



AN INTERVIEW WITH

Lael Wilcox

STORY BY ELLEE THALHEIMER | PHOTOS BY RUGILE KALADYTE

The world of endurance cycling collectively raised its eyebrows when 27-year-old Lael Wilcox pedaled across the finish line of the 2,745-mile Tour Divide bikepacking race in June 2015. Wilcox, who tends to ride in old T-shirts and sneakers, shaved two days off the women's record, finishing in 17 days, 1 hour, and 51 minutes. New to ultra-endurance bike racing, she has been a full-time bike traveler for seven years, working at restaurants or bike shops in between trips and calling Anchorage, Alaska, her home base.



But it was her 2016 overall win of the Trans Am Bike Race — 4,300 miles across 10 states in 18 days and 10 minutes — that sent shock waves through the realm of endurance sports and the bike industry. By beating every male competitor and smashing the women's record by three days, she confounded the gender status quo in endurance sports.

We thought we'd see what she's up to after her Trans Am win so we snagged her just as she was coming off guiding long-distance off-road bike tours for Cyclist Menu in Patagonia, Arizona.



What was your experience after you won the Trans Am, and how was it different from breaking the women's record of the Tour Divide?

Basically there wasn't much difference. After the Trans Am, I was a grouchy, dead-bodied, eating machine. I was focused on trying to mentally function again. I was so sleep deprived, it took days for my body to remember how to rest again. I spent a little more time pulling my bike over to do random phone interviews with outlets like *Jezebel* and *The Guardian*, but everything else was the same. I was on my bike again really soon after the race to ride to the Canadian border so I was pretty disconnected. On social media, people were excited, but in my own space nothing was different.

What is the Baja Divide and how did it evolve?

It's a 1,700-mile dirt touring route down the Baja Peninsula from San Diego to

San José del Cabo, Mexico. Between racing the Tour Divide and the Trans Am, I co-pioneered the route with my partner at the time, Nick Carman. In December 2015, we rode the route, and, less than a week into the trip, we knew we had to share this fantastic route. The project took off that spring because there was a huge response to our invitation for a group-ride start in January 2017. We hadn't even published the route online yet! It was just a concept with no website. So that motivated us to get it together. It took us two runs to make all the connections, map it out, and post the GPS tracks online. Ninety-six people started that group ride. It's such an incredible winter riding option with great weather through wide-open spaces with low populations. (All route information is free to you with love from Wilcox and Carman at bajadivide.com.)

You cofounded a program called GRIT (Girls Riding Into Tomorrow) in 2017. What's that about?

GRIT is a middle school bicycle mentorship program for seventh grade girls in Anchorage. The program facilitates bike-buddy pairing and 15 weekly lessons (like bike safety, mountain bike skills, and route planning). As a capstone, we take the girls on a self-supported, three-day ride on bike paths and gravel roads from Anchorage to Eklutna Lake. Cait Rodriguez and I came up with the idea as we were riding the group-start Baja Divide tour. And Specialized agreed to sponsor the program with bikes. At the end of a successfully completed program, each girl gets a bike. We had 11 girls the first year, and it went really well. This year we'll

have 18 with some graduates coming back as mentors. We started the program because it's the kind of thing we would have loved at 12. But there was nothing like this. At that age, girls are like, "Yeah, we're going to do this!" Older girls seem to lose that spark. We want to get them while they're motivated. (More information at anchoragegrit.wordpress.com.)

Since the TransAm, you've given away two riding scholarships to women. Tell us about that.

When we were planning the group start for the Baja Divide, Nick and I thought it would be cool to give someone a scholarship to do the ride — like a bike, stipend, gear, everything. And I actually just wanted to give it to a woman because they tend to ride

this kind of thing so much less. So I organized a bunch of sponsors to make it happen. And “Lael’s Globe of Adventure” Baja Divide Women’s Scholarship was a huge success: 200 applicants with ages ranging from 19 to 67. Many women who applied and didn’t win rode the group-start Baja Divide anyway or rode the route on their own. They just needed that extra boost. Then, in the summer of 2017, I rode all the roads in Alaska (4,500 miles). I wanted to show it could be done. I loved it, especially stuff in the north. People say it’s a wasteland, but riding above the Arctic Circle for hundreds of miles was incredible. And I just stayed on the road system. There’s no development; it’s amazing. So I created the “Lael Rides Alaska” Women’s Scholarship for a woman to ride all the roads in Alaska. I don’t want to always be the one telling the stories. I want other people telling the stories.

What’s it like being a woman in this niche of cycling that has a tiny minority of women?

From a marketing perspective, it’s a huge opportunity. I get to make up whatever projects I want. I get to give bikes away to girls and women. I ask brands to be a part of projects, and they always say yes. Commercial brands want to be involved with this work. I’ve definitely faced people telling me I’m not capable. And people have accused me of cheating because they think I can’t ride like I do on my own merits. But for the most part, people are so inspired.

A person wrote to me saying that they read about me when they were struggling with a long

sickness and it inspired them to keep trying. Eventually, after the sickness passed, they got out on their bike again. People reach out with stories like that. People say what I do gets them going in a good direction.

What would you say to women out there who might be interested in endurance bikepacking?

As far as racing goes, I’m tired of there being separate categories. In endurance races, women can be competitive with men. But women don’t think they can be. If you don’t believe you can, you won’t be able to. More women are emerging, like Sarah Hammond in Australia who led Race to the Rock, a 2,300-kilometer unsupported ride from Adelaide to Uluru, by 200 kilometers, and was the only person to finish it entirely. And Sarah Cooper, who finished eighth overall in the Race Across America. It’s good to see more women taking the overall win. People don’t believe it’s possible until someone has the result. I shoot for overall win, the overall record ... which, you know, is kind of hard.

What’s next for you as far as racing?

In summer 2018, I’ll be racing in Europe and Asia. I’ll head to Switzerland in June for the Navad 1000, a 1,000-kilometer race from Romanshorn to Montreux with 108,000 feet of climbing. Only two women have competed in it, and only one has completed it! In early August, I’ll do the French Divide Route, a 2,170-kilometer mostly gravel route across France. Then, on August 18, I’ll squeeze in

the Silk Road Mountain Race. It’s an unsupported 1,700-kilometer bikepacking race in Kyrgyzstan.

How can we keep track of you?

When I’m racing, you can follow me and the race on trackleaders.com. Otherwise, I’m on Instagram (@laelwilcox) and I update my blog (laelwilcox.com).

What would the next five years look like in your wildest dreams?

I have no idea. I actually have plans through September, which is the longest I’ve ever had plans. **AC**

NO LAUREL RESTING:

Wilcox’s timeline since the Trans Am

Fall of 2016

Toured the Colorado Trail, the Vegas to Reno route, and a northern Baja scouting mission for the Baja Divide trail.

Early in 2017

Group start of the Baja Divide (96 riders started the route together in San Diego), and in March rode the Baja Divide’s fastest known time — 11 days, 13 hours. In 2018, Pete Bassinger beat her time by an hour and a half.

Spring 2017

First year facilitating Anchorage GRIT, a school program for seventh grade girls to teach them mountain biking and bikepacking.

Summer 2017

Rode all the major roads in Alaska (4,500 miles over several trips) and organized a scholarship for another woman to do the same thing.

MORE ABOUT LAEL

Do you listen to music while you ride? If so, what are some of your faves?

I started last spring. I’d never done it before. But I began to listen while riding my fastest time on the Baja Divide. Just because I was in so much pain. I listen to hip hop from the ‘90s like Notorious B.I.G. and the Fugees. And country music like Dolly Parton and Steve Earle. I went through a phase of French pop from the ‘50s through the ‘70s. Once I downloaded 12 Mariah Carey songs.

Do you have a favorite snack while racing?

No, I get so sick of eating. Though every race I have a different go-to. On the Trans Am I was into chocolate milk ... it was kinda gross. Lately it’s been lots of chips and salsa.

What gets you up in the morning during a race?

Technically, an alarm on my GPS with weird bird chirping. Now I have PTSD from that bird-chirping ringtone. My routine was to pull myself out of my bivvy and take three ibuprofen and a couple of puffs on my inhaler. Sometimes I carry instant coffee. I shake it up in a water bottle and drink it cold.

Favorite time of the day?

Love the moments before sunrise. Usually I’m already riding. When the sun comes up, it’s incredible.

Longest day in the saddle?

386 miles for the Fireweed 400 in 2014.

Best part about crossing the finish line?

Stopping.