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MEET OUR
makers

This month, we're thrilled to feature professional athlete Lael Wilcox in our newsletter. She's an iconic role model and ongoing source of inspiration in a sport that few people are familiar with - bikepacking. Read on to learn more about Lael's extraordinary feats and unusual eats (see how we did that?!) or click the "What's New" link below for the latest and greatest media updates from Tucson.

[What's New](#)



Meet Lael Wilcox

Five minutes into my interview with Lael Wilcox, I'm convinced she may be the real-life version of Superwoman.

On the day I spoke with her, the 37-year-old and her wife had just returned home to Tucson from Lael's sister's wedding in Greensborough, North Carolina, what she described as a "beautiful occasion." She dovetailed the wedding with a road trip to Rochester, New York.

“You drove there, right? I mean, surely you didn’t cycle the whole way, did you?” I find myself asking.

“Oh no,” she responds. “The route was about 700 miles and I biked about half of it. When the road got busy or narrow, I hopped in the car with my wife.”

The truth is, for Lael, 350 miles of cycling is a cakewalk. She’s been riding a bike for years, traversing different continents initially as a mode of transportation and a means of seeing the world. In fact, she’s never had a license or owned a car.

During a seven-year stint of exploring the world on bike, the Alaska native offhandedly registered herself for a race in Israel, not knowing what to expect.

She placed first in the initial leg of the race and second in the final leg. Just like that, she was hooked.

Three years later, thanks to the help of sponsors, cycling became her job. That was in 2018.

“It’s something I came into later in life,” Lael said. “I never imagined I could make a living off of cycling. I’m living my dream.”

Today, Lael is at the top of the leaderboard in the relatively new sport, commonly referred to as bikepacking. Competitors carry their own food, water and sleeping supplies during their multi-day treks. She calls it a “hybrid” that is mostly comprised of cycling but sometimes incorporates walking, like on the 840-mile Arizona Trail Lael will be traversing on the 19th of this month.

The trail starts at the U.S.-Mexico border and works its way north through the state, gaining and losing elevation in an ever-shifting array of ecosystems ranging from the cactus-filled landscapes of the Sonoran Desert to the

ponderosa pine forests of Northern Arizona. The route concludes at the border of Utah, just north of the Grand Canyon, an arduous stretch that Lael describes as the most challenging part of the race. It's there that she will affix her 40-pound bicycle to her back through a 26-mile stretch of winding ascents and descents. But the exertion is well worth the reward, Lael assures me.

"The last time I did the Arizona Trail, it was a full cactus bloom. It was in the south, and it was so beautiful. It felt so special to be able to ride it at that time and see that," Lael said. "There's a lot of beauty out there, even if it is hard. I've learned that most good things have an element of challenge to them, or they wouldn't be good."



Lael currently holds the bikepacking record for the Arizona Trail, which she set in April 2022 while riding solo – just her against the clock. She completed the trail in 9 days, 8 hours, and 23 minutes, beating the then-record (held by a man) by more than two hours.

If you're a fan of Radiolab, you may have heard the episode about Lael's ride – how she trained her body to deliver an optimal performance despite sleeping on the ground for just four hours each night, fighting omnipresent thirst and hunger, and experiencing significant temperature shifts from day to night.

“I think the hardest thing about the Arizona Trail is getting enough water. If I can time where I sleep to be near a freshwater source, that’s ideal,” Lael said.

“Truthfully, I’m always running at a water and food deficit. When I did it the last time, I packed full cheesecakes, and I would eat those because they are so calorie dense. I also drank salsa because I felt like I needed some vegetables. It sounds wacky, but when you’re out there in the desert, your body starts craving bizarre things.”

Despite her notable efforts, Lael’s 2022 ride on the Arizona Trail is asterisked in the record books because the newly observed rules of bikepacking require competitors to be completely self-reliant. Though Lael played by the rules in obtaining her own food and water and singlehandedly made minor mechanical fixes to her bike, she had a media crew documenting portions of her ride. The sport’s rule keepers argue she received an unquantifiable dose of moral support that gave her an edge, though the crew provided nothing tangibly substantive to Lael.

Lael sees things differently. After all, she had to stop to provide sound bites and gather footage, which took time and required mental acuteness not related to the race.

Either way, she’ll have the chance to prove herself again on Oct. 19, though this time she’ll ride in a field of 60 competitors. It’s the first time she’ll race with others on the Arizona Trail and the first time she’ll ride the course in the fall as the number of daytime hours are dwindling.

“This late in the year, I’ll end up riding in the dark for 8 hours a night,” Lael said. “I have a light on my bike and a light on my helmet. The more light I have, the more awake I feel, but I even must ration that because I can only carry a limited number of batteries and I don’t have time to charge things.”



Lael doesn't seem to mind the grueling physical and mental challenges the sport presents. In fact, it's what fuels her. She's not obsessive about winning as much as she is with experiencing the world's details that are so often missed when you're in a car. She recognizes that each ride will present periods of discomfort, but she seems to accept that, knowing that her rides are evolutionary and each hour is different from the next.

Next year, she will take on her biggest challenge yet, riding 18,000 miles around the world via a route that she imagines up. Beyond the pre-set distance, the only requirement she must meet is to encircle the globe while continuously heading east. She has hopes of beating the current record of 124 days by two weeks, but she says she'll be satisfied regardless of the outcome.

"I think a lot of people want to design the flattest route they can, but I love riding in the mountains, so screw it I'll just ride in the mountains," Lael said. "That's way more inspiring for me."

Some of her preparation will occur in Tucson, riding routes like the grueling nearly 7,000-foot climb to the top of Mt. Lemmon, the highest point in Tucson's Santa Catalina Mountains. She deems that ride her favorite and says it's a big part of the reason she settled in Tucson six years ago and a major contributing factor to why she'll stay.

"The first time I came to Tucson, I was on a road trip, and my plan was to move to Austin, Texas. I stopped in Tucson to go on a ride with some friends, and while I was riding a couple of days, I thought, 'I don't think it's going to get better than this,' so I've stayed," Lael said. "Tucson really feels like home. It's my favorite place to ride and the place I want to be."

When she's not competing in races or training for them, Lael is encouraging others to explore Tucson from the seat of a bicycle.

This November, she's orchestrated The Tucson Komoot Rally, a 400-mile cycling event that will bring together 50 women ranging from 19 to 70 years old. While it's the sixth rally of its kind, it will be the first held in Tucson and the United States. Lael says the women who participate hail from all over the world and she's excited to show them the beauty of the state she calls home.

She's also a longtime advocate for introducing long-distance cycling to 11- and 12-year-old girls who wouldn't otherwise have the means to ride bikes or exposure to the sport. Called Tucson Girls Riding Into Tomorrow or GRIT for short, Lael spearheads the program that provides underprivileged girls with a bike they ride over a six-week period and later take home. The program concludes with an overnight weekend adventure ride.

"Some of the best parts of doing these programs for girls and women is they don't think they can do it. They're so apprehensive," Lael said. "And then when they go out and ride somewhere or sleep outside, it's like they're overcoming this huge thing, and it changes their lives. That's a good reminder for me

because if all I did was race or ride 200 miles a day, at some point, it would no longer be exciting. When I see people take on new things, and shock themselves, and get excited, it brings me back to why I love this sport so much.”

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