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THE STORY OF GILA COMPOSITE

SOUTHERN NEW MEXICO'S FIRST
HIGH SCHOOL MOUNTAIN BIKING TEAM

BY OTTO KHERA

The Gila Composite is southern New Mexico's first high school competitive mountain biking team, New Mexico's first biking team to join the Arizona High School Cycling League, and the second team to join the National Interscholastic Cycling Association (NICA). "Yeah, Taos beat us to it by a few months," says Gila Composite's coach, manager, organizer, and biggest fan, Nathan Shay. "When I organized the team, I wanted them to have fun and to learn what is possible. It's nice to lead, but it's more important to participate as a team and to build core biking competencies and confidence amongst the riders."



Photo by Jay Hemphill 2015



Photo by Jay Hemphill 2015

Gila Composite competes in Arizona, while Taos competes in Colorado. Since September, Gila Composite has been competing every two weeks across Arizona including at Flagstaff, Prescott, and the Valley of the Sun (Phoenix area), and on Oct. 24-25 the team competed in Lake Havasu City. The team's last race, again in the Valley of the Sun (White Tank Regional Park; west side near Waddell), is Nov. 7-8. Each race consists of 5.7-mile loops with at least two laps and up to four laps depending upon the rider's class: freshmen and sophomores at two laps; junior varsity at three laps; and varsity at four laps.

Gila Composite combines riders from Silver High School and Aldo Leopold High School. Topping the list are the two JV riders from SHS — Josh Saari and Garrett Laney. Following is the SHS sophomore and first and only female rider from southern New Mexico, Virginnia Burgess. Rounding out the team are the three Aldo Leopold High School freshmen: Aiden Linke, Xavier Khera and Zach Donnelly. Also on the team is middle schooler Jacob Saari, who is not allowed to compete in Arizona until he is in high school.

"I guess I was sleep deprived when I decided to do it on a whim," says Virginnia Burgess. "Every day I ride from Pinos Altos

to Silver High and back. I thought I would take advantage of the daily training and give it a try. I'm really glad that I did; I get to hang out with some of the coolest people around!"

And the Gila Composite team members are indeed some of the coolest people around. The unanimous reason among the riders on why they joined: "Because it's fun!"

"I like the straight-up competitiveness of moving forward with speed and agility," says JV rider and football athlete Garrett Laney of SHS. "It's a lot of fun and the most difficult sport I've experienced. You have to pace yourself and know your strengths and limits as a rider. It's not easy when you ride at 7,000 feet elevation or in the midday desert heat."

"I've always liked road cycling, and now I'm getting into mountain biking for the first time," says Xavier Khera, who has participated in the past two Tour of the Gila road bike races with fellow mountain biker Zach Donnelly. Together with Aiden Linke, the three Aldo students bike nearly every day to school and all are clearly enjoying the competitions and opportunities to learn from Coach Shay. "I like moving myself on a bike and the freedom that gives me," says Aiden about cycling.

It was only three years ago — 2012 — that the Arizona High School Cycling League formed, and that was only three years after the 2009 formation of the National Interscholastic Cycling Association (NICA) itself. The mission of both NICA and the Arizona Cycling League is to instill confidence, teamwork, and self-sufficiency. Each rider is responsible for his or her own bike maintenance during a race, and riders are encouraged to complete the race with proper sports behaviors above all else. Says Arizona's mountain biking league founder and executive director, Mike Perry, "NICA and the Arizona League are open to all high school students who show up with a bike — we even supply helmets if necessary. We want to see the kids enjoy themselves as they compete, and



From left: Jacob Saari, Virginnia Burgess, Xavier Khera, Garrett Laney, Aiden Linke, Nathan Shay (coach), and Josh Saari. Photo by Jay Hemphill 2015

to build self-confidence, leadership, and learning skills. ... We have over 300 riders competing from 70 high schools in Arizona and a couple from outside — New Mexico and Nevada."

"Really, it is all about learning," says Nathan Shay at the third mountain bike race near the Verde River and Fountain Hills at McDowell Mountain Recreational Park, as the sun is setting and dinner is being cooked up at the campsite. "Listen to the conversation. The riders — they are sharing information about the track, their bikes, and strategies for riding the track." And it's true: The high schoolers are alternating talk between the difficult and easy parts of the track, the specifics of their technologies, including gear ratios, interactions with other teams and riders, and about how hot it's going to be the next day. "It's all about developing the mind and body at the same time, always adapting to geography and the people around you, with technology as a major part of it. It's about food, nutrition and understanding of your own body's limits and needs," underscores Nathan.

Considerable research and evidence correlates physical movement, learning and self-esteem. Students who exercise more, according to these studies, perform higher on tests and exhibit higher levels of self-confidence. For example, a study from 2000 published in *Pediatric Exercise Science* found that "both females and males who exercised more had considerably higher levels of self esteem." Similarly, a 2010 U.S. Health and

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From left: Josh Saari, Garrett Laney, Zach Donnelly, Aiden Linke, Xavier Khera, Virginia Burgess, and Coach Nathan Shay at the Prescott competition. Some have likened the team to the Bad News Bears — despite limited resources, on a winning trajectory.
Photo by Jay Hemphill 2015



Human Services report found that “there is substantial evidence that physical activity can help improve academic achievement, including grades and standardized test scores.” Gila Composite hopes to attract more high school students who can benefit from these serendipitous rewards along with the riding and social fun the program offers.

Much welcomed as a parent, the other parents and event supporters and competition organizers cheer *all* of the riders, especially the ones who manage to get back on their bikes after crashing and those who display a sincere sense of effort. This positive reinforcement and supportive, inclusive environment seems to be the most refreshing part of the NICA and Arizona League sports events: It’s all about having fun and supporting *all* of the riders while keeping it real — the track itself is tough enough and requires a high level of commitment, skill and endurance.

The scrappy Gila Composite team has been likened jokingly to the Bad News Bears. While the Arizona teams are extremely well funded with bikes costing often 10 times as much as the southern New Mexican racers and with a cadre of support team members, the Gila Composite has a coach and an assistant coach, and relies on the parents of riders to provide transportation, equipment, and competition fees. “Thankfully SHS and Aldo have helped with some of the equipment!” says Nathan. But like the Bad News Bears, do not underestimate the potential of the team; this is their first try and they are advancing quickly, especially given the distance factor (travel takes time and energy!) and difference in available resources and support.

The fledgling southern New Mexico team today stands at number 24 out of 50 teams. “That’s exactly where we need to be in the first year,” says Assistant Coach Jon Saari. “What’s most important in this first year especially is to get the team rooted with a solid foundation. We want the riders to enjoy themselves — now and in the future. The

competitions are great, but really what we are seeing is a lot of social connections among the riders. The riders talk to the other teams and look forward to seeing each other.

Jon Saari has been a key supporter of the team, and has reached out to numerous others in the Silver community toward supporting the team’s costs and needed resources. “Next year, Nathan and I plan to break things up a bit where I’ll focus more on the support, sponsorship and logistics. Nathan will then be freed up to focus more exclusively on coaching the riders and getting them comfortable with the different riding environments and competitive demands,” says Jon.

“The team wouldn’t exist if it weren’t for the local sponsors like Suzanne Thomas and Desert Springs Physical Therapy, Dan Cook, Wayne Sherwood, Dr. Brian Robinson, Assistant Coach Jon Saari, and many others who have given us money, special prices on products and services, and other donations. It’s definitely been a community effort,” shares Nathan proudly.



SHS sophomore Virginia Burgess finishing in Prescott, Ariz. Photo by Jay Hemphill 2015

As the team's coach, in addition to being a Category 1 competitive mountain bike rider himself, Nathan Shay is also a certified New Mexico substitute teacher with years of experience instructing high school and elementary school age children. For 10 years he taught physical education at Down to Earth School, and he sees physical exercise as essential to healthy learning. Quietly and in his own way, Nathan repatriates the community and honors those from Silver City who came before him and who got him interested in the sport of cycling: "Getting kids into it — that's what it's all about. In the early 1990s, experienced competition riders like Barin Beard, Bryan Thomas, and Lonnie Shoup got me into it and spent a lot of their weekends taking me and others to places like Big Bend, Texas, for the Chihuahua Desert Challenge. Those early experiences got me into competitive riding, and later into teaching. It's been a really positive part of my life that I want to pass on and share with the kids in Grant County."

As an official NICA coach, Nathan participated in the NICA Leaders' Summit — a weekend of how to coach kids who are learning to ride. There he learned about breaking down the basics: Food. Training. Support. Coaching girls — there's a manual for that. And more. "I take this seriously from training to food, and steer away from fast-food options and more toward nutritional options, especially ones that have been endorsed by NICA."

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If you are in high school and interested in participating in the competitions, or wish to support the team, please contact Nathan Shay directly at bikeshay@msn.com.

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Coach Nathan Shay multitasking — cooking the evening meal while advising the riders on what to expect the next day at the Prescott competition. Photo by Jay Hemphill 2015