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**SHANKEN CHANGES LIVES  
THROUGH ADAPTIVE SPORTS**



## SHANKEN CHANGES LIVES THROUGH ADAPTIVE SPORTS

by Matt Richtel, Contributing member

**T**he OC hosts lots of golf events, clinics, challenges, amateur and pro tournaments — and then there’s the event in late May developed by the Olympian with no right foot.

His name is Alan Shanken.

“I was born missing my fibula and half a dozen bones that make up my foot,” he said. Birth defect. Efforts were made to surgically repair it, but they didn’t take, and when he was age 3, his parents made the hard call. His lot in life is to be a congenital below-the-knee amputee.

*Photo by Gene Choi, Contributing member.*

Also a golfer, cyclist, New York marathoner, swimmer, triathlete — just the usual fare for an OC member and Northern Californian, undaunted. Plus one more thing: Shanken changes lives.

Since 2006, he's been deeply involved with the Challenged Athletes Foundation (CAF), which has a mission of providing support for people with physical disabilities so they can compete in competitive sports or, broadly, in fitness activities. What's known now as "adaptive athletics."

Which brings us to late May and golf — the third annual adaptive golf clinic, an event hosted by OC and CAF, organized by Shanken. "People in wheelchairs who want to play golf, amputees, blind people, people of short stature," he said. Plus, "the five best adaptive golf coaches in the country."

These elite instructors will coach the players, then also use the opportunity to coach PGA teachers in how to work with other adaptive golfers.

"We're really trying to grow the adaptive golf program in the U.S."

It's Shanken, spreading the love, teaching the mechanics, but with a heavy dollop of psychology and wisdom to go along with it.

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I met Shanken for breakfast on a Saturday morning in mid-April at Article III. We sat in the section near the front because we were wearing shorts, which the restaurant doesn't allow in the carpeted area. I'd worn shorts to work out. Shanken had worked out too, but he had another reason for the shorts. He was making a statement about the comfort he feels exposing the prosthetic, a vulnerability that didn't come easily.

"I don't think anybody really cares. I mean, maybe people care," he said. But "I'm not a rookie at this anymore. I'm 63 years old, so I just want people to know all about me. I just feel good about that."

That self-assurance was not always the case.

He recalled what it felt like as a kid, with athletic inclination and ability, experiencing the ordinary pressures of proving himself, but multiplied by self-consciousness. Witness one Wednesday night basketball league, and hear Shanken's inner monologue:

"I remember what I was thinking in my head was that there's this game going on, and everybody there was looking. That's not true, obviously. But I did think that people were focused on me, my ability, my disability, what I could do, what I couldn't do."

He didn't play on a sports team in high school. "Never really found my way in sports. The issue was not having the confidence to go out for a team, even though I had the ability to do it."

He turned to lifting weights, a solitary experience, benching twice his weight in college. "But I was never part of a team. And that was a miss, that was a life miss for sure. I didn't get the camaraderie, the determination, the discipline."

Sidenote: he's clearly got those things now, becoming a family man and wealth manager, among other achievements; in 2020, he won the prestigious Jim McLaren Award from the CAF for his service.

Point being, Shanken got there, eventually, with fitness and athletics, but he didn't want others to have to wait as long as he had waited in his life. So, as a part of his work,



At the 2023 adaptive golf clinic at the OC, participants aged 7-75 learned from elite instructors. Photos by Hannah Ly.

he helps adaptive athletes understand the emotional side.

Lately, for example, he's been mentoring a 28-year-old double below-the-knee amputee golfer in Colorado. The CAF funded his clubs and coaching. And he recently met a young man with an arm deformity whom Shanken invited to last year's OC adaptive golf clinic; The young man met fellow adaptive golfers and ultimately got a grant from CAF to pay for his Pings.

Shanken's initial conversations with these players may be about networking with other adaptive athletes, or mechanics of the sport, or how to approach the game. But under the surface, Shanken has an awareness that he's working with young adaptive athletes to push aside the voice that says: They're looking at me and what I can and can't do.

"You really need to get to know somebody well for them to show you those vulnerabilities," he said.

Then, during our Article III breakfast, he paused, and said, "I need to tell you about her."

He was referring to a woman who had walked by, who works in custodial services at

the OC. Several years ago, Shanken got out of the pool after a swim and noticed that the woman was eyeing him curiously. He didn't think much of it. But he opened the door for conversation and the woman took it. She told Shanken about her 25-year-old granddaughter, who had gotten into a car accident and traumatically lost her leg as a result. The woman had seen in Shanken an amputee with an open heart.

Shanken worked with the family to connect the woman's daughter and granddaughter to a community of women dealing with similar issues. Since then, he's been invited to the family's house for Sunday dinners, and he's learned that his willingness to act had made a difference.

"She's not on this island by herself," he said of the granddaughter. "She's got this group with 30 people on it with her, and when she's in that chat, she's not feeling like she's 'other.'"

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Last October, Shanken stepped up to his ball in the fairway on the 12th hole of the

Ocean Course. He was about 150 yards out. He stiffed his 8-iron. It rolled to inches. Birdie.

That was his favorite shot of last year. His middle irons are his strong suit. But he'll be the first to tell you that the shot was the exception, not the rule. "I don't really excel at anything in golf," he told me within a few minutes of knowing him, ever a fan of the full disclosure. (But I'm ever the fan of the question, so maybe I asked). He's working on playing to a mid-teen index.

"It's a great, great game," he said. "It's a brutal game."

He said his physical challenge isn't much hindrance. "There are certainly some things you've got to work on, like weight transfer and turn and balance and things like that. But, you know, for the most part, the game is very, very doable."

He's spreading the word. Last year, the local ABC news affiliate came out to Lakeside to do a story about the adaptive golf clinic. The story showed participants from ages 7 to 75 taking golf lessons and then showed a brief interview with Shanken.





“We have people with visual impairments. We have single leg amputees. We have double leg amputees,” Shanken told the Bay Area audience. “We have veterans here today. We have kids who have Spina Bifada who may never walk again, but we’ve found a way for them to golf.”

“That’s fantastic,” the co-anchor said.

True dat.

Polio survivor Diane Ngo, a participant and volunteer at the Adaptive Golf Clinic, told me that what strikes her as noteworthy about the now-annual event is that it demonstrates “a collective, concerted effort” and one that gets elevated by the setting. “The fact that a place like the OC, with its prestige, would open its doors and care enough to allow us to come is a huge hug and a big high-five.”

She met Shanken in 2016 at adaptive CrossFit and has been playing golf since age 11. At last year’s adaptive clinic at the OC, she found herself doing less golfing and more volunteering when she began chatting with a short-statured woman who was “so shy,” Ngo said. “So, so shy.”

Ngo, who was born in Vietnam, saw a chance to connect with the Korean-American woman. The two started chatting. “She had never played the game, and she didn’t know there was a club that could fit her,” Ngo said.

The woman began to settle in, an instructor came over, and then the woman was getting lessons with a club that fit. “The smile I saw afterwards really touched my heart,” Ngo said.

Ngo says much credit goes to Shanken and “his value system.”

“It’s not about preaching. He models it, he lives it. It’s not about him, not about elevating himself. It’s about lifting those who need to be lifted.”

But she also thinks he gets lifted, too. “Giving back in the ways he is able to do — because of those opportunities — he fills that hole he felt growing up, of not being able to participate. He’s changing that for others, and in a lot of ways the work he’s been

doing redeems the trauma and discouragement he experienced.”

Shanken notes that a big part of the day of adaptive golf instruction is connecting human beings with each other — the adaptive golfers, the OC community and all involved. The significance, he said, is that “community” is life’s best medicine.

“People who are active in sports have higher self-esteem, are great teammates, are more independent and have an enhanced quality of life. Our community is a self-selecting group of forward-thinking adaptive folks who want to excel in life.”

Not to get lost here, though, are the hot dogs. Hot Dog Bills provides the refreshments for the clinic. Win, win, win, bliss.

Shanken personally loves a Burgerdog. It goes down well with what he says is the CAF “universal message”: overcoming obstacles is a part of daily life, and adaptive athletes are living proof that everyone can relate to.

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A brief tale of quintessential Shanken:

Several years ago, Alex Tabuena was walking out of the PGA superstore in El Camino when he saw a guy staring at him. The guy was Shanken. Tabuena, a 30-something techie from San Mateo, politely said: “Can I help you? Why are you looking at me?”

“May I ask what happened to your arm?” Shanken said.

Tabuena’s left arm didn’t fully develop, a condition called radial dysplasia, leaving his left wrist bowed inward.

“I’m like you,” Shanken said. He pulled up his pants to show his prosthetic. Shanken told Tabuena about CAF and about opportunities to connect, work on adaptive sports, even get grants.

“I was apprehensive at first,” Tabuena said, laughing. “Who comes up to you and offers you money?”

One thing led to another, and Tabuena wound up at the adaptive golf clinic and got a

grant for a set of Ping clubs that suits his grip. At the clinic last year, he said, “there were different instructors who helped me understand the club path, my alignment, different ways to set up and address the ball.”

Tabuena has a swift sense of humor. “I don’t like Alan at all,” he joked to me. Then took a more serious path, “He’s a great guy.”

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Years ago, as Shanken got more heavily involved with his charity work and advocacy, he’d get notes, emails, texts. “I’d print them out and put them in an envelope. Then I got a lot of them and threw them in a shoe box, and now I have a grocery bag. It’s now a family heirloom,” he said.

Speaking of family, Shanken’s whole crew rides shotgun with him. In 2010, he met his wife, Allison, also an OC member, at a CAF Heroes, Heart and Hope Gala, where she is a founding volunteer. Shanken, his 34-year-old son Ross (also an OC member), and Ross’ wife are planning to run the New York City marathon in November to raise money for CAF.

They can all share in the praise Shanken has received as part of the grocery-bag family heirloom. Here are some snippets:

“I am so grateful our paths crossed five years ago, that day has forever changed my life. Thank you for the intro to CAF and encouragement to go more.” — 30-year-old who lost a leg to cancer.

“You are the most incredible instigator, organizer, mentor, friend and backbone I have ever seen.” — CAF Donor.

“Your passion and commitment is over the top.” — Woman with cerebral palsy.

As our Article III breakfast wound down, Shanken’s eyes turned moist with gratitude for the circle he’s been a part of. “If I have a messed-up day, I go in and pull out a note. It’s a pretty cool thing to do.” ■