Cook, the advocacy coordinator for the Women’s Sports Foundation, supports the fight for changing the seasons all across the country.

“We don’t want girls to have more of a disadvantage,” said Cook. “To have a season that’s different from everyone else? The message it sends is that we don’t value your participation in sports enough to give you a regular season.”

The plaintiffs of the ’99 lawsuit agreed with Cook and focused on the rights of volleyball players. This claim was more specific than the previous Ridgeway lawsuit, which focused on the rights of girls’ basketball players as well as girls’ volleyball players.

The proponents of the ’99 lawsuit argued that the unique volleyball season discriminated against Montana volleyball players by denying them a club season that matched the national club season, said former Carroll College basketball Jim Gross.

Gross, who testified at the HRB hearing in 2000, said the claimants of the ’99 lawsuit also argued that the winter volleyball season hurt recruiting of Montana volleyball athletes by collegiate programs.

Again, this pressure by volleyball to take over the fall season met with resistance from the basketball community.

“I knew we were against the national norm,” said Sweet Grass County High (SGHS) superintendent Al Buerkle, “but I felt the system worked.”
Despite some public outcry, HRB examiner Terry Spear ruled in favor of the volleyball parents in 2000. According to the MHSA, Spear ordered the girls’ volleyball and girls’ basketball seasons to be exchanged for the 2002-2003 school year. The MHSA did not contest the decision and set plans in motion to enact the changes.

The legal struggle for the fall season officially ended in 2000, but that court decision didn’t put an end to the argument. The public battle between volleyball and basketball went into overtime.

Both sides of the conflict continued the argument – this time debating whether or not the decision to change the Montana athletic seasons helped or hurt Montana high school sports. Volleyball supporters argued that the change helped volleyball, while the basketball supporters argued the change hurt girls’ basketball.

Gary Williams, Helena volleyball referee, celebrated when volleyball took over the fall season.

“It gave Montana volleyball some validity with the rest of the nation,” Williams said. “It legitimized the sport in Montana.”

Capital head volleyball coach Mike Burke agreed with Williams that the change gave new opportunities to volleyball players.

“It was a good move for the sport of volleyball – it showcased it,” said Burke.

Helena High coach Sheila Williams and SGHS superintendent Buerkle agree that volleyball has seen an increase in the number of fans since they moved to the fall season.

Columbus athletic director and basketball coach Paul Barta said he believed the change would also give female coaches more opportunities in Montana.
Sheila Williams and Rocky Mountain college volleyball coach Wade Wells said the fall season gives Montana athletes more opportunities to be recruited for college programs.

“In the overall picture it was going to benefit kids, especially if they were looking to go [to college] out of state,” Wells said.

However, while many celebrated increased opportunities for girls’ volleyball by moving to the fall season, others mourned the lost opportunities for girls’ basketball in the winter. The big negatives for basketball, said Jim Gross, included difficult practice times and a shortage of good officials.

Twin Bridges superintendent David Whitesell agrees with Gross. The change meant Whitesell’s school was forced to crowd all the additional athletic practices into the school’s single gym.

“We’re sending kids home at 8-9 p.m. every night,” Whitesell said.

According to Twin Bridges principal Georgia Nye, her school just built a new gym to help solve the scheduling problem.

Even Cassidy Merrick, who liked the change because it helped soccer, acknowledged that the schedule in the new basketball season proved difficult. Merrick was disappointed because the girls’ and boys’ basketball teams could no longer see each other play.

Volleyball coach Sheila Williams, a strong proponent of the change of seasons, admitted that the change of seasons probably hurt attendance at girls’ basketball games. Fans now have to choose between girls’ and boys’ basketball on many nights or deal with “Saturday extravaganzas” of all-day basketball.
“As far as attendance at games,” said Jim Opitz, Helena Schools District Activities Director, “probably the crowds at girls’ basketball were smaller.”

SGHS superintendent Buerkle recalled some fans leaving a girls’ basketball game during a “Saturday extravaganza” because they were burned out on basketball, even though it was only a two-point game!

Amy Heuiser, Carroll College volleyball coach, said that the change of season has actually hurt recruiting for the smaller colleges.

“The small schools start [recruiting] in March and that won’t change,” Heuiser said.

The smaller colleges recruit after their own season is over because they don’t employ enough extra staff to travel to see high school prospects. Small colleges are now at a disadvantage because larger colleges can recruit year-round.

Though the argument may continue, the seasons were changed and girl’s volleyball now rules the fall.

Many admit that despite reservations, Montana athletic programs are making the change of seasons work. However, as we saw with Merrick’s story, the adjustment to the change of seasons required change and alteration – and for some, heartache and pain.

“We force the student to make a choice,” says Capitol High athletic director Ed Beniger. “It’s really a juggling act for the kids, their parents, and the coaches. It creates a hardship for everybody.”

“A Change of Seasons” will continue in next week’s installment with an in-depth look at the choices and changes facing athletes, parents, and coaches after the change of seasons.
A Change of Seasons: Decision Time

Cassidy Merrick, Helena High soccer and basketball player, celebrated in 2002 when girls' basketball joined the boys in the winter season. Her basketball coach Steve Keller, however, faced a tough choice.

Moving girls' basketball to the winter season and girls' volleyball to the fall season allowed players like Merrick to participate in both soccer and basketball for the first time in Montana history. For Keller, who coached both boys' and girl's basketball at Helena High, the change of seasons meant a new conflict between his activities.

Keller could no longer coach both his boys' and girls' teams in the simultaneous seasons and was forced to decide which team to coach. He decided to coach his boys' team and gave up his girls' team for the 2002-2003 season.

"When I had to sit here and tell my seven seniors I was picking the boys over them, it was rough," said Keller.

This tough choice was not unique – many Montana coaches faced similar choices when the seasons changed.

"There were 70-80 coaches that did both [boys' and girls' basketball] and maybe five did both after the change," Keller said.

* * *

The first installment of the "Change of Seasons" series took an in-depth look at the history of the season change and the legal battle for the fall season between girls' basketball and volleyball.

However, a simple record of important dates, court cases, and decisions cannot paint an accurate picture of what really happened.
The story of the change of seasons is at its heart, a human story – a tale of changes and choices.

A wide variety of individuals faced difficult choices.

The change of seasons altered the lives of the coaches and players in girls' basketball and volleyball, of course. However, the change also altered the lives of fans, parents, referees, band members, cheerleaders, and students.

**Coaches**

The change of seasons forced Montana coaches to make hard choices.

Many, like Steve Keller, surrendered one of their coaching positions. Others attempted the daunting challenge of coaching two programs simultaneously.

Columbus head basketball coach Paul Barta coached both the girls' and boys' basketball teams at his school before the change of seasons. However, unlike Keller, Barta attempted to continue coaching both his boys' and girls' teams in the same winter season.

Luckily for Barta, he not only coached the Columbus team, he also scheduled their games and practices.

"The games were easy for me," said Barta. "I was also the athletic director."

Though Barta would dedicate four hours each day to practice and every weekend to games, the regular season did not present too many conflicts.

But Murphy’s Law prevailed: both teams battled through the regular season and both qualified for their respective state tournaments. To make matters worse, at the end of the 2002-2003 season, the boys' and girls' tournaments were held the same week in
different cities. This tournament schedule meant Barta was forced to miss the first
divisional tournament game for his boys' team.

“Both my teams were playing Saturday nights back-to-back. I was fortunate to
have good assistants to cover everything in the locker room,” said Barta. “What are the
odds of both teams going to state?”

Though Keller and Barta took different paths, both faced tough decisions because
of the change of seasons. So did other athletic leaders in Montana.

Mike Burke, the volleyball and football coach at Capital High, initially opposed
the change of seasons.

“Whenever the AA coaches had a vote, it was 12-1,” recalled Burke. “I was the
one.”

Burke opposed the change of seasons because volleyball in the fall would force
him to choose between the sports he loved to coach.

Burke coached football in the fall and volleyball in the winter before the change
of seasons. Moving girls’ volleyball to the fall "football" season created a conflict for
Burke.

“I actually stopped coaching football because I knew it was going to happen,”
Burke said. “For the game of volleyball, though, it’s a positive change.”

**Recruiting**

Even though Burke believes that volleyball has benefited from the change, he also
knows it caused problems for many individuals. Surprisingly, college volleyball coaches
were among them.
“It was harder on college coaches to recruit when we’re playing at the same time. I would bet most of the Frontier Conference coaches would agree,” says Burke.

Amy Heuiser, Carroll College head volleyball coach, does agree. Heuiser says the change of seasons hurt recruiting for the smaller colleges like Carroll.

However, with our volleyball season matching the national norm, a Montana volleyball athlete can be better recruited by a Division I college than a smaller school, she said, because the bigger schools have bigger coaching staffs. That allows bigger schools to send assistants to watch prospective players at high school games.

Coaches at smaller colleges, however, cannot watch potential recruits directly in their games and instead rely on videotapes of games or intra-squad matches at high school practices.

“Most recruiting is now done by video. It’s hard for college coaches to see the players play,” said Tim Kelly, Capitol girls’ basketball coach and former Carroll assistant.

The change of seasons creates the same advantage for Division I schools in basketball.

“If you really want to recruit,” says former Carroll basketball coach Jim Gross, “it’s better to go out and see the players in action.”

Larissa Obert, a current Carroll basketball player who played high school ball at Sweet Grass County High School, agreed that recruiting has changed. She said that many college coaches recruiting her attended her practices rather than her games.

Before the season change, these coaches would have watched Obert and her teammates at Big Timber’s games. Obviously, Obert managed to make the college ranks,
demonstrating that the change of seasons did cause disadvantages for college recruiting, but nothing too prohibitive.

**Younger Players**

Varsity girls’ volleyball and basketball players were affected in numerous ways after their seasons were exchanged. Practice times, game schedules, recruiting, and gym schedules changed for both sports.

But the players on freshman and junior varsity basketball teams, both boys and girls, faced additional hardships.

“Practice times are very difficult for some of the younger kids,” said Gross. “They are working in grade school gyms and [facing] early morning practices.”

Tim Kelly agreed; finding practice times for the younger players was tough. Kelly said Capital basketball athletes practice until 9 p.m. at night, every night.

Coaches and athletic directors struggled to schedule gym time for all the girls’ and boys’ teams. At Capital, for example, there are four boys’ basketball squads and four girls’ basketball squads needing to practice every day. This overload results in freshman and junior varsity teams typically being assigned the early morning or late-night slots.

Capital High athletic director Ed Beniger says his younger teams often practice as early as 6 a.m. The younger teams sometimes practice in gyms in other schools, including grade schools. Despite these adjustments, the younger teams still cannot be guaranteed a court to themselves.

The age of athletes on younger basketball squads presents another problem.

“Some of the younger kids don’t have cars or can’t drive,” said Beniger. “Some of the younger people have to walk [to practice] and that’s almost a mile.
This struggle for practice affects both basketball players and their parents. Volleyball players are spared this hardship because they do not compete with another indoor sport for practice time and space.

Capital High volleyball coach Mike Burke, however, said that girls’ volleyball and boys’ basketball teams faced the same scheduling problem before the change of seasons.

“We have the same number of teams.” Burke said, “But they [basketball coaches] still claim gym time and say freshman and JV teams can’t practice together.”

Carroll coach Amy Heuiser agrees that the change of seasons should not cause a huge facility shortage. Heuiser indicated there was still one men’s and one women’s team in the fall, just a different women’s sport.

Former Carroll coach Jim Gross, however, maintained that the change of seasons created new conflicts for parents with younger basketball players, especially for those with more than one athlete.

Parents

Capital High boys' basketball coach Bill Pilgeram often heard reports from basketball parents about the hard choices they faced after the season change. As a coach, Pilgeram heard few complaints from fans, but many complaints from families with one boy and one girl playing basketball.

“It’s most difficult on the family that has one girl and one boy on each team,” said Coach Tim Kelly, “You’re making people make choices.”
It might seem that having one girl and one boy playing basketball wouldn’t be difficult to manage. However, in many Montana cities, when the girls’ teams play away, the boys’ teams play at home.

Even when both teams compete in the same city, the games often take place in different gyms. The last choice for scheduling games is the Saturday “extravaganza” in which a school plays all the girls' and boys' games in the same place on the same day. The games start at 2 p.m. in the afternoon and last until 10 p.m. at night.

Pilgeram sees both sides of the season change debate. He understands the reasons behind the change of seasons, but as a parent, he just doesn’t like the new arrangement.

“Wearing a father’s hat or a fan’s hat, I don’t like it,” Pilgeram says. “I have three daughters and coach boys’ basketball and would never get to see them all play.”

When girls’ volleyball played in the winter season with boys’ basketball, there were also scheduling conflicts and some parents might also have faced choices if a son played basketball and a daughter played volleyball. However, the conflicts differed some because girls’ volleyball and boys’ basketball did not share a referee pool and some scheduling was different.

Pilgeram points out that a basketball coach can now easily watch his daughters play volleyball, but not basketball.

Fans

Athletes aren't the only ones facing tough choices. Coach Kelly says the whole student body suffers.
High school students face new schedules and conflicts for girls’ and boys’ basketball. Some schools schedule the boys’ and girls’ games on different nights while some schools play all day Saturday.

“The student body generally has to make a choice: boys or girls,” says Kelly.

For the student body, watching both basketball teams is no longer an option. The new winter schedule includes simultaneous tournaments, which forces students and fans to choose one team over the other.

“Right now, the way our schedule is set up,” says Kelly, “when one team is at home, the other is on the road. It splits the fan base.”

Before the change of seasons, the volleyball and boys’ basketball tournaments were offset by one week and therefore conflicted less. However, the Montana High School Association and many Montanans are already considering changes to the way the basketball tournaments are currently scheduled.

“We are experimenting with state tournaments two winters from now,” said Jim Opitz, the Helena Schools District Activities Director. “We’ll be doing the state tournaments at the same place for both boys and girls.”

Al Buerkle, superintendent for Sweet Grass County High School (SGHS), said that high school students, and all basketball fans, struggle with the current game schedules. During one Saturday extravaganza, when the girls played the last game of the evening at 8 p.m., Buerkle recalls, many tired, sleepy fans left at half time of a two-point game.

“The girls played to a very empty gym the second half,” said Buerkle.

The change cost schools money, too.
The year before the change of season, the SGHS boys' and girl's basketball home games earned more than $23,000. After the season change, the teams combined earned just over $12,000.

Volleyball, on the other hand, seemed to earn more money after the season change.

"Volleyball had better attendance than in the past." said Columbus coach Paul Barta, "They are usually in the hole [financially]. We paid for every game this year and had some left over."

For Montana basketball fans, however, the biggest negative is the game conflicts.

"As a fan and a spectator, I can't see all the basketball I used to watch," said Carroll athletic director Bruce Parker.

The amount of emotion Montanans demonstrate for the sport of basketball may seem strange to individuals from other states. However, Parker explained that in Montana basketball is more than a game – it's a social event.

**Pep Band/Cheerleaders**

When the Human Rights Bureau (HRB) announced its decision to change the seasons, Montanans expected players and coaches in girls' basketball and volleyball to be adversely affected. Moving the seasons, however, wasn't only about the students who could shoot and dribble – the ones playing the sax and pounding the drums were affected, too.
Big Timber, a small class B town and home of Sweet Grass County High School, loved its pep band – fans always enjoyed their performances. After the change of seasons, the pep band lost some of its members and some of its musical oomph.

In small schools, students participate in multiple extracurricular activities – many athletes also play in the pep band.

For Sweet Grass County High School, the new schedule for basketball resulted in fewer pep band members because those who play sports had conflicts more often.

“‘The pep band was demolished,’” said Buerkle.

Cheerleaders, who support athletic teams during every season, also felt the impact of the season change.

The Capital cheering squad also needs time and space to practice in addition to all the different athletic teams.

“It does kill us for floor time for practice in the winter,” Campbell says. “We’re usually in the balcony or the hall.”

Linda Campbell, a Capital cheering coach, said that one conflict is the majority of her girls want to cheer for basketball. Campbell said recruiting cheerleaders for the fall season – football and volleyball – became more difficult. The majority of her cheerleaders wanted to continue cheering exclusively for basketball.

**Hard Choices**

All of these individuals have something in common – they were forced to make choices or change their lives because of the change of seasons. Some choices were more
difficult than others, but for everyone involved the season of 2002-2003 was a strange and troubling one.

Perhaps Jim Opitz, Helena Schools Athletic Director, puts it best.

"I think for us to be in line with the rest of the country was the right thing to do," said Opitz, "Not that it was painless."

"A Change of Seasons" will continue next week with the final installment. This conclusion will look at the change of seasons debate two years later and reflect on whether the change was the right decision for Montana.
A Change of Seasons: Looking Back

It’s spring in Montana: a time of year characterized by late-night calving, freak snow storms, and high school basketball tournaments.

This February marked the end of the second athletic year after a change of seasons moved girls’ basketball to the winter with the boys, and girls’ volleyball to the fall season.

And while high school girls and boys are battling for state titles in front of cheering crowds all across Montana, the uproar over the change of seasons seems to have faded into background noise.

“The interesting thing to me from the time I started is the amount of anger people have over this issue,” said Joanne Austin, equity manager for the Montana High School Association (MHSA).

Austin witnessed the factions fighting for possession of the fall season like basketball players scrambling for a loose ball.

As the first two installments of this series outlined, the battle for the fall season was an arduous 20-year legal battle and even longer public clash between supporters of girls’ volleyball and supporters of girls’ basketball.

August 2002 marked the official end of the legal fight when girls’ volleyball took control of the courts in the fall.

However, the court of public opinion has not yet adjourned on the case for the change of seasons.
Many questions remain for Montanans about the change of seasons: Did the switch improve athletics in Montana or not? Was the change the right decision to make or will the state regret the switch in years to come?

* * *

Many Montanans still believe the change of seasons was the wrong choice. Jim Gross, former Carroll coach, thinks changing the girls’ volleyball season in order to improve recruiting was inappropriate.

“High school is supposed to help the student become better socially adapted, get better job skills and the academic background to go to college,” says Gross. “It’s not the high school’s responsibility to get scholarships, especially not athletic ones.”

Columbus coach Paul Barta thinks the change of seasons in Montana will eventually help volleyball and hurt girls’ basketball because whatever girls’ sport controls the fall will have an advantage.

“I think volleyball will grow and girls’ basketball will decline,” said Barta.

Other coaches also expressed regret that the change of seasons resulted in big negatives for girls’ basketball.

“At Helena High School, I’ve noticed that it’s really hurt attendance in the girls’ basketball,” said Tony Arnston, Helena High football coach. “It’s too bad because girls’ basketball in Montana was something special.”

Bruce Parker, Carroll College athletic director, noted that while girls’ volleyball played to larger crowds after winning control of the fall season, girls’ basketball competed with boys’ basketball for gym time, game schedules, and fans.
"[Fans] are going to go watch the boys [basketball] before the girls," said Parker.

"It may not be right, but that’s a fact."

Helena High basketball coach Steve Keller also witnessed injuries to Montana girls’ basketball.

"I don’t know why we have to tear one down to build up another," said Keller.

Many other Montanans agree. They support both girls’ basketball and volleyball, but don’t like to see one activity advanced at the expense of the other.

* * *

Opponents of the change of seasons accurately predicted many actual consequences for girls’ basketball.

Most coaches agree the number of fans attending girls’ basketball games decreased after the change of seasons.

Practice schedules became more difficult for girls’ and boys’ basketball, especially for the younger squads. However, the practice difficulties were only new to girls’ basketball – many volleyball coaches said the same facility shortages and late-night times faced girls’ volleyball and boys’ basketball before the change.

Coaches agree a referee shortage occurred after the change; however, many different causes contribute to the shortage of referees – only one of which is the change of seasons. Many Montanans have noticed an overall decline in individuals volunteering their time for athletics.

"Any shortage has to do with other things," said Capital volleyball coach Sheila Williams.
She believes one of the primary reasons fewer officials volunteer is that too many sports fans abuse referees during games.

Many individuals like Keller, Gross, and Parker, still believe that the change of seasons will leave a legacy of long-lasting negative effects for basketball.

* * *

Winners of the battle for control of the fall season, however, are rejoicing.

Soccer player Cassidy Merrick received the opportunity to play soccer for Helena High her senior year because the change of seasons was enacted. Merrick even helped win a state championship, and caught the eye of Carroll soccer coach Mike Hiemenz for an opportunity to continue her athletic career.

“Now I play for Carroll,” says Merrick. “I don’t know if I would have wanted to come without the season change.”

In addition to providing soccer players with new opportunities, the change of seasons helped girls’ volleyball in Montana.

Even Capital head volleyball coach Mike Burke, who quit coaching football because of new conflicts, admitted that volleyball gained crowd support, recruiting opportunities, and respect.

“It was a good move for the sport of volleyball – it showcased it,” Burke said.

Coach Sheila Williams agrees and believes the season change provided Montana volleyball players with a better opportunity to play collegiate ball. Additionally, she thinks female coaches in Montana will gain opportunities in volleyball, and the sport, as a whole, will gain in popularity.
“Volleyball is something, an awesome spectator sport. A very unique kind of game,” Williams said.

Amy Heuiser, Carroll College head volleyball coach, also thinks the change of seasons will help volleyball in the future.

Specifically, she believes the change will encourage younger players to pursue the sport and help the overall level of volleyball in Montana.

“More than ever, kids are picking up club ball and playing in the spring and the summer. They have also attended more volleyball camps in the summer in preparation for their season,” says Heuiser.

* * *

The individuals supporting volleyball in the fight for the fall season did predict some benefits for the sport, such as gaining fans and respect.

However, they also predicted increased recruiting of Montana volleyball players. That turned out to be only half true. Division I colleges can recruit more effectively, but smaller colleges face new hardships because of the simultaneous seasons.

No exact numbers are available to prove that recruitment to colleges improved after the change of seasons, but most volleyball coaches believe that it did.

A club season – off-season volleyball tournaments and games – matching the national norm represented one of the major reasons for the change of seasons. However, Montana has not changed its spring season to match the national winter club season.

"As long as I've been involved," said Rocky volleyball coach Wade Wells, "everything starts in the spring. The season change had no real effect on that."
Many individuals like Williams, Burke, and Heuiser still celebrate the change of seasons. They maintain that the control of fall season will continue to boost volleyball in Montana.

* * *

It is hardly surprising that volleyball is pleased and basketball frustrated by the change of seasons – the people supporting both sports vigorously defended those positions for two decades.

But how do others see the change?

And many of the people involved in Montana athletics suggest a very common-sense approach to the future: stop arguing and make it work.

Buerkle agrees with many Montanans that moving girls’ basketball to the winter proved difficult. However, he is witnessing the schools making the adjustments necessary to assemble the new schedules.

“Montana is a big state with a lot of communities,” said Sweet Grass County High superintendent Al Buerkle, “but we’re learning.”

Columbus coach Barta still dislikes the change of seasons; however, he believes that everyone involved is doing his or her best to implement the decision.

“If it goes well the next couple of years, we’ll have a smooth transition,” said Barta. “It will be like it never happened.”

* * *

And so, more than 30 years after Title IX and more than 20 years after the initial lawsuit, the battle of the change of seasons ended.
Whether the changes are for the better is still debatable. The conclusion drawn depends a great deal on which sport in Montana a person prefers: basketball or volleyball.

Fans of basketball, whether girls or boys, are apt to long for the days of separate seasons when they could watch every basketball game in both seasons.

Girls' basketball did prosper in its separate fall season. When competing with boys' basketball, the girls are bound to lose some fans, coaches, and referees.

However, losing the experienced coaches means new opportunities for younger coaches. Barta thinks the change of seasons will help increase the number of female coaches in Montana.

"More ladies can get opportunities to coach girls' basketball [now]," said Barta.

Smaller Montana schools faced more difficult choices.

"Small schools often have a hard time bringing in qualified people [to coach]," said Capital coach Tim Kelly.

The large (Class A or AA) school with several gyms probably felt little impact from the change of seasons. A smaller school (Class B or C) would likely feel a larger impact because of a shortage of facilities and qualified individuals. Even some class A schools, like Capital High in Helena, faced gym shortages because their school only has one facility.

“'I think in fairness,” said MHSA equity manager Joanne Austin. “'I have to say B and C [schools] have more hurdles.”

Fans of volleyball, however, are mostly pleased with the new fall season.

Volleyball teams across the state are gaining fans, which means gaining money as well. Most coaches agree that Montana volleyball players gained recruitment
opportunities from Division I schools, even while losing some opportunities from smaller colleges.

The increase in focus on volleyball in Montana and the gradual influx of female athletes predicted by Carroll coach Heuiser and others represents the biggest positive effects for the sport.

Helena High volleyball coach Sheila Williams believes many more opportunities exist for female athletes in Montana now than when she grew up.

And what about all those fans, musicians, and cheerleaders? Well, they're adjusting to the change of seasons as well.

Capital cheerleader coach Linda Campbell sees more applicants for the winter basketball season. Campbell said, however, if the winter season fills up and a cheerleader is only willing to do the fall season, "she may not make it."

"That's about the size of the effect on cheering because we have to cheer equally," said Campbell, "no matter what the season."

The pep bands are learning to adjust, but still struggle with scheduling conflicts. Despite the diminished numbers in the band, the SGHS pep band plays at every home game it can – trying to play the same number of girls' and boys' games.

* * *

So, with the change of seasons two years old, where are we?

The majority of Montanans may still disagree, but it seems the athletic community has put aside their partisan politics and are trying to make the new schedules work.
Joanne Austin (MHSA) summed up the general feeling after the seasons were officially switched with a comment from one female basketball coach she knows.

“‘You know what?’ the coach said. "I would like the seasons to stay where they were, but we’ll play whenever they throw the ball up.”
A Change of Seasons: The Birth of a Thesis

This journalistic feature article with three installments offers an overview of the Montana change of seasons. However, my personal experience in Montana athletics and my continuing ties to that playing field fueled my passion for this project. As the installments indicated, the story of the change of seasons is a personal, human story. Therefore, in order to understand this project fully, the history and personal experience behind the thesis must be outlined. The following is an account of the first few moments of the change of seasons and a personal look at the frame through which I viewed this topic . . . .

* * *

On August 15, 2002 in a small town in southwestern Montana, the girls on the Whitehall Trojan volleyball team arrived at the gym to begin practicing for their season. Only four short months following the end of their last volleyball season, the players walked one by one into the locker room for a new season. The girls carefully pulled on their kneepads and volleyball shoes. Several players stopped at the training room to get their ankles taped. Pam, the school trainer, was already hard at work trying to get the countless football players taped and ready to hit the field.

In the gym, this year’s freshmen volleyball girls assembled the volleyball nets so practice could begin on time.

Coach Adams strolled onto the court and blew her whistle, announcing, “Time to stretch, ladies!”

The team began to warm up, led by the senior players. The atmosphere in the gym was overflowing with emotions – excitement and tension.

Normally at this time of year, these girls would be dressing in purple and white basketball jerseys and their new basketball shoes. Coach Kieckbusch would pull down the baskets and move the bleachers back for extra space during try-outs. The typical
expectation of extreme workouts, shuffling drills, and hill exercises during basketball practiced vanished.

In its place, the volleyball practice promised jump training, spiking, and receiving drills.

The gym, and the fall season, finally belonged exclusively to the Montana volleyball players.

Usually the beginning of their volleyball season had been shared with the boys’ basketball teams. That meant their practice ended at exactly two hours, with the boys sitting on the sidelines waiting impatiently for them to take down the volleyball nets.

This year, the players began to sneak glances at the clock as the two-hour mark came and went. This year, there wasn’t anyone waiting at the doors.

Coach Adams announced the second practice would begin at 3 p.m. The fall season allowed "two-a-day practices" – another new, and not entirely happy, aspect of this new schedule. The volleyball team slowly filed out of the gym and headed home.

The first day of their new volleyball season had just begun.

* * *

The 2002-2003 athletic season in Montana was unique – for the first time in our state’s history, girls’ volleyball would be held in the fall season.

This move to a “traditional season” matching the national norm greatly interested me because of the direct impact of the change upon my coaches, teammates, and family members.
Many individuals in Montana faced difficult choices and changes when the seasons switched. The new athletic seasons presented a unique challenge – something no Montana athlete faced before.

I was introduced to the topic of athletics at a very young age because my dad coached at Whitehall High School. My dad coached both the girls’ and boys’ varsity basketball teams (something that is now impossible because of the season change).

In the fall season, my dad coached the girls and in the winter season he coached the boys. My dad experienced equal success and failure, frustration and delight in both seasons. He always used to say that though the girls and boys were different, they both were a joy to coach. Not satisfied with just donating his time for two athletic seasons, my dad also sponsored youth basketball camps in the summer and a youth league on Saturday mornings.

The basketball players my dad coached were more than just players – they were a special part of our family.

They often played with my brothers and me when we attended practices and games. My dad, too, was an integral part of his players’ lives. Some of these individuals still contact my dad for catching up, for references, or for advice. Through athletics, my parents' friends, my role models, and my friends were all formed.

My brothers and I played in my dad’s basketball camps and practiced at home constantly. We drove all across the state of Montana with my mother— anytime, any season – to watch the Whitehall Trojan’s basketball games.

Obviously, the house in which I grew up was a hotbed of athletic interest – every memory I have of early childhood is framed by athletics in some way.
This athletic past that I loved was filled with traditions. The girls always played basketball in the fall when the boys were playing football. Everyone in Whitehall (and in other Montana towns for that matter) watched girls' basketball and boys' football in the fall. These two sports never conflicted, so fans could enjoy them both.

The girls' basketball team earned loyal fans that traveled to all their away games, no matter how bad the Montana winter. Fans even happily traveled to Baker, which from Helena, is farther than Seattle, Washington!

Boys' basketball, in the winter season from November to March, competed with girls' volleyball and boys' wrestling. The boys shared gym time with the girls' volleyball team. There must have been some scheduling conflicts for both practices and games between boys' basketball and girls' volleyball, but I don't remember hearing about such conflicts as a child.

In the minds of most Montana fans, boys' basketball was the only sport in the winter season. Many athletes participated in wrestling and volleyball, and their parents and fans often traveled to their matches. However, the Montana fans flocked to boys' basketball games.

Volleyball was typically relegated to the back of most Montanan's minds. That situation existed partly because volleyball was not officially sanctioned by the Montana High School Association (MHSA) until 1984.

The Montana volleyball fans, coaches, and players, however, knew that their sport was growing in popularity and success. Several volleyball proponents filed the Ridgeway et al. lawsuit in 1982 requesting equality for all female athletes. While the
volleyball parents, coaches, and players began clamoring for a change of seasons in 1982, I remained barely aware the sport existed.

I did hear about Title IX in the early 1990s, but once the initial Ridgeway, et al. lawsuit was settled, most Montanans assumed the changes were over. The Ridgeway settlement introduced measures such as equal number of sports for girls and boys, equal length of seasons and much more. The settlement did establish the possibility of a season change, but the MHSA did not act upon that suggestion.

Before my first year of high school, I hardly heard any Montanans discuss the athletic seasons as "out-of-sync" and almost no one talked about "non-traditional" seasons or season change.

I played volleyball for the very first time at age 13 in our junior high program at Whitehall. I participated in both volleyball and basketball in middle school. Clearly, however, my love affair with basketball began earlier, lasted longer and was more intense than my affinity for volleyball.

I suspect many athletes my age shared my passion for basketball. As the more popular sport of my youth, basketball offered more opportunities for young athletes than volleyball as we were growing up.

* * *

In November 2002, the Whitehall Trojans attended the very first Montana girls’ basketball practice in the winter season.

The girls' basketball team practiced in the afternoon for the first week and the boys practiced in the evening slot. Coach Kieckbusch and all of the girls' team members were in the gym, but things were not quite the same. It seemed strange for the first
practices to begin during Thanksgiving break – normally basketball practice started before school was in session.

As the second hour of practice began to wrap up, the doors to the gym opened, and the boys’ basketball team began to stretch on the sidelines.

Coach shouted, “That’s it ladies. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Practice never seemed so short, but the Lady Trojans basketball team never before shared the gym.

For the boys’ basketball players waiting on the sidelines, everything was normal and even possibly improved. The boys were used to sharing the gym with another indoor sport already, but girls’ basketball didn’t take up their precious practice time tearing down their nets.

The animosity and rivalry between the Whitehall volleyball team and the boys’ basketball team vanished, and only their fellow basketball players remained.

The boys' basketball coach announced, "The first game will be in two weeks. Friday we'll play in Ennis and the girls will play at home. On Saturday, we'll be at home against Big Timber and the girls will be on the road."

Several of the boys frowned when they heard the new schedule– their girlfriends played on the girls' basketball team and the boys enjoyed watching their games.

With this new schedule, the boys' team would never be able to see the girls play, and vice versa. At least when the boys competed with girls' volleyball in the winter, they could see each other's games occasionally.

Former Helena High girls’ basketball player Cassidy Merrick agreed the new schedule was tough: “Everyone hated the [later] practice times.”
Merrick also said she wished her school could have scheduled more games together so the girls' and boys' basketball teams could see each other play.

The parents waiting outside to pick up their athletes were worried as well. Many of these parents had sons and daughters playing athletics: whom would they choose to watch? Larissa Obert, former Big Timber basketball player, said that she knew of several parents who faced that dilemma. Specifically, one family from Columbus faced tough choices at the state tournament because both their son’s and daughter's teams qualified. This is just one example of the many difficult decisions that Montanans faced because of the change of seasons.

When the seasons switched in 2002, I was a sophomore attending Carroll College in Helena. Though I left the competitive athletic world behind when I moved to Carroll, the change of seasons remained an interesting topic to me as my heart lingered with athletics.

I first heard the rumor of a season change as a senior in high school. I remember thinking at the time how lucky I was because the seasons wouldn't change until after I graduated. I remain grateful to this day that my high school athletic career was not interrupted by such a monumental change.

Although this change did not directly affect me, it did affect my family, friends, and former teammates.

At the time when the seasons were switched, my dad coached only the boys’ basketball in Big Timber. Still, he could not have coached both girls' and boys' basketball even if he wanted to because the seasons now conflicted.
My younger brother Jayce, a sophomore at Big Timber, played boys' basketball. Jayce, not directly affected by the change, still shared gym time with girls' basketball and endured adjustments due to the season change.

Big Timber enacted two different policies concerning the scheduling of games. In most cases, the administration scheduled the boys to play away and the girls at home or vice versa. When possible, they would schedule a Saturday extravaganza for both teams.

Luckily, my younger sister Nicole was only 9 when girls' basketball moved to the winter and girls' volleyball moved to the fall. She did not face any of the tough choices. When she enters high school in a few years, the new seasons will probably seem completely normal.

My parents were not forced to choose between their son and daughter, as my younger sister competed only in intramural games. However, my parents, grandparents, and other fans did complain about having to endure nearly 10 hours of basketball during the Saturday extravaganzas.

Big Timber Athletic Director Al Buerkle said that he often witnessed fans leaving at half time of the last game because “they couldn’t take any more basketball!”

Most of my friends graduated in 2000 as I did, but some of my teammates still played in high school at the time the seasons changed.

These girls' basketball and volleyball players faced a new season, a new schedule, and the “honor” of being the first Montana athletes to play in the “traditional” season.

The Montana basketball fans, like my grandparents and other community members, were affected by the change of seasons.
The choice between events might seem inconsequential to someone from outside Montana. However, as Carroll College Athletic Director Bruce Parker said, “In the winter in Montana, it’s more than a game – it’s a social event.”

Before the season change, fans enjoyed girls’ basketball one season and boys’ basketball the next. After the change, those fans chose which one to follow and watch – they no longer could religiously follow both the girls’ and boys’ teams.

Girls’ volleyball, on the other hand, gained fans in its fall season. These athletes profited from better practice times and game schedules. Additionally, proponents of the change of seasons trumpeted the new opportunities for club volleyball and collegiate volleyball as well.

Even as a college student far removed from the hub of the season change debate, I constantly heard about the positive and negative aspects. My family, friends, and new acquaintances all seemed eager to discuss their perspective and whether the change was right or wrong.

* * *

The first fall volleyball season in Montana came and went. Then the first winter girls’ basketball season began and ended.

As my senior year at Carroll approached, I debated the potential topics to research for my senior thesis project. I knew in my heart that I would like to better explore the season change in Montana athletics.

The topic still interested me, even four years removed from the high school sports scene. Like many individuals in Montana, I wanted to know whether or not the Human Rights Bureau decision to move the athletic seasons was the correct one.
I chose the Montana change of seasons as my topic, but I still needed to choose a method with which to research the season change.

I rejected the strict qualitative or quantitative communication research because I thought such a method would not adequately illuminate all the different and personal aspects of this event. While surveys would reach the entirety of the Montana population, such surveys would lack a personal dimension. The change of seasons covered many years, legal battles, and public debates. The topic contains many facets, not easily described through strict numerical research, although some numbers would clearly add to the overall discussion.

I, therefore, decided to use a journalistic approach to explore how and why Montana decided to move girls’ basketball off the courts in the fall and moved volleyball into the gym in its place.

* * *

The story of that change remains just as fascinating to me now as it was then. I only hope the readers of my articles will agree.
A Change of Seasons: The Making of a Feature Article

Few people realize the amount of work that is required before a feature article appears in their local newspaper. The short columns, catchy quotes, and interesting stories represent only the surface of an intense and lengthy process. The three installments of the feature article at the beginning of my thesis do not wholly represent the body of information and insights I learned from this experience.

I. The Process

The topic of choice for this thesis was recounted in my personal account “The Birth of a Thesis.” This choice represented a culmination of years of athletic experience and academic preparation. Additionally, the battle for the fall season took years to play out in the legal and public realms.

The writing of my thesis needed to be completed, however, in one year's time.

I officially selected the topic of my thesis as well as the method for studying the change of seasons in the spring of my junior year. I then began my research.

The research of the Montana change of seasons, however, could not be conducted in a library. Few studies were available because the change of seasons was only a year old. I searched the Carroll library archives and Lexis Nexis to no avail. The only documentation I discovered in the traditional research locations included collegiate information about gender equality and a few lawsuits about high school equity.

Discouraged, I turned my research efforts to the journalistic medium. I searched the archives of the large daily papers in Montana, including: The Helena Independent Record, The Great Falls Tribune, the Montana Standard (Butte), the Billings Gazette, the Bozeman Chronicle and the Missoulian.

In the sports pages, I found the history of the change of seasons.
The articles did not include mention of the Ridgeway, et al. lawsuit, but they did chronicle the development of the second lawsuit, the Human Rights Bureau decision in 1999, and the subsequent repercussions. Many of the newspaper pieces were written as editorials – giving one town or newspaper's opinions on the change of seasons.

Initially, I worried that I would discover an article so comprehensive it would render my thesis pointless. Luckily, I found no such article. Moreover, although many different articles existed, no one article covered all of the angles of the change of seasons as my thesis would.

With all the research compiled, I needed to begin actual interviews with affected parties all across Montana. I initially discovered several problems – how to identify the individuals with information, how to find the individuals, and when/where to conduct interviews. Thousands of athletes, coaches, fans, referees, and other involved individuals possessed pertinent information – suddenly, the topic I chose seemed overwhelming.

My first list of "people to interview" came directly from the sports articles I collected. I searched each article for individuals interviewed or discussed in relation to the change of seasons. I also printed out the Ridgeway et al. settlement from the Montana High School Association (MHSA) Website and pulled more potential interviews from that document as well.

My first major problem solved, I prepared questions for all the different "groups" affected by the change of seasons. I pulled together potential questions for coaches, parents, players, fans, referees, and administrators.

Armed with questions and people to interview, I ran into my second major problem: how to contact the people I wanted to question.
Not owning every phone book in Montana, I turned to the Internet and the helpful Quest.dex.com site. Searching by name and city, I linked phone numbers to many of the potentials on my list. However problems arise when searching a huge database if the person's name is common or if he or she has moved out of state. Sadly, only about half of the list could be located.

Foiled once again, I filed my list and decided a different approach might work better. My dad, still heavily involved in the athletic scene in Big Timber, provided a way to begin "networking" in Montana athletics.

The first interview my dad set up was with Columbus coach Paul Barta. An interview with Barta was ideal because Barta coached both girls' and boys' basketball before the season change and attempted to coach both after the seasons switched.

I conducted the interview with Barta at my parents' home in Big Timber. With my questions prepared, I assumed the interview would go smoothly. However, the interview with Barta proved to be difficult because he "dodged" many of the questions I prepared. He really wanted to give me the "politically correct" answer.

Barta had tried to coach both his girls' and boys' basketball teams in the first year after the season change. By the time I interviewed him, Barta had made the decision to coach only his boys' basketball teams. However, rather than indicating there were any difficulties to the new season, Barta instead attributed his choice to personal reasons. While this could be partially true, given his vehement opposition to "tearing down girls' basketball" to build up volleyball, it certainly seemed like I was only getting part of the story.
Once again frustrated, I moved onto the second interview networked through my father, this time with the Big Timber superintendent Al Buerkle.

Buerkle, a friend of the family, turned out to be a great interview. I met Al at his school office in Big Timber. He happily provided me with honest information about the change of seasons and even dug out comparisons of money made at home games before and after the change.

Once I completed the initial interviews, networks of people opened up. The next individuals I interviewed were those recommended by Barta and Buerkle.

Throughout the remainder of the summer and fall, I conducted many different interviews with people from all the different "groups" in Montana. Overall, I discussed the change of seasons with between 25 and 30 different people.

During each of the interviews, I took notes in a small "reporter's notebook" and typed the quotes and information for easy access. With the interviews completed, I needed to organize my information and identify themes for the feature article.

The three themes that I identified consistently through my interviews were the following: the history of the change, the choices forced by the change, and reactions to the change of seasons after implementation.

Finally, of course, I set about writing the actual feature article in its installments.

My first drafts appeared rough, but through revision after revision, the sports story slowly emerged.

In the end, the drafts began to use the human-interest stories to keep the reader's attention, quotes in the correct places, and the correct journalistic style. While the first
draft resembled a poorly written academic piece, the final draft closely resembles a polished sports article that might appear in a Montana newspaper.

This project taught me some amazing lessons. The small information about journalism I knew before this project ballooned into a huge compilation of insights I can use not only in future journalism projects, but also in my general academic life and future career.
II. Insights

- **The "whole" truth about any story is elusive.**

  When a reporter sets about writing a feature story, he or she looks for an answer - a truthful answer.

  However, I learned early in the process that it is impossible to discover the whole truth for a story. The truth is unattainable because so many different individuals participated – and each has a unique perspective. Some of these individuals can be located, but many are lost – either they move, refuse to talk, or even pass away.

  As an enterprise journalist, one must, therefore, search every avenue possible. Nevertheless, one must realize that no matter how many years a reporter works on a project, the complete truth from every possible angle still remains elusive.

- **The quotes and information most helpful to the story will often be off the record.**

  Individuals who are located and interviewed rarely tell everything a reporter wants to hear. For many different reasons, the people interviewed will not totally disclose all the information they possess. Some people, like many I interviewed, "spin" the truth and tell the information in the way that serves their own “agenda.” Others, realizing the public will read the information, "hedge" and give only the politically correct answer – even if that is not the complete truth.

  Finally, a great number of individuals will disclose amazing stories, perfect quotes and juicy details – all safely off the record, of course. I encountered this situation in my interviews several times. The best part of the interview, or at times an entire interview, remained off the record. While I respect the person's choice to
remain off the record, as a journalist it is frustrating to "know" the information without being able to use it.

- **Stories are never completed; stories are abandoned.**

  After working at least 12 months on my feature article, I discovered I remained distant from a finished project. I learned (the hard way) that no story is ever finished. A reporter simply completes the story as best he or she can within the deadlines.

- **A reporter will get half the information needed, but the paper will only provide half the column space needed.**

  As I mentioned before, the number of interviews conducted for a feature article is limited by many factors. However, no matter how many column inches are available, the reporter still possesses too much information.

  In my feature article, I interviewed a select few Montanans. However, when I started organizing information and selecting a theme, I discovered I had acquired excessive amounts of information. All three of the installments in my article are too long to print in most newspapers.

  Of course, the challenge is to adequately deliver necessary information to the public, while remaining within reasonable column space. Before I started writing, I set the goal of no more than 1,700 words. However, after I began writing, the words jumped exponentially – the longest article nears 2,400 words. I still need to crop the article before marketing to a daily in Montana – an exercise I do not look forward to!

- **What a reporter can illustrate in three paragraphs, one good quotation perfectly captures in five words.**

  Learning how and when to use quotations was the most important insight I gained from my exploration of enterprise journalism. The change of seasons topic proved to
be dense and difficult to explain at times. However, after many revisions, I learned that what took me hours to write could easily be explained using one good quote.

Many times, I found that my interviews said what I needed, in ways I never imagined.

The problem with quotes, however, is they are difficult to obtain. Many interviews I conducted – probably half – were useless for quotations. I still used those interviews for paraphrasing and background information. Still, getting the "perfect" quote is difficult. Even if a reporter asks the right questions, it truly depends on the person interviewed – some subjects just aren’t very quotable.

- **When a reporter understands a topic well, writing for an "inexperienced" audience is extremely difficult.**

Writing for an audience that did not have my knowledge of Montana athletics and the change of seasons presented a difficult challenge. Many times, I wrote sentences that made perfect sense to me; however, those same sentences would be gibberish to my less informed audience. In some cases, I had to review my notes to work my way through the reasons behind what I wrote. Only then could I illustrate my ideas with clarity to the audience.

- **Editors are tough critics – and they might not always agree.**

One of the final lessons I learned about journalism came after I finished writing the whole series and turned the drafts in for revisions. I felt the drafts represented an accurate portrayal of the change of seasons given the information I accumulated.

Upon receiving the edited drafts, I faced a dilemma I never considered before: what happens if the editors do not agree? I had four different opinions about the article, the information, the angle and everything else.
Two of my editors presented small corrections in grammar, tone, and the overall format of the article. The other two editors presented me with huge, article-wide, changes.

With this conflicting information, I was very confused.

The insight learned from this experience is that even your editors will sometimes disagree. I tried to incorporate all the ideas from all the suggestions as best I could, while still maintaining the integrity of the article and the interviews I conducted.

I tried my best to be objective about the comments about the article and to evaluate, once again, my own bias in the piece. The editing, while confusing, led to a better end product that I feel better represents the overall intention of the project. So, editors may be conflicting and confusing, but they do help a reporter gain perspective of their own article.

• **Nothing is ever as simple as it seems.**

When I began writing about the change of seasons, I made the erroneous assumption that I knew the majority of the information about the topic available. That assumption was proven wrong repeatedly while I was interviewing.

My extensive knowledge about athletics provided both an advantage and disadvantage. Knowledge of the traditions in Montana athletics was a definite advantage in writing this article. The disadvantage I dragged along with me included the preconceived notions about the change of seasons.

Clearly, having played basketball and having been raised in a sports-crazy family provided me with valuable insight into the topic. But my experiences also reduced my
objectivity because I started the project with some preconceived notions about the change of seasons.

The change turned out to be very complex.

At the end of my exploration, I have no definitive answer as to whether the change was right or wrong. Journalism, however, does not aim to answer the question. The purpose of journalism is to discover the opinions and inform the public about what happened. The reader of the articles must decide for himself or herself whether the change was the right one to make for Montana.
III. The Future

The future of this feature article is simple. I am planning to continue refining the story and market this article to a Montana newspaper. My initial plan included this publication as part of the thesis; however, reality stepped in. In order to complete publication, the articles probably need to be shortened, quotes need to be checked with all interviews, and the stories need to be marketed to the right paper.

The future for me, personally, does not immediately include a career in journalism. However, the skills I developed in this project leave the door open so that if I needed or wanted to, the career of journalism is a possibility. More likely, my future will include working in public relations – preferably in a non-profit. The journalism skills I gleaned from this thesis will undoubtedly be useful in my career. Writing press releases for any organization will involve applying the lessons learned in this thesis. And, at the very least, understanding how journalists think and write will be a huge asset to that PR career.

The future of this thesis is not as clear-cut as my own. At the conclusion of this project, I recognize several drawbacks to the method used in the exploration of the change of seasons. The journalistic approach did provide depth and personal insights into the conflicts and choices presented to individuals in Montana athletics. Cassidy Merrick's amazing story, for example, could not be obtained from a numerical survey. But the approach did lack wide application – the interviews were primarily conducted in the southwest end of Montana. A different research method could have better reached all corners of Montana.
I chose to interview the individuals by convenience. The individuals interviewed all lived in the geographic area in which I’ve lived – the majority from Helena, a few from other parts of the state.

The thesis, therefore, could have been strengthened by a wider variety of interviews spanning the entire state of Montana. In my own defense, I attempted to interview several individuals from the eastern section of Montana. However, the distance proved to be a barrier.

The use of a quantitative research method such as surveys would add much information and insight to this project. However, I still think the journalistic approach was correct, but I will grant that adding a survey could mean improved results. A survey could provide a cross-section of views over a broader geographic area. Instead of citing just one person who disliked the change of seasons, I could, for example, prove that this person was representative of the statewide opinion.

Expanding the process into additional states could provide information for comparison. Several other states – including Michigan and West Virginia – experienced a change of seasons as well. The comparison of the process from state to state could establish trends.

Expanding the process into states with "normal" athletic seasons could validate or nullify the arguments from Montana for moving girls' volleyball to the fall season. Other states, like bordering Idaho and North Dakota, might provide evidence that female athletes indeed profit from the "correct" seasons. However, a study of other states might also suggest that the change of seasons does not enhance equality in athletics.
This thesis presents a somewhat isolated vision of the change of seasons, from the viewpoint of some Montanans. Bringing in other states, or other individuals, could provide context for the topic.

This feature article explored the implications of making significant changes to an athletic paradigm. This athletic paradigm in Montana is intrinsically linked to the educational community as well. The history in the "Change of Seasons" indicated just how difficult change can be for any educational paradigm.

The Montana community reacted violently to the proposed change of the athletic seasons. However, this reaction could have resulted from the method used to instigate change – a lawsuit in federal court. Initially, the courts and the public rejected switching the girls' volleyball and basketball seasons.

The supporters of girls' volleyball did not relent and filed a second lawsuit that culminated in the Human Rights Bureau hearing. The MHSA did not contest this decision. However, the MHSA did consider the change of seasons issue several times before the HRB decision. The members – primarily coaches – always voted not to change. The last task force formed by the MHSA actually approved changing the seasons – before the second lawsuit was filed. The MHSA did not implement the recommendation of the task force. It seems a clear possibility to me that girls' volleyball would eventually have taken over the fall season – with or without the second lawsuit.

The individuals I interviewed for the feature article expressed varying degrees of acceptance or disapproval of the season switch. However, several of the coaches involved expressed equal disgust of the "methods" used or the "reasons" claimed to award volleyball the fall season. Coach Jim Gross, for example, indicated in his interview that
the HRB questions were "set up in advance," and he says no extra comments were allowed.

I learned an important lesson about changing a major part of any community or educational system: it is extremely important how change is enacted. In the case of the athletic change of seasons, many people felt their opinions did not matter because the courts and the HRB mandated the decision.

That is not to say that emotions would be reduced if the change happened slowly and democratically. I think the girls' basketball supporters would still mourn lost opportunities, and girls' volleyball supporters would still cry out for equal rights. Using a less confrontational method might, however, have appeased some individuals.

The final task force vote, narrowly approving the volleyball request, indicates that changing "norms" is possible, but takes time.

Many Montanans do not believe in "conforming," and this belief represented a major part of the resistance to matching the national "norms" in athletic seasons. Advantages of matching the national norm in athletics included small border towns being able to compete with schools in Idaho or North Dakota. The disadvantage for of the season change for Montana was the uncertainly surrounding the change. Most states never have to face the change or the choices Montanans were forced to make.

* * *

The change of seasons in Montana constituted only one isolated event in the athletic history of this state. The debate about the change of seasons was hard fought on both sides. In the end, the change happened and Montanans are learning to live with the results. From this one case study, we can see how changing an educational paradigm
affects a community. I hope that the study of changes in educational paradigms will not end with my exploration of the change of seasons. It is entirely possible, in fact, that other changes – beyond athletics – just might have a greater impact on education than who gets the gym in the fall. But don’t tell the coaches, players, and fans I said so.
### Appendix A: Timeline of the Montana Change of Seasons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Original lawsuit filed in Federal District Court <em>Ridgeway et al. v MHSA.</em></td>
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| 1983 | Ridgeway settlement drafted and adopted on Title IX issues in Montana high schools.  
Idaho federal judge agrees to hear the season change trial but dies before giving judgment. |
| 1986 | Trial for season change set, but seasons remain unchanged. Appeal to Ninth Circuit Court denied. |
| 1990 | West Virginia forced to switch non-traditional seasons to match the national norm.  
Montana High School Association (MHSA) decides to revisit the issue of a season change. |
| 1995 | MHSA task force meets periodically, narrowly votes to change the seasons (10-9). MHSA does not enact their recommendation. |
| 1999 | Complaint filed by volleyball coaches and parents to the Montana Human Rights Bureau (HRB). |
| 2000 | HRB examiner Terry Spear orders the MHSA to change the seasons by 2002-2003.  
MHSA votes not to appeal the decision. |
| 2001 | MHSA officials set calendar for 2002-2003, the first year of the season change. |
| 2002 | Season change enacted. Volleyball begins play in the fall season, while basketball waits for the winter season to begin. |

*(Information courtesy of the Montana High School Association's "A Brief History of Montana's Switch of Seasons" provided by Equity Director Joanne Austin.)*
Appendix B: Interviews

Players
1. Larissa Obert: Sweet Grass County High basketball and volleyball player, current Carroll College basketball player
2. Cassidy Merrick: Helena High soccer and basketball player, current Carroll College soccer player
3. Vanessa Lanz: former Whitehall High basketball player

Coaches
1. Paul Barta: Columbus High School athletic director and current boys’ basketball coach
2. Mike Burke: Capital High school volleyball coach and former football coach
3. Sheila Williams: Helena High school volleyball coach
4. Tony Aronst: Capital High school football coach
5. Steve Keller: Helena High school boys’ basketball coach and former girls’ basketball coach
6. Linda Campbell: Helena High school cheering coach
7. Tim Kelly: Capital High school girls’ basketball coach and former Carroll College assistant girls’ basketball coach
8. Jim Gross: former Carroll College head girls’ basketball coach
9. Bill Pilgeram: Capital High boys’ basketball coach
10. Amy Heuiser: Carroll College head volleyball coach
11. Wade Wells: Rocky College head volleyball coach

Administrators
1. Al Buerkle: Sweet Grass County High school superintendent
2. Joanne Austin: Montana High School Association equity director
3. Ed Beniger: Capital High School athletic director
4. Bruce Parker: Carroll College athletic director
5. Jim Opitz: Helena School District Athletic Director
6. David Whitesell: Twin Bridges superintendent
7. Georgia Nye: Twin Bridges principal

Other
1. Gary Williams: Helena pool volleyball referee
2. Tom Cotton: Helena Independent Record sports editor
3. Kerryanne Cook: Advocacy Coordinator for the Women’s Sports Foundation
4. Bill Gardner: National Foundation of High School Activities
Appendix C: Editor’s Critiques

Rich Myers, City Editor
*Helena Independent Record*

I think your thesis is interesting and well written, and if I were the person making the decision I would certainly pass it.

But since you say it is written as a series for a daily newspaper, I though I should share some thoughts.

First and foremost, there is no longer a news angle to justify such a lengthy history of the decision to switch seasons. You may have been able to make an argument for doing a history piece right before the switch took place because it would have been in the context of a news angle – the impending switch. But it happened a couple of years ago. Why wait until now?

I’m comfortable saying that if a news editor were assigning someone to do a story about this issue now, the angle would be what you touch lightly on in the last page and a half or so of the third section: How well are schools coping with the change now that it has been in place for a couple of years? How have they “stopped arguing and made it work?”

I’m sure the Montana High School Association could give you numbers to address at least in part many of the issues you raise. Others might take more digging, but digging in the present: How are schools handling the gym space issue? Have the numbers of female coaches increased? Attendance for girls’ basketball verses attendance for volleyball? etc.

All the issues you raise, but raise them in the current context, not that of a couple years ago. The history could be handled sufficiently for that kind of story concisely.
The way the piece is written now retains a lot of thesis-style rather than journalistic-style writing. For one thing, there are quite a few places in which the same idea is repeated numerous times. On page 24, for example, Parker is quoted about volleyball playing to larger crowds, etc… Gross and Parker said the same thing within a few pages, but there were all treated as though they were new topics.

The topic that there’s competition for gym space was introduced dozens of times, over and over. That’s not journalistic style. It’s the significant redundancy of thesis style.

On page 4 and 5, when you say what you’re going to discuss, that’s straight thesis talk. You’re laying down what you’re going to be arguing. Journalists don’t talk that way.

Also, your opinion is apparent all the way through the first three parts of the thesis. Once again, that is fine for a thesis, but not for a newspaper story. You seem to downplay questions alone that might lessen the impact of the “pro-basketball” argument: how much conflict was there in gymnasium scheduling with volleyball? did parents every have conflicts with one kid in volleyball and one in basketball? etc.

At times after a couple of pages of people making the pro-basketball argument, you sometimes add a paragraph about what the other side says. If I were editing this for publication, I’d have you outline the issue that surrounded the change, then set about finding how they have played out – with numbers wherever possible – now that they’ve been in place for a couple of years: What’s happening now?

Finally, I’d say congratulations on the insights into journalism that you gathered from doing this project. I think you learned some things I’ve seen it take reporters years to learn.
Glenn Drosendahl  
*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

I'm impressed by your thoroughness and the sweep of the project. I do have a general complaint, however. Parts 2 and 3 have a great deal of repetition, it seems to me. Much of it is in the form of introducing a source with a characterization of how he or she feels about the topic, and then repeating that with a quote that says nearly the same thing. I don't want to sound harsh, but to me they read like you were tired when you wrote them. That's OK, if it's not too late, because that's what editing is for. You can eliminate some wordiness and repetition. I think it's possible to tighten parts 2 and 3, which would make them more interesting to readers.

The recurring problems I saw were sentences explaining what the following quote would say, or transition graphs that didn't seem necessary. Generally, strive for a stronger narrative voice. Digest what you've learned through reporting and then say it in a direct way using only the best quotes.

Generally, the series is notable for the number of people you contacted and the array of problems you discussed. If time was not an issue, I would try to get more real families or students in the stories. As is, the people quoted are mostly coaches and administrators.

Something I didn't do carefully and hope you will is to check how each person is identified on second reference. Not being from or in Montana, I had some difficulty keeping them straight. I liked it when, on second mention of a source, you'd say something like "Kelly, the Capital High football coach." That was helpful. Please act on or ignore my suggestions as you wish. I appreciate being asked to help and hope I did.