



The Hellgate Lance

Hellgate Flag Football's Inclusivity Outweighs Funding Motives

Sabine Glaser
Reporter

This year, the new flag football team at Hellgate high school was received with widespread support. But, the process of its implementation and the reasons behind the new promotion of the sport began not in Montana, but Georgia, from the desk of a billionaire.

"Arthur Blank, who owns the Atlanta Falcons, came with an idea to start girls flag football in the state of Montana, and it was going to be fully funded by him," said Judson Miller, principal at Hellgate.

Blank, who maintains a part time residence in Montana, proposed the idea of introducing flag football in the state four years ago.

"[Blank] was excited to bring the same opportunities that were happening for girls, playing football in Georgia, to another place that he deeply cared about," said Nick Laatsch, Hellgate athletic director.

The sport also had the support of the National Federation of High Schools (NFHS).

The financing for the flag football program would come by a three-year grant from the Falcons, totalling \$45,000 for each school's program. After watching other schools implement the sport throughout Montana, Laatsch and Miller decided to give it a chance at Hellgate.

"Mr. Laatsch and I had a number of conversations over the course of two years. There were AA [schools] in Montana that had flag football before we did, and we gave it a year to just see how that was working. And our colleagues said it was wildly popular," Miller said.

As a multibillion dollar company, the National Football League (NFL) is always looking to widen its fan base to create more revenue and viewership. This move by Blank turned

out to be a marketing strategy for the Falcons and NFL as a whole.

"They wanted to increase the popularity of the NFL, of football, to benefit their product," said Laatsch.

Both Laatsch and Miller suspected this from the start.

"If you look at the way the NFL has tried to expand its market base, it's a multi-billion dollar company, they



The Hellgate Flag Football team had incredible success in their debut season, placing second in the state championship. Photo courtesy of Kate Hansen.

recognize that they're not going to do that by just playing to athletic men. The NFL has grown, exponentially, and I think it's been very intentional in this way," said Miller. "If you were a part of a flag football program and it was fun and you enjoyed it, and now you understand what downs mean and all this stuff, it creates a different familiarity. Your perception of football is going to be different."

Laatsch said he was "happy that they acknowledged that that was part of their goal" because without the cloak and dagger of marketing, it was more clear as to why funding was offered and made the move less suspicious and surprising.

Blank failed to address that the NFL is not only widening its fan base, but they are also guaranteeing the future of their sport. Awareness about the effects of concussions in football has been on the rise, and with it, more hesitancy from parents to let their kids play.

"I think the idea from Arthur Blank and some of the people who created the opportunity is that then these athletes will go out in their adult lives and have a different connection to the sport of football. But to be honest, I don't care that much about that. I just think it's cool that [the athletes] have a connection to each other and the school," Miller said.

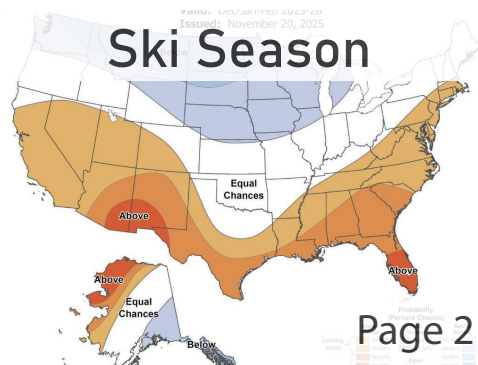
Hellgate's strength lies in its broad inclusivity and school-wide participation. "It's our job to create places for kids to find connection," Miller said. "I am really excited about it. But to be honest, I would be equally excited about anything that brought a new group of kids to something that was healthy and participatory."

For him, flag football's debut was an incredible success. "Whenever we add something, we are trying to add something for a new group of kids. And it was clear to us that flag football kind of attracted kids who aren't already doing something. And that's what made us so excited about it."

The implementation and progress of the team was "far grander than expected," Miller said.

Hellgate flag football team looks forward to a bright and lasting future in the state of Montana. The faculty, athletes and coaches can continue to bring inclusivity, empowerment and activity to Hellgate, despite the ulterior motives of its funder.

"I hope it continues indefinitely. It's been an amazing experience," said Miller.



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La Niña Set to Bring Snow, Cold Temps to Montana

Will Hansen
Editor

Ladies and gentlemen, it's here. The days are getting shorter and the nights colder, and that can only mean one thing: ski and riding season is rapidly approaching. With that in mind, the current loudest tenant in the apartment buildings that are the brains of skiers and snowboarders is the question of snow: when, where and how much. Thankfully, Montana and the greater northern Rocky Mountains are in for above average skiing conditions this season.

In September, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) issued a La Niña watch, which came to fruition in October when these conditions materialized. La Niña will likely stick around until early 2026, when a potential transition to neutral conditions could take place. NOAA predicts that there's a 55 percent chance of this transition occurring – otherwise, the fairly “weak” La Niña conditions we're experiencing should continue all winter long.

“If La Niña actually materializes, we're going to have a really good season,” said junior Elan Torretti, Hellgate Backcountry Club's co-leader and an avid skier. “It's going to be colder, and just a lot more precipitation.”

In order to predict the future snow conditions for a given year, meteorologists examine a massive climate pattern in the Pacific ocean called El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO). ENSO has two phases, El Niño and La Niña. These phases greatly impact both temperature and precipitation globally, specifically in North America. ENSO can also exhibit neutral conditions, when neither El Niño or La Niña occurs.

When the El Niño phase happens, Pacific trade winds weaken, letting warm water along the west coast to remain stagnant and moving the Pacific jet-stream south. This means more precipitation in the southern United States and warmer, dryer conditions in the north.

In a La Niña year, trade winds strength-

en, pushing the warm water on the surface away from the North American coast and causing cold-water upwelling. This moves the jet stream north, right over the peaks and chairlifts of the northern Rockies. La Niña typically means colder and wetter winters in the Northern United States and dryer and warmer winters in the south.

In his yearly prediction, renowned On The Snow meteorologist Chris Tomer foretold of a season similar to last, if a little colder. Similar to NOAA, Tomer predicted La Niña conditions during Fall and early winter, with a transition to a weak La Niña or neutral conditions happening soon after the turn of the year.

“I believe we'll see the most snow, and most consistent snow, in the Pacific Northwest, British Columbia, Western Montana, Western Wyoming and Idaho,” Tomer said in his prediction. This matches up with the snow we saw in the 2024-25 season.

“Last year the snow was pretty good,” Torretti said. “It was one of the best seasons in a few years. But it wasn't even a full La Niña cycle and this year should be.”

Torretti said she is feeling optimistic about the conditions. “January isn't supposed to have that much snow,” she said, referencing a lull in precipitation that Montana often experiences. “But we're supposed to get more snow at the end of the season, so maybe it will be a longer season.”

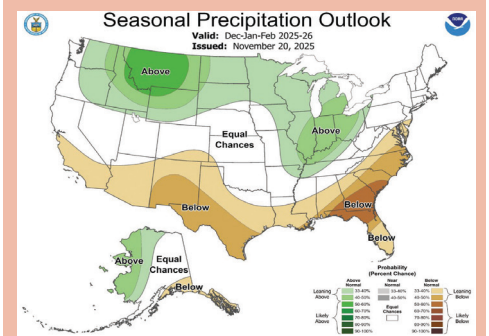
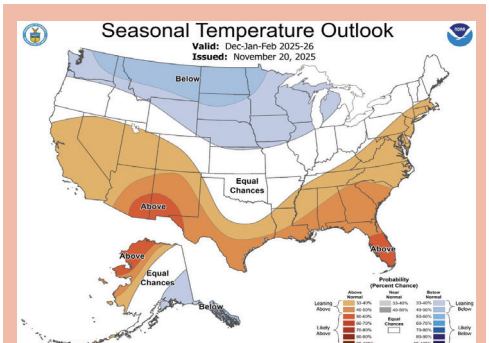
Skiers and riders are notoriously quick to jump on the slightest indication of rapidly approaching pow days, and while the endorphins received when reading the words “La Niña” and “predicted” in the same sentence are truly exhilarating, it's important to keep expectations neutral for mental health's sake. In their appropriately titled “Way-Too-Early Winter Forecast,” Ski Magazine emphasized that all predictions currently out are long-range and not to be completely trusted.

That being said, all indicators are pointing towards a cold and snowy winter for Montana. This bodes well for skiers and riders itching to get out on the slopes as soon as possible. Lookout Pass, often the first resort within driving distance of

Missoula to start turning chairs, opened their terrain to skiers on Dec. 5. Big Sky opened one day late on Nov. 27, and Whitefish opened on-time on Dec. 4. Weather-dependent backcountry skiing has also been possible for the truly ambitious skier or rider.

Torretti said she can't wait for the snow to start falling. “I'm looking forward to the colder temperatures to go ice climbing, because for that we need the ice to fully freeze for long periods of time,” she said. “And I'm hoping for more snow so that we can build jumps at Lolo [Pass] and go and hit rails and stuff.”

With that sentiment in mind, the Lance recommends an exponential increase in sacrifices made to the snow gods and a significant upping in intensity of nightly snow dances. A La Niña ski season is rapidly approaching, so as always, pray for snow.



NOAA's seasonal temperature and precipitation outlooks place Montana in the perfect spot for a cold and wet winter. Graphic courtesy of NOAA.

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Stranger Things: Sci-Fi Meets Social Justice

Quinn Stromberg
Editor
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Reporter

Stranger Things was initially rejected by 15-20 networks before it was picked up by Netflix, according to a Rolling Stone interview with Matt Duffer, one of the show's creators. Most people had balked at the idea of a sci-fi TV show following a group of kids whose target audience was not children. One exec told the Duffer Brothers that they either had to make it into a kids show or center it around "this Hopper [detective] character" played by David Harbour. The Duffers responded to this criticism by saying that doing so would cause them to lose everything interesting about the show.

"This [show] isn't going to work because people don't get it," Matt Duffer said when asked what the brothers had been thinking that week before they were connected with Netflix.

This concept of "not getting it" is a general theme in Stranger Things. The show focuses on a wide range of characters; the only thing they have in common is that each of them is somehow an "outcast" as stereotyped by society.

The show opens with four young boys, Will, Mike, Dustin, and Lucas, playing their favorite game, Dungeons and Dragons. DnD is typically seen as a kind of "nerdy" interest, and this assumption is further depicted in the show when the boys are bullied at school—Lucas because he's Black, Dustin because of his cleidocranial dysplasia, Will because he's assumed to be gay, and Mike because he's friends with them.

Lots of shows and media portray outcasts as main characters, but Stranger Things depicts the things that make these characters "outcasts" as the least interesting things about them, the least "strange" things in this show full of monsters and alternate dimensions.

The plot of Stranger Things could entirely be achieved with a cast of characters who are not societal outcasts, and yet it wouldn't be the same show without them.

Sci-fi, as a genre, isn't viewed as anything monumental to cultural change—no one is looking to the demogorgons and children with supernatural abilities to fight racism, homophobia, misogyny, and discrimination based on disabilities and other "outcast" stereotypes. People watch and consume science fiction media for fun, not to confront social injustice.

Stranger Things draws a wide scope of audiences due

to its range of themes: science fiction, horror, comedy, coming of age and family. While the main cohort of viewers are between 18 and 29 years old, there is significant viewership from Gen Z/teen audiences as well as older audiences (Millennials, Gen X, and Baby Boomers) who are drawn to the 1980s nostalgia of the show. Stranger Things differs from other shows that specifically depict marginalized characters—such as Heartstopper and Atypical—because their plots are entirely centered on the fact that the characters are outcasts. This is not a bad thing—these shows are important in highlighting the experiences of people who are not always given a voice—but they don't draw the broad audiences that Stranger Things does for this same reason.

According to NBC, season three of Stranger Things gained a record of 26.4 million US viewers the July 4th weekend it was released. In this season, Robin Buckley (played by Maya Hawke) is introduced to the show. Robin works at an ice cream shop in the new Starcourt Mall with Steve Harrington (played by Joe Keery), a fan favorite character, and is initially assumed to be his love interest. The show writers were not afraid to let audiences believe that for the majority of the season, only revealing that Robin is a lesbian after Steve confesses his crush on her. This is obviously a much bigger deal at the time period the show takes place, because it was much more

socially stigmatized to be queer in the '80s than it is now, but it is still monumental as an emotional coming-out scene in mainstream media depicting an accepting and heartwarming reaction from Steve, who is initially represented as a careless jock, instead of a homophobic one.

This is a stark difference compared to the multitude of shows and media that have been accused of "queer-baiting" (implying queer subtext in a piece of media that stays ambiguous or is replaced by a heterosexual relationship.) Stranger Things had no qualms with doing the exact opposite—effectively "straight-baiting"—by making audiences root for a heterosexual relationship and then revealing that one of the characters is gay. This scene is arguably one of the most widespread coming-out scenes in all of television history, due to Stranger Things' viewership.

Stranger Things season five is being released in three parts, the first on Nov. 26, the second on Dec. 25 and the finale on Dec. 31. This season is predicted to have the highest viewership yet; the series picked up 404.1 million viewing hours in the first half 2025 in preparation for the new season.

Amidst the current political climate of the US and the recent near-revisiting of Obergefell v. Hodges by the Supreme Court, queer rights are a hot topic right now, and Stranger Things season five has the unique ability to affect the opinions of people inside and outside of the US on this topic.

Arguably the most popular and most controversial ship from Stranger Things, "Byler," emerged from the show's narrative of queer subtext between the two characters Mike Wheeler and Will Byers. Regardless of whether or not you subscribe to the evidence that defends the possibility of a romantic relationship between the two characters, the existence of their relationship in season five could have a monumental effect on the acceptance of queer people in society. The relationship between two characters that Stranger Things' wide range of viewers are conditioned to root for would challenge the culturally homophobic beliefs that are still prevalent in our society today.

It would mean the existence of gay characters in a mainstream show that isn't about being queer, proving that queer people can exist without their sexuality being their only defining feature. This could easily shift public opinion, if only slightly, because pop culture media can be incredibly influential in politics and social issues. Stranger Things isn't viewed as that socially monumental of a show, because it's simply about kids fighting monsters. Simultaneously, this is the exact reason why it is so impactful, because the fact that all of the characters are outcasts has absolutely nothing to do with them saving the world.



The Stranger Things Season 5 poster fore-shadows the end of the beloved show.

THE KNIGHTS STRIKE BACK: Hellgate Gears Up for Goat 2026

Will Hansen
Editor

“The first year we had Goat I thought it was really silly,” said Velita Rholl, Hellgate’s student government advisor. “I thought that Gertie, this golden goat statue, was one of the most absurd things I had ever seen. Then a couple weeks ago I was at Big Sky and I saw Gertie in her little Big Sky cage.”

Since 2019 when Missoula’s infamous Golden Goat spirit competition began, a lot has changed. After five straight wins and a year off for COVID, Hellgate’s reign came to an end in 2024 when Sentinel High School displaced Gertie from her happy stable home. Last year, the forces of karma worked their magic on the Spartans and Gertie changed residence to Big Sky. This year the Knights, armed with a creative theme and a sense of determination resulting in the loss of the Golden Goat two years ago, are hungry to return Gertie to her rightful place in Hellgate’s trophy cabinet.

“We want to get Gertie back, because Gertie doesn’t like it at that horrible prison that is Big Sky High School,” said Leo Westenfelder, student body president. “Gertie likes her home here at Hellgate.”

On Jan. 30, 2026, the Knights will have an opportunity to earn Gertie back from the Eagles under the bright lights of the Adams Center. Student government has been hard at work organizing all things Goat.



Hellgate’s 2024 Goat theme was ‘Building a Legacy,’ and wasn’t quite enough to keep Gertie safe. Photo courtesy of Faith You.

“Our officers have spent a ton of their time working really really hard on the nitty gritty to make sure this is a great goat year,” Rholl said. “And our large senate group has been broken into committees focusing on things like halftime, shirt sales, decorations, student involvement, and props, and they’ve gotten a lot of good ideas generated.”

This year, the Knights have chosen a Star Wars theme, specifically “GOAT WARS: Knights Strike Back.”

“[Senior] Lucy Hutchins proposed it to me in IB English last year,” Westenfelder said. “I was like, ‘I think that’s an incredible idea.’ Word started spreading and there was general positivity. We narrowed it down to pirates and Star Wars, and Star Wars took the vote.”

The winner of Goat each year is based off of a rubric decided on by student government advisors from each school. Rholl said it is a “funny juxtaposition” working so closely with the Big Sky advisor while still competing against one another, but that it has been an amazing experience.

Points are awarded based on five categories, with 20 points available for each. This year, the categories are Sportsmanship, Theme & Shirts, Posters/Props/Decorations, Cheering & Spirit, and Halftime Performances,

with a number of subcategories making up each category.

“A lot of our focus so far has been towards the half-time show, as that’s where we’ve lost points in the past,” Westenfelder said. He said that student government has been working closely with choir, band, art club, color guard, and a number of other clubs in order to maximize student involvement across Hellgate. Delia Simms, a freshman on Hellgate’s dance team, said the team has started choreography for the halftime show.

Simms said she likes the Star Wars theme: “It’s going to be a good theme to work off of for our choreography and how we conduct the dance,” she said.

“We’ve learned from past years and where we lost points, and I think we’re just going to excel in those areas even more,” Westenfelder said.

Rholl said that this year, video production for the hype videos created by each school will be factored into the score, as well as the incorporation of themes into student entrance. These categories haven’t been considered in the past.

While the outcome of the two basketball games does not actually contribute to the score, the spirit competition is centered around the battle on the court. Ryan Meservy, a senior shooting guard on the girls team, said she’s feeling confident about both the girls and boys chances of beating Big Sky.

“I think we have a good chance at winning both



Hellgate’s 2026 Goat Shirt Design, designed by senior Gus Darty.

games at Goat,” she said. “[The girls] only lost one senior last year, so we should be pretty good and have some good chemistry. The boys lost a few more seniors, but they still have a lot of seniors this year, so they should also have good chemistry because they’ve known each other for so long.”

Rholl said that since Goat’s first year, her opinion of the spirit competition has shifted.

“I think teenagers often... have a hard time connecting with the larger community, and with adults in the community, unless the adults happen to be involved in some way,” she said. “[Goat] is a way to show the larger community how amazing kids are at organizing events and at coming together as a school community.”

Overall, Hellgate student government is feeling confident about the school’s chances of winning Goat this year and returning Gertie to her rightful home.

“Not to put ourselves on a pedestal, but we are just the best high school,” Westenfelder said. “I think when it comes to spirit, we’re both the most outgoing and positive, so we bring the energy without hating on the other student section or team.”

This sentiment is exactly what Goat was founded to promote, and what it will take to win: intense school spirit without the negativity that often comes with it. Golden Goat will take place on Friday, Jan. 30 in the Adams Center, where the Knights will face off against Big Sky to bring Gertie home. May the Force be with us all.



Hellgate basketball seniors stand with Darth Vader in media officers Slade Jones and Kate Hansen’s hype video released on Dec. 1.



GOAT is on JANUARY 30th @ THE ADAMS CENTER, 6PM

WEAR:

- Goat Shirts, on sale in the front entrance starting Jan. 14.
- Star Wars costumes! Buying or making your own is encouraged.

BE:

- Positive
- Loud
- Respectful
- Participatory
- ON THEME

“Gertie likes her home here at Hellgate.”

-Leo Westenfelder, student body president

SHOW UP TO BRING GERTIE HOME!!!

The Hot Chocolate Showdown

Piper Wells
Reporter

Hellgate High School students are getting closer to winter break on Dec. 22, 2025 and the holidays are approaching. On Dec. 2, 2025 Missoula reported one inch of snow in the last twenty four hours, and it has continued to snow frequently since then, proving winter is officially here. According to YouGov the 2020 concensus was that America's favorite winter holiday drink was hot chocolate.

Throughout Missoula, there are multiple coffee shops to hit up as the weather gets colder, but by far the most popular is Copper Mountain Coffee. They are the most popular because of their iced lotus drinks, and their friendly customer service.

If you're looking for the best hot chocolate though, the first place I would recommend

A lot of people would suggest going to Loose Caboose Coffee, but hot chocolate wise that would be my last recommendation.

I always like to get double the chocolate flavor so it's a more rich drink, but even with double the flavor from Loose Caboose there is too much



Le Petit Bakery

milk and not enough flavor.

For the cold weather, the best warm pastry to follow up with a Florence hot chocolate would be



Liquid Planet Grille

from Le Petit Bakehouse on South Higgins Avenue. The bakery has loads of different European Style bread and pastries options.

If you're not looking for a drive through coffee spot and more of a breakfast restaurant that



Mazevo Coffee Shop

would satisfy all family members, and that has good hot chocolate, I would strongly suggest Liquid Planet Grille on Brooks Street.

The restaurant is cozy, allergy sensitive and serves breakfast all day with cartoons playing on the TVs. While you may not want to wake up early for breakfast, this restraunt has no rush, andthey serve breakfast all day.

If Florene Coffee doesn't sound appealing, or isn't on your side of town the second best place for hot chocolate would be Mazevo Coffee on Brooks Street. The coffee shop is both drive through and sit down with a variety of sweet and also savory breakfast items.

With many coffee shops all over Missoula, the best place to get a hot chocolate this winter is at Florence Coffee. They have multiple locations, and seasonal pastries that can pair up great with

whatever drink of preference you have.



Florence Coffee Company on Third Street

is Florence Coffee Company. Each spot is a convenient drive through which takes less than five minutes to get your drink, and the flavor ratio from milk to chocolate is perfect.



All photos by Piper Wells

Knights Ready for Winter Sports Season

Wesley Banziger
Sabine Glaser
Reporters

As fall ends and winter begins, so do winter sports. Basketball, wrestling, and swimming are all in season now.

Swimming

The Hellgate girls swim team ended their season last year placing eighth at the state AA swim meet. All of the girls who placed at state last year will be back, looking to improve their times. The girls team is strong and hopes to capitalize on their experience and strength. It should be a great season. “My goal is to final at state” said junior Molly Simms.

The boys team placed fifth in the state meet and only had one senior graduate (captain Taj Gritzner), which means that this year’s team looks to dominate. There are a lot of sophomores on the team this year so the whole team is hoping to improve their times and their overall state record. The people on both the boys and the girls team who placed in the top six at state last year (Emily Henseiker, Molly Simms, Ellie Barkley, Abigail Fricke, and Ophelia Massey) will all be back this season.

Wrestling

The 2024-25 wrestling season was a tough one for Hellgate for both the girls and the boys, but the team is seeing a lot of new faces this year. Linus Peterson a junior on the team said “A few team goals are to improve sportsmanship and just general persistence”. Peterson has high hopes for this season “I see even the newest people pushing everyone to do the best that they can. I’m excited for this season!”

Basketball

The girls basketball team is looking forward to starting their season with many veteran players. The only team member that graduated last year was Shannon Kane leaving almost the entire varsity team intact. The Hellgate Knights girls team had a record of 11-3 in the region and a 15-8 overall record.

Winning the consolation bracket at the state tournament last year was pretty good but the Lady Knights hope to improve their skills and do even better in the upcoming season, “I would love to win...doesn’t everyone?” said sophomore Alexandria Miller.

Miller, who was a JV starter and a Varsity player during her freshman season, expressed a lot of excitement for the upcoming season “Now we have a lot of seniors whereas last year we had only

one so I’m hoping we’ll do a lot better.” When asked how she was trying to help her team win more tight games Miller described working on her ball handling and reducing her turnovers.

The boys basketball team had a great season last year, right up until the end. They finished the season with a 14-7 record and a 10-4 record in their conference. This year with 12 returning players, most of whom are seniors there are high hopes for the Knights. State went similarly for the boys as it did for the girls last year. The Knights lost to the Gallatin Raptors 54-39 in the first round of the tournament and then they played their crosstown rivals the Sentinel Spartans where they had a heart breaking loss 51-50, ending their 2025 season.

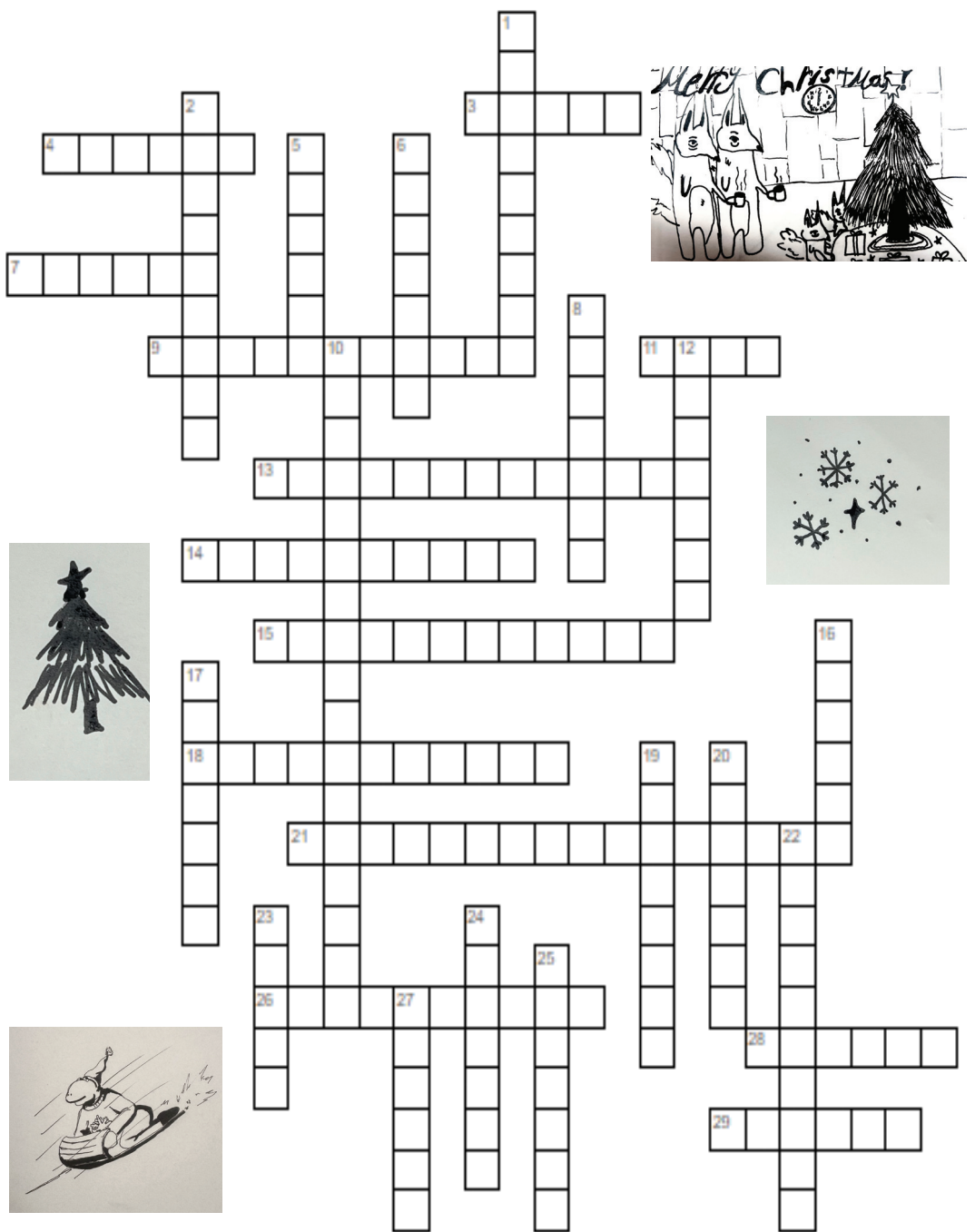
All of these sports are so fun to watch, so make sure to show up and support you Hellgate sports teams this winter.



The Hellgate girls varsity basketball team has largely stayed intact since last year, leaving little room for JV movement. Photo by Wesley Banziger.

Crossword Puzzle - Winter at Hellgate

Created by Gus Darty



Across

- The best thing to donate for the Snowball Fight Fundraiser!!
- One mountain, two sticks, and a reason to skip school for some
- Publisher of the greatest newspaper at Hellgate
- The location for the climactic battle against the Big Sky Eagles on Jan. 30
- Seniors-only fourth floor privilege
- Dodgeball tournament and fundraiser this holiday season
- What your second period teacher SHOULD be playing every monday
- Many Sean White wannabes will be taking to Snowbowl this season
- Sometimes doing work, mostly getting coffee
- The older you get, the more stressful it becomes
- Slow but reliable piece of hardware
- "Hellgate Knights are what?"
- Have fun during break, but prepare to come back to tests and torment

Down

- Hellgate's creative writing journal
- Flash game fixation
- "Ain't no thing but a chicken wing!"
- Johnny's domain
- The only class at Hellgate where playing with fire is encouraged
- "Yo dude, you got a _____?"
- The most recent production of the Good Knight Theater Company
- A wonderful animal that misses us very much
- An amazing gift that Missoula County Schools never receive
- It's definitely better than Top Gun!
- Hellgate's yearbook
- The last day of school before a long awaited winter break
- To some, their favorite teacher, to more, their favorite food
- The studios and the skippers share one space
- Hellgate spirit squad
- Knoble the Knight