

Shelby Stanger: I'm a big fan of being able to find your way around your own true north, literally and metaphorically. So today I'm talking to someone who encourages people to do just that with her annual event that takes place in varied terrain between Nevada and California. If you're a fan of road trips, rally racing, off-roading, motor sports, or you just want to know a little bit about finding your own way in life, you're in for a wild ride on this one. I'm Shelby Stanger and this is Wild Ideas Worth Living.

Shelby Stanger: There's an event that happens every year where you not only need a good sense of direction, but you also need perseverance, intelligence, the ability to work as a team and a little grit. In the event, you can't use a GPS or a cell phone to get from point A to B. You get to rely only on old school topographic maps, a protractor, a compass, and your off road vehicle. Starting in Lake Tahoe area, you go really far over varied terrain for seven days almost all the way to Mexico and you'll see some amazing sites you might never have seen on regular roads. Every night, when you make it back to the final checkpoint, you'll come home to a meal prepared by a Michelin star rated chef, the comradery of other participants and you get to camp under the stars. Then you get to get up the next day at the crack of dawn, take down your tent, fill up on coffee and breakfast, get your map and figure out with your teammate where you're going to go next and get on the road. The event is called the Rebelle Rally and it was created solely for women by Emily Miller.

Shelby Stanger: I'm not totally sure how I met Emily, but if you're a fan of badass women in San Diego, you just end up knowing and meeting her. When Emily was younger, she spent a lot of time doing line sports, sports where you had to get from point A to B by either ski, mountain bike, or even racing triathlons. After college, she was working in sports medicine when the dot com world took off, and Emily ended up combining her two passions into a career in sports marketing event production and PR. She worked with everyone from the Tony Hawk Foundation, to Red Bull and motor sports companies like GM and Michelin. She also raced with one of the most famous off-road racers in the world. It's a sport for few women at the time were involved with. Emily's not one to talk a lot about herself, but I got her to tell us a little more about her background and why she created this unique event. Plus, we get into how you can find your own true north.

Emily Miller: So I was an off road driver, off-road racer and I raced for a guy named Rod Hall. He's one the most winning racers in the history of the sport and he had a General Motors factory team. He picked me to drive for him and he taught me everything, and it was an awesome experience. Everybody wanted the job that I was doing, but he believed in me.

Shelby Stanger: What were you doing before?

Emily Miller: Well, I had started my business and I was just working super hard and I met Rod at the National Automobile Museum. I had no idea who he was. And he started

following me around and wanted me to work on some projects with him, and then one day we were on our way to a meeting and he said, "I found my new driver," and I said, "Oh, who?" And he said, "You."

Shelby Stanger: Wow.

Emily Miller: And I thought he wanted me to just drive vehicles for GM and place them strategically for guerrilla marketing in front of the events I was doing. I had no idea he wanted me to drive for him. But I had such a love of cars and I had such a love of go fast line picking sports and I was a really hard worker, and so, he told me, he goes, "I can't teach you how to work hard, I can't teach you how to be competitive, but I can teach you how to drive a car off road." And it just... That's been my life. You work really hard and you try to do the right thing, you try to do a great job and you try to work well with others and windows open.

Shelby Stanger: So your background, you got into driving and navigation in off-road motor sports at a time where there wasn't a lot of females doing it. What was it like to be one of the only females in this sport? How did that shape you?

Emily Miller: It was interesting. I didn't mind because I've always been in a lot of spaces where sometimes I was one of the only or very few women in a space. You're in sports world and in sports marketing world, so it's predominantly male or it has been predominantly male so that didn't bother me as much, but I would always... I was definitely under a bigger microscope than other people. Some, I think, wanted to see me fail. It was a really great exercise in keeping your head down. I had a job to do. I had someone that I reported to, Rod, and I had to meet his expectations and filter all the other things out, which I think was a really cool learning lesson about get the clutter out of your mind and get the naysayers and - all the people putting you under the microscope don't matter.

Shelby Stanger: Do you have any stories of mistakes you made and how they changed your perspective?

Emily Miller: Oh yeah. I was driving in Baja, the only time I've never finished a race, and it was 4:00 AM in the morning. It was a gnarly fog storm and then the silt dust was caught up in the fog, and I was in a car I hadn't driven and I was put in at the last minute by my race boss. And I knew that we were coming up to an area that had been washed out by the hurricanes and I knew something wasn't quite right, but I hit this wash out that was covered in silt and you couldn't see it. And I hit this, what was like a foot and a half high straight squared off, felt like a cement ledge basically, and I ended twice.

Shelby Stanger: You what?

Emily Miller: I ended.

Shelby Stanger: What's that mean? Rolled?

Emily Miller: Rolled, hood over end-

Shelby Stanger: Holy cow.

Emily Miller: And then I barrel rolled and then I landed on my wheels going the opposite direction. And I looked over at my co-driver, I said, "You okay?" He said, "Yep." So I turned it around and I said, "Which way?" And I turned around, pointed it in the other direction and we kept going, and it was clear we had damage so we weren't going to be able to finish. And we were 11 hours ahead of the competition and we ended up being one of seven vehicles that rolled at that same spot. There were cars around us and people lying underneath them, and it was really tough. And we sat and waited for the team, it was for probably 20 hours, and it was rough. When you make a mistake driving, you don't blame anybody else. It is the driver's fault. And you just let down a team. And it was heartbreaking.

Emily Miller: I remember there was another race and I came across the finish line and they'd told me that I'd won. It was a gnarly race, crazy, super steep. And I got to the award ceremony the next day and I thought, "Oh wow, I'm really good," and I found out I lost by two seconds in an eight-hour race. And I went back and that was the best lesson because there's nothing like getting second place to... They say second's first loser. And it was a really funny, because I went back and I started adding up all those two seconds and all the things that I could've done differently. And there was about 13 minutes that I could have picked up by not wasting time, by making different decisions, et cetera. So when I thought I had won, I thought, "Oh, I'm so great," and then I found out I lost by two seconds. I learned more by losing by two seconds than I ever would have learned by winning. And it made me better.

Shelby Stanger: I was lucky enough to take a navigation course through the Rebelle Rally a couple of years ago. Their prerequisite was actually a navigation course at REI. So I mentioned on the show before that I have a terrible sense of direction. I've gotten lost in the same cross country race I was in second place, the girl out front was so far ahead, and I went the wrong way and ended up in third, not once, but literally two years in a row. So the thought of driving long distances without even a Thomas Guide, let alone my cell phone, well that was pretty daunting for me.

Shelby Stanger: So for this course I got a compass and a protractor. It's something I hadn't used since fifth grade. And I headed out to the desert outside of San Diego. The course was hosted by Emily and was set up like a mini Rebelle. We spent one day learning how to use our tools and the second day, putting our knowledge and our tools to test out on the road.

Shelby Stanger: Why and how did you come up with this idea?

Emily Miller: I have competed in a lot of events and I've also been an event producer, and when I was racing there were really no women racing, there very few, and I really wanted to create something that would be a badge of honor for women, designed for women to challenge their strengths but also their weaknesses. And I knew that if I opened it up to anyone we would fill up with men and we might have one team of women or two teams of women like I see in every other event that might be similar to this. So that's why I thought it was really important to give women an opportunity to push themselves. And what I hope is that through it we've created a world-class competition that they may want to keep coming back to. But if they don't, they take these skills and they go out into the world and use them to adventure, and push themselves, and try new things and see new things, and develop that confidence. I have men every day who call and say, "When are you going to do one like this format for men?"

Shelby Stanger: That's so funny. That's great.

Emily Miller: Which is great. The thing that gets concerning is that when I describe this event to men and women, men say, "Oh my gosh, where do I sign up?" Okay. Or, "I can't sign up. I want the women in my life to do this." But then the woman standing there so many times says, "Oh, I could never do that," and doubts herself or finds all the reasons no. Even when the men are encouraging them to say yes. And I want women to stop saying no, to stop thinking that they have to have all the answers and to be perfect at something before they ever try. So I started it because I wanted something for women and now I want to continue it because I think it's that important of an event for women to say yes to and then really dig down deep because it's hard and then see who they are on the other side.

Shelby Stanger: So can you talk about what a rally is for people who don't even know what we're talking about?

Emily Miller: Rallies don't have to be cars. It's just a multistage or a staged event. And our situation, it's a multi-day competition that is comprised of stages, and every stage is scored. And every stage, in our situation, is different. The course is different. It's not a race for speed. I think that's the most important thing for people to understand the differences is it's a competition for points. It's not who can drive the fastest to get to the finish line. So in our case, it's really a navigation rally. And it's eight days long, and seven days are scored. And we seal up their cell phones on what we call day zero, which is the unscored competition day. We take their phones, we take any GPS devices, we seal them up. These teams become so good and so in tune with their maps and the tools that they do have and the terrain, they just nail these checkpoints.

Shelby Stanger: So you drive from point A to point B and then you get to camp every night?

Emily Miller: Yes. And we cover... Like last year, we went up as high as 10,000 feet and down to sea level. And our coldest temperature was 17 degrees for two nights. And

our hottest temperature was about a hundred degrees. So it really teaches you not only about driving and navigation, it's all the little stuff.

Shelby Stanger: I love that you can't use your phone. I mean, it would freak me out not having my phone whenever my reception goes dead in LA and I have to get somewhere, I kind of freak out, but that's... I mean, we used to not have our GPS or our cell phones, and it's a really good lesson to be able to navigate and find your own way. And it's a great metaphor for life as well.

Emily Miller: It really is. And I see so many people relying more and more on these digital devices, and they're so incredible. So if you're skilled, these devices, our phones, our iPads, all these things are great tools. But in the hands of someone who lets those skills go away, it becomes a crutch.

Shelby Stanger: Your background is quite remarkable and you drove for years with Rod and then on your own, and now you have this Rebelle. What sort of gems of wisdom have you learned from driving? Because you drop them a lot, and I love them.

Emily Miller: Yeah, they usually come out pretty spontaneously. But I think a lot of them are one-liners that I've learned from Rod, which is to finish first you must first finish, and if it were easy everyone would do it. I think that helps me a lot because sometimes I think, especially today everybody wants success to happen easily, and it doesn't. It's kind of like life is a long haul. And another thing that's really cool about Rally, which is you have a driver and a navigator, and it really forces you to understand yourself and your weaknesses and strengths and to come to terms with your weaknesses because they will be very pronounced in a car sitting next to someone. So I think it made me better in my marriage. That's one thing. Another thing too is that you don't look in the rear view mirror. You can glance in the rear view mirror and you can keep it in perspective. But like Chris Woo, our tech director says, this is one of my favorite quotes, which is "There's a reason why the windshield is bigger than the rear view mirror."

Shelby Stanger: Oh, I love that.

Emily Miller: Yeah, that's one of my favorites.

Shelby Stanger: I struggle with looking back and having regret sometimes on decisions, and that is just such a waste of time and such a cluster for my brain. I mean, looking ahead is really the only thing you can do. Once you make a decision, you just go.

Emily Miller: Yeah.

Shelby Stanger: And yeah, driving, you have to or you can crash.

Emily Miller: And there are also things like you don't just look right at the front of your hood, you look down the road. You look way down the road and you put your eyes on the next thing that is going to change what you're doing and you make decisions

and you make quick decisions because by the time you've hit that point, you're already in the middle of it. You can't change. And if you change right in the middle of it... So it's kind of talking... That is such a good metaphor for look ahead and make a plan. And then push your eyes back down the road and keep looking ahead, but also learn from your mistakes.

Emily Miller: I had a really great lesson from a very famous guy in off road racing, and he said, "Hey," and he's built two empires and he said, "Hey, I've gone bankrupt. I've been at the bottom." He said, "The most important lesson is that, and it applies to racing, is if you make a mistake, figure out why you made that mistake and don't make it again." If you keep making that mistake, that's when you get in trouble. And that's the same thing in driving, and rally, and competing. You have to learn from your mistakes and you have to do the hard work to fix it so you don't keep making that mistake.

Shelby Stanger: Yeah. I think the biggest thing you taught me when we did the navigation course was I was really scared because I don't have a great sense of direction naturally, but there was this metaphor in learning navigation about finding your true north. And I'm just really curious what that means for you and what your true north is and how finding this event allowed you to find your own true north.

Emily Miller: Yeah. Gosh. For one thing, I lost my brother and he was my... I idolized my brother. He was the ultimate extreme sports athlete-

Shelby Stanger: How old were you?

Emily Miller: I was about 30 when I lost my brother. At that moment, I was working in San Francisco and I ended up spending a year commuting back and forth to be there for the kids. And my nine-year-old nephew pulled me aside one day on a bike ride and said, "Hey, you always said you're going to be there for us and you're here but you're not here. What are you going to do?" And at that moment I went back to San Francisco and I packed up my bags and I left and I went back to Colorado. And there are these moments in life that are pretty crystallizing and they're not... When you graduate from college or when you get married, they're more subtle than that, that I think really are profound and you have that decision. And knowing your compass or your true north helps you make a decision even when that decision is really hard.

Emily Miller: You spend your life doing all these crazy things, and crazy sports, and great experiences, and amazing adventures. But also what you're doing over that time is you're having experiences that really define who you are and the decisions you make. And when I decided to do the Rebelle, it was really scary. I had to change, I had to let go of clients, I had to take this stable life that I had, but I knew I had to do it. I knew I had to do it. And I knew I had to do it because the Rebelle is the culmination of all the things I've done in life physically, and then also all the cool things that happen metaphorically, and put it into one amazing package and event that would change the world by making a profound impact

on women. Because I'm not here to tell women what the Rebelle should be. I'm just here to give them a platform.

Shelby Stanger: This is interesting. There's so many metaphors between... When I took the navigation course and I had to figure out what true north was, which is hard for me if I'm not near a mountain or I'm not near the ocean, if I'm near the ocean I know where west is because we live in California, it's easy, but if I'm not, it's really challenging for me. But once you know, then you know the other ways that you need to go or you know where you don't need to go. So you know where to say yes and where you know to say no.

Emily Miller: Well, it's a grounding feeling. I think when you know true north, physically, you feel grounded and you feel safe. I know where I am. And it's the same metaphorically, when you don't know where you are and you don't what decision to make because you have nothing to guide you, that's why you have to have experiences and people and things in your life that really ground you and really are your compass. It's pretty profound.

Emily Miller: And honestly, there are days I wake up and I go, "I can't do this. This is too hard," and then I get a call from someone who's done the Rebelle and she says exactly the reason why I started it, and I can hear myself in her. I can hear myself thinking, "Wow, this has made me a better team player. It's made me a better wife. It's maybe better at work. I know clearly when I'm going the right direction and I also know clearly when I'm screwing up." And those calls are my reassurance that the Rebelle is the right thing. And this makes me happy, but seeing what it does for other people makes me feel purpose.

Shelby Stanger: Any advice at people who are a little lost? A lot of people are lost right now, they want to do something a little wild, they want to find their own true north, where do you start?

Emily Miller: If you're feeling lost and you really don't know what to do, I think what you have to do is you have to go out in nature and you have to turn off your cell phone. And you need to take some real time in quiet away from the clutter and away from all the artificialness of the urban and the messages that we're getting bombarded with, and you need to find your own message. And I think one of the best ways to do that is out in the middle of nowhere. I think that there is nothing better than nature, and the wind, and the sun, or the rain, and the clouds, and the dirt, and no cell phone, no marketing, and spend some quiet time alone. You owe it to yourself to get away from the noise and to find your own direction.

Shelby Stanger: When we come back, we'll hear from some Rebelle rally participants about why events like this, especially ones designed just for woman and designed to get you out of your comfort zone, matter.

Shelby Stanger: I'm a big base layer fan, especially when temperatures drop and I need to go for an early morning run. This is why I was excited Smartwool released new intraknit technology for base layers this season. The company basically took 25 years of knitting expertise and combined it with brand new technologies to create 3D knit garments. They're designed to give wearers complete freedom and high intensity activities. What I like best is their specific ventilation and insulation zones, which keeps your body temp stable and articulated flex zone so you can basically move freely in areas like your elbows and knees without your base layers bunching up or restricting you. I also like that they're made with virtually zero waste production, using the finest responsibly sourced Merino wool that's super soft and feels good. They're ideal for high intensity activities where you move between extreme exertion and rests. Activities like running, hiking and skiing, and even snowboarding. You can buy the new Smartwool intraknit based layers exclusively at rei.com through October. Just search Smartwool to find the product.

Shelby Stanger: The whole event sounds pretty bad ass, a bunch of adventurous women driving through the desert and on mountains using their limited tools to figure out where they're going next. I wanted to talk to some past participants about why events like this matter and why learning skills used in the Rebelle help them in the real world. I talked to a lot of women who compete in the Rebelle and they come from all walks of life and backgrounds. One woman I spoke with said after doing the Rebelle, which she was really scared to do because she had to take off so much work, she said when she came back to work, her boss gave her a promotion. And all these people who didn't really know what she was like in person at work, they just looked at her in a whole new light. They thought she was awesome.

Shelby Stanger: Others said it totally improved their relationships at home, some got out of toxic relationships, others started businesses. They all came back with this amazing sense of confidence about them. Jo Hannah Hoehn is a repeat Rebeller. Jo Hannah works at a Jaguar and Land Rover car dealership, so she knows a little bit about the off road capabilities of some of the Land Rovers, but in real life most people drive their Land Rovers to the grocery store and back and never get to put them to the test. Jo Hannah wanted to test the vehicle herself in all kinds of conditions over a longer period than just taking it to a track, plus she wanted a physical and mental challenge for herself.

Shelby Stanger: So why did you actually sign up?

Jo Hannah Hoehn: I signed up, number one, because I love Emily and I admire her and I wanted to support this event, but personally just because it's a challenge on every level, physically challenging, mentally challenging, emotionally challenging. And it's bizarre because you know you're going to go through it and be torn down, but for some reason I keep going back.

Shelby Stanger: What were the hardest skills to learn? Was it the navigation or was it the driving or was it just camping or dealing with everything?

Jo Hannah Hoehn: The navigation is the hardest part to learn. It takes a lot of getting used to and it's still the type of thing that no matter how many times you practice, you still never feel like you've mastered it. The driving is hard, but you can at least feel yourself getting better at it. The navigation, sometimes you think you've made all this progress and then you completely misjudge a checkpoint and feel like you have no idea what you're doing.

Shelby Stanger: So when you were done with the first rally, you must have changed a little bit. How did you change and how did you come back different?

Jo Hannah Hoehn: I noticed after the rally there were certain things that I didn't give up on like in my work that I, looking back before the rally, would have given up sooner.

Shelby Stanger: Why are you coming back and why do you recommend it to so many people?

Jo Hannah Hoehn: I recommend it because you will go away with something no matter what place you end up in and no matter what your rally is because everyone's rally's different and everyone's goals are different. But everyone is going to take something away from it.

Shelby Stanger: What was your goal and what did you take away from it?

Jo Hannah Hoehn: I take away something different every year. I think at this point it's very humbling because even though when you think you're getting more accomplished and better, sometimes you just still get it handed to you and it's a good lesson in humility and also a good lesson in the nature of the competition. Emily always says it's not the people that have really, really good days and highs and lows, that it's the people that ride the middle, and that's been the most difficult thing for me and my navigator because we'll have super good days and then super bad days. And it's the lack of consistency that's been our greatest challenge.

Shelby Stanger: The fact that it's all women, how does that add to the element of special-ness in this whole event?

Jo Hannah Hoehn: It's just really cool to see how each person got there. And it's not just women who have grown up around the off road world, it's people coming from every walk of life. I think all the women sort of immediately get the intent of the event in a way that maybe men wouldn't immediately get-

Shelby Stanger: Because it's not a race.

Jo Hannah Hoehn: Yeah, it's not a race and it's extremely competitive. But it's a long game and it's a strategic game, and it's also a game where you support other teams.

Shelby Stanger: So Emily talks a lot about finding your true north, did you, after this event, get more clear on your own true north?

Jo Hannah Hoehn: Yeah. I think for me it wasn't finding my true north, it was more sticking to my true north.

Shelby Stanger: You don't need a lot of tools in life, but if you have a few good ones and you know how to use them, you'll be able to your own way and you'll start to gain confidence. So whether it's knowing you can get from point A to B, or to the top of a mountain peak, that confidence, it will seep into other parts of your life.

Shelby Stanger: After I did the Rebelle Rally course, my phone died on the way home. I knew though that if I headed west where the sun was setting, I'd get there, but this is why I love adventure and events like this. And I love adventures that force us to unplug. They help us understand that we can do more than we think we're capable of doing if we use the tools we have. I love adventures that push us toward our own true north.

Shelby Stanger: Thank you to Emily Miller for creating the Rebelle Rally, for inviting me to tag along on some stops and some events and trainings. The Rebelle Rally partners with Tread Lightly goes through extensive permitting with the Bureau of Land Management and is big on giving back and teaching people to respect the land. Thank you to Jo Hannah Hoehn for sharing your experiences with me. You can watch all the women compete at the Rebelle Rally October 10th through the 18th. And you can literally follow them live at rebelalerally.com. That's R-E-B-E-L-L-E R-A-L-L-y.com.

Shelby Stanger: This podcast is produced by REI with the help from Annie Fassler and Chelsea Davis. Tune in the week after next to hear from my favorite all time running author Chris McDougall. He's coming back to share about his experience running with donkeys. He learned a lot about animals and a lot about himself and about humanity as well. You're going to love this podcast. It's probably one of the funniest ones I've recorded yet. As always, I appreciate when you subscribe, when you tell 10 friends or 10,000 friends about this podcast, and when you rate and review the show wherever you listen. I love reading your reviews, they're awesome and they mean a ton to me. Remember, wherever you are, some of the best adventures often happen when you follow your wildest ideas.