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"I never had aspirations of playing professional golf, and to play it at the highest level, it's like a fairy tale. It doesn't seem real."

Tough competitor has tender spot for UA

• LEWIS, continued from 1D

clothes, nothing tight; everything was loose. She hid [the braces] all the time, because she was very conscious of it. She would never talk about it."

Lewis worked as hard at hiding her condition as she did at her golf game. The only people who knew she had scoliosis were her family members, her doctors and her closest friends.

"I hated every minute of it," Lewis says. "I didn't want anybody to know, which is kinda weird because now I'm talking about it on a public stage."

Lewis is exceptionally observant, the kind of golfer who relishes the opportunity to watch players with stronger aspects of the game than hers, and she's right to notice the irony. After spending her teen years trying to escape the brace, she has chosen to make it a critical component of her image.

At her personal website, the aptly-named stacysback.com, there are two X-rays of her spine. The first was taken after doctors realized that the years of back braces had not remedied the scoliosis, and that her spine was more twisted than ever.

The second X-ray was taken after she went through spinal surgery in 2003, which left her two inches taller, permanently carrying a rod and five screws, and uncertain if she would ever be able to play 18 holes again.

"I appreciate what I get to do every day" since the surgery, Lewis says. "I appreciate being able to work out, to putt, to hit balls. Coming back from surgery, a bad shot doesn't seem so bad anymore."

"It changed the way I look at a lot of things. Instead of having to go practice, I get to practice."

And that's the difference: Lewis gets to play golf. That's why she became the most-successful player in the history of the Arkansas women's golf program, why she has won five times (and counting) on the LPGA Tour, and why today she'll talk to anyone about the back braces she wore.

At 28, soon to be inducted as the youngest-ever member of the Arkansas Sports Hall of Fame, Lewis is comfortable sharing her battle with scoliosis. She's always happy to provide encouraging words to kids facing the condition, plenty of whom don't have much interest in golf but want to know that the diagnosis doesn't come with limits.

"The game of golf was almost taken away from her," Arkansas women's golf Coach Shauna Estes-Taylor says. "It gave her a renewed sense of passion for the game of golf. [Her life story] is pretty amazing."

DECENT EXPECTATIONS

Kelley Hester recruited Stacy Lewis for her first recruit at Arkansas.

The Razorbacks had finished last and next-to-last in the Southeastern Conference Championships in the two

years before Hester's arrival at Arkansas, so she knew the program needed an infusion of talent. At the same time, she had to be realistic about the caliber of player she could bring to Fayetteville.

"Stacy was not a physical specimen," Hester recalls. "She was not someone you look at and think, 'Man, one day that's going to be the LPGA Player of the Year.'"

Lewis had been a good golfer at The Woodlands High School, a contributor to three state championships, but never the best player on the team. She and her parents had sent her information to colleges around the country, but Lewis was small and her game lacked power, so she hadn't drawn much interest.

Like many colleges, Arkansas hadn't shown any enthusiasm for Lewis initially. Near the end of her junior year, Dale Lewis read that the Razorbacks had made a coaching change, and he told Stacy that she should reach out to Arkansas again.

Intrigued by the fact that Lewis sent a picture of herself wearing a Notre Dame hat, rather than one from the school whose attention she was trying to get, Hester quickly responded, inviting Lewis to visit Arkansas. By the time the Lewis family began the drive back to Texas, Stacy knew where she wanted to go.

"I had gone to two other places before that [Kansas State and Louisville], but it just felt right" at Arkansas, Lewis says. "I told my mom on the ride home, 'That's where I need to be.' Everything felt right there; it felt like home."

In most college golf tournaments, five players take the course for each team, with the top four scores counted. After Lewis signed with the Razorbacks in 2002, Hester

said she would "definitely help in the 3, 4, 5 area," but didn't imagine she would become Arkansas' top player.

Indeed, Hester says part of the reason she recruited Lewis was that she was an excellent student at her Texas high school, and thus eligible for a Border Scholarship, which is academics-based. Lewis didn't receive any golf scholarship money until 2004-05, her second year at Arkansas.

"She's so bright, but I really didn't know about her work ethic then," Hester says. "I really felt like she was not much a cornerstone, but a presenting player."

STAYING THE COURSE

Hester was hardly alone in her analysis of Lewis' potential.

"I was average" coming out of high school, Lewis says. "I was pretty little, didn't hit it far, and had kind of a hook."

The middle of three sisters, Lewis started golfing around age 8. She loved competing against her dad, a serious golfer in his own right who gave Stacy her fierce competitive nature, but she was plenty happy when her parents dropped her at the course after school and picked her up close to sundown.

Like her sisters, Lewis swam competitively as a kid, but when she got into high school and had to choose a single sport to play, she went with golf.

The Woodlands High School had a great girls golf team, with some 30 girls competing for five slots in tournaments. Stacy was usually a scoring player, but rarely the top one.

"She likes to play games and likes to win," Dale Lewis says. "It's not just golf; she liked to play basketball, swimming, card games; if anything was going on in the house, as

far as playing something, Stacy was involved."

Golf was more than a game to Stacy Lewis; it was her escape from the brace.

Just days before she signed with Arkansas, doctors told Lewis she was finished growing, and that she could at last shed the brace. Three months later, a checkup revealed that her spine had curved significantly.

Surgery was recommended. Lewis calls it "the worst day of my life." She worried that Arkansas might turn its back on her.

"[Hester] could have said 'The scholarship's off the table,' but she said, 'When's the surgery? I want to be there. You can red-shirt your first year.'"

"The whole university really took a chance on me, because there was no guarantee I would ever play golf again."

HOG FOR LIFE

Last summer, Lewis donated \$100,000 to the Arkansas women's golf program.

In doing so, she was the first former female athlete in Arkansas history to join the Razorback Foundation Century Club. The gift is earmarked to go toward the construction of a planned indoor facility at the Blessings Golf Course, the Razorbacks' home course.

"She's drawn tons of recognition to our program and university," Estes-Taylor says. "[Her donation] was just tremendous for our program."

When Lewis arrived on campus, she weighed less than 110 pounds, having lost 20 pounds post-surgery, much of it muscle. She wasn't cleared to carry more than five pounds for over six months, so her coaches made sure there was always someone to carry her books to her classes.

Meanwhile, she wasn't al-

lowed to touch a golf club for three months after the surgery, and for the next three, all she could do was chip and putt. So she worked with Estes-Taylor, then the assistant coach, as long as her back could stand the movement before retreating to the trainer's room and another lengthy ice session.

Many times, Lewis simply sat in a golf cart, talking with her coaches and studying her teammates.

"She really had to regain her flexibility," Hester says. "Her core strength was not very strong to begin with, but because of the way she gradually came back into it, she got stronger before she needed to swing, which kept her from developing bad habits."

After red-shirting the 2003-04 season, Lewis astonished people by recording five top-five finishes the next year, including three victories. She capped the season by winning the SEC individual title, and was the first National Golf Coaches Association All-American in the program's history.

Her success continued as a sophomore, but it wasn't until she won the NCAA individual title in 2007 that she began seriously considering a pro career. Until then, she had been planning to do "something in business."

The *ESPN the Magazine* Academic All-American could have turned pro after winning the NCAA title, having already earned her bachelor's degrees in accounting and finance, but felt she owed it to the university to stay one more year. She capped off her Razorback career with her second SEC title, and fourth coaches association All-American selection.

Later that year, she qualified for the 2009 LPGA Tour by winning its annual

qualifying tournament. She finished 2009 ranked 47th on the tour, was 34th at the end of 2010, and broke through in 2011, when she held off No. 1 world champion Yani Tseng and won the Kraft Nabisco Championship, one of the LPGA's majors.

She won four more times in 2012, reaching as high as No. 2 in the Women's World Golf Rankings. Hallett, her coach of three years, says her continued improvement is in large part due to her patience and intelligence.

"She's a dream student," Hallett says. "She's smart enough to take information in small bits, and then takes the time to get them right, to learn, practice and then play with them under pressure."

Lewis moved to south Florida a year and a half ago. She had remained in Fayetteville after graduating, but December and January, down months for the LPGA Tour, are when she needs to get in the most practice, and that's not prime golf time in Northwest Arkansas.

Still, the state and the university are never far from her mind. Her car has an Arkansas license plate frame, the driver in her bag is covered by a Razorback mascot, and wherever she plays, she's greeted by enthusiastic Arkansas fans.

She says it plainly: She feels incredible loyalty to the school, because it showed so much to her when she was at her lowest point.

"To think back, [10] years ago I was coming out of surgery, hurting just while walking around the house," she says. "It's hard for me to believe every day. I never had aspirations of playing professional golf, and to play it at the highest level, it's like a fairy tale. It doesn't seem real."

Ridley

• Continued from Page 1D comes from individuals, not from corporations."

Last year's Wall of Distinction banquet was something the foundation had been considering for years. It took the place of a children's festival, and its success allowed for a record amount of grant money to be awarded to Rogers teachers.

Grants were given in the final days of the 2011-12 school year, but this year they should be awarded earlier, because the Wall of Distinction banquet is being held earlier in the year. Tucker-Ridley says the event should receive a major boost because it is being assisted by the Rogers Early Risers Rotary.

Last year, Rotary surprised the foundation with a \$10,000 donation, and this year, Rotary members will be on the grant committee.

"We can make a bigger impact this year," because of the joining of forces, Tucker-Ridley says. "We're seeing a big trend for technology [in grant applications] — iPads,

apps, there were a lot more requests last year than in the past."

Tucker-Ridley came into the Rogers School District as a fifth-grader, when her family moved from Indiana. She graduated from Rogers High School and then the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. It was her former sixth-grade math teacher, Denny Higgins, who asked her to join the foundation.

"It was a great experience," Tucker-Ridley says of her education. "I had great teachers and great facilities."

There will be four people honored at this year's banquet: Joye Kelley, Cpl. Aaron Mankin, David Matthews and Virginia Movicnik. A video about each honoree will be shown, and their names will be added to the glass Wall of Distinction at Rogers High and Rogers Heritage High.

Tickets are available at the Rogers School District administration building, Tucker's Furniture and Appliance, and any Arvest Bank location in Rogers.

For more information about the Rogers Public Education Foundation, call (479) 381-0633.



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The Rogers Public Education Foundation raises money to supplement supplies and extracurricular activities in the Rogers School District. Angie Tucker-Ridley is the foundation's president.

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