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# *Journey to Everest, Part I:* An Idea Takes Flight

Text **Ron Courson, ATC, PT, NREMT-I; Mary Donahue, MEd, ATC, PT; and Mike Ferrara, PhD, ATC**

*\*Editor's Note: The first of this two-part series is a narrative account of three NATA members' journey to the Himalayas, as related by Mike Ferrara.*

It had all started fairly innocently one day. I had been traveling several times to Beijing and various parts of China for athletic training related activities in preparation for the '08 Olympics. I had always looked at the map and saw how close Everest was to China and started to think about going to Nepal.

Then one day, while eating at a local restaurant, I happened upon a former UGA volleyball coach, Steffi Legall, who had just returned from Nepal and trekking to Everest Base Camp. She described the beauty, the friendliness of the people and the adventure. Mind you, I am a city boy – born and bred in NYC – and had never planned such a trip, much less hiked into thin air. But after a couple more conversations with Steffi, I was hooked.

I was going to get to Everest Base Camp.



**Megan Ferrara, Dan Piccininni, Nick Ferrara, Mary Donahue, Dave Wharrie, Mike Ferrara and Ron Courson** meet with guide **Shyam** before starting their climb toward Everest Base Camp.

## Assembling the Trekking Team

Prior to the start of an athletic training class in Spring 2008, I mentioned I was thinking of trekking to Everest Base Camp (EBC to those in the know). I got a lot of blank stares and mumbblings.

But one student, Gina Woodward, said, "You should do it!" Then I mentioned it to Ron Courson and Mike Dillon, ATC, NREMT-I, prior to the start of our Spring Athletic Training Banquet, and they both listened politely.

Out of the blue two days later, Ron called. "I'm in!" he said. "Let me know what I need to do."

Mike Dillon wasn't able to go due to the baseball schedule. Ron and I decided if we were going to do this it would have to be in May '09.

Now the date was set!

Next my daughter Megan listened as I described the trip, and she decided to join the adventure. This was all happening so fast, within a matter of couple of weeks our count-down to Nepal had already begun. I started talking about it at the NATA Annual Meeting in St. Louis with Mary Donahue from Detroit; she signed on. Joe Picinnini, MSc, CAT(C), an athletic therapist from Canada who is an avid trek king and proved to be an invaluable resource during the planning phase of the trip. He was not able to join us; however, his son Dan and friend Dave Wharrie signed on. The last person to join the group was my son Nick.

Now we were a team of seven individuals going on an adventure of a lifetime.

## Goals and Dreams

Through e-mail correspondence, we each described what we wanted from the trek, and we contacted around 20 trekking companies. Very early in the process we decided we wanted a custom trekking tour because we wanted the flexibility of designing our own schedule – plus, most of the major companies had trekking expeditions in April and we couldn't leave until May.

We had also decided to go with a local Nepali company as a way of supporting the local economy, Above the Himalayan Trekking ([www.nepalguidetrek.com/index.php](http://www.nepalguidetrek.com/index.php)), mostly on the recommendation of Steffi, who used them.

We were impressed with Puru, the owner of the company. He was responsive and willing to design an itinerary that suited our varied interests and skills. We developed a conservative schedule, giving us plenty of time to acclimate to the altitude and minimize the possibility of getting acute mountain sickness. We would highly recommend them to anyone considering going to EBC and Nepal.

## Training and Preparation

In the months leading up to our departure, each of us trained to get us in top physical condition for the trek to EBC. From stair climbing to acclimatization hikes in the Rockies to high intensity aerobic training, we were all preparing physically for the challenge of EBC.

We learned all we could about the culture, the environment and the people.

Finally, after 12 months of planning and preparation, departure day was here!!

## Kathmandu

After traveling for close to 30 hours, we finally made it to Kathmandu. We were met at the airport by Puru and escorted to our hotel in the Thamel region of Kathmandu. This is the location where most foreign trekkers stay. Our first impression? "We're not in Kansas anymore."

The city of Kathmandu puts you into sensory overload. It was quite congested and smoggy, with monkeys sitting in the trees, skinny cows and mangy dogs roaming the streets, traffic swirling like crazy. Cars were all over the road, as lanes were immaterial and there were very few stoplights. Buses, car, motorcycles were buzzing all over the place.

However, in all the chaos, there seemed to be order and very few accidents even as cows and dogs would lazily cross the street or just lie down in the middle of the intersection. Life had its own rhythm, smells and sounds, and we were enjoying every minute of it.

## Scariest Flight in the World

We met first with Puru to review the itinerary and then with Shyam "Sam" Shahi, who would be our lead guide. The next day, we awoke at 5 a.m. for a 6:30 a.m. flight from Kathmandu to Lukla.

If you've never had the pleasure of this flight, let me assure you it is the scariest one in the world.

Sir Edmond Hillary built the airport in Lukla to eliminate 4-6 days of trekking in the low lands. He built the airport in this small village, but the runway was constructed into a cliff and was banked about 12 percent grade to slow the airplanes as they taxi to the terminal. The same strip is used for take-off, so the planes go downhill to build up speed for a good



liftoff. The entire runway spans no more than 1,700 feet.

We had watched videos of this flight and heard of the many crashes into the mountain.

So, we took off, white-knuckled, from Kathmandu in a little 18-seater and flew for about 40 minutes. The plane made two turns, then BANG! We landed hard, bounced up the

runway and stopped abruptly. We had arrived, ready to begin our trek.

In Lukla, we met our porters, Delaye, Bejaye and Chandra, who were truly amazing. We had outfitted ourselves with the latest and best equipment – yet they were walking in sneakers and jeans while carrying a 60-70 pound loads. We also met our assistant guide,



Ramesh Sapkota. Our group of seven had grown to a team of 12, and after all the months of planning and miles of travel, we were about to hit the trails.

*Next month: Part II: An Enchanted Land.*

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