

From World Champion to Runner: My Journey Never Stopped

By Gary Panttila

People often ask how I went from being a six-time world champion powerlifter to becoming a sheriff's deputy and eventually finding a passion for running. The truth is, those aren't separate chapters—they're all part of the same journey.

Athletics became a part of my life at a young age. Sports gave me confidence, discipline, and a place where hard work mattered more than talent. I started lifting when I was about 18 years old. I weighed 132 pounds. Like a lot of teenagers, I originally wanted to get stronger and build confidence. It didn't take long before I discovered powerlifting, and I fell in love with the discipline. I learned patience, consistency, and that showing up every day, even when progress came slowly, brought results.

Over my powerlifting career, my body weight changed several times, and I competed in multiple weight classes along the way. During my later years, I competed at approximately 308 pounds. In 2024, I was at 365 pounds.

Powerlifting has several organizations, each with its own rules and standards. Throughout my career, I competed in several powerlifting federations, represented Team USA, served as a coach for five years, and was a member of the USA Powerlifting Rules and Regulations Committee. Those roles gave me the opportunity to give back to the sport.

I primarily competed in the bench press and deadlift, where championships are often won or lost by technical precision as much as strength.



Gary preparing to lift 451 lbs. Photo courtesy of Gary Panttila

It took 14 years of hard work before I reached the top of the sport. My first world championship came after years of competing, learning from failures, and steadily improving. Eventually, that journey led to six world championships over a 24-year competitive career. I'm competing again this November for my seventh world championship.

But the trophies were never what meant the most. The greatest reward was learning that success comes from consistency, resilience, and embracing failure as part of the process. That mindset ultimately led me to law enforcement.

Becoming a Pima County Sheriff's deputy wasn't about finding another challenge; it was about finding another way to serve. I wanted a career where integrity, accountability, and helping people mattered every single day. The academy challenged me in completely different ways than powerlifting. I lost more than 100 pounds, which

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From World Champion to Runner, continued



From left: Tabby Greeney, Joan Heinmiller, Gary Panttila, and Tonya Patrick. Photo courtesy of Gary Panttila

was in many ways harder than winning world championships. There were days I wanted to quit, but I kept reminding myself why I started. The transformation wasn't just physical—it completely changed my mindset. I had to learn to walk before I could jog and then run. Along the way, I struggled with anxiety and self-doubt. Courage isn't the absence of fear; it's choosing to move forward anyway.

Running entered my life when I realized I needed a different kind of challenge. After years of carrying well over 300 pounds, I knew my body would eventually fail, and I knew my health had to become the priority.

I started walking every night. It was not easy. It took me about five months to jog my first mile in 2025. Later that year, I suffered a hamstring tear while running that sidelined me for months. Thanks to rehab and working out with weights again, I'm running better than I ever have and have come back stronger.

These days, you'll almost always find me near the back of the pack. I'm perfectly okay with that. That's exactly where I want to be. I'm not chasing podiums anymore—I'm chasing purpose. My goal

is to finish every race, encourage those around me, and make sure the runners behind me are okay. Some people measure success by how many runners they pass. I measure it by how many people I can support before we cross the finish line together. Every runner deserves to be seen, encouraged, and reminded that finishing is just as meaningful as winning.

The running community has become another family. They've welcomed someone who used to identify only as a powerlifter and showed me that finishing a race can be just as meaningful as winning one. Every race presents new challenges. I'm still learning pacing, endurance, injury prevention, and how to train for distance instead of maximum strength. It's a completely different sport, and that's exactly what makes it exciting.

I have some goals in mind: run a 10K with SAR in September, a half marathon in 2027, a full marathon in 2028, and a 100-mile run within the next five years.

Today, my goal isn't to be the fastest runner. It's to become the healthiest version of myself while inspiring others to believe it's never too late to change their lives. That's the race I'm running now.

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From left: Ethan Novilla, Gary Panttila, and Miguel Chavez. Photo courtesy of Gary Panttila

The Inside Track

By Sarah Wolf

Have you ever wondered what happens behind the scenes to make SAR races happen? Here's a quick look at what your board has been working on the past couple of months:

Volunteers are the heart of our club, and our biggest need. Race directors tell us again and again: we need more volunteers! The board is expanding our volunteer recognition program, including new swag designed exclusively for our volunteers and a volunteer appreciation event. (See **Celebrating Our Volunteers**, page 4.)

If you've ever thought about getting involved, now is a great time to jump in and support our running community! (runsar.org/volunteer)

Even during the summer, the SAR board is preparing for fall races and planning ahead for 2027. From permits and course logistics to safety planning, there's a tremendous amount of coordination involved for every event.

SAR is strengthening connections in our Tucson community. This spring, we supported the Kiwanis Relays, which brought in nearly 700 middle school athletes. This summer, the SAR Summer Track Series provided opportunities for runners of all ages to get on the track and compete. (See **Summer Nights at the Track**, page 5.)

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There Goes My Hero

By Craig McCarthy

Each year, SAR gives back more than \$68,000 to charities across Southern Arizona. You could say we are a charity club with a running mission. That impact is all thanks to you. You run our races. You volunteer your time. You support SAR events throughout the year.

\$68,000+

GIVEN BACK TO SOUTHERN ARIZONA EACH YEAR

As the oldest and largest nonprofit running club in Southern Arizona, SAR keeps races affordable while putting on high-quality events that give back to the community. Each race supports a designated charity partner.

Each of these organizations plays a vital role in strengthening Southern Arizona, supporting youth, conservation, health, education, and families in need. Every race entry and volunteer hour helps these organizations continue their missions and grow their impact in our community.

These partnerships reflect the heart of SAR's mission: using running to strengthen our community. Every race you run and every hour you volunteer helps make that impact possible.

2026 Charity Partners

- Ben's Bells
- St. Luke's Home
- Youth on Their Own
- Achilles International
- Team Hoyt of Arizona
- Kiwanis Club of Tucson
- Jim Himelic Foundation
- U of A Adaptive Athletics
- Friends of Sabino Canyon
- Children of Fallen Officers
- Grace and Gratitude Foundation
- Friends of Saguaro National Park
- Children's Fitness Fund & FitKidz
- Commitment to Underserved People Clinics (CUP)

We also support partner running and community organizations, including

- Beyond
- Toys for Tots
- Step Up to Justice
- Greater Tucson Leadership
- Children's Museum Tucson

Celebrating Our Volunteers

By Caroline Gardiner

Behind every successful SAR event is a team of dedicated volunteers. From registration and course set up, to water stations and FitKidz support, the time, commitment, and generosity these volunteers bring to our community make it possible for SAR to host safe, welcoming, and memorable events for all participants.



Sarah Wolf with the new volunteer shirt and hat. Photo by Caroline Gardiner

Anyone who has volunteered at a SAR event or FitKidz program during 2026 is invited to attend.

If you've volunteered this year, you'll receive a complimentary SAR Volunteer Shirt. Volunteers who have contributed 10 or more hours will also be eligible for additional appreciation gifts based on the table below.

Watch for details on the date and location in the coming weeks. We hope you'll join us to pick up your swag, connect with fellow volunteers, and let us thank you in person for everything you do to support our running community!

SAR has expanded its volunteer appreciation program to recognize the many ways our members contribute. Volunteers can now earn a variety of appreciation gifts based on the hours they give, whether or not they participate in SAR races.

To kick off the fall racing season, SAR will host a Volunteer Recognition Happy Hour in August.

The Inside Track, continued

Supporting young runners is central to our mission. FitKidz continues to see strong participation, from race-day events to the spring running club. We've updated the Children's Fitness Fund, increasing the maximum award amount for grantees. We're also developing new outreach opportunities, including a FitKidz event with Owl and Panther to introduce refugee youth to our running community.

Coming this fall, we'll be piloting a new initiative: a shoe recycling fundraiser that will allow members to donate used running shoes to support SAR programs. More details will be shared soon about how to participate.

SAR is powered by our members. Whether you race or volunteer, you're part of what keeps the club running. If you're looking for a way to get more involved, volunteering is one of the most valuable ways to support our club.

Volunteer Hours	Appreciation Gift
1-9	SAR Volunteer Shirt
10-19	SAR Hat
20-29	Race Entry Voucher
30+	Hooded Sun Shirt

Summer Nights at the Track

By Sarah Wolf

As the sun set on a warm summer evening at Salpointe Catholic High School, 80 runners of all ages gathered on June 30 for the second of SAR's four Summer Track Meets, sponsored by The Running Shop. First-timers lined up alongside experienced athletes for an evening of friendly competition and personal challenge.

Summer track meets have long been a Tucson tradition. When the City of Tucson's Parks and Recreation Department discontinued its program, SAR stepped in, ensuring local athletes of all ages would continue to have a place to compete each summer.

Across the meet, many runners were focused on competing against themselves, chasing personal bests, and celebrating incremental improvements.

"I wanted to get to 12 seconds," said Kensley F. after placing second in the 100 meter dash. Kensley also competed in the 200 meter dash and the 4×100-meter relay. Having run with her team for the past two years, she hopes to continue competing in high school.

Nearby, teammates Tinley G. and Finley J., who had competed in the 100- and 200-meter races, were catching their breath before the relay. Finley has been attending the summer meets since she was three years old and said their relay team is "really strong." Tinley, who recently completed her first school track season, said simply she was "feeling good" about her events.

The Summer Track Meets have become a tradition for many local families, giving young athletes a chance to stay active between school seasons, build confidence, and gain race experience.



FitKidz 5 and under open the meet with a 50 meter dash. Photo by Wayne Lubis

The meets also attract adult runners to the shorter track distances, a faster change of pace from the longer distances typical of SAR events.

For Santiago C., the atmosphere keeps him coming back. "The event is very fun," he said, offering advice to fellow runners: "Have fun, do your best, stay hydrated..."

"...and don't fall short," his friend Nicholas T. added with a laugh. Nicholas has been running since fourth grade and enjoys spending his summer evenings on the track.

Others appreciated the opportunity to keep moving. "It's a great way to stay active during the summer," said Dominic R.

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Summer Nights at the Track, continued

Chelsea D., a coach at Catalina High School, has been bringing her children to the meets for the past three years. Her daughter, Kitzia, earned third-place finishes in both the 100- and 400-meter races, while her son, Elio, claimed second in the 100.

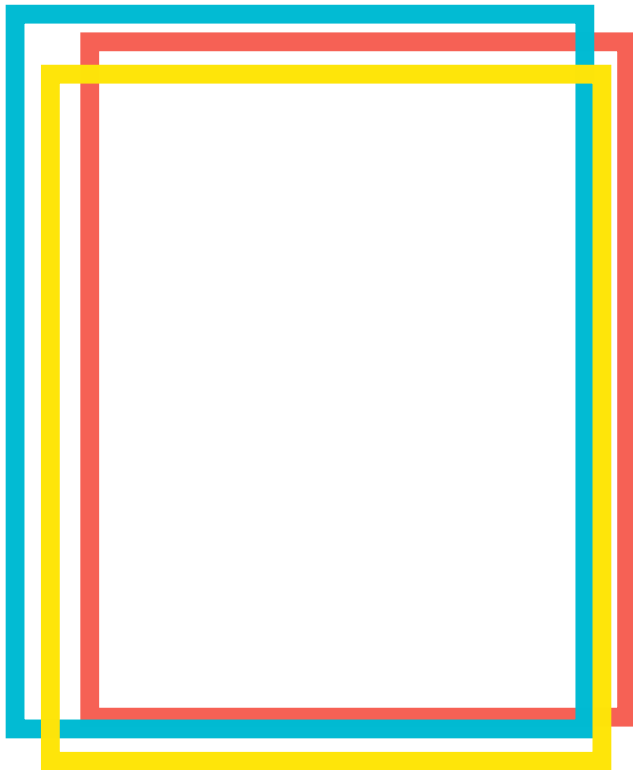
Chelsea's coaching advice is simple: "Consistency is the most important advice I give any athlete. Get out and practice every day."

She also hopes to see the series continue to grow. As a coach whose daughter excels in the jumping events, she'd love to see field events added in the future.

This year's Summer Track Meet Series brought competition and community together, continuing a Tucson tradition for runners of all ages.



Chelsea D. (top), Elio (left), and Kitzia (right). Photo by Sarah Wolf



Member Photo Spotlight

Running comes with its share of memorable experiences, and we'd love to share yours. Each issue, we'll feature a photo submitted by a SAR member that captures a favorite running moment.

It might be a sunrise on your favorite trail, a race-day memory, or a picture that tells your running story. Submit your photo along with a short caption sharing where the photo was taken and why it's meaningful to you.

Email submissions to sarahwolf9@gmail.com

Make The Most Of Your SAR Membership

By Wayne Lubis

Thank you for being a member of Southern Arizona Roadrunners! By joining SAR, you've become part of an organization that supports running, walking, fitness, and healthy living throughout Southern Arizona. Your membership includes a variety of benefits, and helps SAR support local charitable partners and programs that make a positive impact in our community.



From the Editor

By Sarah Wolf

As I step into the role of newsletter editor, I'd like to take a moment to thank our outgoing editor, Wayne Lubis, for the time, care, and dedication he brought to The Roadrunner. Producing this newsletter takes countless hours behind the scenes, and his tireless efforts have helped keep SAR members informed and connected. On behalf of the club, Wayne, thank you for your service!

Looking to the future, I'd love to make sure this newsletter continues to reflect our running community. What stories would you like to read? Is there a runner you'd like us to spotlight?

Do you have a story, favorite training tip, volunteer experience, or local running adventure to share? If you have an idea for an article, or would like to write one yourself, I'd love to hear from you.

This newsletter belongs to all of us, and I hope it becomes a place where we celebrate not only our races and community impact, but also "the friends we made along the way" that make SAR such an amazing community. I look forward to hearing your ideas and seeing your photos!

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2026 SAR RACE SCHEDULE

- September 7th: TMC Saguaro National Park Labor Day 8 Mile & 5K Run/Walk
- September 13th: TMC Tucson 10K & 5K
- September 26th: Sabino Canyon One Mile FitKidz Classic
- September 27th: Jim Click's Run 'n' Roll 5K & 1 Mile
- October 18th: TMC A-Mountain Half Marathon & Cigna 4-Miler + FitKidz Mile
- November 1st: Dave's Run for ALS 8K & 5K + FitKidz Mile
- November 26th: Thanksgiving XC Classic 5K & 1.5 Mile Fun Run/Walk

About SAR

The Southern Arizona Roadrunners is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to promoting health and fitness in Tucson and Southern Arizona through running and walking.

Our vision is to strengthen and support the running and walking community in Southern Arizona through high-quality, affordable, and family-friendly events and programming that empower people of all backgrounds, abilities, and ages to pursue a healthier lifestyle. We promote community engagement by celebrating the joy of athletic achievement, individual and group participation, philanthropy, and volunteer service.



For the latest information, visit us online at runsar.org
You can also follow us on Facebook and Instagram at: [@azroadrunners](https://www.facebook.com/azroadrunners) & [@runsar](https://www.instagram.com/runsar)

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