

RELEASE: September 11, 2024: After 6:30 p.m.
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BSSG ANNOUNCES ATHLETES OF THE YEAR

The Big Sky State Games 2024 Athletes of the Year are Lynne Erickson of Billings and Jim Thomas DeJongh of Billings. Youth Athlete of the Year is Ainsley McFarland of Billings. These awards are designed to recognize individuals who best personify the ideals of the State Games movement: participation, sportsmanship, effort, and positive attitude.



Female Athlete of the Year is Lynne Erickson of Billings. Lynne Erickson has been participating in the Big Sky State Games since 1988. She has competed in Basketball, Softball, Road Race but her dominant sport has been Track and Field. Erickson has accumulated over 100 medals since 1988. Her medal count since 2001 is Gold 51, Silver 7, Bronze 4. She has nineteen Big Sky State Games Track and Field age group records and in 2024 added the High Jump and Triple Jump records for the 65-69 age group.

Erickson spent 30-plus years as a track and field coach and was an athlete at Rocky Mountain College participating in both basketball and track and Field. Erickson taught and coached at Lavina and Billings Senior High School. She just recently retired from teaching, but is going to continue to share her Track and Field knowledge as the jumps coach at Billings Senior High School. Erickson encourages her athletes to participate in the Big Sky State Games and lets them know it is low pressure fun event.

Erickson stated "I just think it's fun. It's just so much fun to be at the track and talk to the same people that are there every year."



Male Athlete of the Year is Jim Thomas Dejongh of Billings. Jim Thomas Dejongh has been participating in the Big Sky State Games since 1996. Throughout the 28 years, his events have included Triathlon, Cycling, Road Race and Open Water Swim. He has accumulated 31 medals (Gold 20, Silver 7, Bronze 4). In 2024, he broke the Big Sky State Games half marathon age group of 70-74 record with a time of 1:51.16. Also, competitions in 2024 included the Cycling Gravel Race and Tim Trial events earning Gold medals in his age group.

Jim Thomas-Dejongh started running to stay in shape while attending college at Michigan State. He moved to Billings in 1979 and continued his running and is a fixture at the local races. Thomas-Dejongh transitioned into cycling with the Peaks to Prairie triathlon in 1986. He had top finishes at Peaks to Prairie even winning the solo race. Swimming became part of his routine with his first Triathlon at the Big Sky State Games in 2003. Thomas-Dejongh continues to participate in local running races including the Heart and Sole Run, Montana Marathon, 406 Race Series, Governors Cup, and triathlons in Bozeman and Helena. In addition, he has qualified and competed at the USA Triathlon Nationals. Thomas-Dejongh continues to be a consistent age group medalist in his various local and regional events. On September 1, Thomas-Dejongh finished the Michigan Triathlon Championships first in the 70-74 age group in the Olympic distance.

Along with Running, Cycling, Swimming, and Ice Hockey Thomas-Dejongh stays busy in the summer backpacking, bike packing and rafting. He stated “I stay in shape to continue my endurance activities and I have a competitive streak with my racing.”



Ainsley McFarland of Billings is the Big Sky State Games Youth Athlete of the Year.

McFarland is an athlete who has dedicated many hours a week throughout the years to train and excel in precision shooting, particularly smallbore and air rifle. She is seventeen years old and has been participating in the Big Sky State Games since 2017 earning 25 Gold and 2 Silver medals. This year her accomplishments included a Gold medal in the expert class for 3 Position Smallbore, Gold medal for High Junior in Precision Air Rifle - Standing and Gold medal for High Junior in Precision Air Rifle - 3 Position.

McFarland is currently involved in the Yellowstone Rifle Club's smallbore league and is one of top shooters in the league, state and nation. McFarland is a board member for the Montana Rifle and Pistol Association and works as a volunteer at the Yellowstone Rifle Club helping younger shooters during practice. Additionally, she coaches the Lockwood ROTC Rifle shooters and volunteers at Big Sky State Games rifle events helping with scoring and awards.

Some notable achievements for McFarland include:

- 2023 NRA National Champion for 3 Position Air Rifle and 2nd in 2024.
- 2023 American Legion 3 Position National Championship- 3rd in the prone event.
- Participated in Winter Airgun 2023 - Olympic Trials Part 2
- Montana 4H record holder (Overall and 15 & Up) in both Smallbore Rifle and 3-position Air Rifle. Match winner in both events for 2024.
- 2024 USA Shooting National Junior Olympic Championship placing 3rd in Air Rifle and 2nd in Smallbore. She has qualified for USA Shooting National Junior Olympic Championships since 2019.
- 2024 Civilian Marksmanship (CMP) 3-Position State Championship held in March 2024 -1st.
- Civilian Marksmanship (CMP) 3PAR Regional Championship held in Sandy, Utah -3rd overall as an individual in April 2024.
- Competed at USA Shooting Nationals in both Air Rifle and Smallbore. This was an open match including adults, Olympians, and collegiate shooters.
- Competed at the Civilian Marksmanship (CMP) National Air Gun Championships and the CMP National Smallbore Championships at Camp Perry, OH.

McFarland attends Billings West High School maintains a high GPA and was selected as one of the 2024 Big Sky State Games Character Counts Scholarship winners.

This summer, McFarland attended the summer session at the Naval Academy worked at Electrical Consultants, Inc. and in her free time helped her dad on the family ranch. McFarland's ultimate goal is to attend college and to shoot on the college rifle team. She is currently being recruited by several Division I schools and will make her announcement in the Fall.

Major sponsors of the Big Sky State Games are Kampgrounds of America, First Interstate Bank, and Blue Cross Blue Shield of Montana. Wendy's sponsors Opening Ceremonies.

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