

Journeyman Downsizes His Life, Upgrades His Game

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Last Sunday in San Antonio, as Will MacKenzie played into contention at the Texas Open, he tried to keep thoughts of the Masters out of his head. He was tied for second after a final-round 70, and then

waited for the leader, Steven Bowditch, to finish.

MacKenzie, a 39-year-old PGA Tour journeyman, knew that a win would mean his first trip to Augusta National. But Bowditch, 30, won by a stroke, earning a berth in his first Masters.

“It’s a dream of mine, to play in the Masters, sure,” MacKenzie said two days later by phone from his home in Jupiter, Fla. “But I guess it’s a dream that’s going to have to wait at least a year.”

MacKenzie skipped this weekend’s Houston Open, where a victory would have secured his place in the season’s first major tournament.

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“It had been my plan all along to take this week off,” he said, “but I didn’t know I’d have come so close to getting into the Masters, and my hand is somewhat hot. But I’m sticking to my plan, and I’ve got huge weeks of golf coming up and I’m going to prepare for those. I’ve got a chance to play in other majors, and even though Augusta would be my favorite, I’m going to have to try to get into it next year somehow.”

MacKenzie is trying to add discipline and structure to his game. In 11th place in the FedEx Cup standings and second on the PGA Tour with five top-10 finishes, he has put together the best season of his career. He has earned \$1,782,250, which is more than \$600,000 better than his previous best money-winning season, 2007.

But after 2007, his earnings declined each year until he lost his PGA Tour card after the 2011 season. Playing on the Web.com Tour in 2012, he earned less than \$50,000.

“Until about six months ago, I was broke as a joke,” he said. “I was living in a \$2 million house with an epic view on the water in Jupiter and getting run dry. Living a PGA Tour lifestyle on Web.com money.

“I’m back to living in a little townhouse. It’s fine. It’s perfect. I’d like to upgrade just a little bit here in the future so my boys can have a yard to play in, but I need to be normal.”

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MacKenzie has rarely taken a normal path. Although he was a terrific junior golfer in Greenville, N.C., he quit playing seriously at 14 after missing two short putts that kept him from winning first-place trophies. He was a star soccer player and football place-kicker in high school but chose to be an action sports vagabond rather than stay at Lees-McRae College in the mountains of North Carolina. For five years, he lived out of a van, bouncing from ski destinations to surfing outposts and white-water kayaking hot spots. At one point, he lived in a snow cave in Alaska, he said, going 30 days without showering.

“It was a pretty soulful thing to do at the time,” MacKenzie said. “Except for the broken bones, bumps and bruises you get along the way from those types of sports.”

In 1999, while trying to heal, he watched on television as Payne Stewart won the United States Open at Pinehurst, and then went to the range to hit a bucket of golf balls. Six years later, he was on the PGA Tour, making hundreds of thousands of dollars. He married a swimsuit model, Alli Spencer, had two sons, Maverick and Nash, and seemed to be on his way.

“It’s almost like being a drug addict who has to go to the brink before they go to rehab,” MacKenzie said. “They almost have to die first. For me, it’s almost like I had to be broke to realize, well, I need to be smarter and think about my children’s future. I’m just hoping I make the right decisions this time with the money I’m making now.”

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MacKenzie credits much of his 2014 success to putting his life in order off the course. He and Alli are divorcing. When MacKenzie is not on tour, Maverick and Nash live with him full time.

“In 2010, Alli and Maverick went to 24 events with me,” MacKenzie said. “That was a huge undertaking, and it took its toll. I love my family more than anything in the world, but traveling around on the PGA Tour with toys and strollers and all that became unmanageable for me. I couldn’t be selfish, but that meant I couldn’t get the reps I needed to play well.

“This year, I think I’ll have the boys with me at five events, and I’ll have people there to help me.”

MacKenzie earned his way onto the PGA Tour last year through the Web.com Tour finals, which replaced the qualifying school last year, and he credited his coach, Jeff Leishman, who works out of the Dye Preserve in Jupiter, with helping him adopt what they both call “the plan.”

Leishman said: “Most of what we talk about is just repeating the same stuff. We have one thing for his putting. One thing for his pitching. One or two things for ball-striking. We agreed there’s not going to be a lot of indecision on the course. When we’re together, we check to see that everything is O.K.

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“There’s been no rebuilding of his golf swing. That wasn’t needed.”

Part of their plan is for proper rest, which is behind MacKenzie’s decision to pass on the last event that could have taken him to Augusta. MacKenzie, who is 84th in the world rankings, can rationalize.

“Last year, I felt like I was playing some pretty good golf,” MacKenzie said with a laugh, “and I think I was ranked No. 700 in the world. I would say to friends: ‘Man, I’ve got to be more like 400th, don’t I? Maybe 500th? Not 700th.’ Well, now I’m in the top 100, so something’s working. I’m licking my chops right now, ready to go higher, but I’m not going to change what’s working.”