

Missoula's Middle Earth

The Battle for Bonner Park

Story by A.J. Mazzolini

"Stay with the unit!" the battalion leader screams, his hoarse call rising above the clamor of the battlefield. To the far left of his commander, a muscular 6-foot troll holds the flank. His drooping hat sways from side to side as he eyes the oncoming horde through dark goggles. Nic "Malark" Brouillard holds his sword behind his head, guiding his 12-member brigade as they circle farther left, moving as a single entity. They're outnumbered 2-1.

The foes charge, axes and swords colliding with shields and bodies. An arrow slices through the crowd, striking Malark in the side of his left leg. Dazed and off-balance, he falls to his knees, bracing himself with his shield. Though the leg can no longer support him, Malark continues to battle from the ground. He defends two attackers from the front, blocking their advances, bashing one with his shield.

He holds them off as long as he can while his allies drop around him. But a third adversary, a woman in all white, approaches from the rear. Her blade swings downward across his back. Malark tumbles forward, hitting the ground with force. The troll lies still as the combat rages around him, just another warm body in the cool grass.

"You try to die in some creative fashion," Malark says. "It keeps it fun because it's all imaginative."

Imagination is crucial to the battle for Malark and fellow enthusiasts of Belegarth, a medieval combat society. Warriors dressed in a myriad of different historical and fantasy outfits attack each other with foam shields and weapons. The foam provides padding, but the hits are very real, he said.

Malark, 23, is a Missoula native who's always enjoyed fantasy games and the occasional violent encounter. So when a friend introduced him to the rather small local society of Dark Ages fighters, he was sold on the idea immediately. It's been eight years since his first practice on the battlefield and he said he rarely misses their weekly gatherings at Bonner Park.

Belegarth was born from the minds of fans of J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Lord

of the Rings" in the late 1970s. Since its inception, chapters have sprung up around the country and extended internationally into Canada and Europe. The first clan in Missoula started fighting in 1995.

The local battlers belong to a wider "race" of Uruk-Hai, thriving in the Stygia (Missoula) Realm, the only

active Belegarth community in Montana. Malark is one of 20-40 people/creatures in Missoula who practice the hand-to-hand combat every Sunday, preparing for massive battles that are held regionally in the United States. The giant melees can persist for a week or more.

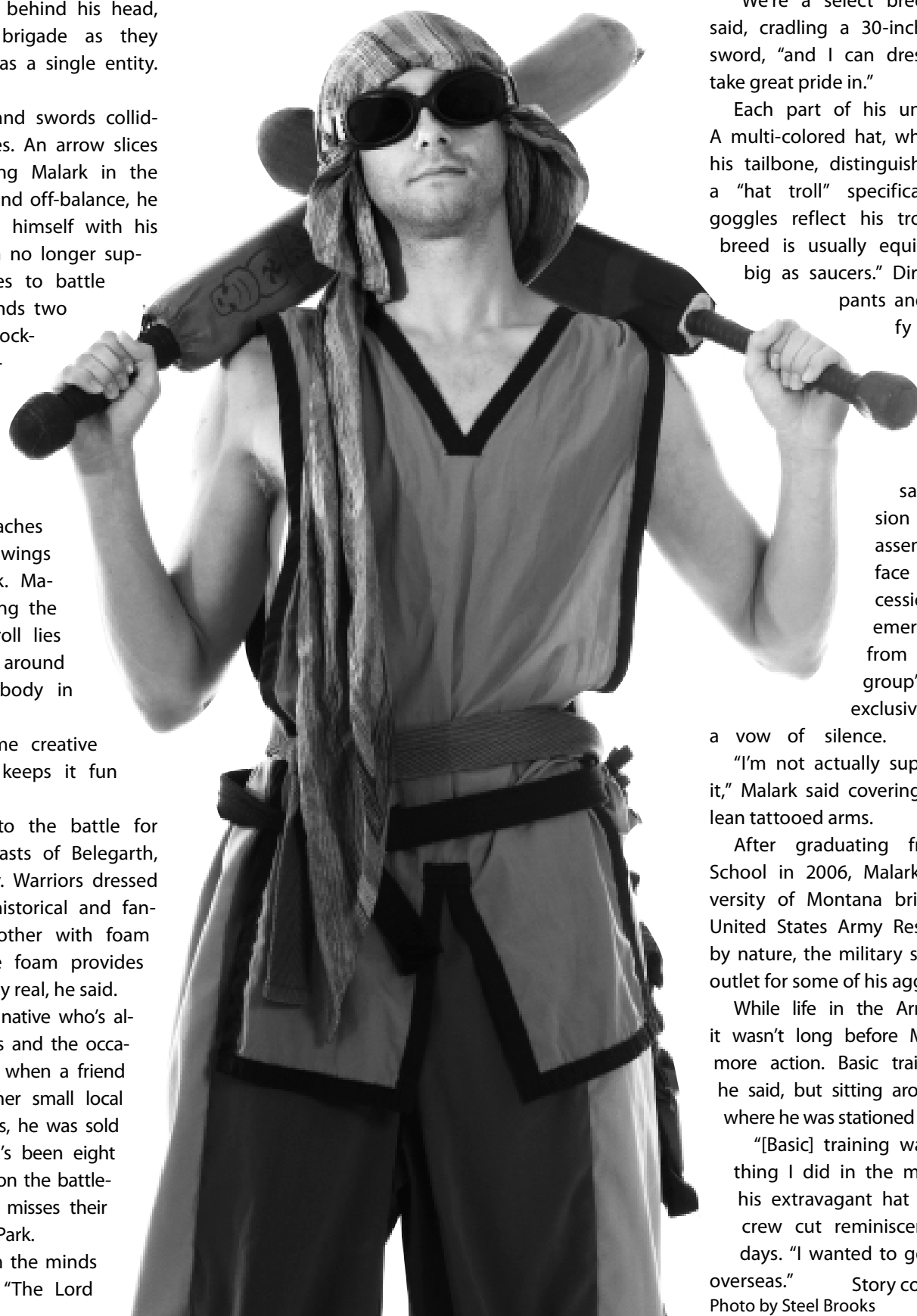
"We're a select breed of nerd," Malark said, cradling a 30-inch long foam broadsword, "and I can dress funny, a liberty I take great pride in."

Each part of his uniform has meaning. A multi-colored hat, which dangles close to his tailbone, distinguishes him as a troll—a "hat troll" specifically. The wide-eyed goggles reflect his troll nature since the breed is usually equipped with "eyes as big as saucers." Dirty-green renaissance pants and tan leggings signify

his affiliation with the Uruk-Hai. A long, red-and-black sleeveless tabard is the mark of the For-

saken. To attain inclusion into this hierarchical assembly, a fighter must face 53 opponents in succession, not necessarily emerging triumphantly from each encounter. The group's membership is so exclusive, entry comes with

a vow of silence. "I'm not actually supposed to talk about it," Malark said covering up the tabard with lean tattooed arms. After graduating from Hellgate High School in 2006, Malark attended The University of Montana briefly and joined the United States Army Reserves. A fierce man by nature, the military seemed to be a good outlet for some of his aggression. While life in the Army started out well, it wasn't long before Malark began craving more action. Basic training had been fun, he said, but sitting around at Fort Missoula where he was stationed was definitely not. "[Basic] training was the most exciting thing I did in the military," he said with his extravagant hat in hand, revealing a crew cut reminiscent of those military days. "I wanted to go active duty and go overseas." Story continues on next page Photo by Steel Brooks



UM students battle to the ‘death’

BUT THE OPPORTUNITY never came. Five years later, he’s a civilian again, still carrying the violent tendencies that he attributes to human nature.

Rage is a common sight for those who know Malark, said Ashton Zackus, a friend since high school and occasional Belegarth participant. She said one of his favorite activities at parties is picking fights. It’s less antagonistic, she said, and he sees it more as sport, an establishment of physical dominance.

“He likes meeting random guys that he sees as a challenge,” Zackus said. “He enjoys an ass-kicking almost as much as when he’ll dish it out.”

When provoked, Zackus said her friend’s fervor can rise quickly. During one particular Belegarth practice, a clumsy driver struck his Jeep while parallel parking. Malark dropped the fantasy act and began marching toward the commotion. In the car, the driver scrambled for an explanation, apologizing repeatedly, his voice quivering. Upon inspection, Malark decided that no damage was done to his Jeep.

“Nobody has to die today,” Malark said only half-jokingly while strolling back to the fight.

His weekly delve into live action role-playing has become the vent for his aggression.

“It’s awesome emotionally,” he said. “Every person has violent urges and we live in a civilized society where you can’t go out and act on that. I think Belegarth is very therapeutic.”

Generally, the fights are much cheaper than run-of-the-mill therapy sessions, but the price can climb. Malark’s clansman, Chris Bashaw (Soo Ma Tai) has been fighting other medieval forces for 15 years. In that time, he’s collected an armory’s worth of weapons and various garments, many fashioned by his wife. The 38-year-old helped start the realm and is now the oldest of the local Uruk-Hai.

“Our attempt is to be as historically fantastic as possible,” Soo Ma Tai said. “But our priority is safety, playability and then realism. That’s why you’ll have orcs and goblins fighting pirates.”

Each fighter gets to choose their battlefield persona, Malark said, and then a fighting name. Real names are rarely used and warriors usually only know each other by their in-game characters.

Malark’s personality pointed him to troll. There are a lot of monster characteristics he sees in himself that made the choice clear.

“We trolls tend to be aloof and wear hats,” he said. “There’s an aggression thing that goes along with it. You growl at people on the field.”

And despite his ferocious in-game tendencies and occasional outbursts, the former Army reservist is a very supportive and ebullient man, Zackus said. He puts loyalty to friends and family above all others. After many of Zachus’ friends abandoned her following a series of poor decisions, Malark never strayed from her side.

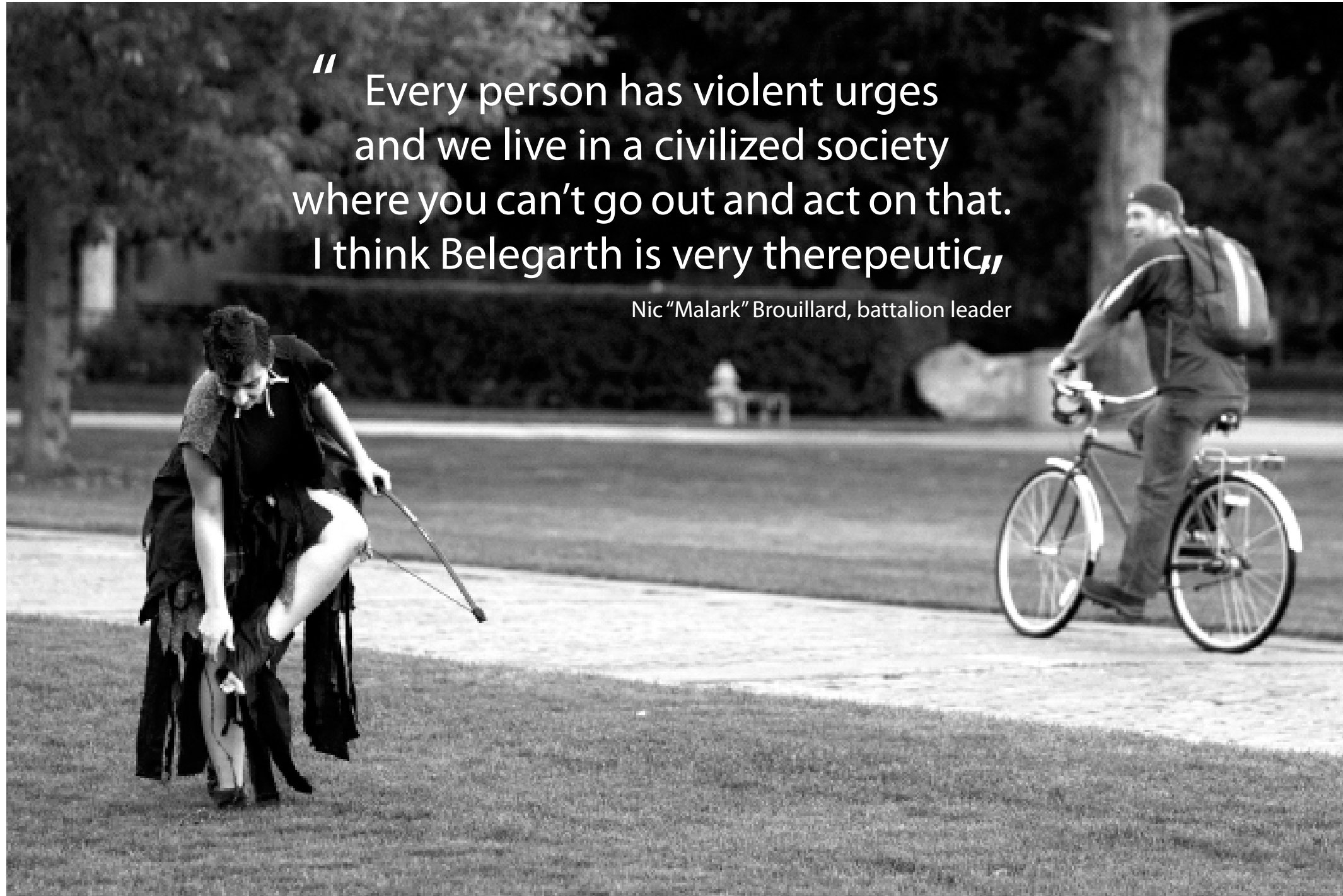
“If he sees you worthy of being a friend, he’ll stick it out until the end,” she said. “The only problem is he doesn’t get it a lot in return.”

His initial decision to join the armed forces was made with much haste, Zackus said. Malark is impulsive. The same thing occurred with religion, she said, and his “attempt to become Catholic.”

“He liked the structure of it,” she said of the Army and the

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Nic “Malark” Brouillard, battalion leader



Church, “which is why he gets drawn to those things. He likes ritual.”

He’s become a spiritual man in recent years, working at Missoula’s First Presbyterian Church for a time before returning to school this year. In picking up his education again, he chose religious studies as a focus.

“I adore studying how people perceive the Infinite Divine,” he said.

His fascination with faith helps explain some of his more admirable characteristics back on Earth. He’s quick to politeness and even quicker to avoid offending others.

“Do you mind if I smoke?” he asked during an interview. He then proceeded to check for a breeze and align himself downwind for the remainder of the conversation.

“You have your social masks on a lot of the time,” he continued, pausing for a moment. “At Belegarth, I feel like I can be myself. People have different sensibilities. I make sure to watch myself so that I know I won’t offend anyone ... but I know people at Belegarth have just as weird and depraved sense of humor as I do.”

There’s a quick break in the action (“Uruk-Hai, drink water!” their commander yells) and the warriors lower their weapons. Today, a good number of the 30-some fighters stick out, jeans

and t-shirts complementing their medieval armaments. People new to Belegarth, Malark says, are fun to knock around.

Community members walking by often get caught up in the action, he says, and stick around to try it out. Others remain on the sidelines, content to avoid the non-lethal sword blows.

“It’s a spectator sport for certain,” he said. “Football players in an empty stadium can still play a game but it’s more fun with people watching.”

As he finishes his sentence, a young couple crosses the street to the Bonner Park battlefield. The man, with both hands on his hips, looks from the scene to the woman, then back to the park. He arches his eyebrows, creating a mass of wrinkles on his forehead. He sees children tossing a football to each other on the far side of the field, perhaps pretending to be NFL stars. But closer to where he stands, he sees grown men pretending to be knights and trolls.

Malark senses their presence, the two of them whispering back and forth. Turning to face them, he smiles. He’s used to the puzzled looks and double-takes.

“What perfect timing,” he laughs.

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(ABOVE) Alisia Duganz/Montana Kaimin
Jerry “Frost” Lyndee had sections of his boots handmade by a leather craftsman.



(TOP LEFT) Steel Brooks/Montana Kaimin
Jamie “Zuloo” and Julia “Red” fight during a Belegarth battle on the Oval. Belegarth is a large group sport using padded swords and medieval weapons.

(TOP RIGHT) Steel Brooks/Montana Kaimin
A student bikes by the oval as Aleeshia “Pow Pow” picks up arrows. Pow Pow is part of a Belegarth group in Missoula that practices every Sunday at Bonner Park.

(ABOVE) Alisia Duganz/Montana Kaimin
Members of Belegarth battle on the Oval Thursday evening.