



# Giving Thanks

Despite being stricken with multiple sclerosis, Marc Shotzberger is grateful for many things, including the chance to be a superintendent

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF

## *“Why not Marc Shotzberger?”*

That’s what Joe Owsik asked himself while considering whom to hire to fill the open golf course superintendent position at the Philmont Country Club. Shotzberger, who had worked on the club’s golf course maintenance crew for two years, was a former superintendent. He had the managerial experience and know-how to get tasks completed efficiently, and he knew Philmont’s operation well.

## *“Why not Marc Shotzberger?”*

The notion to hire Shotzberger made sense. Owsik knew there were many good reasons to promote him to superintendent. But Owsik, the director of golf course operations at the 36-hole private club in Huntingdon Valley, Pa, also knew there was one reason a lot of people in his position would never hire Shotzberger.

## *“Why not Marc Shotzberger?”*

Owsik knew the answer to his question almost as soon as he asked himself it. He wasn’t going to let the fact that Shotzberger had multiple sclerosis stop him from promoting Shotzberger to superintendent.

“It was like a light bulb turned on in my head and told me what to do,” Owsik says.

While Owsik realized Shotzberger wouldn’t be able to perform some of the job’s physical duties that the position required, such as dragging a heavy hose around to water greens and their approaches, he knew others would step up and perform those tasks to get the work done.

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"Marc was here, and he had the skills needed to do the job," Owsik says of his decision in 2007 to promote Shotzberger. "And it dawned on me that it was the right thing to do."

So Owsik went to Shotzberger with the offer. The stoic Shotzberger was stunned. Because of his condition, he just figured nobody would ever give him the chance to be a superintendent again.

"I felt honored and elated at the same time," Shotzberger says. "Joe didn't have to do this, but chose to do it anyway. He took a chance on me."

Shotzberger fought back tears of joy when Owsik gave him the fantastic news. But the welled-up tears in Shotzberger's eyes also felt good. It had been awhile since he had been on the end of any positive news. In fact, Shotzberger had been on the end of a lot of bad news — beginning with his 1998 diagnosis of multiple sclerosis, a degenerative disease of the central nervous system.

Shotzberger was working as an assistant superintendent in Chicago when the symptoms of MS struck. He was 35 and healthy. When Shotzberger began experiencing dizzy spells and his back began to ache, he told himself it was just middle age settling in. But when the symptoms grew worse over the next few years, Shotzberger went to a neurologist, who diagnosed him with the shocking news he had MS.

The symptoms continued to progress the next few years. Shotzberger had trouble lifting his right leg, which felt as heavy as a steel-iron beam. His walk exhibited a noticeable limp. In the late 1990s, the disease began affecting his job as superintendent of Spring Mill Country Club in Ivyland, Pa. Shotzberger could no longer perform some of the job's physical duties. He says he was dismissed in 2001 "because the club wanted to make a change."

Shotzberger landed a job a few months later as an assistant superin-

tendent at Lookaway Golf Club in Buckingham, Pa. A month into the job, he was getting off a tractor when he accidentally kicked it into gear. The tractor ran over Shotzberger's right leg — the one hindered from MS — and tore three ligaments in the knee. A few months later, while Shotzberger was still on the mend from his injured knee, his wife of 11 years told him she wanted a divorce. Shotzberger, who has two sons, moved out of the family's house and into a lonely one-bedroom apartment.

Shotzberger, who was no longer working at Lookaway, was out of work. But eventually he found a sales job selling golf course maintenance equipment. It didn't last long, however, because the golf economy soured.

It was 2004, and Shotzberger was genuinely scared. He had to pay the rent. He had to survive. And he was worried his illness might prohibit him from ever working on a golf course again.

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**Joe Owsik (right)**  
promoted Shotzberger.  
**Matt MacAlister (center)**  
says "I can't say enough"  
about Shotzberger's  
work ethic.



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Shotzberger heard about an opening on the maintenance crew at Philmont. He and Owsik were acquaintances, having seen each other at local association meetings. Shotzberger went to Philmont to ask Owsik for the job.

Owsik knew Shotzberger had experienced a string of Job-like bad news the previous few years. Owsik also knew Shotzberger had MS, but hired him anyway.

"I couldn't imagine all those things could happen to the same person around the same time," says Owsik, who begins his 20th year at Philmont in 2011. "I wanted to help him."

Owsik could pay Shotzberger only \$12 an hour. He knew the money wasn't close to what Shotzberger made before as a superintendent.

"But sometimes those jobs can lead to other things," Owsik says.

**T**HE 54-YEAR-OLD Shotzberger recently finished his fourth season as one of the two superintendents at Philmont. Owsik, a devout Catholic who says he relies on the Man Upstairs to help him make good decisions, says the club's golf course maintenance team hasn't missed a beat with Shotzberger as one of the superintendents.

"Maybe somebody is watching over us," Owsik says with a smile.

Shotzberger is just as grateful to Owsik, today, for giving him the job as he was four years ago.

"I don't know what I'd do without this place," Shotzberger says.

The promotion came with Owsik's offer for Shotzberger to live in a modest house next to the maintenance facility. To say Shotzberger was ecstatic about that is an understatement.

"It was a godsend," he says, beaming.

On a recent day at the club, Shotzberger is dressed in a gray Philmont polo shirt, khaki shorts and work boots. It's easy to notice his disability — espe-



cially his lifeless right leg — but Shotzberger pays no heed to it. He gets around the best he can, but his right leg is an obvious detriment. He smiles and laughs often. He's not afraid to exercise his sometimes sarcastic wit. He ribs his co-workers, and they rib him right back.

Shotzberger has received the utmost support from the club's 25-member maintenance crew. But when he was promoted, there was at least one person who wondered whether he could cut it as superintendent. That was Matt MacAlister, Shotzberger's co-superintendent at the course, who has been at Philmont for 10 years.

"When Joe floated the idea of having Mark as my partner, I was skeptical because I know how physically demanding the job is," says MacAlister, who's accustomed to working up a sweat on the golf course.

But the 35-year-old MacAlister also knew Shotzberger deserved a chance. He knew that, despite his physical limitations, Shotzberger still had the eyes, ears and brain of a seasoned superintendent. And what MacAlister has witnessed the past four years is someone who has refused to pack it in and feel sorry for himself.

"Marc has a very intense desire to feel like he's pulling his weight, which

**Shotzberger watches Matt MacAlister water a green. "Matt's the man," he says.**

he does," MacAlister says. "I can't say enough about him."

When he was promoted, Shotzberger didn't want anyone to think he was a charity case. "The last thing I want is freakin' sympathy," he says sternly. "Nobody wants a pity party."

Owsik is impressed that Shotzberger could've applied for disability payments and probably have received them, but he'd rather work. "That's inspiring to others around here," Owsik says.

It's also inspiring to Owsik that Philmont's crew members have pitched in to help Shotzberger any way they can. That includes Owsik, who has been known to do his share of hand-watering.

Shotzberger misses the physical labor.

"I would love to be able to weed whack and drag a hose, but that's not happening," he says. "My mind wants to do those things, but my body says no."

While limited physically, Shotzberger does everything he can. Owsik purchased a hand-operated roller so Shotzberger could use it. Shotzberger also mows greens and fairways. On both occasions, he sits at a sidesaddle position. He operates the peddle with his left foot because his right leg has no feeling.

"He's a helluva worker," says Tony Marchione, Philmont's head technician. "You put him on a mower, and he mows until the job is done."

Shotzberger asks for help from others, although it's clear he'd rather not, MacAlister says.

"He inspires me," MacAlister adds. "He has been dealt a tough hand, but he deals with it with a lot of class."

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It's not lost on Shotzberger how much everybody helps him do his job. For instance, Marchione leaves equipment in areas where Shotzberger can access it easily in the morning.

"Everyone on this crew has been willing to help me," Shotzberger says. "They do a lot of little stuff. But it's big stuff."

"Everyone on this crew has been willing to help me," a grateful Shotzberger says.

Shotzberger doesn't want his disease to make his co-workers feel uncomfortable around him. So he often makes his disease the butt of jokes.

When he first started at Philmont, Shotzberger says everybody ran to help him back on his feet when he fell down. "Now they just step over me to get where they're going," he says with a laugh.



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**S**HOTZBERGER SAYS he was moving around much better when he started at Philmont six years ago. Now, he falls down more than he did then and his balance is deteriorating.

"It's the nature of the beast of the disease — it gets worse," Shotzberger says matter of factly. "But if you see me on a daily basis, you might not notice it."

He doesn't mind talking about the disease from a medical perspective. Shotzberger explains that MS is an inflammatory disease that affects the ability of nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord to communicate with each other. The nerve cells communicate by sending electrical signals down fibers, which are wrapped in a substance called myelin. With MS, the body's own immune system attacks and damages the myelin. When myelin is damaged, the fibers no longer effectively conduct signals.

Shotzberger is fine and alert mentally. His speech isn't hindered. Some of the symptoms of MS are heat exhaustion and fatigue, but Shotzberger hasn't experienced them, which is fortunate because he works outdoors.

Those who work with Shotzberger are amazed at how he handles himself. "I'd like to think I would deal with it with as much dignity as he has," MacAlister says. "But I can't say that I would."

Shotzberger was a jock when he was younger. In fact, he was once a competitive weight lifter. Shotzberger was also a scratch golfer and played other sports. He has good memories of those days, but doesn't dwell on them.

"People ask me if I miss golf," he says.



"Sure I do, but I can't think about it too much or it will drive me nuts."

But Shotzberger's oldest son, 17-year-old Aaron, has helped his dad stay in the game, so to speak. When Shotzberger says he's living vicariously through his son's golf game, he means it. Aaron is one of the best players on his high school team, and his dad is his biggest fan. Aaron credits his dad "for teaching me everything I know."

Those may be difficult words for Shotzberger to hear because he wants so badly to putt on the same green as his son. But Aaron's words make him smile, nonetheless.

Shotzberger's boys are his pride and joy. He shares joint custody of Aaron and 12-year-old Noah with his ex-wife. The boys are the reason Shotzberger never went on disability.

"My sons need to see their dad get up and go to work," Shotzberger says. "Maybe when they get older, they'll look back and say, 'The old man didn't take the easy way out.'"

**T**HE GOLF ECONOMY has impacted Philmont like it has many private clubs. But while rounds are down, Philmont still operates in the black.

Still, the club has had to make cutbacks. Shotzberger was laid off last winter and will be laid off again this winter. He'll draw unemployment until returning to full-time work in March. Shotzberger will work one day a week in the winter to keep his benefits. With a free place to live, he gets by.

While Shotzberger isn't happy about being laid off, he understands the situation. He realizes Owsik would keep him full-time in the winter if he could.

Shotzberger can't say enough good things about Owsik, not just for hiring him but for being his boss and friend. He says Owsik, who's known for his altruism, has the best disposition of anyone for whom he has ever worked. "You need someone to drive the bus, and Joe drives it well," he says.

Shotzberger realizes Philmont will likely be his last stop in a career that began when he enrolled at Penn State University to study turfgrass maintenance in 1988. He would like to work five more years if he can.

"But it's inevitable I'll end up in a wheelchair," he says.

While not afraid to face reality, Shotzberger doesn't dwell on when that day will come. Instead, Shotzberger, who has experienced his share of hardships, counts his blessings in life.

"I have a good job, I have a home, and I have two sons whom I'm close with," he says. "I also happen to have MS, but I'm not going to feel sorry for myself."

Shotzberger says he'll "forever be in his debt" to Owsik for giving him the chance to be a superintendent again.

"I've been lucky," he says. "I've been blessed."

Owsik will tell you he made the right decision four years ago when he asked himself, "Why not Marc Shotzberger?" ■

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