

MacKenzie a winner after returning to golf from adventures

by Ed Zieralski

Adrenaline junkie and naturalist that he is, pro golfer Will MacKenzie seems out of place in a game where players work extremely hard to keep emotions and adrenaline in check.

But MacKenzie, 32, from Greenville, N.C., thrives on the PGA Tour despite the urge to paddle a kayak over Class V rapids, surf the closest reef, climb the nearest mountain or drop from a helicopter for some snowboarding on some fresh snow.

OUTDOORS TOUR - PGA tourist Will MacKenzie, playing at Torrey Pines, once earned his living running rapids. CNS photo by Jim Baird. MacKenzie, one of 13 first-time winners on the PGA Tour last year when he won the Reno-Tahoe Open, fascinated the media earlier this year with his story of how he quit golf for 10 years to pursue his own life's journey as an outdoorsman. This is a guy who was content to live out of his van, once going 30 days in Alaska without taking a shower.

"Golf has its own set of adrenaline rushes," MacKenzie said in a recent interview. "It's very demanding trying to hit a 4-iron 210 or 215 yards over some water to a green surrounded by bunkers. Golf is just a great balance of athleticism and mind. I do like to go fast on a snowboard and in a car, or anywhere, but you have to slow it all down out here. It's a balance, and it's a real character-building sport. But I've always liked things that force you to make the decision, and then it's on you."

When he was at Kapalua, Hawaii, last month for the season-opening Mercedes-Benz Championships, he surfed as much as he golfed. He talked of Hawaii's wonders, its surfing beaches, breaching whales and hiking trails, but when it came time to tee it up, he played well enough to tie for fourth. Thus far this year, despite missing the cut in the Buick Invitational at one of his favorite places, Torrey Pines, he has earned \$361,027 in five events, including a tie for 39th Sunday at the FBR Open in Phoenix.

Not bad for a one-time junior golf star from Greenville, N.C., who dropped the game in his sophomore year in high school. He cited burnout, but it was more than that. He'd found the natural world of hunting, fishing, skiing, kayaking and other things that gave him more joy than golf.

"I was a little bummed out because my summers were being taken up by golf," he said. "I burned out on golf sooner than later, and I think that's probably a blessing for me. If I had gone to college, who knows. I might be right where I am now, but I might have burned out in college and not be here."

Instead of college, MacKenzie followed I-40 to Montana, and at 19 he was living out of his van, doing odd jobs. He worked at a Taco Bell for a while. He washed dishes and then cooked at a restaurant. He was a

security guard. Soon, he was river guiding, and though he slept in his van, he had access to a nearby lodge for use of the hot tubs, showers and the like.

"I did a lot of sneaking around," he said.

In 1999 he returned to North Carolina and reassessed his life. He tried being an entrepreneur, importing 500 hammocks like the one he slept on for three months in Costa Rica during a surfing trip out of Jeff Spicoli's imagination. He tried selling the hammocks, but Carolinians like their Hatteras Hammocks better, and his business dream flopped.

The failed venture gave him time to think, and that led him to pursue golf again.

"I did a little three-month session in late 1999 to see if I sort of fell back in love with the game, which I did," he said.

MacKenzie credits the late Payne Stewart for inspiring him to get serious about golf again. MacKenzie always admired Stewart's originality, how he wore knickers and had a unique style. He said Stewart's performance at Pinehurst to win the 1999 U.S. Open brought him back to the game.

MacKenzie won on the mini tours, was named Player of the Year on the Hooters Tour in 2004 and earned his PGA Tour card that fall. He lost it the next year, but regained it at Q-School at the end of 2005. And last year, he sank a 10-foot birdie putt on the 72nd hole to win the Reno-Tahoe Open by a stroke and capture his first PGA Tour win and qualify for the Mercedes-Benz Championships.

These days he's balancing his love for the outdoors with his new career.

"I'm from North Carolina, and hunting is what we do," he said. "I spent 10 days a month in camouflage this winter. I shot a bunch of ducks, and when I'm not hunting, I'm in Florida in my boat fishing like a madman. I go to the fly rod, and we catch false albacore, what you call bonito out here, snook, redfish, whatever."

He's back, more centered and a lot more driven as a golfer. MacKenzie says this is what he wants to do.

"Oh yeah, this is where I'm meant to be, and I love the guys out here," he said. "It's just where I am in my life

right now, and I'm trying to embrace it and love it. I'm enjoying doing this and the challenge. It's huge.

"I know that this is a fleeting game and I'm not to the point that I feel I've got it wrapped up for a while," MacKenzie added. "I know that I've got to play great golf to stay out here. I'm just very blessed that I'm here. But I'm not like, wow, I've got out here. This is what I set out to do. This is where I planned on being. That's it. I planned on being here, and I want to stay here."

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