

Course Feature

A Racing Certainty

Scott MacCallum meets up with motor racing legend, Nigel Mansell, owner of Woodbury Park, in Devon.



Nigel Mansell

One thing this job does involve is a bit of driving, as I clock up the miles travelling the length and breadth of the country visiting golf clubs and chatting to some wonderful people about their work and their golf courses. What it gives me is plenty of time to think, and I often find myself wondering what common ground I might share with the person I am about to meet. It can help to oil the cogs of the interview.

So, as I headed south towards Devon last month, thoughts were going through my head about what connections I might be able to make with my soon-to-be interviewee, Nigel Mansell.

Where to start? Well, we both have an interest in cars. Nigel has driven a Lotus, a Williams and a Ferrari. My stable of vehicles has included a Mondeo, an Escort and a Cavalier.

Nigel is a two time World Champion - Formula 1 in 1992 and Indy Cars in 1993, when he became the first, and only, rookie to lift the title. Evidence of my speed behind the wheel may be contained in the speed camera which flashed me on the M5.

We share an interest in golf. Nigel currently plays to 1.6; is a member of the R&A; has played in the Australian Open and owns Woodbury Park Hotel Golf and Country Club, near Exeter. I play to 14; am a member of The Oaks GC, near Selby, and play in the occasional BIGGA and Association of Golf Writers event. I don't currently own a golf club.

On the face of it, while they may be connections, the fact remains that we've been operating in slightly different leagues. But one thing we do certainly have in common is our birthday. Leos both, we were born on August 8th, although Nigel does have nine years on me.

This year that birthday was particularly significant for Nigel as it brought up his half century and enabled him to play in, as well as host, the Sunseeker Nigel Mansell Classic, an event on the PGA European Seniors' Tour.

The youngest man in the field, he teed it up with European Tour legend, Neil Coles, and old friend, Bill Longmuir, and proceeded to shoot opening rounds of 73 and 72, both of which he is quick to tell you should have been much lower. Tougher pin placements on the final day, combined with a tricky wind saw him card a still respectable 78.

"Running the tournament, with all the responsibility that entailed and then to go out and shoot a respectable score was very satisfying," said Nigel, who was also delighted that had there been a cut in the tournament, he would have been the right side of it.

He credits much of his success to the fact that he didn't have to worry about the golf course as Course Manager, Ian Chenery, had done such a wonderful job.

"I can't praise Ian and his team enough. His organisational and management skills in getting the job done were fantastic. The biggest compliment I can give him is that I didn't have to worry about the golf



The Woodbury Park Team

course. It was in the back of my mind but I knew it was being attended to and I could focus on other areas."

His ambitions for himself and the Nigel Mansell Classic offer excitement in both areas.

He is President of UK Youth, an organisation which provides programmes for up to 750,000 youngsters with the help of 45,000 volunteers and, if it wasn't for the fact that its AGM clashes with the final rounds of European Senior Tour Qualifying School in Portugal, he might have given it serious consideration. In the meantime he is still hopeful of some invitations for Senior Tour events and wants to get his handicap back down to scratch.

As for his own event, he is keen to grow it over the next few years to the stage that the prize fund will attract the biggest names in Senior golf which, in addition to the legendary Americans like Watson and Nicklaus, will soon include European players like Faldo, Langer, Ballesteros and Woosnam. Greg Norman, who provided the youngest member of the Mansell family with his Christian name, and a godfather, is a likely entrant when he hits the big 50.

"A date slightly earlier in the calendar, when the course is looking its absolute best, would be ideal," explained Nigel.

Talking with him you can't help but be swept away by his drive and enthusiasm and you can't believe that his dreams for the Nigel Mansell Classic, and for his own game, will be anything other than a racing certainty.



Hole 4

Nigel bought Woodbury Park 10 years ago, while he was still actively racing and a club close to an airport was a major consideration. Exeter Airport is just ten minutes from Woodbury Park.

The next factor was the potential of the club and, with a little imagination, the box for that could also be ticked.

"When we came to visit there was a Portacabin which acted as the clubhouse while the course, or track as I called it, was in its infancy and was awful. It was no fault of the greenkeeping staff, it just hadn't had money spent on it. Basically it was unplayable all through the winter.

I hated the tees. I hated the fairway. But I loved the greens and felt that everything else could be fixed. I just thought potential, potential, potential."

His knowledge of golf comes as a direct result of his enormous love of the game and the rare opportunity he has had to play some of the finest golf courses in the world.

"When I was racing round the world I rated the race track by how close it was to a golf course. They actually tell you that the best thing to do to acclimatise into a time zone when you fly into Australia, New Zealand or America is walking in the sun and exercising. Well, if you are going to do all that... play golf!

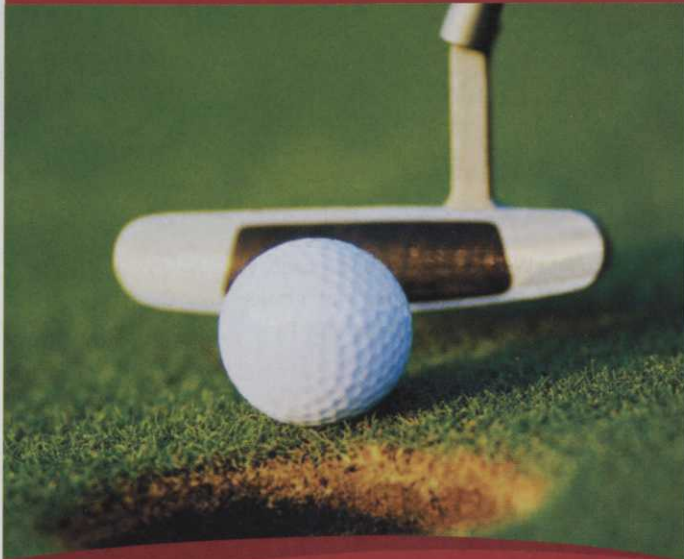
"So I visited all these magnificent golf courses and learned a lot in the 'touchy feely' way you do when you play a course. I'm not an agronomist. I'm not a greenkeeper, but I think I can hold a conversation with them and I know what's right and my team here gets it right," said Nigel, who reads up about greenkeeping and does read Greenkeeper International.



Oaks, Par 3, 3rd

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"Sometimes though, I just make out that I know nothing as it's easier that way!" he laughed.

When he is at the club - he currently resides in Jersey and spends a lot of time travelling around the world - he is not averse to taking his turn on a mower.

"In the past I've been told that a job takes a certain amount of time. I've doubted it so I've jumped on a machine and gone out there and done it in much less time."

Nigel is also keen to point out the great strength he and his management team have at the 27 hole complex.

"The strength of the business is that if we have a hiccup it is immediately fixed and then we'll have a chat about it if necessary. We can call a Board Meeting at a moment's notice and nothing is left on the back burner."

Ian Chenery knows that he can call his boss at any time and that, if needed, Nigel will get on the telephone himself to sort out a problem. It isn't the first time a supplier has heard a familiar voice giving him some straight talking down a phone line.

Nigel's management style is very committed and obviously influenced by the team bosses he raced for - Frank Williams, Enzo Ferrari, and his great mentor, Colin Chapman, whose portrait hangs on a wall of his office.

His conversation is sprinkled with words like "sensational" and "fantastic" and it is a positivity he exudes and expects from others.

"If you want to succeed in any job in the world, while you're in your 20s, 30s and 40s, 'No' shouldn't be in your vocabulary. You get on and do it. If you are a good organiser and disciplined you can do the job and fit everything else in round about it.

"I've got a gentleman sitting next to me (Ian), and another in my Chief



Oaks Par 4, 12th

Executive, who I know would still be here doing their jobs even if an atom bomb were to go off. That commitment rubs off on their teams. There isn't a guy on Ian's team who wouldn't die for him. I know that," said Nigel, who recently flew three of them over to his home in Jersey to look after the garden and enjoy a short break on the island.

The answer he gives when asked if he considers himself a full time golf club owner, provides an insight to his obsession.

"I live, breath, eat and sleep Woodbury Park. I have a notebook beside the bed and I'll think about the 5th hole, or remember what Andy Stubbs (Senior Tour Managing Director) has said, or what Neil Coles has said. I'll wake up and write it down immediately. We are always tweaking and doing things to the course. We are already planning for next year. It never stops."

Having been involved at the technological cutting edge of F1 it is interesting to hear his views on fine turf machinery and the manufacturers.

"You can't compare this industry to Formula One as they have hundreds of millions of pounds to spend and grass cutting machinery would be twice the cost it is now if it were engineered so that it didn't fail and people wouldn't pay that for it.

"But I have to say the greenkeeper's biggest enemy is the burst pipe. You can have a mechanical failure of some kind and no harm can be done, but you burst a hydraulic line... I think whoever invents a lubricant which doesn't scorch or kill the grass would make a fortune."

Over the last 10 years Woodbury Park has enjoyed an exclusive machinery agreement with Ransome Jacobsen, struck with the then Regional Sales Manager, now National Sales Manager, Alan Prickett.

"The biggest credit for that deal should go to Alan. I'm a people person and I struck up a fantastic working relationship with Alan. I genuinely

believe we have the best relationship with a company which has the best equipment and the best back-up. I'm very faithful and if you're friends you should be friends for life. It would take a lot for me to change."

Sitting in that office high above the clubhouse terrace, overlooking the beautifully criss-crossed fairway which acts as the bail out area for the water guarded par-3 18th, it is easy to see why 2000 members now call Woodbury Park home.

"We pride ourselves in giving people far more than they pay for but next year we are going to put our prices up sensibly because we don't want to be accused of being busy fools. We don't want to wear out our product and we'd like to get the same revenue, or a little more, for fewer rounds played.

Nigel's success on the race tracks meant that when it came to developing Woodbury Park his wife, Rosanne, and he had advantages not open to most developers.

"When we built the course we did so with zero members and when we built the sports centre we did so with zero members. We backed our beliefs and acted as our own bankers. Happily it has all worked out," said Nigel, whose Nigel Mansell World of Racing Exhibition is housed within the hotel and is well worth a visit.

In addition to the golf, the complex also boasts tennis courts and a Premier League-standard football pitch which is used by the likes of Chelsea and Fulham for pre-season training.

After an enjoyable hour, the interview was over and we headed downstairs to take a few photographs. Oh, and I did let him know of our "connection". I also told him that we shared our birthday with Dustin Hoffman, as well as The Edge out of U2. He seemed delighted to learn that he was among such luminaries.

Course Feature



Ian Chenery

Ian has been Course Manager for 10 months but has been at Woodbury Park since it was first opened 13 years ago.

Currently studying for his Masters Degree at Cranfield University, Ian is a stickler for presentation and ensures that both courses are maintained to highest presentational standards.

"We cut fairways, tees and greens and semi rough and hand rake bunkers daily and the rough is cut twice a week on the Oaks and once a week on the Acorn while the greens are cut and the bunkers are raked at weekends," explained Ian.

He was delighted with the work of his team during the Nigel Mansell Classic when each man clocked up 100 hours work.

"We were double cutting fairways twice a day and the Tour said the greens were the best they'd played on all season. We had them at 10.5 which was just right for them and they were extremely true."

During the week they had additional machinery brought in as part of the partnership agreement with Ransomes Jacobsen and support from PJ Flegg, from whom Des Marks, was in Ian's words, an "absolute star".

He also has praise for Mark Ganning, of Rainbird, who was on hand for three days when an irrigation problem emerged 10 days before the event.

As for his boss Ian is full of admiration.

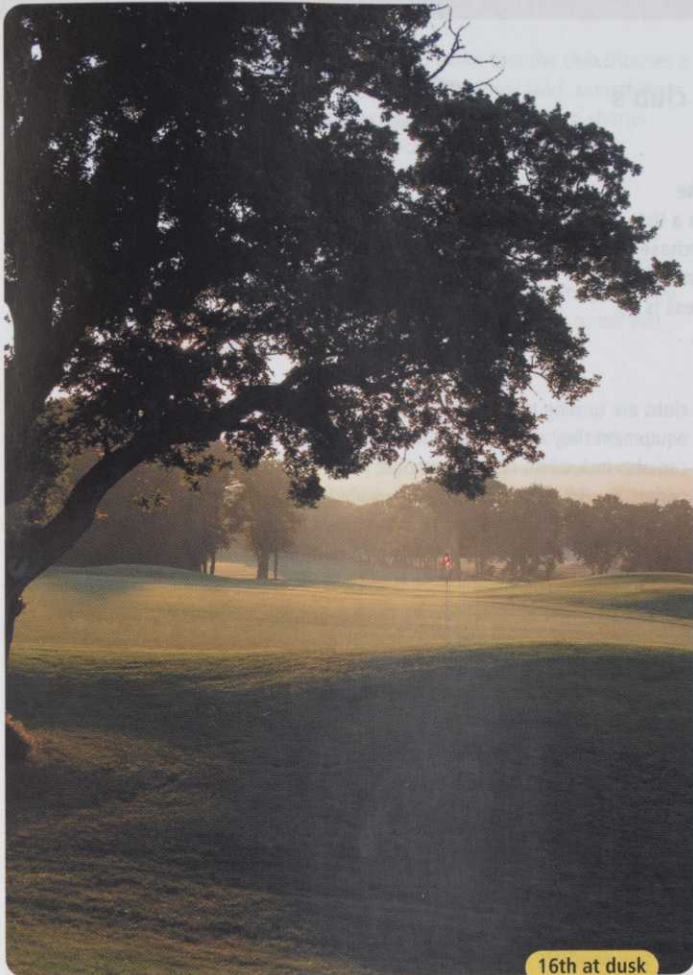
"He is quite knowledgeable about greenkeeping. Maintenance is our job but he doesn't miss a trick and would notice if we've dropped the fairways. He speaks to Course Managers at courses he plays and I always know when he does because he comes in and says something I'd no idea he'd know anything about!"

He also likes to be kept in touch with the maintenance regimes.

"He rings up the club on a daily basis and speaks with me if necessary and I give him a monthly plan detailing heights of cut, what aeration work I'll be carrying out and what fertilisers I'll be using."

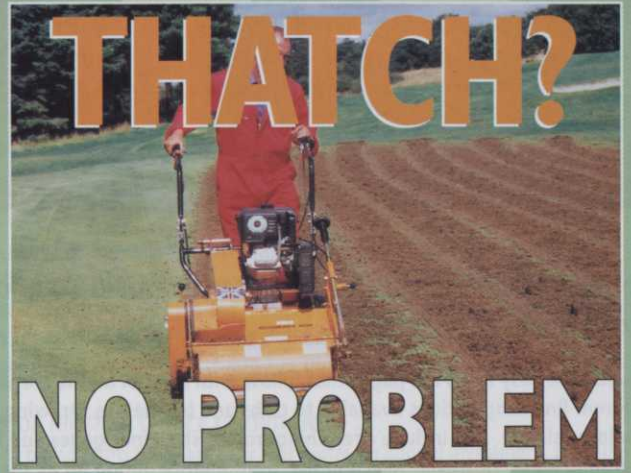
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- 2 Jacobsen GK 526 Hand Mowers
- 3 Jacobsen Greens King 6
- 2 Jacobsen LF3800 Fairway Mowers
- Ransomes HR9016
- 2 4 Wheel Cushman



16th at dusk

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- E-Z-GO Electric Buggy with Box
- GR30 Aerator
- 2 Iseki 538-4 One with Front Loader
- Renault 70.14 Tractor
- Ford 3610 with Back Actor
- Sand Scorpion
- 3 E-Z-GO St 350G Haulers
- Jacobsen AR250
- Turfco SP1530 Top Dresser
- Core Harvester for Cushman
- Hardi Cushman 300LT Sprayer with Blobber
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