



SURVEYING his domain, the Golden Boy looks over the holiday weekend crowd on Holden Beach July 4th.



STAFF PHOTO BY ERIC CARLSON

NEIL'S COFFIN is not used for sleeping or kept for his future interment. It's a display model he bought from a friend as a Halloween decoration.

## 'The Golden Boy: A Man For All Seasons

*I too am not a bit tamed—I too am  
untranslatable;  
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs  
of the world.*

—Walt Whitman

BY ERIC CARLSON

He has what is probably the most recognized face (or head) in Brunswick County. Few local government officials, business executives, sports stars or social figures show up in as many newspaper photographs or television clips.

Every summer, you can see him swaggering along the strand at Holden Beach like a beneficent giant, pausing to talk with friends or strangers and waving at others who greet him from afar.

"Hey, Golden Boy!" they call out.  
"Yawp!" he bellows back, holding two beefy arms in the air.

Every fall, he becomes the unofficial mascot for the West Brunswick High School Trojan football team. You've probably seen him on the TV highlights, stalking the sidelines every Friday night, carrying homemade signs and hollering enthusiastic "yawps" to encourage the players.

When winter arrives, you can't miss him in the Shallotte Christmas parade, wearing his red-white-and-blue "flag suit," revving his customized motorcycle "Lucille" and throwing candy to the children.

In any season, you might spot his bright blue pickup with the hand-painted surfer on the tailgate parked at the beach. You might even see him riding the waves on one of the huge antique surfboards. He claims to have gone out at least once in every month of the year—without a wetsuit. (He'll probably lend you a board, if you ask nicely.)

A lot of people recognize Neil Clarke (a.k.a. "Golden Boy") when they see him. And while most are probably unsure about what they've seen, they do tend to remember him.

Maybe it's his size, which is rather large. Or it could be the black leather vest with the peace sign painted on it. Or the grinning silver skull dangling from his left ear. Or perhaps it's his voice, which booms like a drill sergeant in need of a cough drop. Or the thundering red motorcycle with the Maltese-cross mirrors and the skull named Harvey on the handlebars.

Or maybe it's the Mohawk.

Yep. It's definitely the Mohawk. Nobody wears a Mohawk better than Neil Clarke. In fact, not many people wear a Mohawk, period.

Like an asphalt highway of hair crossing a smooth desert of tanned skin, Neil's Mohawk announces his presence from a mile away. Some might say it tends to make him look a bit...shall we say...menacing. As if he just walked off the set of a "Mad Max" movie.

Consequently, folks tend to make a lot of assumptions about Neil, most of them false. So for those who have never had the chance (or the courage) to strike up a conversation with him, here are a few facts about the man they call "Golden Boy":

He got that nickname because of his hair, which used to be long and bleached out to a golden yellow by the summer sun, while the rest of him turned a golden brown.

He is not a professional wrestler. ("That's the question kids ask me the most," says Neil.)

He does not sleep in a coffin. Although he did purchase a display model from a friend in the funeral business who wanted to get rid of it. Neil uses it for Halloween festivities.

Neil is a NASCAR fan who grew up in Kannapolis (a few miles from Dale Earnhardt) and once dated the daughter of stock car legend Glen "Fireball" Roberts, who is one of Neil's heroes, along with Elvis Presley and James Dean.

Neil's father, Richard Gray Clarke, was a third baseman for the Milwaukee Brewers who used to play

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against Babe Ruth.

Neil did not attend West Brunswick High School. He became a rabid Trojan fan while his daughter, Sherrie Lenea Wisnowski, was there. She does not have a Mohawk (although Neil has tried to convince her to get one).

Neil does not sleep in a cave and eat small children for dinner. He lives with his wife of 21 years, Vicki, at Holden Beach in a trailer he single-handedly converted into a sprawling house decorated with paintings by Sherrie, who also helps him customize his vehicles. It's a quite normal looking house with a tidy, landscaped lawn surrounded by a picket fence with mimosa and live oak trees growing in the yard.

His characteristic war cry, heard regularly at Trojan games, originated as a surf call used to summon waves: "Yawp!"

Neil used to drive a customized 1964 Ford with "mufflers so loud they could shatter glass." He liked the way they sounded. The Kannapolis Police did not. He kept driving. They kept giving him tickets—36 in all. Now he collects "Hot Wheels" cars, of which he has nearly 500.

He is not a beach bum. Neil is a high-school graduate who has had a steady job with the Brunswick County Schools system for the past 10 years. He's also operated his own chimney-sweeping business for 12 years and does yard work on the side. He admits to being "workaholic."

Neil is not a mean, nasty, belligerent, violent barbarian. He just looks that way. In fact, Neil is a very friendly, gentle guy who loves children and wouldn't lift a finger to hurt anyone. As long as they don't make him mad. And who would want to do that?

Lounging in a living room chair after work last week, Neil told a visitor about the night he went to the Holden Beach Fishing Pier to shoot pool and decided to wear a dog collar as part of his evening attire.

He overheard a couple of guys saying that it might be fun to jerk his chain. Between shots, Neil made it a point to stand directly in front of the group, allowing them easy access to his choke chain. There were no takers.

So why does he wear dog collars and flag suits and skull earrings and drive outrageous vehicles and cut his hair in a Mohawk?

"I've always liked to be different; always liked to attract a little attention," Neil said. "Everyone's unique. They should have the right to look the way they do. I'm

a rebel with a cause."

It's an attitude he's had since childhood. In the 1960s, as an early Beatles fan, Neil was the first male student at A.L. Brown High School to wear his hair long. The school administration told him he couldn't accept his diploma with the other graduates unless he cut his hair.

"I said right then that if I ever get old enough and big enough and mean enough, I'm going to wear my hair any way I want to," he remembered.

So the next time an employer objected to his hair and told him to get it cut, Neil obliged by shaving his head. The Mohawk is his idea of a compromise. One that has its advantages and disadvantages.

"I don't spend too much on shampoo. But them Bic razors are costing me a fortune."

Neil said he's learned a lot over the years about discrimination and about the way people tend to make assumptions about others based on their appearance.

Like the time he was back in Kannapolis one night and stopped by the side of the road to help a woman whose car had broken down. Out of nowhere, he said several police cars appeared. The officers jumped out and immediately trained their guns on the big man with the Mohawk. It reminded him of the old days, when he used to get stopped because his hair was long.

Neil has gotten used to such occurrences over the years. Perhaps it's the price he pays for being unique. And while he understands prejudice first hand, he still doesn't condone it.

"It's true what they say about not judging a book by its cover," he said. "That Bible over there might have a .357 magnum inside. Never judge a person by the way he looks, or by his age, or by his race. Judge him by his heart."

"I'm going to cut my hair any way I want to," he said. "I plan to be the only person on earth who dies at 98 with a haircut like this. And when I do, God's going to say, 'Where's that big soul with the Mohawk?'"



PHOTO BY DOUG RUTTER

TROJAN FAN extraordinaire Neil Clarke roots on the team with war cries and handmade signs. He plans to attend every game this year.



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A REGULAR ATTRACTION in the annual Festival by the Sea parade, Neil "Golden Boy" Clarke waves to fans and revs the throttle on his custom motorcycle.