

Golf fundraisers for MS



Golfers participate in a variety of DIY events.

by James Townsend

Back in 1995, Blake Scheider met three guys at an “UGLY (“Understanding, Generous, Lovable You”) bartender contest in Pennsylvania who had been raising funds for multiple sclerosis. Together, they came up with the idea for the Longest Day of Golf — an event that challenged people to play as many holes as they could over 24 hours. The event, held at the historic Berkshire Country Club in Reading, Pennsylvania, has raised nearly \$500,000 over the years for the National Multiple Sclerosis Society as part of the DIY events program.



Haven Shaffer, Blake

**Scheider's MS consultant,
attends the Longest Day of Golf
event at the Berkshire Country
Club in Reading, Pennsylvania.**

The DIY program taps into people's ingenuity in creating fundraising events. "One of the things that makes the DIY program so unique is that it gives people almost a blank canvas to get involved," says Christina Carro, senior director of emerging events with the Society. "We offer toolkits and support for people who want to organize events, and many of the fun ideas they come up with are fascinating."

In 2022, DIY events raised more than \$3 million. Golf tournaments are among the most popular events.

Playing under the stars

After the sun goes down, participants in the Longest Day of Golf use headlamps and glowing golf balls stuffed with LED lights so they can track the ball in the dark. "The headlamps also help us not to hit the deer or skunks that come out on the course at night," Scheider, 53, says.

"Not everyone who starts at 6 p.m. makes it through the 24 hours," he adds. "For instance, some students who play have to work in the morning, but we're happy to have anyone play for as long as they can. In 2022, Josh Mayer from Josh Mayer Golf joined us and recorded all 24 hours and posted a seven-minute video of his experience on his popular YouTube channel."

Scheider traces his determination to raise money for the Society to witnessing his mother live with MS for nearly 50 years. She died in 2016. "I'm glad she got to see me play in this event before that," Scheider says. "She started having symptoms even before she became pregnant with me, but they didn't know what it was back then."



Personalized golf shoes from Blake Scheider's Longest Day of Golf event, where golfers play as much as possible over the course of 24 hours.

One of the things that keeps him organizing the event year after year, he says, is the bonding that happens between those who become involved with fundraising. "They're great people, passionate and dedicated. I've made many friends through this."

Finding an alternative event

When Mike Mingoelli of Wellesley, Massachusetts, was diagnosed with MS in 2008 at the age of 35, he got involved in the MuckFest MS fundraising event. "But when that went away, I wanted to do something else that my friends and I would really enjoy, and I love golf," he says.

So, he and three other organizers started the 18-hole End MS Now Invitational in Newton, Massachusetts, in 2021. That year, the nearly 100 participants raised \$85,000. In September 2022, they raised \$90,000.

"I'm a partner at an insurance brokerage firm, and I've got some very generous colleagues who support the cause," Mingoelli says. "They have many professional friends in their network, as well. And it's just a lot of fun."

Playing for their kids



**Melissa
O'Donnell**

Melissa O'Donnell's daughter Kelley was diagnosed with MS when she was 18. That's when O'Donnell and her husband, Tom, got busy. They joined numerous events to raise funds — Muckfest MS, Walk MS, Bike MS — and then they teamed up with Kathy Pahl to create the Driving Fore! MS Golf Tournament at the Legends Golf Course in Prior Lake, Minnesota. Pahl, whose daughter Meghan also has MS, serves as the tournament's accountant, while Tom

O'Donnell does most of the public speaking.

O'Donnell says the tournament has raised \$284,000 since it began in 2013, with 34 to 36 teams participating each year and reaching out to their connections to raise money. "It takes a village, as they say. We even have one donor who has generously donated \$10,000 to the tournament for the last two years and has asked to remain anonymous."

Creating connections

Hoping to increase his Christian fellowship with a group of friends, Rich Elliott began a small golf tournament that also ended up raising money for a local children's camp. Six years later when he was diagnosed with MS, the event evolved into the Heritage Classic Golf Tournament to support MS research, and it moved to Prairie View Golf Club in Carmel, Indiana.



After he was diagnosed with MS, Rich Elliott (middle) started the Heritage Classic Golf Tournament in Carmel, Indiana.

"That first year, we raised \$15,000 for MS," he says. "In 2022, after our 25th year, we were able to write a check for \$95,000, bringing our grand total to \$856,000. We now have golfers participating from all around the nation, 136 of them in 2022."

"I sort of became the poster child for MS," adds Elliott, who wears a leg brace to help with his balance. "Last year during our tournament, I asked for a show of hands of people who had a direct connection with someone with MS other than me, and about 75% raised their hands."

One of the event's successful promotions has been giving participants top-of-the-line Polo golf shirts with the Heritage Classic logo. "Now, we get pictures of people wearing them to

everything from dinner to work to church and at different golf courses across the country," Elliott says.

James Townsend is a writer in Boulder, Colorado.