
SLINGS
ERA V1
132

QUEEN of AIR & SEA

Big Air kiteboarder Michaela Pilkenton fosters change in wind sports worldwide.

By **Erin Morrison** Photos by **Max Unkrich**



Michaela Pilkenton rides through the surf off the coast of Florence, Oregon.

On a clear November day, the wind roars down the Columbia River Gorge at 40 knots, whipping up whitecaps and sending anything unsecured downriver. It's cold, loud, and relentless, but people are not hiding from the wind — they're playing in it.

The deep bass of house music throbs through the speakers of Michaela Pilkenton's dark gray Jeep Wrangler. The back seat is full of nondescript black bags filled with multicolored kites, ranging from seven to nine meters in length, covered by boards that look like a cross between a snowboard and a wakeboard. Wetsuits and down-fabric ponchos occupy all remaining space, making it impossible to see out the back window. Her wife, Kimmy Gustafson, occupies the passenger seat, her long, dark, wavy hair held back by a green trucker's hat, creating a curtain over her face as she bends over her phone. As the Jeep crests a hill, Mount Adams appears. Gustafson looks up and, with Pilkenton, catcalls the mountain, which reveals a fresh snow-clad look.

"Don't look at the wind," says Gustafson from the passenger seat, still scrolling on her phone.

"I'm looking anyway," shoots back Pilkenton, already lifting her phone at the stoplight. Her eyes squint as she quickly scans over a complex-looking graph. Crossing the river into Washington state, the car pulls into the East Point Kite Beach parking lot. Above the churning river, flashes of color streak across the sky, and crescent sails trace arcs over the water. Along the river itself, the triangular rainbow sails of wind surfers and kiteboarders weave around each other like dancers.

Most of the tiny figures stay close to the water, but one, a single green and black sail with an orange S, launches its rider into the air, twisting 50 feet above the surface. Politely disagreeing with gravity, the rider kicks her legs out sideways and grips the board as she descends, before skimming back across the water, spraying foam in her wake.

Hood River is the windsurfing capital of the world and a black diamond in difficulty for any brave windsport athlete. Wedged between the cold Pacific Ocean and the hot desert of Eastern Oregon, the Gorge is a natural wind tunnel. Heat rises in the desert, pressure drops, and the cooler marine air blasts inland to fill the void. By summer and well into fall, the river becomes a gathering place for the world's best wind athletes.

Pilkenton made a goal for herself this year: prove it's possible to kiteboard every month in Oregon. As long as the combined temperature of the air and water is at least 100 degrees Fahrenheit, she's open to heading out. Anything colder and she risks hypothermia. Today, she is shooting footage for her November YouTube video, and it's a rare day when the water is warmer than the air.

Out on the river, she holds a GoPro between her teeth to give a true first-person perspective of what it's like to rise, twist, and free-fall through tricks only four



other kiteboarders have been able to land. When she's satisfied with the footage, Pilkenton shoves the camera into her five-millimeter wetsuit and expertly weaves through the other kitesurfers before catapulting skyward.

A barge comes down the river, and Pilkenton beelines for it.

"She's thinking about something," says Gustafson.

Seconds later, Pilkenton is back in the air, racing the ship downriver. Gustafson whoops from the shore, hair whipping around madly by the relentless gusts while she snaps photos with her camera.

Kiteboarding may not have the largest global following, but Pilkenton has made a large impact as a professional athlete, mentor, changemaker, film festival founder, and artist. With waist-length blonde hair, a small frame, and a laid-back surfer vibe, Pilkenton has been described as having more stoke per pound than anyone else. Spending her professional career fighting for women to have a place in the community, Pilkenton looks to take on the next phase in her career, kiting in the Oregon backcountry.

Pilkenton, the 2024 Association of Wind and Water Sports Industry Female Kiteboarder of the Year, did not grow up dreaming of surf and sails. Raised in Sherwood, Oregon, she was a competitive figure skater by 5, intent on chasing Olympic ambitions. In high school, she traded in her skates for soccer cleats and later a snowboard. Still searching for the right fit, she started down the path of becoming a professional skier and mountaineer.

Working as a camp counselor in 2016 to save money for a mountaineering course in Alaska, Pilkenton turned to her mentor, Dan Crowe, for ideas on staying active. An amateur kiteboarder, Crowe directs the University of Oregon Outdoor Pursuits Program, which teaches students how to explore the backcountry safely. He suggested Pilkenton try kiteboarding.

"Go and see these people down at Floras Lake," explained Crowe. He quickly sketched out a map showing how to get there from Highway 101. "That's the place to learn. You should go take a lesson."

Arriving at Floras Lake Windsports on Oregon's southern coast, Pilkenton announced, "I'm here to learn how to kiteboard."

She had a vision: she would use kiteboarding to make her a better skier. By turning a sail into a ski lift, she could speedily reach all the best snow at the top of a mountain that would normally take hours of backcountry traversing to reach.

The instructors asked if she'd booked a lesson.

"This is all I've got," said Pilkenton, holding up the map Crowe made.

They squeezed her in. Day one of learning to kiteboard is spent on land with the equipment, studying proper body positions and learning when to jump. Students usually do not get on the water, but Pilkenton talked her way onto the lake after a brief morning lesson.

The instructors knew they had just met someone special. Reed Brady, co-owner of Floras Lake windsports, mentored and befriended Pilkenton, letting her use the equipment free of charge.

"She just picked it up so quick," says Brady. "It was always like the sensei and the padawan. Michaela was always trying to chase me."

Pilkenton stumbled across one of the fastest-growing sports in the world, and she was ready to chart the undiscovered. There weren't many women kiteboarders in the late 2010's. She spent the summer of 2017 at Floras Lake and entered the kite park division, which uses ramps and rails to perform tricks similar to those in skateparks. It didn't stick.

One day, while sitting at Floras Lake with Brady, she told him it was "a bummer women didn't do Big Air."

"Bull fucking shit," said Brady, slapping down a copy of *Kite Mag* with a cover photo of Angely Bouillot. "Women absolutely do Big Air. Now go learn kite loops."

Big Air, one of seven kiteboarding disciplines, mixes freestyle and height, sending athletes soaring up to 100 feet in the air with winds strong enough to knock people off their feet. Crowe recalls being out on the water with Pilkenton, watching her jump over his kite, twisting in circles, and spinning her board in her hands in the process.

But before she started soaring over riders, Pilkenton had to learn how to crash and burn.

"It's like hitting concrete sometimes," says Pilkenton. "The gear back then wasn't made for it, so we crashed a lot."

But the biggest thing she crashed into was a glass ceiling.

Currently, Big Air is the most popular kiteboarding event recognized by viewers, but women were not always included. The modern style of Big Air kiteboarding began in 2003. At a freestyle competition, Dutch kiteboarder Ruben Lenten debuted the Megaloop, a full rotation of the kite in the air before the rider lands back on the water. Red Bull is the main sponsor for high-profile kiteboarding competitions, and in 2013, they brought back the King of the Air competition.

Women's divisions in kiteboarding competitions began in the late 2010s. Women wanted a place within Big Air, where men already had one. With over a decade of experience, passion wasn't enough to close the gap and early competitions proved difficult.

"They'd send us out when the wind was too light or dangerous," says Pilkenton. "At one event in Cape Town, the conditions were bad enough we finally said, 'We're not going.' It was one of the first times we all banded together. That's when things started to change."

Right as the women's movement in Big Air was gaining momentum, COVID sent them back to square one. Competitions paused as the world slowed to a crawl. Pilkenton and her family, living in Australia at the time, left the country the day before the borders closed and returned to Oregon with no plan. Brady called up Pilkenton and offered her a job teaching at Floras Lake from July to September in 2020. She and Gustafson lived in a tiny trailer, owned by the Brady brothers, at the Boice-Cope Park campground. Equipped with a single bed and a bathroom that didn't work, they rigged a camp kitchen under a pop-up canopy on the back of the trailer while their then 7-year-old son, Lincoln, slept in the back seat of the Jeep.

"It was appalling," says Brady. "I just said, 'Oh my god. I don't know how you guys are doing that.' I don't even think they were running the fridge. But they were happy as clams."

"I have very fond memories of that summer. I feel like we had the least we've ever had and we just had the best time," says Pilkenton.

Pilkenton spent every day on the water, learning new tricks and teaching classes. Constantly in open-air environments, Lincoln spent all day equipped with a walkie-talkie and a packed lunch, running around with the other kids staying in the campground. While teaching proved fulfilling, Pilkenton never swayed from competing.

Coming out of the pandemic lockdown, Pilkenton was ready to bring women to the professional kiteboarding stage. In 2022, Red Bull still had no women's divisions in any of its three major kiteboarding competitions. Frustrated, Pilkenton tried rallying other riders to make a statement. The plan was to have a large group of female athletes ride through the competition zone before the men's heats to show that, regardless of gender, their technical skills could speak for themselves.

"It wasn't a riot," says Pilkenton, "just a way to show we were ready."

The day before the competition, Pilkenton called it off. Only three other female riders were willing to make a public statement, and Pilkenton resigned herself to finding other ways to spur action after the competition. However, word spread fast. Standing in a coffee shop the morning before the King of the Air event, the head organizer of Red Bull South Africa called her and asked if she planned to start a riot.

That conversation opened the door. Soon after, she was invited to the table, with the goal to include women in future events. In 2024, Red Bull introduced its first women's Big Air competition: Queen of the Air.

Today, the number of female Big Air athletes remains small and scattered. Pilkenton often trains with some of the most experienced wind athletes in Hood River. Still, she only gets to compete against other women at her level when she travels to places like South Africa or Maui.

"For me, skiing and those sports had become really lonely," says Pilkenton. "Kiting was the way I could be on the water with my friends at my level and theirs. We can share the same wind."

The sport isn't without its risks. The highest winds Pilkenton has ever competed in were 55 knots, almost 65 miles per hour, and she has no limit. Pilkenton tries to ride in almost anything. But there was a time when she nearly called it quits.

On September 27, 2022, Pilkenton had just finished a day riding Naish Beach on the North Shore of Maui with close friends and fellow kiters Zach Draper and Avery Nardone. At some point in the afternoon, Nardone headed further up the shore to Kite Beach, where she had met up with Karlie Thoma and the eight-time world champion female Big Air kiteboarder, Mikaili Sol.

As the sun started to set, Pilkenton returned to shore before the wind shifted and began blowing over the land, heading east. Nardone was the last one out on the water when she pulled up in between the rock jetties of Naish Beach, excited to show off the tips she picked up from Thoma and Sol.

Nardone threw herself into the biggest kite loop Pilkenton had ever seen. About 30 feet in the air, the kite flew in front of her, stalling all the momentum and dropping her out of the air. With her kite at the wrong angle, there was nothing to slow the fall. She hit the water. Pilkenton and Draper stood transfixed, unable to react until blood-curdling screams filled the silence.

The force of the landing broke both Nardone's tibia and fibula, pushing the bone through the squishy flesh of her leg and the rigid carbon fiber of her board. Gustafson was loading up gear with a friend when she heard the screams from the parking lot. As Nardone dragged herself to shore, the small group of friends immediately jumped into action. Pilkenton called 911 and ran out to the access road to lead first responders to Nardone. Draper took off his white T-shirt and tried to wrap the pieces of Nardone's leg back together while Gustafson held Nardone down. Within minutes, the shirt was deep red and dripping blood onto the sand, all the while Nardone's screams filled the rapidly descending night.

It was the first time Pilkenton saw up close what a life-altering injury from her sport looked like. She exited the beach shaken, questioning her goals tied to the sport. Six weeks with an extreme sports performance coach and two years of heavy training to regain her confidence later, the guttural screams have stayed with Pilkenton. Now, anytime she hears someone yell on the water, her body jolts with a fight-or-flight response.

"I think that there are a lot of athletes, especially in the extreme sports world, that don't ever get faced with the consequences of the decisions they're making, until it's too late," says Pilkenton. "And there I was, staring down the consequences of the decisions I make right in the face."

This past summer, Pilkenton had her own major crash. Her kite lines tangled, preventing her from releasing the safety. She "death looped," her kite spun in one direction, line tension could not be released, and she hit the water hard on her side.

Most days when Pilkenton is out on the water, Gustafson watches nearby. Sitting on the banks of the Columbia or staring out the Jeep's front window with the heat cranked up, now it's hard for Gustafson to lose the image of Pilkenton death looping.

"I thought she was gonna die," says Gustafson.

Luckily, her impact vest saved her ribs from breaking, which is a common injury in the sport, and she was only left with bruises. Six weeks of rest later, Pilkenton's passion did not waver. The tools she learned from the performance coach after Nardone's crash helped her get back out on the water.

As one of the most recognizable faces in the sport and one of Hood River's local legends, Pilkenton's natural tendency toward shyness and doubt is overruled by her passion for building community. Onshore, she constantly chats with other riders as they inflate their kites, high-fiving onlookers who recognize her, and graciously accepting compliments when people fawn over the difficulty of the maneuvers she pulls off on the water.

"I'm not famous. Just well known in a niche sport," says Pilkenton. "I'm also the queen of imposter syndrome."

Her wife is the other side of that coin. Unafraid to back down, Gustafson says it as she sees it, jumping in and firmly pushing Pilkenton to give herself credit instead of selling herself short. But the one area Pilkenton will never let imposter syndrome bleed into is her queerness.

"Being queer emboldens her," says Gustafson.

Pilkenton was "pleasantly surprised" by how accepting windsport athletes were overall upon entering the community until a photo of Pilkenton competing with a pride flag and shirt was posted in a worldwide kiteboarding group on Facebook, which was the first time she ever experienced backlash. Gustafson recalls that her wife "got eaten alive" in the comment section with social media users claiming sexuality should be kept out of sport.

Rather than retreat from the anonymous jabs sent over the opaque battlefield of the internet, Pilkenton responded by creating something positive. In 2023, inspired by the ski films she loves and the Banff Film Festival, she founded the Wild Wind Film Fest, a showcase for wind sport films.

"There wasn't a space for that in kiteboarding," says Pilkenton. "So I made one."

Her goal is simple: make wind sports more visible and build a community across the wind sports industry. But that's easier said than done. In just three months, she and Gustafson turned the idea into a real festival with showings in 10 cities worldwide. Within the first 48 hours, they sold out every show. With a clear audience and desire for the content, the only obstacle is having enough films.

"You ask ten people in Portland if they know what kiteboarding is, and they'll all stare at you blankly," says Pilkenton. "It's huge in Europe, but here, not so much. It's what I love, and I want people to see it."



With a lack of entries for the 2025 festival, Pilkenton and Gustafson made their own film inspired by the unharnessed wind in the mountains. Through trial and error with wind prediction, editing, drones, and handheld cameras, they single-handedly produced Thin Air, however, this year the couple made the hard decision to cancel the festival.

"Kimmy [Gustafson] and I's word for the year is ease," says Pilkenton. "You need to know what you want to let go and what you want to force."

Like many of her other experiences in the sport, when Pilkenton approaches a wall, she pivots. Her most recent endeavor is to break new ground in adventure kiting. Armed with a 1980s guidebook, intimate knowledge of wind prediction, and extensive backcountry skills, she's started conquering alpine lakes across Oregon. Proving that wherever there is wind and water, there is a space for her sport.

"It's hard to say what the future holds, but I want to get people stoked on kiting and get paid to do that," says Pilkenton.

Pilkenton isn't just riding the wind, she's changing its direction.

