

'Caddying gave me a new life...

and it's a Fantastic life'

After a stroke robbed Neil Francis of his profession as a successful chief executive, golf and caddying came to the rescue. Looking for inspiration in 2014? We suggest you read on...

Words Alex Narey | Photography David Cruickshanks

If you're a regular reader of *Golf Monthly*, then you may have done this yourself: pitched an idea for an article, or even sent in a story for publication. We get plenty of them, from hole-in-one tales to proud parents wanting to shout about their talented eight-year-old, and we welcome them with open arms because, quite frankly, we want to know what our readership is up to. The problem is that you can't please everyone and so running even a fraction of what we receive proves impossible. Lack of space and a lack of time force us in most cases to reply with a polite "thank you" and a "good luck" message for the future.

But there was one email back in June of this year that particularly caught my attention. That it came direct from the editor was an immediate cause for interest. Punched energetically into four sentences, it read simply: 'see below email. Can you give this chap a call? He's a caddie. Pretty inspirational story.'

Indeed it was an inspirational story, but like many inspirational stories, there was a sad twist at its core. In the present day, Neil Francis is simply a 48-year-old man from North Berwick who had taken up carrying golf clubs as a profession in 2008. This was a profession that offered fulfilment,

a profession that made him happy, a profession that gave him a role in life. But in days gone by, the same Neil Francis had been a young entrepreneur. A talented businessman, he had set up an Internet start-up company in 1996, cashing in when the good times rolled and the web boom gathered pace towards the new millennium. Company Net would build large websites for their high-end clients, going from strength to strength with a decorated portfolio that included the Scottish Government, Disney and Coca Cola. The business grew from its initial two-man crew to 40 within the space of five years, with Neil its chief executive.

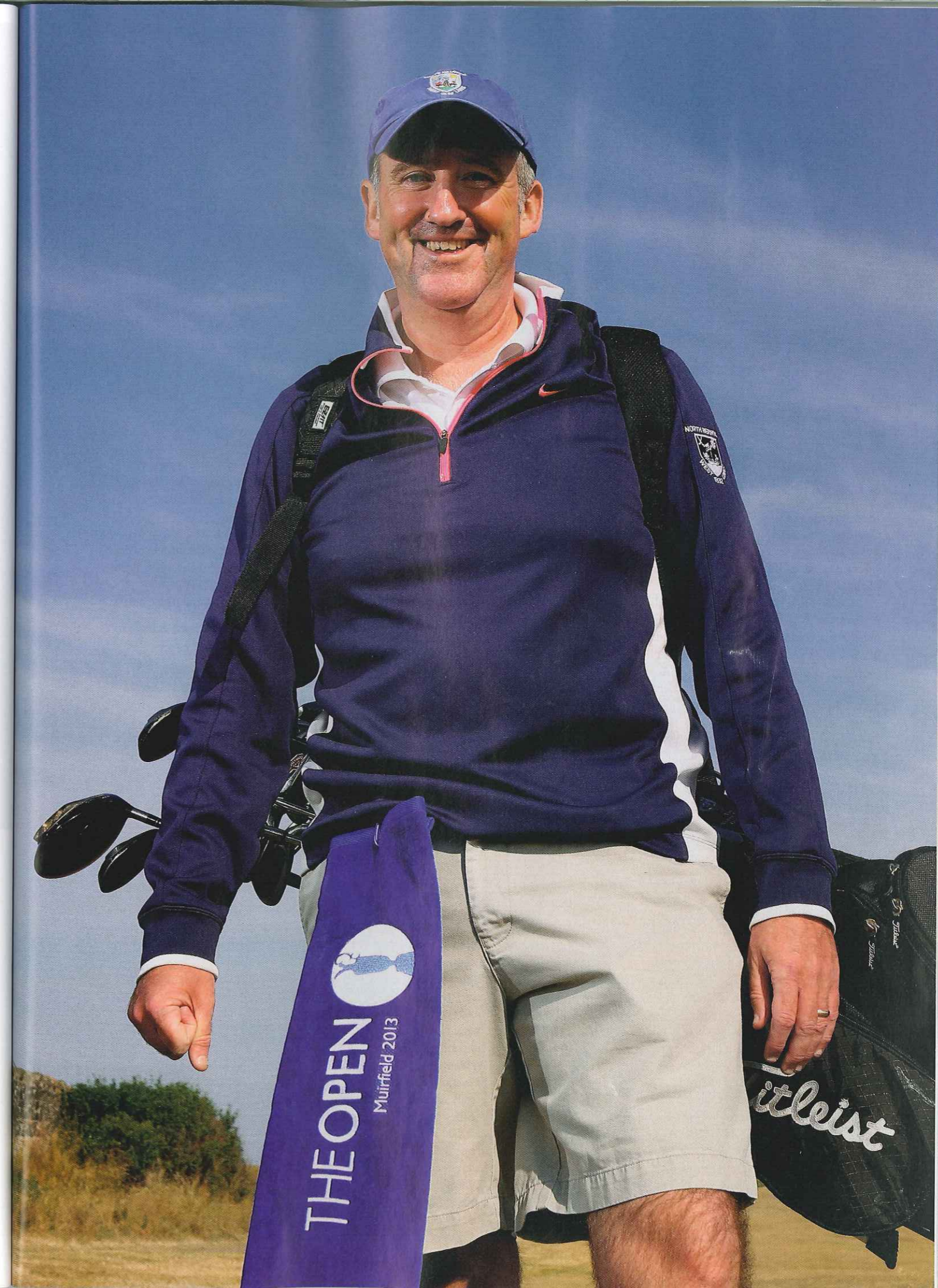
Then, on October 19, 2006, everything changed. Needing to know more, I pick up the phone and dial Neil's number...

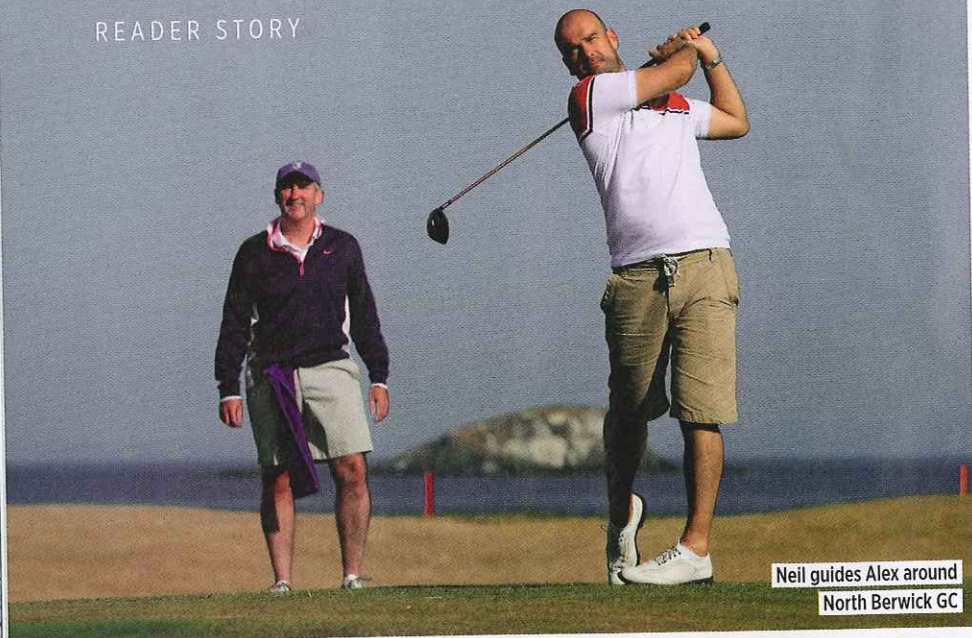
FATEFUL DAY...

"It was a family holiday on Arran," recalls Neil. "My wife got out of the car to go to the shop, and I was sat there, with the three kids in the back. I got out of the car for some fresh air. Then it happened. I know it happened now, but at the time I didn't know what was going on. I couldn't see out of my right eye. I couldn't speak. I thought I could speak, but I couldn't, you couldn't make sense of what I was saying. My wife came out of the shop, and she could see I was in distress. That was it. I was having a stroke. I was having a stroke at the age of 41..."

As Neil relays this story to me, I try and imagine the scene. Its frantic nature seems a million miles away from the serene setting at North Berwick Golf Club, where we are walking and talking about life before and after that day some seven years ago. We talk more about the stroke and the immediate emotions and fear he felt. We talk about his early days in business. We talk about his wife and kids. We talk about his recovery and the sacrifices he was forced to make due to his illness. We talk about the book he has recently completed, called *Changing Course – Inspiration, Ideas and Insights for Starting Again from the CEO who became a Caddie*. But mostly, we talk about golf and caddying, because it is golf and caddying that rescued him. Golf and caddying have given him a new life.

Though Neil is as softly spoken as they come, I'm convinced that you don't build a CV like he has without being as hard as nails underneath, and he's keen to stress that back in the days when his business skills had to be at their sharpest, he was as hard-nosed as anyone. "I had to make big decisions," he says, "and I thrived on that! A typical week for me would be planning sessions with my leadership team, working on marketing strategies, approving budgets, chairing board meetings – everything that went with being a chief executive. I lived the life, that's for sure."





Neil guides Alex around North Berwick GC

FIGHTING BACK...

North Berwick has been Neil's home for some 15 years, but the golf course has been his office for the last five. Both places have brought him much joy, but there is a sense of irony as we walk the hallowed turf of one of the UK's most cherished stretches of golfing land, because it was here, playing a round with his son, that he sustained a calf tear that would lead to a series of blood clots in his leg.

"Looking back, I can see what happened. In April or May of that year (2006), I had jumped over a fence at North Berwick. My son and I had just headed out for a few holes. I thought the gate was locked, so I jumped over it, and as I landed, my calf muscle tore and unbeknown to me, damaged a deep vein in my leg. Then two months later the doctors said that a DVT had developed in the already-damaged vein, causing clots, during a business flight from Boston. Through chance and sheer bad luck, one of those clots broke off, travelled through a hole in my heart – which I didn't even know I had – and up to my brain."

After the stroke, months of recuperation followed. Neil's speech had been lost. The children's books he would read to his kids, he now read to himself in the hope that he could piece a sentence together. "I was trying and fighting to work out what was going on in a comic book," he laughs. Holding hopes that he could battle back to be the businessman and leader he once was, Neil fought on bravely. But some six months on, he was forced to resign from the company he had built when a neuropsychologist broke the news that he had some serious permanent cognitive impairments.

"The cognitive challenges meant I could no longer multitask. I had serious memory problems and struggled for words, and I felt as if I was living in the 'now' constantly. I couldn't do a presentation because that requires you to present and think at the same time. Your stress levels go up, and I was also incredibly tired. In short, I was knackered."

The resignation, naturally, proved tough to take. Those emotions of coming to terms with a lack of identity and not being able to proudly declare what you do for a living, and what you have done successfully for the past ten years, was a chief tormentor. Neil admits that, financially, he and his family were "Okay" – but he needed to work. Company Net would keep him on board as a non-executive director, a move Neil describes as "wonderful and typical" of the people he worked with and trusted. But his rebuilding process would not be complete until he found another job. While he may have been dealt a harsh hand, there was also the realisation that a third of people

"I could relate to the guys I caddied for - these were the guys I used to be. I loved being around them"

who suffer a stroke don't get the opportunity to see their kids again. The only thing he could do was be positive and get on with doing something he enjoyed, and was able to do. Caddying was one such thing.

"I was watching a programme about golf in St Andrews. It was everything about golf, but not about the golfers, and so there was a lot on the caddies. My wife said I should do that in the spring. She said it would be good for my confidence and that it would get me out of the house (laughs). So I went down to see Sam Fox, who is the starter and caddie master at North Berwick. I was really nervous about that, I have to say, because they get a lot of people asking to caddy. He said he would put me out and that it would be good for me."

And so it began, in a role reversal for the man who was once the international high-flier hiring a caddie for himself. "Firstly, it was a role. I now had a role that I was fulfilling,

and fulfilling properly. I didn't need help. Physically it could be tough, but I could do it. Secondly, it was a routine; it was getting me fit. And thirdly, there were the people. The guys who I caddied for, I could really relate to them, because these were the guys who I used to be. They were managing directors, chief executives, marketing directors. I loved being around them."

Although Neil's primary job is to get his man around North Berwick, the door is often opened when a client pokes an interest into his past. They ask a question and the story comes out. "It was great; these guys found my story inspiring, and that in turn inspired me."

As Neil continued to carry the clubs, his confidence grew and his speech improved. He began to network again, while his story gathered pace and popularity that led to a publishing contract for *Changing Course*. The book has proved a huge success – a 220-page tome offering advice for people who choose, or are forced, to find a different career path. Off the back of this, newspapers have been calling for columns, while businesses seek his advice as a consultant.

"Now I have that identity again. When I go to a party and someone asks me what I do, I tell them I am a caddie, I'm an author, I'm a non-executive director of a company and I'm a business consultant. But it all came from caddying..."

FEELING PRIVILEGED...

On the way home from North Berwick, I'm grateful for meeting Neil Francis, because I'm as guilty as the next man for seeking pity when I simply have no case to do so. His story is inspirational, but more than that, it's a wonderful tale of a decent bloke getting his life back on track with the support of the people he loves and trusts. Of course, there are still struggles. The cognitive problems he has bring with them everyday challenges that Neil battles against. He says that if we had tried to conduct the interview three years ago, we would have stood no chance. Even today, if there are too many things going on, his concentration levels can be pushed to the limit. But he manages everything with a sense of positivity. More importantly, he manages everything with a smile.

"You have to keep smiling and you have to be positive. But you have to appreciate what you have. It's as simple as that!" **GM**

● **Inspired by Neil's story? Thinking of changing the course in your life in 2014? We've got the perfect Xmas offer for you. *Changing Course* is published by Hay House, normally priced at £12.99. However, *Golf Monthly* readers can take advantage of a 30% saving on this price. Either go to www.hayhouse.co.uk and search for *Changing Course*, or call 0203 675 2459 and enter the code GM14 at checkout. Free delivery is also available within the UK. Offer ends January 15, 2014.**