

HIGH ON NATURE



UPHILL CHALLENGE: Lee Peh Gee (left) doing stair-climbing training with her Everest team-mates (in descending order) assistant team leader Sim Yi Hui, Joanne Soo, Lee Li Hui, Esther Tan and team leader Jane Lee.



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HAD anyone told Lee Peh Gee that she would be part of the first all-woman Singaporean team to scale Mount Everest when she grew up, she would have rolled her eyes in disbelief.

The 30-year-old army captain readily confesses that she was never a sports buff in her younger days.

She did dabble in track and field, but that was because there was an empty slot in her class' 4x100m relay team which had to be filled.

When she was young, she felt more at ease with an er-hu in her hand than a basketball or a badminton racket.

Lee says she was more "cultural" than sporty during her youth.

"I was very active in Chinese society and Chinese orchestra during my school days," she told *The New Paper*.

"I played liu-qin in primary school and er-hu in secondary school.

"I was never a sporty person. My ball sense is very bad. Anything that is round does not go together with me."

While she was by nature cultured, there was another side of her embraced Mother Nature.

Whenever her family went for overseas trips, they would choose farm stays over city tours.

She said: "I'm not sporty, but I'm a very outdoor person. I love nature."

"I guess my parents had a huge influence on me. As a kid, my parents used to take me and my younger brother for camping and trekking trips to Malaysia."

Joining the army proved to be a life-changing experience for her.

She said: "You can say that I became more sporty after I joined the army."

"I used to have a fear of the deep sea. So to overcome my fear, I took up scuba diving.

As a girl, all she wanted to do was to master the er-hu.

But come March next year, her goal will be to conquer the 8,848m-high Mount Everest.

That was one of many "great" things she decided to accomplish in life when she was 14 years old.

"I was inspired by one of those Chicken Soup For The Soul motivational books," said the bespectacled Lee.

"One day, the writer sat down and wrote down the list

of things he wanted to accomplish in life.

"It sounded like a good idea and I decided to follow suit."

For a start, she identified the places she wanted to visit.

She wanted to walk in the Sahara Desert, swim in the Amazon River and visit the Galapagos Islands, where Charles Darwin was inspired to write his monumental *Origin of the Species*.

Then, she wrote down the things she wanted to do.

Some of the less ambitious aims were bungee jumping and sky-diving, which she tried when she attended a technical mountaineering course in New Zealand many years ago.

A few years ago, Lee, who is single, spent 10 days in meditation at the Suan Mokh Temple in southern Thailand — another of her must-do things in life.

But it is the Everest assignment that will prove to be the toughest challenge to date.

She will attempt the monumental task with five others — team leader Jane Lee, assistant team leader Sim Yi Hui, Joanne Soo, Lee Li Hui and Esther Tan.

Over the last two years, the team have been training rigorously for the expedition.

Some of the mountains they have climbed so far are Mera Peak (5,476m) in Nepal, Erlang (3,454m) in Sichuan and Muztagh Ata (7,546m) along the China-Pakistan border.

Lee said: "Climbing a mountain has made me realise how fragile human life is. At the same time, it brings out the toughness in us to survive against the environment, facing our own fears and overcoming them."

Despite their busy schedules, they train up to three times a week.

GRUELLING ROUTINE

On Tuesdays, they meet in Orchard Road for endurance running.

On Thursdays, they climb a 30-storey HDB block in Tiong Bahru lugging backpacks weighing 15kg. They repeat this gruelling routine eight times.

On Saturdays, they trek for up to 10 hours in Bukit Timah Nature Reserve with 25kg of weight on their backs.

But those ordeals mean nothing to this group of iron-willed women.

Lee said: "This is not only a physical and mental challenge. Financially, it has been a huge strain, too."

"We need \$1.8 million for our expedition next year, but we are sponsored only by the Singapore Sports Council and the Singapore Council of



Women's Organisations. So far, most of our expeditions have been largely self-funded."

So what's next after Everest?

She said: "I will most likely try cavern diving or cave diving. I heard it's quite fun."

"My Everest team-mates and I are planning to set up a Singapore Women's Adventure Network to gather all the adventurous women in Singapore. We will also start a Women's Alpine Club for those who are interested in climbing and mountaineering."

Any takers out there?

◆ The Singapore Women's Everest Team 2008 can be contacted at

womenseverest@gmail.com.

HER TARGET: An album shot of Lee Peh Gee during her Mera Peak trek in May 2005. That's Mount Everest in the background.

picture | Joanne soo

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— Lee Peh Gee

Army helps me develop my leadership qualities

SHE graduated with a degree in hospitality and tourism management from the Nanyang Technological University.

But what is Lee Peh Gee doing in an army uniform?

She said: "You are not the first one who has asked me that question."

"A lot of my friends were shocked when I joined the army. Even my parents found it hard to believe."

"But I always knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to develop my leadership skills and I felt that this was the best job which allowed me to take up leadership positions."

It was her first job after graduation, and chances are it will be her last.

Due to confidentiality issues, she could not reveal her vocation.

But what she can reveal is that she has 60 men under her command.

Is it tough earning the respect of her subordinates?

She said: "I believe in doing the right things and doing things right. One way to earn the respect of others is to mean what you say."

"Of course, there are times where you have to make some unpopular decisions. But as long as you believe in them, you must stand by your decisions."

"Every day, I'm learning something new. The road of leadership is never ending."

Although Lee does not take the same Individual Physical Proficiency Test as the men, she tries to lead by example by obtaining the gold award in her yearly fitness test.

She said: "I can't claim that I'm the first to cross the finishing line, but at least I make sure that I'm not the last."

"I make it a point to maintain a certain level of fitness, not because I'm afraid that I may feel inferior to my men. It's for your own good that you keep fit and healthy."

— LIM HAN MING



pictures | dominic yip

IN COMMAND: Captain Lee Peh Gee (left) in uniform.