She's reaching for new heights

Despite MS, Valencia woman to tackle Everest

By JOHN ENRIETTO Eagle Sports Editor

Maggie Schneider can't move mountains, but she can climb them - even with multiple sclerosis.

The 44-year-old Valencia woman was diagnosed with MS nine years ago. She woke up one morning with blind spots over her eyes and an MRI confirmed the diagnosis.

"My initial reaction was complete devastation," Schneider said. "I shut down. I figured my athletic life was over."

Her athletic life has been busier than most. A graduate of Banting High School in Ontario, Canada, Schneider competed in volleyball, basketball and badminton there.

That's right, badminton.

"It was a popular high school sport in Canada," she said. "I've always been an active person. I was president of student council and later got into camping, backpacking, rock climbing, ice fishing, road biking, scuba diving, down-hill skiing - you name it."

She has also climbed Mount Washington in New Hampshire and Mount Popocatepetl in Mexico, among other mountains.

Now she's planning to climb 17,500 feet to the base camp of Mount Everest, located in the Himalayas of southern Asia and considered the largest mountain in the world, in May despite constant numbness in her right leg.

By the mid-1990s, 4,000 people had attempted to climb Everest with 660 successfully reaching its summit. Another 140 died trying.

Schneider said the news that she had MS didn't shut her down long.

"Maybe a week or so," she said. "I am extremely blessed. I have wonderful friends and family and pretty strong faith."
"Being in good shape has benefited me. I've learned the the stronger you are, the better off you'll be. I'm staying as healthy and active as possible."

Schneider has thought about climbing Mount Everest for 11 years, since she climbed her first mountain. Her climb is scheduled for May 1 through 24 and her partner will be Will Cross, a Pine-Richland area man who eventually wants to climb the highest peak of each continent.

Both are members of the Explorers Club in Pittsburgh. Schneider works as an academic advisor in the College of Arts & Sciences at the University of Pittsburgh.

To prepare for the climb, Schneider goes to the gym at 7 a.m. five days a week, lifting weights Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and riding a stationary bike.

Schneider swims 20 laps each Tuesday and Thursday and walks the steps of Pitt's Cathedral of Learning - 37 flights of stairs - six times, twice a week.

Her trainer is Mark Voit, a triathlon coach whom she met at their church, the New Community Church of Cranberry Township.

"Mark has been behind my training program and has been a tremendous asset," Schneider said.

"Because of the numbness in my leg, I have to concentrate hard to feel my foot and be very aware of each movement. That can be a positive in mountaineering, though, because you have to be so precise with each foot placement. You can't be sloppy."

Schneider receives an injection once a week to help keep her disability under control.

"Having MS, I always fear getting worse," Schneider admitted. "The (shot) gives me peace of mind. Without it, I'd be a lot worse off."

While climbing Everest, Schneider will be carrying a daypack with her essentials. Porters and yaks will be carrying the other equipment during the three-week journey.

Schneider will be gone approximately 35 days, including 10 to 12 days of preparation, and the expedition will cost nearly $10,000.

Schneider competed in triathlons for eight years and has completed a 150-mile bike race.

Now, Mount Everest stands in front of her.

"I'll be ready," she promised.