

# Mid-Am Comrades Achieve Peak Performance

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By Ron Driscoll, USGA

In the fall of 2013, as Lisa McGill and LeeAnn Lewis drove from Philadelphia to the U.S. Women's Mid-Amateur Championship in Asheville, N.C., McGill listened as Lewis attempted to turn the tables on her good friend.

The kindred spirits got to know each other in the late 1980s through golf. A mutual friend got wind of McGill's planned hiking tour of Australia and New Zealand in 1990 and suggested that Lewis join the group. Twenty-five years later, their adventure-travel partnership has taken them from Yellowstone National Park to Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa to Machu Picchu in Peru. As they drove to North Carolina three years ago, Lewis was pitching McGill on the ultimate destination: Mount Everest.

"Most of the time, it's Lisa's idea – she's the planner," said Lewis, of Great River, N.Y. "I told her, I've done every trip you've ever asked, and this is the only thing I'm asking. It's a trip I've wanted to do for 20 years."

McGill, of Philadelphia, joked about her predicament on the car ride, in which she finally acquiesced to Lewis's wishes.

"I had nowhere to run," she said. "My family thought it was crazy. After we decided to go, there was an earthquake in Nepal [in April 2015], and they said, 'So you're not going, right?' I said, I think I am... What are the odds of them having another earthquake?"

Lewis and McGill traveled to Nepal last September and reached their destination, the Mount Everest base camp, with a short trek above the camp to Kala Patthar, which at 18,300 feet provides a commanding view of the 29,029-foot Everest summit.

"I've never had delusions of climbing to the summit," said Lewis, "but I've always wanted to go there and see it, ever since reading 'Into Thin Air.'"

As the mother of two teenage daughters, McGill had the perfect perspective on going along with Lewis's once-in-a-lifetime goal.

“You know how you make your kids do something, and they fight you and fight you and then they end up liking it?” said McGill. “I went in not sure how it was going to be, but it was better than I could have imagined. Every time you rounded a corner, you saw more beauty. To me, this was the greatest of the three trips.”

Those three trips include Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, the highest peak in Africa; Machu Picchu, the 15th-century Inca citadel in Peru; and the Everest base camp. The duo climbed Kilimanjaro in 2011, then visited Machu Picchu in 2012, both at McGill’s behest.

“My dear friend Lizzy Larned – who is not a golfer – suggested Kilimanjaro as a way to celebrate her 50th birthday,” said McGill, who has competed in 32 USGA events and was a semifinalist in this championship in 2007. “She had attended a presentation in Utah by Dean Cardinale of World Wide Trekking, and I thought it sounded great.”

“When Lisa told me, I said, where is Kilimanjaro and what do I have to do?” joked Lewis. “I pretty much always say yes when Lisa plans an adventure. I looked into it a little bit more and said, OK, let’s give it a whirl.”

Cardinale’s company organizes several dozen trips of varying difficulty annually, and Lewis and McGill appreciate his guiding philosophy.

“There is some training involved, but the key is to get acclimated and to take your time,” said McGill, 57. “As Dean says, you don’t race up the mountain, you sneak up it.”

“Take Kilimanjaro – a lot of groups try to go to the summit in four days,” said Lewis, 53, who played golf at Rollins College and has won several match-play and stroke-play championships in Metro New York and Long Island. “We took five so we could acclimatize and do it successfully. Same thing with the Everest trip – I think we took 10 days to get to base camp. It’s challenging, but it’s a great adventure, and you’re sharing it with like-minded people.”

Not knowing each other well before their initial 1990 trip to Australia, McGill and Lewis made a point of rooming together at the North & South Women’s Amateur Championship in Village of Pinehurst, N.C.

“We figured we were going to be with each other all day, every day for a month, so we needed to be sure we could get along,” said Lewis. “We did the Milford Track [in New Zealand], went hiking in Tasmania, and we came back the best of friends.”

Their travels have not been completely without incident. Lewis recalled one trek in Alaska, when they left their cruise ship and found themselves on a cliff. “We could see the ship, but we weren’t backtracking properly and we had to be back on time,” she said. “I was a little stressed out, but I’m not sure Lisa even noticed. I don’t like unguided things.”

McGill remembered encountering fierce weather on their 2012 Machu Picchu adventure.

“That’s why they call it adventure travel, right?” she said. “The plan was to hike until lunchtime, then spend two hours hiking to the lake after lunch. But a cold front came through, and instead of stopping at the lake we had to continue over the Salkantay Pass or turn back. Nobody wanted to turn back, but it was snowing, and generally speaking, we weren’t prepared for it. It wasn’t like we weren’t going to make it, but it was a very long day and a little nerve-wracking.”

The companions take bumps in the road in stride, ever-ready for their next adventure.

“Lisa is the big-picture one who says we’re going to go on this grand adventure,” said Lewis. “And I’m like, we need to rent a car. We tend to complement each other really well.”

“I feel so lucky to have this one as my pal and as my travel mate,” said McGill of Lewis. “I don’t know that I’ve ever gotten mad at you. I might yell at you, but then you’d yell back, and then we’d laugh.”

Their families also laugh, although they occasionally shake their heads.

“My daughters [Sydney, 17, and Annie, 16] think it’s pretty great,” said McGill. “They want to do Kilimanjaro, for sure, although my husband [Jeff] and my parents thought I was crazy on the last one [Everest].”

“My husband [Murney] is very supportive, and my father [Bill Vogel] instilled in me that, if you have an opportunity, you should take it, because you may not get that opportunity ever again,” said Lewis. “I’ve really taken that to heart, maybe even to the extreme. When we come to USGA events, I say, what’s there to do here, because we may never be here again.”

“We love golf as much as anyone at these events, but these once-in-a-lifetime trips have been super special,” said McGill. “It’s fun when you have a great pal and get along so well. I’d say we have the travel spirit.”