

# OFF HIS TROLLEY!

Having your caddie arrested at the turn? It's the sort of thing that happens when you play 1,000 different courses. Just ask this chap...

BY KEVIN BROWN  
PHOTOGRAPHY JAMES CHEADLE

Apart from his golf handicap – currently standing at 19.5 – Mick Shopland doesn't do things by halves. He's the sort of chap who goes at everything full throttle; and that particularly applies to playing golf.

Mick, a former international rugby union referee, was a late starter to the game and didn't pick up a club until he was 56. Clearly, he was determined to make up for lost time. Playing

courses all over the globe quickly became his passion. Or probably more accurately, obsession.

In typical style, Mick decided to give his new number one sport his very best shot. So much so that, against all the odds, he's astonishingly just chalked-up his 1,000th course just 19 years after playing his very first golf shot! And Today's Golfer was on hand to see him reach the magical milestone, fittingly achieved at Celtic Manor's 2010 Course, scene of next year's Ryder Cup. ►







Mick's 'golf room' is a shrine to his 19-year golf odyssey.



Despite all the golf Mick's handicap is stubbornly fixed at 20.

If your maths is up to scratch, you've probably already worked out that Mick's courses marathon has seen him play on average one different layout a week for the best part of two decades. It's been a monumental, record-breaking effort, especially considering both Mick's knees are severely arthritic and he has brittle bones in his legs, meaning the only way he can possibly get round a course is on wheels – he has his own single-seat buggy which always accompanies him on his travels.

Clearly he's no Tiger Woods or Jack Nicklaus, but nevertheless this pensioner from Lymm, Cheshire, has joined golf's legendary ranks and become something of a phenomenon – the last golfer to amass 1,000 courses took an extra six years to reach the milestone.

As he celebrated with wife and regular golfing partner Dot over a pot of tea in the luxury Celtic Manor clubhouse, Mick reflected on where and how his unique golfing journey began. "I was in Florida on holiday in 1990 and was contemplating what I was going to do when I retired from rugby. I was persuaded to go out onto a course nearby and despite sticking a load of balls into the lake, I

**GLOBE TROTTER**  
**WHERE MICK PLAYED**  
 England: 582 courses  
 South Africa: 86  
 Scotland: 76  
 Wales: 51  
 Ireland: 50  
 America: 46  
 Spain: 32  
 New Zealand: 18  
 Canada: 14  
 Kenya: 12  
 France & Phillipines: Both 9  
 Canary Isles: 8  
 Italy: 6  
 The Caribbean: 1

**"I enjoyed regular neck massages while waiting my turn to putt out"**

surprisingly enjoyed the experience.

"That was my very first course and when I got home I bought a second-hand set of clubs, joined my local municipal course and started having some lessons. I got hooked from there though I soon became bored with playing the same course all the time.

"So I then set out to play all the courses in Cheshire; and when I'd done all 109 of those, my mission became simply to play as many different courses as I possibly could."

Mick spectacularly did just that, meticulously keeping a record of every single course, every scorecard, and even every shot as he did so. He has a golf room-come-office in his home dedicated to his golfing travels and exploits and it's absolutely chock-ablock with boxes of scorecards, trophies and assorted memorabilia.

He revealed: "The year I started playing was also when I got my first

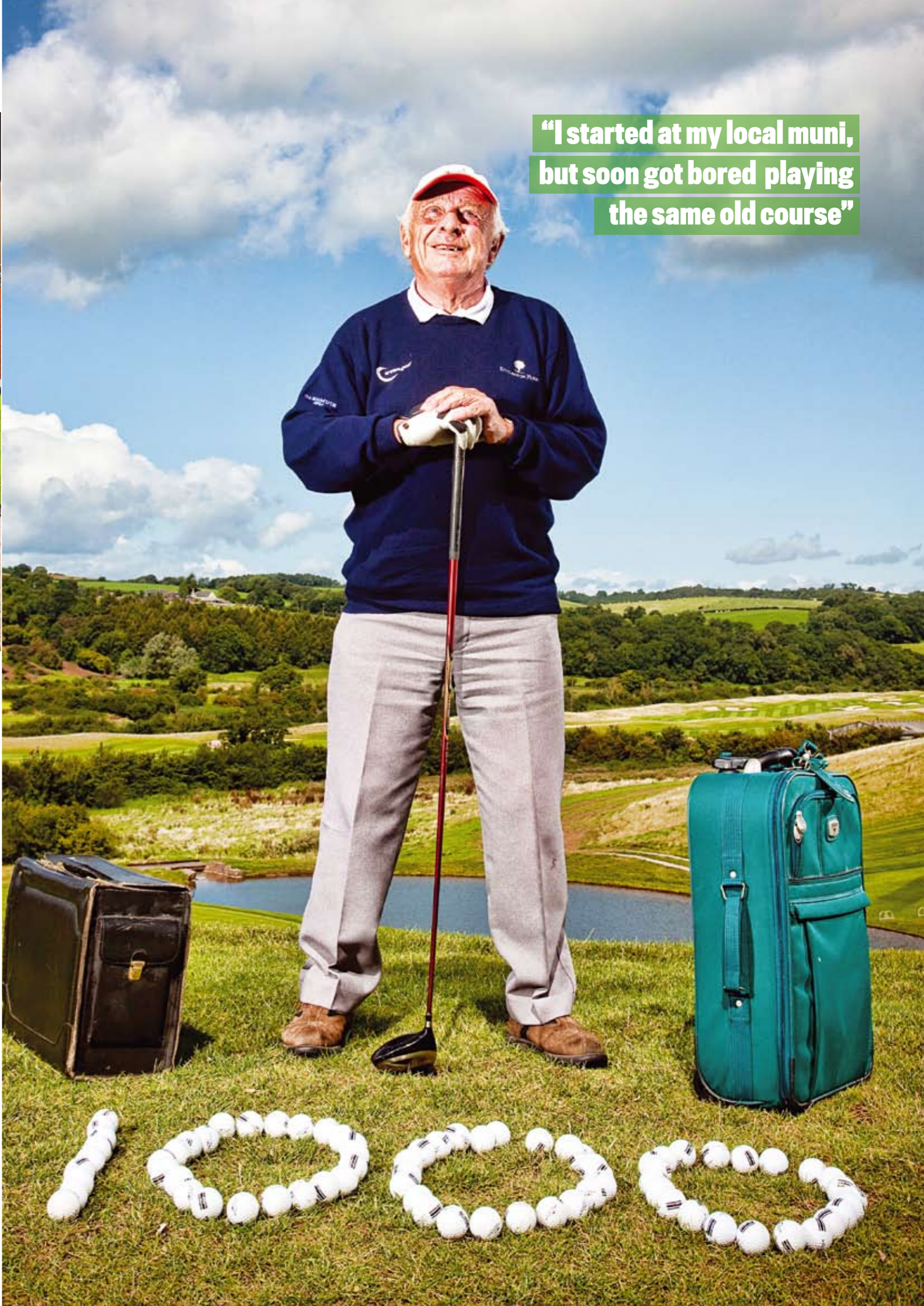
computer and that has enabled me to keep all my golf course visits and records fully up-to-date."

Mick has seen it all on courses across the globe and there are countless stand-out moments but probably nothing to compare with his amazing experience at Santa Barbara GC in the Philippines. "We were treated like royalty during our time there – they put the St George's flag up when we arrived at the club and it was lowered as we left."

Mick was equally shocked when he took to the course too, pointing out: "We were accompanied by six caddies, two umbrella girls and two chair carriers – being over 70, I was planted in one of the chairs and enjoyed regular neck massages while waiting for my turn to putt out."

Mick's regular trips to South Africa – he refereed rugby matches there during the country's apartheid period – were also pretty eventful to say the least. He recalled: "At Humewood GC in Port Elizabeth I played in a competition with a Scotsman who always wore a kilt when playing golf. Not only that; he also had a rather unusual trolley – it had four optics, containing whisky, rum, brandy and vodka, and in his bag's pockets were ▶

**"I started at my local muni, but soon got bored playing the same old course"**







Mick has lost more than 1,500 balls... but found three times as many.



Middle of the cup: Mick enjoys a well-earned nip at the 19th.

the mixer drinks and ice. "The idea was that if any of the fourball managed to win a hole outright they had to take a 'shot' – with or without the mixer. I thought 'what a way to enjoy a round of golf!'

"On another course in South Africa I was quietly enjoying my round until the 10th hole – when my caddie was arrested in front of my eyes after his girlfriend had apparently reported him for throwing her out of their apartment. I guess that's one way to get out of paying a tip!"

Closer to home Mick has vivid memories of his last visit to the Home of Golf. "I played in a competition on the New Course at St Andrews but the rain was coming down stair-rod style. You couldn't see more than 100 yards so I decided to play with just a 7-iron and a putter... and ended up scoring 14 points and beating the 25-strong field by six points! I reckon the other players lost about 100 balls between them because they insisted on using their drivers."

Mick, with wife Dot in tow, regularly takes to the golfing high road in the UK aboard his trusty campervan, sometimes for weeks on end, though as Mick playfully admits, the odd solo round is quite welcome:

## STATS FEST THE NUMBERS GAME

**Total rounds played:** 3,220  
**Different courses played:** 1,000  
**Courses played the most:** Lymm 951, Walton 489.  
**His best round:** He shot a 77 (off the Medal tees too!) at Hawkstone Park's par-72 course in September 2000.  
**And his worst round?** He compiled a shocking 142 against a par of 72 in December 1989. Mind you, it was only his second full round of golf ever!  
**Average score per round over the 1,000 courses:** 97.011.

"I'm not too keen on playing with Dot all the time because she talks too much!"

This year Mick has played 37 new layouts and 92 different courses but by far his most prolific year to date was in 2004 when he registered 61 new and a whopping 156 different courses tally.

So what's his idea of the perfect golf course then? "One where I hope to be able to find my ball most of the time. I hate hitting it into the rough and taking an age to find it."

Value-for-money is another key ingredient according to much-travelled Mick. "Over the years I've played a lot of courses using 2-FORE!-1 vouchers while it's also helped being a member of Eccleston Park GC, part of Crown Golf who have 41 18-hole courses dotted around England. I've got in my campervan and played all those free-of-charge which has been an added bonus to say the least."

Is there one course Mick has so far missed that he would really love to play? Actually there is, and no it isn't Augusta National. Mick has his sights set on teeing it up on the Queen's private course at Windsor Castle and though that might appear one course too far, if anybody can swing it, it's Mick Shopland.

## TALE OF THE TAPE

### SIMPLY THE BEST KEY COURSES ON MICK'S ODYSSEY

#### Toughest tracks

"In the United Kingdom I'd have to say Church Stretton in Shropshire – it's so hilly it's untrue! Outside these islands it's got to be Havelock Mine in Swaziland even though it's just a nine-hole. The fairways had knee-high grass on them and our caddies went ahead to hopefully spot where our balls landed! They then flattened an area where we could drop the ball and play our next shot from."

#### Best greens

"Sabie River in South Africa is a spectacular place to play, sitting next to Kruger National Park. The greens were like snooker tables and you need to watch out for them and the hippo lurking in the water – you get a free drop from the hippo pool! Actually, this is the best course I've ever played."

#### If he could only play one course for the rest of his days...

"The Hotchkin Course at Woodhall Spa. It's my ideal course – challenging but fair."

#### Best value-for-money

"The municipal courses on Merseyside. As a senior I can play them all for just £7."

#### And balls?

"Between 1998-2008 I lost 1,534 balls – but found 4,447!"

#### Most memorable hole?

"I was playing this course in South Carolina when I ventured into the rough looking for my ball. I didn't find mine but unbelievably discovered nearly 60 others around the area. Shortly afterwards I spotted the rather large snakes warning sign!"