

ARIZONA DRIVER

THE ENTHUSIAST'S GUIDE TO LIFE BEHIND THE WHEEL

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BAILEY CAMPBELL AT KING OF THE HAMMERS



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A LITTLE FAMILY TIME

Off-road racer and fabricator Bailey Campbell of Arizona, following her dad and brother into rock crawling, sand driving and all sorts of desert adventures since an early age, runs in this year's King of the Hammers

By Elizabeth Williams



Photo: Larry Chen

King of the Hammers—a week of exciting racing through treacherous and challenging boulder-filled trails and terrain known collectively as “The Hammers,” in the Southern California desert’s Johnson Valley—has grown from humble beginnings as a wager among a small group of friends in 2007 into the largest off-road motorsports event in the world, one of the largest events to take place on public lands in the US, and a must-attend event for any off-road enthusiast.

Obstacle-filled sections of the Hammers race course with such names as Jackhammer, Wrecking Ball and Sledgehammer create intense action and fierce competition as teams battle to get through them in one piece and cross the finish line.

With nearly a dozen days of racing for off-road vehicles of every shape and size, and 897 teams from 37 states and multiple countries, the 2023 Progressive King of the Hammers Powered by OPTIMA Batteries (KOH) was the biggest ever.

Although King of the Hammers began as a one-day race for single-purpose rock-crawling rigs, the event now has separate races for UTVs, desert-racing trucks, buggies and motorcycles throughout the week. New in 2023 were short-course off-road races for trucks and buggies, a Youth 170 UTV class, and additional classes in the desert and Ultra4.

The massive event also draws tens of thousands of spectators. At the center of all this action is Hammertown, a temporary city in the desert built on Means Dry Lake. This beating heart of the event includes race pits and over 150 vendors for parts, gear, food and beverage, plus Jumbotrons for spectators to view live race broadcasts, with a festival atmosphere all day long, live music at night and many interactive experiences.

A celebration of racing and off-road culture, this is the place to be for offroad enthusiasts who make the trek to enjoy the races and drive their own vehicles in Johnson Valley’s wide open spaces.

Bailey Campbell

For some families, it’s a given that the kids are going to follow in their parent’s footsteps. While this may not have been the case for Bailey Campbell, she embraced it at an early age to follow her dad and brother into rock crawling, sand driv-

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Photo: Nicole Dreon



Photo: Nicole Dreon



Photo: Danny Fisher & Harlen Foley



Photo: Nicole Dreon

ing, and all sorts of desert adventures.

Born and raised in Arizona, Bailey never felt pressured to join the family race team. But watching her dad and brother compete, she fell in love with the sport. It was a way for her to connect with family and challenge herself in new ways.

Bailey practically grew up in the driver's seat. "My dad started building cars and rock crawlers before I was born," she says. "He really started to get into rock crawling around 1995. Then my brother was born, and I followed just two years behind him in '97. We've just constantly grown up around all of the automotive stuff, and it's been basically our whole world." Bailey laughs when she remembers her childhood. "My dad always says he wished he would have put us in soccer because it would have been cheaper—but here we are."

The kids both started driving the cars their dad built when they were about eight years old—she says, "Right around when we could put a pillow behind our backs and reach the pedals a little bit." They practiced rock crawling out in Florence, Arizona, on local wheeling trails.

Just a year behind her brother Wayland, Bailey had her first race at thirteen and has been expanding her experience and gaining respect ever since. They both raced in W.E.Rock (World Extreme Rock Crawling Championships), a series run by Big Rich Klein that is still going on today.

Campbell Enterprises

In addition to their rock-crawling passion, the Campbell family has established themselves in the local economic community of the Phoenix area. Bailey's dad Shannon and uncle Nick started their full fabrication shop in Gilbert, working on 4x4 vehicles or anything they could get their hands on.

From there, the business really took off into building rock crawlers and eventually supporting all of the vehicles for their own competitions. "I believe this year we're going to start bringing more customer vehicles back into the business," says Bailey. "We want to bring back getting to know other people and their vehicles and see how we can help the off-road community again."

Bailey isn't shy to jump in and get her hands dirty in the business as well. She does almost everything, from helping her

mom with the books in the office to trying her hand at fabrication. "I go outside to work on anything that has been brought in. I do my best with the fabrication side, but I am more mechanical than anything."

Nitto Race of Kings

The Nitto Race of Kings—an "OG" Ultra4 race—is where this massive desert-racing event all began. It's populated with a limitless, anything goes, whatever you can dream and build group of rock-racing vehicles now referred to as the 4400 Ultra4 Unlimited Class, pushing the boundaries of performance and strength of the cars, as well as the talent and perseverance of their drivers, against a course widely considered to be the toughest in the world.

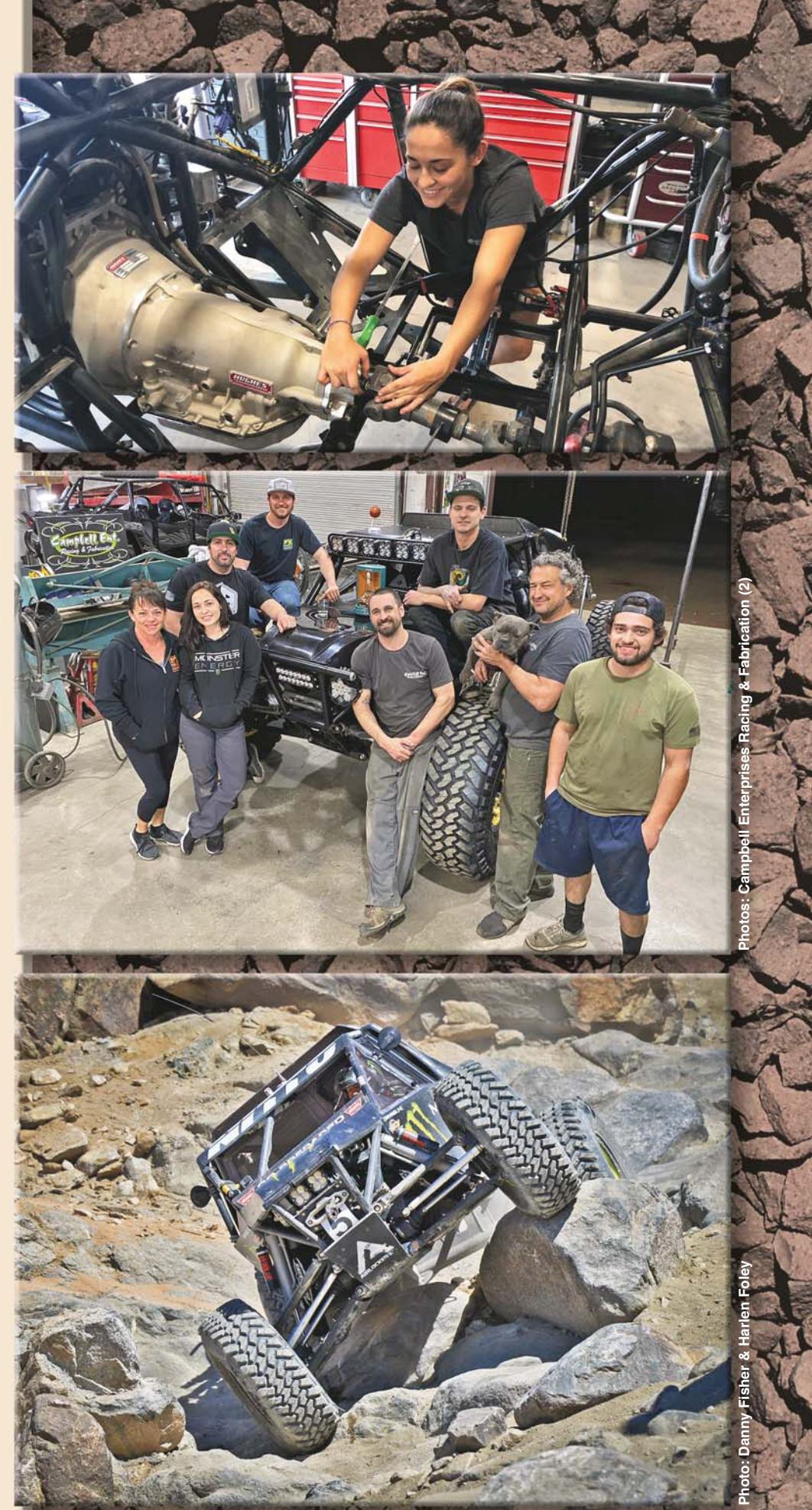
Many of the 4400 Ultra4 cars are custom-built by their drivers and co-drivers and include single-seat and two-seat designs with front or rear engines, and solid-axle or independent suspensions. To run in this event, a team must possess a rock-solid race car, excellent drivers and support team members, cool heads to deal with a range of situations that may occur, and a dose of good luck. It is a titanic battle that often sees attrition rates in the 50 percent range.

Bailey raced in the Nitto Race of Kings, which is the main event that crowns the 2023 Progressive King of the Hammers powered by Optima. In the Race of Kings, there is only one class, the 4400 Unlimited. Bailey and her brother did not have an easy road to the finish line. Both faced engine failures earlier in the week, jeopardizing their hopes for competition.

Levi Shirley, who owns one of the Campbells' chassis they had built in Arizona, offered it back to them, fully prepped and ready to race. The vehicle the team piloted is a single-seat, independent front suspension car with an LSX454 engine and a 6L80 transmission built by GM. It features a King Shocks suspension system and Evan Weller Racing Third Member front and rear differentials. Completing the setup, the team added the Nitto tires and Walker Evans Racing wheels they always have on their regularly run vehicles.

It was a last-minute decision, so for the first of three laps of the competition, Bailey piloted the desert route, while Wayland ran the second lap—the first through the

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Photos: Campbell Enterprises Racing & Fabrication (2) Photo: Danny Fisher & Harlen Foley

Johnson Valley Hammers. Bailey's co-driver, Ryan Miller, tackled the third and final lap through the imposing rocks.

"That was my first time in a single-seat car, which was, honestly, so nerve-wracking," Bailey says. "Anybody who came up to me that morning while I was in the start line made me cry a little bit because they kept telling me, 'We're so proud of you! We know you're nervous!' But they knew that I could handle it."

Nerves may have been pouring over, but once out in the competition, the team didn't let it show, working their way from a 105-position start to finish in 20th place, facing only a few minor issues with fans that overheated the car.

The King of the Hammers race is not for the faint of heart, a grueling 200-mile, three-lap race where only about one third of all competitors completed the entire course this year.

When asked about the future and the family tradition of Campbell Enterprises, Bailey says, "My husband also races one of our cars, so we're both very into racing. And if that is something my daughter wants to do, we'll definitely put her behind the wheel of something." At the end of the day, she wants to make sure that she is knowledgeable about the mechanics of a car, so she never has to rely on anybody to take care of vehicles for her. In fact, one of Bailey's favorite things to do was learn about how cars operate, and she even went so far as to give her girlfriends in high school advice on how to fix whatever may be wrong with their vehicles.

For fun, Bailey wraps up our conversation by sharing her favorite places in Arizona. "There's one that's a little challenging, more of a rock crawling trail that was meant for our moon buggies back in the day. It's called Hell's Gate."

For Bailey Campbell and her racing family, the hammers of Johnson Valley are only the beginning. With her bright smile and infectious laugh, it's hard not to like Bailey. She's a breath of fresh air in a down-and-dirty starting line, where competitors tackle rocks for breakfast. Each of the Campbell family has driven or co-driven for each other at some point in time. So for her, when it comes down to competition, it's all about family.

For additional event information, visit kingofthehammers.com ■



Photo: Ernesto Aralza



Photo: Robert Kranz



Photo: Campbell Enterprises Racing & Fabrication

