

"I WAS A CEO - BUT

NOW I'M A CADDIE"

THE INSPIRATIONAL STORY OF

NEIL FRANCIS, WHOSE CAREER AS A HIGH-FLYING

BUSINESSMAN WAS CUT SHORT WHEN HE HAD A STROKE, PAVING THE WAY FOR A BRAND NEW LIFE IN GOLF

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PHOTO: EVE CONROY

For many years, business was life and life was business for Neil Francis. The co-founder of successful web design firm Company Net, he counted some of the world's biggest brands - Disney, BP, Microsoft and Coca-Cola and so on - amongst his clients.

So, it's somewhat at odds with that background to find him now working as a caddie at North Berwick Golf Club in East Lothian.

How did he get there? The answer is tragically simple: he had a life-changing health experience. A stroke, to be precise. On holiday in Arran with his family a few years ago, Neil was getting out of his car when, suddenly, he could neither speak nor see out of one eye and felt as though he was falling over.

In medical terms, he had a 'paradoxical embolism' caused by a blood clot in his leg he developed during a trans-Atlantic business flight.

"For about a year after, I couldn't really communicate," explains Neil. "Words just wouldn't come out, even though I knew what I wanted to say. It was very frustrating. I felt confused and highly-charged emotionally. I was

unable to read or write, was very tired, had difficulty expressing my thoughts and trying to focus on more than one thing was impossible."

As he notes himself, none of these things are particularly good attributes to have if you're at the helm of a major company. In the end, the outcome was inevitable.

"One day I was a CEO and the next, well, I was some bloke who used to run an internet company," he explains. "I could no longer

again and wondering what to do with the rest of his life - but with the added difficulty of actually being 41 and having a mortgage to pay, family to support, and a wide range of responsibilities to fulfil. He was lucky enough to have enough money to tide him over for a while but, still, the future had become a scary-looking place. Until, that is, one evening when he and his wife sat in front of the TV.

"We were watching a programme about the

caddie master and starter at the club, Sam Fox, and with his help and support, I started caddying in 2008."

Fast-forward five years and Neil is still there and loving every minute of it. He says: "I've caddied for doctors, lawyers, judges, pilots, venture capitalists, millionaires, billionaires, sports champions, bankers, truck drivers, politicians, entrepreneurs, investment managers, professors, senators, estate agents,

in a similar position, you can do likewise. "Through my experiences of being a CEO, a stroke survivor and a caddie, I've accumulated a wealth of ideas, methods, thoughts and philosophies on how to change course successfully," he explains.

"What I've written isn't an academic handbook, nor is it one that looks at the theory of changing course. Instead, it's a practical handbook, packed full of information and advice on how to take your life in a different direction.

"Seven years ago, I was forced to change course from my role as a CEO. Today, I'm a caddie, but I'm also a non-executive director, a consultant, a joint founder of a charity, and an author - and I've achieved all of this after having a stroke."

It's impossible not to be inspired by Neil. He's living proof that there is no such thing as one career path for every person. He's living proof that a health scare needn't make you afraid for the rest of your life. And he's living proof of that which most people already know to be the case - that Scotland's caddies are a fascinating, wonderfully diverse bunch of folk.

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fulfil my role. I had to stop attending meetings. The pitches I'd once made were now done by other people in the business. My trips to the USA, Africa and Europe came to an abrupt halt. The corporate event invitations were now sent to other employees. The clients I once lunched with met with the new CEO. It took me a while to figure it out but I realised I was going to have to completely change tack."

Neil describes that realisation as like being 18

caddies at the Old Course and my wife suggested that maybe I should think about caddying as part of my recovery," explains Neil. "She thought it would keep me fit and give me the opportunity to meet the types of people I used to work with. She also thought it would be good for my confidence and, from her point of view, get me out of the house!

"It made sense. I'd always loved golf and was a member of a famous club, North Berwick, so I approached the

brokers and CEOs. There have been fathers, grandfathers, wives, sons and daughters. I've met people from across the USA, as well as France, Canada, Australia, Germany, Denmark, Japan, Italy and so on. It has been an amazing privilege."

It has also been a learning curve for Neil, who has taken some of the lessons and conversations he has had with these golfers to write a book about how he has found a new purpose in life - and how, if you ever find yourself

CHANGING COURSE



Inspiration, Ideas and Insights for Starting Again from the CEO Who Became a Caddie

NEIL FRANCIS

READER OFFER

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